

The Principles Of Bullspeak

Or

**How To Utilize Our Strategic Conceptual
Capabilities To Leverage Communication
Solutions**

**Zork Hun
2005**

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The Principles of Bullspeak

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“Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent and our language -- so the argument runs -- must inevitably share in the general collapse. It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism, like preferring candles to electric light or hansom cabs to aeroplanes. Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes.”

George Orwell

Politics and the English Language (1946)

**Words are not bad
They are just used that way**

Introduction

When Orwell wrote his essay on “The Principles of Newspeak,” we lived in a different world. The essence of the assault on language as he saw it was an attempt to limit language to limit communication.

He saw the abuse of people, rights and even language in the communist world and brought what he saw to its logical conclusion in “1984”. He created the concept of language as a tool of coercion.

The world has changed since, and Big Brother does not seem to be as scary a prospect as it seemed in 1948. There is an explosion of communication, wonderful new things around us have new names and we have new ways to talk about them. Yet the dangers to language are still around. Not only do we have the Little Sisters of Political Correctness and the Mini-Minds of Academic Writing but also the Weasels of Advertising, Skunks of Politics and Dopes of Business Communication. All of them try to do more than simply manipulate us; they try to manipulate language itself to make it more suitable to their goals. They do not have the power of Big Brother, but they are dangerous nevertheless.

They are dangerous because they are succeeding. I see more and more people taking for granted that they have to lie to get ahead, that they have to use a certain kind of language to present themselves to look credible. D. C., a young man I used to work with in the heydays of the dotcom boom decided after the bust (just like me) to try to make it on his own. When I looked at his Web site promoting his services, I didn't know if I should laugh or cry.

“As one of Canada's premier corporate strategy firms, XYZ Management helps small to medium sized business achieve sustained shareholder value growth through the development, enhancement, and implementation of innovative business designs.”

His is a one person company with a rented desk somewhere. The information on his site is 90% bullshit. D. is a nice guy. He is not exceptional, but he does have a good attitude, willing and able to work hard. He is very competent managing small projects. The problem is

that he honestly thinks that this is the way to do business. By bullshitting. Because that is what everybody else does. He put together a string of buzzwords. What the sentence actually says is impossible to determine, he probably does not know himself, but it is not important anyway. All he is trying to do is to send out good vibes. That is what it's all about. Not about meaning or information but vibes. Projecting - not even an image, just a positive attitude with an allusion to competence.

These problems start with language. With the statements we make, with the expressions we use to make those statements. The world around us is neither true nor false, it is what it is. Only statements about it can be evaluated as true or false, therefore nothing is as fundamental to truth as the language we use to formulate the statements to communicate it. If we allow language itself to become as deceptive as it seems to become, we will not be able to know any more what the truth is.

People who try to sell you 'solutions' instead of products and services are not just stupid. They know the difference and they are lying to you deliberately, because they hope to gain an advantage. They may not even consider what they do immoral. They are just stretching the truth a little, using perfectly acceptable synonyms, making just tiny logical jumps. They do not think that the lies are that serious. They aren't even lies in their eyes, just tools of gentle persuasion. They are just introducing a little flexibility into the interpretation of some expressions. Very often I have the impression that the expressions I target with my criticism are used without ill will, used just to keep up with the Joneses, not to be left behind, not to look less than the rest, not to lose a competitive edge.

This book is not as much about language, as it is about the morals distorting it. Language indeed does have a natural growth and we cannot shape it directly. What we can shape is our attitude, our moral conduct which is so clearly reflected in our use of language. Muddy language is a reflection of confused minds; sleazy, manipulative language is the reflection of corresponding attitudes.

Why is this a problem? Because it directly affects the morals of our interactions. We are so much used to the bull that we do not even blink any more when encountering it. My aim is modest. All I want is to

make you blink. I only wish to raise into our collective consciousness the lies ossifying into the words of everyday communication. I just want to show that word by word, we are selling our souls and what we get for it is definitely not worth it. Not only do we lose our soul, but also end up looking like idiots.

This book will deal with a little more than the few plastic words that irritate me so much. It will deal with the mechanisms we use to fool ourselves and each other by using suggestions instead of direct meaning to communicate.

I will try to show that the changes to language are not accidental, that we are not talking about simple mistakes, but deliberate concoctions designed to benefit the speaker.

I will explore the ways these linguistic aberrations work their magic, at least in the hopes of the speaker.

I will ask questions such as: Does a kinder language create a kinder world? Do we get more by pretending that we do? What matters more in communication: the exchange of information or signalling the intentions of the speaker? Can we refer to the things we have by the names of the notions we aspire to attain using them?

I will also try to show how incredibly rich language is. When I delve into the meaning of individual expressions, I try to dig up meaning that most of the time does not reach our consciousness. I will speculate extensively about background, the intentions of the speaker and the possible connotations expressions evoke in listeners.

I will include a few hyperlinks to Web sites. The only thing I can guarantee is that they were alive when this book went to print. I would most certainly hope that I will be able to embarrass the creators of at least some of those pages just enough so that they will change them.

I will not deal with many things marginal to this investigation:

My target is morality in our use of language; I will not deal with mistakes and stupidity.

Inconsistent spelling (protester – protestor) or inappropriate use (calling a candidate incumbent, which I see these days quite regularly in job ads) or trends like writing composite words as separate ones as

in ‘trouble shoot,’ ‘our selves’ or ‘out perform’ (from the Intel Web site).

For that, you should read the “Anguished English” books of Richard Lederer.

I will not target grammar and style.

For that, you should read the wonderful works of the Underground Grammarian, Richard Mitchell.

I will use a representative sample, not a comprehensive list.

For that, you should read William Lutz, whose books, “Double-Speak,” “More Doublespeak” and “Doublespeak De-fined” build on extensive research, although I have to admit that I am very tempted to elaborate on some of his examples.

I will make some references to possible linguistic theories but I will not develop them to any extent.

For that, you should read the works of linguists like Steve Pinker or George Lakoff.

Most importantly, I will not discuss PC language. No matter how tempting it is, I will try to keep away in this work from the subject of political correctness, even though it would probably be the easiest target for my subject. I will refrain from analyzing it mostly because it would be too easy a target and also because several people did it already quite well.

What I am trying to say is more fundamentally political than the petty aims of PC Language. Talking about it would drag me down into discussing what I consider right or wrong about particular issues. I will try to talk about the way language is used to manipulate, not about the ultimate aims of the speakers nor about the content of their message.

I will use two formats to identify my sources:

This format represents a dictionary definition or quote excerpted from The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition Copyright © 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company.

...while this one represents quotes from the world around me, the world wide Web, spam, business communications, billboards, business signs and any other communication aimed at us.

I am an immigrant to the English speaking world. At the age of 27, the extent of my knowledge of English was to know that ‘She Loves You Yeah, Yeah, Yeah’ and that ‘Happiness Is A Warm Gun’ (and at that point in my life I still spent most of my time looking for the triggers.) While writing this book some people questioned the audacity of my enterprise. How do I dare to think that I can have something to say about a language that I didn’t even speak for the better part of my life? I would like to think that it is an advantage. I have a perspective native English speakers may not have. I have a base for comparison and an analytical approach just because I learned the language as a conscious adult. Of course, it also means that at times I may be wrong. That is why I enlisted the help of so many people to look at it before I released it to the world.

I would like to thank those who helped me with this project:

Jake Wallen, Anna Cseke-Gál, Győző Fülöp, Andrea Németh-Newhauser, János Samu, Gábor Zsigovics.

So let’s start by giving shape to the subject we will be talking about.

Subjects (the nature of the bull)

In his wonderful story of “Funes, his memories” Borges makes the case for the value in the imperfection of our memory. The hero of his story loses the ability to forget after being injured in an accident. He remembers everything from that point on which eventually makes him unable to function. Since he can remember everything, he is unable to generalize his experience. He ends up vegetating in a low stimulus environment to escape the incapacitating information overload.¹

Every notion in our head is the reduced substance of related experiences. We interpret the world by comparing new experiences (which includes not only direct experiences but knowledge we gain through communication as well) to notions in our mind. Without the ability to forget, language could only consist of proper names, unique descriptors of every instance of our conscious experience. Without the ability to generalize we would not be able to communicate, we would not be able to create categories. Without the categories we would not be able to create abstractions, and without abstractions even logic cannot exist. The process of understanding is a process of comparing our new experiences to the fuzzy abstractions in our head. It is the fuzziness of our notions that makes thinking possible, but the fuzziness that makes abstract thinking possible also gives us the power to manipulate our message.

Meaning is not precise, meaning is not direct. Not only is it fuzzy, but also has different aspects. Let us call these aspects derivative, representative and evocative².

The derivative aspect is the dictionary definition, the meaning that represents and describes the conceptual commonalities of the things to which we apply the word.

The representative aspect means all the actual examples of that word in our memory, including the instances of its use in different contexts.

The evocative aspect means the associative and emotional response it gets from us. All connotations and all emotions, all the things it reminds us of.

We can define what the word table means (by the deduction of functional commonalities) and we can think of all the examples of tables we have seen. We may also have associations and memories of tables we liked, the dinners we had on them and the games we played under them as children.

The richness of language stems from these manifestations and associations. Our message is never really precise, every word we use carries within a whole bag of associated and related meaning. If I say ‘house’ the mental image in your mind should be in all functional ways similar to the one I have in mine. If I say ‘home’ I mean something different and I expect you to have a correspondingly different image in your mind. Talking about your house or your home I may refer to the same physical entity, yet I would likely be talking about different things.

When we communicate, we do not only convey information, but also signal (or hide) our intentions and try to influence the reception of our ideas in our interlocutor. Which of these aspects will prevail will depend on the purpose of the communication. If my goal is to convey information, then I should try to be as precise and descriptive as possible. If my goal is persuasion, then I should focus on the effects of what I say, the imagery and associations that are the most likely to render my listeners susceptible to my argument. We can manipulate our message by using expressions that are rich in manifestations but vague on the abstraction. We can manipulate our message by choosing synonyms with more positive connotations even if the meaning is less precise. We can also manipulate our message by using expressions that will create an emotional response and we can manipulate that response by altering the meaning of the words to serve our goals.

If you don’t get this, you must be a retard.

Did I get you? Are you offended? Would it have been different if I said: read the above again?

(I even got myself a few days after I wrote this. I shocked myself with my rudeness. It took me about a second to remember that I wrote it to make a point).

It could of course be argued that being rude has nothing to do with language, it is behaviour, but then it could also be said that communication is a kind of behaviour as well and our choice of words is just an aspect of that, a sign of the stance we take. I could have said “if you don’t get this, it’s your loss” or “if you don’t agree, think again,” but if my intention is to get you into an adversarial position, then calling you names is the best way to achieve it.

Most expressions I expose in this book try to do just such manipulation. Without exception they try to create a more favourable reception for the things, actions and notions they represent. Most are signs of a paternalistic, condescending stance on the part of the speaker and all of them are promising something they have neither the ability nor the desire to deliver.

Newspeak and Bullspeak have different aims and work in different ways. Let’s see how the two compare.

Newspeak & Bullspeak

To bullshit means *'to attempt to mislead or deceive by talking nonsense'*

Bullshitting is not lying outright, it is just deceptive misdirection.

Bullspeak is the linguistic objectification of this manipulative dishonesty. **Bullspeak** is the process by which the deception gets incorporated into language. **Bullspeak** is the process by which the focus is shifted from the derivative to the evocative aspect of expressions. **Bullspeak** is the appropriation of the legitimate meaning of expressions to increase the perceived value of the things its expressions are (inappropriately) applied to.

Bullspeak goes beyond bullshitting, as it works on the very basics of our communication, the meaning of words.

I find it amusing when linguists start to show how Orwell was wrong, how and why exactly newspeak is a theoretical impossibility. They seem to miss the point. "The Principles of Newspeak" was just an appendix to an analysis of the nature of power. The Principles of Newspeak is a brilliant satire, but it isn't really about language, it is about the mechanisms of oppression.

Newspeak is not about language, it is about power.

The Newspeak concept is simple. By controlling language, we can control reality. Language itself turns coercive.

We live by the assumption that there is a correspondence between our reality, perception and expression, an assumption that we control - if nothing else - then at least the way we see and understand the world around us. Orwell tried to show us that with enough power we can make our perception subservient to notions that appear to contradict it, that logic itself can be destroyed by language.

The recognition of the importance of mental imagery and conceptual connotations is the most important part of the Newspeak principles. The powers of Ingsoc were simply trying to eliminate the unpredictable

elements of thinking by trying to eliminate undesirable connotations evoked by certain expressions.

The offensive aspect of the statement ‘war is peace’ is not the assault on the referential integrity of language, but the coercive power of the system expecting us to reconcile the inherent contradiction in it.

All Orwell was trying to show is that language can be quite readily turned into a tool of oppression, that oppressive ideas will find oppressive expressions.

Quite similarly:

Bullspcak is not about language, it is about manipulation.

The Bullspcak concept is simple. By manipulating language we can manipulate reality. Language itself turns deceptive.

We live by the assumption that there is a more or less precise correspondence between reality and the words we use to talk about it. A house is a house, and if we call it a home, we are talking about something different. We may refer to the same thing, but using a different expression will change the message by evoking slightly different images and associations.

The recognition of the importance of mental imagery and emotional connotations is the most important part of the Bullspcak principles. The speakers of Bullspcak are trying to minimize critical thinking by misdirecting our attention to the desirable connotations evoked by certain expressions.

The offensive aspect of the term ‘concept solutions’ is not the lack of meaning or adherence to simple grammatical principles but the manipulative attitude driving it. I will try to show that language can be quite readily turned into a tool of deception, that manipulative ideas will find manipulative expressions.

Bullspcak employs a process quite similar to the one described in the evolution of Newspeak, only in this case the devolution of language is spontaneous.

- Newspeak is about power; Bullspcak is about manipulation.

- Newspeak is brute force; Bullspeak is sleaze
- Newspeak is rape; Bullspeak is prostitution
- Newspeak is stripping meaning by coercion; Bullspeak is stripping meaning by deception
- Newspeak limits meaning by reducing the number of possible associations attached to a word; Bullspeak limits thinking by replacing meaning with insinuations.
- Newspeak is the control of language to control reality; Bullspeak is the manipulation of language to manipulate reality.
- Newspeak is the reflection of the power of big brother. Bullspeak is the reflection of the deteriorating morals and attitudes of our times.

The goal of Bullspeak is to soften up the target of our communication. Precise meaning is more difficult to manipulate. Bullspeak pretends to convey information while offering a heavy load of emotionally charged associations and connotations, expecting the listener to respond to the message, not the information.

In an expression of Bullspeak, the acquired meaning has no inherent logic. It only makes sense through the interpretation of its associated meaning. To show you how this works, let's pick a word that you can hear with an alarming, annoying, irritating and most importantly: increasing frequency.

Let's look at the bull of the bulls: Solutions

Solutions

This was one of my favourite jokes when I was about 12:

The doorbell rings at 3am. A quite irritated, sleepy guy comes to open the door. The man who rang says: “sorry to bother you sir, but do you have some ink?” Now the man of the house gets really pissed. “You woke me up for that? It’s three o’clock in the morning! NO, I DO NOT HAVE INK!” he says and slams the door.

Fifteen minutes later, just when he falls asleep again, the doorbell rings. It is the same guy. “What do you want NOW?!?!?” “Nothing”, says the guy. “I brought you some ink.”

Offering you a solution most often means a proposal to solve a possible or imaginary problem you never even knew you had, offered to you in a rather obnoxious manner. This book started out as a twitch to the itch caused by my allergic reaction to this one expression. The decisive moment in my dealings with this linguistic idiocy was the one when I found a flyer on my bike advertising *“bicycle accessory solutions”*.

It happened years ago, but I still wonder sometimes what exactly a bicycle accessory problem could be. That was the moment, when the ideas about this book started brewing in me. Things have only gotten worse since, now we seem to be inundated with ‘solutions.’

Dozens of companies are registered and incorporated every day with the word ‘solution’ in their name. It seems that nobody has products or services to sell any more. They have solutions; or better yet, ‘product solutions.’

The dictionary definition of the word ‘solution’ is quite simple and straightforward:

*‘The method or process of solving a problem. ‘
‘The answer to or disposition of a problem.’*

A problem is not a thing and neither is a solution. A need does not have a solution. Neither does a question. Most essentially, a solution is a notion, not an object. Things cannot have solutions. Only problems can have solutions.

If I am thirsty, that is a condition. If I cannot find something to drink, that is a problem. A problem is something that typically requires me to take actions. A solution is not necessarily that action itself, but simply the recognition, discovery or proposition of the action that needs to be taken to eliminate (to dispose of) the problem.

If my problem is being thirsty, then drinking water can solve that problem but that does not make water a drinking solution, or according to the logic of some of the examples we will see, a ‘drink solution’ or a ‘thirst solution.’ If the problem is a state of being, then only an action directed toward changing that state can be described as a solution. Finding the way to eliminate a problem is a solution, we can even call the process a solution, but definitely not the tools we use in the process.

The stance and the mental process that leads to this madness where absolutely anything can be called a solution is actually simple – despite the elaborateness of this explanation:

- People do not like to have problems and if they have any, they will try to find a solution to that problem.
- People will be well disposed toward those who can help them to solve their problems.
- If I can portray myself as a helper, people will be better disposed toward me.
- Any action can be described as help as long as I can define the target of that action as a problem.
- Not possessing certain things can be perceived and described as a problem and therefore buying those things can be perceived and described as the solution to the problem of not having them.
- It is only a minor stretch to extend the notion and call what I have to sell a solution. It will solve the problem of not having it; therefore it is a solution to the problem.

- By this logic it is also perfectly acceptable to talk about ‘solutions to needs.’ A need is a problem; anything eliminating a need is a solution.
- Calling something a solution innocuously steers potential buyers to perceive their need as a problem.
- Saying that the solution is having or buying whatever I am selling puts an unnecessary focus on the fact that the buyer will have to pay for it. Calling the thing itself a solution shifts the focus from the act of buying.
- If I have something to sell, it is beneficial for me to portray it as a solution because that puts me in a position where I can be perceived as a person doing something for you, where I am a helper, where with my action, I make you indebted to me.
- You have a problem; I have the solution to your problem. Portraying myself as a ‘solution provider’ I can make myself appear as a helper.
- Such image is better than the image of the producer or peddler of wares and services.
- Calling something I wish to sell a solution will increase its perceived value.
- Calling something a solution implies a promise of performance (it will solve problems) without offering any specific guarantee that it will.
- Making vague promises is safer than making specific claims.

Positioning yourself properly in a negotiation is essential to achieve the desired outcome. You want to strike an assertive stance to gain an advantage. In any negotiation it is important to figure out who needs the deal more. What is more important, my getting money for my wares, or your getting something for your money? Who is doing the favour to whom? Both parties will try to convince the other that it is not them, but the other that needs the deal more.

If you are doing me a favour by buying, you will have the right to be critical, to take a close look at what you are buying, to compare it to other options and most importantly to try to get it for the lowest possible price. If I am doing you a favour by solving your problem,

then the question of value will be attached to your problem, not to my wares. The question becomes how much is it worth to you to have your problem solved.

Nobody thinks this over every time when calling something a solution. It took me a few hours to explore these implications. But they are there, and every time the expression is used, they are implied.

It is not by accident that the expression picked up its popularity in the IT world. As a new, dynamic and complex industry, information technology produces many products with serious problems. Sellers of these products would like us to think that it isn't so. By calling their wares solutions, they try to avoid the possibility of being perceived as sources of problems which they quite often happen to be.

Words are not bad, they are just used that way. Not every use of the word 'solution' is Bullspeak. How can you tell the difference? Replace 'solution' with a filler such as 'something' or 'whatever.' The best would probably be a newspeak expression such as 'goodthing' which would pretty well cover the meaning as well. If the change does not significantly alter the meaning of the sentence, you can be certain that it is Bullspeak. In proper context such switch would not make sense.

When we talk about the solution to an equation, we can not replace the word with a filler without losing the meaning. On the other hand, the meanings of the expressions 'storage solution' and a 'storage thing' or 'storage goodthing' are exactly the same. 'Storage solutions,' by the way, are garden sheds, as I happened to learn at Home Depot. But they could just as well be shelves, dressers, closet organizers, trunks, suitcases or backpacks, treasure chests, filing cabinets, boxes, any kind of service having anything to do with them; computer discs like hard drives, floppies, CD recorders or blank CDs, backup tape drives and any other kind of removable device and media and of course any software that makes them work.

With a little work you could find real life examples for any of the above.

Words are not bad. They are just used that way. If I were to start a company tomorrow to do troubleshooting of networks, communication

or security, I might call it “Solution Finders” and I would consider that name appropriate, because it would describe what I do, finding solutions to problems.

Unfortunately, the moment everybody starts calling just about anything a ‘solution’ and competition starts between the assertions, it quickly turns out that not all solutions are solutions. That is when you get idiocies like this one from Monster.com:

“Get the right solutions. Get the right results.”

Get the right solutions as opposed to what? The wrong solutions? Can the wrong solution be called a solution? Isn’t a solution right by definition? If it does not solve the problem, can we call it a solution? In this case I could not even replace ‘solution’ with ‘goodthing’ because it would still not make any sense (the right goodthing). Get the right ‘thing’ sounds OK; a little stupid but still far better than ‘solution.’ Get the right answer would be right if we were talking about a question, but we are not. We could call it service, product or package; all of those would be acceptably descriptive. Neither would – on the other hand – have the positive connotations of a solution, and that is what BULLSPEAK is about.

Before we attempt to create a dictionary definition reflecting this new usage of the expression, let’s take a look at some of the ‘solutions’ offered to us.

Our solutions can be sorted into some broad categories.

The decorators

The decorators are just dressing up their statements by sticking the word in wherever they can. Most of the time, the word solution is just dropped behind another expression as an ornament, a charm or magic spell. It is supposed to provide some mysterious benefits, but has nothing to do with the actual meaning of the expressions they accompany. It does not add anything to the information already given. Other times it may simply mean ‘thing’.

“Apple Internet Server Solution”



An “Apple Internet Server Solution” is an Apple Internet Server

Since a Web site is obviously on the Internet, the reference to the Internet is superfluous. We are talking about an **Apple Server**. Since ‘server’ is the description of the very function of a ‘powered Web site’ (serving pages to the Internet), even that expression is redundant. The piling of nouns is supposed to give us the impression that we are getting more information than we would from a shorter phrase. Couldn’t we just say: “Another Web site powered by **Apple**?” It has the necessary information; the rest is just the message: Apple can solve your problems.

On a page of the Checkpoint Web site called “OPSEC - Integrated Internet Security Solutions”³ we are offered to:

“View partners and product solutions”⁴

The whole site is heavily loaded with Bullspeak, but this sentence is particularly telling about the extent of the damage done to the language. View product solutions as opposed to what? Product problems?

All the author of the page was trying to say was “View (lists of) partners and products” but at the present rate of linguistic devolution this could not be said without the risk of sounding outright dull. Nobody sells products any more. Whatever you sell has to be more than simply a product, you have to include in the message something positive. Who cares that it sounds stupid? Everybody else sounds stupid too, but at least they all sound positive.

Since I wrote the above, the checkpoint site was redesigned and they no longer offer product solutions. Now they have ‘Solutions and products’. Once you follow the link the site only talks about products. You will never learn what the solutions are or what the difference is between them and the products.

Softchoice has switch solutions:

"This 19" rackmount switch from Hawking is the ideal switch solution for the workgroup user who needs high performance and seamless migration between 10BaseT and 100BaseTX network speeds."

What is a 'switch solution? A certain kind of switch, or a certain kind of solution? How can you 'solve' a switch? What is a switch problem? Are switches problems? Are they problematic? What is the difference between a switch and a switch solution? In what way is a switch solution more than a switch?

A switch solution is a switch and you could only be more specific about it by describing some of its properties or differentiating it from other switches. The word solution is not an adjective, nor is it a descriptive property. According to the logic of the English language, a switch solution is a certain kind of solution. Compare clock-tower and tower-clock. The first is a certain kind of tower, the second is a certain kind of clock. In a typical noun-noun modifier it is the first noun that acts as a modifier for the second.

In this structure the actual product, the switch, becomes a quasi adjective just so that the weight can be moved to the goodthing, the 'solution'. If they would at least call it a switching solution! It would be still Bullspeak, but at least with some referential integrity. Switches do switching, so if you have a switching problem, than buying a switch would be the solution. What would be solved is your switching problem. The only function of the expression here is the psychological posturing. You have a problem, our product solves it. It is not you doing us a favour by buying our product, it is us doing you a favour by solving your problem. It would be outright ungrateful of you to haggle over the price or investigate the product. We are giving more than a mere object; we are giving you something far more important, a solution to your problems.

In this particular sentence, the word 'solution' isn't simply superfluous, it is meaningless. In the expressions 'switch solution' the word solution does not have a legitimate grammatical function.

...and there is more:

A Dell notebook accessories page about a combo card claims, that it

“Combines two most frequently used PC Card solutions into one card.”

I am gratified to know that solutions can be combined into cards. Dell has the power to combine notions into objects. ‘Solution’ here stands in for function, but the author seems to think that solving problems is more important than simply functioning.

From an Epson ad I learned about *”Ideal POS Printer Solutions for Retail & Banking.”*

On the Twinhead Web-site I learned that *“Creative supplies Twinhead International with powerful Notebook audio solution “* .

Moving onto the Creative Labs Web-site I was informed that *“Blaster® CD-RW 4224 is the ease-to-use solution for burning CD Media, Copying and Archiving on CDR and CD-Rewritable Media.”*

An ease-to-use solution? Ouch!



Touting their new software, Infopath, Microsoft tells us that in it *”New forms solutions can be silently and automatically installed and upgraded.”* You can wonder about the function of the plural yourself.

And we could go on, but let’s instead move on to:

The obfuscators

The obfuscators are the worst offenders of Bullspeak. The authors know exactly what a solution is, they know exactly what they are selling and why are they calling it a solution. They just want to confuse you. Want you to keep guessing, want to keep their reference as wide as possible. In these, ‘solutions’ are simply something they do, something they offer, something that would be just too much of a hassle and beneath them to describe in detail. The goal is to arouse your curiosity, to make you want to know more, to talk to them, to give them an opportunity to tell you what your problems are and how they can solve them for you.

Let me start with the one that was a revelation to me: Mapquest⁵

<p>LinkFree</p>  <p>A FREE Link To MapQuest.com</p> <p>Enable your website visitors to link to interactive maps on MapQuest.com that display your individual locations</p> <p>Create a MapQuest LinkFree link now</p>	<p>Solutions</p>  <p>Mapping Solutions For Businesses</p> <p>Select from a full range of applications</p> <p>Get started for as low as \$4,400.</p> <p>Learn more about Solutions now</p>
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This is where the difference between things and solutions is most clearly implicated.

What you get for free is a map. The map you have to pay for isn't called a map any more; it is a 'mapping solution.'

For nearly four and a half thousand dollars it must be able to deal with some serious problems (Let's not discuss what 'as low as' means in this context) They will solve mapping kind of problems. I wouldn't send my teenager to them, but when I develop a serious mapping problem, I will know where to go.

"Wilson Logistics,⁶Solutions by proven professionals."

I found this pearl on the side of a truck while driving home. Once I got home I looked up their site, where I got the real education:

“Wilson has also turned some of our successful customer solutions into ready-to-go logistics concepts. The concepts are ready-to-implement solutions catered to typical needs of some of our larger clients.”

Let me get this straight. Customer solutions are turned into logistic concepts which in turn are actually solutions. In other words, solutions are turned into solutions through a step of logistic conceptualization. Catered to typical needs and ready to implement. We can also learn from the site that integrated logistics concepts are actually plug-and-play solutions based on combinations of forwarding, logistics and IT services. (Is your head spinning too?)

When you are looking at such meaningless blabber, you may still have an impression that something was said, only you are not smart enough to understand it.

What they do is just implied and what they say has little to do with that. They can handle it like a military operation. They don't simply have methods and experience, they have concepts. They are thinking about the logistic details in a higher plane by conceptualizing them. It is natural to expect that such a disciplined and conceptualized approach will solve all your problems.

What could possibly be conceptual about figuring out how to stick a label on a product or how to package it for shipping? What this company does requires paying attention to details. Not the creation of concepts. Ready-to-go or otherwise.

The most likely fact behind the blabber is that Wilson did create some methods and procedures that can be applied to other companies. After all, the procedures in warehousing, shipping and receiving are the same no matter what you store, ship or receive. What Wilson Logistics is trying to say is that they are experienced, they have well worked out, tried, proven methods to perform the tasks associated with the handling and shipping of different products. They have the procedures, the infrastructure, the software and they are ready to apply their knowledge and experience in your service. To say that on the other hand is sort of plain. It is so much better to present themselves as the conceptual problem solvers working with the precision of the military.

You can probably tell by now that I do appreciate attention to detail. I am not trying to put Wilson Logistics down. I can imagine that they are good at what they are doing, but promoting exactly the opposite of what they should - just to look better and more important - definitely does not inspire my confidence.

“New Horizon System Solutions”

This is another beauty I noticed on a sign driving home. I found it intriguing. There is no way to figure out what it could be. The structure is: vague metaphor – bull – bull.

“New Horizon” is the core of the name, but since it is an abstract metaphor it does not convey any specific information about the nature of the company. The word ‘system’ has nine definitions in my dictionary and the one in this company’s name could be almost any of them. ‘Solutions’ is pure bull, especially in this context, where it refers to yet another fuzzy, undefined ‘something’. A system can be anything and a solution can be anything.

We can speculate. My guess would be that the company must have something to do with computers. Not just because computers are often referred to as systems, but because that is the field where the use of ‘solutions’ has taken the strongest roots.

I could tell you what New Horizon System Solutions do, but why don’t you find it out for yourself? Their Web site is beautiful. The home page alone could give you bull-bingo. Just be cautious if they offer you a bridge for sale.

“Consulting Solutions to Engineering Problems...”

What does this mean exactly? Wouldn’t engineering problems require engineering solutions? If I had an out-of-tune piano, should I try to fix that problem by painting a picture of it?

This expression makes two assertions, both are logical stretches:

If you had a consultant your engineering problems would be solved.

In all fairness, I have to assume that the author of this document is not evil. Contrary to the appearance he may not even be stupid, just completely brainwashed. The word solution has been so badly abused already, that he does not even question any more the assumption that it is a valid descriptor of something, however vaguely defined. Consulting good-things to engineering problems.

What they most likely mean is this: We offer consulting services, if you have engineering problems; with the help of our consultants you may be able to solve them.

The above sentence has three distinct parts: This is what we offer, if what you need is this, then the potential result is this. The original sentence from the Web page turns this three step mental process into a single objectified expression. It sounds tangible, and what is most important, the conditionals are out. Hiring them as consultants is a solution by definition.

The problem (and this time a real one) only starts when the author is trying to make the statement 'logical' by establishing a connection between the notions of a problem and its solution. Only then does the sentence become truly pathetic. The truthful expression would be "Consulting services to help you solve your engineering problems" which may be too long, but I could also live with "Consulting services for your engineering problems." Couldn't you? It contains all the relevant information without any bull. The corrected sentence on the other hand does not have the promise and in the battles between logic and Bullspeak, logic tends to lose. It is not considered persuasive enough.

"IT Solutions delivery director."

I found this in a job ad. It seems that there is no information in this title, only hints, but of those, there are plenty.

IT is a broad description covering a whole industry. What makes it most confusing is the word Solutions. It is absolutely without any meaning in this context. It does not narrow down the scope laid out by the ‘IT’ acronym.

All you can figure out here is that you would be doing something. The only thing that seems certain is that the job has something to do with Information technology. You will probably be in a managerial position but that is far from sure. But solutions? Delivery? Is this a position for a software development project leader or middle management position for an implementation team? Could be a supervisory position for a network support outsourcing company. Since a solution can be anything, this could be the job of a dispatcher of a cabling team (directing the delivery). I will not even ask how one can ‘deliver’ a solution. It would be probably akin to delivering a strategy or an attitude. It is clear that in this position you will have to carry a load of complex notions on your shoulders.

Clarity in the body of the posting went downhill faster than you could read it. After reading a full page of the requirements, I was still not able to figure out what the work involved.

....and there is more:

Allstream⁸ is *“Connecting strategies to solutions”*

Allstream is an Internet communications spin-off company of AT&T. What we see here is a beautiful example of the compound bull. Just in case you did not get enough positive vibes from solutions, they assure you that whatever you do can definitely be called a strategy. Only corporate bums would connect networks to the Internet. Real businesses are connecting their strategies.

You might think you could expect something better from the craftsmen of language. I found the following in the names and on the sites of translation agencies:

TRADOS is the biggest player in the field of translation software, but if you did not know that, seeing a page about *“Trados automation solutions⁹”*, you would be lost. The company name is not descriptive

and an ‘automation solution’ can be anything, as long as it is something that has something to do with the automation of something.

*International Text Solutions*¹⁰ Is an organization of translators. Shame on them.

“LCS Language and Content Solutions AG,” offering *“Incredible international Solutions”* is another one. Shame on them too.

The many sites of Microsoft are true treasure-troves of Bullspeak. One could become a fluent bullspeaker studying them.

“Visit the Microsoft Industry Solutions site to learn how businesses in your industry are deploying solutions and how Microsoft technologies and solution providers can help solve your company's business challenges.”

Not only did they manage to squeeze three solutions into one sentence, they even put the verb there as well! Notice also that the meaning of the third solution is different from the first two. Solving a challenge? When it comes to the challenge of business communication, Microsoft definitely solved it here.

On a Microsoft BackOffice page¹¹ you will learn that you can *“Improve your Web site's profitability with real-time commerce tools. Come on in and see Microsoft's Internet commerce solution in action.”*

Now, what are we talking about here? Tools or solutions? Could that be a tool solution?

If you are not happy with a Microsoft solution you have, worry no more, customize it.

“A digital dashboard is a customized solution that consolidates personal, team, corporate, and external information with single-click access to analytical and collaborative tools. It is designed to integrate well with existing business systems.”

I came across the beautiful expression *‘fieldwork solutions.’* I wrote it down without commenting on it or noting the source. Naturally, I forgot where I found it and I was not sure what it is, so I did a Google search. I found an impressive array of things. Eventually I remembered

that I was searching for survey software when I came across the link but I learned from my search that basically anything can be called a ‘fieldwork solution’ as long as it has something to do with ‘fieldwork’ whatever that fieldwork may be. I encourage you to search the net. You will find more than you would care to look at.

CUSTOM LUBRICATION SOLUTIONS

“Single - source solutions to your lubrication problems”

Considering their refined taste in typography we can only hope that when these guys solve your problems, at least it will not hurt too much.

I could go on giving you dozens of examples each representing a slightly different aspect of the solution idiocy:

About Ingram’s *“technology solution and XML solutions;”*

About Macromedia’s *“solution for professional Web graphics design and development;”*

About Home depot’s *“color solution center”* (replacing the paints section in the stores) and their *“home remodelling solutions;”*

About *“an amazing selection of Barrier Free solutions”* of Cambridge Corp.^{12;}

About *“the Summer solution you’ve been looking for”* – season tickets to an amusement park;

About *“Profile Solutions”* from *“Recruitment Specialists In IT Career Placements;”*

About *“solutions for your Technology staffing and Human Capital services needs”*¹³ from cnc.ca;

About *“Solutions for Today’s Digital Communications”*

About *“The industry-leading, proactive network event management solution”* of Veritas

And about the *“phone2enter solution”*¹⁴ if your credit card is maxed out before you gained enough porn-watching satisfaction.

We could dissect every one of them, but I have to stop somewhere, and that is here. We are ready for a definition.

Definition

After looking at these examples, I think we should be ready to create a proper dictionary definition reflecting this new usage of ‘solutions’:

An undetermined or unspecified product or service offered for sale

I took a deep breath before I wrote down the sentence above. I was prepared to give you a complex definition that incorporates all aspects of usage but then I realized that this is it. No need to be complex to accommodate the meaning implied in the different occurrences, because the common element is the very vagueness of the expression. The fact that it does not mean anything specific and identifiable. Since ‘something’ means ‘An undetermined or unspecified thing’ we could even provide a tighter definition saying:

Something available or offered for sale.

The definition says everything. A solution is something that can be anything, the only thing that is certain about it is that you will have to pay for it.

We could try to incorporate the hidden message in the definition. We could claim that the central meaning is the promise that it will solve some unspecified problem, but then this is the central question of this book: can these implications be considered to be part of the meaning? Is the implied promise part of the definition, or more importantly, could it be part of the definition at all? Is there not a line between the meaning and the message?

A ‘solution’ in this new meaning always appears with some sort of specifier as in ‘fieldwork solution’ ‘storage solution’ ‘bicycle accessory solution’ or ‘platform solution.’

The best we can do with the definition is to include this dependence on a specifier (which most of the time is anything but.):

Something available or offered for sale having something to do with or somehow related to the expression accompanying it. Or:

Something available or offered for sale with a vague connection to the accompanying expression.

I cannot vague it up any more but I hope that the definition does expose the problem, the reason why this usage is harmful to language. A definition should create the scope of the meaning, not destroy it.

In the final analysis, this new meaning of ‘solution’ is simply ‘something’ with some positive associations hijacked from its central meaning. The best definition is still the newspeak synonym: **‘goodthing.’**

More aberrations

While ‘solutions’ are the clearest indications of our problem, they are far from being the only ones. Let’s look at a few more of them in detail. We will start with two lovely examples from the field of real estate: townhomes and affordable housing.

Townhomes

What is a home? According to my dictionary it is:

1 : one's place of residence

2 : the social unit formed by a family living together

3 : a familiar or usual setting : congenial environment;

also : the focus of one's domestic attention

The word home does not refer to a particular type of physical object such as a house, a cave or an apartment, but rather to a function or a particular relationship to such places. I can own twenty houses, but I can hardly have twenty homes. A home is something intimate, something personal, a place where we live and to which we are likely to be emotionally attached.

A real estate agent explained to me a while back the legal differences of land ownership between the different types of dwellings. In the case of a house the owner of the house owns the lot under it; in the case of

a townhouse, the land is leased from the municipality where it stands. Rules governing what you can do with a townhouse are much stricter than the rules for houses. Townhouses (which are usually fully attached) are built for higher density than houses. These differences make townhouses less valuable even if everything else (dimensions and floor size) is the same.

The point of the above is very simply this: a townhouse will always be worth less than an equally sized house, just like a semi-detached house is worth less than one that is fully detached.

Townhouses are harder to sell because buyers attach value to the greater control they have over a house. They are also less likely to appreciate in value, because the most considerable portion of appreciation is of the value of the land under them.

In the early nineties some real estate advertising genius figured out a way of taking away the stigma that plagues townhouses by creating a beautiful expression of Bullspeak. If the word has negative connotations in the mind of potential buyers, he thought he may change that perception by using a more positive expression, such as ‘townhome.’

You may not notice, (but you can try on your own) that the spellchecker of a word processor does not recognize the expression townhome. It wants to correct it to town home, an expression that makes sense. Your town home is your home in town as opposed to the one in the country, NOT a description of a certain type of dwelling. It is a qualifier for those who maintain more than one home. Gentry lived in their estates in the country while also maintaining a residence close to the Court, their home in town, or town home.

The expression “townhouse” is specific, neutral and descriptive. The essence of “townhome” is the emotional baggage it is loaded with. When they sell you a townhouse, they sell you a piece of property; when they sell you a townhome, they sell you something personal, something only you can have, something you will have a very close intimate relationship with. It is not just a house, it’s a home. Who cares

at that point about the limited control? What is the value of the control you lose compared to that warm fuzzy feeling that you gain?

And a simple switch has achieved it all. Replace the neutral descriptor with an emotionally loaded qualifier.

I have yet to see a developer selling fully detached homes. Fully detached houses are still more likely to be referred to as ‘property’, an expression emphasizing ownership and value instead of coziness.

The world is changing, new ways of handling construction evolve. The natural process of urbanization demands higher density, while it also costs less to developers to build higher density sites. Often they plan townhouse style developments on land they fully own. These developments are not townhouses according to the legal definition because you own the land under them. Essentially, what they are building are row-houses sold in a condominium like arrangement where the owners have even less control than they would over a townhouse. Row-house is an ugly expression. It has nothing but bad associations. Low class, working class, poverty. The ones that are built today are far better than the ones which created the bad connotations and they are less likely to be built as ghetto-like enclaves but when it comes to their social status, they are no different from the ones we can so easily associate with the British working class. Of course, these developments are not targeted to the upper classes; but since developers have to pretend that their customers are more than what they are and that they always get more than what they pay for, the doublebull expression **freehold townhome** was born. Can you count all the positive connotations?

Freedom. You are free to hold whatever it is that you are holding. It is your home and it is free to hold. You have control over it. It is your home. None of that row-house crap of hearing your neighbour through the wall and smelling their dinner when you get out onto your porch or being crammed into a small piece of land where you have no control over the construction of your house. You cannot make changes, cannot create additions freely. No. The message you get is intimacy and empowerment. EXACTLY the opposite of what you are actually

buying into. **And there is the essence of Bullspeak: an emotional override of reason.**

Searching the Internet for townhomes gave me another interesting expression:

On the floor plans of Celebrity Townhomes¹⁵ you will be hard pressed to find living rooms. Most (it seems anything over 200sq feet) are called ‘great rooms.’ You have kitchens, dining rooms and ‘great rooms’. Judge the ‘greatness’ for yourself:



The two definitions of ‘great’ that have significance here are **‘large in size’** and the informal **‘very good, first rate.’**

Whenever you name a particular property of an object, you can describe an attribute, a function, or a quality. ‘Large’ is an attribute, ‘living’ is a function, ‘great’ is (mostly) a quality although it can refer to size as well, as in a ‘great mountain.’ Although in normal usage the size aspect is marginal, ‘great rooms’ are trying to capitalize on this marginal meaning hoping that it will drag into the picture the positive connotations of the central meaning.

Custom builders like Viceroy, which sells *“Custom home and house solutions”*¹⁶ has also replaced living rooms with ‘great rooms’ in their new designs and even where they did not, the literature refers to them as ‘great rooms.’ In some models a *“Stunning two storey great room dominates the home with its soaring wall of windows.”*

The notion of the ‘family room’ was born out of necessity as we needed a name for a new kind of room in houses, a kind of room and a kind of use that did not exist as such before.

The name ‘family room’ suggests a space that is less formal than a living room, a place for small children to play, but most importantly it was a new kind of space in a typical house that needed a name. It did not replace an existing name. We did not start to call the closet or the guest room family room. The ‘great room’ replacing the living room is pure bull. ‘Great’ is a qualifier pretending to be a descriptor. There is nothing great about them except maybe the audacity of the people who think that you will buy the bull. If you do, you deserve your fate.

How about the expression ‘single family home’? Why is that OK?

‘Home’ in this case describes a function, the living space of a family, not the legal status or physical characteristic of the building to which the expression is applied. Families have homes, houses have attributes. A ‘single family home’ is something that can fulfill the requirements of being the home of a single family. The word ‘home’ is attached to the word ‘family.’

So you have a house, a home, a residence, whatever. The next thing you have to ask is: can you afford it?

Affordable housing

‘Affordable housing’ is the battle cry of the political left when they try to squeeze some more money out of government for subsidized housing. In this sense it is more than simply Bullspeak, it is a slogan of the fight for income redistribution, government regulation and control.

Affordable means:

‘To have the financial means for; be able to meet the cost of’

...and in this sense, it is meaningless without a frame of reference, without knowing who is doing the affording. Whatever is not affordable to me, may be quite affordable to you.

The fact the expression is trying to steer you away from is that you can afford absolutely anything if someone else is paying for it. The critical element of the mental process with the term ‘affordable’ is pushing responsibility away from you. The affordability of the housing becomes a quality of the housing, instead of being the result of the delicate balance between your financial means and consumer aspirations. If affordability is no longer our ability to afford but a quality of the object we desire to possess, then making it ‘affordable’ is not our responsibility any more. Somebody has to make it affordable for us.

When it comes to the ‘affordability’ of residential properties in a metropolis like the one I live in, one can easily adjust affordability to his own financial means. Size, neighbourhood, quality and dwelling type will all make a difference, but the easiest affordability adjustment by far is commuting distance. Around the city I live in, real estate prices are in inverse proportion to their distance from downtown (all else being equal). The further I am willing to commute, the cheaper I can live.

‘Affordable housing’ is also the alarm bell journalists and politicians like to ring when the real estate market cycle is approaching another high. The early 90s saw the rebirth of the Toronto waterfront just as it happened with many other North American cities situated next to large bodies of water. Developers bought up land and started submitting plans. It is prime location, they can build there prime quality condominiums selling for premium prices. The plans submitted reflected these ideas, beautiful buildings, some with pueblo like terraces, roof-top gardens, balconies and solariums making the whole waterfront look pretty and inviting. Some ‘activist’ councillors at the city decided to make a point of sticking it to the rotten capitalists, the developers, the rich, and started a campaign to force developers to build “affordable housing” as well. The waterfront should not belong only to the rich was their reasoning. As it was the price of their building

permits, the developers had no choice but to agree. They built a few buildings the cheapest possible way. Disgusting concrete blocks with cheap looking windows, no balconies, no ornaments, just plain ugly. I do not know if it is affordable, in a location like that there are no vacancies.

And since we are on the subject ...

There is another great example of Bullspeak describing income redistribution in housing: “rent geared to income.” Dealing with this and similar expressions would go beyond the scope of this book, but it should be clear to you that the machinery of deceit goes well beyond Bullspeak - the changing of the meaning of individual words.

“Rent geared to income” suggests a simple mechanical process. Forget about taking money away from one person and giving it to somebody else. NOOOO! If we can just find the right gear, the right mechanical process, we can make it work. It is not about making hard decisions; it is not about the question of who is providing and who is benefiting; it is about our ability to find that thing (the right gear) that will make it work. Just like affordability, ‘rent geared to income’ displaces responsibility.

Talk about affordable housing and rent geared to income is always talk about income redistribution. The people, however, who do the talking must have realized that they may run into some opposition on the part of the people they want to take the money away from, so they had to devise some ways to hide the true nature of their ideas. That is what they aim to achieve by making relative terms appear as objective qualities and very subjective decisions as results of mechanical processes.

The people using these expressions tend to see themselves as champions of justice and morality. What I would like to submit for their consideration is this:

Isn't the fact that you have to hide your true goals the clearest indication that the ‘moral imperatives’ justifying them could not stand up to scrutiny if they were expressed honestly?

If you can afford a new house, you must deal with someone who will sell it to you. You will come in contact with a species with many names, but a single, coherent attitude.

Relationship managers, sales executives and sales associates

What exactly does a relationship manager do? Manages relationships. Or does he? Most likely he is an inside salesman reselling products to clients who probably bought something from the company already. The expression went through a little evolution. First we had salesmen, then sales representatives, sales associates and sales managers. Later they evolved into account or relationship managers and client representatives.

A company I used to work for had one salesman who was called a Senior Sales Executive. Let me be absolutely clear about this: the company at that time employed only one salesman. He was seven years younger than me and I do not see myself as a senior. Since he was the only salesman, seniority was not in the picture either. The salesman had no executive power, no say whatsoever even in the decisions affecting his own job, let alone the way the company was run. He did what he was told to do by the real executives. The only word with any truth value in his title was ‘sales.’

The expressions ‘sales executive’ and ‘sales manager’ both evoke the same connotations, a position of power and affluence. A status of importance.

A manager is

***‘One who handles, controls, or directs, especially:
One who directs a business or other enterprise.
One who controls resources and expenditures, as of a household.’***

Calling someone a sales manager could still be a little confusing. There are times when it is used to mean what it suggests, a managerial position in sales, a manager of salesmen. Increasingly however, it is

used as a synonym for salesman, related in meaning to account manager or relationship manager.

The drive is very simple. Being a salesman is not a particularly respectable profession, if you can call it that at all. It isn't really a profession. Salesmen are seen as the necessary nuisance that you have to tolerate in order to get to the product you wish to buy. Calling them managers gives the impression that they are not just foot soldiers of the enterprise, but managers of the company's affairs. The distinction is even more pronounced with 'sales executives' which suggests decision makers.

An executive is someone who executes, 'carries out' some decisions, makes things happen.

***'Executive - A person or group having administrative' or
'managerial authority in an organization'***

To execute means: ***'To put into effect; carry out; to perform;'***

While the noun 'executive' has a pretty well defined meaning, nothing stops us from 'recreating' the noun from the verb, using the synonymous meanings. In that sense, an account executive is someone who puts into effect, carries out, does or performs certain actions in relation to accounts. Perfectly valid grammatically. The fact that it sounds more important of a position than it actually is must be purely accidental.

Does managing customer relations make you a manager of relationships?

I am trying to analyze my feelings here. About relationships. I have a gut level opposition to this notion and its implications even though if I think about it rationally, I have to admit that it may have some legitimacy. Let's deal first with the irritating aspect then we may give it partial absolution.

Relations are:

The mutual dealings or connections of persons, groups, or nations in social, business, or diplomatic matters.

Managing relations is indeed a diplomatic matter. The customer relations department deals with the problems of the customers and the image of the company, mostly at times when that image is in need of repair.

A relationship is a natural, a committed or formalized relation. Every definition of the word represents closeness, either in the form of kinship or a strong emotional bond.

- ***The condition or fact of being related; connection or association.***
- ***Connection by blood or marriage; kinship.***
- ***A particular type of connection existing between people related to or having dealings with each other: has a close relationship with his siblings.***
- ***A romantic or sexual involvement.***

The central meaning is the bond of some kind.

What the expression is trying to suggest to the customers is commitment and a higher degree of care and attention.

There are also unspoken expectations in it. Relations, and especially their management can be one-sided, while relationships are reciprocal by nature. When you allow that ‘thing’ between you and someone to be called a relationship, you take on some obligations yourself. None of us likes to be taken advantage of which is more likely to happen in casual encounters than in committed relationships. What a relationship manager tells you with his very job title is that you will have more than a casual encounter. Definitely not just a one-sale-stand. It will keep happening all over again.

A ‘relationship manager’ is an inside salesman. What the expression is trying to suggest to the salesman is the lack of hassle; that it is not about selling, but about maintaining an existing customer base. A relationship manager does not have to do cold calls to make a living. In an ideal world of course. In the one we live in it may simply be a suggestion that the business by nature has returning customers who provide reoccurring sales opportunities and that the job has a higher ratio of order-taking than pushing the buyers toward decisions to ‘close’ the

deal. It also carries within the slight hint that it is a managerial position, which it is – of course – not, but sounds like it is.

Having said all that, I can imagine legitimate uses of the title. If the ‘relationship manager’ represents a supplier with a complex product or service that requires extensive interaction with his clients and if that person is also the customer service representative for that client, then the title may be appropriate.

Manufacturers may have this relation with wholesalers who in turn may have close ties with retailers. Customer relations manager would still be better, but what the heck. Unfortunately, more often than not, this is not the case, and the title refers to any salesmen a company has regardless of how sales and customer service are done.

Why can we live with the notion of ‘sales representatives’? Because salesmen indeed represent their company more so than most other workers. Sales and marketing is how a company ‘presents’ itself to the world. Calling those who do this representing ‘representatives’ is quite appropriate.

I could go on arguing that ‘sales representative’ is an appropriate title for salesmen of manufacturing or service companies but not so for retailers, but that would be nitpicking and would take us off track.

Interestingly, the people who do purchasing are not called representatives. They are called agents. They are acting on behalf of the company. They are making commitments and take on responsibilities on behalf of the company.

As you saw from the examples to this point, bullspeakers are trying to think, make judgements and draw conclusions on our behalf while pretending to be detached and impartial. Let’s take a closer look at how that is done.

Concepts (the ways of the Bull)

The message of the Bull

Steve Pinker in his book, “The Language Instinct” compares our faculty for language to the trunk of the elephant as an evolutionary advantage. The trunk allows the elephant to do things no other animal can. Language, the ability to communicate abstract ideas is as unique to humans as the trunk is to elephants. The ability to create abstract notions and to communicate them is to us what the trunk is to the elephant. It is our evolutionary advantage.

Animals are quite adept at communicating their attitudes and intentions, what they are not capable of is conveying information. I never have a question about the intentions of our dog. I have no idea what he thinks, but I know what he wants.

When we communicate, we convey information, express opinions and indicate intentions. In order to form our own opinion we must be able to separate these three aspects in any communication directed to us. Information in any communication has the highest value to us. It comes closer to being an objective descriptor of facts than opinions or suggestions; it enables us to draw our own conclusion. It does make a difference how precise the information is.

Message or Information?

On a billboard Fido claims: „*We bill to the exact second*”

Makes me wonder. The exact second as opposed to what? An inexact second? What makes that second exact for billing purposes? What happens to half seconds? If they bill a full second for every one started then how exact is that second exactly? What about a tenth of a second?

Will they charge me for a full one? Will they still call it exact? The point is simply that they cannot be exact about something that they do not control. I control the length of the call. If you make a call from a phone-booth in Europe, you know that you will have x amount of talk-time for y amount of money. Exactly. The phone will disconnect exactly when the time runs out. The phone company controls the time and therefore can be exact.

The information content of the Fido sentence is that they bill by the second, as opposed to the competition which usually bills by the minute. They bill a full minute for each one we started. Just like Fido is making us pay exactly one full second for each one started. I wonder if the competition considers the minute they bill by ‘exact.’

Fido is (mis)using language to send a message disguised as information.

“Billed by the second” is information. “Billed to the exact second” is a message. The message is that they are more precise and therefore better than the competition. The information alone could suggest that and any person with double digit intelligence can figure it out. Billing by the second is better than billing by the minute. It means that I will not have to pay for all the seconds that I did not talk. I will still have to pay for split seconds, but that is better than paying for split minutes. Fido, unfortunately, does not have the confidence in our intelligence, our ability to recognize that seconds occupy a higher position in the precision scale than minutes. It could also be that the message is so important to them that it needs to be emphasized even at the cost of meaning.

What we see here is a typical overkill of advertising. Providing the information is judged to be insufficient; it has to be upgraded to a message. The message clearly represents a higher value to the speaker, which is in clear conflict with the interest of the listener, who values information more, because that is seen as more trustworthy.

People like to make their own decisions and seek information that enables them to do that. They want facts, not opinions. Sellers of things – including trust, respect, ideologies, acceptance and other intangibles - have a strong incentive to make their message look like information. **Exact** information.

Message with and without truth

Sometime in the distant past I worked in a computer store owned by a first generation Chinese immigrant. He is a great guy, we still keep in touch. I never had any question about his honesty or integrity. That said, he gave me one of the most interesting cultural lessons about different perceptions of truth in the context of communication. The store started out as a bookstore, long before the major chains realized that they needed a whole section for computer books. Our store was the first game in town and the clientele was comprised of mostly corporate IT departments and libraries. Over the years, we started to sell hardware as well. The boss decided to cater exclusively to our existing corporate clients. One day he was in the middle of a conversation with one of these corporate clients when an obviously clueless home-user walked in mostly to satisfy her curiosity and to look for something to introduce her to computers (this happened way before Pentium times when computer use was still not pervasive and the dumb idea of the dummies series still did not exist) She overheard the conversation and at some point asked the boss “You are selling computers too?” He looked at her, measured her up and said “No.” She looked a little shocked, said ‘oh,’ then left.

I confronted him later about the incident. What he said was so clearly, obviously, blatantly untrue that there could have been no question in any participant’s or observers’ mind about it. “Doesn’t it bother you that she knew that you were lying?” – I asked. “But I did not” he said. “I gave her a clear indication that I do not wish to do business with her and I did that without being rude to her”

In essence he explained to me that telling someone to get lost is rude, telling the truth is too complicated and potentially insulting. Therefore, telling them something that clearly indicates your attitude and intention is the most appropriate response. The fact that the statement is not true is immaterial. The essence of communication is the message, and any form that sends the message clearly is acceptable. Only the truthfulness of the message matters, not that of the statement delivering it.

And therein lies the question. What matters more? Factual truth or the message? Isn’t the message - that I promise to solve your problem -

more important than the actual name of the gadget I will do it with? Isn't the message - that I intend to give you as much attention as I would to my girlfriend - important enough to be included in my job-title?

These questions could be legitimate if they were appropriate. They are inappropriate, because the messages of Bullspeak are not true. The 'sales executives' are not the decision makers of the company. What you will have with them is not a relationship and what they sell you may or may not solve your problems. The message my ex-boss sent to the clueless shopper was simple and truthful. He did not want her business. The 'relationship managers' who will sell you some 'ready-to-go strategic solutions' are bullshitting all the way. They want to charm you with the promise, they may even try to screw you, but that does not make a relationship.

Message and associations

As we discussed, the word 'solution' is stuck behind the names of some objects not for any grammatical reason, but because it has good associations. These simple nonsense names however still cannot even come close to the grandeur of some examples which would truly defy any attempt for an analysis (although I will try later anyway.)

In a pop-up ad the University of Phoenix OnLine claims to be:

"Built on ambition, powered by opportunity"

Picturing ambition as an architectural foundation and opportunity as an energy source isn't particularly descriptive, but it is very creative. It will definitely make you think. In the speedy world we are living in, this is all an advertiser can hope for. Four words, without any proper meaning in the context of the statement, but all heavily loaded with positive association.

You want to **build** your future , you have **ambitions**, you want to be **empowered** and you are always ready to seize an **opportunity**. This university must be for you.

The expressions try to detach you from practical references so that you can be left with little more than the (free floating and positive) associations attached to the individual words. Every expression of

Bullspoke is a message already in itself, but the better ones can do more than that by opening the door to a range of free associations. When you are trying to make sense of a sentence, your mind races through the derivative meanings, then the representative ones, and when they both fail in creating a coherent image, there is nothing left but the associations.

Messages, true or not, are still quite clear. They may present a judgement as a fact, they may lack factual truthfulness but they indicate the opinion and the intentions of the speaker. The free-floating associations of Bullspoke are designed to create a receptive mind-set, a positive predisposition toward the sales pitch that is sure to follow.

The logic of the Bull

The expressions of Bullspeak can be grouped into some broad categories:

Inflation

The **status inflation** is typical of job ads but can be found in any areas where status matters.

Let me tell you a joke:

There is a barber on Maple street. At some point two more barbers open shops across the street. The first puts up a sign saying “The best barber in town.” The other one puts up a sign saying “The best barber in the state.” The first then changes his sign to say “The best barber in the Country.” The second changes his sign to say “The best barber on the continent.” The first comes back with a new sign “The best barber on the planet.” Eventually, our very first, original barber feels the need to make his own statement, so he puts a small sign in his window saying “The best barber on Maple street”

Just like with the barbers of the joke, trying to sound more important than your competitor can very quickly get out of hand.

In a marketing document of Monster.ca I came across this most amazing euphemism for HR:

“Talent Cultivator”

We have to ask: does the expression make any sense? Is it possible to cultivate talent? Any new age business guru will tell you that it isn’t just possible, it is necessary for the survival of any business in this new millennium. Talent needs nurturing and tender gentle care. Anybody who ever worked at a corporation with more than a hundred employees can tell that HR will never do any such thing. At best they administer and coordinate. There can be a general culture cultivating talent, or there can be management cultivating talent, but it is definitely not HR. Only those can cultivate a talent who understand it, the managers who work with the people whose talents need to be cultivated.

‘Talent cultivator’ as a job title is pure Bullspeak, but that is not the point here. By coining this new expression, even the value of “Human resources specialist” went down a notch. It is the new fashion that soon everybody will have to imitate to stay competitive. The moment that happens, a company will come up with a new expression just to differentiate their service from the rest, thereby perpetuating the inflation of titles and names in the never ending chase for respect, appreciation, and most of all to stand out in a crowd where everybody will quickly adapt to what they see beneficial to their image. Since we are talking about the same reality, this inflation cannot happen without Bullspeak. Deception and manipulation will always have to creep into the titles.

Switch

The **notion switch** is the language of politics, most clearly represented in PC language but going far beyond it. The notion switch is the closest relative of newspeak.

The most typical manifestation of this phenomenon is the way the political left uses the word “right” as in ‘right to work’ or ‘right to a decent standard of living.’ I found these expressions used extensively in the work of a linguist, in a book written about the language of politics. The author is one of the bright stars of the West Coast linguists. The least we could expect from a linguist is to refrain from abusing language, but he consistently confuses the notion of rights with the notion of entitlements. His misuse of the word may be consistent with socialist phraseology, but is unacceptable for someone who claims to be a scientist of language.

The "right to work" means that one is not legally restricted from entering into contracts involving his labour. As a Canadian, I do not have the right to work in the United States. If I received a green card I could accept a job, but I couldn't possibly expect the US government to provide me with one.

In socialist phraseology, the “right to work” or the “right to a decent standard of living” denotes entitlement, things one should be provided with. Communist propaganda called these "social rights" as opposed to the "human rights" that conservatives seem to have such a hang-up

about. Obfuscating the fundamental difference between these notions is clearly an abuse of language.

After almost a century of communist propaganda, this particular switch is firmly entrenched in several languages, not just in English. Strictly speaking this is not a linguistic but a philosophical problem, but strictly speaking, most of the expressions discussed here are like that.

In a ‘good’ society, rights are desirable, privileges are not. I was about to say ‘in an egalitarian society’ when I realized that the expression ‘egalitarian’ has also been abused into uselessness. Out of context there is no way to know whether the speaker means equal outcome or equal opportunity.

As it is used today, the demand for ‘social justice’ is simply a battle cry for income redistribution with its most vocal advocates expressing clearly their desire to make the decisions themselves about the ways they wish to spend other people’s money.

Justice is a very fundamental notion of our social existence, the foundation of our morality. Referring to any demand as a matter of justice is aimed to paralyze possible opposition before any argument regarding the merits of any particular demand can be voiced. Once opposing arguments are made, they can be dismissed claiming the power of morality.

The arguments themselves are ignored and a counterattack is launched against those who made the argument. Justice is a moral imperative and morality should have a higher value than logic. Anyone opposing a proposal made in the name of social justice must be an opponent of justice itself and therefore – by definition – immoral. With these deceptive misdirections, bullspeakers can quite effectively force their opponents into a defensive position.

Bullspeakers say:

- **right** when they mean **privilege** or **entitlement**,
- **fair** when they mean **more**,
- **affordable** when they mean cheap or **subsidized**,
- **deserve** when they mean **need**,
- **investment** when they mean **spending**,

- **decent** when they mean “**anything I may decide is,**” (after receiving ‘decent’ compensation for making such responsible decisions)

Most of these expressions come under the umbrella of a greater bull-switch, ‘**Social justice**’ which means the whole system of **income redistribution** with the whole bureaucratic machinery needed for its ‘**just**’ administration.

While politics is not the exclusive domain of the notion switch, that is where the motivations are most obvious.

Reinterpretation

If you are managing something, you are a manager, are you not? Doesn’t managing your time make you a manager?

Doesn’t executing the orders of your boss make you an executive? Anything you do at work that is visible to outsiders reflects on your company. Doesn’t that make you a representative of the company? If you progress from the water-cooler to your desk isn’t your position progressive?

A considerable portion of the Bullspeak expressions are following this logic. They sidestep the established meaning which usually designates a certain status and justify the new usage with the logic used to derive it from its verb root.

The reinterpretation provides the justification and a quasi legitimacy. The positive connotations are the benefit. If asked, one can say “but of course you are a manager, you just have to manage to make that pile of paper disappear”

I have a cousin who was teased by being called a **director** when working on a farm. Bulls are kind of heavy and can easily hurt the cows in their amorous excitement. His job was to **direct** that important part to the right location and thus minimize potential injury to the cows. In his case the title was mockery, but I can see this type of reinterpretation more and more often presented seriously.

The grammar of the Bull

Function inversions

Words have certain grammatical functions. Nouns tell us what things are, adjectives tell us what they are like, verbs tell us what they do and adverbs tell us how they do it.

When we evaluate the truth value of statements, in the hierarchy of word forms, nouns rule. Nouns tell us what the things of the world are. They are naming the world for us. In our perception they have the highest truth value because they have the lowest level of dependence on judgement. A chair is a chair. Whether it is pretty or comfortable depends far more on the judgment of the speaker than understanding its basic nature. You cannot call it a chair if one cannot sit on it. Adjectives on the other hand, especially the ones that explicitly evaluate the noun they are connected to are not received with the same level of expectation. Yet in combination, a noun – adjective pair is seen as more factual than a verb – adverb pair. The expression ‘quick run’ seems to be less of a personal judgment than the expression “running quickly.” The second is a little more a matter of opinion than the first.

“Voice solutions are the lifeline to your business. Bell is a leader in the design and creation of local service packages and offerings, Long Distance and Toll-Free packages and Voice Systems to make your business run more effective and efficient.”

The sentence calls for adverbs. You do not do something quick, you do it quickly. Your business does not run effective and efficient, it runs effectively and efficiently.

The message of the above sentence from Bell is that their product will immediately provide you with these benefits. It will not simply enable the business to function better, it will **make** it better. There is a more definite promise in the adjectives than would be in the adverbs. The adverb may get you there, the adjective says that you **are** there. It is not how you **can** be, it is how you **will** be. Buying their product will not just give you a possibility to improve, it will be the positive result by and in itself. You may think that this is just bad writing, but if you keep

looking for it, you will find this type of misuse in business communication often enough to prove that it's more than a simple mistake.

'Value' and 'budget' represent the same mental process. Nouns that act as adjectives. The same happens in most cases of the qualified solutions, where the specifier (**switch** solution, **product** solution) acts as a quasi adjective.

This objectification of judgments represents a clear trend in the English language made possible by the peculiar English grammatical function of the noun-noun modifiers that cause quite some headache to Natural Language Programmers¹⁷.

Caption from an article in an automotive magazine proclaims that "*The new TL is more expensive than its predecessor. But it is just as value-packed.*" According to this statement, value is a thing that you can pack into an automobile.

Nissan is also offering '*free value*' with their latest models while Audio 2000 '*delivers quality.*'

What Audio 2000 means is that they will sell me products of high quality, assuring me that this is not just an empty promise, they really will. They will 'deliver' on their promise. I would never be able to find out what Nissan means from the expression itself, but it is in a way explained in the commercial. It simply means that certain features that are options in most cars are standard features in the models they advertise. That is the free '*value*'. What makes the features 'free' is still kind of fuzzy.

Value, quality, size and colour are attributes, NOT things by and in themselves. Nobody can give me value or quality any more than they can give me color or size (although I get spam these days promising just that).

The linguistic *trouvaille* is building on the fact that we are talking about nouns, and in common perception (as we all learned in grammar school) nouns are the names of things. Being a noun, the attribute of something is just as real as the thing itself and therefore – or so the bullspeakers' reasoning goes - we can use them interchangeably.

The judgment is always implied. Quality and value are always high and size is big. This of course does not make any sense in the case of attributes without judgments, with no inherent value expectations. Nobody will ‘deliver colour’, because there is no inherent value difference between – let’s say - red and green.

When I say that something has ‘high quality,’ I attach an adjective to a noun naming an attribute. My statement is clearly a matter of judgment. If I deliver quality, the positive value is implied, in a way incorporated. By using a noun, the promise is made more tangible, more real, more true. And of course: more of a bull.

At times it can get outright stupid. Future Shop sells gift cards. The card informs us that it can be ‘*refilled with value*’ later. The meaning of the word ‘value’ in this context is credit. The card can be recharged, it will be active as long as you keep pumping money into it. We are not talking about objectified judgements any more. The expression that started as an attribute became in this statement a sign of sheer stupidity.

Metonymy inversion

If ice-cream makes me happy, can I call ice-cream happiness?

If a gizmo solves my problem, can I call it a solution? At that point, does it stop being a gizmo and become a solution? How do I refer to it from then on? Gizmo or solution? If I call it a solution, how do I differentiate it from other things that went through the same mental process to become solutions as well? By calling it a gizmo solution?

When “*The micro technology erases hair cleanly and discreetly*” what does the erasing? The technology or the shaver? Can technology erase?

If I desire something, can I call the object of my desire a desire? Can I shop for my desires? Can those who could fulfill my desires say that they have my desires? (Not that they have **what** I desire, but that they have **the** desire?) Now substitute ‘need’ for desire to see that asking these questions is not as silly as it first seems.

The logic of these substitutions is similar to the logic of metonyms, but metonyms they are not. They are metonyms standing on their head.

Metonyms are tools of reference. Their essence is to select one aspect or part of a larger phenomenon and refer to that larger phenomenon by the name of the part as in “we have new faces in our class” or “Bush started a war in Iraq.” A face in this context meaning a person and Bush meaning the USA. There are many kinds of metonyms, but all share the conceptual structure of something lesser referring to something more, or to be more precise one defining aspect or part of what we are talking about referring to a more complex whole. Metonyms are very useful in emphasizing certain aspects of the larger phenomenon saying, in fact, that in the speaker’s judgement and/or in the context that is its most clearly defining characteristic.

In the case of the Bullspeak examples I gave above, the reference goes the other way, identifying a larger concept with a lesser one. The object I need is not an aspect of the concept of need, what solves my problem does not explain in any way the concept of solutions. When an inverted metonym refers to an object, it tries to convey benefits from the larger concept, to make the thing referred to appear more than what it is.

In a metonym, the thing referred to is more than the reference; in the inverted version it is less. A person is more than a face (however pretty that face is) while ice cream is somewhat less than happiness (however happy it can make me personally.)

Metaphor inversion

Let’s take another look at the ambitions of the University of Phoenix OnLine:

“Built on ambition, powered by opportunity”

While these words are without proper meaning in the context of the statement, they do have meaning, and the statement itself does have an aim. It tries to imitate a metaphor.

Rogers AT&T has *“A business plan that works hard.”* The ‘metaphor’ here is that a business plan is a worker.

It would take us off-track to dwell on the concept of a ‘business plan’ which, in this context, means a packaged service offering, one of many

payment plans you may choose from; but try to reflect for a second on the connotations that slipped in with the other meaning.

By participating in a beta tester program of Symantec, I can “*become part of the team that drives the solution*”

There is no way to determine which definition of ‘drive’ they mean:

- ***To push, propel, or press onward forcibly***
- ***To guide, control, or direct (a vehicle)***
- ***To carry through vigorously to a conclusion***

...but it does not really matter as none of these can be properly applied. Picturing ‘solutions’ as a vehicle that can be driven serves only one purpose - to project an image of control.

The function of metaphors is to anchor our abstract ideas into our perceptual experience, just as I did in this very sentence. A metaphor is a reachable image we can use to understand a complex concept or sentiment. I compared complex ideas to a boat that can drift away if not anchored to something, while I pictured our perceptual experience as a solid foundation of our understanding.

The inverted metaphor works differently. It projects an image of power and control. It sends a message that we mastered these complex notions to the extent that we can control them as simple physical objects. Not only do we know what ambition is, we can handle it as if it was a piece of brick. Opportunity is no more complex to us than pumping gasoline into our car: it just keeps our machinery running. Our machinery, you see, is so sophisticated that it runs on a complex notion. Forget thermonuclear fusion! Opportunity is the real stuff.

You are using an inverted metaphor when you:

- Connect your strategies to solutions
- Build on an ambition
- Drive a solution or
- Make concepts ready to go

In “Metaphors We Live By” Lakoff & Johnson give metaphors a looser definition saying that “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another,” but then go to great length to show how metaphors are rooted in what they call ‘natural

kinds of experiences,’ and go to say that in metaphors “we conceptualize the less clearly delineated in terms of the more clearly delineated.”¹⁸

When we are “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another,” we are always understanding a complex kind of thing in terms of a simpler one, in terms of one that is closer to our perceptual experience, which is the basis of everything we understand. In the examples above, one fuzzy notion is conceptualized in terms of another.

The inverse metaphors of Bullspeak ‘explain’ a simple kind of thing in terms of a complex one in order to create a message of power, control and importance. The simple tasks of warehousing and shipping become ‘ready to go logistic concepts.’

Metaphors are signs of our humbleness, signs of the knowledge that language is subservient to understanding which, in turn, is governed by our perception of reality.

The inverted metaphors are signs of pure arrogance; signs of the belief that words can change reality; that we can rule and control our reality with complex notions.

The faith in that ability is the foundation of the Bullspeak attitude. The aim is to manipulate the targets of our communication, to make them more receptive to the message. Now that we have explored how it is done, we should look at why is it so bad for us.

Issues

(the effects of the Bull)

The effects on language

What is the source of the richness of language? Is it the number of expressions it has? Is it the complexity of the grammar, or is it the generativity, the ease by which the speakers of the language can generate new expressions? Does the richness of language have something to do with the richness of our cultural experience? With the structure of our societies? With our ability to interpret the world around us?

Could it be that all the changes in usage and the interpretation I talked about so far represent a natural evolution of language? Whenever I speak about the harm we are doing to language and present my case in my typically animated manner, people tell me that I should just calm down, that the whole thing isn't that important.

I am calm. I know that language changes all the time. Many of those changes are not only natural, but are also for the better. New words are created and unused ones fade into oblivion. New expressions can arrive into language, abbreviations can take a life on their own and existing expressions acquire new meanings while some meanings fade from use. Language is changing, language can and should change. In an accelerated time like ours, it changes even faster than before.

"Cloning" still didn't make it into my edition of the American Heritage dictionary, but hardly anybody in the English speaking world would have a problem attaching the appropriate meaning to it.

Sometimes a new meaning overshadows the old one(s). Not many people would describe a bright and lively room as 'gay.' Not any more. Gay means ONE thing. Screw the other meanings.

Language is evolving just as it has been through the history of humanity, but this fact shouldn't invalidate the arguments presented here. We should be cognizant of the nature of these changes, and aware of their implications. The changes we allow to happen can either enrich

or impoverish our language and as an extension, can add to or take away from our whole life experience. Lies are demoralizing, and if we allow lies to take over our very nouns, the building blocks of our communication, then to a certain degree, we demoralize our lives.

As I am writing this, Tony Blair is facing some serious problems in his parliament. Yesterday on the news I heard him saying about the Iraq war that “we won that conflict.”

Tony Blair is one of the most eloquent orators of our times. I always enjoy listening to him, even when I do not agree with what he says. This sentence, however, caught my attention. I didn’t think that you could win a conflict. You can win a war, a fight, a battle, an argument, but not a conflict. The way I understand the word, it does not contain the element of competition that would require one party to come out ahead. I derive this impression from the other meanings of the expression, none of which contains the element of competition, only the disharmony.

In his present ‘conflict’ with his parliament, however, the less Blair uses the word ‘war’ the better. So he is using a euphemism which, in this context, is hard to reconcile with the message that they actually won a war that isn’t a war at all.

What I have to ask of myself is if I am not too picky when noticing such things. There is no law carved in stone stating that “thou shalt not pair the notions of conflict and victory.” We can start using it that way, but I think that would slightly alter the other meanings of the word as well.

Operation Iraqi Liberation (OIL, as it was originally known) by the way, was not a conflict. It was a war. The Jews and the Arabs around them have a conflict. The Jews wish to survive, the Arabs wish they wouldn’t. That is the conflict. Sometimes they fight wars, but they always have the conflict.

With most expressions of Bullspeak, people hope to elevate their subject or minimize the negative impact of undesirable facts. What they in fact do is debasing language. In a few more years, essential notions may disappear from the English Language. We will have no expression to describe a situation where we put something to practical use as

opposed to simply using it, because the word utilize will be indistinguishable from the word use.

When we start referring to different things (objects, actions, ideas) with the same word, we are taking meaning from language by reducing the use of meaningful and specific expressions. When we use new words to describe things, the old expressions will fade from use.

When the prevailing use of an expression is deceptive, it is difficult to use it honestly.

The problem is not the fact that language changes, but changes for the worse should be unwelcome. Language should be “an instrument which we shape for our own purposes.” Abject dishonesty should not be allowed to become one of those purposes. Changes should enrich and empower language, not diminish it.

Not all changes are bad; it is possible to create new expressions without harming existing ones.

When changes work and when they do not

Let’s take a look at two metaphors, ‘framework’ and ‘platform.’

They are both overused and sometimes abused, but the original meanings of the words have not been altered or replaced.

A framework is:

A structure for supporting or enclosing something else, especially a skeletal support used as the basis for something being constructed.

An external work platform; a scaffold.

A fundamental structure, as for a written work or a system of ideas.

As opposed to the associations that come with structure and skeleton, framework suggest an external structure, something that needs to be filled rather than built upon. A framework suggests not only a structure, but outside boundaries as well. It suggests that the most important parts, structure and boundary are defined, and need only details and

finishing to be complete. The suggestion is intellectual comfort with a touch of flexibility.

A platform is:

A horizontal surface raised above the level of the adjacent area, as a stage for public speaking or a landing alongside railroad tracks. An oil platform.

A place, a means, or an opportunity for public expression of opinion: a journal that served as a platform for radical views.

A formal declaration of the principles on which a group, such as a political party, makes its appeal to the public.

But it also means:

The foundation technology of a computer system. Because computers are layered devices composed of a chip-level hardware layer, a firmware and operating-system layer, and an applications program layer, the bottommost layer of a machine is often called a platform.

In everyday usage, the type of computer or operating system being used.

A platform is a stable structure to support further construction. It represents a starting point for further actions. The suggestions presented by these expressions (platform and framework) are intellectual, not emotional. They do not try to lead you anywhere, they just place the subject in a phase of its creation and do what metaphors are supposed to do, illustrates a complex notion by providing us with an image closer to our perceptual experience.

I love linguistic innovation, I love playing with words and I love slang. I like to create words, and I like the ways the logic of certain expressions can traverse cultures. The evolution of language is a good thing.

I just read a column in a Microsoft newsletter about unsolicited mail. The author¹⁹ claims that nobody knows the origin of the word ‘spam,’ and that it actually stands for nothing more than what it is most widely used for - to describe unsolicited e-mail messages. The expression does of course have a clear origin, it is a registered trademark (which she knew), and its present usage is a reference to a Monty Python skit

featuring the meat product as a source of considerable annoyance (which she did not know and therefore was puzzled by the connection). The expression has a very clear and specific origin, but it's current meaning has been planted in the language so firmly, that most people don't even know what that origin is.

'Warez' isn't simply a new word, but a reference to a simple linguistic rule as well. Appz, gamez and serialz are illicit versions of the things with the same name but proper spelling.

No matter how noble the goal is, hijacking expressions just to create different emotional coloring takes something away from language.

However, what simply does not make sense is not necessarily abuse. Creative advertising can give us plenty of expressions that are harmless.

When it does not (really) matter

A trendy, upscale neighbourhood on our waterfront had a residential development project. Its entire advertising campaign was built around the slogan "*Live the life.*"

I think it is a brilliant idea. It means nothing, but does it in a clever way. It aims to mean nothing. It calls on a vague set of associations. It makes you think about what it means to live your life. The pronoun suggests that it is not any, but a certain kind of life as in the expressions 'beach-life', 'city life' or simply 'active life.' The imperative makes itwell, imperative. Most importantly, it does not make a claim, it does not make a false promise, it does not make either the buyer or the seller look more than what they are and the merchandise more than what it is. The message is subtle: "living here will bring you closer to the possibility of living your life to its fullest. Make the step, and buy that possibility!" I find nothing wrong with this message.

On the billboards of another residential development close to where I live the messages are:

High resolution living and High definition lifestyle.

They are not metaphors, they are not analogies, as far as any real meaning is concerned they are just plain stupid, but they get noticed.

They can even make you think; both about your life (and how you define it) and your involvement with technology. These images are harmless and there is little chance that either the notions or the expressions in them can be abused. It is not a metaphor, but neither is it an action plan or a practical suggestion. It does imply certain things. The marketers are definitely not catering to seniors and families. The expressions are targeted to young urban professionals. The people who can relate the high-tech suggestions to an active, urban lifestyle. This is creative advertising giving you meaningless but memorable concepts that you will hopefully attach to a place, vendor or product in your mind.

How about Royal burgers with Deluxe fries and Jumbo cokes?

In the case of the French it is understandable, since “they wouldn’t know what the !@#\$ a quarter pounder is. They have the metric system there.”²⁰ In ours, it is just harmless bullshit. Primitive boasting. If stuffing another potato’s worth of deep-fried starch into your already overweight body makes you feel that you are sitting on the lap of luxury, then be my guest.

Language use can have quite some latitude with adjectives, because they are so subjective. If I call a Quarter-Pounder ‘humongous’ you may think that I am silly, but I did not do anything to deceive you, as long as you know that I am talking about a Quarterpounder.

Yet another area of harmless linguistic manipulation is the model names of products. Since they are in a way proper names, they cannot possibly influence the usage of their source expression.

Integra, vigor, intrepid, dynasty, alero, achieva, acclaim, reliant, impreza and so on. Most play on associations. Impreza should be imprezzive and the reliant reliable. You may think it is silly, you may think it is clever, but, in either case, you must agree that it is harmless.

When it is just plain dumb

I have to admit that this is one of my pet peeves. After years of having it forced on us, I still feel uncomfortable using it and try to avoid it whenever I can. I am talking about ‘folders.’

In the mainframe, UNIX and DOS worlds there were several acceptable expressions to refer to information kept in digital form. Using the expression ‘file’ was a no-brainer, since it does have a conceptual meaning:

‘A complete, named collection of information’ and an association of linearity which describes pretty well the characteristics of digital information storage. A file is a named collection of information stored in a linear fashion of one bit after another. The expression describes a notion - not necessarily a physical object. When it came to referring to the organization of the files, the hierarchical structure in which they are placed, several expressions were used, such as ‘library,’ ‘catalogue’ and ‘directory.’ The function of all of these was to describe a set or a subset of references to files in computer storage. Then came Steve Jobs trying to introduce the concept of cool to geekdom. His idea of cool was to make visual references to concepts then to refer to the concepts by the name of the visual reference. Files are kept in folders, so the image of a folder is an appropriate visual reference and, therefore, it is also appropriate to rename the concept and to start referring to it by the name of the visual reference. At first glance that may even seem OK. The problem starts with the derivatives. A directory directs. A sub-directory still directs - to a subset of information. What does a subfolder do? Sub-folds? Folds into a subset of information? When you start working with the notion it quickly turns pathetic.

This could have stayed all OK because Macs never had a chance to become mainstream. Then came the hopeless geek Bill Gates, who never really had an original idea, but can sell his ‘creative borrowings’ better than any of the originators.

Microsoft has always been on a quest for the elusive cool that seemed to come so easily to Macs. Macs use many great ideas but Microsoft managed to ‘borrow’ from them one of the dumbest. That is how we ended up with things than can sub-sub-fold, sitting on a ‘desktop’ that

is actually a sub-sub-sub-sub-subfolder of something that is represented on the desktop as a visual metaphor. We could call this whole concept the ‘misunderstood metaphor.’

The effects on our minds

The linguistic con game

Most of the expressions discussed here are linguistic manifestations of the confidence game.

The number one rule of the game is that you have to gain the **confidence** (hence the name) of people you wish to rip off. This is done by offering them something to make them feel indebted to you. If someone takes us into his confidence, we feel obliged to reciprocate. We trust those who trust us. Our existence as social animals depends on reciprocity. It is bred into us.

That is what con-men live on, but we also have to remember the wisdom dispensed to us by Joseph, the Yellow Kid Weil who claimed that he never cheated an honest man, only rascals. They wanted something for nothing; he gave them nothing for something. It takes two to tango. There is no con-game without the willing participation of the victim.

The greatest success of the advertising industry is the creation of the atmosphere where most people expect to receive things for free and actually believe that they do. Bullspeak will promise to give you something for nothing, but you will end up getting nothing for something.

When a company calls its salesmen ‘sales executives,’ they are being conned into believing that they will get more respect, that they will be more than salesmen. When you, as a shopper, deal with a ‘sales executive,’ you are given the impression that you are dealing with a decision maker, someone more important than a salesman.

Any inflated job title will do that. If you are called a specialist, you will feel special. If you are dealing with a specialist, you will trust him more. What you actually get is nothing. It is just a name. Yet you will be ready to give devotion and loyalty on one side and trust and respect on the other because deep down you would like to believe the lies.

When you are promised something that cannot be sold (like a home or an opportunity) you may think that you will be given something when in fact it is you, who give your commitment to make those promises a reality. Only you can turn a place into a home or make something of an opportunity. When you take advantage of an ‘opportunity’ to hassle your friends with some crap to sell in a multilevel marketing scheme, you work much harder than you would if the same work were a unionized government job. If you buy into the promise of the opportunity, you will try to live up to your end of the responsibility that the notion implies.

It is a standard practice of scams to talk almost exclusively about the results, the benefits of success. Ninety percent of the content of late night “Make money with [fill in whatever]” infomercials is the promise. How you will be waving wads of cash, cruise on your yacht surrounded with gorgeous babes and finally have the self-confidence that you ‘deserve’ (!!?)

Solutions, opportunities, wealth management are no different, only harder to notice. Late night infomercials make explicit promises, while Bullspeak only implies, but that does not make it any less of a con.

Every word we utter contains a judgment, if nothing else then the judgment that led to its selection from our mental vocabulary. We have to make judgments about grammar, to select not only the right word but the right grammatical context as well.

When we talk about “affordable housing” or a “decent standard of living” we pretend that these are more or less absolute values. If you ask, people will give you a dollar figure. They will tell you what affordable is. They will tell you without realizing that by giving their own interpretation they became victims of the con. What we can afford may vary from time to time or person to person. The fact that it will always be a specific figure when we spell it out does not make it absolute. A ‘value’ and a ‘budget’ makes no sense without a frame of reference. Although we can claim that the reference is implied, the reference is not to anything tangible, just to an attitude.

When you accept a relative term as if it was absolute, you’ve been conned. Like signing a blank cheque, you gave your agreement to something that may turn out to be quite disagreeable to you.

Hindering the thinking process

Bullspcak evolved to hinder our thinking process. That is why you can find it flourishing in advertising. That is also why it is the foundation of PC language and many other forms of political manipulation. In any of these cases the communicator wants to evoke in you an emotional, not an analytical - logical response.

The processing of information requires thinking. When you draw conclusions and make judgements, you are evaluating information. If the judgements are made for you, you don't have to think about them, which is exactly what bullspcakers want.

I see this as part of a larger trend. Bullspcak is just another manifestation of a trend of moving away from analytical to associative logic. Of course I know that 'associative logic' is an oxymoron. Let me try to correct it: we are moving away from analytical thinking to associative thinking, something that is a lot less dependent on language.

We are replacing logic with associations, descriptions with insinuations, narratives with like: enactments? You know, like when you go like: duhhh!

I am sure I could find half a dozen books blaming television, popular culture or the schools system for this decline in the quality of our communication, but the cause at this point is irrelevant. What is not, is how much Bullspcak is helping the process.

With many of the expressions we talk about I could ask, to what extent is the objectionable use a question of language? Could it not be a problem with the very notions? When we talk about the 'right to a decent standard of living' isn't the problem the mess in the head of the speaker? Not knowing what the word 'right' means? We can indeed ask how conscious Bullspcak is, how deliberate its use is. In the case of newspcak the answer was obvious. It was something forced on the people of Oceania. Bullspcak is growing out from our voluntary interactions, that is why it is so important to understand its effects on the way we think.

In order to make my point all through this book, I pictured a setup with two sides: the cheating, scheming, manipulative bullspeakers on one and the duped victims on the other. There is no such dichotomy. If there is an enemy, it is us.

Information – opinion – persuasion

The primary functions of communication are sharing information, expressing your opinion (thoughts and intentions) and influencing the thoughts and opinions (and therefore actions) of others.

Bullspeak is simply pushy. It is an unwelcome intrusion into our mental space. While I welcome opinions, it should be up to me to decide whether some goods or services can or cannot solve my problems, if a house will be my home or my investment, and whether I can or cannot afford a personal Learjet.

Shortly after my arrival to America, among many other attempts to make a living, I went to an “information session” of what turned out to be a Multi-Level-Marketing snake charming performance. Being both curious and desperate, I signed up: I lasted a month. In the past twenty years, I have indulged one friend by attending her ‘home presentation’ of something similar. The first thing they tell you when they teach you how to organize these parties is not to tell anything about the product to the people you are inviting. You have to do that to keep them curious, to keep up their interest. If you tell them what it is about, they won’t even show up, and if they do, they will come full of negativity, armed with all the arguments against what you are trying to sell them. Yes, of course, I was told, it is about this wonderful product that practically sells itself, but if you give people time to think, they will not have the right disposition to buy. You have to dazzle them with your presentation, then close the deal as quickly as possible.

Knowledge is the worst enemy of manipulation and propaganda.

Advertisers want to grab your attention and arouse your interest, not to satisfy your curiosity. Salesmanship is not about knowledge, it is about persuasion. A good salesman will learn everything about you and what you want (or at least not be adverse to the suggestion of wanting) before you know anything about him or the product. Companies gather more

and more information about you to find the best angle for their next sales pitch.

Bullspcak is the tool of sales, whether we are talking about goods or services, positions or job titles, ideology or morality, political views or aspirations, social status or respect. Bullspcak blurs the lines between the three major aspects of communication: the exchange of information, the expression of opinions and persuasion.

When you see or hear any of the expressions reviewed here, you should have your guards up. Someone is trying to mess with your mind.

The effects on our morals

Small lies make the big ones possible.

If we can say that words are powerful weapons, then we can also say that “solutions” are the drive-by shootings of free speech. It is already a truism that if we let people get away with small crimes, the big ones will be sure to follow. The amazing success in cleaning up New York made it clear to anyone paying attention. The vigorous prosecution of even petty crimes created a drop in the crime rates across the board.

Lies and BS are no different in some respects. If you allow people to get away with them, they will push their limits to see exactly how far they can go. If you do not object to calling whatever is sold to you a ‘solution,’ maybe you won’t mind when they start to nickel and dime you either. Maybe you won’t care that the ‘solution’ is full of bugs, maybe you won’t care that it causes more problems than it solves.

At the end of the line you will find the Enron-scale fiascos. Some of the most immoral scams of Enron were perfectly legal, they were just bending the rules, not breaking them²¹. I am certain that their business communications were full of rosy pictures and implied promises. Solutions connected to strategies.

Bullspcak isn’t really just linguistic inflation, it is embezzlement. Most embezzlement starts as desperate borrowing, not as an elaborate rip-off scheme, but if they can get away with it, the embezzlers will grow

bolder. Bullspeak starts borrowing a little respect here, making a false promise there, nothing serious, nothing illegal, nothing outright immoral, nothing binding. By making false and fuzzy claims, bullspeakers acquire importance, respect and trust they did not earn and do not deserve.

The dynamics of respect and social status

Libertarians and conservatives like to point out the obvious when they remind us that society cannot give without taking what is given from somewhere else. There is an equilibrium between production and consumption; there is no way to consume more than what has been produced. And if any individual takes an amount greater than his contribution, then that extra must come from the contribution of someone else. This is income redistribution in a nutshell.

Everybody loses the race that everybody wins; there is no way to elevate losing without debasing winning. Very similar to the notion of income redistribution, we could call this respect equalization or respect redistribution. Like with any other redistribution schemes, the likely result of the process is getting everything to the level of the lowest common denominator.

I wouldn't be the first to notice that our civilization is developing a hefty dose of victimhood mentality. Bullspeak fits into this change in every possible way. The expressions of social BS, like social rights and affordability, are all about disclaiming responsibility, while 'solutions' and 'strategic capabilities' are displacing and avoiding responsibilities. When someone is selling you a solution, they do not want you to think about the merits of whatever they are selling, only about the possible benefits that you may be getting. Merits you may compare, benefits must stand on their own. Merits are in the domain of the seller, benefits are in the domain of the buyer.

Of course this argument is a little far fetched. People will not formally and consciously disclaim responsibility for their product based on the fact that they called it a solution when they sold it to you. They just don't want you to think about it because that would be the beginning of critical thinking, the worst enemy of sales.

The noble goals of social engineering

Words are the easiest targets of social engineering. You cannot change thoughts and attitudes by decree, but you can certainly change words. As Orwell showed us, we can go quite far affecting society by forcing changes in language.

PC language is trying to steer us toward a better world at the cost of language.

I was always puzzled by the feminist opposition to expressions like ‘secretary.’ The word means ‘a keeper of secrets.’ A confidant. A trusted person in a position of trust. No one would seriously suggest renaming the position of the ‘Secretary of State’ - the keeper of state secrets - to administrative assistant of the State.

There is nothing wrong with the name; the word itself actually suggest something more valuable than ‘assistant.’ When feminists in the sixties targeted the word, they were fighting against the way the female workforce was seen, something subservient in a “man’s, man’s, man’s world”. We can argue endlessly whether anything really changed and if it did, whether PC language contributed to the change. What we cannot argue is that a perfectly legitimate expression has been smeared in the process.

If Negroes are not getting the kind of respect they should, we can easily fix the problem by translating the word. If that does not work, we can keep replacing it. It can be said, as advocates of PC language do, that selecting a synonym simply means selecting an alternative aspect of what we try to describe and referring to something with an expression with more positive association will change our perception. We could get into ideological arguments about the primacy of mind over matter, but unfortunately, we have a far more practical problem. We can seldom afford to create new expressions. The ones we choose already have meanings which are hijacked by the new reference. Not only is it a risky proposition to hope that it will work, but we can be certain that it will cause damage. If the switch sticks, the original meaning of the word will be altered, if it does not, it will still be – at the least - confusing.

If we call black men African Americans, how do we distinguish first generation immigrants from Africa? Especially if they are whites or Arabs from Northern Africa? Here is a little puzzle for you: How do you refer to a first generation immigrant from Liberia? Would that be an African American African American African? Let me translate this: Black (African American) from Africa (African) descendent of repatriate Americans (American African). Is my son Canadian or Hungarian-Vend-German-Japanese-Welsh-Canadian? Or maybe European-Asian-American? Do any of these names make him any different? I cannot tell you how I wish it was that easy. I would have a better behaved teenager.

Not having something is different from having it. Having different things is not equivalent to not having things. If I have great hearing and you have amazing vision, then we may be called “differently abled”. If I am missing my legs, my abilities are not simply different. They are lesser than the abilities of the properly legged people.

Can we fabricate respect? Manufacture status? Bullspeakers believe we can. They may even think of themselves as linguistic innovators who, while being aware of the consequences, consider the gain more valuable than the loss.

The biggest problem of PC language is that by formulating the parameters of the discussion they are.....well, formulating the parameters of the discussion. Calling an amputee ‘differently abled’ instantly draws me into a political debate where by my choice of word I have to make a statement . It is not just a reference any more, but the demarcation point of an argument.

My first language is gender neutral. Hungarian has just one word for third person singular. Does that make us less sexist? Trust me, it does not. A Hungarian man can be just as much of a male chauvinist pig as the guy next nation, and if he is not, the gender neutral language is not what made the difference.

PC language lies somewhere between newspeak and Bullspeak.

The aim is clearly newspeak, the elimination of undesirable thoughts. If we eliminate the word, it will not be possible to think it any more.

Unfortunately, words do not change reality. War is still a war, even if you call it peace and a handicap will never be an advantage.

Calling the mentally retarded 'challenged' will only refer to the bad thing while describing something completely different. The way is Bullspeak. Choosing words with doubleplusgood associations to replace valid expressions describing unpleasant realities that we wish we did not have to talk about.

Am I saying that intentions do not matter? Am I saying that they should not matter? Are intentions irrelevant? The answer is no to all. What I am saying is that intentions should not be used as justification for lies and dishonesty, because they cancel out the moral imperatives that we started with. We cannot use lies to become better persons; the ends do not justify the means.

Good intentions are not an excuse. Newspeak was full of good intentions. So was Ingsoc. And communism. Even fascism. Just like PC language.

The Bullspeak dictionary:

All definitions are excerpted from The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition Copyright © 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company.

To preserve space, I only quote definitions relevant to my arguments, the ones being hijacked or misrepresented.

Achieve

“3-DNET® is a prestigious, GLOBAL link between Individual and Industry whereby the internet is regarded as only one of the available means to achieve desired contacts.”

You can find contacts (persons) or you can establish contacts (the act of contacting), but achieving them?

Meaning either a person or an act, how do you ‘achieve’ a contact?.

To achieve means *“to accomplish something successfully.”*

An achievement is *“Something accomplished successfully, especially by means of exertion, skill, practice, or perseverance.”*

In a world where everybody wants to contact everybody, it is difficult to establish contacts. Finding people who are willing to listen to your sales pitch may very well be an achievement, but that still does not mean that you ‘achieved’ the contact. Although this may look like a mildly off-the-wall contraction of the process leading to the expression, you should not be fooled by the appearance. This is a dangerous precedence. Just as we are getting close to the point where anything can be called a solution, it is not unconceivable that any action can be called an achievement. After all, once you achieved a contact, should you not try to achieve a meeting with that contact?

Affordable

As in affordable housing

I gave a whole chapter to this beautiful notion. Go to page 37

Analyst

As in help desk analyst

An analysis is *'The evaluation of a situation or problem, including review from various aspects or points of view'*

and an analyst is *'one that analyzes'*

Quite understandably, in most of the technology businesses the 'help desk' guys represent the bottom of the pecking order. Their job is to filter the calls, answer the questions with obvious answers and hand the difficult questions to second-level support. There is really nothing analytical about their work; they provide support where they can, and pass on the questions where they cannot. It makes a big difference how good they are, because their time is much cheaper than anything higher up on the support chain. Analysis is a serious process of thinking, delving into structure and detail, the ultimate target being understanding. Knowing how to do something is good, finding out how to do it is better, but figuring out what to do is clearly the most important. That is what analysts do. Figure out what to do. Traditionally, a system analyst was on the top of the IT world. The traditional application of the expression demands respect. In the new interpretation, anything that involves answering a question is an analysis. Calling the help desk guys 'analysts' is trying to steal the respect belonging to the system-analyst title.

The expression is also used to describe bottom level technical support, the people who actually walk to the desks to look at the problems of end-users. To them the same argument applies.

Activist

As in the 'new activist movement'

'The theory, doctrine, or practice of assertive, often militant action, such as mass demonstrations or strikes, used as a means of opposing or supporting a controversial issue, entity, or person.'

For most of its life, the expression was used with a specifier like ‘environmental activist,’ ‘peace activist’ or ‘[whatever] right activist;’ even as ‘political activist.’

The bare naked use of the expression is a new development, not more than 15 years old.

If you check out sites like the one of ‘The Activist’ magazine²² you will find that ‘activists’ are communists, anarchists, feminists, queers and their ilk – the same old gang sporting T-shirts with slogans claiming that “negative press is success in my book.”

However rickety the status and viability of the communist system was, the very fact that it existed conferred a certain legitimacy to leftist groups. The communists after all were at least trying to do the right thing, proper leftists just had to figure out a better way. The existence of the system provided a foundation for variety as well. Up to the fall of communism it was still ok to call yourself a communist, a Trotskyite, an anarchist, environmentalist or pacifist because these were just variations on the same noble concept. In the nineties, however, the value of these ideas faded into pathetic insignificance.

The new activist movement has to live with the fact that there is not a single clear issue to stand for. There is no coherent ideology to advocate, no real alternative to offer. What they can have at best are some tactical battles over specific issues that need only some righteousness, not an overall ideology. Those who call themselves activists openly admit in their name, that they do not have a clue what they stand for; therefore, they just describe what they are: **they are active**. These new leftist radicals just picked up the expression after the movement discredited every other describing their true political aspirations. I would describe them as righteous vandals, but I understand why they could not adopt such a name. It would suggest an ideology.

Associate

As in Sales Associate.

We can start wondering which of the many definitions apply here:

'A person united with another or others in an act, an enterprise, or a business; a partner or colleague'

The hint is there, the truth is not.

'A companion; a comrade'

A sales-buddy? I don't think so.

'One that habitually accompanies or is associated with another; an attendant circumstance.'

Partner in crime? Probably not.

'A member of an institution or society who is granted only partial status or privileges.'

An associate member of the college of sales? Naaah.

'Often Associate A degree conferred by a two-year college after the prescribed course of study has been successfully completed: an Associate in Arts.'

Definitely not.

The answer is none of the above. The expression in this context has nothing to do with any actual status, a relation to something or someone which is the common element of the definitions.

The word carries suggestions of status, something that a simple salesman wouldn't have. The status that is hinted here is the status of 'associate brokers,' 'associate professors,' 'law associates' or 'Business associates'

An associate is usually a trained professional in some important discipline. Professionals associate. Plumbers or car mechanics do not. At best they form partnerships. Being an associate represents a formal status within an organization, something that is not conferred to a person in a gratuitous or haphazard manner. One of the many steps toward tenure in academia is to become an associate professor. Being an associate suggests a certain level of status and tenure. An associate is not a simple employee. Being a sort of partner in the business, he represents the business at a qualitatively higher level.

None of these are true for sales associates; the use of the expression in this context is simply hijacking the positive connotations to elevate the perceived value of a not particularly well respected occupation.

Let me digress: I am a professional, trying to sell my services. I am also a lousy salesman. I am trying to convince some salesmen to sell the services of my company. There are many professionals like myself. My suggestion would be to establish themselves as free agents and provide their services (selling) to professionals like myself. If I can succeed in getting the idea that this is a viable business arrangement for them through their thick skulls, I could call them my associates in the business associate sense. I would still rather call them business associates, but calling them sales associates wouldn't be entirely improper.

In 95% of the cases however, a 'sales associate' is just a salesman with a Bullspeak title.

Budget

The dictionary definition of the noun is

'A systematic plan for the expenditure of a usually fixed resource, such as money or time, during a given period.'

...but the dictionary already has it listed as an adjective, with the following meanings:

*'Of or relating to a budget
Appropriate to a budget; inexpensive: a budget car; budget meals.'*

Even the dictionary definition is bull. What is appropriate to a budget? Whatever is put in it. I can plan to fly first class and then go around in a chauffeured limousine; if I can justify it; if I have the money for it and if I put it into my budget, then doing it is exactly what is appropriate to that budget.

The expression projects a positive image to the potential buyers about themselves. The process is replacing logic with a fuzzy affirmation, attempting to appeal to a targeted group of potential buyers.

You cannot say that 'we wish to rent cars in this category to those with limited means,' nor can you say that you are selling them something cheap; that what you offer them is lesser in quality or level of luxury. You cannot remind them of these facts if you wish to sell. No, you have to address them as people responsible in their spending habits.

The message implied in the expression is this: “People, who are careful with their ways of spending money and plan their expenditures usually have a budget. People who give serious consideration to their buying decisions choose this. Responsible people choose this. Choosing this shows that you are a responsible person.”

Do not confuse the logical explanation of the process with the ‘logic’ of the expression. Of course we can explain, but that does not make it less manipulative. An expression that is relative by definition acquired an absolute meaning, however fuzzy that meaning is.

Capability

‘A talent or ability that has potential for development or use.’

‘The capacity to be used, treated, or developed for a specific purpose.’

Capability is used with an increasing frequency to mean ability.

A capability is an ability combined with a capacity, with the inseparable element of development. Because of this element, the availability for further development, ‘capability’ is more dynamic than ability. Capability has an implied promise that ability lacks. Most people misuse it simply because it sounds more important and they do not understand the difference.

See also [Utilize](#)

Cash

As in ‘cash money.’

There is a disgusting, annoying, irritating clown in Toronto advertising his jewellery store on local TV stations. He is dressed up in a Superman style leotard, as he is ‘CASHMAN.’ Waving wads of money in his hand, he urges us to bring him our ‘used’ jewellery, ‘broken’ gold, Rolex, Cartier and Patek watches, BECAUSE: he gives us **cash** for it. He shouts **cash** about a dozen times in a 30 second ad. I was always wondering how he can do that, since it would be illegal for him to give me **cash** for something I just walked in with off the street. He would

have to do both an ID and a product check that takes time but never mind that for now. Let's suppose that he has the police in his pocket and he can get away with it.

Just as a side note, notice how little sense the word 'used' makes in this context. There isn't much wear and tear on jewellery. Possessing and displaying are just about the only things you can do with them. Most will actually gain value with time. The expression here is used as a qualifier, to knock down the perceived value and justify the low price that will be offered for your used (read worthless) jewellery. Compare this concept to pre-owned vehicles.

The idea behind the bull is that cash is more real than other forms of money such as a check or credit. A cheque is still just a promise of payment. A cheque is not real money, therefore cash, which is real, must be worth more. A hundred dollars in cash is in a way more money than a hundred dollar cheque

From a junk mail I learned that:

„It is so simple to qualify for a free cash grant!”

The same 'program' is also advertised on television. I have yet to see a government grant that is paid in cash. I mean anything more than what is handed out in shelters for bus fare, but never mind.

All it means in this context is that it is real money. It is really there. You can really get it.

I will not get into analyzing the 'free' aspect of the cash grant, I will let you do that.

Every few years investigative journalists descend on sleazy businesses cashing checks for those who need cash in a hurry. The ones with names like "CashMoney," "FastCash" or "Cash-to-Go." The journalists uncover the shocking truth that the fees push actual interest rates up to 25-30% which is illegal in any civilized country. Then nothing happens. They have a solid market catering to a rather unsophisticated, low class clientele that is likely to be intimidated by the more involved processes of banking and who are the most likely to be in situations where they need to get money (in the form of cash) urgently.

‘Cash’ is usually very expensive. Whenever you see the word ‘cash’ emphasized in any way, you should brace for a rip-off. Better yet, avoid that business if you can.

Challenge

I always had the feeling that the mistreatment of this word started out as a joke that was first taken seriously just by some humourless people but then took on a life of its own. Not enough of a life, mind you, to make it into a respectable dictionary as an adjective, but PC language has managed to push it into the vernacular.

In the usage of politically correct language it means some kind of deficiency, as in ‘optically challenged’ or ‘ethically challenged.’

The meaning that has been distorted is:

A test of one's abilities or resources in a demanding but stimulating undertaking

A challenge by definition is a difficult undertaking, therefore - according to the use in question - if someone has difficulties doing things that person is challenged. What is so fundamentally insulting and inconsiderate about the use of the expression to describe people with radically diminished abilities is the fact that this word gives the impression that they are the way they are by choice, that it is outright stimulating to them to have a handicap. I have the same kind of objection about most PC expressions euphemizing lesser abilities.

We’d be lucky if it stopped there. Unfortunately, it gets worse.

"Under the new rules of "No Child Left Behind" every child in the school system must be tested regardless what category he is assigned to: mentally challenged, special need child, special education student, regular enrollment. Only test material listed in FedEd Bulletin 324 can be used. Thru the test questions the student is meant to be mentally challenged to give a reliable score..."

In this example the expression ‘mentally challenged’ is used with two different meanings. The first means retarded (probably, because technically it could mean exceptional students just as well), the second means challenged (by the task).

Being mentally deficient is not a good thing. Talking about it as if it was will not make it any better. Understanding the difference is relatively easy now, because everybody knows that it is a euphemism and that it actually means retarded, an expression nice people are not supposed to use. Saying ‘retarded’ does not only refer to that bad thing, but also describes the nature of the ‘badness.’

Once the new use takes hold, ‘challenged,’ which is a good thing will refer to something that is not.

When we call someone with some sort of disability challenged there is still some sort of connection to the original meaning. It implies that even what we consider normal activities represent a challenge to the person with the handicap. The expression loses any reasonable meaning when it is used the way it is used in a book by Nancy Reeves²³. She is talking about a patient whose fetus was diagnosed as hydrocephalic, so the expectant mother and her husband prepared themselves for a baby with ‘health challenges.’

The expression ‘health challenge’ can be perfectly legitimate. If I was diagnosed with diabetes, adjusting to a lifestyle to accommodate it would be a challenge. It would be **‘a test of my abilities and resources in a demanding undertaking.’** Losing weight can be a health challenge. But hydrocephaly? In the context of the text quoted, ‘challenge’ simply means problem. The logic of the expression is the same as the logic of ‘solutions.’ If overcoming a problem is challenging, than we should be free to call the problem itself a challenge. With a stroke of a pen we eliminated the problem.

I have to digress for a moment. In one of my favourite books, the “First Circle” by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the main character has a long discussion with his friend about the virtues of hardship and comes to the (here simplified) conclusion that hardship makes us better. I tend to agree. I do not have any problem with the concept that we should treat our problems as challenges. What I have a problem with is the attitude that forces this perception on us. A problem is a problem and it should be my prerogative to decide how I wish to approach it.

Competency

(as in ‘our core competencies’)

This expression is used almost exclusively in situations when an organization has to cut back on its activities. When your company decides to focus on its ‘core competencies,’ you can start looking for a job or expecting new bosses.

According to my dictionary, competency=competence. I looked in other dictionaries; no luck. I spent hours looking at different examples, trying to find a discernable pattern in usage, but again no luck. The only expressions that would support my feelings are residence/residency.

Still, I cannot shake off the feeling that in most people’s mind competency represents more, that it has more competence than the plain vanilla version.

None of this matters however, because the quoted use almost invariably means dealing with the lack of it. Corporations start talking about their ‘core competencies’ (notice the plural) when they have managed to prove themselves incompetent, usually by overextending, or by doing things they should have no business doing.

The distinction [the bull] in this expression is so subtle that dealing with the expression may be seen as nitpicking. I was ready to drop it when I learned to my great relief that competency can be managed: <http://www.competencymanagement.com/> (Realizing Excellence Through Human Resources worldwide) I will let you make your own judgment about the competence of the site’s designer.

Concept

Remember Wilson Logistics?

With its *”ready-to-go logistics concepts. The concepts are ready-to-implement solutions catered to typical needs”*

We can start wondering where exactly a concept can go and what makes it ready-to-go. How does a concept go? In steps? Is it going like the Energizer bunny? Shouldn’t that thing (whatever it is) be specific, before it is ready to go?

What the word means in this context (or rather refers to) is that the subject is not accidental. The message is simply this: “We didn’t just do it. We thought about it first.”

A concept is ‘**A general idea derived or inferred from specific instances or occurrences**’ or “**something formed in the mind; a thought or notion.**”

The dictionary warns of a usage problem in the context where the word means a ‘scheme’ or ‘plan’ as in a ‘concept for a new restaurant’ or TV show. We could add concept cars and concept art, all of which, I think, fit the central meaning of the word: organizing details (specific instances or occurrences) around one central idea.

A concept car or a concept restaurant fits into this definition. Concept shipping does not. In the case of a concept car or restaurant, the concept (whatever it may be) points beyond the function of cars and restaurants. A concept car may embody our vision of the future. The parts in such cases are supposed to reflect the general idea of the concept. If I have a ‘concept restaurant’ based on the theme of Roman feasts, then my patrons should be lying around with starving Hollywood actors with curly hair functioning as napkins.

Of course, if Wilson Logistics used 17th century galleons, navigated with technology appropriate to the age and handled by sailors acting the part, calling it concept shipping would be acceptable, but I seriously doubt that the shipping concepts of Wilson can meet these conditions.

Deserving

In the greeting-card section of my neighbourhood pharmacy there is a sign saying:

“Get the card you want for the price you deserve.”

Just slightly condescending..... It isn’t enough any more to pay for the product, I have to deserve it too. It makes me wonder who is making the decision? How will they know whether I deserve it or not? What did I do to deserve it and how will they know that I did it? How good do I have to be to deserve it? If I am very, very, very good, can I get them for a penny?

I have seen a few ads recently demanding our support for the plight of getting more government funding for special education, because ‘those children deserve more.’ The suggestion is that failing to reach minimum acceptable standards is an achievement deserving recognition.

I have not seen too many instances of this yet, but I am afraid that it may still catch on. The bull in it is transparent. If we talk about needs, then the question of whether we wish to satisfy that need is a matter of decision. It can be debated and argued. If it is a merit, as the word ‘deserve’ suggests, then there is no discussion. We owe them something. It is our moral obligation to reward them for whatever we consider meritorious in their conduct.

Being whatever or however you are is not a merit. Even in the pathetic rituals called beauty contests we make the contestants perform so that we can claim that we are not rewarding them only for the beauty they were born with.

Those who use the expression do not want to make their case; they do not want a discussion. Apparently, they consider manipulating us to live up to a moral obligation easier than to convince us to do the right thing. Nobody could argue that people with different degrees of mental retardation need special attention. Several arguments could be made on both moral and economical grounds to support the idea that society should provide that special attention. There is absolutely no need to convince me that we should spend on special education. The Bullspeak can only make me less willing to support the idea because it will make me distrust the advocates.

Duplicatable

- Plug Into Our Duplicate-able 3-Step Success System.

I do not think that the English language is in serious danger from this aberration, a typical sign of pyramid schemes and MLM scams. The essence of any MLM scheme is that once you are fooled, you have to be able to fool others. MLM schemes are never about the products. The products are just an excuse. MLM schemes are about duplicating your experience of being duped. (Shouldn't this spell ‘dupe’-licatable?)

Most of the schemes are sold on the assumption that this is easy to do. When you are charmed it seems quite plausible that you can charm others. If it worked on you, it must work on others. Once you realize that you are not exactly a snake charmer and duplicating your experience is far from easy you are likely to give up. That is why ‘duplicatable’ is the key word of the above pitch, even more important than the promises implied in ‘success’ and ‘system.’ I am completely lost on ‘Plug into.’

Energy

As a replacement for ‘heating oil’

As we were pulling out of the Kingston, Ontario Bus terminal, I saw a fuel truck with the slogan “*[company name], the energy supply company.*” It was clearly a fuel truck delivering heating oil to homes.

Yes, of course, I understand.... when you burn heating oil, it releases energy. I think I passed the intelligence test. Heating oil – energy – they supply it – I got it.

But then, I have to ask, how do you supply energy? You can generate and use energy. You cannot supply it. You can only supply the source that generates the energy that you can in turn use.

So why is the Bull? Because they are supplying an unclean source of energy. Heating oil is the environmental pariah of the home heating market. Every alternative is marketed and sold on the premise that it is cleaner and more efficient than oil. So how can you improve the image? Remove the reference, the image of the dirty source and advertise yourself as the provider of the result. Never mind that the slogan does not make sense; never mind that it is abusing the language; never mind that it is a lie.

The source has a bad image; the result has a good one.

Oil is a bad thing. Dirty, inefficient, expensive, causes wars.

Energy is a good thing. It does things for us. Makes us feel alive. Energy is empowering.

Oil – bad, bad, bad – energy – good, good, good. Which one would you want to “supply?”

Executive

See page 40.

Fair

There is serious yuppification going on in my neighbourhood. It used to be ethnic, but now the Poles are moving out, the Yuppies are moving in. Most of these yuppies also have puppies. About a year ago a political campaign put signs on their front lawns saying “give students what they need to succeed – Insist on fair funding.”

Fair means equitable, *‘being in accordance with relative merit or significance’* according to the dictionary. According to a study conducted a few years ago, per student educational spending in Canada was the second highest in the world. The rank of Canadian students in international tests at that time was 28th. Unless we want to suggest that Canadian children are generally dumber than children elsewhere in the world, these numbers clearly point to a problem with the educators. Canada is the undisputed world champion of educational incompetence and waste. The teachers’ unions who launched the campaign suggested to solve this problem by giving them even more money to waste. ‘Fair’ would mean tying the spending to the results. If our rank as spenders would be the same as the rank of our students’ achievements, that would be fair. That would be *“in accordance with relative merit or significance.”*

The same campaign also judged standardized tests and teacher recertification requirements to be extremely unfair. Recently we experienced some improvements in the test results of our students in international competitions. Despite the cutbacks and tough standards that the campaign was launched against. One could argue, that the improvements happened not despite but as the result of the changes. Who knows, if we try to get a little more ‘unfair,’ we can become the best in the world.

Formula

Next to technique and technology, formula is the third most frequent descriptor of get-rich-quick schemes. Let's take a look at some of the definitions:

An established form of words or symbols for use in a ceremony or procedure.

A method of doing or treating something that relies on an established, uncontroversial model or approach:

A symbolic representation of the composition or of the composition and structure of a compound.

A prescription of ingredients in fixed proportion; a recipe.

The appealing element of this expression is a combination of two of the above definitions.

The message is that if you possess this information (the formula,) then that is all you need to succeed. If you have failed so far, it is not because you are incapable or did not work hard enough but that you lacked the formula.

What the notion 'formula' is trying to cover up is possible problems with the concept itself, the procedure or the approach. The recipes (formula, technique, technology) are all designed to give you a map to the treasure trove, a guide to your personal fortune. A formula implies that you will not have to learn, think or plan, you will not have to work hard, because all the work has been done already by those who created the formula. You just have to use it and reap the benefits.

It may also have something to do with intelligence. Not in the sense that only idiots would buy into these promises, but in the sense that people of lesser intelligence are puzzled by success and achievement. A 'formula' they can understand. If you are successful, you must have some kind of formula.

Of course, 'formula' can also mean a recipe, as in a "*Doctor approved Male enlargement formula*" which will hopefully be 'proven' as well. I cannot help to think that the popularity of the expression (in this context especially) has something to do with the Hollywood perception of the miraculous medicine. Think Hulk and Hyde and all the other 'formulas' causing immediate 'genetic' transformation. The

Hollywood ‘formula,’ the concise result of years of research that can always fit on a slip of paper, suggests a rapid, if not immediate, effect; an important aspect of the Bullspeak message. You just won’t get that from a pill, or, God forbid, a food supplement.

Free

The two definitions we will deal with are:

Costing nothing; gratuitous: a free meal

Publicly supported: free education.

All sixteen of the remaining definitions are variations of the underlying theme of being unbound, unrestricted, unobstructed or uncontrolled. It is logical to assume that this one is also rooted in the same concept, meaning unbound from the obligation to pay. Most often this means that you will get something that you will ‘pay for’ with your time and attention or that you will receive a discount given to you in kind as long as you are willing to spend enough on other products of the advertiser. Nothing that is advertised as ‘FREE’ ever is.

Scotiabank now offers “*The Scotia Free Down Payment™ Mortgage*”²⁴ which they apparently felt strongly enough about to register as a trademark. It is:

an affordable 5 or 7 year fixed rate mortgage where the bank will pay on your behalf, the 5% minimum down payment required for your home purchase.

Sounds like a gift, doesn’t it? “The bank will pay on your behalf....” That is free money!

The bank will give you a bigger loan, probably with a higher interest rate to compensate them for the higher risk. (One of the conditions is that you have to qualify for a mortgage insurance.) In essence, they offer 100% financing on ‘qualified properties.’ Programs like this do not come around by accident. The investment climate is cool, interest rates are low, the banks are desperate to lend their money. They are willing to take more risk.

I know all this, but I am still confused. What does the word ‘free’ in this trademarked name refer to? A down payment is not something I

receive, but something I give, therefore it makes no sense to refer to it as 'free.' What this (trademarked) expression means is 'no down payment mortgage' or 'full financing' or '100% financing,' a mortgage that is free from the obligation of making a down payment.

What the (trademarked) expression hints is that you will get something, something you do not have to pay for, which is of course, a lie. This (trademarked) Bullspeak expression misdirects your attention from the fact that you will take on a higher burden, makes you feel that something is given to you when in fact it is you, who are buying in all likelihood a quite expensive financial service. Calling the mortgage 'down payment free' would be legitimate but less appealing because it does not have the hint that you will receive something.

Did you ever win a free chance to win something? If you did not, you don't get enough free spam, or you don't surf the Web diligently enough. Claiming your 'prize,' an infinitesimally small chance to win something, usually involves divulging more information about yourself to strangers than what I would feel comfortable sharing with someone on a first date. Saying that you won it, makes you feel lucky already, and if on the top of it the chance is free?.....man, who wouldn't?

I cannot resist the temptation to share a joke with you:

- I am so lucky, - says a guy – yesterday I found a four leaf clover.
- And did it bring you luck? – asks his friend.
- Yes, - he answers - today I found another one!

Did you ever receive a 'free gift?' You know, the kind of gift you do not have to pay for? Since I tend to pay dearly for the gifts I receive, I am always happy to get one for free.

Let's take another (serious) look at the second money related definition: "**Publicly supported: free education**" What exactly is 'free' in public education? Teachers do get paid and schools do not maintain themselves. If teachers are paid from a public purse, then **we are paying them** through our proxy, the government. If it is publicly supported, then it is paid for by our tax dollars. Where exactly does the notion 'free' enter the picture? Does the possible delay between the payment and the delivery of the service qualify the service as 'free'?

The government is our servant. We pay them through our taxes to manage our common affairs. Nothing we get from the government is

ever free. IT IS OUR MONEY! It is the greatest success of politicians that they have managed to change this perception, that they are seen as the masters who hand down favours to us. We are getting things from them for ‘free’? If we are lucky, we may get something for the money they took from us! Maybe for ‘free,’ but not for sure.

Go ahead

When Dirty Harry said ‘Go ahead, make my day’ he meant it the way it was supposed to be meant. So did Ronald Reagan when he picked it up from him. The ‘go ahead’ I am talking about here is a turn of speech that was/is frequently used by Bill Gates. Now, whenever I see any Microsoft presentation, I am under the impression that there is a quota for Microsoft presenters obliging them to use the expression a given number of times in any time period. Most probably they are just trying to emulate the boss as not being quite sure what the source of his success is. Maybe he is where he is because he went ahead and got there.

While the expression itself did not change meaning, the way it is used is not different from the use of Bullspeak. The expression did not change meaning because of the grammatical structure it has to be used in for proper syntax. “Go ahead” in this context is always used in conjunction with another verb. “We go ahead and click” “I went ahead and closed the window.” In typical Microsoft usage ‘go ahead’ is just a stupid filler. Most of the time it could simply be removed without that removal affecting any change in the meaning of the sentence. What earned it a place on this list is the motivation behind it. The positive message it sends.

The main elements of that positive message are a forward direction, energetic movement and decisive action.

The people at Microsoft never simply “**do**” something. They do more. They forge ahead. They make decisive actions. There is nothing accidental about it. There is a forward swing in the expression. A deliberate decision. The sudden beginning of movement that is suggested also implies a ‘take charge’ attitude. What this expression is trying to say is:

‘We are always moving forward. We know what we are doing. We are energetic and positive.’

What makes it pathetic is the compulsion of the Microsoft folks to reaffirm this message a few dozen times every 15 minutes of public speaking. What makes it irritating is how stupid it sounds when you hear it two or three times a minute.

I even heard it referring to a passive action, as in ‘you click here and the user will go ahead and receive your warning.’ I kid you not.

I could take it as a personal idiosyncrasy of Bill, but not as a quasi policy of the entire company.

In all fairness, I must say that Bill himself is getting much better. The last time I heard him speak in public he used the expression only twice in half an hour and both times appropriately. Now if only his minions could pick up the new trend!

Incumbent

‘*Currently holding a specified office.*’

What makes this expression slightly different from the rest of the expressions on this list is that its usage is based mostly on ignorance on the part of its (mis)users. It is not that the word has an element of meaning that its users aspire to capitalize on, it just sounds better to them than the alternatives.

I came across the expression in job applications referring to the applicant, as in “*The incumbent must also log and prioritize incidents*”

They clearly meant in all cases ‘the successful candidate,’ or ‘the person holding the position.’

I saw the expression used this way at least a few dozen times. We could claim that this is just widespread ignorance, but the coincidence factor is too high for that. It is clear that the writers have only a vague idea of its meaning, that it has something to do with holding an office, being in a position. Incumbent sounds good, sounds important, sends a positive message, and that is the key. Making the position and the

prospect of getting it more important, more respectable. Who cares that it does not make sense?

Investment

Property or another possession acquired for future financial return or benefit.

As in the ads of a retailer of consumer's electronics assuring me that they will make sure that I will enjoy my home theatre investment well into the future. I invest into my 'listening pleasure.' When an electronics or car salesman tells you that the car or TV you are about to buy is an investment, you have to ask yourself: in what way? Will its value increase? Will you receive some sort of income while possessing it? When you decide to part with it, will you end up with more money than you had before you 'invested' in it? Of course not.

Investing your money is not the same as spending it. When you invest, you can have a reasonable expectation to end up with more money at some point than the amount you started with. The notion that this interpretation cuts from the dictionary definition is the '**financial** return' which is the very essence of the word investment.

Anything with long-term benefits can be described this way as an investment. It is not just a purchase, it is an investment. What you gain is more than what you part with. Seems familiar yet? The posturing? The suggestion that the goods you get are worth more than the money you give for it? Calling it an investment to justify the spending?

If you are a DJ, making a living using your own equipment, then buying a sound system could be called an investment. It will help you earn money, it will further your business. If you stick the same thing into your living room, it can not.

Buying a house is often referred to as an investment even if you buy it to live in it. In that context it usually means 'spending a big chunk of money' which is justified by the implied promise that it will at least keep its value.

It is quite possible to buy an object that will increase in value with time. Even with the fluctuation in value, buying a Picasso is still an investment and so is buying vintage cars. I am sure that my 80-year-

old Remington Rand typewriter will increase in value even though it is now completely useless.

Leverage

I sat through a day of solid information presented by Microsoft. One of the presenters had two 90 minutes sessions. In the process of three hours of talking, he did not once use the word ‘use.’ Not even utilize. He ‘leveraged’ absolutely everything, even to the point of ‘leveraging’ the mouse to open a window. In the break I suggested to him that the word is not synonymous with use, after which he made a special effort to ‘leverage’ the expression even more often. Actually, most of the time he ‘went ahead’ and leveraged, but that’s another entry above.

If we use a tool to achieve something we leverage the power of the tool, but maybe we leverage the inherent qualities of the material we use. If I use a knife to carve a toothpick, what am I leveraging? The wood or the knife? In a Microsoft presentation, it would probably be both.

Let’s be fair. The word is overused all around. Bill could try to file a patent on ‘go ahead’ after dukeing it out with Clint, but Microsoft is definitely not alone in leveraging. Spammers leverage too:

“Thanks to following the Proven Formula I’ve finally figured out a way to earn a leveraged income, make huge money AND have the time-freedom to enjoy it.” Now this is one lucky woman. The only thing I cannot see clearly is how that income is leveraged? In this instance it does not mean ‘use.’ No matter how hard I try I cannot think of any legitimate meaning for the expression in this context. ‘Leveraged’ here simply means better than plain vanilla income. It is a doubleplus good income.

Need

“Walmart has all your gardening needs.”

In the minds of the Walmart people, there is no conceptual difference between your needs and the things you can acquire to satisfy those needs. We could ask endless questions about the nature of my needs and about the ways somebody else can have them. If they have what I

need, do they have my need? How could others have my need? Then it would be their need, would it not? If they have what I need, and that is also their need, then they don't really have a need, do they?

If you could just stop for a second to think about it you would see how preposterous the suggestion is. A need is not an object. A need is '**A lack of something required or desirable**'. It also means **Something required or wanted; a requisite, as in: "Our needs are modest."** The common element here is that a need is a uniquely personal condition, not a set of objects possessing that quality.

Calling what they want to sell to you "your need" is just another example of focus-shifting manipulation. Walmart does not want you to think...sorry, to **focus** on the fact that they want your money. They want you to think that you are in need and that they can satisfy your needs. There is also an ever so slight hint of intimacy. They know what your needs are. They have your needs. Now, how much more intimate can you get?

Costco.com urges you to

"Shop here for your business needs and have products delivered to you."

What are business needs? Why should I shop for them? Why would I want more 'needs' than I already have? When I shop for my needs, when do those needs turn into products?

The word need in this sentence is not simply superfluous (un-needed if you will) but something that makes the whole sentence sound completely idiotic.

The easiest solution would be to correct the sentence and say: "Shop here for your business and have the products (or your purchases) delivered to you." They could also say: "Shop here for the **things** your business needs...."

The author of this sentence must have gone through reasoning quite similar to the one I analyzed talking about solutions. The goal is the same, creating a favourable bargaining position by implying that the buyer needs the deal more than the seller. The interaction is not about you doing a favour to them by buying their wares, but them doing a

favour to you by satisfying your needs. Talking about your needs is still not an assault on language; calling their wares ‘needs’ is.

Opportunity

A favorable or advantageous circumstance or combination of circumstances.

A favorable or suitable occasion or time.

A chance for progress or advancement.

Just across from the Kingston, ON bus terminal there is a building with a sign saying “Opportunity shop” with beautiful calligraphic letters. I have to confess, I never found out what the opportunity was.

The calligraphy threw me off. I was thinking writing, stationary, printing, but none of that made any sense with ‘opportunity’ When I started to look for an answer, I found several ‘opportunity shops’:

- Second hand stores and thrift shops,
- Antique stores,
- Résumé writing centers and recruiters (The one I saw was probably something like that)
- Hardware stores and craft stores (What the opportunity refers to is beyond me)
- Internet sites selling mailing list (business opportunities)
- Christian home business opportunities (whatever that is)

According to some Internet pop-up ad, I had ‘Won An Opportunity!’

The opportunity was – of course –an opportunity to spend my money. I cannot tell you how lucky I felt when I won it. I wanted to know what’s the rip-off, so I called. After listening to a fifteen minute uninterrupted sales pitch with the accompanying theatrics (“Hold on, I will have to confirm with my manager”) I finally learned that I won the chance to spend about \$1,000.00 on a trip to Disneyworld and other fabulous places in Florida. I would have grabbed the opportunity if I were a Disneyworld kind of guy.

It is a typical advertising tactic to create a sense of urgency. That is why you see in TV ads furniture salesmen shouting and many others running or moving around. The more a buyer thinks, the less likely it is that he will spend. The word ‘opportunity’ does half the work:

- An opportunity will not be around for long.
- Not seizing an opportunity makes it lost.
- An opportunity is a gift, either from a person or fate itself.
- An opportunity you have to grab because if you do not, you will personally lose something.

Calling something an opportunity will create not only the sense of urgency, but a sense of obligation as well. You owe it to yourself, to the person who offered it to you and to the opportunity itself to take advantage of it.

Equal Housing Opportunity

I found this beauty while trying to get a feel for how widespread the use of the word ‘home’ for house is in real estate. (The ‘equal housing

opportunity’ folks, by the way, are the same people who invented ‘great rooms’):

I was genuinely puzzled when I first saw it. I wrote an e-mail to the site asking what they mean by it. I received a short, to the point answer:

“equal meaning we do not discriminate when it comes to race, age, or handicaps....everyone is treated equally”

The answer confirmed what I thought. I suggested in my reply that they should consider changing the word order but then I realized that this ordering was no accident.

What they mean is, of course, that anyone applying has an equal opportunity to get accepted as a tenant. What they mean is “equal opportunity housing”, it is the opportunity that is equal, not the housing. Unfortunately, that would mean that they are talking about “housing” and while that may be true, it does not carry a positive message. “Housing” is something for the poor. If you can offer something better, you should. You can offer an opportunity. An opportunity is for everybody. Since the word isn’t specific enough to convey any useful information, you have to qualify it as an opportunity of the housing kind. The focus is on ‘opportunity.’ The way you are supposed to read the sentence is : Equal [pause] housing opportunity. Never mind how stupid it sounds. It has a message. Better yet, it has two.

Yet another instance of sacrificing grammar and logic on the altar of the positive message.

Platform

Intel stopped being a chipmaker. These days Intel is ‘*building platform solutions*.’ I just learned it recently from an Intel presenter at a Microsoft seminar. That was the title of the presentation. Apparently it is not good enough for them to make chips. As hardware is on its way to becoming a commodity, Intel, by definition, is becoming a manufacturer of commodity items. Building something is more serious than making something. It is more substantial. More durable. More permanent. More important.

Remember: words are not bad, they are just used that way. A chip is a finished product, but it cannot do much on its own. It requires code to run, an operating system to function and be useful. When referring to different processor families, the industry often calls them platforms. We can talk about an OS being written for the Intel platform, meaning that it will work on Intel processors. Since these chips share basic architecture and instruction sets and since the operating systems are designed to take advantage of those features - to 'build' on them, it is appropriate to refer to them as platforms. That, however, does not make Intel a '*platform solution builder.*'

The details are somewhat irrelevant. I have tremendous respect for Intel. I think that their work was the most essential part of the computer revolution. That however does not excuse this triple bull. The importance of Intel is fading, not because what they do is not important any more but because it is not glamorous any more. It is that fading image they feel the need to spruce up. Just compare 'chipmaker' to 'platform solution builder' or maybe even a 'platform solutions architect.' If you had the choice, which one would you want to be? It may do even more for their image than the funky guys in the radiation suits.

I tried here to come up with some examples to demonstrate the silliness of this concept, but anything I could come up with would be just equally silly. If a certain thing can be used in a certain way, that does not mean that its maker is the maker of the way. Banana peels are slippery. Are banana growers slip makers? Are the makers of flatbed trucks also building platform solutions?

Pre-owned

The bull in this is so blatantly obvious, that it has a shaky place in this dictionary. It is dishonest, it is immoral, it is 100% bullshit, but it is not Bullspeak *per se*.

It is more of a spit-in-your-face insult than a put-your-guards-to-sleep deception. A previously owned item is used. The insinuation of the expression is that it is not. The fact that you own something does not diminish its value. It is the use that does that. As long as you only own

a car but never drive it, its usefulness and therefore its value should stay the same.

Calling something pre-owned does not change the meaning of the word. It does not diminish language, it does not hijack the original meaning of the word 'own.' Pre-owned' creates a new notion. It can be seen as a warning sign over the used car sales lots that can be freely translated as:

"We are used car salesmen, direct descendants of horse-thieves. We steal, we cheat, we lie. Come in and let us rip you off!"

I've heard a creative variation on the idea, a radio ad for the Auto Trader magazine about the wonderful *'previously enjoyed vehicles'* advertised in it. The ad is a clear mockery of the pre-owned vehicle concept. Beside being obviously sarcastic, it may even be true. Enjoyment presumes use. More so than ownership. You cannot enjoy a vehicle without using it. It is quite possible that it was enjoyed and the expression carries the suggestion that I will enjoy these vehicles myself. It is possible to be creative, it is possible to play with language. The problems only start when we start taking our jokes seriously.

Pre-selected, pre-approved

I can pre-dict with a high degree of certainty that you will receive at least one piece of mail within the next month informing you that you have been pre-selected or pre-approved for something. How could you doubt it? Your name is on it. They know your address. It must be real.

I detest the events where I am forced to register even if I pay for my participation. Especially the ones that will not accept the form without irrelevant things like title. At some point I started to use silly business titles such as CxO or NOYFB (as in none of your business).

Now, when I receive a mail informing me that I have been pre-selected or pre-approved, I can have a pretty good idea who sold my address to them.

Did you ever wonder what a pre-approval process is like? What is the criteria? I know that having a name and an address gave me a good

start, but what else was needed? What are the people who fail that pre-approval process like?

Program

This is another one of the recipe expressions. See formula for more.

Progressive

- *Moving forward; advancing.*
- *Proceeding in steps; continuing steadily*
- *Promoting or favouring progress toward better conditions or new policies, ideas, or methods*

When a company claims that it has a ‘progressive’ approach, the meaning can be pure bull saying simply that they are doing something good in a moving forward, advancing kind of way, or it can truthfully mean that it is actually describing the company’s modus operandi as being gradual, not revolutionary, proceeding in steps, not in leaps. You can only tell the difference in context.

The expression also has a political meaning not very far from the fuzzy nothings distinguishing today’s ‘activists.’

The bull index of this one is low, since there is no radical departure from the original meaning of the word. There are however, some rather questionable manifestations, such as in:

Progressive positions

What was the last time you looked at job ads in a daily newspaper? Can you picture some progressive positions? Did you ever wonder what people actually do in ‘progressive positions’ ?

I did. After doing some research, I found out. They are debt collectors, health insurance claim adjustors and insurance salesmen. The people who will step on you when you are down. What is progressive about these occupations? The hint in it is very simply that you will have an opportunity to advance. The employee turnover in these occupations is so high, that anybody can get into a managerial position if they have a thick enough skin and a strong enough stomach to hang on for a few months. Once they progressed to a new position they will spend their

time trying to motivate the newcomers to stay at least as long as they did so that they can move up yet another step on the ladder.

Often, the inappropriate usage tries to capitalize on the positive connotations of a related meaning. The ‘primary’ bull in the expression is the attempt to cover up the high turnover rate on such jobs, but it also carries an ever so slight hint that you will be a good guy. The good guy aspect comes from the use of the word in politics.

This political aspect is so strong that it is very difficult to separate it from the more pedestrian meanings. Political ‘progressives’ did an excellent PR job promoting the idea that they are the good guys. The conservatives are the ones who are trying to preserve the status quo of whatever, while the progressives are the folks who wish to make changes for the better. Although the dominant motive of calling debt collecting a progressive position is the advancement aspect, it does have the soothing element of moral superiority as well. A lift that the unsavoury nature of the job can definitely use.

To progress or to conserve, that is the question.

The best example of the political bull is the former name of Canada’s conservative party, the Progressive Conservatives, or PC for short. They profess to conserve and progress at the same time. Maybe conserve progressively. Or is that progress conservatively? Does it matter?

Proposition

As in “price/performance proposition”²⁵

“... that will broaden 3Com’s product portfolio of enterprise networking solutions to offer customers a superior price-performance proposition.”

...or on the Checkpoint site:²⁶

“Check Point’s customers will now have a new solution that will significantly enhance their price/performance proposition.”

The expression is used consistently in this manner in several brochures and web pages I came across. In the first case the proposition is offered to the customers, in the second the customer already has the proposition that will be significantly enhanced by the new solution. All of which still leaves us with the question about the nature of the proposition. A proposition is:

1. *A plan suggested for acceptance; a proposal.*
2. *A matter to be dealt with; a task.*
3. *An offer of a private bargain, especially a request for sexual relations.*
4. *A subject for discussion or analysis.*

What does a price/performance proposition propose? Price/performance is a ratio. It would be easy to correct the sentence to say "...offer customers a superior price/performance ratio" or "...enhance their [product's] price/performance ratio," but both of these two statements would contain a definite promise. The function of the expression here is to 'vague up' the promise. Neither of these companies are promising anything.

It would be easy to say that this is simply stupidity and the sentences are the result of the cluelessness of their author. The central element in the different dictionary definitions is its 'unfinished' nature. A proposition is something expecting a response or a further development. When I make a proposition, I pass the ball.

They only offer you the 'possibility of a promise, still subject to negotiation,' which would be the best definition of the expression in this context. Price-performance proposition=pure Bullspeak.

On the other hand, it may be that these propositions have something to do with the third dictionary definition and simply mean that they will screw you hard but do it cheap.

Public Power

As I was writing this, we were getting close to a provincial election. The socialists, who are called 'The New Democratic Party' in Canada were conducting their campaign with the slogan "Public power"²⁷ From the moment I saw it I had a fuzzy bad feeling about the

expression. It is unlike any other use of the word ‘public’ that I have seen so far. It can mean so many things. It isn’t really clear whether the focus of the expression is ‘public’ or ‘power.’ The word ‘public’ can function both as a noun and as an adjective.

adjective

Of, concerning, or affecting the community or the people: the public good.

Maintained for or used by the people or community: a public park.

Noun

The community or the people as a whole.

It can be seen in this expression as a noun, meaning the power of the public, the public’s power. Would this be the same pattern as ‘public opinion’, the opinion of the public?

Does it mean that the party promises to give more power to the public?

Is this a reference to public ownership of power generation? (The party was ferociously campaigning against the privatization of the province’s electric power utilities.)

In that case it means the public’s ownership of the [electrical] power.

Public power= the power of the public?

“Public power” builds on the power of insinuation. When we hear ‘public’ [anything], we think of ownership. Public parks, public utilities, even the word ‘republic’ means ‘a thing belonging to the people’ (*from Latin rēspūblica : rēs, thing + pūblica feminine of pūblicus, of the people.*)

The essence of the expression is ownership, suggesting that ‘power’ can be owned which, of course, is impossible. Power is not tangible. It can be had, it can be exercised, but cannot be owned.

In the end, I don’t know how to see this expression:

As clever manipulation suggesting that under a socialist government I will have more power, that power will somehow belong to the ‘public’, of which I am a member of – or:

As the thinly veiled admission of their statist drive, that they will try to get as many things as possible under government control.

The answer is probably both; the first trying to make the second more palatable.

The opposite of public power is private power. There is a clear conflict here. More public ownership means less private ownership. More public control means less private control. I have less power over anything that is public because I have to share the power with the other members of the public. If all power belongs to the public, none belongs to me. I know that. I grew up in a political system that was built on this principle. In the end, ‘public power’ isn’t just Bullspeak, it is an oxymoron as well.

Relationship manager

See page # 40

Representative

As in ‘sales representative,’ ‘account representative,’ or ‘technical support representative.’

In Comfort Inns, the receptionists are now called ‘guest services representatives.’

I completely, wholly, fully agree with the sentiment behind the expression.

Every company that cares about its image will make it clear to their employees, that they are representing the company. I usually make a point to let the persons to whom I am complaining know that in my eyes they are the company. If I feel wronged by the company they must deal with my anger. They cannot disown responsibility claiming that they ‘just work’ there. To me, they are the face of the company. Anyone I talk to becomes a representative of the company in my eyes. Whatever they tell me is told to me by the company. To behave accordingly therefore is a matter of attitude, not status. What the above examples try to insinuate is that these representatives have a higher status, that they are more than simple employees.

When you are a representative, you stand for more than yourself. A politician – a parliamentary representative represents – speaks for

thousands of people. A lawyer is a representative of his client. The receptionist is an employee.

Residence

As in condominium residences.

The place in which one lives; a dwelling.

The act or a period of residing in a place.

This expression is very similar in usage to ‘home;’ the only difference being the nature of the subliminal message. While ‘home’ is supposed to convey a message of comfort, privacy and intimacy, ‘residence’ evokes class and status. Only the poor live in places. The rich ‘reside.’ The implied message of residence is choice and therefore also the hint that you can have more than one. Royalty and nobility had winter and summer residences. If you have a residence, you are clearly a more important person than the poor sods who live in apartments²⁸.

An apartment or a condominium only becomes a residence when it’s in use. A residence is a qualified dwelling. Calling a dwelling a residence is qualifying it for a certain use. An apartment is usually a residential dwelling, but only when someone moves into it does it become the residence of that person. The notion of residence cannot be separated from the act of residing.

In common usage, the word condominium says it all. Calling it a ‘residence’ is just decoration to make it appear more than what it is.

Right

Something that is due to a person or governmental body by law, tradition, or nature.

A just or legal claim or title.

As in ‘right to work’ or ‘right to a decent standard of living’

Just around the corner from me (on a trashcan of all places) there is a sign proclaiming: “*Literacy is a right.*”

The question that jumps to my mind the moment I see something like this is: Who are the bastards who want to take that right away from us? Followed quickly by the second: How can they do that anyway?

Preventing me from buying books? Putting in jail those who would be willing to teach me? Did the Taliban find a new home in Canada?

What the sign in this context means is simply that “Literacy is a really, truly, very, very, very important thing that everybody should have.”

When you examine such demands and the organizations behind them, you will invariably find demands for money that should be spent according to the priorities set by the organization advocating the ‘right.’

Talking about rights gets a quick reaction from most of us. Rights are about the most precious things we have. We cannot be assured to have anything else without them.

But a right is never a positive action, only an assurance that a positive action can be taken. The right to literacy means that no one will stop you from learning; it does not mean that someone must teach you.

We could probably say that the closest synonym to right is ‘goodthing’ if it was not for the stakes. ‘Goodthing’ is a good thing in and by itself while rights have to be protected, enforced and acted upon.

The word ‘right’ is one of the most fundamentally abused probably because it is so important to our existence as social animals.

Take abortion. It is probably the best of all possible examples because both of sides of the argument have the word ‘right’ in the very name of their movements: the ‘right to choose’ vs. the ‘right to life’ when talking about the same issue. While the issue is the same, the position is diametrically opposed, yet, both sides claim that they are talking about ‘rights.’

We have to emphasize, that this question has nothing to do with our stand in the issue, we are only talking about language. There is nothing wrong with the expressions ‘pro-life’ and ‘pro-choice,’ as they are ‘for-this’ or ‘for-that,’ just indicating the stand of the speaker. When we talk about rights, something must be wrong. And indeed it is.

Does a rock have the right to be heavy? Does cyanide have the right to kill? Does the wolf have the right to eat the rabbit? Does the AIDS virus have the right to live? To kill? Do my fingernails have the right to grow? How long can they grow before my right to cut them will

prevail over theirs to grow? All of these questions are – of course – nonsense. Only conscious actors can have rights. You must be cognizant of your rights before you can exercise them or even call them as such.

After equating the opposing ideas of right related to abortion, I must take a personal stand. One of the uses is wrong, the other is right. The right to choose is a right, the right to life is not. A woman seeking abortion is a conscious actor making a conscious decision that should be called a right. A fetus is not a conscious actor, cannot make a choice and what could or should happen to it cannot and should not be called a right.

‘Animal rights’ and ‘right to life’ activists are striving to be custodians of the ‘rights’ they advocate. Again, the issue here is not what these groups stand for and what they hope to achieve, but their choice of words that describes their demands. I love animals and I strongly advocate their ethical treatment, but I would never say that animals have rights. That would be Bullspeak.

Our rights are extremely important and to protect them, we have to jealously guard the appropriate use of the word. Every time we allow a political movement to hijack its meaning to serve as justification for a particular agenda, we all lose some real rights.

Sales manager

See more at page 40

Social justice

I do not think I could possibly summarize the wonderful work of Friedrich Hayek, the second volume of his trilogy on Law, Legislation and Liberty, ‘The Mirage of Social Justice’. And I should not. Hayek treats the subject exhaustively and with far more seriousness than it deserves. His biggest problem stems from the fact that he is trying to deal with the subject as if the expression meant something. Giving tremendous latitude to allow for any possible meaning, he proves beyond doubt that even if such a thing were attainable, it would definitely not be desirable.

The notion becomes even more naked in the expression ‘economic justice’ which is a cry for equalizing income regardless of the value of the contribution or even the effort put into contributing. In both cases the assumption is that equal opportunity is not just, that there is no justice unless the outcome is equal. The fact that we can argue this seems to be beside the point. By calling it justice, the argument is redirected. Now we are talking about the morals of the speakers, not the merits of the subject.

Solution

[See page: 16](#)

Specialist

As in ‘computer specialist,’ ‘technical specialist,’ or the best: ‘solutions specialist.’

My friendly neighbourhood car mechanic is proclaiming on a big sign that he is:

“Specializing in all makes and models”

No, they are not dealing with certain aspects or parts like body work or fuel injectors. They are specialized to repair any part of any car. One must wonder what generalists do? Generalize in some models? Oops, I almost said ‘in specific models’.

What was the author thinking? Our specialty is that we have none?

A specialist knows more simply because he is focusing his attention on a segment of a more general field of knowledge. A specialist isn’t necessarily smarter or more knowledgeable than a generalist, but by definition should know more about his specialty. Whenever you have a specific problem and have the choice, you would want to deal with a specialist for exactly that reason.

What’s wrong with saying “Servicing all makes and models?”

The expression is an oxymoron. The claim that they ‘specialize’ has only an emotional function of creating a vaguely positive association. Using the word ‘special’ in this context makes it lose its meaning,

which should be actually: special. He who says that he specializes in everything is a liar. He is trying to increase his own value in your eyes by the ‘creative’ use of language.

An even better example was my job title at one point. I was called a “Technical Specialist.” My function was to provide third level technical support. It meant that if the people on the first two levels gave up on a problem, they handed it to me and I could not pass the buck; I had to find some sort of resolution. All kinds of problems came to me. General kind of problems. Yes, the job was technical since we were providing technical support, but there was absolutely nothing special about it. My job title meant that I was the smart guy.

The word specialist came to be a synonym for expert, for being good at what you are doing. You can find it these days in job titles everywhere.

RightFirst²⁹ is looking for an “IT solutions specialist” What’s the job? All you can find out from the title is that it has something to do with Information Technology, that you are supposed to be good at it (specialist) and that you should be able to get it done (solution). Aren’t these latter two requirements a given in any job?

Strategic

As in ‘strategic opportunity.’

Strategic means:

- *Important or essential in relation to a plan of action: a strategic withdrawal.*
- *Essential to the effective conduct of war: strategic materials.*
- *Highly important to an intended objective: The committee discussed strategic marketing factors.*

Unlike tactical which is:

‘done or made for the purpose of trying to achieve an immediate or short-term aim’

Searching Google for ‘strategic opportunity’ gave me 11,400 hits. Most of those I looked at used the expression correctly. These were documents advocating actions fundamental to the general direction of the targeted organization or project.

There were, however, plenty like this one from Cisco:³⁰

“Productivity + Customer Loyalty = Strategic Opportunity for Business Success.”

‘Strategic’ suggests a grand design, high level planning for the long term. Tactical decisions should be subservient to larger strategic goals. Strategy is clearly very important; that is why it is used as a synonym of important. Its only function is to stress that point. A strategic opportunity is an important opportunity.

Success

As in a “success system.”

“Plug Into Our Duplicate-able 3-Step Success System”

Need I comment? Success here qualifies ‘system’, hinting in a not so subtle way that success is guaranteed by the system. Success is an attribute of the system. Even the verb calling you to action suggests some kind of machinery. This thing is working. Just plug into it. Roll up your dollars. Plug them into the envelop and you are on your way to riding the machinery of success.

System

As in “proven system,” to get rich quick:

“The original eBay success system can now be yours on compact disk absolutely free”

“Our proven system has helped thousands of people earn money on eBay.”

“Become financially Independent using our proven system! “

The primary connotation of ‘systems’ is complexity:

A group of interacting, interrelated, or interdependent elements forming a complex whole.

The expressions ‘success’ and ‘system’ are quite often found together. Searching Google for ‘success system’ gave me 36,200 hits.

A success system can be anything about diet, education, get-rich-quick-home-business³¹, cancer research and health care, or any kind of marketing and investment.

Even waterfowl hunting has a ‘success system.’³² I am tempted to say that it can only compete in its universality with solutions, but when I look at the numbers, I have to admit that nothing can beat solutions.

Technique

As in get rich quick techniques.

Most get-rich-quick scams work on the presumption that you will buy into the promise.

My all time favourite was one of the “no money down” real estate “programs” that opened with an ingenious suggestion:

“Find a depressed property!” A ‘depressed property’ is one that its owner is desperately pressed to sell for less than it’s actual value. Then for a few hundred dollars they go on to tell you what to do with the money.

We could get into a detailed analysis about the scams presented in the programs, but they do not really matter because the only goal is the sale of the recipe which shows you the ‘technique,’

The systematic procedure by which a complex or scientific task is accomplished.

The implication of the expression is that all the work has been done already on your behalf. It implies serious ‘scientific’ and ‘systematic’ procedures. The message is that you will not have to think, only to follow the outlined procedures which have been researched, formulated and tested with systematic, scientific precision. It isn’t that different from selling a treasure map. It caters to the same crowd.

With technique we are back at the concept of the recipe which is even more obvious in the next beauty:

Technology

As in ‘sales technology’

Technology is:

The application of science, especially to industrial or commercial objectives.

The scientific method and material used to achieve a commercial or industrial objective.

“This Is The BEGINNING Of A WORLD-WIDE Marketing & Educational Campaign For This NEW Technology. Many Businesses In The World Will Soon Rely On This NEW Marketing Technology And You Will Be One Of The First 10,000 People To Be Part of This MULTI-BILLION Dollar Technological Industry.

This is truly a REAL ground floor opportunity.

(Powered by OptaMail e-mail marketing technology).”

While we cannot really say what this particular junk is promoting, more than likely it is some spam software. As for the basic argument, see ‘technique.’ Technology is already the inflated version of ‘technique.’ A technique may be a single thing, a particular way of doing something, while technology suggests a complex system (with *the application of science to accomplish a commercial objective*, such as annoying millions with stupid messages like the one above.)



In this ad, an electric shaver is called technology. With ‘Finishing Touch’ it is the *scientific method* itself that does the work. Not the shaver.

Intel is urging me to buy a notebook computer with Centrino technology built into it. Centrino is a chip. An object, not a method. Nanoimprint lithography is a technology. The products that are made using that technology are things, not ways to do things.

Braun makes revolutionary new dental care technology. I'll let you guess what that is.

Town-home

See page 33

Utilize

This is one of the two most abused expressions (with 'capability') quoted by style manuals.

"A number of critics have remarked that utilize is an unnecessary substitute for use. It is true that many occurrences of utilize could be replaced by use with no loss to anything but pretentiousness...thus the sentence The teachers were unable to use the new computers might mean only that the teachers were unable to turn the computers on, whereas The teachers were unable to utilize the new computers suggests that the teachers could not find ways to employ the computers in instruction³³."

Could not have said it better myself. Unfortunately 'utilize' is already devalued to such extent, that creative speakers are replacing it with even more positive expressions. See 'leverage.'

Value

As an adjective, as in 'value meal'.

- *An amount, as of goods, services, or money, considered to be a fair and suitable equivalent for something else; a fair price or return.*
- *Monetary or material worth: the fluctuating value of gold and silver.*

- *Worth in usefulness or importance to the possessor; utility or merit.*

This still didn't make it into the dictionary as an adjective, which is the way it is used in the expression. A value meal is a valuable meal. The implication is that it can only be good. A value meal is a good deal. I happen to think that anything you can buy in a fast-food chain restaurant is a bad deal. Anything but a good value, and deep down everybody knows that.

The assumption is that by definition a discount increases the value - which, in turn, rests on the assumption that the original price represents some kind of absolute connection to the product.

Here is the mental process of the argument:

You wish to buy a hamburger. If you are willing to spend another dollar on some potatoes that cost me maybe 30 cents to produce, then I will charge you, instead of a dollar only 50 cents on the sugar water that costs me 10 cents to produce. This is a valuable deal.

The break, which seldom represents more than 10% of the total cost, is definitely compensated for by the profit on your extra purchase. The vendor squeezes more profit out of you by making you buy more than you otherwise would have.

The message is that buying the package is a good deal. They could, of course, tell you that this is a good deal, or that it is a valuable offer, but both of these would be statements, judgements about the value with which you may choose to disagree. Incorporating the judgement into the very name of the product makes it more difficult to disagree. What you see after all is not an opinion. It is the descriptor of the product. When you are buying a value-meal, you are **by definition** purchasing something valuable.

The use is very similar to 'budget' defined as an adjective.

Wealth management

Dundee Wealth Management Inc. has Blue Chip Solutions³⁴, but they are definitely not alone managing wealth. They are just on the top of the list of 1,500,000 hits.

Wealth is ‘*An abundance of valuable material possessions or resources; riches.*’

How about investment management or investment portfolio management? Money management. How can you manage wealth? Can you do poverty management? How can you manage a quality?

What can be managed are processes. When you manage people or things, you are actually managing their actions and interactions: processes. What can be managed are the things that may produce wealth if they are managed successfully. Wealth is the product of savings, luck or successful money/investment/portfolio management. Compared to investment, wealth is a relative notion. It is a qualifier. The notion of ‘wealth management’ equates the process with the desirable result.

Since the outcome of investment management is far from certain and the value of your portfolio can go either way, it is logical to question the competence and the track record of your portfolio managers.

Could there be a hint here? That they will not deal with you if you are not wealthy enough for their standards?

If you are wealthy, someone managing your money may claim that he is managing your wealth, but the statement will always include the judgment. You cannot manage my wealth if you have no idea how much money I have; if you cannot determine whether it is appropriate to apply the term to it.

As a classic expression of Bullspeak, “Wealth Management” represents an attempt to replace reason, logic and accountability with fuzzy, warm emotions and a vague, implied promise.

Afterword

Since I started this book with a quote from Orwell, the opening of his essay on “Politics and the English Language,” it seems fitting that I finish with his conclusion from the same essay.

“Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind. One cannot change this all in a moment, but one can at least change one's own habits, and from time to time one can even, if one jeers loudly enough, send some worn-out and useless phrase into the dustbin, where it belongs.”

I could simply replace ‘political language’ with Bullspeak.

Innatists (linguists of the school claiming that language is an innate human faculty) tend to extend the idea to language itself, creating a quasi-metaphysical entity beyond our power to control, very much the way it is described in the opening quote from Orwell. While I fundamentally agree with the innatist approach as far as our talent for language is concerned, I see no contradiction between this belief and that of Orwell when he speaks of language as “an instrument which we shape for our own purposes.”

You do not have to be a guardian of language, or a champion for the morals of social interaction. All you need is enough self respect to guard your own integrity, to stand firm on your principles and to avoid using Bullspeak yourself.

When someone Bullspeaks to you, let them know that you do not appreciate the disrespect it represents. **The only thing that is worse than the bull is our complacency accepting it.**

Personally, what irritates me the most is not simply the bull itself, but the cocky attitude that typically accompanies it. It is the smugness of the crooks that bugs me. The smugness of the bullspeakers thinking that they have it all figured out. That by changing a few words they can pull the wool over our eyes because we are unlikely to be able to articulate what it is exactly that we find objectionable in what they say.

I can imagine the self satisfied pride of the person changing the company slogan from “The heating oil company” to “The energy supply company” on the oil delivery trucks. I am quite sure that he thinks of himself as a very clever person who just solved a major PR problem.

Not only is this nonsense a violation of our language, but it also shows disrespect for all of us.

If someone is mistreating you this way, all you need to do is to stand your ground. You may even find that you can turn the Bullspeak of others against them. Bullspeakers speak that language to gain an advantage. You can easily put them on the defensive by calling their bluffs. Ask them where the living room is and what makes the ‘great room’ great. When you talk to a sales manager, ask how many people he manages. From a relationship manager – how close he wants your relationship to be. Ask about the fairness of ‘fair funding.’ Ask to see the pre-owned car and be shocked if the odometer shows more than 50 miles. Ask the solution providers what they have to offer if you do not have a problem. **Make them squirm.** They are liars. **Do not be afraid to call them liars;** ask them how can they possibly expect you to trust anything they say. Let them know that you do not tolerate the bull, and that as long as you have the buck, you are the boss and you dictate the terms of any deal; as long as they want you to support their ideas, they will have to let you be the judge of the facts.

Notes to the reader

If you are here, I am glad that you got to this point, and I hope that you enjoyed the journey. I hope you liked it and I trust that even if you disagreed with my conclusions, you found the core of the argument thought provoking.

There is nothing I would like more than to keep writing books like this. I have over a dozen projects outlined. All I need is the time to write them. Time is money and my daytime job leaves me little enough of either.

While I would like to make money with this book – who wouldn't? - I would also like to see it in libraries and classrooms.

A few years ago I wrote and self-published a book with a friend. We printed a thousand copies and we are still selling it on Amazon.com at a rate of a copy or two a month. The money hardly even pays for the postage and the maintenance of the Web-site. What I learned from that experience is that writing a book is nothing compared to the task of marketing and selling it.

I decided to leave self publishing as a last resort. I would like to find a publisher for this one. You may have noticed while reading this book that I am not particularly fond of salesmen and salesmanship. It may be the problem of sour grapes in my case. I am a lousy salesman, I hate to push myself onto others, and I take rejection very badly.

Finding a publisher is also sales and I am not looking forward to the possibility of rejection.

That is why I have decided to try my luck with 'viral marketing.' I will give away 1,000 copies in PDF format before I approach any publisher, and will continue to do it until I sign a deal. All anyone has to do to get a copy is to ask me for one. Here is all I ask in return:

If you liked this book, if you think it deserves to be published, tell your friends about it. **Tell them to ask me for a copy.** If your friend is a publisher, all the better.

All I ask and expect from you at this point is to keep me in the loop. Do not make copies yourself. You don't need to. The book is almost free.

I would also like you to send your comments to me. Time permitting, I will create a web site for them.

Endnotes

¹ The story is a hyperbole. We don't need to argue with it.

² Some of my reviewers asked me where did I get these ideas and terminology. They are mine. This is one of the instances where contrary to my promise I do venture into linguistic theorizing. These aspects of meaning are important to make my point and I did not come across any work discussing them. Exploring them and their implications would deserve a study on its own.

³ <http://www.opsec.com/>

⁴ <http://www.checkpoint.com/>

⁵ <http://www.mapquest.ca/solutions/main.adp>

⁶ <http://www.wilsonlog.com/ieindex.html>

⁷ <http://www.newhorizonsolutions.com/>

⁸ <http://www.allstream.com/home/>

⁹ <http://www.trados.com/solutions.asp?page=48>

¹⁰ <http://www.spraakservice.net/translators/>

¹¹ <http://www.microsoft.com/backoffice/promo/comm3/>

¹² <http://www.cambridgecorp.com/BarrierFree/BathSystems.html>

¹³ www.cnc.ca

¹⁴ <http://usa-network.nocreditcard.net/phone2enter/>

¹⁵ <http://www.celebritytownhomes.com/newtownhomes.html>

¹⁶ <http://www.viceroy.com/default2.asp>

¹⁷ There are many possible links, search the web for “NLP noun-noun modifiers”

¹⁸ George Lakoff And Mark Johnson; Metaphors we live by; University of Chicago Press 1980

¹⁹ crabby@microsoft.com

²⁰ Vincent Vega In Pulp Fiction

²¹ I would go too far off track discussing how stupid regulations made it possible, search <http://www.mises.org/> for “Enron” to see for yourself

²² <http://www.theactivist.org/manifesto/index.html>

²³ Nancy Reeves; A Path through loss (Northstone Publishing, 2001)

²⁴ http://www.scotiabank.com/cda/content/0,1608,CID6803_LIDen,00.html

²⁵

http://www.3com.com/corpinfo/en_US/pressbox/press_release.jsp?INFO_ID=143873

²⁶ <http://www.watchguard.com/press/releases/wg189.asp>

²⁷ www.publicpower.ca

²⁸ It is interesting to note here how the word apartment is also rooted in the lives of aristocracy. Apartment means to keep apart. Only the wealthy was able to afford to 'keep apart' from the rest of the family.

²⁹ <http://rightfirst.net/careers.html>

³⁰ <http://www.cisco.com/warp/public/756/industryanalysts/presentations/103101.pdf>

³¹ <http://www.fantasticfortune.com/bb1/bb1.aspx#>

³² <http://www.takeem.com/products/System.htm>

³³ Excerpted from The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition Copyright © 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company.

³⁴ <http://www.dundewealth.com/en/public/BlueChipSolutions.htm>