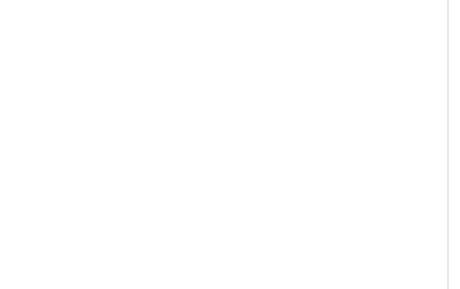How foundations garble their message
and lose their audience

bad words for good

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The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation

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Simply Stated: Words Do Matter

A foreword by Michael Bailin, *President*

Writing has never come easy for me and, frankly, I don't expect that it ever will. It has, however, gotten better over the years. I attribute these modest improvements to two things. One was the good fortune to have had a series of jobs that required me to write regularly for a range of audiences. The second was the habit of asking a sampling of those people to comment on my writing. Most often, the questions I've asked are: "Is what I'm saying clear? And what can I do to make myself better understood next time?"

I've surely benefited from constructive criticism (even when it hasn't been easy to swallow). Most helpful have been those people who, instead of commenting directly, held up my own writing to me and asked me to explain what I meant.

It was in that spirit that a little over a year ago we commissioned Tony Proscio to write an essay for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation that pleaded with people throughout the foundation world to rid their writing of jargon. *In Other Words*, which featured a catalog of commonly misused or confusing words, argued that jargon-infested foundation-speak was more than an assault on our ears. The real threat of unclear language is its power to extinguish thoughtful public discourse about important issues that foundations are trying to address through their work. As Proscio noted, when people don't understand what they're reading or hearing, they're not likely to respond, react, or comment. Instead, they'll choose to opt out.

Since the book's release, hardly a day goes by when people don't request copies for themselves or for their colleagues. Not surprisingly, since jargon isn't the exclusive province of philanthropy, requests come from all sectors and industries. Many have also written to urge us to keep up the

good fight, to publish more words and guidance on how—and how not—to use them.

This book was commissioned in response to those requests. But it's no mere sequel. It has all the power and punch of the first. Like last time, Proscio began collecting words that foundations routinely rely on to describe their work, and talked with others about the most egregious examples he found. As he got deeper into his investigation, he felt obligated to match—even surpass—his earlier effort to call attention to the hurt foundations do to their efforts to be heard and understood.

Proscio's examples of the many ways foundations get tripped up by their own words are at once illuminating and provocative. The message that came through loud and clear as I read his essay is that foundations don't yet pay enough attention to the need, importance, and benefits of clear writing and speaking. Some of that might be attributable to a long history of our talking mostly to each other inside our organizations or

to our colleagues throughout the field (hence our comfort with jargon). Whatever the reason, and as the examples in this book show, we have a lot of work to do. Our failure to do a better job of communicating will only undercut our ability to achieve our missions. Grantmaking isn't our only means for advancing change and improving society. As foundations, we also need to engage the public, along with policy makers and opinion leaders, in meaningful discussions about the underlying needs that are driving our grant choices. We also need to inform others, especially those outside our immediate circles, about the knowledge, lessons, and other discoveries that are resulting from our work and that they might be able to put to good use.

Many of the examples in this book will make you laugh, or even shake your head in disbelief, but in the end Proscio minces no words about the danger he sees in muddled communication. And while some of the examples he uses and the conclusions he reaches might sting, it's important

to remember that criticism is never meaningful if it doesn't hit home. In the spirit of full disclosure, I admit that I frequently winced at seeing our foundation's own words offered up as evidence of the very sins we want to quash. But in my view, that is a fair price to pay for continuing the effort we began with *In Other Words.*

Still, if after reading this you feel Proscio has done you wrong, he offers you the same opportunity he gave us. Challenge him—and us, too. Email your comments to jargon@emcf.org. We'll routinely post your comments—and Tony's responses—on our website at www.emcf.org/jargon.

One final note. In thinking about this volume, I recalled a plea for clear writing that E. B. White included in his revision of the 1935 classic usage book, *The Elements of Style*, originally published by William Strunk:

> Muddiness is not merely a disturber of prose, it is also a destroyer of life, of hope: death on the highway caused by a badly worded road sign, heartbreak among lovers caused by a misplaced phrase in a well-intentioned letter, anguish of a traveler expecting to be met at a railroad station and not being met because of a slipshod telegram.

One can only imagine the many other examples of damage caused by muddy prose that White could have culled from the rivers of words that regularly pour out of foundations. But instead of White, we have Tony Proscio.

Bad Words for Good

How foundations garble their message
and lose their audience

Toward the end of the 1970s, the decade that replaced the used car with the "pre-owned vehicle," an alert reporter discovered that park rangers in the Grand Canyon were routinely killing wild burros. The beasts' grazing evidently contributed to soil erosion. Confronted with a charge of organized slaughter, a ranger objected: "We prefer to call it *direct reduction*."[1]

Some two decades later, a more benign but equally squeamish American foundation reported that it was lowering the incidence of "negative health outcomes" among a group of poor people. Fewer of the people, it seems, had died. (Unfortunately, the foundation's boast may prove overhasty. Sooner or later, all of us have pretty much the same "health outcome," an eventuality against which even very large endowments have been known to fail. But never mind.)

To be fair, death and disease leave most people groping for euphemisms. So perhaps the minced words in these cases can be indulged, if not quite forgiven. Yet something more mysterious seems to be afoot in this next bit of gibberish,

culled from a foundation memo recommending grants for education reform:

> These grants will incentivize administrators and educators to apply relevant metrics to assess achievement in the competencies they seek to develop.

The writer seems to be saying that the grants would be used to pay teachers and principals who agree to test their students. Yet the writer was evidently embarrassed by this mercenary depiction of American educators (who seem to need "incentivizing" before they will consent to administer a test) and by the crudeness of ordinary learning, compared with which "achieving competencies" offers young people a more refined and elevating experience.

What could have inspired this writer to dance so awkwardly around his subject? "Muddled thinking" is one common, if unkind, explanation. Many critics of clumsy writing are inclined to advance it almost automatically in situations like this one. Trouble is, it doesn't fit this case. The memo goes on—albeit in much the same style—to present a carefully reasoned and politically astute argument. The fact that it takes three readings to figure out what that argument might be is unfortunate for both the reader and the writer. But once it's puzzled out, the reasoning leaves no grounds for suspecting careless thought.

A more plausible explanation might be an excess of caution. The writer is, after all, proposing that a foundation give people money for doing something that many (less astute) observers would consider merely all-in-a-day's-work. The sentence, like much of the rest of the memo, grapples with some relatively ungainly political facts: Many teachers dislike

[1] According to columnist William Safire, the incident prompted Michael Winship of the *New York Times* to wonder, "What do you suppose *indirect* reduction of burros constitutes? Birth-control lectures?"

the kinds of tests that this foundation hopes to induce. The test results will embarrass some schools and teachers. And the foundation can expect some heat for stepping into so controversial an arena. Rather than state all of that bluntly, and thereby risk scaring off fellow officers, trustees, and assorted allies, the writer may have chosen to veil the controversy in a camouflage of doubletalk. If that's the case, then perhaps the intent is not all that different from the ranger's use of "direct reduction."

A third possibility, in some ways the most likely, is that the writer (and even some readers) consider the doubletalk a matter of *stature*, a lofty and imposing verbal proscenium befitting the complex drama it frames. The cavalcade of Latinate coinages—*incentivize*, *metrics*, *assess*, *competencies*—marches past us in all its plumage as if to say, "Stand back! Something marvelous is coming."

Using words that way, as mere trappings of nobility, is often taken for arrogance, but it may well be just the opposite. Authors who feel unduly humbled by the weightiness of their subject may feel bound to pay it the homage of addressing it in Latin. The problem, in that case, is not a haughty author, but an overly deferential one. If you're intimidated by your subject—or worse, by the brazenly exhibitionist act of writing about it to an informed public—you may resort to the learned equivalent of hemming and hawing. You thatch together a few verbal fig leaves to deflect censure, rather than expose anything remarkable.[2]

[2] I owe part of this insight to critic Louis Menand, who wrote in a September 2000 *New Yorker* essay, "Writing … is a kind of self-disclosure, and a natural instinct of prudery does tend to inhibit people when they are faced with the task. These people can be treated; shamelessness can be taught."

INSIDE THE CLOISTER

These questions of motive—of why experts in foundations and think-tanks seem intent on expressing themselves in stilted phrases that harm their message—are not, by themselves, the subject of this essay. To some extent, it is beside the point *why* people write this way, so long as they can be persuaded to write differently. But in the months since the publication of an earlier essay on this topic (*In Other Words: A Plea for Plain Speaking in Foundations*) I have heard from many smart people in civic and philanthropic organizations of all kinds who say, persuasively, that they find it forbiddingly *hard* to write more clearly. The problem is not that they don't know any better, but that they find it painful, and sometimes even unwise, to avoid the buzz-words and clichés that make their field seem impenetrable and off-putting to others. It's useful to understand why they feel that way— why so many writers, scholars, and activists bewail jargon in theory but revere it in practice.

Within their field, these writers say, the obscure and stuffy phrases enjoy too much prestige, and encapsulate too many subliminal allusions, to be avoided or omitted entirely. It is simply not the same, they say, to write that some program "helps" parents "deal more effectively" with the school system, when what they want to say—*need* to say, for subtle reasons of protocol and professional bona fides—is that the program "empowers" parents. The word *empowers* is overused and vainglorious, they concede. But it also encapsulates a view of the world, shared by like-minded people and institutions, that casts the parents as the heroes of a specific drama, in which the struggle for power is the chief plot element. It is

a drama, moreover, whose cult following includes many of the committed and influential people to whom the writer wishes to appeal. "If you want to preach in this church," said one nonprofit official, "you've got to sing these hymns."

When foundation writers and scholars are dealing only with one another, and by extension with their ideological brethren, the hallowed old expressions probably do serve a purpose—especially if the author isn't trying to say anything particularly new. But those expressions, precisely because they are so enthusiastically received among the faithful in the pews, quickly become habit-forming. In time, through overuse, the popular words come not to express serious thinking, but to replace it. Using the terms becomes an acceptable substitute for thinking the thoughts, and eventually the terms line up like the facades of a Potemkin village, grandly adorning intellectual empty space, to the unwitting delight of gullible passers-by.

So when a foundation officer writes—as one actually did—that "a geographically targeted effort will benefit from synergies," the writer evidently wants the initiated to envision the careful process that adepts understand as targeting, and to expect the calculated chain reactions that social scientists like to call synergy. The implied meaning comes off looking quite grand, really: *We will pick such ingenious locations for our grants that all the healthful vapors will gather like clouds of angels about our cause*. Yet what the sentence actually *says* is so vague as to defy paraphrase. Incredibly, the writer never goes on to describe what synergies might be involved, or how they would bestow their benefits. It's all incantation with no point.

The writer no doubt *had* a point. But because of the soothing, almost narcotic effect of the jargon, she or he was evidently unaware that the point was never made. Even the

old hands who know these words well will gain no insight from reading this sentence (though they may glide right past it, mollified by the murmur of reassuring sounds). Yet in fact, it was written for publication far beyond the philanthropic cloister. Those helpless lay readers who don't spend their days talking about synergies and targets could only be baffled —or, in a worse but likely case, annoyed.

THE PRICE OF DOUBLETALK

A few lay people, grappling with the sentence about synergies, might silently defer to the author's superior expertise, assuming that the writing expressed something important but beyond their ken. That misimpression might even have been intentional, but probably it wasn't. Most foundations don't set out to intimidate, overwhelm, or befuddle their public. Most, in fact, seem eager to be better understood, and even to endure the self-exposure that clarity and understanding entail. Foundation conferences for some years have been consumed with a search for greater *accountability*, for a philanthropic *bottom line*, for *metrics* of achievement, and so on. Foundation leaders insist they want *dialogue* and *partnership* with their grantees, and *feedback* from their *stakeholders*. From all this earnestness (however much weighed down with jargon of its own), we can only conclude that foundations are trying to own up to their ambitions, and to be held to account when they fail. Why, then, does their speech so thoroughly belie those good intentions?

The only charitable answer is that they don't realize what they're saying and writing. All that leaden verbiage means

something to them, or so they believe, so it comes to them as a bit of a shock when no one else can guess at their meaning. A less charitable corollary, though, may be that the mystifying vocabulary produces pleasant side-effects. Warding off criticism is a happy achievement, even if the price is warding off understanding.

That price may not seem terrible at first, but it grows far worse over time. Opinion polls over the years suggest that social causes in the United States—the sorts of humanitarian work favored by foundations, churches, nonprofit groups, civic associations, the whole altruistic establishment, Left and Right—no longer enjoy the respect or trust they did in decades past. Some of that surely lies at the doorstep of a few celebrated frauds who made off with charitable millions. But those cases are rare, and the most famous ones are many years old. The more insidious and persistent culprit behind the civic world's loss of stature may be the way it *sounds*. (Something similar may be said of politics, but that's a topic for another day.)

Make obscure points in vague and self-important language, and you can expect to be greeted with suspicion. People who can't puzzle out your real meaning will soon draw their own inferences about it. "Various institutions are creating tools to successfully advance this field within a civic-minded framework," says one paper meant for a wide audience. It is easy to infer from that sentence that other "frameworks" are to be regarded as less "civic-minded," and that other people's "tools" have *un*successfully advanced the field (a neat trick). At least overtly, the sentence is intended to point toward good news and promising work. But it

practically begs people to read between the lines for more shadowy meanings. Why? Because there is too little bright meaning shining from the lines themselves.

Of course, the easiest response to impenetrable writing is simply to cast it aside, and that is, in fact, what most people do with it. But an unlucky minority have no choice but to read some of the denser material, because their jobs or their passions require that they follow what people are writing in a given field. Among those readers, the stilted or pompous writer will encounter something worse than indifference: distrust. Whether the listeners are your grantees, colleagues, scholars, ordinary citizens, or your own trustees, they are likely to conclude, over time, that your words don't mean as much as they seem to. Or worse, they may come to suspect some contraband of inscrutable hidden meaning secreted behind every comma, traps of sophistry set for the unsuspecting. Either way, any hope of informing or persuading people has been defeated.

UNLOVELY AND UNLOVED

Trusting that most foundations and nonprofit groups want to avoid that result, the remainder of this essay sorts through some of the verbal gargoyles lately glowering down at anyone who dares to join the American civic debate. Some of these expressions meet the classic definition of "jargon"—the peculiar vocabulary of a technical field—but others are not really technical, they're just obscure, evasive, or vague. In any case, all of them aspire, in their daily labors, to fit the newer and much harsher definition of jargon that *The American Heritage*

Dictionary places first on its list: "nonsensical, incoherent, or meaningless talk."

This listing supplements an earlier one, published in *In Other Words* (available, like this volume, from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation). Like the earlier list, most of the entries that follow were nominated by weary foundation and nonprofit officials whose own desks sag under the weight of all these sodden words and phrases. The terms appear here, in short, because they have by now annoyed or offended enough people to earn disrepute even within their fields. Therefore, the normal defense of jargon—that it is a convenient shorthand, useful to its adepts—scarcely applies to these expressions any more. They are approaching a stage of friendlessness that should make writers wary of them no matter who the intended audience may be.

This discussion might therefore reflect the first stirrings of a readers' rebellion. Who knows? Though the rebels are still few, their vigilance, far more than any effect of this essay, may eventually subject the worst of these expressions to a "direct reduction," or better still, a "negative health outcome." But that, I fear, may yet take some incentivizing.

Static on the Line
Philanthropy's favorite noise, and the meaning it conceals

In the early years of World War II, when the British philosopher Bertrand Russell was briefly living in the United States, Harvard University invited him to give a guest lecture to its philosophy department. Russell submitted a draft for approval, titled "Words and Things." A bemused dean replied that the draft seemed fine, but the title obviously would not do. This was, after all, an elite group of philosophers, entitled to something a bit more … professional. Russell substituted something like "Linguistic Correlates of Epistemological Constructs" and was enthusiastically received.

Herewith, a few of the more fanciful linguistic correlates adorning the epistemological constructs of modern philanthropy:

Not exactly community, not exactly cheese
-based

On Sunday mornings, fresh from my faith-based institution, I stop at the community-based deli for a caffeine-based beverage. After a thought-based interlude, I select an information-based publication from the rack, and the knowledge-based attendant

accepts an income-based emolument in exchange for his customer-based service. I return to my home base wishing I could de-BASE this language for good. But in at least one sense, it is already as debased as it can be.

Where did all these -BASES come from? When did things cease to have qualities of their own and start being merely *based* on other things? In the field of urban development, there was once such a thing as a community development corporation. Now they're all community-*based* development corporations. Groups of very smart people used to be proud of being learned or expert; now they hide their diplomas behind the lifeless claim of being "knowledge-based." Why are synagogues, churches, and mosques not fighting to regain their sacred charter as religious institutions? Are they content to have it said that they are merely *based* on faith—perhaps the way Velveeta® is based on cheese—and not aflame with the genuine article? Why are the clergy not marching on Washington over this? Where is the outrage?

The answer is that this dodgy game of base-running is actually useful in the sneaky political realms where such coinages proliferate. The Constitution may look askance at alliances between government and religion, but it might be said to be silent on *faith-based* activities. *Community* organi- zations might be expected to demonstrate actual support from their neighbors—something many of them enjoy, but not all. Yet if they're *community-based…* well, all they really have to do is be *based* there.[3]

Our compendium of slippery language begins here, in the linguistic basement, solely because it is an alphabetical list, and "ba" comes first. Yet on substantive grounds, there could be no

3 In that sense, a certain thrice- renamed telephone conglomerate is among the "community-based organizations" in my neighborhood. Its hulking head- quarters are a few blocks away. Even Microsoft is a community-based institution, if your community is Redmond, Washington.

more perfect beginning than -BASED for a list of words whose utter meaninglessness invites sinister interpretations, deceptive usage, and winking cynicism shared by user and reader alike.

Storm clouds—but why look beyond the silver lining?
challenges/challenged

In its original sense, the verb CHALLENGE was positively crimson with menace. Derived from the Anglo-Norman word for "calumny," it described the kind of mortal affront that led men into duels. It has by now been so thoroughly emasculated that, with all its remaining fangs bared, it could not frighten the neighbor's cat, much less provoke anyone to arms.

In its domesticated state, some might argue that there is no real offense in using CHALLENGE. Jargon it certainly is not. Yet its meaning is so diffuse and all-inclusive—on a par, perhaps, with that ubiquitous placeholder *appropriate*—that it serves, like many jargon words, to convey a false impression that something has been revealed or some position taken. In fact, when most people speak of mincing words, they are referring to expressions like "challenging litigation," or "fiscal challenges." In each case, the reality is far more troublesome than the cowardly expression conscripted to its service. The unintentional but certain message of those euphemisms is that the writer is too effete or timid to speak frankly about being hauled into court or impending bankruptcy.

A writer friend of mine first drew my attention to these expressions with this note:

"Physically challenged," introduced a few years ago, was one of those well-intentioned terms that invited ridicule

almost as soon as it hit the page. People were jokingly calling short people "vertically challenged" within a week. It's arguable that this euphemism has caused more harm than good to the dignity of disabled people.

Injuries and disabilities aren't the only tough subjects that have been swept under the CHALLENGE carpet. The euphemism has likewise made its way into business papers, civic plans, and, most of all, foundation documents, whenever unpleasant realities threaten to rile the mighty. "Scaling up this demonstration project is fraught with challenges" almost certainly means that the odds of a successful expansion are one in ten. "The grantee is coping with organizational challenges" means it's time to send in the auditors. Strategic plans rarely speak of "risks" or "dangers" any more, at least in the more genteel circles. Everything's a "challenge," and, thanks to that, the people who might be tackling and solving problems are instead left, like the neighbor's cat, to purr unworried and unwarned.

You know—us, them, whatever
community, the

In the earlier essay *In Other Words*, we discussed one version of this polymorphous word: the annoying sense in which it describes any group of people with practically anything in common. But readers' response to that essay made it clear that we had been too easy on COMMUNITY, neglecting one of the other ways it has muddied philanthropic discourse. Quite apart from near-oxymorons like "the diplomatic community," "the academic community," and "the arts community," the far more mysterious use of the word is in its plainest and most generic sense: THE COMMUNITY—meaning, it seems, something

like "the universal fellowship of all regular folks." For example, "mentally ill people should live in the community," "service should be provided in the community," and "the community must decide how to respond."

Should elderly people be helped to remain "in the community" (meaning, we presume, somewhere this side of Antarctica), or would it be more to the point to say "at home"? There may well be a difference between those two ideas, but if there is, the word COMMUNITY does not convey it. When mental health programs are told that their work should be done "in the community," they are probably being told that their hospitals and clinics are too far away from where their customers live. But the word doesn't *say* that, unfortunately—especially not if we read in an adjoining article that the "health care community" is doing something or other. Are the services of the "health care community" not in "the community"? We're back to oxymorons again.

Whoever wrote that services belong in "the community" no doubt wanted to urge that services be provided in "residential neighborhoods where many patients live." To replace that specific idea with a formless placeholder like THE COMMUNITY is to presume that everyone already knows what you're really talking about. And if that's the case, why are you talking at all?

Everything between here and anywhere else
continuum

Before mounting our high horse to tilt against this tedious expression, we are duty-bound to tip our hat to the people who first dragged it into the civic realm. Those who tried, late in the 20th century, to create a "continuum of care" for people

in profound need—the isolated frail elderly, chronically home-less or mentally ill people, abandoned or runaway children—did the world too great a service to justify quarreling over their choice of terminology. They argued convincingly that people with many chronic needs should get a more prolonged and seamless kind of help than was available from typically discrete, short-term programs. They are still struggling to make their case, which has been warmly greeted by theorists but only grudgingly accommodated by government and philanthropy.

But meanwhile, oh, what has become of their word! Now every activity that lasts longer than a day and connects ever-so-glancingly with any other activity is officially a CONTINUUM, and wants to be discussed in the reverent tones reserved for things with Latin names. Ever since Einstein gave us a space–time continuum, we have had to bear the encroachment of exotics like school-to-work continua, perinatal continua, the Left–Right political continuum (what does that leave out, exactly?), and the labor–management continuum. In the advancing postmodern ooze, very few things have rigid borders any more (everything has parameters, but almost nothing owns up to perimeters). Consequently, everything sooner or later runs into everything else. Voilà! Continua all around!

Not a mere host, not a mere meeting
convener/convening

Some may be surprised to learn that these are venerable words with an ancient pedigree. *The Oxford English Dictionary* traces CONVENER to at least the 16th century, and the noun CONVENING to the 18th. But you'd never know it from the howls of derision the two words summon from fed-up nonprofit

and foundation officials. And in fact, the deriders are right: Although these words are correct English, they are pretentious and antiquated. (Indeed, not one usage from the OED is more recent than the mid–19th century, and nearly all are older.) In modern-day use, the word is nothing more than a posh disguise for ordinary meetings, conventions, and conferences. The self-styled CONVENER is simply whatever outfit hosts the meetings.

There is, in fact, something slightly pathetic about the bloated self-importance of the CONVENE clan. To insist on referring to the drudgery of meetings and conferences as if they were a summons to Buckingham Palace suggests a life starved for excitement. Said one foundation officer: "Whenever I'm invited to a 'convening,' I make it a point to decline. If they're calling it that, they must be desperate for participation, and that means it's the last place I'll want to be." The whole matter could not be put more succinctly.

Daddy Warbucks meets Maurice Chevalier
entrepreneur

We hereby salute whatever 19th-century scholars of business and management first came up with this sexy new word for the heroic swashbuckling capitalist—the adventurer who thinks big and lives dangerously, who wagers all on a great commercial dream. Their ambitious *mot exotique*, drawn from the French word for "undertake" (*entreprendre*) does not, in English, mean "undertaker" (more's the pity, perhaps). It came out as the much dandier ENTREPRENEUR. In some circles, you get extra points for pronouncing the r's as if you were dislodging fish bones from the back of your throat.

In the mid-1800s, when the word's modern meaning made its debut (referring, at first, to the proprietor of a music hall or gambling establishment), it offered a colorful term for colorful people, a nice fit of form to function. The original idea was indisputably so out-of-the-ordinary and specific as to deserve its own word. And when you want something colorful, there's really no source like the French. (Even a fleeting acquaintance with the 1960s sit-com *The Addams Family* will call to mind the explosively libidinous effect of French on the leisure classes. ENTREPRENEUR is, come to think of it, really the perfect word for a capitalist Gomez Addams.)

So what is this gorgeously ruffled word doing lurking about in philanthropy? It sailed over from Wall Street on an immigrant ship loaded with other business mumbo-jumbo. Just like *capital* and *venture* and *return*, the word ENTREPRE-NEUR has lately acquired the dignifying adjective SOCIAL (q.v.) and set about Doing Good. Result: A word once specially designed to describe Donald Trump or Ted Turner has lately been applied with equal verve to the founders of peace movements and soup kitchens.

By this route, the visionaries who inspire selflessness in others—so long as they go about it in any remotely unusual way—are now (get ready with the fish bones) social *entrepreneurs*. They are also civic entrepreneurs, public entrepreneurs, and, more rarely, philanthropic entrepreneurs. By recent standards, any effective leader who can finish the fiscal year on the safer side of ruin is promptly anointed an "entrepreneur," and takes a place, however uncomfortably, alongside the Rockefellers, the Morgans, and the Fords.

To be fair: The watering down of ENTREPRENEUR is not solely an offense of the nonprofit establishment. Even before the word swamped the immune system of the philanthropic world, it had already overrun the business libraries. "Like *enterprise*," says the *Bloomsbury Good Word Guide* (1997), "the noun ENTREPRENEUR is losing its traditional connotations of risk and initiative and is indiscriminately applied to any person who becomes self-employed or sets up a new small business." That presumably means that, somewhere in the entrepreneurial family portrait between Rupert Murdoch and Archbishop Tutu, if I look closely enough, I should be able to spot my dry-cleaner.

A kick in the pants, set to music
incent/incentivize/disincent

The useful word "incentive" comes into English from (appropriately enough) the most alluring origins. Its Latin root, *incinere*, past participle *incentus*, means "to intone," or "to sing to"—suggesting that the lilt of a lover's serenade (no doubt under a balcony, surely by moonlight) may have been Western civilization's first intentional incentive. Would that all incentives had remained so sweet.

The word has come a long way from the twilit Veronese cobblestones, nowadays turning up most often amid the tedium of construction contracts, economics texts, and labor negotiations. But then, many things that began in the moonlight end up losing their luster by and by. We would have wasted no sympathy on "incentive" on those grounds, had this charming little word not been kidnapped, abused, and sold into slavery in the past ten years, forced to play a verb

and do the work of (far less tuneful) words like "encourage," "induce," and "pay."

Lately, you will find this erstwhile troubadour either painted in the cheesy makeup of INCENTIVIZE or stripped almost naked and forced to go about as INCENT. Both words now turn up everywhere among the writings of social scientists, public officials, and the scribes of philanthropy.

"Formula-driven rent increases under Section 8," says a paper on employment and housing policy, "disincent tenants to seek jobs." First of all, shouldn't it be "disincent tenants *from* seeking?" Then again, who cares? Better prepositions will do no good against the pestilence of DISINCENT. A word that began as music has ended as rank noise.

It is hard to conceive the evil mind of whoever loosed DISINCENT on the world. It is uglier, more abstruse, and less expressive than almost any available alternative: "hinder," "dissuade," "deter," "daunt," or (most refreshingly) "scare off." It adds nothing to the rich vocabulary of discouragement with which all the social sciences are already ripe. Who could possibly have concocted this ghastly word, and what was their wicked design? Here, at last, is useful employment for conspiracy buffs.

Undergarments for the social engineer
infrastructure

As early as 1950, Winston Churchill was already bewailing the migration of this esoteric term from engineering into the whole realm of human designs. "In this debate," he complained in the House of Commons, "we have heard the usual jargon about the 'infrastructure of a supra-national authority.'"

(Not only has the jargon not changed in half a century, but apparently neither has the prime topic of debate in the House of Commons.)

Churchill's comment not only took aim at jargon but cleverly poked fun at a subtle absurdity, as well: the "infra" in INFRASTRUCTURE means "below," and it's the opposite of "supra." "Supra-national infra-structure" would seem to describe whatever lies below the things that rise above nations.

INFRASTRUCTURE's Latin roots strictly mean *what lies beneath (or within) things that are built*. In that sense, steel girders and wooden beams are infrastructure. Subways and sewer pipes, too. It's harder to understand why a bridge qualifies as infrastructure, though civil engineering does seem to classify a soaring span as if it were just a piece of undergirding that managed to climb into full view—like the underpants defiantly hiked above the belts of modern teenagers.

The problem with INFRASTRUCTURE is that, as metaphors go, it is often a good one—too good by half. Yes, many organizations do need to improve the hidden, back-office functions that are the bureaucratic equivalent of beams and girders. New projects usually do need offices, computers, phone lines, bank accounts, technical advisers, and contractors—all the mundane rigmarole that stands behind a successful effort. The word fits those usages, but it fits a great many others, too. Everything, one presumes, would benefit from the strengthening of some hidden component parts. Is *everything*, therefore, an infrastructure project? Ever since Churchill's day (and evidently for some time before that), the word has been applied metaphorically to so many things that it is now quite impossible to know which thing it is supposed to invoke in any given context.

Used sparingly, in situations where some kind of construction or engineering is under way, the word still has some frail integrity left. But in most cases, it is simply a grandiloquent stand-in for "component parts," "elements," "organization," or, in management circles, "administrative functions." Clarity would usually be served best by saying just which of those things is meant.

Magical multiplication of minimal force

leverage

The head of an exceptionally successful (and incidentally "well leveraged") nonprofit organization gave this succinct definition of philanthropy's favorite buzz-word: "If I give a dollar and you give a dollar, and we get the guy next door to give a dollar, we each got 200 percent leverage. The budget may be $1 million, and we're still $999,997 away from it, but we've got excellent leverage."

More and more observers of philanthropy and fundraising treat LEVERAGE as an automatic fraud alarm, and it is hard not to agree with them. The nonprofit executive's illustration perfectly illustrates why: The word is meant to imply (indeed, in most common usage it actually *means*) that someone has done something timely and clever that induced others to do a great deal more toward the same goal. The image of a lever—"a rigid bar pivoted on a fixed point and used to transmit force," according to *The American Heritage Dictionary*—was meant to invoke the moving of great objects with diminished force. Yet often it is used to describe things done by any group of people that they would otherwise have done anyway.

In finance, LEVERAGE typically describes the amassing of huge investments or big profits without using a great deal of one's own money. In that context, most leverage is smart borrowing and good timing. Yet quite often it involves more than a little hucksterism, too, as when a borrower induces several banks to lend millions of dollars apiece to a shaky venture, urging each lender to take comfort in the presence of the others. From such leverage, great S&L debacles are born.

"This grant leverages the contributions and talents of many participating organizations in the community," said a foundation report. The clear implication: By making this grant, we induced "many organizations" to take part in something that would not otherwise have interested them. By further implication, the sum of all those efforts will be worth far more than we, the frugal foundation, are planning to pay. Now, here is the reality in that case, as in so many others: The "many organizations" were already rolling ahead on the project in question, and the foundation's contribution simply helped one left-out group to join the caravan, rather than being stranded on the roadside. That was kind of the foundation, and maybe a good thing for all involved. But was it *leverage*?

In financial circles, the word still means only one thing. It gets out of control—sometimes comically so—when it slips the boundaries of finance and begins to describe everything else. "The paper leveraged a lot of creative thinking in the child-welfare field." "We leveraged more media from this event than from any of our previous efforts." "The presentation got excellent leverage in terms of feedback." Oh, dear.

metrics

Many Americans still admit to being flummoxed by hectares, litres, kilometres, and all the decimal exotica cooked up in the smoke-filled salons of the European continent. But sorting steres from deciares is child's play compared with navigating modern civilization's *other* metric system: the cult of METRICS in the world of social policy and programs.

Change one or two words, and the following sentence will nestle snugly into the writing of any branch of the human services: "The failure of the mental health industry to devise adequate metrics to capture long-term outcomes has resulted in confusion as to appropriate timing and levels of intervention." The phrase "to devise adequate metrics" is apparently the universal choice to replace the hopelessly outdated and déclassé verb "to measure." We no longer count anything in the digital age. We now devise metrics.

"Without metrics of success," says a recent foundation paper, "it is impossible to say with certainty whether the results of neighborhood redevelopment in the past 20 years justify the level of investment." The sentence is remarkable not so much for its use of METRICS—it would be much more remarkable to find a piece of foundation writing that does *not* use the term—but for its specific application to the field of neighborhood development. Here, one might have supposed, is a branch of American philanthropy and social policy that is among the most metricked civic activities in history. Neighborhood development groups in the past 20 or 30 years have made an art of counting new houses, refurbished apartments, reclaimed blocks, numbers of investors and lenders,

square feet of renovated commercial space, and (with a more fanciful standard of reckoning) the number of jobs added to the neighborhood employment base. Compared with neighborhood development, only professional baseball is more awash in metrics. So what more is the author of the quoted sentence looking for?

The key is in the seemingly innocent word "success." In modern philanthropic usage, what distinguishes METRICS from mere measurement is that the fancier word gauges *success*—or, as the mental health writer would have it, "long-term outcomes." Metrics are contemporary social policy's equivalent of the Philosopher's Stone—an elusive but potent medium that transforms the base metal of mere results into the unalloyed gold of "long-term outcomes." Building houses and treating illnesses are fine, but will they permanently solve the deeper problems? Seek ye the metric that will pierce *that* mystery. And be prepared for a long search.

(To be fair to the alchemists who sought the Philosopher's Stone: They may have been a little confused about the limits of chemistry, but at least they knew for certain what gold was. The same cannot be said for those seeking today's "long-term outcomes.")

Striving for better and better ways of recognizing success and failure is a mark of excellence. Foundations can be justly proud of their pursuit of that goal. But showering the field with METRICS, and then arrogating to the term all the powers of divine wisdom, hardly advances the cause. At best, the fruits of human services will someday be gauged over longer time periods, and units of comparison may come to fit more and more aspects of human progress. But even then, the

methods will still be those of measurement, plain and simple, and the resulting standards of "success" will still be partial, relative, and open to debate. The use of METRICS perfumes the whole enterprise with a false whiff of approaching finality. It seems to imply that someday mere measurement will become obsolete, replaced with something more conclusively scientific and indisputable. Around that superstition, with its gilded vocabulary of metrics and outcomes, gathers a new generation of cowled alchemists gibbering their way through the Information Age.

When just do won't do
operationalize

Those who set out to cure jargon and other self-important speech take their place in a humblingly long line of earlier scolds—a lineage stretching back at least to Aristophanes—who had in their day no more success than this essay is likely to have now. The prospect of success, in fact, never seems dimmer than when one confronts American jargon's answer to Original Sin, the perennial habit of attaching -ize to everything in sight (maximize, strategize, localize, institutionalize, prioritize, and on and on). In his devastating 1975 essay "Ize Front," the venerable NBC journalist Edwin Newman complained:

> -ize is thought to have a businesslike ring or, what in some cases is just as good, to sound technical…. What those who use -ize overlook is that it is usually unnecessary and always dull—it is a leaden syllable that imposes monotony on the language by making many words sound the same…. I have been told that a television news broadcaster in Alabama announced that a deputy sheriff, killed in the line

of duty, would be funeralized the following day, and there is, unfortunately, no reason to doubt it.

Despite Newman's best efforts (and his application of methods from outright ridicule to gentle erudition and literate wit), *-ize* is still with us a quarter-century after the funeralization of that Alabama deputy. As a result, we continue to endure sentences like this one, which appeared recently in a foundation publication: "Long-standing museums [are] seeking to reconceptualize their permanent collections as civic resources." How are we to suppose these museums "conceptualized" their collections before? As matters of civic indifference? As exclusive playthings of the pampered elite? As parasites upon the body politic? The sentence doesn't just confuse the reader, it invites all sorts of unflattering speculation.

Among the worst of the evil ize is OPERATIONALIZE, merely because it enjoys some of the simplest and most obvious synonyms in this whole essay. Most of the time, you can easily funeralize all six windy syllables and substitute "carry out," "work on," or simply "do." For example:

"The next phase will be for the coalition to *operationalize* the elements of its plan." Try "do what it planned."

"The challenge will be in *operationalizing* the six steps to financial independence." Try "taking the six steps."

"Having carefully negotiated a consensus process, the more difficult challenge will be to *operationalize* it." Once you fix the dangling participle at the beginning of that sentence, you can substitute "carry it out."

The problem with OPERATIONALIZE is not just that it's ugly, but that it is so sprawling a word—like an ill-planned building with too many additions—that it suggests something

complicated, demanding, and obscure. It tries to awe the reader with its sheer unruliness, as if it contains so many ideas that it might be dangerous to unleash them all. Yet the closer you look, the more likely the thing is to mean nothing more than "do." It's a Texas-size word that, as Texan Lyndon B. Johnson once said of some Lone Star poseur, turns out to be "all hat and no cattle."

A pattern of thought, often shifty
paradigm

Foundations can hardly bear primary blame for the relentless spread of this muddy word, which by now has oozed all over the vocabulary of the social and natural sciences, philosophy, art criticism, business management, and just about everything else. Its popularity has grown in direct proportion to the watering down of its meaning, which was never exactly concrete to start with, and has grown thinner with every new use. By now the word is indistinguishable from more honest (if less thrillingly Greek) terms like "pattern," "structure," "formula," or "model."

Philosophers may still retain some rigor in their use of PARADIGM. It was their laboratory, after all, from which the word first escaped, never to be recaptured. T. S. Kuhn gave it a seemingly permanent mystique in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, when he used it to describe the web of accepted theories through which scientists normally regard their subject. By Kuhn's definition, a paradigm is the set of inherited preconceptions, the "glass darkly" through which even the most scrupulous inquirer habitually views the world. When someone shatters the glass—as Einstein did with his theory

of relativity, for example—everyone is forced to ask questions differently, and to view the challenges of science and philosophy in a new way. Presto: a PARADIGM SHIFT.

It must have been obvious from the start that this word, thus invested with so spectacular a meaning, would be purloined by everyone with a plan destined to change the world. Nowadays we have a "welfare paradigm," a "hospital paradigm," the versatile "12-step paradigm," "urban paradigms" of various shapes and colors, and "market paradigms" too numerous to reckon. All of them, according to some observer or other, urgently need to shift. These metaphors and models and what-have-you are all related to Kuhn's original idea, no doubt—the kinds of poor, distant cousins who show up in Dickens or Balzac novels demanding bed and board. But any kinship with Kuhn is so tenuous, and the relevance of the fancy word is so diluted, that most uses of PARADIGM today are mere posturing, intended to flatter the user more than to inform the reader.

In some people's view (we claim no license to judge), Kuhn wasn't being all that precise himself. "The notion of paradigm," writes science historian Roy Porter in *The Harper Dictionary of Modern Thought*, "was too vague. The term seemed to be used to describe both whole sciences and individual concepts within them." Yet whatever its original shortcomings, Kuhn's idea was a dazzle of clarity compared with the uses the word has been put to in modern public policy and philanthropy. Because people in those fields often hope to change inherited ideas, practically anything they touch turns to paradigms. In attacking the "insurance paradigm" behind Social Security, for example, a foundation writer apparently rejected the more accurate words "analogy"

or "model" in favor of something that sounded more perfectly destined to *shift*. By borrowing Kuhn's word, the writer may also have hoped to dress up a simple reform plan as a scientific revolution.

Similarly, by decrying the "educational paradigm" behind employment training, a writer seemed to be arguing simply that such training should not be done by schools, or in classrooms. Seeking a "new leadership paradigm," a foundation trade group probably just wanted to find new forms of leadership, or new management styles. Both phrases provided a thunder of gravitas, yet neither meant anything special.

Still, it must be said that in none of these cases was the word wrongly used. Its general definition, apart from any special uses in philosophy, is so vague that it applies to almost anything. The Greek roots are simply the prefix *para*, for "alongside," affixed to the root *deik*, for "show" or "teach." Anything that's explained or taught with reference to anything else probably fits the basic concept.

Small wonder that little or no clarity has come from that morass. For anyone genuinely intent on a scientific revolution, Rule No. 1 might be: Find a more concrete word with which to state your case, and shift away from PARADIGM.

A love story with a prenuptial agreement
partnership/to partner

The pretense of many foundations to be "partners" of their grantees is at best a charming absurdity. The kinds of "partnerships" that result when one partner has a billion-dollar balance sheet and the other an annual five-figure deficit are the stuff of *Divorce Court* reruns. But our brief here

involves not the *idea* of partnership, lopsided as that may be in this context, but the word—and especially its more feeble relative, the verb TO PARTNER.

In the idealistic world of civic and charitable institutions, PARTNERSHIP has lately taken on the rosy mystique of the more mawkish fairy stories, with the nonprofit grantees in the role of Cinderella. "In this program," says one princely foundation, "we invite our program partners to share in more than the funding of individual initiatives, but in a whole range of supportive interactions." The first mystery in that sentence is the peculiar phrase "program partners," which turns out to be a euphemism for "grantees." The next is those unspecified "supportive interactions," in which a jaundiced eye might detect a "come-up-and-see-my-etchings" quality. But we have no time for such prurience here. The problem with this image of partnership is not so much that the intentions might not be honorable, but that the label is so broad that one can scarcely guess what intentions might be crouching behind it.

This ambiguity would be harmless enough, on a par with the gauzy endearments in Valentine cards, were it not for the inflated expectations to which the word gives rise on all sides. The expansive use of PARTNERSHIP now in vogue commonly implies that the "partners" share all manner of confidences and dreams, shoulder one another's burdens, support each other in sickness and health, and so on. (In actual experience, veterans of such partnerships most often come away sadder but wiser about what happens to love when money steps in the door.) The surprising fact is that, common as this blushing sentimentality has become, it most often goes unexamined.

Dictionaries and law books tend to take a far more detached and mathematical view of PARTNERSHIP, emphasizing explicit agreements in which control, expenses, profits, and losses are all divided in fixed proportion to each partner's share in the capital and risk of the enterprise. That approach is true to the word's roots—from the Latin *partior*, "to divide"—the same word that gave us "partition." In this traditional sense, still common in the making of business agreements, the partnership consists not in the *sharing* of "supportive interactions," but in the precise *dividing* of material interests, with each side knowing exactly how much of the common enterprise it owns and where its privileges and obligations lie. Strong fences, you might say, make good partners.

One sign that foundations take a more whimsical view of these matters is the popularity of the verb TO PARTNER, a breezy coinage rarely heard in the law offices where business deals are hammered out. In *The Oxford English Dictionary*, which traces the verb back to Shakespeare, nearly every example of its use refers either to light romance or to sport. Where large sums of money are involved, it seems, common sense would seek more concrete terms. So should foundations.

A bare stage for dancing adjectives
setting

"All the world's a stage," says Jaques in *As You Like It*, to which American social scientists and public policy aficionados add in chorus, "and all the scenes and places merely *settings*." There must be something of the frustrated playwright in the denizens of modern foundations and think-tanks. Wherever they look, they see not buildings or locales, but only settings.

For example:

"When care is available at all," writes someone in a foundation health program, "it is normally in institutional settings." Not in institutions? (Or better yet, in hospitals?)

"Many lower-income youth currently receive balanced nutrition only in educational settings." Not in school?

"Recreational programs are provided in community settings." That would be sports, we presume, in the neighborhood?

In every case, besides being redundant, SETTING is both more vague and more cumbersome than the simple word it replaces. Perhaps the writers intended their "settings" to include more than the specific places suggested here. Maybe there are "educational settings" that are not schools. There might even be "institutional settings" that aren't institutions. But if so, few readers are likely to guess that fact, much less to conceive what all those other, unnamed settings might be. SETTING adds nothing but unresolved (and possibly spurious) mystery—a useless hint of undisclosed scenery lurking somewhere in the wings.

Valuable, and apparently highly contagious
social

Nowhere in philanthropy and public policy is the cult of the financier more evident than in the gluey adjective SOCIAL. The term is now stuck onto every gilt-edge buzz-word from the New York Stock Exchange to the Harvard Business School: social *capital*, social *investment*, social *leverage*, social *dividends*, social *entrepreneur* (q.v.). This fixation may have begun with a useful little metaphorical insight by, among others, Robert Putnam, whose book *Bowling Alone* argues

that the wealth of societies is measured not only in their financial assets and human skills, but in the social glue that encourages trust and interaction among members. The depletion of this last form of wealth, "social capital," spells trouble for modern America, in Putnam's argument.

All's well up to that point. But as happens so often, one evocative metaphor soon becomes an unstoppable fad. What began with *capital* has affected every other noun known to capitalism, so that by now every financial doodad in the *Accountant's Handbook* has gone SOCIAL. This would be merely a cliché like so many others, if it weren't for the belief —by now widespread in the foundation world—that all these pinstriped coinages have real meanings, and must be imposed on grantseekers as criteria for selection. To qualify for support from many foundations, applicants now must show how they intend to build social capital, earn social returns, increase social productivity, and so on. All too often, grantees understand that this simply means they must dust off last year's grant proposals and rewrite the old points in this new Socialese.

Put together (by us) with great skill
structured/crafted

The ancient verbs "arrange," "shape," "organize," "put together," and "prepare" are out, chucked aside among the dowdy detritus of the cool, corporate New Age. Today, everything with any structure at all is STRUCTURED, and anything that reflects the least craft must therefore be CRAFTED. The former word, at which *The Oxford English Dictionary* sniffs "not common until the 20th c.," is now so common that no writer who purports to be serious or sophisticated in the 21st c. can do

without it. The word has passed the 1990s' ultimate test of chic: There is a brand of underwear called STRUCTURE, and as a standard of celebrity for high-fashion words, that is the equivalent of marrying royalty. The verb TO CRAFT—to which the OED's British editors give the ultimate brush-off "chiefly U.S."—has indeed all but overrun American usage, in every context from art to brewing (where "craft brewed" is now a euphemism for "has some detectable flavor").

Yet if CRAFT is "chiefly U.S.," it earns no official welcome on these shores, either. The authority on U.S. English, the generally lenient *American Heritage Dictionary*, has no patience with the word's most common meaning: to put something together cleverly or write effectively. The AHD delicately brands that sense of the word as a "usage problem," on the grounds that it portrays thinking and writing as, in the AHD's phrase, "a kind of handicraft," like stitching potholders or making angels out of toilet-paper rolls. A craft, in the most common sense, is a manual skill that can be taught and mastered by any reasonably coordinated person. In the fancier and more pretentious modern uses of CRAFT, that is the opposite of what's intended. Used in the fashionable way, the word defeats its own purpose. (An even older definition, "to deal evasively or deceptively," slips an unintentional self-revelation past modern writers who insist on "crafting" things.)

But the real problem with both these words has nothing to do with nuances of meaning. The problem is that they're everywhere, like overexposed sports celebrities with too many endorsement contracts. They have that starved look of the desperately publicity-hungry, a "hey-look-at-me" quality that has rubbed the shine off whatever glamour they once

possessed. Anyone looking for a refreshing way to describe something that is nicely put together or carefully prepared would do well to try two genuinely unusual expressions sure to provoke surprise and admiration in any reader: "nicely put together" and "carefully prepared."

Probably capable of lasting until the next grant

sustainable

In the predecessor to this essay, we argued that most jargon is born in the technical laboratories of experts who are exploring new territory. There, it has a useful—and sometimes even noble—job to do, describing new or unfamiliar ideas. So when environmentalists and economists first applied SUSTAINABLE to certain forms of development and methods of harvesting natural resources, they had something precise and significant in mind. The best of them could tell you, with great specificity, what they considered to be the "sustainable" method of fishing for tuna or culling a forest. Whether they were correct about those things was a question that reasonable people could debate, because there was a definition of SUSTAINABILITY that both sides, supporters and opponents, could grasp and reckon with.

Unfortunately, the environmentalists had picked a word that already had a number of other meanings in occasional use. So the minute their new meaning caught the public imagination, it took no time turning up in every subject that wished to borrow the political or scientific cachet of environmentalism. Suddenly, no one wanted a sturdy or durable program any more, they wanted a *sustainable* one. Expenditures could no longer merely be affordable, they had to be sustainable.

Skills taught in school couldn't just be lasting, they had to be sustainable. Anything, in short, that made it past autumn's first frost was now *sustainable*. Any connection to the survival of whales or rain forests had been lost for good.

This perfectly illustrates the price we pay when a crisp, technical term becomes a mushy cliché, when commonplace ideas masquerade as technical esoterica. There is nothing more sophisticated about a "sustainable" budget than about a stable one, though writers who use SUSTAINABLE that way evidently hope to be taken for savvy and wise. Yet while they are tossing the word around for empty effect, its usefulness in its original context starts to dissolve. Is "sustainable" development near the Everglades merely development that will survive the first flood? No, that wasn't supposed to be the meaning at all. But thanks to (forgive the expression) the watering down of the original term, the important, old meaning has been … well, washed away.

The energy needed to fit tab A into slot B

synergy

This ostentatious word means nothing more than "working together." It's just the Greek prefix *syn-*, meaning "together," stuck onto the word for "work," *ergon* (which gave us the recent coinage *ergonomics*). It can apply just as perfectly to ham-and-rye or bat-and-ball as to more ethereal stuff. There's absolutely nothing occult about it. So why is it whispered all over philanthropy in the awestruck tones normally reserved for exorcisms? Apparently because those who use the word believe (or maybe wish to pretend) that they are invoking some sort of powerful mystical fusion, something understood

only by Tibetan monks and particle physicists. The dispiriting reality is that they are simply substituting an ancient Greek word for more common, and better understood, English ones, like "cooperation" or "common effort."

We take the charitable view that those who use SYNERGY this way are unaware of the false pretenses under which it travels. They are, we presume, hapless victims of a lexical confidence scheme. The author of the following sentence, for instance, would no doubt wish to have received a timely nudge in the ribs before committing this absurdity to paper: "A second benefit of this venture will be the synergies it produces in the cultural, political, and social climate of the surrounding community." Can't you just see the acolytes readying incense and rose petals for this impending ritual of climatic metamorphosis?

Likewise, someone should have warned the author of this one: "The program has excelled in synergizing the efforts of other community institutions around the community center." This bears all the marks of something out of a Kung Fu movie: *Come forward, nimble warrior, and be synergized if you dare.*

Finally: "The goal of this partnership will be to take advantage of synergies with health care and educational institutions." You have to wonder whether that sentence originally said, "We're going to work with hospitals and schools," and someone told the author to make it a bit more … professional.

value added

Here, as with SYNERGY, is an expression that means nothing special yet has somehow become indispensable to any serious discussion of civic or philanthropic affairs. The phrase means exactly what it seems to mean: raising the value of something by doing a little work on it. This thoroughly pedestrian meaning has some limited use in economics, and particularly in the field of taxation, where foundations and nonprofits would presumably have no use for it. Yet in the philanthropic world, VALUE ADDED has been invested with all the gravitas of fundamental mission and high charitable purpose. You won't catch a foundation expressing a wish to do something valuable, or to be valuable to others. They all want to *provide value added*, or in briefer form, to *add value*.

Well, who wouldn't? The alternative would be to work all day, then go home at night and face your spouse and children with the pathetic admission that you *had not made anything better* all day long. Perhaps there are people working in foundations today for whom that nightmare is a daily reality. We are not acquainted with them, thank God. But in any case, surely no one would *aspire* to that situation. And therefore, no one should consider it any great achievement to "add value," much less to "*seek* to add value." It's the very least that America can ask of her sons and daughters. The issue is how much value you add, to what, and for how long. The expression VALUE ADDED is silent on all of that. It says nothing about degree or quality or wisdom, just mere increment. Perhaps translating the phrase into Greek would make it more expressive. On second thought, don't even suggest it …

venture

The hottest topic of debate in foundation circles nowadays is the merits of venture capitalism (or in some versions, investment banking) as a metaphor for smart philanthropy. The debate is not mainly about vocabulary or writing style, but about a real substantive question: Are grantmakers a species of investor, building benevolent enterprises that produce a measurable return for society, or are they more passive enablers of good, seeking mainly to support those who pursue charitable ends by whatever path. That is a thorny philosophical matter far beyond the boundaries of this essay. We therefore approach the word VENTURE warily, not as a way of settling the "venture philanthropy" debate, but as a window through which to view a broader phenomenon: the wholesale importation of financial palaver into the glossary of public and civic affairs.

The starched-collar solemnity of VENTURE is ironic, considering that the word is a medieval foreshortening (probably accidental) of *ad*venture, with all the derring-do that implies. For some centuries, VENTURE had a cavalier, throw-of-the-dice quality—it meant random chance, or risk, or, in some senses, hazard. It came into its modern business meaning through the portals of risk: the word initially described the work of those devil-may-care visionaries (later ENTREPRENEURS) whose more far-fetched business ideas took on the qualities of an adventure, a sort of safari into the jungles of commerce.

These days, at least among foundations, it has acquired almost the opposite meaning. To be a true venture, an idea now has to be gravely responsible, supported with all the prudent INFRASTRUCTURE of a well-oiled organization, with precise METRICS of return, particularly if it is a SOCIAL venture. It must have CAPACITY, or else get TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE (see *In Other Words*) and keep all its STAKEHOLDERS (see below) confident and content. Sort of drains the adventure right out of the thing, doesn't it?

The popularity of these words is only partly an outgrowth of the recent "venture philanthropy" debate. Before anyone ever suggested venture capitalism as a model for the modern foundation, all these business terms (VENTURE included) were already floating about the charitable ether, haphazardly sticking to any undertaking more ambitious than a grammar school bake sale. Sometime in the 1980s, talking like financiers started making people feel responsible and prudent (perhaps it did the same for financiers, as their institutions crumbled about them). At the same time, public attitudes toward foundations and nonprofit institutions were growing more skeptical. Thus did the bankers' jargon increasingly become a bromide for queasy grantmakers.

Today, this pilfered vocabulary might actually be more relevant, and certainly more interesting, if it could regain some of its lost connotations of peril. The fact is that many of the most urgent callings of modern philanthropy entail risks that would make an ordinary business start-up look like a license to print money. The odds of achieving, say, a lasting recovery for a cocaine addict, or steady employment for a person with no experience and few basic skills, or a safe and healthy upbringing for kids in dangerous neighborhoods—now *those* are ventures, in the chanciest old meaning of the word.

In the tired vocabulary of "venture" and "return" and "investment" and the like, it is the genteel, leather-armchair

quality that offends. At its best, philanthropy is an *ad*venture, with its first syllable fully intact and all its hazards out in the open. Foundations can accept the risks or avoid them, as they see fit, but hiding them behind a suite of oak paneling gains nothing—except to take some of the fun, and much of the virtue, out of their work.

To be fair, some foundations do maintain "venture funds" designed expressly for grants that lie somewhere outside the foundations' normal bounds of safety and familiarity. When the intended meaning includes that sense of unusual risk, the word plays exactly the role for which it was designed. Unfortunately for those foundations, most readers are by now so accustomed to seeing the word used in the stodgy sense of "businesslike operation" and "responsible enterprise" that they are unlikely to detect any more daring intent.

action plan
buy-in
consensus-building/consensus
implementing
stakeholders

In wrapping up this catalogue of doubletalk, we depart from the discipline of an alphabetical listing to linger a moment over a rare treasure, a jewel of modern jargon, a sentence that offers in one stroke an illustration of at least five of philanthropy's favorite buzz-words.

To develop a realistic, credible, and doable action plan—one that requires buy-in from numerous stakeholders—we must devise an ongoing decision-making and consensus-building process, [including] determining priorities, identifying the implementing entities, … and assessing available funding.

Now, for the benefit of tourists from English-speaking countries, here is a reasonable translation:

To do this, we should have a good plan, and we'll need support from the many people who will have to carry out parts of it. That means, in turn, that we have to set up a good process for dividing the work and the cost, and for making decisions along the way.

What makes the second sentence better than the first? Let's compare the jargon with the ordinary English words that do the same job.

ACTION PLAN (vs. "plan"): There are, we presume, *in*action plans somewhere in the world. But surely no one would write about them publicly. With apologies to Gertrude Stein, a plan is a plan is a plan.

BUY-IN (vs. "support" and "play a role"): Unless we are actually asking people to purchase shares or other securities, they are participating in and supporting our plan, not buying pieces of it. The "buy" language simply takes an ordinary process of participation and turns it into some unspecified kind of securities transaction.

CONSENSUS-BUILDING process (vs. "process for making decisions"): True consensus is nice but elusive. CONSENSUS, in fact, is simply the Latin equivalent of the Greek *sympátheia*, "sympathy": It entails a real harmony of feeling and purpose— lovely to imagine, but hard to accomplish in your ordinary,

workaday "action plan." What you want is a way of settling the inevitable disagreements. The result may be some set of parliamentary rules, perhaps. But true consensus? Not likely.

IMPLEMENTING (vs. "work"): The "implementing entities" in this sentence are simply those people (sorry: stakeholders) who have to do the work. See *In Other Words* for a discussion of that metaphysical bubble ENTITY. Here, as in most cases, IMPLEMENTING refers amorphously to doing whatever has to be done.

STAKEHOLDERS (vs. "people who need to play a role"): This isn't an exact translation—not all "stakeholders" presumably "need to play a role." But we make the substitution mainly because the original word plays a cheap trick, and the translation tries to make it honest. In most civic and charitable projects, the people with a "stake" in the results are legion. When people try to improve schools or health care or Social Security, who has a "stake" in the results? Answer: *All of us*— every last woman, man, and child. Half the time, STAKE-HOLDERS is a passable substitute for "all the living, and even a few of the dead." As such, in any practical context it is useless noise. In the sentence in question, the only people actually at issue are the ones whose "stake" is big enough to warrant giving a little sweat to the cause. For those people, this translation fits fine.

The only explanation for the spectacular success of STAKE-HOLDERS in the philanthropic demimonde is that the word sounds tantalizingly like its cousin "stockholders."[4] For those with a painful, gnawing envy of Wall Street and all its blandishments, the desire for stockholders must have the merciless pull of an addiction. (Funny, that: Most *actual* denizens of

Wall Street would be delighted to give their stockholders the heave-ho, as long as they could hold on to the capital.) Among Wall Street wannabes, a word that gives the thrilling *feeling* of stock without the nuisance of actually paying dividends would naturally be a big hit. For those with a chemical dependence on the gibberish of high finance, STAKEHOLDERS is something like methadone: It eases some of the craving, without inflicting the harmful side-effects of the real thing.

4 The similarity is misleading. David Hunter of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation pointed out to me that the word's true original meaning is almost exactly the opposite of its now-fashionable one. Originally a "stakeholder" held other people's stakes in a bet or dispute. "Thus," writes Hunter, "stakeholders had no preference regarding results … and that's what has changed."

Coming to Terms

Drawing sense from the wells of gibberish

Writing about Warren G. Harding, the 29th president and regarded by some as the worst American chief executive, former Treasury Secretary William Gibbs McAdoo rendered this withering assessment:

> He spoke in a big bow-wow style of oratory. His speeches leave the impression of an army of pompous phrases moving over the landscape in search of an idea. Sometimes these meandering words would actually capture a straggling thought and bear it triumphantly, a prisoner in their midst, until it died of servitude and overwork.[5]

The Harding administration is happily gone and mostly forgotten, but the "bow-wow style of oratory" lives on. The armies of pomposity still amass daily in their fearsome battalions. But if the bow-wow orators and the uniformed windbags were the only ones ignoring the decencies of honest diction, the world would be no worse off than it's ever been. The problem with overblown, meaningless writing and speech—with jargon, in a word—is not that scoundrels indulge in it, but just the opposite. It is lately a sin of very good people with important things to say. And the penalty is therefore paid not just by the guilty, but by the many honest thoughts that die imprisoned.

5 Harding, whatever his official misdeeds, was at least honest enough to acknowledge that his official words were often impostors. Midway through one overheated speech, he stopped midsentence and admitted frankly to his audience, "I didn't write a word of this, and I don't agree with anything I've just said."

Not only do good people fall into jargon's rhetorical traps—heads of worthwhile programs and fine organizations, thoughtful scholars, visionary reformers—but more specifically, good *writers* do it. The words listed in the previous chapter are not the inventions of nincompoops, but more often of gifted people with a flair for language. Conversely, some of the clearest, frankest writing is the work of relatively prosaic authors whose ideas are nothing special, but whose genius lies entirely in their candor and their passion to be understood. Marry that candor and passion to the good work of the best philanthropic and civic organizations, and the effect could be impressive. Yet in practice, that rarely happens. Why?

One reason, almost certainly, is a fear of ideological taint—a desire to express ideas with the detached, antiseptic certainty of science, not the heat of zealotry. It is no coincidence that the great majority of off-putting words and stilted phrases in this volume (as in its predecessor) sprang from fields known for their cucumber-cool precision: engineering, the natural sciences, finance, the military. You don't get sports metaphors very often in philanthropy—at least not in the official writing—nor do you get those of art or cuisine or even religion (FAITH-BASED being a perfect illustration: it's a description of religion that is unknown in the actual *practice* of spirituality). Those fields are all too instinctive, subjective, or creative. In philanthropy, it seems, the main impulse is to make everything seem like a law of physics or math, beyond shades of interpretation or traps of dispute, all strictly Q.E.D.

From that impulse come TARGETING, METRICS, and INFRASTRUCTURE. And they turn up among people with rich vocabularies, perfectly capable of using more precise, clearer, or more colorful terms. So what happens to those people?

Privately, many of them confess to seeing no alternative; they're bound to use the conventional fad phrases to establish their bona fides among philanthropy's big-shots—something like an "open sesame" to unlock the doors of foundation conference rooms. A grantee of several major foundations told me bluntly, "If I wrote the way you suggest, I would be discounted in half the foundations I now depend on. Give me a choice between a grant and a reputation as a lively raconteur, and I'll take the money, thank you very much."

Touché. But before we unfairly brand program officers as the sole villains of this tale, here is a similar quote (likewise off-the-record) from a program officer at a major national foundation:

> Any grant I write up has to pass muster with [an academic scholar in top management] and then with our general counsel, who is looking for exact correspondences between the foundation's program priorities and my write-up. If I don't use the right words, [the general counsel] won't see the correspondences, and [the senior manager] won't feel there's academic rigor here. Then there are the board members, who expect to see "tough business thinking" in these grants—by which they generally mean banker-speak. How much trouble am I willing to put myself to, avoiding the very terms that all my bosses seem to want? I'm not in this for martyrdom. I'd write it in Flemish, if that got my grants approved.

Point conceded. It would be merely quixotic to suggest that writers for civic and philanthropic causes should fall on their swords just to avoid clumsy but popular jargon. If the fad words of the moment absolutely must be used to gain credibility with a particular audience, then used they will be.

But responsible people can—and, we dare to suggest, *ought to*—fight back in ways that don't hurt their cause. Here are two:

First, when using vague clichés and insider buzz-phrases, go on to *explain them in concrete terms*. This has the benefit of compelling both the writer and the reader to penetrate the jargon and explore the practical meaning behind it. I stumbled onto this principle, rather like Archimedes in his bath, when I read the following sentences, written by some of the more literate writers and thinkers in youth development (I've added the italics to reinforce a point):

> Full appreciation of the significance of sports [as an avenue for reaching troubled young people] must take into account the vast investment in *infrastructure* supporting youth participation. As the 42,000 Little League teams suggest, along with the thousands of other kinds of leagues and recreation departments around the country, part of this *infrastructure* is organizational. At the same time, there are tens of thousands of gymnasiums, football and soccer fields, baseball diamonds, basketball courts, and other physical forms of *infrastructure* crisscrossing the country.

The repetitive, insistent use of INFRASTRUCTURE in this paragraph looks like a political calculation. Someone in the intended audience (perhaps several people) evidently suffers from an unwholesome fondness for the word, and the authors felt it necessary to lay INFRASTRUCTURE on a bit thick to appease that class of reader. Fine. But look at the rest of the paragraph: It's a virtual catalogue of *precisely* what organizations, facilities, and programs the writers have in mind. Despite the repetitive use of one buzz-word, an ordinary reader will come away from this paragraph exactly as any good writer

would hope: clearly picturing a national landscape of playing fields, gyms, and sports leagues, not the gas lines and sewer pipes that INFRASTRUCTURE ordinarily denotes. In short, the paragraph works, despite its descent into jargon, because it drowns the jargon in a deluge of clarity.

The second duty of a careful writer confronting jargon is to police the language mercilessly—to subject every use of a faddish or technical expression to a test of necessity and fitness, every time. The worst enemy of clear writing is *habit*—the lazy reliance on cliché and boilerplate that, in Edwin Newman's phrase, "imposes monotony on the language." Readers who are impressed by jargon are powers to be reckoned with, no question. But they are few, compared with the legions of other readers with no time or patience for tired, bloated, and imprecise prose. Every use of jargon should be weighed on those scales: How much do I gain by impressing the few, and how much have I lost by alienating the many? The answer may be different each time.

"Give me a choice between a grant and a reputation as a lively raconteur," said the seasoned grantee, "and I'll take the money." Fine, but that's not always the choice—and for most civic and charitable activity, most of the time, that isn't the choice *at all*. The words and phrases cited in this essay turn up routinely in press releases, policy papers for elected officials, textbooks, even brochures and other public relations pieces. The purpose of those pieces is to prompt imagination, excitement, a thrill of discovery among a wide circle of readers, not to prove one's membership in some technical club with code words and secret handshakes. When jargon turns up in those publications, it is almost certainly the result of

self-defeating habit. Breaking those habits, or at least subjecting them to an unrelenting discipline, is the duty of everyone with anything even remotely important to say.

In the skeptical world in which most nonprofits and foundations ply their trade, writing nowadays is an act of salesmanship. Sometimes the sales job is aimed at particular executives or trustees whose chimes are rung by OPERATIONALIZE and VALUE ADDED. Far more often, the prospect is some weary block association leader, civic activist, or congressional staffer, old enough to have been chastened by Model Cities and "maximum feasible participation," serial school and welfare reforms of no lasting consequence, and the occasional charitable chimera or even outright scam. For today's philanthropic message, every customer is a tough customer, to whom tortured and alien language from any public-interest type is just one more signal to pull on the rubber boots. In this atmosphere, the penalty for self-flattering doubletalk and empty stock phrases—for the "bow-wow style of oratory" popular in too many foundations, universities, and nonprofit groups—will sooner or later be the penalty paid by Warren G. Harding and his armies: dismay at first, ridicule later, and finally contempt.

Harding, at least, may well have deserved it. Foundations and their allies owe themselves a better fate.

Acknowledgements

Nearly every sample of jargon in this essay was nominated—and sample abuses sometimes supplied—by members of two national organizations, the Communications Network and the Council on Foundations. Both of those organizations gave me privileged opportunities to argue my point to their members and to solicit the words and phrases that now fill these pages. Their help made this little volume much more complete than anything I could have done on my own.

Likewise, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation not only supported my work on this essay and its predecessor, but generously furnished some of the offending specimens from its own files. In the end, only a tiny minority of the samples I used came from those files, but the ones borrowed from the Clark Foundation were all offered voluntarily—a refreshing act of institutional humility uncommon in any walk of life.

The Park Service quotation in the opening paragraph came to my attention courtesy of a 1980s-era column by William Safire of the *New York Times*, whose tart weekly parsing of trendy English sets a standard to which this essay does not dare aspire. The anecdote about Bertrand Russell on page 19 came from John Derbyshire, contributing editor of the *National Review*, in a February 2001 article on an unrelated topic. (Even though the topic wasn't related to jargon, Derbyshire's column did describe a scholarly tome "written in academic jargon," by authors "who write 'veridicality' when they mean 'truth.'") Although I haven't independently fact-checked either of these anecdotes, they have the ring of veridicality.

Finally, I thank editor Anne Mackinnon for her ideas, inspiration, and chastening corrections. The world, sadly, is not overrun with good editors. But in my experience, it has been blessed with at least one great one.

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