

**A Tool or a Weapon? Analysing the Exploitation of Corporate Jargon in Workplace
Communication**

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Consider a scenario set in a quarterly business review meeting at a middle-sized corporation that has recently fallen short of its financial targets substantially. The participants include a senior executive, a mid-level manager who has been in the firm for several years, a junior employee who has been with the company for less than a year, and several other staff members. The situation of the firm is beyond recovery and downsizing is inevitable.

The ultimate goal of the senior executive is not a simple disclosure of the situation and the decision of layoffs, but rather using a strategic communication approach, or as we call it, “corporate jargon”, to prevent panic, maintain morale, preserve a facade of control and competence, and motivate and reassure the remaining workforce. In simpler terms, the goals are to control and to heal.

This essay argues that corporate jargon is a series of meticulous linguistic choices (Zamfir, 2024) that function primarily as tools of social control and manipulation through the mechanisms of euphemism, obfuscation through syntactic manoeuvring, and shibboleth. The essay further argues that while the use of corporate jargon is intended to be a tool for constructive communication, it can easily become a weapon that alienates different audiences.

The Linguistic Mechanics of Obfuscation

This section explores the verbal strategies employed in corporate jargon used by the senior executive, illustrated by examples for the scenario described above.

A Linguistic Choice: Euphemism and the Euphemism Treadmill

Stein (1999) defines euphemism as a substituted fragment of language that conveys fewer negative connotations than the original term, which is often considered offensive or harsh. Rittenburg et al. (2016) see euphemism as a way of reducing transparency, thereby serving the function of obfuscation. In other words, euphemisms are used as a semantic softening agent. For the scenario of this essay, the senior executive may employ terms such as, as Vickers (2002) suggested, “right-sizing”, “downsizing”, or “shifted resources” instead of the more straightforward terms “layoffs”, if not “firings”. As for the substantial shortfall in meeting targets, rather than a disaster-like “failure”, one may frame it as a “challenge” or a “need for calibration of expectations”. The use of euphemisms in this context often shifts the focus from the negative aspects of the situations to a more positive connotation, which can help maintain

morale while also obscuring responsibility, achieving the purposes of control (managing the emotions and response of the employees) and healing (preserving the image of the executive as a competent leader).

However, one may argue that the controlling and healing effects from the perpetual use of these terms gradually wear off, as the audience starts to map the euphemisms to the underlying negative realities. Indeed, as Lumen Learning (n.d.) suggested, in the modern corporate life, the term “downsizing” is generally considered to be delivering a negative connotation. Nevertheless, this is an expected outcome of the use of euphemisms, as Stein (1999) also noted that euphemisms draw away attention from the negative ideas on one level, but they, on a deeper and uncommunicated level, also imply what is being euphemised.

To overcome the weakened euphemisms, new euphemisms need to be invented. This behaviour is known as the “euphemism treadmill” (Pinker, 1994). On this treadmill, the words are constantly renewed, powering euphemism to sustain itself over decades of corporate communication. While more senior or experienced employees may be already familiar with decoding phrases like “downsizing”, the shift towards “right-sizing” or “workforce optimisation” may buy the executive some time and further defer the negative connotations for both senior and junior employees.

In Jakobson’s (1960) terms, euphemisms of corporate jargon are strategic exploitations of the expressive (to inform) and phatic functions (to keep social bonds) of language, while also skilfully mutating the referential function (to refer to the underlying ugliness) to achieve the purposes of control and healing.

Syntactic Manoeuvring: Nominalisation and Passive Voice

While euphemism lives on the lexical level, corporate jargon also exploits the syntactic or grammatical level to achieve obfuscation. It is not uncommon for corporate jargon to intentionally use complex syntactic structures to create further obfuscation and blur responsibility. Whereas Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) view nominalisation as an essential tool for English, Bello (2016) examines its cognitive implications – turning a dynamic action, often acted by a person, into a static, reified object. Nominalisation leads humans’ minds into isolating the objects from the agent and the person being acted upon (Barsalou et al., 2010), and thus creates a

sense of detachment of responsibility and agency.

For example, rather than saying “the company has failed to meet its targets”, the senior executive could have instead phrased it as “a recent challenge has been noted in the area of target achievement”, which transforms the verb “to fail” and “to meet” into “challenge” and “achievement”, respectively. As for the layoffs, instead of saying “we have decided to lay off 20% of the workforce”, it could have been “a decision of workforce simplification has been made”.

One should immediately notice that in the above examples, nominalisation is often accompanied by the employment of passive voice. Indeed, the passive construction is a common verbal strategy for drawing attention towards the action and the result, rather than the agents (Memmedli, 2025). In such constructions, the agent is introduced by a “by” clause, which can further be omitted to entirely erase agency, and in turn, responsibility (Bailey, 1997).

Not coincidentally, the use of nominalisation and passive voice serves the same purpose of obfuscation through detachment of agency and responsibility. This sort of language manipulation is particularly effective in the setting of corporate communication through delegating the responsibility to virtually no one, while the senior executives remain in control of the narrative. The objectification of the actions taken also eliminates the tied sentiments of guilt and blame, which is crucial for maintaining morale, and hence, the healing function of language.

The Shibboleth Effect: Passwords for Identity Gatekeeping

Having explored the syntactic linguistic strategies, this essay now dives deeper into the sociolinguistic mechanism of shibboleth. Serving as an insider/outsider test historically (McNamara, 2005), the shibboleth effect has now been established as a linguistic marker and tool of social differentiation and bifurcation (Busch & Spitzmüller, 2021). Busch and Spitzmüller (2021) further argue that shibboleths are linguistic passwords that create a binary distinction, shaped by the underlying power dynamics. In modern contexts, shibboleths are simply defined as words or phrases that are only used and understood by a specific group of people.

Recall that in the scenario, remaining employees that are not laid off still need to be motivated and reassured. For those who are already familiar with corporate jargon, hearing

“this is a pivotal moment” and “we need to reposition ourselves to create synergies” while decoding them internally to “things are really bad now” and “we need to take up more work to account for the layoffs”, respectively, may actually be comforting thanks to a sense of identity and belonging. Through Jakobson’s (1960) theory, the vagueness and abstractness of these phrases in fact mute the referential function, delivering no information at all. However, this is a clever exploitation of the phatic function, as the employees that are capable of decoding the jargon comfortably pass the shibboleth test, and hence feel a stronger sense of belonging to the in-group. As established by Van De Mierop (2023), this is a powerful process of “identity gatekeeping”, which can be a strong tool of social control.

Be that as it may, one intuitive counterargument is that the shibboleth language easily alienates the junior employees who are not familiar with the jargon (Busch & Spitzmüller, 2021; McNamara, 2005). As this essay shall later reveal, the shibboleth effect indeed serves the controlling function of corporate jargon well, but it also risks alienating the junior employees, whose motivation is crucial for the healing function of corporate communication.

Outcomes

Intended Outcomes

To briefly summarise the above analysis, corporate jargon is a synthesis of verbal strategies, from the smallest unit of language (through euphemism) to the syntactic level (by nominalisation and passive voice), and finally to a grander sociolinguistic layer (through shibboleth), that achieves the purposes of control and healing in a workplace setting.

Unintended Outcomes

It has been established that the euphemism treadmill is a powerful engine to keep corporate jargon in fashion, nevertheless, it was more about a generalised audience. That is, the sense of positivity is refreshed in the general sense. If we examine from the perspective of one individual employee, it is not difficult to see that the fatigue of decoding accumulates and does not get refreshed by the treadmill. Take the senior employee for example, the constant renewal of euphemistic terms may initially buy the executive time, but as the employee becomes more accustomed to the jargon, the alternative terms may convey just the same level of negative connotation. This is where the euphemism strategy can fail to achieve its intended purposes of

control and healing.

As for the shibboleth effect, while it can strengthen the bond of the more experienced, for the junior employees, it can be doing the exact contrary – creating confusion and alienation. This is the nature of the shibboleth effect, rather than a flaw of corporate jargon – it amplifies the existing bonds and puts the barrier higher for the outsiders. In Bourdieu and Thompson's (1992) theory of linguistic capital, the outsiders, in this case, the junior employees, often pay a significant cost to acquire the identity from the linguistic market. When the cost is higher than the sense of belonging itself, the outsiders may just give up altogether and feel alienated from the in-group internally, which is the opposite of the intended function of corporate jargon.

Reflections and Conclusion

To conclude, corporate jargon is a powerful linguistic tool that can be used to control and heal in a workplace setting, but its excessive and non-selective use can lead to the opposite of its intended outcomes, which is to alienate and to divide. This tool consists of multi-layered linguistic manipulations, from lexical to sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic levels, that work together to achieve the major purposes of control and healing.

Inherently, corporate jargon was created for the sake of efficient communication in corporate life, through features such as brevity and abbreviations (Kapralikova, 2024), nominalisation (Bailey, 1997), *et cetera*. These features aim to create a shared language that is efficient, objective, professional, and agent-neutral. In certain contexts, when applied appropriately, corporate jargon is indeed a useful tool of verbal communication. However, when the jargon is deployed solely for obfuscation, it can easily become a weapon that alienates different audiences, either intentionally or unintentionally.

This essay further reveals that language itself is never neutral, but rather, it is always with a purpose. The choice of words is not a merely stylistic preference, but an act of ethical and social responsibility. While clarity is often the idealised standard for communication, including corporate jargon, ambiguity and abstraction are often strategically weaponised for power management. The question, then, is not whether language can be exploited – it always can be – but rather, who is empowered to exploit, and at whose expense.

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