

Double-Talk: Jargon and Slang in Corporate Language and the Spectrum of Business Idiomaticity

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Abstract: *Depending on the frame of reference, the linguistic concept of double-talk (or double-speak) shapes the context in which it is used by intentionally masking the meaning of words. Among the different forms of verbal interaction, jargon and slang expressions, colloquialisms, or clichéd words and phrases make up what is known as 'tosh-speak' in modern business environment. Apart from keeping up with the current jargon and slang trends used into the language of corporations, both with positive and negative connotations, the paper also concentrates on the spectrum of business idiomaticity. Thus, the outcome of my research has been to analyze a corpus of business idiomatic expressions and classify them into three groups accompanied by their explanations and examples. Findings show that these specific categories of idioms are easier or more difficult to understand because of their high/vs/low frequency vocabulary.*

Keywords: *business idiomaticity; double-talk; jargon; multiple meanings; slang;*

1. Introduction

Nowadays nonstandard language varieties, such as jargon and slang, are a controversial topic in intercultural business exchanges, and the debate on their linguistic and sociological relevance is still heated. Business people generally have the capacity to make up new words, which they can add to their repertoire and then deliberately use them to create a strong effect upon both the speaker and the hearer. Vocabulary inequivalences, multiple meanings, or cultural thinking patterns can be troublesome when learning and communicating in a new language. Widely regarded as specialized vocabulary related to a trade, profession or a group of people (Andersson, Trudgill 1990; Nash 1993; Burke 1995; Allan, Burrige 2006; Mattiello 2008), jargon displays two identity markers, according to Allan and Burrige (2006): “1. to serve as a technical or specialist language for precise and economical communication; 2. to promote in-group solidarity, and to exclude as out-groupers those people who do not use the jargon” (Allan, Burrige 58). From the out-groupers’ perspective, Allan and Burrige state that they find jargon

abounding in uncommon or unfamiliar words and therefore unintelligible or meaningless talk or writing; gibberish. If the out-

grouper is sufficiently rancorous, s/he might also conclude that the jargon is debased, outlandish or barbarous. (Allan, Burridge 65)

Unlike the technical nature of jargon, slang exudes an air of freshness and novelty due to the power of metaphors (idiomatic expressions) to enrich each level of the language, i.e. phonological, morphological, grammatical, semantic, or pragmatic. In agreement with Anderson and Trudgill's (1990) *Bad Language*, Mattiello (2008) highlights that slang is more familiar and spontaneous than the conservative and pretentious feature of jargon, making her acknowledge that

Today slang covers both the specific and the general sense. It typically consists of new words and novel or extended meanings, and develops from the attempt to find fresh, vigorous, colourful, pungent or humorous expressions. (Mattiello 35)

As far as the spectrum of business idiomacity is concerned, the figurative meanings of idiomatic expressions are difficult to decipher if English is not our native language (Fernando 1996; Cooper 1998; Maalej 2005; Liu 2008). Talking to native speakers is a great way to grasp new vocabulary words and start feeling comfortable with the grammar of sentences. Thus, we will find the idioms of a language very enlightening, by discovering the cultural background idioms might originate from.

2. Double-talk

Deceptive language (*double-talk*, or *double-speak*) pervade the business environment with the intent to disguise the meaning of words, by doing their rounds in almost all business deals, workplace relations, contract agreements, or negotiations between parties.

In a podcast interview hosted by Eric Schwartzman, the American linguist William Lutz, author of *Doublespeak* and a well-known specialist in the use of clear language, delves into the deceptive qualities of the term *doublespeak* with reference to business contracts and marketplace offers. He pleads for writing in plain language and disapproves of using deceptive language:

Clear language is essential so that both parties understand what they are agreeing to. In any contract that you enter into, you have to understand what your obligations and rights are under the terms of that contract. If a company writes a contract in such a way that consumers think they understand what their obligations are, but in reality don't, they may agree to something they don't understand, and

ultimately cannot fulfill. When companies use anything other than straight-forward clear language to describe the terms of an offer, they're not dealing honestly in the marketplace. They are setting up consumers to fail. (Lutz, in Eric Schwartzman's podcast "Why Doublespeak is Dangerous" <https://www.eric schwartzman.com/why-doublespeak-is-dangerous/>)

The linguistic concepts of *double-talk*, or *double-speak* (Lutz 1987; Orwell 2004; Allan, Burridge 2006) generate new expressions which take on different connotations depending on the context in which they are used.

The spoken business language abounds in overused, jaded phrases which business people tend to develop a preference for. The problem is that their excessive, careless usage (sometimes merely for effect) overwhelms the listener up to the point of losing their effectiveness. Expressions such as *blue money* (unwise or reckless spending of funds), *due diligence* (the thoroughness that the owner of a business has in onboarding decision-making), *gold mine* (a very profitable business or activity), *hardball* (aggressive business tactics), or *mushroom principle* (keeping employees in the dark and cover them with 'muck') can be described as ambiguous phrases in current business English usage with an intent to mislead or deceive.

Common areas of double-talk in current business communication may include *war* (e.g. *be on the warpath* → be very angry; *hit your targets* → reach financial/sales targets; increase the amount of products; *be gunning for sth* → be trying very hard to obtain a job, for example), *gambling* (e.g. *pay over the odds* → pay more than it's worth; *there's a lot of money at stake* → the possibility of losing a large amount of money as a result of underestimating the risk of an investment, project, or business venture; *come up trumps* → produce good, unexpected results), *shipping* (e.g. *don't rock the boat* → don't destabilize a situation until negotiation talks are finished, or cause problems when you start a new job; *plain sailing* → a smooth, easy progress/clear course of a business; *sailing into uncharted waters* → moving into an unknown business area), *hunting* and *the animal world* (e.g. *be on the prowl for sth* → look for an opportunity to buy a product cheaply, such as a bargain; *the rat race* → the struggle for success in a business/job; *top dog* → the boss or the leader of a group), *gardening* (e.g. *bear fruit* → produce successful business results; *low hanging fruit* → earning a quick profit with little effort; *right up/down sb's alley* → a job which sounds ~ is very (un)suitable for a job seeker), and so on. Such expressions become clichés with context-driven meanings through repetition and overuse.

3. Jargon, Slang and Clichéd Expressions

Pretentious, irksome and fruitless terms conceal a lack of frankness and openness. Jargon masks real meaning. People use it with unrestrained power to attain their goals and influence others to move “in the right” direction. Tosh-speak flourishes in the modern business environment. Business idioms, colloquialisms, jargon come from different contexts (sport, IT, etc.) and make sense in those domains. Once they are used as corporate jargon, the (intended) message may become ambiguous, unclear: e.g. *If they say they need to have enough bandwith to meet customer requirements*, it means they need the *capacity, time* and *resources* to understand and respond to situations quickly.

I find of particular importance Max Mallet, Brett Nelson and Chris Steiner’s (Forbes, January 26, 2012) list of *Annoying, Pretentious and Useless Business Jargon* which disapproves of the “Jargon Madness” labelling it as an “annoying gobbledegook which has mesmerized the rank and file around the globe”

(www.forbes.com/sites/groupthink/2012/01/26/the-most-annoying-pretentious-and-useless-business-jargon).

I do not wholly agree to their classification. My objection is that they include a mixture of words and phrases (nouns, adjectives, verbs, idiomatic expressions, abbreviations) in one large class of business jargon terms. From the corporate buzzwords classification point of view, they are right. However, from the linguistic point of view, all these words should be arranged according to the parts of speech they belong to, the psychological state they create or the emotions they lead to, as I suggest below:

● nouns:

buy-in – approval of a plan or decision;

leverage – influence on state finances; borrowing money invested in other business activities; debt-equity ratio: e.g. *If the American banking system had more subsidiaries in the area, it would have greater leverage. | With leverage, the company could invest millions of dollars in new production facilities. | The company had strong gains in large capitalization shares and reduced its leverage. | Statistics show they have high rates of unsecured loans warning investors about the risks of high leverage. | Heavy leverage and accelerated expansion are heading for a weak fiscal performance.*

There are nouns in business English, results of the conversion process, i.e. verbs converted into nouns (through nominalization), such as:

learnings – knowledge gained through practice or study: e.g. *critical learnings from the internship experience*;

However, the noun *learnings*, formed by conversion, is an abstract, pretentious word, that is why the verb *learn* should be preferred, since it

seems to be more natural: e.g. *I learned a lesson from that internship experience.*

ecosystem – (biological term, jargon) a community of sellers, producers and customers; a dynamic interaction between like-minded people and the connection between things;

vertical – a particular area of expertise, a career advancement/promotion, a new industry to be developed: e.g. *The aircraft software engineers serve the US manufacturing vertical.*

● nominal/idiomatic (metaphorical) collocations consisting of N+N; Adj.+N; N+prep.+N:

N+N:

price point – the price offered by a company when they want to sell a product: e.g. *They announced a fairly good price point;*

swim lane – a specific area of professional responsibility within an organization;

Tiger teams – very good IT specialists well-known for their skills with repairing computers: e.g. *As far as I know, he joined a Tiger team a couple of months ago.*

Adj.+N:

core competency – (a rather ambiguous collocation because there is no such counterpart as ‘peripheral competency’; instead, we should prefer ‘core workers’) an essential skill: e.g. *Core workers are a company’s highly-skilled people;*

bleeding edge – (only before a noun; a pretentious collocation) used to relate to the most sophisticated methods, systems or equipment: e.g. *bleeding edge product/service/technology/projects;*

corporate values – (a phony expression) used to refer to the values in which the people in a corporation believe;

burning platform – (business jargon) something that announces an upcoming change/crisis; instead, we should say, “We’re in serious trouble”.

low-hanging fruit – (cliché) a very easily achieved job or task.

N+prep.+N:

body of work – the whole output of a company, the end product, preferably the product line;

window of opportunity – (a modern expression, frequently abbreviated as WOO) a certain interval for bringing something to a good end.

● adjectives:

scalable – (very frequent among venture capitalists) more and more growing enterprises: e.g. *scalable businesses;*

robust – (with nouns such as *product, service, system, organization, or economy*) of the best quality, functioning according to a very high standard;

cut and dried – (when preceding a noun, the expression is hyphenated, i.e. *cut-and-dried solutions*) a ready-made situation, decision, or procedure; settled beforehand.

● verbs:

empower – (‘the most condescending transitive verb *ever*’ according to Mallet, Nelson and Steiner in *Forbes*, January 26, 2012) to delegate more responsibility to staff members;

synergize – (a noun converted into a verb through nominalization) to devote a common effort into attaining certain objectives;

punt – (a football/rugby metaphor) skip over / jump a point or idea which you consider low on your list of priorities at the moment;

impact – (a ‘wannabe verb’ according to Bryan Garner, editor in chief of *Black’s Law Dictionary*, 2019) used mainly to replace the commonly confused and misused verbs *affect* and *effect*; used transitively, its figurative meaning is to exert a huge, direct influence on someone or something (*syn.* to impinge on): e.g. *Our product’s sudden rise in popularity will impact our competitor’s sales.* | *Recession will impact the company.*

● phrasal verbs:

drill down – to rigorously consider all the details / aspects of a situation: e.g. *drill down through the annual trade figures, drill down into the sales statistics;*

reach out – (often considered to be a ridiculous corporate jargon complicating things as in *Reach out to them by email, or Reach them out by phone*) an unnecessary jargon term for the more frequent *let’s contact them, let’s schedule a meeting next week, let’s email them, let’s call them.*

● adverbials in prepositional phrases:

over the wall – (slang) sending an itemized billing to the client; finishing a part of the project then passing the baton to the next member of the group;

out of pocket – remaining out of funds after a business transaction.

● simple (fixed) phrases and idiomatic phrases + verbal collocations:

ducks in a row (*to get/have/put/keep ducks in a row*) – (AmE slang, idiom, cliché belonging to the professional specialized vocabulary) become efficient, well organized, to get one’s affairs sorted, to cover all bases: e.g. *Let’s call a meeting on Monday to make sure our ducks are in a row before the guests’ reception / the product’s launch.*

lots of moving parts – (about a *complex* and *intricate* business/strategy) running like the moving parts of a pinball machine: e.g. *The new product roll-out has lots of moving parts and many of our offices will be working on overtime to get the job finished.*

move the needle – (a preferred metaphor to venture capitalists) generate positive cash flow, preferably replaced by *the success of your product beats that of your competitors*;

peel the onion – investigate, gradually getting at the root of things;

take it to the next level – make progress by making things more exciting;

drinking the Kool-Aid – (pejorative connotation) blindly obeying the company’s policy;

giving 110% - (a pervasive expression in motivational speeches) squeeze the most out of yourself or your employees;

take this offline – set an issue apart/aside and return to it later, preferably in private;

make hay – (short for *make hay while the sun shines*) benefit from an opportunity, enjoy present success.

4. Classifications of Jargon and Slang Expressions in Corporate Language

In comparison with Max Mallet, Brett Nelson and Chris Steiner’s enumeration of corporate jargon terms, I further analyzed a corpus of slang expressions and colloquialisms, clichéd words and phrases which are doing the rounds in the business lexicon nowadays. Linguistically, the aim of my research has been to present some interesting common structures which paint an exciting picture in the language of corporations and bureaucracies, and to suggest a classification of business buzzwords in terms of their structure, grammatical status and content. The main resource for my analysis has been Irwin’s (2005) *The Ridiculous Business Jargon Dictionary*, a wide collection of business jargon terms online. I have identified and selected a series of relevant words and phrases which I have grouped in two categories accompanied by their explanations and examples.

4.1. Positive expressions in corporate language

As regards such expressions, I have focused on a few contexts in this specialized language according to some specific situations which concern ways of managing business changes, cultivating positive and good results-oriented thinking, or giving one’s project/product greater interest:

a) When one wants to manage incremental changes:

- idiomatic phrases

boil the frog – (an overused metaphor taken from a parable about boiling frogs) the process of managing change gradually.

b) When one follows or believes in the success of one’s dreams, stays positive and turns things around:

- nouns

Mecca – (a religious term) a financial/commercial place that attracts people like a magnet: e.g. *Wall Street is the mecca for investors and stock brokers. Silicon Valley is the mecca of computer industry. Makkah Province is being promoted as a shopping mecca.*

- nominal collocation

sweat equity – the time and effort investment put into a new project hoping to get a return for shares;

- idiomatic phrases

run sth up the flagpole – (slang, cliché, ironically associated with *Let's drop it in the pool and see if it makes a splash*) to test an idea or a plan in order to see if it catches people's interest/attention: e.g. *Before sending the memo to his employees, the chairman ran it up the flagpole at the board meeting informing his council of the merger deal.*

c) When one follows a product/project from the starting point to the completion point and has success with it:

- verbs:

productize – to develop a service/concept and turn it into a commercial product: e.g. *We'll have to productize designers' expertise to create attractive web sites. We'll have to productize technology to optimize marketing services.*

cannibalize – “if one of a company's new products cannibalizes another, it takes sales away from it” (Summers, *Longman Business English Dictionary*, 70): e.g. *The factory's cotton products were a best seller cannibalizing sales of other elastane fabrics.*

- idiomatic phrases:

in the pipeline – (colloquial) a plan/idea under way, or an event about to happen: e.g. *The travel agency has new resort facilities in the pipeline for the summer tourist season. | You now have completed several projects. There are 10 or more in the pipeline. Unlike the other withdrawn items/articles, this strong product pipeline will emerge soon | The blueprint for a new shopping mall / an integrated transport system is in the pipeline, but it will take months to get approval.*

4.2. Negative expressions in corporate language

As regards the negative phrases in business language, I have taken into consideration some situations specifically related to: describing someone's influence within a group, an unprofitable business product, a business failure/market crash, or attaining an objective by dishonest tactics.

a) When describing someone's profile, or influence over a larger group:

- nominal collocations (N + N):

muppet shuffle – (slang) the transfer of an employee with a slack job activity

to another department without firing him.

b) When one describes a product/business activity which is dragging one's down/back with difficulties jarring on one's nerves:

● nouns:

dog – (slang, an animal metaphor) a poor quality product in a falling market: e.g. *The investment in the production of jute carpets is a dog* – it is not worth the price.

c) When one describes an uncomfortable financial/commercial business situation:

● nouns:

blow-out – a business failure or a financial market crash; a quick rise in the price of raw materials: *The coal extraction blowout hit jobs in the mining sector hardest.* | *The blowout in the balance of payments will generate a strong effect on world oil prices.*

● idiomatic phrases:

burn your fingers/get your fingers burnt (be or get burned) – to face financial ruin after the failure of a high risk business deal: e.g. *The company got badly buried in shady dealings and lost a lot of money.*

d) When one uses agile product/management planning sometimes balanced with manipulative, ruthless, or dishonest tactics to attain one's objective:

● nouns:

dogfooding – (AmE. slang also called 'eat your own dog food'); when a company tests its products on employees before launching them to consumers: e.g. *We'll eat our own dogfood and test the application / prototype ourselves.*

hardball – (AmE. slang, a baseball metaphor) an aggressive/unpleasant business practice: e.g. *It's time we play hardball with them and walk away from the negotiation if they do not concede to our demands - acting ruthlessly, in an uncompromising way;*

● nominal collocations (N + N):

mushroom principle – (also known as 'blind management') minimizing employees' responsibility/contribution, thus leading to workplace-related stress: e.g. *The sales manager's mushroom behaviour led to his employees' negative attitudes and lower commitment.*

pain point – (a medical metaphor) a manipulative selling tactic pretending to solve a customer's problem: e.g. *It doesn't take long for marketers to take advantage of their customers' pain points and convince them that their products are the solution to their problems / start positioning their products as the solution to their prospects' problems.*

support pain point – an inadequate support during the main stages of a sales process: e.g. *We badly need to qualify our sales staff in monthly customer trainings to avoid support pain points and boost retention.*

- phrasal verbs:

nail sb. down to sth. – to request and receive a precise answer from someone, to extort a definite promise from somebody: e.g. *I can't open my shaormeria yet, however. First, nail me down to the rent price.* | *Our clients are worried so nail us down to a delivery date as soon as possible.* | *Before they start repairing the installation nail them down to the deadline.*

- idiomatic expressions:

snake oil salesman / peddler / dealer – an insincere salesperson, a charlatan who deceives people into accepting fake/fraudulent products; someone offering quack remedies to gullible buyers: e.g. *I can't believe I've been swayed by the promises of this snake oil salesman. I bought this supplement full of herbs and spices, without any trace of healing properties.*

open the kimono – (a business jargon with sexual connotation) to divulge the internal mechanisms of a company to an outside party – syn. *open the books.*

5. The Spectrum of Business Idiomacity

As far as the difficulty level of idioms is concerned, Cooper (1998) classifies them into three groups, i.e. *frozen idioms*, *transparent idioms*, and *opaque idioms*, insisting on the connection between the literal and figurative meanings of the expression:

the linguistic characteristics of idioms, such as the degree of syntactic flexibility and the closeness between literal and figurative meanings, affect the ease with which they can be acquired. (Cooper 257)

In terms of cultural background, Maalej (2005) considers that idioms and metaphors conjure up a language which is specific within a given culture making him state that:

Culture-specific metaphors are best represented in phraseology. Native language idioms and set phrases can blend together ethno-specific concepts pertaining to the world view of its speakers, to their national character, as well as their traditional social relations, thus becoming an embodiment of national dispositions and spiritual values. They are presented metaphorically indirectly and figuratively, which is why culture-specific metaphors produce idioms that have no corresponding counterparts in another language. (Maalej 215)

5.1. Frozen business idioms cannot undergo syntactic movement (modification), or cannot be converted into passive, preserving their figurative meaning:

e.g. *Harry kept his head above water for many years.* (Harry stayed ahead in his work/spent less than he earned - to manage to continue to live on your income or keep your business working when this is difficult because of financial problems);

e.g. *I'd swim with the sharks if I accepted the post of bank manager.* (I'd take a huge risk – be in a difficult situation).

The spectrum of idiomacity also includes *transparent* and *opaque* idioms.

5.2. Transparent business idioms are perfectly understandable, as their figurative meanings do not differ from the literal meanings of the individual constituent words (Liu 2008), in other words, there is an alignment between the figurative and literal meanings of an expression, i.e., the meanings of the constituents play a big role in understanding the entire meaning of their phraseological combination (Fernando 1996), thus leading to an easy translation of the idiom. To put it differently, the direct meaning of the constituent words helps infer the figurative sense of their combination.

a) transparent idioms:

to have a fighting chance - to have a chance to achieve something (if you try very hard);

to be in the firing line - to be blamed/attacked for an organization's mistakes (often unfairly).

b) semi-transparent idioms:

to kick goals - to achieve/reach good results, especially in reference to sales;

to start the ball rolling - to start something happening (to break the ice);

to keep several balls in the air - to deal with more than one job/problem at the same time: e.g. *The company risks losing credibility/direction by keeping too many balls in the air.*

5.3. As regards *opaque business idioms*, the literal meaning bears little or no relationship with the figurative meaning in the sense that the non-literal language deviates from the literal meanings of the constituent words to create/convey a more complicated meaning or heightened effect (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2015). The literal meaning of the constituent words does not help in any way infer the actual meaning of the idiom:

a) semi-opaque idioms (the figurative meaning is not connected to or does not intersect with that of the constituent parts):

flying a kite - 1. initiating a project with no defined end point;

2. making a suggestion about a plan in order to get people's opinion: e.g. *The manager has taken the opportunity to fly the economic policy kite.*

moving the goal posts

1. changing the parameters of an ongoing project: e.g. *How can we obtain a trade discount if the producer keeps moving the goalposts?*
2. changing the rules, limits for something while someone is trying to do something, making it more difficult for them: e.g. *They keep moving the goalposts so we don't know where we stand. As a result, our long-term project financing for brownfield development starts being compromised.*

b) opaque idioms (the meaning of the idiom totally differs from the literal meanings of its parts):

to feed the gorilla - to ensure that the core part of a company is solid before trying more interesting or high-risk projects;

to take the knock - to sell at a loss: e.g. *Unit sales of cars took a knock of £4 million last year.*

Depending on one's cultural background, the plentiful supply of idiomatic expressions, which pervade the international business environment, have to be learnt as complete phrases, each with its own meaning. That is why it is best to learn each combination as a phrase, rather than try to remember the adjective, noun and verb separately.

6. Conclusions

As the quintessence of colloquial speech, slang draws on a variety of topics giving us a feel for how language is used in real life situations. Due to the possible variations of phrases used in spoken language, we increasingly develop the power of expression, recycle previous language (slang/clichéd words already incorporated into the standard usage) and stage a new one by keeping up with current slang trends.

On the basis of the above classifications it can be concluded that, although jargon and slang clearly break the established linguistic rules, it is this insubordination which feeds the speakers' desire to make the seriousness of the dominant tone less unpleasant and amuses the hearers, making them enjoy the playfulness of the conversational tone. The attempt of the article was to discuss and insist on the specific categories of idioms (and their common origins) which are easier or more difficult to understand because of their high/vs/low frequency vocabulary.

Seen retrospectively, the most common grammatical patterns in idioms have been examined. The survey covered certain categories of idioms

(linked either by subject area or structure), each with its own (often unexpected) meaning. The explanations provided were likely to ‘fix’ the meaning of these expressions which are more difficult to understand and would be almost impossible to guess.

Thus, communication across linguistic boundaries enables international businesspeople to add new language patterns to their repertoires in order to build rapport with their foreign business counterparts. Therefore, mastering nonstandard forms, such as slang and jargon, can prevent the communication process from being short-circuited, minimize verbal misunderstandings and set the tone for successful business contacts abroad.

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