

# Acronyms and Jargon, the New Language for the Twenty-First Century

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When I was in college, I decided it would be “cool” to take Mandarin Chinese as my foreign language. From the time I walked in the door, the teacher spoke only Chinese, leaving me in a state of panic. That situation lasted for about four days, until I could get an appointment with my advisor and drop the course. Because I took Latin for four years in high school, I simply had no frame of reference for Chinese.

If you are in a technical field, such as IT, finance, law or medicine, you are aware of the heavy reliance on jargon and acronyms. For those of you on the inside, these “buzz words” may make perfect sense. However, for those of us who are new to the field or have less industry knowledge, this is a nightmare. In fact, some business writers caution that acronyms and jargon have become the new language for the twenty-first century. Don Watson, author of *Death Sentence, the Decay of Public Language*, describes the use of this new language as a serious disease.

People unfamiliar with acronyms and jargon struggle to keep up. They feel exhausted and frustrated by every meeting because they are constantly translating what has been said into words they understand. They search for a frame of reference when they hear statements like “doctrinal differences” or “reinforcing loops” when referring to managing their networks. As a result, listeners often tune out. You may notice that audience members seem to get a glazed look on their faces after a while. Allan Pease, an author and public speaker, says acronyms and jargon reduce communication and remembering. What ever happened to the philosophy of speaking to the “seventh grade” level?

Often times, I hear the “yes, but” excuse from technical presenters. They feel acronyms, in particular, are justified because most of the people in the audience do have an understanding of them. They insist that the majority would be insulted if acronyms were not used. I beg to differ. Everyone should quickly understand the message, not just some. It shows respect. If you were at a party and the majority of people spoke Greek, even though they understood English, it would not be okay. Additionally, if you were the person who didn’t speak the language, you would look for ways to escape, in the same way that people who are not familiar with your acronyms do.

What is the answer? The answer is either to eliminate acronyms and jargon all together (would any of us mind?) or to educate listeners by defining your terms, creating analogies, or by providing easily understood power point slides, whiteboard drawings or hand outs. If you choose to speak in this foreign language, you must define all questionable terms several times, and your definitions should be consistent, regardless of the media you use.

Obviously, as speakers our goal is to sell our ideas. To do that, we need people to understand and embrace our recommendations. They should not, as Don Watson says, “feel they are taking a journey in fog management.” If people only have a vague understanding of what you said, they will not be able to do your cause justice. The simpler we make the message, the more likely people will be to get it and be able to recommend these ideas to other decision makers.

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