

How to Clean Out Your Linguistic Closet

By Joseph Sommerville, PhD
Guest Contributor

When Spring arrives, our thoughts will turn to Spring cleaning. But we don't have to wait to begin cleaning out our linguistic closets. You'll be more effective in your language use if you'll get rid of those worn out words, those phrases that no longer fit and those expressions that have lost their elasticity. This is a particularly apt metaphor because as Aristotle wrote in *The Rhetoric*, "Words are the clothes to our ideas." To get rid of the clutter and keep what fits, take a good hard look at these four common types of clutter- the cliché, the platitude, meaningless words and jargon.

A cliché is an overused word or phrase. "I've been busy as a bee because I've been working like a dog." "That made me hungry as a bear so I ate like a horse and now I'm full as a tick." "I hope I haven't been barking up the wrong tree. What I really didn't want to do was open up a can of worms." "I trust that won't be my swan song." Besides taking you on a barnyard tour, didn't that sound trite and worn out? It's clutter because it lacks originality. If you're used to hearing it, get rid of it and go shopping for some new expressions. A British market-research firm recently surveyed young professionals to find out how often these professionals used jargon. Sixty five percent said they regularly used it. The reason they gave was they felt they had to use jargon in order to keep up with their colleagues- even if they didn't know what the words meant. Here are some current clichés to avoid: cutting edge, core competency, and interface.

A platitude is a cliché with attitude. It is also a common saying, but one that purports to be a guide for action or advice about a situation. The problem is, we get contradictory advice. Consider this: "Absence makes the heart grow fonder, but out of sight, out of mind." "Too many cooks spoil the broth, but many hands make light work." "Nothing ventured, nothing gained, but, fools jump in where angels fear to tread." What these examples show us is that far from being rules to live by, platitudes are simply formulaic sayings that we rely on. Try replacing platitudes with proverbs. You won't find contradictory proverbs.

A meaningless word is one that relies so heavily on the person using it for interpretation that we're unsure what it means outside of a specific context. Some examples of meaningless words include: A lot, a few, many, some, expensive, cheap, affordable, a long time, quickly, soon." Upon moving to Singapore, I noticed that Americans got upset when a clerk told them they'd have to wait a while. To Americans, this seemed to be somewhere between thirty minutes to an hour. To Singaporeans, it meant less than five minutes. The meaninglessness of the phrase created much confusion.

Jargon is language that is specific to a profession, an industry or even a hobby. Jargon can be useful as a shorthand or a more economical way of expressing yourself when you are with people who understand it. But, because our own jargon seems natural, we sometimes forget that others don't get it. I've heard financial planners talking about 401K's, tax deferred contributions vs. tax-free contributions. I once heard a financial planner joke that with tax time so near, you shouldn't be a "Roth Sloth." Another form of jargon is the abbreviation. BTU (British Thermal Units), GUI (Graphical User Interface) and EKG (Electro Cardiogram) have meanings for people who use them daily, but can be obscure to those outside the particular trade or profession.

Most of us have lots of clutter in our linguistic closets, and we might as well try to get rid of some of it. Clichés, platitudes, meaningless words and jargon should be the first to go. When you can focus on getting rid of the extras, your ideas will be clearer, your prose cleaner and your arguments more persuasive,

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