

**BUSINESS-SPEAK:
JARGON AND SLANG CORPORATE EXPRESSIONS
HAULING AROUND THE BUSINESS ARENA**

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***Abstract:** The paper is focused on jargon and slang, whose use may affect the way businesspeople think and develop professional relations. To clear up possible misinterpretations, I have analyzed a corpus of slang expressions, colloquialisms, clichéd words and phrases in the business lexicon. My research is a linguistic approach to jargon/slang terms, which takes into account their positive or negative connotations.*

***Keywords:** business, boosting effect, jargon, negative connotations, slang*

1. Introduction

When a language is the person’s second language, jargon, slang, colloquialisms, or clichés could be misinterpreted and become an additional problem in culture interactions. The people with whom we associate and share experiences develop a common transmission channel, speak the same language, and use the same *restricted codes*. When using the host language, a good rule to follow is to be especially careful about how we *elaborate these codes*, so that they ensure that we understand the linguistic environment (verbal messages) in which communication is taking place.

Making an effort to learn our business counterpart’s language widely helps us begin to think from their perspective and grasp the meaning of certain words. Research shows that language misunderstandings due to inappropriate vocabulary usage are numerous in intercultural business situations (Dodd 1997; Weaver 1998; Samovar and Porter 2004). To operate effectively, mastering the specialized terminology used in a particular field, on the one hand, and the idioms, the informal words and phrases associated with certain community groups, on the other hand, are of considerable importance. Phrasing and word usage shape people’s profile and determine who is a member of an ‘in-group’ and who is not.

Commonly acknowledged as the language (specialized vocabulary) peculiar to a trade, profession, or a group of people (Andersson and Trudgill 1990; Nash 1993; Burke and Porter 1995; Allan and Burridge 2006; Mattiello 2008), jargon is the technical terminology (phraseology) used by specialized groups in the fields of science, law, bureaucracy, business, and so on. People sharing habits of word usage, such as “bureaucratese” or “legalese”, have a common work-related interest and use jargon as an “in group” language or as a sign of solidarity among in-groupers. Jargon cannot be tabooed, nor can it be translated into “ordinary English”. If we tried, we would simply distort the message.

2. Characteristics of nonstandard forms of language

Allan and Burridge (2006: 58) highlight two main functions of *jargon* that would keep “out-groupers” out, stating that jargon is used:

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.

Jargon users erect communication barriers to out-groupers who might feel culturally uncomfortable when removed from their usual linguistic environment. Possessing a good knowledge of the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of the host language sets the tone for doing business overseas, but it still isn't a guarantee of gaining cultural awareness. Nonstandard forms of language, such as jargon or slang, can further complicate things and cause potential miscommunication. The linguistic “outsider” should try to adjust to the culture shock (Ferraro 2006: 73) and get “inside” the other language and culture, coping with frustrations and playing down the possibility of communication failure.

Unlike the conservative nature of jargon, *slang* is regarded as more unconventional, nonconformist, open to dispute, a clear rule-breaker. It is restricted to the colloquial style (sometimes offensive), the language of a “highly colloquial and contemporary type, considered stylistically inferior to standard formal, and even polite informal, speech” (Allan and Burridge 2006: 69). It is often seen as a composite of dissimulation devices and a secret sublanguage, being synthetically defined as “very informal usage in vocabulary and idiom that is characteristically more metaphorical, playful, elliptical, vivid, and ephemeral than ordinary language”. (Stein 1979: 1235)

In agreement with Anderson and Trudgill's (1990) *Bad Language*, Mattiello (2008) detects dissimilarities between jargon and slang, pointing out the familiar and spontaneous nature of slang terminology in comparison to technical jargon, and emphasizing the slang's lack of prestige and pretentiousness. This makes her aptly conclude 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 2008: 35)

There are various sources of business imagery, such as sports (football, baseball, basketball, etc.), aviation, military activity or religion. Imagistic metaphors step powerfully in almost everything we do: setting up a business, selling products, negotiating contracts, making decisions, running projects, generating success/profit, implementing changes, taking new opportunities, or applying methods and techniques.

The spoken business language abounds in overused, sometimes outrageous phrases, which businesspeople tend to develop a preference for. Thus, exploring business English slang and jargon has to be considered from both linguistic and psychological perspectives. Such phrases usually express states and emotions, character and personality.

3. Classifications of jargon corporate expressions

The purpose of my research has been to present a linguistic approach to the jargon/slang terms, according to the types of business activities they represent. There are some interesting common structures occurring in the language of corporations and bureaucracies, with both positive and negative connotations.

In my research, I have found of particular importance Irwin's (2005) *The Ridiculous Business Jargon Dictionary*, the largest collection of business jargon terms online, which served as the main resource for my analysis. Irwin includes an enumeration of words and phrases (nouns, adjectives, verbs, idiomatic expressions) in one large class of business jargon/slang terms. From the business buzzwords classification point of view, he is right. However, from the linguistic point of view, all these words and idioms used in business could be further arranged according to the parts of speech or structures they belong to, as I suggest below. I have searched for some of the most relevant words and phrases and have analysed, explained, and illustrated them, grouping them in two large classes: those used in positive contexts, and those that have a negative meaning.

3.1. Positive phrases with a boosting effect

The positive words and phrases that are specific to this specialized language have a boosting effect and are of utmost importance for business English. I have taken into consideration a few contexts in some specific situations, characteristic of business deals, workplace relations, contract agreements, product selling, negotiations between parties, and so on. A distinction was made among situations specifically related to: giving one's job/project/ideas greater interest, safeguarding a company's reputation, taking the right/the best decisions, grouping energy boost, searching for new challenges.

I have suggested a classification of the words and phrases that takes into account their structure, grammatical status and meaning:

a) When one needs to give one's job/study/discussions a spark of interest, curiosity and excitement:

- nominal collocations (Adj. + N)

deep dive – an in-depth study or exploration, a minute analysis of a situation or topic: e.g., *deep dive workshop, take a deep dive on a report*;

blue ocean – (slang, a sea metaphor) high potential profits or markets with endless opportunities: e.g. *This wine company will be more successful and profitable on a blue ocean market.*

- verbs

bucketize – to organize information/data in terms of complexity, accuracy and priorities: e.g. *Bucketizing often helps portfolio managers group their investment assets into stocks and bonds.*

unpack – (transitive) look into/examine the details of a problem in order to clear it up: e.g., *unpack a concept/statement* – reveal

- idiomatic phrases

ride herd on – (AmE, a metaphor alluding to a cowboy riding on his horse to keep a herd of cattle in order); closely watch/control someone's activity: e.g. *The manager is always riding herd on his employees, making sure they follow the rule. / He always works late riding herd on the day-to-day business.*

bat a thousand – (AmE baseball phrase) a 100% success rate/a great sense of achievement; to reach perfection, to have a perfect record: e.g. *He's got a \$10,000 commission after reaching the summer sales target. He's really batting a thousand!*

b) When one wants to safeguard the reputation of one's company, and one should get everyone in agreement and make sure the right decisions are taken:

- Adj.+ N

due diligence – working hard and being careful and thorough to make good business decisions, checking the quality of products/investments before selling them in order to protect investors, taking reasonable action to keep people and their property safe: e.g. *We had to carry out/perform/conduct due diligence on the software packages and we think \$1,700 is a fair offer; The group's latest acquisition was subject to a due diligence review/assessment by the consulting agency and approval from the European Corporate finance organization.*

- N + N

decision sniper – (military metaphor) influencer; a person with an essential role in winning a business/sales process, who influences the decision maker: e.g. *He raised a question just when the CEO's decision was about to be put to vote; a real decision sniper!*

- idiomatic phrases (frequent in management/politics)

sing from the same hymn sheet/book – agree about a subject: e.g. *Union officials need to be singing from the same hymn before trying to impose the oil embargo against Venezuela.*

c) When one wants to keep an eye open for bursting ideas, group energy boost, feel in charge of the results and aim for precaution in choosing the best decision:

- nouns

lens(es) – a point of view; differing opinions in the workplace: e.g. *If a manager peers through the employee lens, he gets a better understanding of what is important to the success of a company.*

- verbs

interface – (about companies) to work together on a particular problem, making the best of their specialized knowledge (syn. *communicate, interact*): e.g. *We attempt to employ a team of experienced consultants who can interface between accountancy and the law;*

- phrasal verbs

hammer out – to reach a consensus on an agreement/contract after long discussions or serious arguments: e.g. *Bank managers are trying to hammer out some good deals on mortgages at the moment.*

- idiomatic expressions

foot on the ball time – (a football metaphor) time when one is on the alert and prepares to take control of a situation: e.g. *If you give me a little more foot on the ball time, I'll get the documents signed and sealed.*

keep one's powder dry – (colloquial, military phrase) bide one's time / not to be in a rush, remain calm: e.g. *Until trade talks look promising, you'd better keep your powder dry. | There are rumours that the CEO's going to resign. Don't sell your shares immediately. Keep your powder dry and see if they're right.*

d) When one tries to achieve the results that one has hoped for through hard work, perseverance and positive thinking:

- nouns

blow-out – a thriving period for sales or profits: e.g. *Real estate transactions are a real blow-out in spring.*

hook – something that is appealing and arouses customers' interest/attention: e.g. *Hotel compensation vouchers are one of the hooks granted to overseas travellers.*

- nominal collocations (N + prep + N)

meat on the bone – (a food/animal expression) profits/growing capital; adding specific details to an issue/idea to make it more complete, clear and interesting: e.g. *Opening a clothes shop will put more meat on the bone and the business will flourish.*

- Adj + N

full-court press – (a basketball phrase) exerting considerable pressure/influence: e.g. *If we want to regain influence on the capital market, we'll need a full-court press from our investment managers.*

gold mine – a business activity leading to large profits: e.g. *The advertising campaign turned out to be a gold mine.*

white smoking meeting – (a religious metaphor alluding to the white smoke coming from a chimney on the Vatican roof and announcing the election of a new Pope) a meeting where an agreement on a big contract has been reached: e.g. *After seven hours of fruitful negotiations, we finally see white smoke in protocol closure.*

- (phrasal) verbs

hook – to succeed in making someone interested in something or attracted to something: e.g. *Apple's new iPhone model succeeds in hooking young people. | Low rents help hook many students in the area.*

hook up with – to agree to work and invest together with another company for a common goal: e.g. *Germany hooks up with Austria and Norway to build 400 hydrogen power stations in Europe next year.*

- prepositional phrases (prep +N)

in the black – earning a profit; not indebted: e.g. *The insurance company is in the black after turning itself into an allfinanz group.*

on the make – (disapproval) power-hungry; money-grabber, intent on gain (in a dishonest way): e.g. *He is a young ambitious businessman on the make who furthers his own career.*

- idiomatic phrases

jockey/manoeuvre/jostle for position – (Am. E. a horse-racing metaphor) to compete strongly in order to outdistance one's rivals, usually by dishonest methods: e.g. *After his resignation, old rivals began to jockey for power to run the department.*

get a bigger/better/enough bang for the buck – (slang) getting something valuable in return for the money paid; a favourable cost-to-benefit ratio: e.g. *The hotel is great and the prices are small, I think the company will get a lot of bang for the buck.*

3.2. Business negative phrases

Apart from its positive, cheerful features, business jargon can also connote weakness, pain, discomfort, betrayal, cruelty, hypocrisy, which may amplify obstacles in communication and may lay the grounds for discontent, potential conflicts, and so on. I have distinguished among terms related to particular situations describing persons' profiles, their influence within a group, their unprofitable business activity, or uncomfortable financial or commercial business activity. Business jargon or business speak may sometimes portray negative information in a more favourable manner:

a) When describing persons' profiles, reactions, their influence over a larger group, etc.:

- nominal collocations (Adj + N; N + N)

dead wood – an ineffective/unproductive worker: e.g. *He got rid of / cleared out the dead wood once he stepped into the role of project manager.*

marzipan layer – “people in a company or organization who have important jobs but who are just below the highest position” (Longman Business English Dictionary 2007: 296); middle management: e.g. *Eliminating the marzipan layer will ease the flow of ideas and the link between senior managers and customers.*

- verbal collocations

make waves – (Am. E. slang) to pick a quarrel in an inappropriate moment, cause trouble: e.g. *You're making the biggest waves. You shouldn't wonder why you're the first on the layoff list.*

- acronyms

HiPPO – (acronym of *Highest Paid Person's Opinion*; a homonym of the animal abbreviation) a high-rank official/senior executive who is a key-decision maker in a corporation: e.g. *What happens when a HiPPO controls large corporate communications?*

b) When one loses control over things, experiences a meltdown, because things are going bad:

- nominal collocations (Adj + N)

dead stick – (an aviation metaphor, alluding to an emergency landing) a stalled project: e.g. *Getting this dead stick back on schedule might take some time.*

- idiomatic phrases

sunset a project/product/service – (an imagistic metaphor) to cancel a project: e.g. *Sunsetting this partnership now will have a strong impact on the bottom line.*

be snowed under (with sth) – (a winter phrase; be buried under an avalanche) to be overwhelmed with work; to have a backlog of work: e.g. *The director keeps snowing me under with many time-consuming tasks.*

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

- nouns

knock – the action of badly/hard hitting a product and making its price fall: e.g. *Lee Cooper store group will take a series of knocks due to frequent clearance sales of clothing items.*

knock-off – (slang) a fake/counterfeit product: e.g. *Beware of artificial silk knock-offs of pure / natural silk garments.*

- verbs

knock – to seriously affect someone/something: e.g. *The faulty articles have severely knocked buyers' confidence.*

d) When one describes an uncomfortable business situation, either financial, commercial or related to the workplace, or the state of being stuck in a bad patch:

- nominal collocations (N + prep +N; adj. + N)

bag of snakes – (slang, animal metaphor) persons whose behaviour or intention is bad, sly, rude; a poisonous office atmosphere (a nest of vipers);

a business with difficult and often unforeseen problems: e.g. *Having the courage to participate in an open tendering with the richest investors for the construction of the motorway is like mingling with a bag of snakes in the hope of winning the auction.*

feeding frenzy – (esp. AmE., a marine animal metaphor referring to an aggressive group attack of sharks or piranhas on a prey) a wild attack on someone/something; a situation in which buyers/investors become overexcited about something and voraciously try to get an advantage of it; frantic competition or rivalry for something: e.g. *It wasn't a quiet meeting, it was a feeding frenzy from the major shareholder.* | *The chief of the supermarket faced a feeding frenzy of the crowd which rushed to the sector of household appliances.*

- nouns

hot-desking – “when people working in an office do not each have their own desk, but work where there is one available” (Longman Business English Dictionary 2007: 254): e.g. *Salespeople are often on the road so that they are forced to hot-desk and share offices.*

- idiomatic phrases

lose the bubble – (a nautical metaphor) to lose contact with somebody or something; be confused: e.g. *Ok, I admit it, I've lost the bubble of customer reviews lately.*

be on the rocks – (a nautical metaphor) a business activity experiencing difficulties, such as financial hardship; a company going bust: e.g. *Heavy losses from selling frozen meat will put the firm on the rocks.* | *This broker is on the rocks. As an accountant, I advise you to withdraw your money from it.*

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 burned in shady dealings and lost a lot of money. I am afraid the investor burned his fingers badly.*

4. Conclusion

Businesspeople's informal conversations are loosely structured, with a plentiful supply of idiomatic expressions, colloquialisms, clichés which shape a group's sense of identity and cohesiveness (Allen 1998: 878-883).

The unconventionality of the jargon/slang lexicon is evident in the expressions analyzed, allowing business people to communicate more easily. Although they clearly break the established communication rules, it is this insubordination that supports the speakers' desire to make the seriousness of the dominant tone less unpleasant or severe.

Through topic-based idioms, animal, biology, sport, cowboy, military, food, religion, medical, aviation, or water metaphors, the slang/jargon user makes certain business situations more challenging and more relaxed.

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