

BUSINESS ENGLISH OUTSIDE THE BOX. BUSINESS JARGON AND ABBREVIATIONS IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: *Business English is commonly understood language, yet Harvard Business Review called business jargon “The Silent Killer of Big Companies”. As we all have been taught in school, we are aware of the fact that in communication we must comply with linguistic rules so that our message gets across succinctly. Yet, there is one place where all these rules can be omitted (at least in the recent decades): the corporate office. Here, one can use euphemisms and clichés, can capitalize any word that is considered important, the passive voice is used wherever possible and abbreviations occur in every sentence. The worst part is that all of these linguistic enormities are carried out deliberately. The purpose of this paper is to analyse to what extent business jargon and abbreviations have affected business communication (which most of the time, it is filled with opaque language to mask different activities and operations) and the reasons for which these linguistic phenomena have become so successful in the present. One of the reasons for the research is that in business English, jargon can be annoying because it overcomplicates. It is frequently unnecessary and it can transform a simple idea or instruction into something very confusing. It is true that every field has its jargon. Education, journalism, law, politics, medicine, urban planning – no field is immune. Yet, it seems that business jargon has been described as “the most annoying”. Another reason is that jargon tends to be elitist. Those who do not understand the terms feel confused and uncertain. The paper starts with defining these two concepts, business jargon and abbreviations, and then it attempts to explain the “unusual” pervasion of these, both in business communication and in everyday communication. For this, the paper includes a list with the most common business jargon and abbreviations. In this view, the authors have accessed different economic blogs and specialty journals. Then, it continues with the presentation of the results of a survey which was applied to Economics students regarding the extent to which communication, with emphasis on business communication, is affected by the use of business jargon and abbreviations.*

Keywords: business; communication; communication etiquette; jargon; abbreviations.

JEL classification: Y90

1. Introduction

In business, it is required to communicate with different types of people, such as business associates, clients and co-workers. Therefore, the rules of business communication etiquette are vital for both interlocutors and they should be incorporated into daily communications, both written and verbal. As in business, the information shared must come across clearly.

Communication problems in business, typically, originate in misunderstandings and many of these problems occur from using ineffective communication techniques.

Communication problems waste time and money, disrupting productivity and resulting in lower product quality and customer satisfaction. Barriers to good communication appear when the person sending a message uses the wrong communication style for a

particular situation. Choosing the wrong mechanism (email, memo, report, letter etc.) or the wrong words complicate things. Thus, in the business world, it is important to determine the communication style of the audience in order to avoid unnecessary problems.

Speaking, listening, writing and reading effectively is not as easy as one might think, especially in the complicated world of business. It requires practice and diligence and it takes effort to provide a clear message, through channels appropriate for the target audience and situation. Business vocabulary (jargon) serves a useful purpose within a company, but when communicating with the external world to the department or organization, it is difficult to understand. Also, abbreviated terminology is helpful for those who work within a particular industry or field because it is fast, efficient and useful in most circumstances, however in the outside world, it does not say much.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to analyse the effects and provide examples of the way in which the use of business jargon and abbreviations in communication with people outside the organization has a tendency to undermine the effectiveness of the communication process.

2. Main concepts. Jargon and Abbreviations

2.1. Jargon. Definition and use

The origin of the term *jargon* is Old French, meaning “chatter of birds”. The first known use dates as back as 14th century. According to Merriam –Webster Dictionary, *jargon* refers to the language used for a particular activity or by a particular group of people. Other definitions of the term are:

- confused unintelligible language; *b.* a strange, outlandish, or barbarous language or dialect; *c.* a hybrid language or dialect simplified in vocabulary and grammar and used for communication between peoples of different speech;
- the technical terminology or characteristic idiom of a special activity or group
- obscure and often pretentious language marked by circumlocutions and long words. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/jargon>

In short, jargon is language specific to a group or profession. It is often distinguished by acronyms and initialisms (“EOD” for “end of day”) and scientific-sounding, polysyllabic words: *deliverable, actionable, metrics, synergy, core competencies*. The use of jargon has been subject to many debates, the most notable belonging to George Orwell, the author of the famous *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the creator of several neologisms, including *cold, war, Big Brother, thought police, Room 101, or doublethink*. An advocate of the idea according to which, in the modern style of language, good writing must be clear and simple, in his essay, “Politics and the English Language”, Orwell states that technical language is nothing but an oratorical trick, simple language is required to clarify difficult concepts, while complex language is needed to explain simple concepts, and lastly, political language is structured to make lies seem like the truth. (Apud Roney, 2002:13) Therefore, in Orwell’s opinion, specialized language is not essential. Instead, the famously controversial writer appreciates that “one can often be in doubt about the effect of a word or a phrase, and one needs rules that one can rely on when instinct fails. I think the following rules will cover most cases:

- Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think

of an everyday English equivalent.

- Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.” (Orwell, 2013:12)

No matter how much we like Orwell’s ideas and we would like to speak accordingly, yet, there is no way to completely eliminate jargon from everyday life. Social groups create special language – jargon – on one side, to make communication short, but most of the times because they want to clearly delineate who is a member and who is not. Members understand the lingo and learn to speak it fluently.

Professionals from different fields and academics are famous for their pervasive use of jargon, but they are not alone. Sometimes, employees use a great deal of jargon which is not part of the wider industry, but unique to that office environment. The reason is to use words shortened to make communication faster.

On the other side, it is ironic that slang – words that are not considered part of the standard vocabulary of a language and that are used very informally in speech especially by a particular group of people (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/slang>) – has a higher status, taking into consideration that slang is used only by few people while many people know and use jargon regularly. Slang is usually associated with different subcultures and, most of the times is not known to outsiders. In business, it is a common fact that, many times, marketers borrow slang to make their product seem cool and linked with a desirable group

2.2. Abbreviations and Acronyms. Definition and use

Acronyms and abbreviations have been used for many centuries. For example, the official name of the Roman Empire was *Senatus Populusque Romanus*. The ancient Romans used the abbreviation *SPQR*. The Latin phrase *ante meridiem* (before noon) became AM.

At the end of the 19th century, businesses began abbreviating their company names in writing to fit into places where space was limited, for example, on a barrel or crate, small print newspapers and railroad cars. For example the *National Biscuit Company* became *NABISCO*. (<http://dchinn1.hubpages.com/hub/Why-Do-We-Use-Acronyms-and-Abbreviations>)

Abbreviations became popular in the 20th century, nowadays being used in almost all fields. According to Merriam-Webster.com, an abbreviation is “a shortened form of a word or name that is used in place of the full word or name”. (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/abbreviation>) Abbreviations can have many different forms. The most popular form is a capitalized letter combination of the first letter in every word of the phrase (e.g. FB is the short form for Facebook and F2F stands for “face to face”). In many cases, an abbreviation of a single word is the first couple of letters of the word with the first letter capitalized, following with a period at the end of the abbreviation (e.g. Prof. for professor or Mr for mister). Another type of abbreviation is to take only one or two letters, which are not necessarily from the original word, to stand for the meaning (e.g. lb (pound) and m (meter)). There are many ways in which abbreviations are formed, yet all abbreviations have only one purpose: to save people’s time, space and effort in written or oral communication, and they are used in particular contexts where they are familiar. Although, many times it results in dialogue distortion. According to Peters (1999), this “distortion” of dialogue is capable of facilitating communication across cultures, so even people in non-English-speaking cultures know the meaning of the abbreviation.

Abbreviations have become more notable since the invention of the telegraph in the 19th century, and especially since the explosion of the electronic age (Beauchamp, 2001:74). Grammar and spelling were highly valued in the study of English language, and abbreviations were only used to stand for long phrases, organizations and so on. Yet, the age of globalization and the need to save time and space have brought an essential change in the way abbreviations are perceived. Digital technology, including the Internet, has led to the creation of a huge number of abbreviations, especially as online chat, internet messaging (IM) and texting (SMS) have gained popularity. Some familiar acronyms from these media include: **FYI** = For Your Information; **LOL** – Laugh(s) out loud; **BTW** – By the way. Texting, also known as SMS (Short Message Service) requires the writer to include a lot of information into a small space. This has led to a modern form of highly-condensed writing, sometimes surprisingly imaginative: B4 = before; L8r = later; CU = See you.

There are three forms of abbreviation:

- *acronym* - a word formed from the initial parts of a name which can be letters or syllables. The word “acronym” was created by Bell Laboratories in 1943. For example, the *North American Free Trade Agreement* is commonly known as NAFTA.
- *initialism* - formed by combining the first letters in a name or expression
- and each letter is pronounced separately. For example, the *United Nations* is known as UN or *European Union* is known as EU.
- *truncation* - a word is shortened to its first syllable or few letters. For example, Wed. is Wednesday and info is information.

The use of abbreviations has been under scrutiny for some time. There are linguists considering that abbreviations corrupt the language and communication can be confusing if one is not familiar with the meaning of various abbreviations and acronyms. Yet, language has to reflect the changes taking place in the world and the development of society and technology is reflected in the growth of abbreviations. On the other hand, when used properly, many acronyms and abbreviations can enhance communication because more meaning is conveyed in less time and fewer words. Many older acronyms provide fascinating examples of the development of language and changing cultural attitudes, especially relating to the field of customer service, especially in the contexts of IT (which has been an especially fertile field for abbreviations) and healthcare. Nowadays, the world of blogs and microblogs (for example, Twitter limits the length of a message to only 140 – 160 characters) and social networking sites (Facebook) contribute to the creation of new abbreviations and acronyms. However, these social networks are platforms to practise Internet abbreviations rather than to create them.

In business, if a company uses abbreviated acronyms into its external communications is likely to experience misinterpreted messages. People may try and derive their own interpretation and this quickly will turn to misunderstandings. Within a company, though, it is safe to use acronyms and abbreviations (although there might be cases when the same abbreviation stands for different meanings, see the list below), especially in reports, memos and training materials if definitions and meanings are understood or explained, enabling the audience to understand the meanings involved.

3. Business jargon and abbreviations in business communication

On 5 December 2012, Citigroup announced that “a series of repositioning actions that will further reduce expenses and improve efficiency across the company while maintaining Citi’s unique capabilities to serve clients, especially in the emerging markets. These actions will result in increased business efficiency, streamlined operations and an optimized consumer footprint across geographies.” (<http://www.citigroup.com/citi/news/2012/121205a.htm>) If the reader is not accustomed with the business jargon, it is difficult to understand Citigroup’s intentions. In fact, the company was about to fire approximately 11,000 employees. In the 21st century, business media has been flooded with press release of this type, euphemisms and empty stock phrases. As many people started complaining about it, Forbes launched its second annual *March Madness–style business-speak bracket*, in which phrases like *thought leadership* and *going forward* are mentioned as replacers for *takeaway* and *make it happen*.

The first to complain about the use of business jargon were the Americans. In his article, “Jargon: It’s not the business world’s fault!”, Friedman makes a short presentation of the evolution of the business jargon in the USA, beginning with 1911, when the engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor published a famous monograph called “The Principles of Scientific Management,” campaigning for a more efficient style of business operation, requiring not charismatic leaders but systematic thinkers. “Taylorism” was soon the subject of academic conferences, congressional investigations, and debates in the popular press. (Friedman, 2013)

Then, in 1914, Douglas S. Martin, in an article for *The Academy and Literature*, wrote: “The spoken [English] of the Americans is now taking on a very pronounced commercial colour, [...] At the tea-tables in the St. Regis, in New York, and the Copley Plaza in Boston...the breezy gossip of the American woman is simply redolent of the broker’s office, the curb market and the warehouse.” (Friedman, 2013) The main idea was that business jargon was not as different for everyday talk as one might have expected. Martin was against words and phrases such as: “stop in,” “deliver the goods,” “win out,” “the straight dope,” “make good,” “get away with it,” “put one over,” “show down,” “come across,” “get wise,” “on the level,” “bawl him out,” “got his number,” “get his goat,” “get warm around the collar,” “hit the ceiling,” “fall for it,” “get busy.”

Mark Liberman, a linguist at the University of Pennsylvania, noted on the blog Language Log that this “speak” had become as common in sports, politics, social science, and other spheres as they are in business. <http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=7069>

Liberman argues that people are unconsciously combining their negative feelings about work or “bosses” with their discomfort for new slang. “Different groups—and groups in different settings—do have different ways of talking and writing, and everyone knows this as a matter of personal experience,...But ordinary people have reasons to dislike managers more than they dislike sportswriters or particle physicists.” <http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=7069> “So when a neologism rubs someone the wrong way,” says Liberman, “and their stereotype-forming system is looking for a group to associate with it, ‘managers’ are a likely target.” The conclusion is that business produces a new type of “strange” vocabulary, but doesn’t everyday culture do so?

After consulting several blogs (some in favour, others violently fighting against the use of jargon), we were able to make a list of some more commonly used business jargon, considered, though, by some to be the most annoying. What is worth noticing is the fact that most of these phrases are used in everyday speech.

- **Think outside the box:** “In the last two fiscal years, we’ve used *outside-the-box thinking* to facilitate best practices and maximize efficiencies by switching to single- rather than double-ply bathroom tissue.” <http://brandjournalists.com/articles/10-pieces-of-business-jargon-that-suck/>

“Out-of-the-box-thinking” refers to a type of thinking that moves away in diverging directions so as to involve a variety of aspects and which sometimes lead to new ideas and solutions. It is usually associated to creativity. This phrase in itself was clever and illustrative at the beginning, yet not it has come to a point when it is overused and it has lost its power.

- **End user:** “Our new website maximizes interaction and efficiencies for our *end users*.”

An “end user” is the person that a product or service is designed for. The term is based on the idea that the “end goal” of a product or service is to be useful to the consumer. This example is illustrative for the way in which simple ideas are made complex. The end user is actually the customer.

- **Leverage:** “Among the options listed by them are: incentive and compensation adjustments for executives, *leveraged buy-outs* and capital structure changes, focusing on core skills, diversifying internationally while focusing on businesses in which a firm has strong competencies, and buying and selling mature businesses.” (Pop, 2013:32)

“Leverage” has several meanings – it may refer to the action of a lever or to the mechanical advantage of a lever. Also, it means positional advantage; power to act effectively. Yet, the term has become worldwide spread due to the world financial crisis of 2007. Before the term was exclusively used in banking, meaning the use of credit or borrowed funds to improve one’s speculative capacity and increase the rate of return from an investment, as in buying securities on margin (leveraged buyout, leveraged assets et.) The problem is that, at some point, people in business started using it instead of “use”.

- **Push the envelope:** “When she starts to whine about her hours to her manager, she really starts *to push the envelope*.” (Yun, Meissner, 2008:16) The meaning of the phrase “to push the envelope” is to attempt to extend the current limits of performance; to innovate, or go beyond commonly accepted boundaries. The origin of the phrase came into general use following the publication of Tom Wolfe’s book about the space programme - *The Right Stuff*: “One of the phrases that kept running through the conversation was ‘pushing the outside of the envelope’... [That] seemed to be the great challenge and satisfaction of flight test.” (Wolfe, 1979:8) Wolfe is not the creator of the phrase as it was first used in the field of mathematics in its original form – “push the edge of the envelope.” (<http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/push-the-envelope.html>)

The sheer overuse of the phrase has led to being stripped of meaning and, nowadays, it is used incorrectly, for, in its original sense, the word “envelope” referred to an aircraft’s capabilities (speed, durability etc.)

- **Core Competency:** “The primary *core competency* of marketing is the ability to identify with the wants and needs of the target customer and communicate the company’s brand image and product value in such a way as to elicit a favorable reaction from that target customer.” (<http://smallbusiness.chron.com/examples-core-competencies-marketing-sales-10240.html>)

Businessdictionary.com defines “core competency” as the “unique ability that a company acquires from its founders or develops and that cannot be easily imitated. Core competencies are what give a company one or more competitive advantages, in creating and delivering value to its customers in its chosen field.” (<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/core-competencies.html>) Yet, the word “competent” does not mean. Bruce Barry, professor of management at Vanderbilt’s Owen Graduate School of Business rates the phrase as “silly” - “Do people talk about peripheral competency? Being competent is not the standard we’re seeking. It’s like core mediocrity.” (<http://www.forbes.com/pictures/ekij45qdh/core-competency/>)

- **Touch base:** “Steve Jobs talks about managing people ‘*Touch base frequently* (focus, simplicity, design is how it works)’” (<https://twitter.com/HeinevdM/status/400365079147081728>) The meaning of this phrase is to make contact, to cover all the possibilities. Many say that it has its origin in baseball where the runners need to touch the base to make a run legal.

Also, we incorporate some of the most common abbreviations and acronyms used in business. Some of the abbreviations commonly used in business are easy to understand, while others might be confusing (see PM):

- **People / job titles:** CEO = Chief Executive Officer; CFO = Chief Financial Officer; CIO = Chief Information Officer; MD = Managing Director; PRO = Public Relations Officer;
- **Finance:** CROGI = Cash Return On Gross Investment; COP = Certificate of Participation; CBV = Chartered Business Valuator; CDO = Collateralized Debt Obligation; EBITDAR = Earnings Before Interest, Taxes, Depreciation, Amortization, and Restructuring or Rent Costs; IBF = International Banking Facility;
- **Management:** ARMS = Administrative Resource Management System; BPMS = Business Process Management Systems; BRM = Budget and Resource Management; CAM = Contract Audit Management; PM = Performance Management; PM = Performance Monitor; PM = Procurement Management; PM = Program Management; TMS = Technical Management System;
- **Other business acronyms:** VAT = Value Added Tax; P&L = Profit & Loss account / statement; KPI = Key Performance Indicators; KM = Knowledge Management; RRP = Recommended Retail Price.

4. Research methodology

The purpose of this paper is to examine the effects the use of business jargon and abbreviations has on business communication. For this study we used a descriptive research methodology. A survey was administered to students of the Faculty of Economics. They specialize in different fields such as: International Business, Finance, Accounting (BA) and European Economic Relations (MA). All the students are familiar with business vocabulary as they start studying Business English in the first year. The BA sample is made up of 1st and 2nd year students and there are very few of them who

work. The MA students study Communication in Business English and some of them work for different local companies while others work for multinational corporations, therefore, they are familiar with different types of documents that are used within a company. Also, they are aware of the importance of correct business communication as they have to communicate not only in their native language but also in a foreign language with their business partners.

5. The results of the research

The survey consists of ten questions which are meant to find out whether students are familiar with terms like “business jargon” or “abbreviations” and whether they consider that by using these, communication in business is hindered. Also, the questions included business jargon terms in order to see whether the students are familiar with their use in business or their use in everyday life.

The answers to the first question – “What is jargon?” - show that 83.7% of the students identify the term with special language used by specific groups of people while 16.7% consider it as being “bad language”. Then, despite our expectations, a percentage of 23.3% of the students surveyed do not consider that the use of jargon affects the communication process in business.

The answers to the question whether business jargon has negative effects on business communication are surprising: 41.9% do not perceive that the use of jargon in business is harmful to the communication process, while (even though more than half of the students questioned) only 58.1% are aware of the negative effects of the jargon used in business communication.

When asked whether business jargon: a) helps business people communicate better; b) makes communication more difficult, the students provided unexpected results as 37.2% of them consider that business jargon helps business people communicate better.

Asked to define the term “abbreviation”, the students responded in a percentage of 100% that an abbreviation is a shortened form of a word or name that is used in place of the full word or name and 90.7% consider that people use abbreviations to save time, space and effort in written or oral communication, while the rest think that the use of abbreviations is fashionable.

Regarding whether the use of abbreviations affects communication, 60.5% of the students provide positive answers, while the rest (which is a rather high percentage) do not consider that the use of abbreviations has any effects on the communication process. When asked whether the use of abbreviation has negative effects on business communication, 47.5% provided negative answers, considering that everybody knows what abbreviations stand for.

When asked what “CEO” stands for, 88.7% recognized the abbreviation for Chief Executive Officer, while the rest identify it with Corporate Europe Observatory. This is surprising considering that the Economics students usually come across the former meaning.

5. In conclusion

In the end, one might think that George Orwell may have been a little paranoid, but in our opinion the famous writer was right: fuzzy language can lead to fuzzy (and even dangerous) thinking. The results of the survey applied to Economics students show that even if they have not actually started working, they are aware of the dangers and problems unclear, fuzzy business communication might lead to. Yet, there is quite an unexpected percentage of students who do not perceive business jargon and abbreviations as threats to business communication, perhaps due to the consideration

that the majority of the business jargon and abbreviations are commonly used in everyday speech. There is though a small percentage of 9% who consider that jargon is "bad language".

In spite of the new trends, of the need to save time, space and money, it is important to write for a general audience. We could not say that jargon is inherently evil. Sometimes it is just a form of technical terminology that gives people involved in a highly specific, shared activity a common frame of reference. When it comes to business English, jargon is sometimes fun as people use new, catchy words or terms. After all, language is a continuously changing thing. Yet, if one wants to use business English in a way that maximizes good communication, he has to be careful about how much jargon he uses in business conversations and meetings. Also, there is no doubt that abbreviations have a significant importance on people's use of daily language regardless it is in relation to social media or to other means of communication. However, there is an ongoing debate on whether Internet abbreviations, especially, as well as the entire Internet language, will benefit or damage the existing language structure. As the results of the survey showed, the use of abbreviations might be confusing, especially in business communication where the message should get across succinctly.

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