



Dr. Jargonlove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Technobabble

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Jargon means the collection of obscure, polysyllabic verbal incantations only the elite understand. Technical communicators see jargon everywhere. Sometimes we can just laugh at it. Other times we have the onerous responsibility of translating it into something that some minimal percentage of the population can actually understand.

In a profession that idealizes the clear and concise, we tend to satirize and vilify jargon as evil incarnate. But the J word isn't *always* a bad thing. Before attacking it, it's helpful to know the enemy. Jargon didn't originate *ex nihilo* just to confuse people ... unless the Genesis 11 story of the Tower of Babel was not really about the divergence of world languages and cultures, but about the rise of civil engineering jargon. Beyond that B.C.-era confusion, why do people use jargon today?

To Be Taken Seriously

In their term papers, students use academic jargon to persuade their instructors that they have indeed grasped the course concepts. In their publications, academics feel that "the biota exhibited a 100 percent mortality response" sounds so much more professional than "all the fish died." That using jargon demonstrates competence and credibility is a regrettable belief, but such psychology is all too frequent in the real world.

In the world of *Star Trek*, scriptwriters casually mentioned "biofilters," "pattern buffers," and "Heisenberg compensators" to reassure fans that, after beaming up to the *Enterprise*, their favorite characters wouldn't end up with fly heads or be replaced by evil clones from a parallel universe. (At least not in every episode—though occasional transporter accidents with technobabble fixes added to viewer fun.) The *Star*

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Trek television and movie series were set a few centuries into our extrapolated future. Thus, the writers tried very hard to make their projections sound as plausible as possible, and they took the science in their science fiction seriously.

To Be Clear and Precise

Although it may seem contradictory, accurate communication does sometimes require jargon. A mathematical equation is jargon in one of its purest forms. Without algebra-class decoding skills, a formula is gibberish, but if you know the jargon, an equation can be elegant. Trying to express formulas with text descriptions instead of symbolic math shorthand would be very cumbersome for all but the simplest problems. Einstein's most famous symbolic equation, for example, is only a fraction as long as "energy equals mass times the square of the speed of light."

Sometimes, as verbal shorthand for complex issues, jargon is perfectly understood by the target audience. Sometimes technical terms are required for precise understanding between specialists—especially when time is vital.

If medical personnel are performing a triple bypass operation on me, they have my full permission to use whatever cardiac surgery jargon seems relevant while I'm under the knife.

To Deliberately Obfuscate, Evade, Confuse, and Deconstruct

If you're a government employee responsible for fish safety, "the biota's 100 percent mortality response" in your report makes it sound like it's really not your fault all the fish died. Bureaucrats cover their ABCs to keep their jobs and avoid lawsuits. They don't want communication to be clear and concise if it's a potential liability.

If you're a postmodern theorist, you can publish articles with deliberately ambiguous, jargon-filled prose in order to deconstruct the artificial nature of language—and confuse your rivals. (Generously sprinkle any discourse with randomly selected terms such as "hyper-reality," "gender signification," or "multiplicity of subject positionalities.") But I'd really rather you didn't waste your (or my) time. All the obscure abbreviations and typos in text messaging will probably finish the job the poststructuralists started anyway.

To Not Work So Hard

Professionals are accustomed to jargon. They used it in those term papers years ago, and now they communicate with peers who also use it. Since it's so ingrained, they just forget that laypeople aren't connected with their collective unconscious.

Most professionals don't intend to be confusing, but crystal-clear communication is hard work. It's easier to do a mental copy-and-paste than to rethink and reformulate concepts from scratch. That, of course, is where we come in. For us, jargon means job security. **1**