

WHAT'S THAT YOU SAY?

By Stephanie MacKendrick, CWC President

I get peeved when I read business books, articles or even job ads and find that I need an interpreter to wade through the latest slew of impenetrable jargon. These « words-du-jour » come and go, as ephemeral as women's fashions. We've had paradigm shifts and hard stops, metrics, outcome-based this, total-quality-based that.

Common situations and issues become impenetrable masses of words that you think you might understand, but you're really not sure. After repeated exposure, you get a general sense of what they mean and start using them too, even if you haven't taken the time to fully understand them. But they sound good.

We also have jargon whose purpose is to prevent or delay understanding, rather than the more usual purpose of explanation. For instance, when the term was first used, how could anyone ever have guessed that «right-sizing » meant you were about to be deprived of your job?

But I think George Orwell said it better. A friend e-mailed me Orwell's 1946 essay *Politics and the English Language*. While he was writing about politics, he could have been writing about business-speak, psycho-babble or any of the other variants of verbal chicanery we are exposed to. Orwell wrote : «In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible...they can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face. »

As an example, Orwell cites Russian totalitarianism in the time of Stalin. « He cannot say outright, 'I believe in killing off your opponents when you can get good results by doing so' ». Probably, therefore, he will 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 of a transitional period, and that the rigours which the Russian people have been called upon to undergo have been amply justified in the sphere of concrete achievement. »

Sounds much like the explanation of «collateral damage » for civilian casualties in military campaigns or, one of my favourites, the term «correction » to describe when the stock market tanks and your portfolio is suddenly worth half of what it was the week before.

Orwell makes the point that by uncritically adopting the bloated euphemisms of jargon – whether political, business or personal – we are also disengaging our minds in the act of communicating. If you string together tired, familiar phrases, you have not stopped to think about what you are really trying to say and which words would best express each thought. His conclusion is that lazy language begets lazy thinking.

Mostly, I agree. How language is used is an important factor in societal change. Use of language both reflects and has had an impact on how women are perceived. While I think that quibbling to the point of replacing human with «huperson » or woman with « woperson » to avoid the unconscious masculine bias of some aspects of our language is ridiculous, I do appreciate efforts to be inclusive.

I think it's a great improvement that I rarely get letters now that, if they aren't sure who I am, are not automatically addressed «Dear Sir », implying that anyone worth

writing to must be male. I think recognizing the potential of women to achieve beyond home and hearth in the use of language continues to be a crucial step in changing society. Equally important to ensuring comparable opportunities for women is that authority figures, executives and other power symbols are not automatically assumed to be male and therefore referred to as «he » or «him » in common usage. It's good to hear «he or she » used as an example, not just « he ».

Of course, there's the Famous Five, a group of courageous women who took on the Supreme Court of Canada and Great Britain in the 1920s to have women declared «persons » under the law, (and therefore eligible for a number of important roles, including sitting in the Senate). I believe that their focus on that one word, «persons », was essential to the progress of women in this country.

One hopes that the war on terrorism can make similar progress, wrestling as they are with the definition of detainees in Cuba as « illegal combatants » (non-human, no rights).

It seems that words can make a difference.