JARGON: LOVE IT? LOATHE IT? LIVE WITH IT!

When young people move out of education and into work, in whatever field they choose, they will sooner or later come up against new ways of communicating, and some of the language used can seem puzzling, even forbidding at first.

Job advertisements themselves have a language all their own. A high-flying post with a health-food manufacturer for example is described like this: *'You will be coming onboard a value-based bioproducts and services sector-leader focused on discovery excellence. A self-starter, you will work within a highly energetic strategic environment in the development and execution of process enhancement and workflow optimisation, partnering with customers and suppliers.'* The ad is doing several things at once. It is setting out the key demands of the job in terms that specialists will recognise; it is also making the company and its activities sound important and dynamic. *Coming onboard* suggests joining the crew of a racing yacht or ship; *self-starter* means someone who can take initiatives without having to be supervised, *process enhancement* and *workflow optimisation* are more formal, and shorter, ways of saying 'make the system better and make sure it works as well as possible'.

Once you are in a job, you'll have to work with the language used by those partners, customers and suppliers mentioned in the recruitment ad. A supplier of computerised healthcare systems claims to… *avoid silos by implementing interactive front-ends, visibility-providing infrastructure, intelligent dynamic*

middleware, context-aware portlets, bi-directional write-back facilities – all within a user-centric framework. Silos (originally big containers for storing grain) is a fashionable word for closed groups of people who keep information to themselves and don't share it; *visibility* as it's used here means making the workings of a system clear to everyone in the organisation. *User-centric* means designed to meet the user's needs rather than just for the convenience of the designers or sellers. To a non-specialist all this would be baffling, but shouldn't present a problem to someone working in the field.

Technical, specialist or work-related terms, especially when they are terms we don't all recognise, are known as 'jargon', a word which probably started out as an imitation, like 'gargle', of meaningless noises, and is very often used disapprovingly. In commercial companies and in public organisations this kind of language is called 'business-speak' or 'management-speak'; the words used are also known as 'buzzwords' if they are particularly fashionable or in the news.

Looked at in close-up jargon is not one simple form of language, but is made up of several related categories: there's the 'hard' technical terminology that you have to learn if you work in science, technology or finance, for example; there are semi-technical terms (like *synergy* –the positive effect of cooperating, or *co-creation* –designers, producers and users working together), typically from management or marketing, which are used in many different areas, then there are labels for trends (*downshifting* –changing to a less stressful lifestyle), new inventions (*blogs*) or techniques (*mashup,*

burning), finally the slang, catch-phrases and clichés (over-used expressions) like *cherry-picking* (choosing only the best parts), or *low-hanging fruit* (things which are easy to achieve) heard in office conversation.

What makes jargon especially complex is that it isn't just supposed to communicate meaning, but has other less obvious functions, too. It's a special vocabulary that belongs to a privileged group of insiders. If you know it and can use it, you belong; if you don't, you may feel left out. It's language that gives a kind of power to some – and denies that power to others.

Some jargon is comical, as when travelling salespeople refer to themselves as *road warriors*, or a lawyer brought in to solve a problem is dubbed a *hired gun* or a *killer bee*. Other terms - *firefighting* for problem-solving, *hot-desking* for moving from one workstation to another - make the working day sound more dramatic than it probably is. In trying to sound impersonal business-people can seem not funny, but cold-blooded; employees are now routinely referred to as *human resources*, even *human capital*. An expression, often sounding neutrally 'official', or even cosily reassuring, that is used to disguise a painful reality is called a 'euphemism'. Thus, firing someone becomes *letting them go*, while ruthlessly reducing the number of workers is called *downsizing* or *rationalisation*. A presentation by a boss to his department might include (it's a real example); *If we can't get buy-in from all stakeholders and bring all cost-centres on board, we may have to consider a rationalisation policy*. This could be translated into 'normal English' as 'If we can't get everyone involved to agree, we might have to start cutting jobs.'

Jargon even finds its way into private conversations between colleagues. *They're going to big-bang the new accounting system. I wanted to input but I couldn't get any face time with my boss. I'm worried that I'm falling off her radar.* How would you react if confronted by language like this? It could be that your co-worker is trying to impress you, or perhaps s(he) thinks that as part of the group you use the same language yourself. If you can't guess the meaning, you'll have to ask, but it doesn't take long to de-code: *big-bang* means start up suddenly, *input* is contribute, *face-time* is an opportunity to meet in person and *falling off the radar* is when you stop being noticed or consulted.

Surveys carried out recently among working people confirm that many of them – 68% in one survey - dislike or fear this sort of language.

In all the surveys around 50% said that they regularly heard jargon used in their workplace; only 19% in small organisations but 65% in larger ones. An Irish study suggests that such language is most likely to be used by those in the 30-40 age group. The younger (18-25) and older (50-plus) age groups are the least likely to use it. 68% think that this type of language is used mainly to impress rather than to communicate information. 63% think that 'business-speak' is primarily used to hide a lack of knowledge and 26% think it is used to intimidate. 64% think it actually makes communication more difficult, but 41% admit to having used such language to impress someone at work.

Where does this kind of language come from? In several of the surveys one phrase in particular was nominated as the most commonly heard or the most annoying, or both. The phrase in question is *think outside the box*, which 77% of people reported that they'd been told to do by their boss sometime in the last year. It means to think creatively, to try a completely new approach. Although the expression has only been fashionable for a few years, it may have originated back in the 1970s when businesses used an intelligence test in which the subject was presented with nine points arranged in a square on a sheet of paper. The object was to join all the points with only four straight lines, drawn without removing pen from paper – something that is impossible unless two lines are extended and intersected outside the square, or 'box'. Quite unrelated is *(it does) what it says on the box,* which means that a device performs its obvious function, no more, no less. *Straight from the box* is used to emphasise that a device is ready for immediate use, while *put it/him/her back in its/his/her box* is slang for removing a dangerous or irritating colleague.

Like much literature and poetry, and like slang itself, jargon relies on its strangeness for its effect. It is by definition language that is novel and exotic, unfamiliar to its hearers or readers until and unless they make the effort to learn it. Despite all the surveys, I'm not at all sure that we should automatically disapprove of jargon. Of course, whenever language is used deliberately to confuse or to intimidate, that behaviour should be condemned, but when speakers strive to find new ways of describing what are genuinely new ideas, and when they play creatively with the possibilities of the

language, they can enrich our vocabulary and extend our means of expressing ourselves. In my harshest moments I'm tempted to challenge the self-styled victims of workplace jargon with a catch-phrase well known in business, media and military circles: 'If you don't like the heat, get out of the kitchen!'

Like slang or texting, jargon will always be a minority interest. It won't help anyone to pass their exams and in a job interview it's safer to avoid it. But like all new aspects of our everyday life, it fascinates many people, and features often in press articles and broadcasts. Very few teachers or academic researchers, in the UK at least, have paid much attention to new and unorthodox forms of language, but at King's College London there is an Archive of Slang and New Language, a focal point for collecting examples of changing language, assembling articles on these subjects and providing links to other sources of information. You can consult the Archive and contribute your own examples to it, or follow the links to some of the best of the many Internet websites which themselves record and discuss new varieties of English.

GLOSSARY

Some key words which are used in many different professions are very rarely used in everyday life:

b2b business-to-business; for the trade not the public

high-end luxury or technically advanced (products or services)

blue-sky thinking letting your imagination go

joined-up thinking coming up with ideas that work together, not just disconnected thoughts

turn an operation around to make a failing operation successful

turnaround time the time necessary to carry out a key operation

roll out to introduce (a system or series of products) in stages

best practice the most effective way of doing things

metrics measurable guidelines, targets, etc.

ring-fence to safeguard from outside interference

This article first appeared in *emagazine*, Issue 36, April 2007