

Wriggling out of the Labyrinth: How *Jargon* Infects Writing

Md Sikandar Ali

Professor, Department of English
Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh

Paper Received on 16-06-2026, Accepted on 18-07-2026
Published on 19-07-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.07.211

Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to sensitize both writers and readers to the menace of jargon. Jargon corrupts writing by diluting the meaning and obscuring the message. Some writers use jargon under the mistaken notion that it presents them as a learned or important persons. There are others who deliberately use jargon to mystify the readers. As English is increasingly being used as an international language, the need for delivering a message clearly and effectively is felt more than ever before. Jargon still creeps into all forms of communication: the language of parliament, press release, official statements, legal documents, business correspondence, news reports, advertisements, leaflets, brochures etc. Currently, efforts are underway in the English speaking countries to write documents in plain English, to make them more available to ordinary people. English that is clear and meaningful for its intended audience has become the standard to which most organizations aspire. Nevertheless, the result achieved till now is far from satisfactory. By citing relevant and useful extracts from authentic sources, this article not just pinpoints how jargon distorts or conceals meaning, but also offers practical tips and suggestions about how to steer clear of it. Undoubtedly, linguistic clarity pays in terms of dividends.

Key Words: Jargon, circumlocution, obscurity, verbosity.

Introduction:

The Oxford English Dictionary gives several meanings for jargon. Currently, the word is used to mean: (i) Words or expressions used by a particular group or profession, and (ii) incomprehensible talk or gibberish, the second emerging conceptually from the first. It is the second sense that linguists have always warned people about. The first person to draw the audience's attention to jargon is Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (1921). In his Cambridge lecture series in 1913, he brought forth the issue under the title 'Interlude: on Jargon'. He pointed out two vices of jargon. The first is 'circumlocution' or roundabout expression rather than 'short straight

expression' and the second is 'vague, woolly abstract' terms rather than concrete ones (p.87). Despite his warnings against these vices more than a century ago, jargon continues to infect almost every piece that appears in print. Jargon occurs when writers or speakers use roundabout expressions because either their thoughts are cloudy, or they deliberately use vague words to hide intentions, or hold the readers in awe by their fake exhibition of erudition. Quiller-Couch (1921) in his pioneering book *On the Art of Writing* points out that a learned writer "prefer the concrete term to the abstract, the particular to the general, and the definite to the vague — as a canon of rhetoric." (p.100)

Jargon in relation to plain English:

Contrary to jargon, plain English is generally regarded as a virtue in communication. 'Plain English' may sound an abstract and a pejorative term. Martin Cutts (1995), the pioneer of Plain English Campaign in his *The Plain English Guide* defines it thus:

The writing and setting out of essential information in a way that gives a co-operative, motivated person a good chance of understanding the document at first reading, and in the same sense that the writer meant it to be understood. (p. 3)

That means the basic premise of plain English is to make the message amply clear. The urge for plain English dates back to centuries. In the 14th century Geoffrey Chaucer had one of his characters in *The Canterbury Tales* utter:

Speketh so pleyne at this time, I yow preye
That we may understonde what ye seye.

In 1550, three years on the throne of England, Edward VI had become so irritated with the intricacies of the law that he remarked: "I would wish that the superfluous and tedious statutes were made more plain and short, to the intent that men might better understand them" (Cutts, 1995, p.4). In 1978 President Carter made an executive order requiring government documents to be written in plain English. In 1998 President Clinton issued a memorandum, 'Plain Language in Government Writing' which began:

The Federal government's writing must be in plain language. By using plain language, we send a clear message about what the government is doing, what it requires and what services it offers. Plain language saves the government and the private sector time, effort and money.

Plain language requirements vary from one document to another, depending on the intended audience. Plain language documents have logical organization, easy-to-read design features and use: Common everyday words, except for necessary technical terms, 'you' and other pronouns, the active voice and short sentences. (Sanyal, 2006, p. xvii)

Sir Arthur robustly defended plain and intelligible language. He believed that jargon is an enemy of clear, direct and vigorous expression. He contrasts Shakespeare's preference for the concrete with other writers' weakness for the vague and woolly imagery. To drive his point home, he gives a paraphrase of Hamlet's famous soliloquy in jargon. Let us compare the original text with its equivalent in jargon. First, the text:

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. (Act 3, Scene1)
Here is the paraphrase:

To be, or the contrary? Whether the former or the latter be preferable would seem to admit of some difference of opinion; the answer in the present case being of an affirmative or of a negative character according as to whether one elects on the one hand to mentally suffer the disfavor of fortune, albeit in an extreme degree or on the other to boldly envisage adverse conditions in the prospect of eventually bringing them to a conclusion. (Quiller-Couch, 1921, p. 96)

Readers can immediately mark the difference. Shakespeare chooses the concrete, definite and the particular bubbling with sheer energy, strength and vitality and visualized images forcing the reader to touch and see whereas the paraphrase is a fog of abstractions wrapped in vague profundity. William Strunk in his ground-breaking book *The Elements of Style* has recommended using words that call up pictures: "The surest way to arouse and hold the reader's attention is by being specific, definite and concrete. The greatest writers—Homer, Dante and Shakespeare—are effective largely because they deal in particulars and report the details that matter. Their words call up pictures." (p. 37)

Dr. Samuel Johnson and his followers called the Augustans brought in a spirit of classical learning pursued by Greek and Latin scholars. They took delight in sounding incomprehensible and cultivated a form of writing dubbed by Macaulay as 'Johnsonese'. They felt that plain English lacked the sophistication to express noble thoughts and sentiments and educated Englishmen should write the way Roman classicists did and speak as they learn to write. They adopted "words of learned length and thundering sound", (Gowers, 1954, p. 57) that tries to impress but instead obscures. Their writing was replete with adjective-laden abstract Latinate nouns that made language cumbrous and obfuscating. Johnson's prose was verbose aimed to impress. He ended up inventing such preposterous roundabouts as 'repress the instantaneous motions of merriment' to mean 'stop laughing' or a 'sanguinary nasal protuberance' to mean 'a red nose'.

Charles Dickens through his portrayal of Mr. Micawber in *David Copperfield* mocked the sick pomposity that crept into Victorian prose. Mr. Micawber abhorred plain English. He was under the impression that an educated Victorian gentleman was supposed to use flowery language with elegant diction which distinguished him from a common man. He always wrote lengthy letters which he read out to impress his audience. Here is an excerpt:

I am at present engaged, my dear Copperfield, in the sale of corn upon commission. It is not an avocation of a remunerative description — in other words, it does not pay—and some temporary embarrassments of a pecuniary nature have been the consequence. I am, however, delighted to add that I have now an immediate prospect of something turning up (I am not at liberty to say in what direction), which I trust will enable me to provide, both for myself and for your friend Traddles, in whom I have an unaffected interest

No example could more exquisitely illustrate the monstrosity of Jargon. Fuzzy thinking naturally leads to clutter and jargon. The string of adjective-laden nouns have resulted in a roundabout expression obscuring the real message. This makes for perverse language. Rudolf Flesch (1949) in his *Art of Readable Writing* suggests “The cure for this sentence elephantiasis is very simple. All you need is to stop being stuffy and talk like a human being and that’s that.” (p.111). A little more orderly thinking and economy of language could make the message clearer. Jyoti Sanyal (2006), the pioneer of Clear English Movement, India, offers a modern version of it:

I now sell corn on commission, Copperfield, but it doesn’t pay and I’m in debt. But something is about to turn up soon (I can’t give you the details yet), that I believe will solve all problems both for me and for your friend Traddles. I’m rather fond of him. (p. 268)

The contrast between the two extracts above points to Victorian pomposity and modern simplicity. The former is longwinded while the latter is crisp. Vagueness in speech corresponds to blather. No one reads vague writing and no one listens to blather.

Facets of jargon:

George Orwell in an essay titled ‘Politics and the English Language’, written in 1946 which has acquired the rank of a classic, points out “Political speech and writings are largely the defense of the indefensible... Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question begging and sheer cloudy vagueness.” He provides numerous examples of deceptive words and jargons politicians use to camouflage their thoughts and actions. When peasants are robbed of their farms and thrown on the roads with no more than they can carry, this is called ‘transfer of population’ or ‘rectification of frontiers’. When people are imprisoned for years

without trial or shot in the back of the neck, this is called 'elimination of unreliable elements'. Orwell gives an interesting example of how an English professor, a supporter of Russian totalitarianism, is likely to mask his sinister intention behind a thicket of verbiage. Instead of saying outright, "I believe in killing off your opponents when you can get good results by doing so", he will probably say something like this: While freely conceding that the soviet regime exhibits certain features which the humanitarian may be inclined to deplore, we must, I think, agree that a certain curtailment of the right to political opposition is an unavoidable concomitant to transitional periods and that the rigours which the Russian people have been called upon to undergo have been amply justified in the sphere of concrete achievement. This is a striking example of high sounding superfluous words employed to deliberately obscure the message. Such deceptive language is called 'doublespeak'. According to William Lutz (1989), doublespeak "is language that makes the bad seem good, the negative appears positive, the unpleasant appear attractive or at least tolerable (p.1). Orwell's essay has often been cited during the wars in Cambodia, Vietnam and Iran. His essay has had such an overwhelming impact on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean that The American Council of Teachers of English formed a Public Doublespeak Committee to draw attention to the use of deceptive language by public figures and gave a George Orwell Award as a token of acknowledgement for honesty and clarity in public language. (Cutts, 1995, p. 6)

We produce clutter when we use more words than are necessary to get across our message. A trite statement is sometimes fleshed out with clichés, unnecessary clauses, superfluous adjectives and tautological expressions. In *The Plain English Guide* Martin Cutts (1995) quotes the following example of jargon used by an accountancy firm in a business proposal:

At present the necessary cycle is aggravating volumes through your modern manufacturing and order processing environments which provide restricted opportunities for cost reduction through labour adjustments and will remain a key issue. (p.19)

Cutts (1995) rewrites it removing the jargon and simplifying the structures: 'Output and orders have fallen because of the recession but there is little scope for reducing the workforce.' (p.19). He observes that 'Part of writing well is writing tight ruthlessly cutting dross' (p. 40) which is also substantiated by Zinsser (2006) "writing improves in direct ratio to the number of things we can keep out of it." (p.19) William Strunk (2005) was one of the few writers to assert on the need to cut out wasteful words in writing:

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines, and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires

not that the writer makes all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subject only in outline, but that every word tell. (p.39)

Jargon violates all these basic principles. In politics ponderous euphemisms are at times used as deliberate attempts to throw dust in the eyes of the populace. During the Vietnam War American officials also took recourse to circumlocution to inject vagueness into their statement to the press. Pentagon officials used preposterous roundabout like 'reinforced protective reaction strike' to mean invasion and the enormous budget needed was for 'counterforce deterrence'. General Alexander Haig, President Reagan's Secretary of State, coined the phrase 'at this juncture of maturization' to mean 'now' and nuclear missiles 'were at the vortex of cruciality' meaning ready to be launched. To dispel public misgivings his message was 'It is not for you to bother about' for which what he actually said was: "We must push this to a lower decibel of public fixation. I don't think there is much of a learning curve to be achieved in this area of content" (Zinsser, 2006. p. 21).

Marjorie Boulton in *The Anatomy of Language* gives an interesting example of how nice it sounds when a political leader speaks in vague abstract language to the followers and what it really stands for when it is translated into concrete detail:

Our gallant troops have the situation completely in hand. All of them have done their sacred duty with courage and enthusiasm. The seditious and traitorous elements who were disturbing the peace in our beautiful capital have been wiped out or rendered harmless. Our beloved citizens may once again walk in the streets, shop and go about their business in peace. And the peoples of other countries can see that only a handful of sedition-mongers are discontented; the real Utopian people has complete confidence in its government. (p. 45)

The staple of the extract above expressed in concrete terms will sound like: There is blood in the gutters and there are bullet holes in the walls of the houses round the main square. The bodies of John, Peter, Ralph, Sam, Bill, Alex and Don are buried in a common grave. Agnes has been raving in hospital ever since the stray shot killed her baby Jimmy. Three wounded demonstrators are missing. We hope they are in hospital too, but screams were heard from somewhere underneath the town jail last night. Harry, Frank, Louis, Dorothy and Cathleen were arrested and their families cannot find out what has become of them. (p. 46)

So, the language of politicians is a kind of oratorical waffle or statement tortuously contrived to evade the issue or one of disclaiming responsibility. Here is Jim Hacker, Minister for Administrative affairs, trying to coax a straight reply from Sir Humphrey Appleby, his department's permanent secretary: 'Humphrey, in your evidence to the Think-Tank, you are going to support my view that the Civil Service is overmanned and feather-bedded or not? Yes or no! Straight answer!' This was the reply:

‘Minister, if I am pressed for a straight answer I shall say that, as far as we can see, looking at it by and large, taking one thing with another, in terms of the average of departments, then in the last analysis is probably true to say that, at the end of the day, you would find, in general terms that, not to put too fine a point on it, there was not very much in it one way or the other’ (Sanyal, 2006, p. 12)

This is an example of pompous official jargon — using language not for communication but for evasion. On purpose politicians sometimes string meaningless words that sound sonorous but amount to nonsense.

In one of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s election campaigns, Frances Perkins prepared for him a speech on social security in which a sentence read: ‘We are endeavoring to construct a more inclusive society’. The President found the sentence containing jargon and revised it as: ‘We are going to make a country in which no one will be left out.’ (Flesch, 1949, p. 209). During President George W. Bush’s presidency ‘civilian casualties’ in Iraq became ‘collateral damage’. In the recent Israel-Palestine wars ‘ceasefire’ was referred to as ‘humanitarian pause’ to make it sound more benign. In parliamentary proceedings instead of saying a plain ‘no’ a minister will say, ‘The answer to the question is in the negative’. (Zinsser, 2006, p. 21, Quiller-Couch, 1921, p. 89)

A new crop of dainty circumlocutions called ‘officialese’ has emerged recently. A slum turns into a ‘depressed socio-economic area’, garbage collectors into ‘waste disposal personnel’, town dump into ‘volume reduction unit’, job cuts into ‘involuntary methodologies’ and a plant shutdown into ‘volume-related production-schedule adjustment’, traffic jams into localized capacity deficiencies, (Zinsser, 2006, p. 20; Burridge, 2005, p. 37). The duller the notion the more intense is the urge to cloak it with showy language. You are likely to come across a sentence like ‘The physical condition of a property is a fundamental determinant of its quality’ which probably just means ‘the quality of a house depends mainly on its condition’. Jargon employed in this manner is “not only unhelpful; it positively impedes communication by the stumbling block it creates to both comprehension and trust.” (Turk, 1989, p. 103)

Then, there is another form of jargon called ‘journalese’ in which rape is referred to as ‘criminal sexual assault’; ‘adverse climatic condition’ corresponds to bad weather. The young reporter of a local paper who writes: “The bride’s father has purchased a property to present to his daughter and her husband as their future residence’ has the following thing in mind: “The bride’s father has bought a house which he has given to his daughter and husband to live in”. A sentence like ‘He was conveyed to his place of residence in an intoxicated condition’ is supposed to mean ‘He was carried home drunk’ (Quiller-Couch, 1921, p. 89; Burton, 1982). Strunk (1995) advised the writers to stamp out vagueness in ‘A period of unfavorable

weather set in' and provide specific detail such as 'It rained every day for a week' (p. 37). Wilbers (2014) puts it humorously: "If a cheetah is chasing a zebra, it's trying to kill it, *not attempting to terminate its life* nor *attempting to effect a termination of its earthly existence*" (p. 41). Some people tend to believe that such inflated style lends dignity to their writing. It doesn't.

The worst offenders against plain English are no doubt the people who manage businesses. They use hideous 'commercialese'. An advertisement in the Hindu ran: "The incumbent, sensitive to our marketing style, should have the ability to increase our market standing considerably" (Yadurajan, 2003, p. 87) which is a high-sounding vacuous prose, which in plain English would likely read 'The selected candidate should improve our sales considerably'.

Doublespeak also exists in the medical profession which is dubbed as 'medicalese'. Hospital officials would rather say 'a patient underwent negative patient care outcome' than saying 'the patient died.' Professor William Lutz of Rutgers University collected many examples of jargon from hospital records. An example is 'diagnostic misadventure of the highest magnitude' meaning 'grossly wrong diagnosis. (Burridge, 2005, p. 173)

'Educationalese' seeks to avoid value-laden terms like lazy, idle, clever and poor and replace them with pleasing euphemisms like 'differently abled' 'educationally and socially disadvantaged groups', 'high verbal ability groups', 'disadvantaged home environments' and 'underprivileged children' (Burridge, 2005, p. 172). In social science research casual talk is 'relatively unstructured conversational interaction' (Yadurajan, 2003, p. 87)

There are horrendous euphemisms currently in vogue used to having things wrapped up pretty softly so that they don't have hard edges but they are often so far-fetched and ambiguously worded that they leave the readers unsure of what they really mean. 'Vertically challenged' to mean short, 'chemical dependency' to mean addiction, 'hygiene break' to mean break for going to toilet, 'fully figured' to mean fat, 'pre-owned car' to mean used car, 'economical with truth' to mean a liar, 'making love' to mean sexual intercourse are only a few examples among many. (Muslim, 2021, p. 197)

People in the subcontinent usually pick their English from textbooks. So their English generally sounds verbose, quaint and archaic resulting in jargon. Here is an extract from a newspaper article: "Spoken English is having its quietus administered by the bare bodkin of change, written English is following suit. Let us then animadvert on Written English". (Siddhartha Chary). Poverty of thoughts is at times concealed by a haze of abstract nouns to make the writing sound sonorous. The

writer's language is overwhelmingly dressed up with bombastic words and the message is lost.

Quiller-Couch (1921) also cites an example of how the Indian Babus embellished the English language to make it more floriferous: "Regret to inform you, the hand that rocked the cradle has kicked the bucket" (p.85). This expression is not only inappropriate and redundant but also flagrantly unidiomatic and ludicrous. The user has learnt the idiom by heart but totally lacks pragmatic knowledge about where and how to use it. Liu (2008) sounds a note of caution about when and where not to use idioms:

Because idioms frequently convey negative attitudes and sometimes have a comic effect, serious situations and topics will not be very proper contexts for the use of some idioms. For instance, 'kick the bucket' is not a good choice of expression when referring to the death of a friend or colleague (p. 35).

Language is ingrained in its culture. In Indian culture high-flown round about expression is perceived as elegant. It creeps up in our letter writing when people tend to sound too humble and passionate.

It is abundantly clear that jargon can be used to hide meaning or message. But whatever advantages anyone may reap from it temporarily, are, in the long run, offset by the harm they do to men's thinking because "slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts" (Orwell). Some people also falsely believe that long abstract terms along with roundabout constructions make language imposing. For them William Zinsser (2006) has some useful words to tell:

The secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components. Every word that serves no function, every long word that could be a short word, every adverb that carries the same meaning that's already in the verb, every passive construction that leaves the reader unsure of who is doing what — those are the thousand and one adulterants that weaken the strength of a sentence. And they usually occur in proportion to education and rank. (p.14)

Conclusion:

While jargon fogs the meaning, plain English makes the message shine. The most important criteria for good writing today are ease and clarity. In *The Kings English* published in 1906, the Fowler brothers advised the aspiring writers to shun showiness and be "direct, simple, brief, vigorous and lucid." and to follow the general principles: Prefer the familiar word to the far-fetched, prefer the concrete word to the abstract, prefer the single word to the circumlocution, prefer the short word to the long, prefer the Saxon word to the Romance. If we must have a taste for good writing, let those rules laid down by Henry and Frank Fowlers serve.

Works Cited

- Boulton, Marjorie. *The Anatomy of Language: Saying What We Mean*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978.
- Burridge, Kate. *Weeds in the Garden of Words*. Cambridge UP, 2005.
- Burton, S. H. *Mastering English Language*. Macmillan Education, 1982.
- Cutts, Martin. *The Plain English Guide*. Oxford UP, 1995.
- Flesch, Rudolf. *The Art of Readable Writing*. Harper & Row, 1949.
- Fowler, H. W., and F. G. Fowler. *The King's English*. Clarendon Press, 1970.
- Gowers, Sir Ernest. *The Complete Plain Words*. The Campfield Press, 1954.
- Klinkenborg, Verlyn. *Several Short Sentences About Writing*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2012.
- Liu, Dilin. *Idioms: Description, Comprehension, Acquisition, and Pedagogy*. Routledge, 2008.
- Muslim, Syed Naquib. *Common and Uncommon Errors in English*. R&R Publications, 2021.
- Orwell, George. *Politics and the English Language*. Penguin Classics, 2013.
- Quiller-Couch, Sir Arthur. *On the Art of Writing*. Cambridge UP, 1921.
- Sanyal, Jyoti. *Indlish*. Viva Books, 2006.
- Strunk, William, Jr., and E. B. White. *The Elements of Style*. Penguin Press, 2005.
- Turk, Christopher, and John Kirkman. *Effective Writing: Improving Scientific, Technical and Business Communication*. E. & F. N. Spon, 1989.
- V., Siddhartha Chary. "English Teaching in India." *The Hindu*, 7 Aug. 1984.
- Wilbers, Stephen. *Mastering the Craft of Writing*. Writer's Digest Books, 2014.
- Yadurajan, K. S. *Current English*. Oxford UP, 2003.
- Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well*. HarperCollins, 2006.