

18 December 2018

Media release

“External career development opportunities” named Worst Word of the Year

Plain English Foundation has voted **external career development opportunities** as the worst word or phrase of 2018.

Former ABC chairman Justin Milne used the phrase when he wanted to fire staff. With this, our public broadcaster joined a long list of institutions incapable of using simple English to describe something difficult.

“For years now, corporations everywhere have contorted the English language to avoid an unpalatable reality,” said the Foundation’s Executive Director Dr Neil James.

“They use words like demising, disestablishing or deactivating to avoid saying ‘job loss’,” Dr James said. “And apparently, General Motors isn’t closing 5 of its plants in 2019 – they are just **unallocated**”.

Each year, Plain English Foundation gathers dozens of examples of the worst words and phrases to highlight the importance of clear public language. 2018 was a particularly poor year for corporate doublespeak and spin.

The banking Royal Commission revealed that bank staff didn’t receive bonuses for higher sales. They enjoyed **short term variable remuneration [to] elicit discretionary effort**.

In the tech world, Amazon introduced **voice sniffing** (eavesdropping), while Facebook labelled Russian election tampering as **coordinated inauthentic behavior**.

Overseas, migrant children separated from their parents were held in what looked like cages but were described as **tender age shelters**.

“What these words and phrases have in common is that they deliberately intend to deceive,” Dr James said. “By using complex euphemisms, corporations try to avoid being accountable for their actions”.

The Foundation also noted companies are continuing to coin ugly non-words like **simplesness, microgapping** and **situationship** to sell their wares.

“Our language shouldn’t be for sale to corporate interests,” Dr James said.

2018 was also a strong year for mixed metaphor, with the winning entry involving a **drowning man grabbing at a fig leaf**. The lost in translation prize went to Coca Cola for the vending machines greeting New Zealanders with “Kia ora, mate” (**hello, death**).

The list is rounded out with the non-apology of the year, when Twitter admitted it **over rotated on one value**.

The full list of 2018’s worst words and phrases follows.

Dr Neil James, Executive Director, Plain English Foundation is **available for interview** over the Christmas and holiday period.

Email: neil.james@plainenglishfoundation.com

Phone for 18–21 December: 02 9290 1288 and from 21 December on: 0416 001 500

Full shortlist



Winner

External career development opportunities

Former ABC chairman Justin Milne admitted he doesn't fire staff, he simply offers them "external career development opportunities".



1 Spin and doublespeak

Using short-term variable remuneration [to] elicit a discretionary effort

Commonwealth Bank CEO Matt Comyn tied himself in knots at the Banking Royal Commission this year.

Unwilling to admit the bank used bonuses to encourage staff to sell more products, he instead said that the bank offers "short-term variable remuneration" which "elicits discretionary effort".

When pushed, he did concede that "variable remuneration" was linked to poor customer outcomes.

Tender age shelters

Talking about the forcible separation of children from their parents at the US-Mexico border, the Trump administration used the euphemism "tender age shelters" to describe where the children are held. Footage shows those facilities include concrete floors fenced with chicken-wire – more accurately described as cages.

Unallocated plants

Staff at 5 General Motors plants were left confused after the manufacturer reported the plants "will be unallocated in 2019". This means the 5 plants will be closed, with up to 14,000 employees losing their jobs.

Coordinated inauthentic behavior

This mouthful of a phrase is Facebook's euphemism for Russian election-tampering. We're not sure why Facebook needed to make this issue any more opaque than it already is.

Voice sniffing

Virtual assistants such as Amazon's Alexa seem to have given us "voice sniffing", also known as eavesdropping.

Amazon patented a so-called "voice sniffer algorithm" in 2017, and terms such as voice-sniffing technology came into general use in 2018.



2 Frankenwords

Simplesness

The corporate world continued to mangle the English language for profit. Among the worst was this “simples” explanation from Jennifer Williams, chief marketing officer of Compare the Market:

“Our Simplesness philosophy aims to simplify the process of comparing confusing products and remove the fear of making a bad decision by empowering consumers with the information and tools they need to make confident purchasing decisions”.

Situationship

Situationship is apparently the new label for a committed yet undefined relationship. Or as one author describes it, somewhere between “more than casual dating” and “not quite fully serious relationship”.

While clarifying the muddy waters of modern dating is worthwhile, we’re just not sure this word helps.

Microgapping

Another new term for a short holiday, microgapping involves taking a quick break. Launched by the Visit England campaign, this one feels like someone spent too long thinking about how to talk to millennials.

Microgapping narrowly beat some other new terms for travel that we’ve spotted this year: jobbymoon, (the break you take in between jobs) and painmoon (a break you take when something bad happens to you). While taking time off to deal with grief is often a good idea, calling it a “painmoon” is definitely not.



3 Mixed metaphor of the year

A drowning man grabbing at a fig leaf

“Let’s call it what it is — Mr Morrison has leapt on the tweet like a drowning man will grab at a fig leaf”.

While we couldn’t go past this mangled metaphor from Labor Leader Bill Shorten as our category winner, it was just one in a rich field of mixed metaphors this year.

Close runners up included the commentator who described a stand-off between Donald Trump and Amazon boss Jeff Bezos this way:

“You want to play with me in the sandbox, then you better put on your helmet, pack a lunch and bring your flashlight”.

And an Australian journalist described politician Craig Kelly 4 ways at once:

“Suddenly he stopped being just a background hiss on the office television, and stood out. Like a sore thumb. Then kept digging this morning”.



4 Lost in translation

Hello, death

By combining the Maori “Kia ora” with the English “mate”, Coca-Cola thought it was getting local in some advertising on New Zealand vending machines.

However, “mate” also means “death” in Maori, as most Kiwis know from the Ka Mate haka. So many read the message entirely in Maori, which translates as “Hello, death”.



5 Non-apology of the year

Over rotated on one value

When discussing why Twitter had suspended a controversial columnist from the platform, CEO Jack Dorsey explained: “We likely over-rotated on one value, & then let the rules react to rapidly changing circumstances (some we helped create)”.