

Where Did Cringey Corporate Jargon Come From? | Otherwords **<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HSbYUEaAwLI> Transcript:** **<https://dontveter.com/ec/corporatejargon.pdf>**

It's Monday morning, and you open your email to find your boss just looping you in on a new thread.

Maybe a client wants to pivot their strategy for next quarter, so we're gonna need you to go ahead and drill down on the data from the last campaign, and maybe share some key takeaways in tomorrow's standup.

No matter how much you roll your eyes reading that email, you can't help but reply that you'll do a deep dive and circle back.

All that corporate lingo occupies a weird space in language where nobody likes it, but everybody does it.

So why can't we resist the pull of talking like sad, beige robots as soon as we step into an office building, and where did all the synergy speak come from in the first place?

I'm Dr. Erica Brozovsky, and this is "Otherwords."

To linguists, all that awkward office speak can be categorized as a jargon, or the technical vocabulary that is specific to members of a career field or activity.

Jargon is meant to make communication more precise and efficient for members of the in-group that uses it, even if it makes no sense to outsiders.

And like all language, corporate jargon has gone through waves of evolution.

The office jargon we know and love to hate today started to emerge at the end of World War II, as businesses took advantage of the post-war economic prosperity, switching up the production efforts from tanks and planes to cars and refrigerators.

When veterans returned home and got jobs at these growing corporate conglomerates, they brought a lot of military jargon with them.

The wartime origins are apparent in phrases like "boots on the ground" or "mission critical," but deploying software, attending an all-hands meeting, even talking about a business strategy or a sales tactic, uses language borrowed from the battlefield.

Some more examples you could encounter as you rise through the ranks of corporate culture include "on my radar," "in the trenches," "rally the troops," or "fight an uphill battle." Around the same time, sports terminology entered the corporate world and stuck around.

A great idea can be a slam dunk or a home run, where a bad one might come out of left field.

I might say a task that I'm competent or skilled at is in my wheelhouse, but in 1959, a wheelhouse was the zone where a baseball player was most likely to, well, knock it out of the park, and "across the board" doesn't just mean widespread, it comes from a type of bet that spectators could place on horse races.

Perhaps all the sporty slang that worked its way into office culture around the mid-century says something about how workers viewed business as a competition, or about the interests of the people most likely to hold office jobs in that era.

Military and sports terminology aren't the only job-specific jargon that came into more general use.

We often adopt language from whatever industry is the most glamorous at the time.

Take advertising in the '60s, which gave us "run it up the flagpole" as a term for testing how consumers would react to marketing messages.

In the '80s, the finance industry gave us "leverage," "return on investment," and even "low-hanging fruit" as shorthand for relatively easy changes that can produce quick results.

In the 2000s, tech startups that shook up the status quo gave us language like "hack" and "disrupt," and the computing technology they used spilled over into describing human communication.

Think, "Do you have the bandwidth for this?"

Or, "Let's double-click on that."

And, sidebar, you may notice that while some corporate jargon is technical and specific, other common office lingo is pretty vague.

You could table something or take it offline instead of straight-up saying, "No," or, "We're not firing everyone, we're just doing some restructuring and need to downsize."

When delivering information directly could cause conflict or low morale, corporate jargon can make a user's language less clear on purpose.

We like to cloak difficult information in jargon for the same reasons that we're so quick to incorporate whatever the hot, new, exciting field is saying and bring it back to our own jobs, because jargon isn't just about communicating information, it's also about communicating power and status.

Sociolinguists argue that word choice plays a role in expressing power dynamics between speakers.

We may use technical jargon in front of someone who isn't familiar with it in an attempt to show off our membership in a powerful in-group.

Employees who know what ROIs, or KPIs, or even what OOO means can demonstrate that they belong.

Workers who don't speak the language may not fit in.

Status signaling is a major part of what keeps corporate jargon going, even when many employees agree that it's pretty annoying.

As we covered in our episode on cult language, researchers found that workers who have lower status in a workplace, like people who are newer in their careers, use jargon more often than people who are higher up the corporate ladder, as they try to compensate for their lack of experience, so instead of corporate language falling out of favor over time, each new generation that enters the workforce reinforces the existing jargon by using it a lot.

There's a chance that Gen-Z-ers could change this pattern, though.

A 2023 survey conducted by LinkedIn showed that while Millennials report using corporate jargon the most, 60% of Gen-Z-ers hope to eliminate it altogether.

Maybe graduating into a workplace culture of Zoom meetings and hybrid schedules could reduce some of the social pressure to conform to other long-standing office norms like corporate jargon, but we'll have to circle back on that.

So it's... (relaxed electronic music) You want me to, like, roll my eyes?

60% of Gen-Z-ers hope to eliminate it altogether.

I have to sneeze. I think.