

a verbal fog that blurs thought  
and obscures democracy

## **buzz-words**

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How the public interest becomes  
neither public nor interesting

## **when words fail**

Tony Proscio

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*“Have something to say  
and say it as clearly as you can.  
That is the only secret of style.”*

MATTHEW ARNOLD,  
BRITISH POET AND CRITIC, 1822–1888

## Table of Contents

Foreword by Michael A. Bailin, <i>President</i>	5
Baffled Beyond Words	9
The Language of the Fringe	25
The Quest for the Common Mind	38
Situational (Un)Awareness	57
Conclusion: Jargon and Its Apologists	74
Index	85

## Foreword

by Michael A. Bailin, *President*

To many, Tony Proscio might seem like a modern-day Don Quixote. He is ever tilting at windmills in an attempt to slay the many forms of jargon that have been laying siege to the written materials and presentations from foundations and allied organizations that are involved in work designed to improve how our society functions. In our view, however, Tony's efforts, while difficult, and at times thankless, have been anything but futile. For starters, he's produced two extremely popular and much demanded books, *In Other Words* and *Bad Words for Good*.

And now he's back with a third volume on the subject, *When Words Fail: How the public interest becomes neither public nor interesting*.

In introducing *When Words Fail*, I thought it would be helpful to remind both past readers and new ones of our reasons for underwriting these books. While Tony's commentary is by intent mocking and spiced liberally with ridicule, we are neither in the business of ridiculing people for its own sake, nor of telling them how to write and speak. We, too, at times (and more than we like) produce our share of obscure text and bloviated mush; we're working hard to limit the damage ...

and hope that Tony's ardent efforts will encourage others to do so as well.

When Tony Proscio first sailed off to hunt for jargon several years ago, we had no doubt he'd find a lot that wasn't pretty about the way foundations and others in allied fields write and speak. But we weren't prepared for what happened after Tony made his rounds of foundation offices and poked through their files, collecting brochures, speeches, white papers, and such. He returned with bags overflowing with example after egregious example of bad words used for good causes (including, much to our chagrin, many from our own files). After publishing *In Other Words*, praise poured in, and requests for copies continued nonstop. So did invitations to Tony to speak at conferences, address foundation boards, and even conduct workshops. Before long, Tony became his own *scaled up* anti-jargon growth industry. Thus followed *Bad Words for Good*.

By this time, we imagined that both the interest and need for more jargon books would be sated. Guess what? We were wrong on both counts.

So here we are for a third time. But take note!—this is the last in our series. While we know there are many more examples of jargon usage hiding in plain sight, this crusade cannot go on forever. Rather, we believe that after three volumes, and having dredged up some of the least flattering examples of how people in our work communicate, the point has been made that this is a serious issue that demands serious attention. Jargon may be a laughing matter when subject to Tony's skewering, but it stops being funny when it gets in the way of plain speaking.

We know that people who work for foundations and related fields are by and large caring people (we are part of that circle, after all). We all want our work to have impact, to improve people's lives. Our plea to all of us who work to better society is that we think more carefully about what we are trying to say and to whom, and ask ourselves whether our ideas and suggestions will make sense and be understood by those we hope to influence. Effective communication is not just about publishing a paper, posting documents on a website, or giving a speech. It's taking the time to think carefully about our ideas and work before we start talking about them to others outside our inner circle.

One sad side note as we wind down this series and put it to bed: We're going to miss some great writing—not to mention wit, irony, and lots of laughs that have been and continue to be a hallmark of Tony's anti-jargon crusade.

Oh well. You win some and lose some.

## Baffled Beyond Words

*“The whole essence of a good, lively democracy is that one has a good, lively argument. But [the use of] clichéd, dumbed-down, inflated, and bogus management-speak... kills real debate. And nobody is prepared to stand up and say, ‘What does that mean?’ because the assumption is made that if you don’t know what it means, then there is something wrong with you.”*

BRITISH JOURNALIST JOHN HUMPHRYS, IN AN INTERVIEW WITH REUTERS NEWS SERVICE, NOVEMBER 16, 2004

Several years ago, under the title *In Other Words*, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation issued what we called, in a subtitle, “a plea for plain speaking in foundations.” Two years later, we followed with another volume, called *Bad Words for Good*, expanding on the theme. Both essays focused on jargon in philanthropy and public service—turgid, vain, or just meaningless expressions whose worst effect is, as John Humphrys put it, to “dumb down” the voice of democracy.<sup>1</sup>

In all honesty, the goal of those little essays wasn’t anything so grand as saving democracy. Our much smaller thesis was that the philanthropic world’s fetish for “bogus management-speak” does even more harm to the people who use this language than it does to the body politic. It gives the impression—a false

<sup>1</sup>Humphrys, following in the tradition of Americans William Safire, Edwin Newman, and Bill Bryson, has written a witty diatribe against official doubletalk in politics and public affairs: *Lost for Words: The Mangling and Manipulating of the English Language* (Hodder & Stoughton, November, 2004). Humphrys’s book is not yet, at this writing, published in the United States, but is available from British book-sellers online.

one, in our view—of a civic and philanthropic subculture stifled by its own pomposity, self-involvement, and muddled thinking. Reflecting on overused words like CAPACITY, BENCHMARKING, INFRASTRUCTURE, METRICS, and SYSTEMS, the essays painted a picture of a field dressed up, like a drunken reveler at a fancy-dress ball, in an absurd and giddy caricature of itself.

Most of this vocabulary isn't even original. It has been pilfered from other fields and stretched beyond all bounds of technical meaning or usefulness. By parroting every verbal fad wafting from the nation's war colleges, investment banks, engineering schools, and management consultancies, foundations and nonprofit groups not only make themselves seem silly—like star-struck teenagers aping the hand gestures of every new pop star—but something far worse: They wall themselves off from the public in whose interest most of them pursue their branch of good work.

To be clear, our complaint wasn't primarily about the aesthetics of public-interest writing. Whether authors use fancy words and intricate phrases or simple noun-verb-noun constructions, whether their prose has rhythm and music or merely plods along, the issue is that they say, clearly and honestly, what they mean, and that they candidly describe ideas and activities that one can readily envision, think over, and maybe dispute. Sometimes, when ideas are genuinely complicated, a rich vocabulary—learned or poetic or both—can be a real plus. But if so, "rich" would have to mean more than just lofty and abstruse. Most of all, it would have to mean precise, concrete, and frank. In too much philanthropic and public-interest writing, those qualities are either absent or buried deep under a layer of gibberish.

## ORIGINS OF A FALSE IMPRESSION

Because I spend most of my time as a consultant to foundations, and therefore know a great many foundation officers, I feel confident that the widespread image of a field populated by confused, overweening elitists is wrong. In my experience, people are drawn to philanthropy and the related fields of civic affairs and public policy largely by a clear-headed and intelligent desire to make the world better. Yet the stilted doubletalk gives a different and far more menacing impression: a country-club bourgeoisie whose every utterance is intended more to impress and intimidate than to discuss, inform, or persuade. If that false image has been spreading—and inviting periodic waves of attack from politicians and the media—the blame for it lies at least partly at the doorstep of foundations and public-interest groups themselves. Speak and write like a narcissistic automaton, and people can be forgiven for believing that's what you are.

Or anyway, that was our premise when this series of essays began. Four years later, as this is written, the subject of foundation and nonprofit jargon has received a bit more attention than it had in the past (not necessarily thanks to anything we've done). But regrettably, the shape and tone of public-interest communication has changed very little. Even in the Internet age, with its supposed premium on crisp, sprightly communication, it is still easy to find a major philanthropic Web site that proclaims:

We support community-based institutions that mobilize and leverage philanthropic capital, investment capital, social capital and natural resources in a responsible and fair manner. Grant making emphasizes community-based

responses to growing needs for prevention strategies and appropriate policies. . . . [G]rant making also helps to establish and fortify organizations and institutions that support asset building through research, training, policy analysis, and advocacy.

Other than tempting the reader to imagine a universe of irresponsible, unfair, inappropriate policies devoid of all forms of capital and not based in any community, and of asset building not achieved through research, training, and whatnot, *what does this description say? What kind of work does the foundation actually want to pay for?* The unintentional but irresistible message behind this avalanche of buzz-words is: Don't ask.

Yet the real problem with statements like this is not the hit parade of trendy words: COMMUNITY-BASED, MOBILIZATION, CAPITAL, STRATEGIES, and so on. In the four years since the publication of *In Other Words*, we've learned that the challenge is not just a matter of finding other words. The words are a problem, sure. But even when the vocabulary is scrubbed of all its LEVERAGE and PREVENTION, the tone and style continue to be evasive, formulaic, often pseudo-scientific, and generally impenetrable.

Take ASSET BUILDING, for example — an intriguing idea with bipartisan appeal, once you know what it means. It has to do with helping poor or disadvantaged people own things that will improve their lives and incomes and give them more control over their future. Elsewhere on its Web site, the same foundation gives helpful, concrete examples of such assets: savings, investments, businesses, homes, and land, among other things. But in most other spots, including the page just

quoted, the text refers simply to disembodied ASSETS, which are somehow to be built (literally? figuratively? no clue) and enriched with all sorts of mobilized CAPITAL, much of which seems to verge on the ethereal. It is often unclear whether the assets in question might include purely metaphorical ones (like skills, connections, worldly wisdom) and thus be built with purely metaphorical capital (like, . . . well, skills, connections, and worldly wisdom). As a result of all the vagueness, a reader who might readily be drawn to this idea will end up having barely a clue what it's about. Even the intrepid types who read all the way to the end of the page will be in the dark — unless, of course, they are already in the field and know the code.

And that, sadly, is the real audience at whom most foundation and public-policy writing is aimed. Most of it is a soothingly coded message from one true believer to another; it is neither intended nor likely to persuade anyone from the outside. Thus the seemingly inbred nature of most philanthropic style, the just-among-us quality that puts off the uninitiated and creates the unflattering clubhouse aura surrounding public-interest organizations of all kinds.

#### THE NOT-SO-IDEOLOGICAL DIVIDE

Well, wait. We're not really talking about public-interest organizations of *all* kinds. Some foundations, mostly those of a more conservative bent, have lately figured out that plain speaking is a more effective, compelling way to pursue philanthropy and public policy. And they've done a brilliant job of proving the point. Pick up nearly any publication of the Heritage Foundation or the Cato, Manhattan, or Hoover

Institutes, and you are likely to be treated to a thrilling or infuriating take (depending on your politics) on the public issues of the day. Click your way over to comparable reports supported by the majority of foundations at the center and left of the political spectrum, and the effect is far more likely to induce drowsiness or, worse, bewilderment. There are, of course, glaring exceptions on both sides. But the pattern is fairly easy to trace with a few hours' meandering around the dot-org cyberscape.

The reason for this seemingly ideological divide is not really ideological at all, but historical. For roughly half the 20th century, conservatives languished in the minority of American politics and had to argue their way — painstakingly, sometimes stridently, but with mounting skill and artistry — back into power. Meanwhile, for several of those decades, liberal ideas enjoyed a comfortable, widespread acceptance. So long as progressive social causes could rely on more or less automatic support, the arguments behind them didn't need to be all that gripping. And as time went on, they became less and less so. The result, several decades into this story, is that conservative commentators have developed a knack for clear, impassioned debate, and nearly everyone from the center leftward has yet to catch up. If that were merely a problem for the ideological left, then it would be best left to liberal thinkers to sort out on their own. But the actual consequences are more general than that. With one large segment of organized philanthropy effectively tongue-tied, the result is an increasingly lopsided civic conversation. Without a lively, skillful back-and-forth, the public is denied its best chance of sifting good ideas from bad.

Liberal (or at least non-conservative) writers sometimes defend themselves with this counter-charge: Simple, crisp language is a lot easier to use when the ideas behind it are not very complicated. Some critics of conservative philanthropy argue that the ideas being espoused on the right are not merely simple but, worse, simplistic: slogans without substance, easy to describe in short, clear sentences because there is no complexity or deep reasoning behind them. Without taking a position on the ideological accusations involved in that argument (except to note that conservatives lob the same criticism back at the left), one can test it easily enough with a few moments' searching on the Internet. In reality, it is possible to come up with statements from conservative think tanks on free trade, taxation, or environmental regulation (topics picked at random) that are anything but simple. The underlying arguments in some cases require an advanced degree to dissect and rebut. Yet it is more likely that a lay person will be able to read, ponder, and even enjoy many of those papers than for a similar reader browsing equally complex and learned writing taking opposing points of view. In fact, as later sections of this essay will argue, the hardest, densest, and most forbidding writing from the left tends not to be primarily on topics packed with complex theoretical or empirical reasoning, but on such blunt, practical questions as "Who ought to do what, for whom?"

As this is written, during the debate over proposed changes to Social Security in early 2005, things seem to be looking up. Advocates on both sides of the issue — those, mostly conservative, who want to revamp Social Security, and the more liberal defenders of the current program — have advanced



complex economic arguments in clear, understandable, and intelligently provocative language. It's not that either side is taking pains to be unbiased (which is not their job), but both are making their pitch with explanations, images, and forms of argument that are easy to grasp and stimulating to think about. Mainstream journalists and the more idiosyncratic "bloggers" (authors of online Web logs) have both had a hand in forcing this discussion into common language, to their credit. If that's a trend, it's an encouraging one. But at this moment it still seems both exceptional and fragile—more an artifact of the high political stakes of this one issue than a change of general habits. Evidence for that bit of skepticism is easy to find in other, lower-key controversies going on at the same time.

One small case in point: the debate over the supply and quality of American teachers. This is an especially revealing issue because, in substance, it is not purely an ideological battleground. There are plenty of disagreements, but they don't fall neatly into columns labeled liberal and conservative. Organizations of the right and left agree on some points. Yet look at the difference in style, clarity, and energy of the writing coming from the two ideological sides.

First, take this quote from a member of the Philanthropy Roundtable, a group of avowedly conservative foundations and donors:

Every additional requirement for prospective teachers—every additional pedagogical course, every new hoop or hurdle—will have a predictable and inexorable effect: it will limit the potential supply of teachers by narrowing the pipeline while having no bearing whatever on the quality or effectiveness of those in the pipeline. A better solution

to the teacher quality problem is to simplify the entry and hiring process. Get rid of most hoops and hurdles. Instead of requiring a long list of courses and degrees, test future teachers for their knowledge and skills. Allow principals to hire the teachers they need. Focus relentlessly on results, on whether students are learning.

Note: Not a word about the teachers' *human capital*, the *capacity* of the training system, or anyone's ability to *instill competencies*. The vivid expression "hoops and hurdles," though provocative, helps to rivet attention and pique imagination, partly by its sheer bluntness. Instead of the usual mewling about "enhancements" and "enrichments," this text simply promises a "better solution." For the core recommendation, the author wastes no syllables on genteel Latin (no "alternative" or "preferable" or "unsatisfactory"), but goes straight for the plain Anglo-Saxon: "get rid of." No "assessment" or "metrics," just "test teachers." The sentences are short and the verbs are active. Best of all, you could recite this text almost verbatim in a coffee shop or sports bar and expect to be understood. (All right, so you'd get an arched eyebrow from the bartender over "pedagogical" and maybe "inexorable." But anyone with a pocket dictionary would know precisely what those words, and the whole argument, mean.)

Now, consider discussions of the same issue from two Web sites whose funders would not describe themselves as conservative. Mind you, both of these are public statements of principle, playing exactly the same role of public advocacy as the conservative text we just quoted. The first one, from a policy think tank that describes itself as progressive, urges the federal government to adopt a "step-by-step blueprint" for

“building a stronger teaching force” (let’s forget, for the moment, that a blueprint doesn’t have steps). Here’s what the authors say the “aggressive national strategy” should be:

(1) increasing the quality and quantity of information about America’s teacher workforce, and encouraging the use of such data for greater accountability and smarter decision-making; (2) creating enriched career advancement structures that treat teaching as a clinical practice profession much like medicine; (3) improving teacher recruitment and preparation in higher education, and ensuring that similar standards for teacher quality are maintained across alternate routes to the profession; (4) providing targeted incentives and enforcing existing laws to decrease inequities in access to qualified teachers and better match teacher skills with student needs; and (5) creating instructional environments that maximize teacher effectiveness and reduce teacher turnover in high-poverty schools.

For starters, the subject here isn’t teachers, but the *teacher workforce*. (Why use two syllables when four will do? And why discuss people when an abstraction is available?) The management-school stand-bys ACCOUNTABILITY, STRUCTURES, TARGETED, and ENVIRONMENTS are all on proud display. The sheer magnificence of phrases like “enriched career advancement structures,” “clinical practice profession,” “targeted incentives . . . to decrease inequities in access” might send the gullible into a swoon of admiration. But the rest of us might fairly ask what these things actually mean. One hears, behind this text, the doleful voice of John Humphrys: “The assumption is made that if you don’t know what it means, there is something wrong with you.”

Here’s another example on the same topic, likewise from a source whose general philosophical leanings are to the left of the first author’s. In this case, a foundation is describing a multimillion-dollar program “to support a wide range of projects aimed at improving the quality and preparation of teachers in the U.S.” It goes on to enunciate three premises on which these projects are based:

- Improving teaching practice requires knowledge of subject matter content, child development, methods of assessing student progress, and pedagogy.
- The highly decentralized character of K–12 education and teacher preparation demands that a wide variety of professional learning opportunities be made available to teachers and schools.
- If teaching practice is to improve, professional learning opportunities need to be more consistent, in-depth and coherent.

Here, the problem doesn’t really have to do with jargon. Each separate word is plain enough, but what, collectively, are they describing? Do these premises mean that the foundation is taking a sharply different position from that of the first author we quoted, or would the two more or less agree? The language is simply too vague to answer the question. We learn that teachers need “a variety of professional learning opportunities” and yet “professional learning opportunities need to be more consistent.” A consistent variety sounds like a tall order, though perhaps not out of the question. More fundamentally, what does the first premise actually say? Do *teachers* need to master all that knowledge (of subject matter content, child development, and so on)? All we’re told is

that “*improving teaching methods* requires” such knowledge. Requires it of whom?

The point isn’t to critique one or another unfortunate bit of bad Web writing. The point is to contrast two styles of public discourse—one of them clear, forthright, and unembarrassed about its beliefs, the other awkward, sheepish, and seemingly flustered. Which one better serves the cause of a “good, lively argument”—and therefore, at least indirectly, of democracy itself?

### VAGUE WORDS, VAGUE IDEAS

The problems run deeper than just the vocabulary. Some of the examples we’ve cited are laden with trendy or ugly words, some not. It is possible to write in meaningless curlicues without ever resorting to the Dictionary of Business School Jabberwocky. Yet the throbbing drumbeat of jargon is usually a pretty good signal of which writing will be the hardest to read and understand, the least intriguing, and the least likely to contribute to real public debate.<sup>2</sup>

Consider these four buzz-words that turned up in the passages we’ve just quoted:

a report card you can fill in for yourself

## accountability

There is something fundamentally wholesome about the idea of ACCOUNTABILITY in philanthropy, and many of its uses are welcome and deadly serious. When grantmakers and nonprofits talk about their own accountability—to the public, to the people they are trying to benefit, and to one another—they are on to an important topic, one that deserves plenty of careful thought. Unfortunately, the word ACCOUNTABILITY

has acquired, by its sheer overuse, the kind of solemn grandeur that often substitutes for thought, rather than encouraging it. Look at the example on teacher quality quoted earlier: The foundation was calling for more use of data on “America’s teacher workforce . . . for greater accountability and smarter decisionmaking.” Sounds responsible, scientific, and reasonable, no?

Now answer this: Accountable for what, to whom, with what consequences? Should teachers be called to account for their students’ test scores? For the teachers’ own mastery of pedagogy or the subjects they teach? For the academic and professional training they’ve completed (what another author calls “hoops and hurdles”), or only for their knowledge and achievements in the classroom? And most of all, who should publish, read, and act on these accounts? The sweet purr of ACCOUNTABILITY makes it easy for writers to tiptoe right past all those nettlesome questions. The word seems to speak volumes, yet it is actually little more than articulate silence.

The beauty of ACCOUNTABILITY in many (not all) of its philanthropic uses is that it seems to discharge a heavy fiduciary duty without breaking a sweat. That is not, to be sure, a foible unique to philanthropy. Business and government have made an art of publishing reams of data, using a few of the numbers to aggrandize their accomplishments, and then pirouetting around any unflattering information so that an ordinary reader is unlikely to make heads or tails of it. When corporations do this in their “accountability” to stockholders, analysts, and securities regulators, prosecutors get interested and people can lose their life savings. When civic and nonprofit groups do it, the losses are harder to calculate. But among the losers is democracy.

<sup>2</sup>One example, from far outside the world of philanthropy: When American experts failed to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, a senior U.S. diplomat eventually conceded that prewar claims about such weapons had been “badly sourced.” The weird coinage—a euphemism for “false”—was an instant hint that *something* unpleasant was being revealed, and not at all candidly.

whatever's out there

## environment

The 20th century was kind to this chronically amorphous word, anointing it with an -ism and giving it a precise meaning for the first time in its 400-year history in the English language. For most of those centuries, the word was so general it could be defined in only the vaguest terms: “the objects or the region surrounding anything” was the best *The Oxford English Dictionary* could do. The result was that anything from the dog house to Bauhaus to interstellar space was an environment of one kind or another. Even “surroundings” was a more specific word—at least it demanded some notion of who or what was being surrounded. Then came “environmentalism,” a movement with a scientific head on its shoulders. For a time, environmentalists almost managed to corral this vast word into a bounded pen of orderly meanings: natural habitats, atmospheric layers, clusters of interdependent organisms sharing a physical locale.

No matter; at its root, ENVIRONMENT could still mean just about anything, and its sheer wispiness has made it nearly irresistible to foundation writers who like to describe areas of activity without being forced to put clear boundaries around them. Instead of working in schools or teacher colleges, they prefer the instructional environment. Disdaining anything so limiting as the arts and humanities, they thrive in the cultural environment. Ill at ease among doctors and hospitals, they feel right at home in the health care environment. The beauty of the un-ism'd ENVIRONMENT is that everything belongs and nothing is excluded. Wander off the campuses and schoolyards, and you could travel for miles without ever leaving the “educational environment.” Are insurance companies part of

the “cultural environment”? Are software developers part of the “health care environment”? Are all of them part of the “urban environment”? Of course!

a mental galaxy far, far away

## space

Put away the science fiction books; we're not talking about that kind of space. The new, trendy meaning of SPACE is more inner than outer, and it's a close cousin to ENVIRONMENT: an undefined region of thought and attitude (cue Rod Serling) in which certain desirable things occur. Think of the last time you heard someone say: “We need to create a space for such-and-such a discussion.” Or: “This idea really belongs in the such-and-such space.” “Our goal,” a foundation officer said at a meeting on after-school programs, “is to enlarge the whole space for thinking about how kids spend their day.” “This program,” said another, “opens up the child development space to an array of new participants.” On another topic, a foundation report trumpets “a new strategic space” for building start-up civic organizations. Most of the time, this sense of SPACE seems to delineate a circle of conversation or realm of ideas where the floor is open to a given category of thinking or points of view. The word has come, in some sort of trendy, post-New Age sense, to suggest a place of intellectual welcome, where certain people or schools of thought (but not, in truth, everyone) can let their hair down and express their more troublesome or unvarnished thoughts. Grantmakers are especially prone to creating “spaces” where they and their grantees can discuss things not fit for the tender ears of the wider world. Thus far, this touchy-feely sense of SPACE is more likely to turn up in conferences and management retreats

than in writing. But its roots seem to lie primarily in the therapist's office—the only space where this nebulous word has real meaning.

a theoretical house of cards

## structure

File this rickety concept next to SYSTEM, another word that often stands in for any actual description of how real people and activities relate to one another or how they work. Like the fake-but-reassuring facades in a Potemkin village, the trendy use of STRUCTURE is meant to give an impression of solidity, of interlocking parts forming a well-built whole, supportive elements mortared firmly to one another according to an elegant plan. You come upon phrases like “enriched career enhancement structures” and you might find yourself nodding with reassurance, pleased that something so rich and sturdy is holding all those “career enhancements” together. You may not even notice that “career enhancements” is a fairly mushy expression all by itself. You probably figure, reasonably enough, that it's some kind of reference to advanced training, professional mentors, postgraduate scholarships, and maybe some other things. But someone who's not accustomed to hearing this mumbo-jumbo day in and day out might well ask: What's the difference between all those training things and a “career enhancement *structure*”? Does the *structure* introduce some scheme of relationships, some rules and tight connections, and a neat set of blueprints (perhaps one of those unusual step-by-step ones) to govern it all? What would all that consist of? Who would build it, from what, for whose use? Ask those questions, and you are likely to be branded a troublemaker and thrown out of the Potemkin village on your, um . . . substructure.

## The Language of the Fringe

**I**n the dog days of 2004, *The New York Times* dispatched the gifted writer Ian Urbina to infiltrate the hidden world of New York City sanitation workers. (Don't even think of calling them “garbage men,” not least because a growing percentage are women.) His assignment was to track down the obscure meanings of the trash haulers' jargon—“a lingo,” he wrote, “almost as funky as the work itself.”

In the small but fragrant world of New York City refuse, Urbina learned, “tissue” is the prevailing term for light work; “tossing the salad” is the act of heaving crud into the truck; “running the baskets” is the low-status toil of emptying municipal trash cans; “hopper juice” is the bile left behind after a garbage truck has been emptied; and “disco rice” is . . . well, for the sake of readers who may have eaten recently, let's just say fly larvae. The little creatures' gyrations evidently suggested disco dancing to some exhausted hauler who had spent too many years on the night shift to remember the real thing.

In the department's higher reaches, the jargon is just as widespread but more genteel. “For administrators,” said 20-year veteran Frank O'Keefe, “we don't pick up trash, we *collect* it. We don't dump it in Jersey, we *export* it. There's never a pile on the corner of Fifth Avenue, there's a *situation*.”

All this might have been just another chapter in the book of New York City *exotica*, relevant to our subject in only the most roundabout way, were it not for an eye-opening reflection on trash jargon that the *Times* picked up (sorry, *collected*) from the Sanitation Department's "artist in residence," Mierle Laderman Ukeles. (Think of her next time you feel your job is hard to explain to your family.) Now in her third decade as the trash handlers' aesthete laureate, she explained that "the very stigma that makes these workers invisible is what gives rise to their gallows humor and the wit of their overall culture. . . . People isolated on the fringe always create their own mores and their own lingo."

People isolated on the fringe. In Ms. Ukeles' view, the haulers' private code words "all go toward showing how tight-knit these folks are. . . . The workers hold two things in common: the language of their trade and the sense of being taken for granted."

Here's a theory about jargon in foundations and nonprofits — take it, if you wish, as just a pile . . . or rather, a situation. But maybe there's something to it. The theory is: In an increasingly materialist and pragmatic age, when values like altruism, sacrifice, and the common good are widely regarded as so many quaint irrelevancies, and when the graceless hand of the market is increasingly presumed to solve all important problems, is it possible that many workers of philanthropy have come to feel "isolated on the fringe," united by "the language of their trade and the sense of being taken for granted"?

A culture of isolation, with its corresponding development of a secret, inbred language, might help to explain the following question and answer, reported on a major foundation's

Web site. This exchange, we are told, took place between a foundation officer and the head of a prominent nonprofit organization in the field of community organizing. The officer asked "what basic lesson the nation's grantmakers should know" about organizing. To this, the nonprofit executive replied (this is the complete, unabridged quote): "I think it would be the relationship between power and community change."

Now, take those words at face value and the point would be about as subtle as a flying orangutan. Anyone with serious questions about the special ability of powerful people to change communities could easily look it up under anything from the Pharaohs to William Tecumseh Sherman. Why would the nation's grantmakers need the matter elucidated specifically for them — and then boast of the fact on the Internet?

But the words weren't meant to be taken at face value. The speaker wasn't referring to "power" and "communities" in the ordinary sense familiar to most Americans — the sense, say, in which the 1950s highway potentate Robert Moses could wake up in the morning and, by cocktail hour, change whole communities into blacktop. Instead, this quotation was a reference to a certain form of political influence wielded by a certain kind of local organization, aimed at a particular kind of change in a very specific sense of "community."<sup>3</sup> It's a safe bet that, if the grantee were told that her words were going to be published, she would have given a richer and more detailed answer. It's the publishing, not the speaking, that turns this quotation into a sad and baffling mistake. The grantee's one-sentence reply, at the moment she spoke it, was simply shorthand, told in a private language, like an old family joke from which a single word puts the relatives in stitches while

<sup>3</sup> Mr. Moses, urban planning buffs may recall, eventually encountered this exceptional form of power in Jane Jacobs and the movement she personified. In time, her power grew to eclipse his — as a result of the kind of "community change" to which the speaker was actually referring.

the uninitiated guests gaze at the wallpaper, stupefied. It was the language of the relatively powerless, spoken *en famille*.

At the risk of engaging in a sort of verbal pop psychology, I find this hypothesis hard to resist: A feeling of being dismissed and discounted may, in some cases, drive people to use words in an increasingly private and eccentric way—a way that not only identifies the users as members of a secret club but makes the club itself seem just a little more desirable, elite, distinguished. As long as the special language is used only within the family, it does no harm. Although the whole situation seems both sad and unsettling, it really is nobody’s business. Unfortunately, as the published quotation shows, the secret language leaks outside the inner circle *all the time*—it is part of the way civic and philanthropic officials commonly speak and write, not just to each other, but to everyone.

Take, for example, the philanthropic world’s strange, just-among-us usage of the following words, whose meanings in the rest of society are plain and unremarkable, but in philanthropy amount to something approaching the mystical.

arrive somewhere, get something, or do just about anything

### access (v.)

“The program seeks to assist seniors in accessing appropriate services,” says an earnest nonprofit’s brochure (mercifully shielding the impressionable elders from accessing anything inappropriate). Elsewhere, a policy paper blames one community’s high rates of unemployment on a widespread “failure to access the full array of available supports.” “It should be possible,” asserts an otherwise thoughtful report on public housing, “for residents to access education, employment, and training opportunities through an on-site office or service

designed for them.” The mammoth popularity of the verb TO ACCESS in civic and foundation circles might strike some people as perverse, given that it is both ugly and vague. The ugliness may, admittedly, be just a matter of taste. But the vagueness is beyond dispute. Yet that may be the very reason why the word seems to turn up just about everywhere.

When you describe people’s ability “to access health care,” as several foundations are apt to do, are you talking about their ability to get to the clinic or hospital? And if so, would that be a reference to the availability of public transportation, the distance involved, or the difficulty of navigating the building in a wheelchair? Might you instead be referring to patients’ ability to get insurance to pay for services? Their knowledge of what services to use? The availability of a specialist who can treat their problem? The availability of doctors or nurses who speak their language? Their ability to get enough attention from overburdened professionals? Depending on where you’re working, and with whom, ACCESS could mean any of these things. Or all of them. The word is most often nothing more than a stand-in for “get”—as in, “people can’t get decent health care around here.”

So why not just say “get” or “get to”? One reason, no doubt, is that the simple Saxon “get” is simply passé. But there is surely something a bit worse going on here: Using such a generic word as “get” would make it obvious to any sixth-grader that the writer is not saying anything special or profound. A program that helps seniors or unemployed people “get services” would hardly sound remarkable, and would provoke in any curious reader the natural question, “Get services how?” The forbiddingly Frenchified Latin of ACCESS doesn’t answer that question any better, but it quiets

the reader with a promise of implied wisdom and erudition. Unfortunately, the promise is illusory. On close inspection, the word is all but meaningless.

The cure for verbal ills like ACCESS is not just to stick with old words (although “get” has earned the distinction of being useful to English speakers since at least 100 years before Chaucer was born). The solution is to say more precisely what kind of access you want to discuss — questions of location? transportation? price? quality? supply? — and use words, whether new or old, that zero in on those concerns. Anything else will draw solemn nods of approval from people within the philanthropic inner circle and little more than blank stares from everyone else.

whatever motions you

## action (adj. or v.)

One of the surest signs that someone is trying to impress you with an image of indomitable force and steamroller determination is the tendency to drop ACTION into every other sentence — especially in tortured constructions where the word turns into a verb or modifier. A brusque, no-nonsense colleague recently recommended to me “a couple of action items with which to move forward” on a stalled project — a gust of verbal cold air that instantly put me on double notice: We would not be wasting our time on merely inert items, and we would not be moving backward or sideways, as other people are prone to do. Apparently the simple expression “let’s get these two things done” would have immobilized us or ground our gears into reverse. By now, the redundant expressions “action items,” “action plans,” and “action agendas” are all but ubiquitous.

Far sillier, though increasingly common, is the verb TO ACTION, as in “the committee decided that it would action only the first two items” — presumably leaving the other items inactioned until later. Laugh if you will, but this verbal fad seems to be sweeping the English-speaking world far beyond the inner cloisters of philanthropy.<sup>4</sup> Soon after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, an American general proudly reported that Iraqis were bringing his troops useful information about local troublemakers “because they feel confident we will action on it.” I believe the Iraqis will back me up on this point: Confidence is one thing the verb TO ACTION does not inspire.

At the risk of making a crude generalization, I’d speculate that any time you find the word ACTION overused, especially as a verb or adjective, you are someplace where too little is being done. When people are really sweating, and bold events are whizzing by, there is usually no time for pomposities like “action this.” As I recall, you never heard Errol Flynn talk about “action” while he was hanging by one hand from a mizzen mast with the cannonballs flying, but ACTION was the first word the critics clung to, from the safety of their office chairs, on the morning after the premier.

a vague condition between flirtation and marriage

## engagement

“Foundations engage with faith-based institutions,” a senior foundation officer wrote, “in many ways and for many reasons.” “We will need further advocacy,” said another, “to engage the resources of the public sector on this issue.” “Someone needs to engage with the issue of developmental disabilities,” someone else wrote in a memo on education reform.

<sup>4</sup>The disease seems to be spreading to other nouns. “We are efforting to produce this result,” an executive director wrote to the board of a Kentucky nonprofit. One hopes the board actioned that efforting by disapproving.



What kind of person uses ENGAGE this way? Military commanders do—but presumably most foundation officers aren't contemplating the kind of lethal engagement typical of the battlefield. Social workers and psychiatrists may, when people withdraw and refuse to interact with others, try to “engage” them in the same sense that some of these writers evidently intended. In those lines of work, the word conveys an effort to make a connection, elicit a response, forge some kind of bond. But unless the writers actually come from one of those fields (a possibility), their use of ENGAGEMENT as a synonym for “speak to” or “grapple with” seems little more than insider code. It carries an unintentionally revealing hint of lonely supplication, a plea for connection, a plaintive yearning for some kind of contact with others.

The real problem, however, is not in the impression the word gives, but in the impressions it fails to give. Divorced from its therapeutic context, it could mean nearly anything at all—and one can hardly escape the suspicion that the writers being quoted had little idea what sort of “engagement” they actually had in mind. (*The Oxford English Dictionary* lists 19 different definitions for the verb TO ENGAGE, of which all but three are still in common use.) “Work with,” “solicit,” and “grapple with” might be possible synonyms of ENGAGE in the examples cited here. But even those words leave open volumes of interpretation. In truth, all three of the quoted sentences literally mean nothing more than “someone doing something with someone else.” The something to be done is left entirely to the imagination—or to the implicit understanding of the other members of the club.

where small things go to gain stature

## scale

In the 1970s, the fertile decade that gave us the Partridge Family and the “inoperative statement,” Americans encountered the philosophy of E. F. Schumacher, author of the classic *Small Is Beautiful*. Foundation and nonprofit writers, perhaps more susceptible to the cult of smallness than their counterparts in the profit-making world, seem to have held on to the book's mystique well past its silver anniversary. Nowadays you can hardly find anyone in the civic or philanthropic world who is willing to say a kind word for anything that dares to be big. Yet that doesn't hold foundations back from the reasonable, often urgent, hope of extending good programs to more people, attracting more money for them, and helping them reach more places, deploy more personnel, and just generally do more good. Fortunately, no one has to describe any of that as growth, or expansion, or enlargement. They can call it SCALE. In the foundation world, small is still beautiful, but SCALE is beautifuler.

It may seem small of me to point this out, but everything—whatever its size or shape or reach—has scale. Even the humble amoeba scores a place on some fine-gauged scale or other. The weird but common expression GOING TO SCALE suggests the kind of staggering quantum transformation that normally only theologians or particle physicists would understand: something of utterly no dimension that bursts, suddenly and spontaneously, into a solid, measurable mass.

The insistent use of GOING TO SCALE is, I admit, merely a figure of speech, and a classic one at that. Rhetoricians

call it metonymy: describing something (in this case, size) by referring to something closely associated with it (the scale by which it's measured). Using SCALE that way is not an offense against proper English, but against clarity: How far away is "scale," and how will we know when we've "gone to" it? Is the thing in question supposed to get really, really big, or just bigger than it is now? Is "big" even the point? Might some other scale—say, that of quality, financial security, renown, or innovation—be the one we're "going to"? When asked this question bluntly, an admirably honest foundation officer answered that these other scales are irrelevant, and only size matters. But he went on to explain that urging his grantees to *grow* would be impolitic. "Growth," he all but whispered, "is something Enron did. We don't do that. We go to scale. Sometimes in a handbasket."

a formula, often secret

## diversity

I was, for a time, loosely affiliated with an arts organization whose board included a crusading civil rights lawyer, a professor of Latin American studies, a strait-laced banker who was also an ordained minister, and two wealthy civic leaders (one gay, one straight), each of whom contributed serious money to the other's political enemies. A well-meaning foundation declined to consider a proposal from this organization because, an officer gently advised, the board had a "diversity problem." The unspoken meaning, which was beyond dispute, was that all these assorted human beings, of different philosophies, hues, and sexual identities, were men.

Now, that was a problem, arguably enough. But a "diversity problem"? There are U.N. commissions more homogeneous than that board. It would have been an unconscionable gaffe to describe this as a "female problem," but it would have been vastly more accurate.

The foundation never inquired about the many ways these folks differed from one another, or about the interesting effects their differences had on the arts group's activities. "Diversity," in the ordinary sense of the word, wasn't really the officer's concern. The foundation's leaders believed, for reasons of both principle and practicality, that boards should not be all-male. Good for them. Unfortunately, they refused to say so. Bad for them.<sup>5</sup>

The foundation officer, like many of her colleagues, kept a "diversity table" on organizations applying for grants. It showed the composition of boards and staff by gender, race, and ethnicity. But the words "gender, race, and ethnicity" were almost never used. Perhaps that's because they are controversial, and the foundation lacked the courage of its convictions. If so, more's the pity. But another, less damning explanation might simply be that this specific sense of DIVERSITY was part of the family code, and outsiders were not expected to know (or, sadder still, expected to care) that it referred strictly to three very important things.

Ironically, using words in such an idiosyncratic, private way raises a troubling question: When any group of people comes to speak in a language that most people are unlikely to understand, how "diverse" can that group really be?

<sup>5</sup>A squeamishness about gender seems to bring out peculiar speech in all sorts of people. Diane Ravitch, taste columnist for *The Wall Street Journal*, cited this quote from something she described as a "textbook in human development": "As a folksinger once sang, how many roads must an individual walk down before you can call them an adult?"

whatever you've got, whatever you need

## resources/resourced

An organization that deals with troubled kids recently wrote that it tries to provide these kids with some of the same opportunities enjoyed by “more resourced youth.” At first, I thought this use of RESOURCED must be just a substitute for “advantaged,” the previously trendy way of describing the well-to-do. But it turns out that the fortunate youth in question are not necessarily “resourced” in material ways. A careful reading of this organization’s literature eventually reveals that “more resourced youth” are the ones with desirable *inner* resources, like diligence, self-respect, and good citizenship. In short, they are the ones whom, in a less enlightened and refined age, we used to call the “good kids.” Now they’re “resourced.” How would a normal reader, untutored in the secret language where such usages are common, ever guess what such a strange coinage was trying to say? Trying to close the psychological and material gaps in the lives of less-fortunate kids is surely God’s work. Calling it “resourcing,” however, sounds like the work of some lower-realm authority. Most of all, the goofy euphemism squanders an opportunity to explain this organization and its kids to people who would probably care and want to help.

“Urban schools,” a think tank report declares, “have been under-resourced relative to suburban districts.” There’s an under-statement for you, in more than one sense. “This program provides critical resources for community organizations involved in preventive health.” Let’s not dwell, for now, on the dizzying concept of “preventive health,” which prompts the question, *What is my health preventing?* Instead, let’s

wonder what those “critical resources” might be. Money? Nurses? Clinics? A few words of hearty encouragement? The text in question never says. We’re expected to admire this organization, but apparently we’re not entitled to know why.

The most common sense of RESOURCES in the public sphere is “whatever you need to get the job done,” a list that usually starts with money but includes many other things as well. The vagueness of the word is therefore sometimes intentional, and occasionally even useful, because the complete list of “whatever you need” could go on for pages. It simply isn’t practical, in many contexts, to list all the “resources” crucial to a given task. Sometimes a big, bulging grab-bag of a word is the only kind that will do, because the thing being discussed is, frankly, a grab-bag.

But too often, the use of a vague, unbounded word like RESOURCES (never mind RESOURCED) is neither intentional nor useful, just thoughtless. Those “under-resourced” urban schools are, in reality, deficient in only one primary resource: money. Everything else they lack—the whole long list—can be purchased with just that one “resource.” So why wouldn’t the think tank say “urban schools get less money per pupil than those in the suburbs”? Are they afraid of sounding mercenary? Or might they be trying to gull some unsuspecting taxpayers into supporting their point of view without ever realizing that it’s more dollars the schools are after? I frankly doubt that the purpose is anything so wily and deceptive. The more likely explanation is that the think tank, like the health outfit and the youth program, have simply slipped into the cozy, familiar code language of the nonprofit world, where resources are scarce, but strange words pile up in abundance.

## The Quest for the Common Mind

**I**n the Internet era, it rarely takes more than a few minutes to find even the most obscure bit of information, thanks to the online engineering feat known as the search engine. To hunt down high school graduation rates in Des Moines (78 percent in 2004), the dollar value of the yuan (about 12 cents), or average rainfall in Burkina Faso (32 inches a year), you need scarcely more than a few mouse clicks and something just as prosaic but critically important: one or two keywords that define what you're looking for.

Conversely, if you have a Web site that you'd like lots of people to find—if you sell things or offer services or simply want to be noticed online—you would do well to make sure that the most common keywords in your field appear prominently on your site, so that the search engines will lead seekers to you. Evidently this little principle is more elusive than it sounds. A great many companies, it seems, are willing to pay expensive consultants to tell them how to describe themselves in common keywords—that is, to teach them the language of regular people.

At a convention of search-engine experts in early 2004, National Public Radio reporter Rick Karr came upon a

marketing executive whose firm exists primarily to dispense just that kind of advice. One of the firm's clients, according to Karr, was a company desperate to be recognized as a leader in something it called “on-site processing,” a business at which the client believed itself to be top-notch. The company reportedly did the best “on-site processing” around, a fact emphatically trumpeted on its Web site. Yet despite all that trumpeting, few of this outfit's potential customers were finding it on the Web. Worse, an alarming number of those customers were instead finding and flocking to the company's competitors.

The problem, suggested the consultant (after collecting a no-doubt-hefty retainer), might be that “on-site processing” wasn't a phrase much used by the actual customers. Instead, they usually searched for “one-hour photo” shops.

The customers didn't care whether the photos were processed on site, in Des Moines, or in Burkina Faso. They wanted their pictures in an hour. The process and its site did not interest them in the slightest. That seemingly obvious fact had been a matter of complete bafflement to the company, until its obsession with process and sites was cured by a stiff consulting fee.

This sad tale of industrial obliviousness will come as no surprise to anyone who works in foundations or nonprofit think tanks. Most of the time, it seems, the simple, common, popular word is the hardest one for anyone in those lines of work to think of. They would sooner write (as someone actually did) “sites engaged in a collaborative process intended to craft a shared vision” of something or other than dare to say what the vision was, who actually did the work, or why it mattered. The participation of the faceless sites, their Byzantine

collaborative process, and their presumably generous sharing all take center stage in the mind of certain observers, perhaps because they believe that good processes involving lots of sharing are, by definition, a font of good results.

In the paper from which those words are quoted, the “collaborative process” appears in an exuberantly detailed description beginning on page 1, and the resulting vision appears half a dozen pages later, in what can only be described as an afterthought.

The problem with this approach is not that its premise is necessarily wrong. Who knows? Maybe the process and all its wonders really are critically important, and the eventual vision is merely a side effect of the brilliant give-and-take that produced it. But that is not a conclusion that most people—or at least most people who are not already enthusiasts of participation, sharing, and collaboration—would take for granted. To an ordinary reader, even a highly educated one, the suggestion that someone came up with a vision creates an instant desire to know *what the vision is*, not what process of organizational necromancy happened to produce it. If you don’t satisfy that automatic curiosity, you have probably lost your opportunity to persuade them on the glories of procedure. In a world of “one-hour photos,” you have produced nothing more than “on-site processing” and thus lost your market.

On a fact sheet from a large national nonprofit, describing an important new housing program, the following information appears under the attention-grabbing heading “Our Success”: “More than a dozen . . . local offices are already involved in [this approach to housing]. Some are convening local public, private, and community interests to develop local strategies and

partnerships to address this challenge. Some are participating in broad collaborative efforts to address the issue. Others are focusing on assisting . . . other nonprofits to take on” the relevant challenges. Except for identifying details, the first four sentences are quoted here in full. Judging from this information, “our success” consists entirely of *involvement, convening, developing strategies and partnerships, participating in collaborative efforts*, and *assisting other nonprofits*.

“Our Success,” curiously, has nothing to do with any actual houses—at least not until well into the discussion, where they eventually do get around to mentioning some projects.

A fundraiser for nonprofit organizations recently suggested to me that the constant harping on processes and partnerships is not solely a matter of philosophy (although, to their credit, many foundation and nonprofit officers do believe strongly in civic participation, consultative decision-making, and collaboration among different elements of society). Another reason is that the civic and philanthropic world revolves more and more around the quest for “proven outcomes,” “metrics,” and “benchmarks.” When your mission is to counsel abused women and children, promote new artists and art forms, or preserve affordable housing in a white-hot real estate market, there is a good chance that your “provable” achievements in any given year will be iffy. In especially hostile years, or in fields of work whose accomplishments don’t come in easily countable widgets, you may have little or no “proof” to show. What’s one sure way to overcome that problem? Bang on about your *partnerships*, your *involvements*, and (grimmest of all) your *convenings*. You can count them, rhapsodize over their unprecedented breadth and inclusiveness, and even

submit testimonials (better still, numerically scored evaluations) from the participants. “There’s a world of accountability in a really good process,” as the fundraiser succinctly summed it up.

That is, of course, only one take on the strange language of philanthropic process. In some cases, that language may be useful and smart, even if a bit obscure from the viewpoint of regular folks. Yet much of the time, an unwholesome fixation on the intricacies of consultation, cogitation, engagement, and partnership—the civic world’s equivalent of “on-site processing”—serves mostly to undermine the natural interest that people would otherwise have in the everyday work of nonprofits, foundations, and policy institutes. Their fixation on thought and talk over product and substance surely has something to do with the uncanny popularity of the following buzz-words.

dwell on things that are all in your head

## conceptualize

“The foundation’s program,” says a publication on leadership development, “strives to shape new ways of conceptualizing leadership as not merely a quality of individuals but as embedded in complex ways in social systems.” This use of CONCEPTUALIZE, like most uses outside the philosophical and psychiatric journals, simply means “think about,” nothing more. The word appears in the sentence about leadership, it seems, for only one reason: to impress the gullible reader. It adds no meaning beyond a simple reference to thought. Yet by dressing up the mere act of thinking in an elaborate, five-syllable word, the author seems to suggest that this thinking is, in itself, somehow singularly important. To some eyes, it might even suggest that people in foundations are

doing a kind or quality of thinking that other people, in their mundane, plebeian thoughts about leadership, do not or cannot do. To a reader who takes such implications personally, the word would be annoying, not just because it is unnecessary but because it seems to convey a subtle put-down (which, I happen to know, the author of this passage would never intend).

But even assuming that most readers aren’t so thin-skinned as to sniff out a subtext like that, or to take offense at it, we still might reasonably ask: Why doll up such an ordinary idea in so much embroidery? Wouldn’t it make much more sense to save your cleverest, most original wordplay for the thing you’re thinking *about*, rather than for the mere act of thinking? (Admittedly, in the case of the sentence we cited, what the author is actually thinking about has something to do with *qualities complexly embedded in social systems*. That would appear to be a destination even more forbidding than the long and winding conceptualization that leads to it.)

Why make your reader pause for reflection over some hypothetical thought process, rather than over the object of that process? The answer is that, too often, that kind of navel-gazing really is what interests people who write about philanthropy and public affairs. The process by which they arrive at an idea (no doubt a rich and provocative process, at least some of the time) fascinates them no end. The photo-processing company mentioned earlier was no doubt similarly enthralled by its ingeniously engineered on-site capabilities. Trouble is, these things are usually a bit less fascinating to other people, and can serve to distract them from the real point one is hoping to make—or even lose their attention entirely.

It’s not that the process is necessarily unimportant. Let’s take it as given that the way foundation people think about

leadership really leads them to better, more imaginative activity. It may even be worthwhile—once the reader’s interest is piqued by some hint of what that activity actually is—to explain that a particular way of thinking led to its discovery or refinement. But until people become genuinely engrossed in an idea and where it leads, they aren’t likely to give two yuans for how it was conceptualized.

the way you do the things you do

## modality

“The ineluctable modality of the visible,” Stephen Dedalus thinks to himself early in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, as he walks along the beach and ponders snippets of classical and German philosophy. In the novel, this moment of private philosophizing is supposed to portray the introverted, over-scholarly mind of a lonely and confused young man. But the lofty word MODALITY and its echoes of intellectual greatness seem to have captivated the 20th-century imagination almost from the instant *Ulysses* found its way into print.

The word belongs, and is probably highly useful, in lectures on philosophy or (more recently) the clinical professions. But in the last few decades, MODALITY has been gaining steam in political, civic, and philanthropic circles, as a pretentious stand-in for “method.” This use, some say, was made fashionable in the 1970s by then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who was exceedingly fond of it. (“The new word that is constantly being heard here is MODALITIES,” *The New Yorker* reported from the Paris peace talks in 1970.) Now it’s common to find papers on all sorts of topics where MODALITIES are the order of the day—including one on

employment policy, for example, in which a section begins, “The program pursues its goals through two primary modalities.”

Why that author didn’t write “we do our work in two ways” is puzzling. The simpler wording would not only have been easier to read and understand, but it would have directed our attention toward the *work*, rather than sending us scurrying to the dictionary to make sense of MODALITIES. (Actually, the dictionary wouldn’t help much. The word has so many meanings that this is the best *The Oxford English Dictionary* could do for a concise definition: “Those aspects of a thing which relate to its mode, or manner or state of being, as distinct from its substance or identity.”)

Why would a foundation have written that it seeks an “expansion in the modalities of shelter and housing”? Why not just say “more kinds of shelter and housing,” or “more ways of providing” it, and then save your meaty vocabulary for the description of the new approach to housing, whatever it is? Why would a civil rights organization explain that it does not limit its work “solely to the modality of litigation”? It could have written “solely to litigation” and left out the superfluous MODALITIES altogether. The worst effect of these solemn phrases is to draw our attention to the authors’ thought processes and their complex approach to the “modes” of their trade, rather than to whatever argument they are trying to make. It’s as if the writer is subtly saying: “Yes, OK, our work is important, and we’re going to tell you about it in a minute, but first let us make a really important point: The elegant way we analyze our field—the sophisticated categories into which we sort our interests, and the fancy names we give the categories—now *there* is something truly marvelous!”

an invitation, with the address left blank

## inclusiveness

“Through its grantmaking and convening with nonprofit leaders,” a regional philanthropy announces on its Web site, “the foundation discovered a widespread community interest in developing a deeper understanding of how inclusiveness of diverse voices and experiences enhances and expands the work of nonprofits.” We have no choice but to trust the accuracy of this surprising revelation: The community in question (a major metropolitan area, not a secluded retreat for social theorists) apparently has a “widespread interest” in “developing a deeper understanding” of INCLUSIVENESS. Whether this community has any interest in actually including anyone is an unexplored question. Its interest, as far as a reader can tell, is merely in *understanding* how inclusiveness enhances things. It’s hard to resist the thought that this is a community where way too little is going on. But who are we to judge?

In any case, the foundation has marched boldly ahead to form an “inclusiveness initiative,” complete with steering committee, convenings, and a recommended list (you knew this was coming) of inclusiveness consultants. Elsewhere, another large regional foundation has a similar initiative called “Embrace Inclusiveness,” which exhorts “organizations and businesses” (note that the latter are included even if they are disorganizations) “to embrace the demographic changes” in this region, which elsewhere are described as creating “a more effusive ethnic, cultural, religious, and lifestyle setting.” The malapropism here is especially unfortunate. The use of “effusive” (“unrestrained or excessive in emotional expression; gushy” according to *The American Heritage Dictionary*)

might strike one as touching dangerously on stereotypes of some of the ethnic and cultural groups in question. Fortunately, we learn at the end of the sentence that this excessive emotion-alism does not apply to any of those groups, but merely to the *setting*, whose very hills and prairies evidently gush forth lifestyles, like the fountains of paradise.

It would be fine to have a laugh at the expense of all this inclusiveness, were it not for the important ideas being held incommunicado behind a fortress of weird vocabulary. The organizations cited here are trying, in their different ways, to bring groups of people into activities from which those groups have been left out. The effort may be aimed at correcting a social wrong or simply improving some activity by bringing more people (and their perspectives) into it. Either way, if the groups to be included were named explicitly, and if there were some specificity about how their exclusion is to be ended, and why, then an important social and practical purpose would no doubt be served. And people would probably want to read about it and learn from it.

But when the allegedly excluded people are obscured behind sweeping banners like “cultural and lifestyle groups” (which is obviously code for something unstated), and when the activity being promoted is gauzed over with empty feel-good expressions like “embrace this,” practically all meaning is lost. Rather than focusing on what needs to be done to include whom, readers are encouraged to dwell instead on the self-congratulatory piety of those who espouse INCLUSIVENESS. Are these “inclusive” organizations urging us to hire, elect, and solicit views from members of certain ethnic groups, women, gays, or some combination? If so, why do they seem so embarrassed about saying so? The problem isn’t the term



INCLUSIVENESS itself, which is tired and overused but not completely meaningless. The problem is the uncompleted thought: *Include whom? In what? Why?*

Some organizations do manage to use the fashionable jargon and then promptly clarify it with specifics. An engineering group affiliated with the National Science Foundation, for example, starts off with calls for an “inclusive environment” but then helpfully adds that “engineering education must be made more open to women and underrepresented ethnic minorities, since their contributions would strengthen the enterprise.” Thanks to that clarification, we now know which groups are to be solicited and why. It’s also clear from context that the people who need to do the soliciting include educators, admissions officers, and professional groups, at a minimum. That is more than enough information to make us forget the gushy jargon and concentrate on what needs to be done.

whatever it is, it’s yours

## ownership

Here’s a rare and exotic species: a case of two-headed jargon. This one word manages to have a separate, trendy meaning for each side of the American ideological divide. Social activists of the left like to dwell on whether ideas and activities are genuinely “owned” by people who are expected to take part in them. Phrasemakers on the right have a completely different twist on the same word. For many conservatives, OWNERSHIP is the antidote to “dependency” and “passivity,” and thus an OWNERSHIP SOCIETY is the prescribed antidote to entitlements (what others call “safety nets”). Two meanings, both evasive, bundled into one seemingly ordinary word.

I have no intention of strolling onto the ideological minefield separating the two camps, except to point out that both, in their different ways, have a tendency to use OWNERSHIP to deflect attention away from practicalities and focus it instead on the motivations and thought processes behind whatever is actually going on. On the right, for example, the shibboleth of OWNERSHIP is supposed to conjure an entire system of values and social-science theory, but in the process it also neatly glosses over some of the more difficult decisions raised by those same values and theories—like what things people ought to own, how much help they should receive in coming up with the purchase price, or even what the “owners” would actually end up with under any given proposal, other than the psychological satisfactions of possession.

There is no more frankness in the way the word is used on the political left, although the context is almost completely different. When community organizers and people interested in social policy talk about OWNERSHIP of an idea or activity, they are usually trying to describe a high degree of personal attachment to whatever is under discussion. “Community organizers,” says a treatise on employment, “need to do more than simply inform residents about the opportunities that are available to them; they need to help residents gain some ownership over the choices these opportunities present.” Will ownership change the way the residents actually make the choices, or the choices they make? We aren’t told. “The program seeks to promote an ownership of traditional art forms among members of the community,” says a brochure. Assuming that members of the community are not expected to walk off with the paintings, what effect is this ownership supposed to have on them? Again, no clue.

In this sense of the word, the “owners” are supposed to be persuaded that some concept, or endeavor or whatever it is, is the fruit of their own thought or an extension of their personal commitment. That kind of emotional attachment can be valuable, as when the goal is to motivate people to work hard for a cause, or to promote an idea to others. But in those cases, indeed in nearly all cases outside the realm of pure psychology, the “ownership” per se isn’t ultimately all that important. The word is a stand-in, a kind of understudy, for the real piece of information that most people would want to know straight away: what behavior the supposed “ownership” is meant to enable or motivate, and what rewards it’s supposed to bring. Fixating on OWNERSHIP deprives us of that very information, and thus of a sense of anything getting done.

Activists and public-policy types aren’t the only people who abuse OWNERSHIP in this sense. Management experts and consultants are unwholesomely fond of the word and tend to use it in much the same way as the social reformers. “The customer-service ethic,” a management outfit wrote to one of its clients, “demands total ownership by frontline staff, rather than a top-down approach.”<sup>6</sup> In management circles, it must be said, the shift of focus toward the warm-and-fuzzy “ownership” of things, and away from the practical consequences, may not be altogether benign. One typical result of greater “ownership” of some set of goals is that people are then expected to work harder to accomplish them. It’s understandable that managers might prefer to package this as “ownership” rather than “harder work,” but once the employees figure it out, they are unlikely to take their newfound ownership quite so warmly.

<sup>6</sup>The sad little phrase “top-down” has become America’s second-favorite whipping boy, after “one-size-fits-all.” Any idea, no matter how banal, can be made more attractive (and thus command a higher consulting fee) simply by attaching the claim that this idea is not “top-down” or “one-size-fits-all.”

That is equally true of a similar trendy word, INTERNALIZE, which tends to be used in much the same way as the verb TO OWN. At a large New York consulting firm a few years ago, top managers sought to instill the firm’s “core values” in its employees by asking them to come up with events and activities that would help one another “internalize the values.” The values themselves were simple and uncontroversial enough (diligence, respect, teamwork, the usual pieties) but the promotional events and activities quickly became gimmicky—not to mention a burden on people who were already clocking long hours in the office. It wasn’t long before at least one employee dreamt of submitting a resignation memo with the heading, “You can take this job and internalize it.”

packed with all the mystery and excitement of an engineering report

## planful

A trendy antonym for “careless,” “haphazard” and “sloppy,” PLANFUL has taken the public-interest world by storm (though it’s been an orderly, responsible, and deliberate storm, to be sure). The person who first submitted PLANFUL to the Jargon Files page of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation’s Web site perfectly summed up what makes this piece of bland piety so annoying: “Prayerful, OK. Merciful, I hope. But please, let’s not imbue the relatively straightforward art/science of planning with too much mystery.”

Mystery is exactly what the users of PLANFUL are trying to conjure—though what they end up with is more often self-parody. Indispensable as a good plan may be, it does not *fill* anything except the mind of the planners (and, if it’s successful, maybe the minds of the people who act on the plan).

A perfectly disastrous activity can nonetheless be stuffed like a Christmas goose with well-meaning plans—as many indeed are. The telling fact about PLANFUL is that, although it is often applied to important activities that are supposed to benefit lots of people, it actually describes only the people and process *behind* the activities—the folks whose cogitating and deliberating went into the plan. While seeming to describe results, it actually says nothing about them, preferring instead to dwell on preparation and process.

Those things are important, but only because they help bring about the intended results, and only to the extent that those results are actually desirable. For most people, the fact that something is well planned may be reassuring, but hardly decisive. Those who use PLANFUL want us to believe that the very act of planning is somehow deeply fulfilling, a kind of shiatsu for the body politic. For them, the word claims a place in the hushed and smoky temple of virtues, in the same pew as “joyful,” “bountiful,” and even that advertising favorite “flavorful”—words that imply an abundance of inner riches, something brimming with metaphysical qualities of immeasurable value. There are no doubt planners who derive that kind of satisfaction from their work, and we envy them. For the rest of us, however, the proof of the “flavorful” is in the tasting, and the best thing you can say about any public activity is not what it was full of, but whether it got anything done.

grazing in pastures of goodness

## grassroots/grasstops organic

Some foundations and political organizations prefer to deal with groups that represent the great mass of rank-and-file citizens, rather than the wealthy and powerful and their elite coterie. When social reformers hustle for “grassroots support,” they are using the term in more or less the same sense for which it was coined more than a hundred years ago. The expression was just starting to appear here and there by 1912, when *McClure’s Magazine* famously described Teddy Roosevelt’s third-party attempt at a presidential comeback as “a campaign from the grass roots up.” Today, even beyond politics, when modern writers refer to scrappy little organizations with lean budgets, or to passionate leaders who have no fancy credentials or positions of power, they are using GRASSROOTS in much the same way as *McClure’s* did. (The single, unhyphenated word was rare until the Great Depression; it’s now standard.) GRASSROOTS is a verbal fanfare for the common man, and it hewed close to that humble meaning through most of its history.

Little by little, though, the word’s historical clarity came to be diluted, both in civic affairs and in politics. One now sees “grassroots ideas” “grassroots values,” and “grassroots movements” applied all over the place, sometimes to prestigious organizations run by famous people with gorgeously engraved business cards. I suspect that too many foundations now use “grassroots” to describe “people of whom we approve,” even if those people might take a limo to Central Park if they wanted to see some grass.

As if to acknowledge that not all grassroots movements are all that rooted in the common soil, some foundations and think tanks have seized on a new earthy term for their favorite causes: “Organic” movements, while not necessarily as common as grass, are nonetheless supposedly pure—in the same way, perhaps, as organically grown vegetables. One foundation now supports and promotes “local, organic initiatives to improve mental health and strengthen communities.” The professionalization of civic activities, warns another foundation, can be a threat to “more organic social movement groupings.”

Not all these “organic groupings” evidently need to be “grassroots” in any traditional sense. The same foundation that worried about excessive professionalization also published a report in a different field suggesting the creation of an online information network. In that network, it wrote, “applied and academic content could interact in a flexible, growing, organic entity.” Although non-professionals would presumably be welcome in this “organic entity,” the thick jargon of the 100-page explanatory text suggests that few truly grassroots types would understand a word of what’s going on.

In short, there’s more to the trendy use of ORGANIC than merely a reference to earthy origins. To be organic in the fashionable sense, apparently, it’s necessary to grow the way natural vegetation does: by drawing nutrients as needed from one’s environment and then manufacturing one’s own growing parts. How this actually works in an Internet “entity” —or any other sort of “grouping” for that matter—is anyone’s guess. Yet even if this use of ORGANIC seems to demand knowledge and skills not widely distributed among the grass roots, it does seem to retain some populist overtones. The word is obviously meant to contrast with more privileged

movements and organizations whose growth comes in bursts of patronage from wealthy or powerful backers. The self-cultivating movements are “organic” to the extent that they are not artificially fertilized by well-meaning but tainted outsiders.

In any case, the supposed nobility of the grass roots, organic or otherwise, has lately become more honored in theory than in practice. The trouble with grass roots, horticulturalists will tell you, is that, though they are great at multiplying and spreading, they are not very deep. For the truly profound thinkers in the public-interest world, the grass roots sometimes just aren’t profound enough. Nor, in many cases, are they organic enough—since some of them end up being all-too-richly fertilized, often by the same wealthy organizations that employ the profound thinkers. When you can no longer claim to be either GRASSROOTS or ORGANIC, it’s time for a new trendy word. Voilà: GRASSTOPS.

This new coinage came to our attention sometime in 2004, when a specialist in education submitted it to the Jargon Files Web page with the following definition: “elites who have power, but are also attached to a good cause.” Used in a sample sentence, the word evidently works this way: “This organization brings together people from both the grassroots and grasstops in order to build a commonly held vision for educational change.” Given that the normal distance between the roots and the top of most grass is a matter of an inch or two, it would seem a little peculiar to use grass—bottom, top, or middle—as a yardstick for eliteness. But that is precisely what makes this curious new word so revealing.

The height of the grass, in this imagery, is really beside the point. What makes grass the metaphor of choice here is not its altitude, but its imputed virtue. “The handkerchief

of the Lord,” Walt Whitman reverently calls it, in *Leaves of Grass* (thus giving an unintentionally phlegmy cast to those glistening pearls of dew, but never mind). What turns wealthy and powerful figures into grasstops? The mere fact that we approve of them—nothing more. They need be no more grassy, in the sense of humble and down-to-earth, than the House of Windsor. They are simply our kind of people, and thus they acquire their grasshood the way great university donors acquire their honorary doctorates.

The problem with GRASSTOPS is not just that it’s obviously disingenuous but that it describes only the mind of the writer. If I declare you to be a member of the Noble Order of Grasstops, I might seem to be saying that you have some social kinship with the great, grassy masses of common humanity. Yet in reality I have made no verifiable claim about your social status one way or another. All I’ve really said is that, in my personal firmament, you’re on the side of the angels. Thus the word manages to do what all of the very worst jargon always does: shift the spotlight from the world of regular people and real problems to the personal idiosyncrasies of the commentator.

## Situational (Un)Awareness

**F**or all its fascination with odd expressions and insider lingo, the nonprofit world is hardly ever a source of original jargon. (The exception might be nonprofit law, which is brimming with terms only an expert would understand. But even there, the real jargonauts are lawyers, not grantmakers or nonprofit managers.) Judging from the original sources of their favorite terms, foundations and public-interest groups seem to be among the most impressionable of creatures, picking up stray expressions and cockeyed turns of phrase from as many as a dozen other fields.

The most popular of these seem to be offshoots of business, including management (for example, VALUE PROPOSITIONS), accountancy (deep or shallow DIVES), finance (MAXIMIZING RETURN), advertising (BRANDING), manufacturing (RAMP UP, ROLL OUT, and a recent entry, WINDTUNNELING), and theoretical economics (SECTOR). Other popular sources include engineering, medicine, psychology, and the natural sciences.

We’ll return to some of these in a moment. But as a font of mystifying words, euphemisms, and sometimes just plain nonsense, there is no source to compare to the official speech of the armed forces. Every field, it seems, borrows at least

some of its slipperiest and most puffed-up words and phrases from the military—all the *targeting* and *reconnaissance*, the *beachheads*, *mobilization*, *fire power*, *collateral damage*, *preemptive strikes*, *heavy artillery*, and *exit strategies*. New projects invariably *hit the ground running*, and enterprising foundation officers *parachute in* to troubled organizations with emergency aid.

In the cutthroat realms of business and academia, this sort of verbal belligerence probably satisfies a natural killer instinct and fits right in. But why this same vocabulary would appeal so strongly to people who work in the peaceable kingdoms of philanthropy, civic affairs, and the public interest may be a question best left to psychologists.

To some extent, we are probably all susceptible to incursions of battlefield jargon, given enough exposure in the popular culture. Times of war and national stress tend to bring out the inner field marshal in all of us. That may be why, even among people preoccupied with domestic philanthropy or public policy, it has become nearly impossible to escape such expressions as *surgical strikes*, *rules of engagement*, and *force deployments*. Roly-poly political consultants, no more fit for military command than Winnie-the-Pooh, nonetheless spent the 2004 election year distinguishing their door-to-door tactics from their media buys with the respective phrases *ground war* and *air war*.<sup>7</sup> Even some expensive sport utility vehicles now have brand names deliberately designed to invoke the rigors of military transport, notwithstanding their surround-sound speakers and individually heated seats.

<sup>7</sup>This boots-and-bombs lingo caught on with nonprofits almost instantly. A fundraiser for a major national charity in early 2004 advised his colleagues that they needed a nationwide media appeal to complement their successful city-by-city fundraising. “You need,” he told them, “an air war to reinforce your ground war.” Whether he envisioned precision strikes or carpet-bombing was unclear.

## WHEN THE SITUATION HITS THE FAN

One battlefield expression has not—at least yet—made its way into the upholstered halls of foundations and policy think tanks, despite a degree of usefulness with which all the other fad terms pale in comparison. The phrase in question turned up on the radio recently, after some tactical miscue following the U.S. invasion of Iraq. In a morning-after report on all the things that went wrong in this incident, a military commander plaintively explained to reporters that his unit’s troubles were the result of a “degradation of situational awareness.” Roger that.

Here, at last, is the military expression most perfectly suited to use in corporate and foundation boardrooms. There is, at first blush, a kind of poetry, or at least a subtle eloquence, to the idea of *situational awareness*—something at once fierce and serene, the all-seeing calm of an Arjuna or Sun Tzu on the threshold of battle. What CEO, on discovering that the company is broke and the books have been cooked, would not prefer to face the microphones with a tragic lament that “all would have been well, but for an unexpected degradation in the company’s situational awareness”? What foundation or public-interest group wouldn’t hope, after spending millions on some failed scheme to save the rain forest or redeem the public schools, to plead that “it would all have worked fine, but for an unfortunate degradation in our situational awareness”?

In reality, of course, “degradation of situational awareness” is simply Pentagon-speak for having no idea what in hell is going on around you. Enlisted troops have some plainer terms for this same idea, which are not printable here. Nonetheless, the expression holds a distinguished place in military texts, such as in a Defense Department handbook on Human

<sup>8</sup> Human systems integration” is another jewel in the Pentagon phrase book. We would have offered some learned opinion on it here, except that after reading more than 50 pages of the defense manual in question, we still have no idea what it is.

Systems Integration,<sup>8</sup> which warns that “information overload and requirements for the warfighter to dynamically integrate data from multiple sources can result in degradation of situational awareness and overall readiness.” Translation: When everything is hitting the fan at once, you may not be able to tell your chin from your elbow.

By those lights, the battlefield isn’t the only place where situational awareness is in trouble. Consider, for example, a foundation memo from a few years ago complaining that “infrastructure needs in the implementation of service reform proposals have not successfully been made part of discussions among state and local stakeholders, despite repeated efforts to engage constituencies in dialogue around these issues.” Anyone who believes that you can “engage” people “in dialogue” of any kind while talking like that is probably suffering from a degradation in situational awareness.

Not long ago, a group of communications experts—yes, we’re talking about the supposed good guys here—announced that it had “adopted a new and aggressive initiative to engage foundations . . . to strengthen the capacity of the sector to apply and integrate effective communication practices to advance programs and create positive social change.” If this daisy-chain of infinitives is an example of “effective communication practices,” then someone’s situational awareness needs upgrading.

An education think tank may also have been facing situational-awareness trouble when it offered this bit of insight: “Many skillful youth workers find reflections on the habits of *adultism* helpful. *Adultism* is defined as all those behaviors and attitudes which flow from the assumption that adults are better than young people and entitled to act upon young

people in myriad ways without their agreement.” Many skillful youth workers, it appears, have decided that bedtime, vegetables, homework, and tooth-brushing, among other things that children find disagreeable, represent an insidious form of imperialism perpetrated by the old upon the young—a social evil so widespread it requires a new, ugly word to describe it. Perhaps it is irredeemably adultist to say so, but something in that situational viewpoint seems dangerously degraded.

When a foundation claimed, in print, that it would “build the capacity of local partners to understand their distinctive qualities and to interact more effectively for mutually desired results,” it soon learned, to its surprise, that its “local partners” already considered themselves sufficiently aware of their own “distinctive qualities,” thank you, and wanted no tutoring on the subject from the foundation. In fact, the “local partners” felt they had a pretty good grasp of one of the *foundation’s* distinctive qualities: Its situational awareness had been degraded.

Another foundation sought to promote family planning in some overpopulated part of the world by “helping individuals and couples attain access to the full array of high quality family planning and reproductive health information, services, and fertility regulation technologies required to voluntarily determine the number and timing of their childbearing, and by promoting and evaluating economic development programs that conduce to reduced fertility.” Imagine someone who speaks like that trying to get you into a conversation about your reproductive practices. (Perhaps for starters, they could explain what it means to “determine the number . . . of their childbearing.”) Situational awareness: degraded.

## BEYOND THE MILITARY

The point of all these examples is not merely that they suffer from bad writing (though a couple of them could enter a Hall of Fame for that alone). More seriously, they suggest a clouded view of the world, a sense that whoever is doing the writing is dwelling in a remote philosopher's cave, inferring the world from shadows and refracted light, seeing events through a glass darkly. That is not, in fact, the case for the great majority of people who make their living promoting or studying the public interest. It is important to restate, at this point, a crucial premise of this essay: People in foundations and policy institutes are not befuddled eggheads out of touch with the world. The great majority are thoughtful, smart, and even passionate about making a better world. But befuddled is a pretty good description of the way many of them write and speak—giving at once a false impression of themselves and a highly discouraging view of their own, well . . . situational awareness.

This chapter began with a promise of a quick tour through some of the civilian fields from which much of this twisted language comes. Although it is a subject on which volumes could be written, here are some thoughts on the samples listed earlier:

a red-hot way to make an impression

### branding

The mammoth popularity of the idea of **BRANDING** in the civic and nonprofit world—where every organization, no matter how high its calling, seems to want its name to be as famous as Kleenex®—would no doubt surprise anyone who

has ever literally branded anything. The word's oldest meaning is "to burn with a hot iron," a definition that ought to take some of the élan (if not the escalating fees) out of the exploding occupation of "branding consultants." But in most modern contexts, the word is obviously intended metaphorically, in a sense that has been around for enough centuries to have earned the number-two spot in most dictionaries' definitions: "to mark indelibly."<sup>9</sup>

In reality, most civic and philanthropic organizations don't use **BRANDING** in either the blisteringly literal or the commercially metaphorical sense. They want their name better known not (presumably) to boost its commercial value, but to mark their particular ideas about the public good more indelibly in the public mind, and perhaps to scare up some donations in the process. Public-interest organizations that have achieved a true brand in this "indelible mark" sense—**CARE**, **Big Brothers/Big Sisters**, and the **National Trust for Historic Preservation** come to mind—have seen their names become synonymous with a particular approach to public problems, a way of thinking and acting on those problems that people can understand, identify with, and join. There is nothing crass (never mind scorching) about that aspiration, and many foundations and nonprofits might honorably hope to do as much.

But nowadays, the most common use of **BRANDING**, at least outside the Wild West, is among the cattle rustlers of Madison Avenue. It was the advertisers, in truth, from whom foundations and nonprofits borrowed the term and fell in love with it. Describing the public identity of public-interest organizations as **BRANDING** both diminishes and blurs their

<sup>9</sup>Actually, some number-two definitions are almost as scary as the number-ones. The distinguished *American Heritage Dictionary* gives the "hot iron" definition first, as nearly all do. But its second definition of the verb **TO BRAND** is "to mark with disgrace or infamy." Best not to mention this to the branding consultants.



achievements. What makes CARE or the National Trust famous is not just that its name, like some catchy brand of dish detergent, is easy to remember and subliminally likeable. They are famous not for their packages and logos, but for their work and the ideas behind it.

There are, of course, a few nonprofit organizations whose “brands” are famous in pretty much the same sense as the dish-soap people’s. They have mastered the art of packaging and advertising, even if not necessarily that of exceptional accomplishment. That is both rare and regrettable. But it is precisely the sort of triumph of form over substance that the slick word BRANDING evokes.

a journey into the unknown — head first

## dive drill down

Someone who read the earlier essays in this series wrote us to comment on the burgeoning popularity of the term DIVES, an expression the reader described as a “corporate buzz-word for auditing (deep) and surveying (shallow).” That was in 2003, by which time the expressions DEEP and SHALLOW DIVE were beginning to turn up well outside the civic world’s accounting and auditing departments. Little by little, nonprofit organizations — especially those engaged in research and public policy — were beginning to conduct “deep dives,” apparently in hopes of surfacing sub-oceanic layers of sunken truth beneath every murky topic.

Here’s a case of a metaphor rich with unintended meaning. The consequence of any dive is that you end up soaking your head. The consequence of a shallow dive is bound to be far

worse. I’m no accountant, but I would have thought that, in the world of business, the whole idea of taking a dive would be considered regrettable. Paying experts to help you do so would thus seem doubly ill-advised. We all know of a few enterprising companies that managed to dive without any professional assistance whatsoever. Several, of course, did pay handsomely for the privilege. Either way, shouldn’t people who labor all day in pursuit of the public good be able to do so with their heads held safely above water?

I feel obliged, in this context, to bring up the related expression TO DRILL DOWN. Like the DEEP DIVE, this oil-industry metaphor is meant to invoke a search for buried treasure—in this case through the penetrating intelligence of the analyst’s drill-bit mind. “The proposal becomes less attractive,” says a policy institute about some employment plan, “when we drill down to the funding and administrative implications.” “This report,” promises another organization, “drills down into the common approaches to universal health care coverage for children.” The main problem with both the diving and drilling metaphors is their unearned claims of profundity. The ordinary expressions “take a close look,” “examine carefully,” or “perform a detailed analysis” say the same things, but without brashly suggesting that one is piercing geological layers or plumbing the salty deep. Those are simply not claims that writers are well advised to make for themselves. The reader, not the writer, should be the one to determine whether one’s work is truly deep, penetrating, profound, or groundbreaking. To claim such things for oneself is just asking for trouble.

## maximize

The verb TO MAXIMIZE suffers, like many grandiloquent expressions, from a kind of inflation, being applied thoughtlessly to far smaller things than it is meant to describe. In that respect, it is cousin to words like “universal,” “brilliant,” “comprehensive,” and the oiliest of the lot, “holistic.” It’s rare to see these words used with anywhere near the expansiveness for which they were intended. A “holistic” cure usually addresses two or three aspects of a problem, but almost never its entirety—to which the Greek prefix *holo* refers. (Compare with “holocaust,” a total immolation, or “hologram,” where all dimensions are visible.) Similarly, “comprehensive” programs usually deal with a handful of related things, but not *all* related things (which would quickly get us to the galaxy’s edge, and beyond).

Likewise MAXIMIZE, which ought to mean achieving the utmost—the living end, so to speak. To “maximize” your return on an investment, you should end up immeasurably wealthy, or at least you should end up with every possible dime that investment could ever yield. (*The Oxford English Dictionary*’s first definition of MAXIMUM is “the greatest of all the values of which a variable or a function is capable.”) Most investors these days are lucky if they get any return at all, but almost no one ever gets everything that’s possible, and most smart investors aren’t foolish enough to expect that. Far too many people, unfortunately, are foolish enough to say that they expect that—or worse, that they can deliver it—a practice that makes the speaker seem injudicious at best.

## ramp up roll out windtunnel

The field of automotive engineering and manufacturing has furnished us with some of the oldest and most enduringly trendy buzz-words and phrases in American English. This no doubt traces to a time in the early 20th century when Detroit’s cachet was somewhat higher than it is today. Those years turned loose the now-ubiquitous clichés *assembly line*, *spinning your wheels*, *cog in the wheel*, *shift gears*, *where the rubber meets the road*, and the many uses of *hit the brakes*, among lots of other perennial favorites. Still, decades after Motown lost its glamour, the hot new expressions keep rolling off the conveyor belt. The newest seems to be WINDTUNNELING, which was largely unknown in civic parlance until the first few years of the 21st century and is still considered exotic even as this is written. But before we get to that late arrival, due respect must be paid to two ever-popular expressions whose uses have spread much farther for much longer: ROLL OUT and RAMP UP.

The idea of a ROLL OUT obviously traces to the magic moment when a shiny new model first rolls off the end of its assembly line, to the choreographed cheers of its builders. The moment has always been more important in image than in substance. The truly significant natal moment for a new model of car is when people buy it, not when it’s built. But no matter; the drama of the factory roll out has so captivated people in every other line of work that for years it has been

almost impossible to find any new thing whose inventors, authors, or investors would be content with a mere “start date.” No matter how intangible the product, and no matter how un-commercial its purpose, it now enters this world on wheels and *rolls out* of whatever factory, literal or figurative, has riveted its parts into place.

Still, complaining about ROLL OUT as an intrusive or dense bit of jargon seems petty. The phrase is overused and a bit self-important, but its meaning is limited to starting dates for new activity, a meaning that’s perfectly easy for people without an automotive background to figure out. More puzzling is RAMP UP, whose meaning seems to have passed through several phases of enlargement and distortion, until it now applies to almost anything that moves onward or upward in any sense at all.

I have found several conflicting sources for the modern meaning of RAMP UP, though the phrase dates back at least to the 16th century, when it simply meant to climb anything. The current sense of a sudden or swift escalation seems to have started when the phrase was used to describe an automobile’s ability to ascend a slope, or ramp. In time it came to mean the process of reaching a desired velocity, even on a flat surface. When used as an adjective (ramp-up time, ramp-up speed) it usually modifies nouns of pace or duration. Even when the phrase spread into management and the social sciences, it apparently started out with that essential meaning intact. People wrote about the challenges of “ramping up” a project or program to a new level of effort, or to new heights of speed or efficiency (no doubt aided, like cars, by new computers). But then the nearly inevitable happened: The phrase became “cool.”

It has now proliferated so far that it describes any advancement of any kind. A friend recently described getting out of bed in the morning as “ramping up” his day. Yet even that usage, however frivolous, at least describes an act of motion, involving some opposition to gravity and inertia. Almost anywhere in management or social science writing, you will read that some organization is “ramping up” an activity merely by expanding it. The desired effect, evidently, is to make the process seem both complex, like some arcane feat of engineering, and arduous, a Herculean struggle<sup>10</sup> against the laws of Newton.

There are, of course, organizational challenges that feel like a struggle against gravity and inertia. For some of those circumstances, a vigorous burst-of-energy metaphor may be apt. Unfortunately, as with most jargon, the phrase has been irredeemably cheapened by overuse. Some securities sharks even speak of “ramping up” a stock when describing a purely artificial inflation of its price. By now, whenever an organization (or an engineer, for that matter) uses the phrase RAMP UP, the reader’s natural skepticism should automatically be aroused: Has anything really important happened here, or is this just a normal bit of progress (or even chicanery), disguised as a NASCAR triumph? Whether such skepticism is warranted or not, it surely is no help to writers, for whom the mere use of RAMP UP now poses an instant risk of losing their credibility — or at a minimum, ramping it steeply downward.

Finally comes WINDTUNNEL, which started turning up among foundations and nonprofits around the latest turn of the century. It originally meant “test something’s ability to withstand resistance” — as when engineers subject a newly designed sports car to the effects of a wind tunnel to see how

<sup>10</sup>Actually, the mythical Greek famous for an arduous feat of “ramping up” was not Hercules but Sisyphus. Perhaps for that reason, people who use this expression tend to avoid mythological references.

much air drag it suffers. But in recent years, it has grown to refer to any test at all. By 2004, people were starting to hear the word used as a synonym for “try something out to see if it works.” The descent into jargon seems to have taken the wind right out of WINDTUNNEL. What once was a technician’s term-of-art in aerodynamic engineering can now describe practically anything from kicking the tires to taking a spin around the block.

a wedge of anything, no matter how you slice it

## sector

An arts funder refers to grants for “experimental work in the dance sector” (note: not *in dance*, which maybe wouldn’t be experimental enough). A policy institute laments the lack of support for a new idea “in the political sector” (but not *among politicians* or *among voters*, or among whoever it is that inhabits the nebulous *political sector*). There was a time, not so long ago, when everything in public affairs took place in an *arena*—the political arena, the welfare arena, the health care arena. People may have become uneasy over the ancient Roman connotations of that cliché (and thus gave it the thumbs-down, so to speak). Now the arenas are crumbling, the gladiators have taken up mathematics, and everything’s a sector.

Judging from *The Oxford English Dictionary*, SECTOR had only a narrow range of meanings, strictly geometrical, for about 14 centuries, starting from its late Latin origins. It referred to a segment of a circle or sphere, radiating from the center outward, and to the various mathematical processes for measuring such things. By the 18th and 19th centuries, as mathematics came to be used in more and more fields, SECTOR grew to refer to anything shaped like a slice of a circle or sphere, or to things whose form or function could be calculated

by using the same techniques as for measuring a geometric sector. Astronomers used it for portions of the celestial spheres, entomologists for wing spans and flapping mechanisms, optometrists for fields of vision. Lots of other scientists came to apply the calculation of circle- and sphere-segments to their work, in ways that any mathematician would probably have understood. And then along came the military.

Sometime during the First World War, it seems, generals stopped thinking of their fronts as lines (a pattern that had produced little more than bloodbaths) and instead envisioned pie-shaped wedges, with a command center at the pointy end and forces fanning out from there. It took only a few decades for this idea to make the metaphorical leap into economics, a field that spent most of the 20th century in thrall to the language of both mathematics and warfare. Starting with two canonical sectors (public and private), the economic pie-slicing proceeded to four by the time of the Great Depression (manufacturing, agriculture, services, and government). It wasn’t long before there was a sector of the economy for nearly every activity under the sun.

Today, Manitoba’s Agricultural Department devotes a page of its Web site to the state of the dry beans sector. A course at Berkeley helpfully applies the Ricardian model of international competition to the soyburger and beer sectors, among other things. A trade group for companies that make disposable wipes is seeking an analysis of the “wet-toilet sector” (no, it’s not a joke). Next to all that, the idea of a dance sector or a political sector hardly seems farfetched.

What it does seem, however, is meaningless. If wet toilets and soyburgers are sectors, then everything’s a sector. That is why the word can now be removed from nearly any sentence

without changing the meaning a whit—proof-positive that it has taken its place among the emptiest words in the whole jargon sector.

whatever makes you better than Brand X

## value proposition

At a conference on corporate philanthropy in 2003, a published summary reports, “a main theme that emerged is that there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach when it comes to assessing the *value proposition* of corporate philanthropy, but that each company needs to develop internally accepted measures.” This sentence appears to leave unchallenged the claim of woolen winter caps to being the only thing in America for which one size actually fits all. But that is not what’s interesting about this unremarkable claim.

Until recently (the early 1990s, as far as we can tell), the idea of a VALUE PROPOSITION was unknown to the philanthropic and nonprofit worlds, but it has been spreading like a brush fire ever since. The phrase describes an approach to developing and marketing products based on a clear idea of what customers consider valuable. The PROPOSITION amounts to a succinct argument for why customers should be willing to part with their money in exchange for your product, rather than someone else’s. An exact synonym for this kind of VALUE PROPOSITION is “sales pitch.”

A foundation that supports civic leadership has posted an online training document on its Web site with the imposing title, “Social Entrepreneurship: Understanding the New Strategic Space for Social Value Creation.” We have already addressed this use of SPACE elsewhere (see page 23), but the

publication’s discussion of “social value creation” leads us, by and by, to the discovery of a new, as-yet-unexplored jargon space: “Developing Your Social Value Proposition.” The document helpfully lists the components of an effective “social value proposition,” all of which bear an uncanny resemblance to . . . a sales pitch.

An organization that represents community foundations urges its members to “strengthen our value proposition,” by which it means that they should “distinguish and promote our competitive advantage.” In other words, figure out why you and your services constitute a better deal for your customers (in this case potential donors) than do those of your competitors. Merchants do pretty much the same thing whenever they make a sales pitch.

It is perfectly understandable that foundations and civic institutions, acting in the public interest and trying to serve elevated ideals, would want to avoid any appearance of peddling their wares, much less engaging in the hawker’s art of pitching a sale. And yet, however much they may abhor the appearance, some of them seem fairly at ease with the reality—so long as it’s elegantly dressed up as a VALUE PROPOSITION, and moves about in an elevated “strategic space” far above the muddy footpaths of the public bazaar.

## Conclusion: Jargon and Its Apologists

In 2002, a reader of the online magazine *Domino Power* (a publication for software savants) wrote to complain about the heavy use of jargon by one of the site's regular contributors, an expert in something called "knowledge management." The contributor responded with a gracious, if revealing, admission: "I continue to reach out for feedback that normalizes my language to something a little more consumable by the audiences for which I write and speak." Whether this satisfied the original letter-writer is unknown. But one suspects that for most audiences' consumption, that feedback could have done with a bit more normalizing.

Still, the interesting part is what came next. Once his nod to normalization was out of the way, the expert went on to defend his use of jargon not just as a personal foible, but as an intellectual necessity. "Jargon is a key cornerstone of Knowledge Management," he wrote. "More importantly, it's a key underpinning to learning and leveraging knowledge. Interestingly enough, a taxonomy is a jargon vocabulary of shortcuts that experts use to iconify conceptually classified meaningful patterns, so they can cover ground very quickly—that is, more productively."

It's hard to tell, but there seems to be an interesting point buried under all that gibberish. More and more, contrarians are arising to argue that jargon is not just useful, but a "key cornerstone" of productive thought (thus putting it high above all the non-key cornerstones). A less iconified version of this argument—i.e., one that used some actual English—appeared in August 2003 on the op-ed page of *The New York Times*. Under the headline "Speak, O Muse, of Strategic Synergy," former *Times* reporter Randall Rothenberg argued that jargon helps "to harmonize the many factions" of a modern corporation. Better still, he wrote, the very vagueness of corporate buzz-words helps to stimulate employees' imaginations. In the course of asking themselves "What the hell could this possibly mean?," Rothenberg argued, staffers grapple with questions that bring them together around gradually solidifying ideas. By and by, this groping for applications and definitions bestows two gifts in one package: It gives meaning to the words and a unifying tribal language to the employees. In this way, "a bit of jargon... has been like Oz to Dorothy, an initially shapeless destination, which, through argument and deliberation, has taken on form and meaning."<sup>11</sup>

For those of us who are routinely forced to read important documents two or three times to wring some meaning out of them, this argument may seem like a stretch. But in truth, Rothenberg has a point. Plenty of arcane, convoluted language is indeed highly useful inside the corporate sanctum (or any of the other sancta—academic, artistic, scientific, military, take your pick). It's a convenient shorthand, at a minimum, and for all I know it may even have those magical powers that Rothenberg ascribes to it: the ability to inspire teamwork, stimulate creativity, and focus imagination. If companies are

<sup>11</sup>I hate to spoil such a nice simile, but Dorothy spent her entire time in Oz begging to get out of the place. Its "form and meaning," she soon learned, had a lot to do with wicked witches and phony wizards.

willing to hire gilt-edged consulting firms like Rothenberg's current employer, Booz Allen Hamilton, to teach them abracadabras like *alignment*, *strategy-based transformation*, *thought leadership*, and *synergies*, then surely the market has spoken: These things are obviously valuable to somebody.

Yet as we saw in an earlier section of this essay, the market is also increasingly rich with other consultants who follow along afterward, charging some of the same companies to *un-teach* them this same vocabulary. (Remember the consulting firm that had to introduce a photo-processing company to the phrase "one-hour photo"? See page 39.) What the companies, or at least the consultants, realize is that the same words that supposedly work such magic within the corporate cubicles can be poison when they leak out into the wider marketplace, where customers tend to prefer their English plain.

#### A TWO-STAGE CURSE

For organizations whose "marketplace" is public affairs, and whose "customers" are the public, jargon's poison can be twice as deadly. The first dose of venom attacks the individual words, draining away their meaning. By definition, when the topic under discussion is not just a single product or service, but literally everybody's business, the participants in the conversation will not all be specialists for whom technical terms have narrow definitions. It's not just that a lot of people won't understand the words — though that's worrisome enough. The bigger problem is that people will soon be using the words in all sorts of sloppy ways. Technical jargon, exposed to the wider world, quickly loses its technicality, its specific and finite application, once a thousand less-expert

people start batting it around. For an easy example, ask any psychiatrist how often she has heard a merely erratic state of mind described as "schizophrenic," or a cardiologist how many times he has heard people use "hypertension" to describe a person who is too tense. A sleek-sounding word will catch on much more quickly, with a much wider public, than will its difficult, complex definition. Pretty soon, the hip new term means everything to everyone, and no one can use it with any hope of being precisely understood. The word is dead, though it continues to walk the night.

That's when the second jolt of venom comes in, killing off the bigger message of which the buzz-words had been only a part. At this point, it's not just the words that don't mean anything — the whole argument ends up cold and bloodless. The reason is that all those newly popular, but increasingly meaningless, expressions make it much easier to speak at length without revealing much. That is already a potent temptation in public affairs, or at least in politics, even without the aggravating influence of jargon. But add in the magic vocabulary, and even the most innocent victim will end up caught in the spell, shuffling zombie-like in a kind of verbal sleepwalking. Let someone expound for half an hour about *capacity* or *institutionalized learning* or *leveraging social capital*, and the poor, besotted speaker may never know that nothing useful has been said.

I learned this truth the hard way. Early in my working life, I got a job at a new nonprofit organization that invested in troubled neighborhoods. The board was packed with corporate eminences — executives of giant companies, Wall Street tycoons, self-made zillionaires. The first time I had to present

an investment proposal to these folks, I took extra care to impress them with my write-up, to show that I had examined the matter from every angle and used all the sophisticated tools at my disposal. I had reams of tables and spreadsheets, risk and ratio analyses, budgets and projections and what-ifs, each accompanied by pages of explanatory notes and text, all of it richly embroidered with a lingo I had lately acquired in a string of graduate finance classes.

Midway through my oral presentation—in which I gassed on in pretty much the same terms as in the write-up—one of the younger (and I must say, kinder) board members quietly closed her copy of my report and plaintively asked a question that I have carried around with me the rest of my life:

“Please just tell me this: Who’s going to do what to whom for how much?”

I had expended all those words, never mind all those tables and calculations, without clearly explaining the first thing anyone would need to know before investing in anything. Nothing I had said, so gorgeously and at such great length, could possibly matter a whit to anyone who didn’t fully grasp the answer to that one question. After more than a month of working on this presentation, I had never noticed its fatal flaw because, frankly, the whole thing just sounded so *impressive*. The fault for that oversight, of course, lay mainly with my inexperience and youthful insecurity. But both of those problems became a lot more deadly when left to ferment in a soup of jargon. In the end, what died in that presentation was the very thing I was trying so desperately to bring to life: my point.

## THE DISCIPLINE OF CONTRAST

Among people who spend their time thinking about public affairs, jargon serves a slipperier purpose than in the business world, where at some point even things with fancy names have to make money, or else they’re finished. In the public and philanthropic world, that kind of financial discipline is rarer. But any new idea may still face a moment of cold reckoning: the day someone cares to ask, “Compared with what”? (That’s why social scientists, among others, are so fond of controlled experiments: The control group provides a flesh-and-blood contrast, a defined alternative, and an unambiguous comparison.)

Every idea has an alternative, and the more plausible and clear the alternative is, the more interesting the original idea will be. Aides to Hugh L. Carey, governor of New York from 1975 to 1982, say that Carey used to pose a standard question to staff members and advisers when they would try to argue him into taking some position on a public issue. After covering all the usual fiscal, administrative, and policy questions, staffers knew they had better be ready with an answer to this one: “What are we against?”

Sound negative? It shouldn’t. The only way to be convincingly positive about anything is to be able to say, succinctly and clearly, what the alternative would be. Yet that is the most important information that jargon, at its worst, helps to obscure. Blather on about a proposal’s MODALITIES, or how people will ACCESS it, or how well CONCEPTUALIZED it is, and you slowly draw your readers’ attention away from Hugh Carey’s starkly clarifying question, and into a world of fog and shadows. The sad part is: That is sometimes precisely



the effect people in foundations and civic groups want to have — not because they want to deceive anyone but because they consider the whole question of contrasts and opposition to be too negative and divisive, and they don't want to be perceived as criticizing others. The fear of alienating or antagonizing other people leads them, without knowing it, to baffle their audience into indifference.

Take the example of ACCESS — as in, “promoting greater access to employment services.” The gray blandness of the word suggests that there is nothing wrong with the employment services, only that people aren't “accessing” them. In reality, of course, people who use the term that way normally believe (and may even admit the belief, if pressed) that current employment services are scarce, understaffed, badly fragmented, poorly publicized, or all of these things in combination. At their worst, many argue, these services neglect or put off some of the very people they are meant to help. The problem isn't that people don't “access” the programs — an image that suggests forbidding remoteness, as if the employment office were atop a Himalayan peak or floating off the coast of Greenland. The problem is that the programs, as currently organized, aren't working well. When people speak and write about “improving access” to these programs, they are bending over backwards to avoid drawing the contrast that would help other people understand what they really mean — to wit: We're against the way the programs currently work, and we think we know a way to make them work better.

Is that an overly negative way of looking at the matter? On the contrary: The flaws are the *only real reason* why someone would want to pay attention to the promise of a better approach. The clarity of an argument is measured in

much the same way as the clarity of a TV screen: by the degree of contrast among the elements of the picture. When writers use ACCESS to paper over the unpleasantness to which they're secretly opposed, they effectively turn down the contrast knob, blurring the bright colors and the stark blacks and whites into a soft but meaningless gray. They end up writing only to those people who already know the code, and already share the author's opinions, and thus can furnish all the details and contrasts on their own. Anyone not yet aware of the problems will see no pattern in the blur before them.

Most readers, consciously or not, are going to remain uninterested in any subject until they know the answer to Hugh Carey's question: What are you *against*? Ineffectual services? Bad locations or staffing? Inadequate publicity? Fine: Now I'm interested in how to fix those. Tell me only that you're for ACCESS, and my only logical answer is: So what? Who isn't?

Not long ago, I tried to help someone formulate an argument on something that insiders like to call “smart growth.” The phrase usually describes efforts to limit metropolitan development, in hopes of preventing the kind of suburban sprawl that lengthens commutes, paves over rural areas, worsens air pollution, and sucks up scarce government money for roads, water and sewer lines, and new schools. Or anyway, that's what I thought the idea was. But when I tried to formulate a succinct description like that one, I felt as if I was falling down a rabbit hole.

“Oh, no,” my client said, “we can't say we want to prevent development. That would alienate the building industry. And we can't say we're against road construction, or that commuting worsens pollution, because that would antagonize

the commuters and suburbanites. And we can't say we're against new subdivisions, because that offends suburban governments . . ."

After a while, doing my best to channel Governor Carey, I asked, "Well, what are you against?"

You can probably guess the answer: "What? We're not *against* anything! We're *for* Smart Growth!"

There, in a nutshell, is the argument for jargon. It allows you to speak *for* everything and *against* nothing. But that luxury, soothing and amiable as it is, comes at a terrible cost: forfeiting all hope of interesting anyone who isn't already interested.

#### WHAT EVERYONE WANTS TO KNOW

Whenever I set out to write anything—and almost anytime I start to read anything more demanding than a cereal box—I find myself asking the two questions I've described here: *Who's supposed to do what to whom with how much?* and *What are we against?* These are not the kinds of questions taught in great writing courses. They do not necessarily lead to more beautiful writing, if that is judged by aesthetic standards alone. But they have one overwhelming virtue that too much of today's public-interest writing sorely lacks: They lead to the kind of information that nearly everyone wants and needs to know.

That information, or the lack of it, is the really critical factor in judging any piece of information about public affairs, philanthropy, or the public interest. Jargon is not the only criterion. Plenty of jargon-free writing fails to answer those questions, and some rare pieces of jargon-laden material actually manage to convey important information in a way that

people can understand. The destructive effect of jargon is not just that it is, in itself, an impediment to understanding. Its much graver offense is that it fogs the landscape and pollutes the air. It creates so much confusion that even the writer loses track of whether the big questions are being answered or not.

Some years ago, in trying to edit (or at least critique) a piece of hopelessly murky writing, I tried asking an author the question I thought would bring the whole paper, and all its problems, into focus. "In this paper," I asked, "who are you asking to do what to whom?" I had imagined that this potent question would cause the author to realize, in a flash, that the most important information was completely missing from his draft. I was wrong.

"Well, the answer to that is obvious," he replied. "We're saying that stakeholders should leverage their knowledge and access to inform the allocation of resources." He had no idea that this mumbo-jumbo amounted to no answer at all. It took hours to probe each of those buzz-words—who are the "stakeholders," what kind of "knowledge and access" do they have, what would it mean to "leverage" and "inform" those things, what "resources" are they going after, and on and on. Only after those hours of discussion did he come to believe that there was, in truth, a bundle of important information that had not been conveyed in the earlier draft. There was a breakthrough of sorts—but only after the wall of jargon had been disassembled, brick by brick.

Perhaps the apologists are right, to a point. Maybe, in some smoky temples of strategic synergy, there is a wholesome role for buzz-words and their imprecision. But that world is not the one inhabited by most people, where normal dramas

of life and work, politics and responsibility, costs and benefits routinely play out. Most important, in the world to which most civic causes hope to lead us—where, among other things, a “good lively democracy” holds sway, as John Humphrys put it in the quote at the start of this essay—the buzz-words are not a solution but a burden. They represent an obstacle to reason and to real participation by people with other things on their minds.

For that reason, clearing away the thickets of bad language is an obligation not only of good writing, but of good thinking and persuading. Let the style be pretty or plain, let the words be long or short, but first of all let the ideas be blunt, concrete, practical, and stark. Any language that promotes those qualities can’t help but enliven the discourse on which democracy depends.

## Index

access (v.), 28  
accountability, 20  
action (adj. or v.), 30  
branding, 62  
conceptualize, 42  
dive, 64  
diversity, 34  
drill down, 64  
engagement, 31  
environment, 22  
grassroots/grasstops, 53  
inclusiveness, 46  
maximize, 66  
modality, 44  
organic, 53  
ownership, 48  
planful, 51  
ramp up, 67  
resources/resourced, 36  
roll out, 67  
scale, 33  
sector, 70  
space, 23  
structure, 24  
value proposition, 72  
windtunnel, 67

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