

Technical jargon: an approach, an idea and an offering

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This is three mini-articles in one:

- *my ideas on technical jargon, its value and dangers, and how I suggest dealing with it (the approach)*
- *a suggestion for a new column (or two) in Clarity – ‘Linguistic Lingo for Lawyers’ (and ‘Legal Lingo for Linguists’), including a request to you for feedback, ideas and contributions (the idea)*
- *my go at a first column, on grammatical terms for verb forms in English (the offering).*

My interest in jargon started as a benign form of people-watching. In my six years as a National Health Service (NHS) manager, I entertained myself in dull meetings by observing my colleagues’ linguistic carry-ons.

It was only later, when my eldest child was born with congenital heart defects, that I realised jargon can be far from a laughing matter. Living at the hospital during his several bouts of cardiac surgery, I was an outsider to the medical jargon that surrounded me. The staff, for all their phenomenal skills and kindness, spoke to parents as if we were privy to their secret code. Long medical phrases abounded; and even the apparently everyday words seemed to have their own special meaning. One day, a nurse told me: ‘Your baby is alarming.’ I felt quite panicky – until I realised that she meant one of his monitors was needlessly sounding its alarm.

Returning to work some time later, I heard a conference of NHS non-executive directors (laypeople) list ‘NHS jargon’ as one of the ten ‘most difficult barriers’ they had encountered when new to the service. It was this that led me to write my book, on tackling NHS jargon. And it was then that I realised jargon is not just one thing; nor is it always bad.

An approach: defining and tackling technical jargon

Types of jargon

The word ‘jargon’ comes from an old French word meaning ‘the twittering and chattering of birds’. It came into English in the fourteenth century, when its meaning was extended to include ‘meaningless talk’ or ‘gibberish’. The Longman Dictionary of Business English defines jargon as:

- (1) *language, written or spoken, that is difficult or impossible for an ordinary person to understand because it is full of words known only to specialists*
- (2) *language that uses words that are unnecessarily long and is badly put together.*¹

Many linguists believe that the word 'jargon' would be best reserved for the first of these definitions. Some people also refer to this as 'technical jargon', 'shop talk' or 'terms of art'.

There have been many suggestions for words to describe the second type of jargon. The most popular today is perhaps 'gobbledegook', originally an American word thought to echo the sound of turkeys. Alternatives used over the years include 'bafflegab', 'bureaucratese', 'officialese', 'doublespeak', 'stripetrouser' (invented by George Orwell) and 'FOG' (frequency of gobbledegook).

A third type of jargon – buzz words and phrases – is also rife in most organisations these days. *Should you have a window of opportunity, I will bottom out and cover off the key issues in this arena. Once brought up to speed with the agenda, you will be able to get your ducks in a row and hit the ground running on talking in buzz words.*

Characteristics of different jargon types

	Type of jargon		
	Technical jargon	Gobbledegook	Buzz words
Typical linguistic features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Official names for things • Sometimes spelt with capital letters • Commonly shortened to abbreviations or acronyms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long words • Abstract nouns • Latin words • Long-winded, complex and impersonal style 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many verbs • Often derived from other fields, especially sports
Common in writing?	Yes	Yes	To an extent
Common in planned speech?	Yes	To an extent	To an extent
Common in spontaneous speech?	Yes	Only words and phrases, not structures	Yes
Rate of change	Depends on rate of change in professional area (very fast in NHS, as government policy changes continually)	Slow	Fast
In an ordinary dictionary?	No	Yes	Not necessarily
Typical length of plain-English alternatives	Longer	Shorter	Varies

The value of jargon

Jargon is often written off as a bad thing. But technical jargon is both necessary and useful for members of a profession or other group to communicate with each other. At its best, it acts as a kind of shorthand, allowing them to express specialist concepts concisely. It therefore improves communication, and saves time and money.

The problems only start when technical jargon is used in writing to people who are not familiar with it, without explaining what it means. Ordinary words used with a specific meaning that the writer does not make clear (such as 'alarming' above) are particularly dangerous. Readers may completely misunderstand the message.

But I believe it is a good thing to include technical jargon in documents for the public and other groups who are not familiar with it, so long as it is well explained. There are two reasons for this:

- From a practical point of view, it is impossible to replace completely most words and phrases that fall into the category of technical jargon with plain-English translations that are concise and accurate in meaning.
- From an ethical point of view, exposing the audience to technical jargon can help them to understand more about the field. This gives them more power.

Take the analogy of patients going to see their doctor. They want to have a clear explanation of their diagnosis, in layperson's language, but they may well find it useful to be have the medical term too. They will then:

- know if their diagnosis is the same as that of someone else they know
- be able to look up more about it in a book or on a website
- feel that the doctor credited them with the interest and intelligence to hear and use the medical term.

Buzz words can be similarly useful as a type of shorthand, their plain-English translations often being longer. However, the meaning of buzz words is often obscure, even among colleagues. Gobbledegook can almost always be replaced by plain-English alternatives that are less long-winded and clearer in meaning.

Value of different jargon types

		Type of jargon		
		Technical jargon	Gobbledegook	Buzz words
Effect on communication	Positive – if used with audience that understands it, or explained to audience that does not	Negative		Negative
	Negative – if used unexplained with audience that does not understand it			

Tackling technical jargon

Like most professions, NHS management has plenty of technical jargon: types of organisation; staff groups and posts; documents; care types and services; clinical specialties, conditions and treatments; funds and budgets; measures and standards; and many more. I advise my NHS clients to take the following approach in tackling technical jargon:

- **Stage 1: Decide what to explain.**
Think about your audience. Will they understand your technical jargon? Ideally, ask someone from the target audience, if you can. If they will understand (for example if you are writing for colleagues), then go ahead and use it freely. (Be sure, however, that you are not conning yourself into believing buzz words or gobbledegook to be technical jargon.) If they will not understand, then you will need to explain it.
- **Stage 2: Explain the technical jargon.**
Explain each term briefly as you use it, simply and concisely (in just enough detail for the reader to be able to understand your message). This means that the audience gets an immediate explanation of what you mean, without having to look away from the document. If you think your readers would find a more detailed explanation useful, provide a glossary (in plain English) for them to read later.

An idea: 'Linguistic Lingo for Lawyers' and 'Legal Lingo for Linguists'

When I was at the Clarity conference in Boulogne, I noticed that many people opened a conversation with the question: 'Are you a linguist or a lawyer?' Of course, many Clarity members are both. As a linguist alone, with an interest in ways of tackling technical jargon, I thought that I could perhaps contribute to *Clarity* by explaining some commonly confused linguistic terms, or difficult linguistic points.

My idea is that this could become a regular column in *Clarity* (to which different people could contribute). It could be called 'Linguistic Lingo for Lawyers'. I wondered too whether we could have a parallel column: 'Legal Lingo for Linguists'? As a reader without legal training, I would certainly find that useful. There would be advantages for readers and writers of the columns:

- For readers – the plain-English explanations could improve our knowledge and understanding of technical terms. It would also be interesting to observe others' techniques for explaining technical jargon.
- For writers – the process of explaining our jargon in plain English would be interesting and useful, and may even sharpen our own understanding of it.
- For both – the columns would provide a building collection of ready-made explanations, which we could use unchanged (subject to Clarity's copyright policy) or as a starting-point in our day-to-day work, for example if we needed to explain linguistic or legal terms to a lay audience.

Perhaps the columns would bring about more articles on different approaches to tackling technical jargon. As Clarity is an international organisation, perhaps writers could look at whether different approaches are needed for different languages or language groups.

The third part of this article offers an example of the ‘Linguistic Lingo for Lawyers’ column, looking at terms to describe verb forms. I have chosen this topic because I have noticed the terms ‘tense’ and ‘voice’ being confused. But I hope that readers will write in with their own ideas on terms they would like to explain, or see explained. My piece is about one area of grammatical terminology, which particularly interests me. But others may be able to explain terms from all kinds of other areas of Linguistics with a link to plain language: phonetics and phonology, morphology, semantics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and pragmatics.

I see the columns, whatever their topic, as being more practical than theoretical. They would be fairly short (say, around 500 words, with a commentary on the writer’s approach as an optional extra). This would encourage contributions and make them attractive to read.

What do you think? Would you like to see these regular columns? Do you have ideas for topics to fill them? Would you like to write for one? Whether the columns continue as long-standing, regular columns depends on what you think. Please email your views to *Clarity’s* editor in chief, Julie Clement, at clementj@cooley.edu.

An offering: Linguistic Lingo for Lawyers – grammatical terms for verb forms in English: ‘tense’ and ‘voice’

What ‘tense’ and ‘voice’ mean

Two grammatical terms that are commonly confused are ‘tense’ and ‘voice’. Both describe verb forms, but express quite different contrasts.

Term	Contrast usually expressed	Categories (in English)
Tense	Where in time the action or state described in the clause or sentence is located, relative to the time of writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Past• Present• Future
Voice	Whether the subject of the clause or sentence is taking the action, or having the action done to them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Active• Passive

Tense and voice in English and other languages

Languages vary as to how they show tense and voice. Some languages use inflections (different forms of the same root word). English has only two inflections for tense: present (for example *I write*) and past (such as *I wrote*). It forms the future tense (and other present and past tenses) by creating verb phrases using auxiliary (supporting) verbs, for example, *I shall write* (future), *I am writing* (present) and *I had written* (past).

The passive voice is formed in the same way: so that *I choose* (active) becomes *I was chosen* (passive).

Remember that ‘tense’ and ‘voice’ are grammatical (not semantic) terms. This means that there is not always a neat one-to-one correspondence between grammatical form and the meaning expressed. For example, tense is clearly strongly related to time, but tense and time do not always correspond: the present tense may refer to past time (such as in a newspaper headline: *minister resigns*) or future time (*she’s going tomorrow*).

Other grammatical terms for verb forms

As well as ‘tense’ and ‘voice’, there are other grammatical terms that describe verb forms in English:

Term	Expresses:	Categories of term (with examples)
Aspect	How long the action lasts, whether it is repetitive, and whether it is complete	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple (<i>she repairs</i>) • Progressive (<i>she is repairing</i>) – also called ‘imperfect’ or ‘continuous’ • Perfect (<i>she has repaired</i>) – also called ‘non-progressive’ or ‘non-continuous’ • Progressive and perfect (<i>she has been repairing</i>)
Mood	Whether the action is a fact; wish or supposition; or command	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indicative (<i>God saves the Queen</i>) • Subjunctive (<i>God save the Queen</i>) • Imperative (<i>Save the Queen</i>)
Number	Whether the action relates to one person or thing, or more	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Singular (<i>I go, it goes</i>) • Plural (<i>we go, they go</i>)
Person	Whether the action refers to the writer, the person addressed, or some other individual or thing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First (<i>I work</i>) • Second (<i>you work</i>) • Third (<i>she works</i>)

Using these terms to describe real verbs

We can describe every finite verb (those that are not infinitives – *to cook* – or participles – *cooking* or *cooked*) in English using these terms. Those who studied Latin at school will remember ‘parsing’ Latin verbs in this way. For example, to use three verbs from the start of this article:

	(my interest in jargon) started	(I) entertained	(my first child) was born
Tense	past	past	past
Voice	active	active	passive
Aspect	perfect	perfect	perfect
Mood	indicative	indicative	indicative
Number	singular	singular	singular
Person	third	first	third

Relevance of terms to plain English

Of the terms covered in this article, those that crop up most frequently in writing about plain English are 'voice' and 'person'. This is because we, as plain-English practitioners, tend to recommend using the active voice, and first and second persons, where possible. The term 'tense' occurs less frequently. We must avoid saying 'passive tense' or 'active tense', which, as this piece explains, are incorrect terms.

The process: my commentary on explaining these terms

1. I have found that explaining these terms has made me think critically about them. Unexpectedly, I ended up doing quite a lot of reading and research.
2. I would also like to compare my approach here to the one I suggest in the first mini-article. This piece is almost a glossary itself, since its whole aim is to explain terms.
3. In thinking about how much to explain, I decided I could assume that readers would understand basic terms such as 'verb', 'subject', and 'clause'. I briefly explained slightly more unusual ones, such as 'inflection' and 'finite', to be on the safe side. I chose not to include a glossary explaining them in more detail, partly as I thought that many readers would already know what they meant, and partly as it could make the piece longer and rather dry (given that it is already glossary-like).
4. In hindsight, I wish I had asked some readers what terms they understood: easier said than done when busy and working to a deadline, but no doubt a good investment.
5. Looking forward, if I need to use the terms 'tense' and 'voice' (or other terms for verb forms) in my day-to-day writing, I could use this piece to write a brief explanation (say, for 'tense': *the verb form that sets the action or state in the past, present or future*). I could use it further if I needed also to include a more detailed explanation, in a glossary. I hope you will find it useful too.

Reference

1 Adam JH (1982) *Longman Dictionary of Business English*. Longman, Harlow, p 261

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