Plain English Foundation®

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Media release

"Alternative facts" named Worst Word of the Year

Plain English Foundation has voted **alternative facts** as the worst word or phrase of 2017.

"With Donald Trump dominating international politics, 2017 saw some of the world's worst ever political spin," said Dr Neil James, Executive Director of Plain English Foundation.

"In a post-truth era, our politicians can apparently give **alternative facts** and be **instinctively correct**, regardless of reality," Dr James said. "Yet a fact cannot have an alternative that is also a fact."

The Trump camp also collected the Foundation's prize for tautology of the year, with Trump tweeting **fabricated lies made up by the #FakeNews media.**

Each year, Plain English Foundation gathers dozens of examples of the worst words and phrases to highlight the importance of clear public language.

While political doublespeak ruled, corporate spin also featured this year. When security staff violently dragged a passenger off a plane, the airline downplayed the incident as an **overbook situation** that led to **involuntary de-boarding**.

"This kind of language tries to minimise scrutiny and evade accountability," Dr James said.

Sexual harassment scandals led to some of the worst non-apologies of recent years, such as Don Burke's admission that **I might have terrified a few people, or whatever.**

"A particularly worrying trend of the year was the growth in Frankenwords: non-existent words that corporations make up to market themselves," Dr James said.

For example, gambling companies exhorted us to have a **Merry Puntmas** or experience more **joyments**, and a new bank marketed its staff as the **Betterers.**

"While the English language evolves, we should call corporations to account for inventing ugly non-words in their own interests," Dr James said. "There's something particularly inappropriate about a gambling company redefining Christmas to promote its product."

Jargon and buzzwords also featured in this year's list, such as **uncommanded engine operations** (a propeller falling off a plane), **co-living** (flatting or renting) and achieving an **optimised non-linear trajectory** (something about electricity emissions).

2017 was also the year of **garriage** and **fixacious, Kwaussie** and **WAxit**, and perhaps the most enigmatic sign ever erected in Australia.

The full list of 2017's worst words and phrases follows.

Dr Neil James, Executive Director, Plain English Foundation is **available for interview** over Christmas until the New Year.

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Plain English
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Full shortlist

🏆 Winner

Alternative facts

On his first day in the job, President Donald Trump's then press secretary lied about the size of the crowd attending the inauguration. Defending him, counsellor Kellyanne Conway said the secretary had merely given "alternative facts".

Just to clarify, a fact cannot have an "alternative" that is also a fact.

🔀 1 Spin and doublespeak

Instinctive correctness

The Trump administration also gave us "instinctive correctness". The press secretary said Trump was "instinctively correct" that disgraced national security advisor Michael Flynn had committed "no violation".

So if you are ever wrong about something, you can simply claim you were "instinctively correct". And day is actually night.

Involuntary de-boarding

While political doublespeak was bad in 2017, some corporations also put a spin on poor customer service.

When a video of security staff dragging a bleeding passenger from his assigned seat went viral, United Airlines tried to downplay the "overbook situation" that led to an "involuntary de-boarding".

The CEO finally issued a lukewarm apology for having to "reaccommodate" passengers, igniting a social media firestorm.

Garriage

Australia had its own spin when it came to social issues. As the debate raged on same sex marriage, a spokesperson for the "No" campaign suggested we consider alternatives such as "garriage", "unism" or "pairage" instead of extending the definition of marriage.

Sexual risk avoidance

Orwellian trends in American government continued when the State Department started to describe sex education as "sexual risk avoidance".

Then to up the ante, health agencies were sent a list of forbidden words, never to be used in budget documents. Science-based advice is now to be known as "science in consideration with community standards and wishes".

2 Frankenwords

Merry Puntmas

2017 was a notably bad year for companies making up ugly words to promote a product. Betting company Sportsbet came up with "Merry Puntmas" to celebrate the big racing season in October and November.

Apart from bringing up Christmas way too soon, there's something particularly inappropriate about turning a religious and family celebration into a gambling promotion.

Betterers

When GE set up an Australian bank, its marketing tagline was "the Betterers":

> These are the Betterers. Latitude Financial's personal loan specialists. Need a better holiday, a better car, or a better whatever? Talk to the Betterers.

Surely they could have come up with something better themselves.

Joyments

The umbrella company for Australian lotteries added "joyments" to the 2017 abuses of the English language. Joyments, they explain, are those everyday moments of joy, like "opening a brand new, even better, cat meme" or having "a scratchie in your pocket".

While we wouldn't dare question how much joy people get from cat memes, there is certainly little joy in "joyments" as a word.

Kwaussie

When the Australian National Dictionary picked "Kwaussie" as their word of the year, quite a few people were surprised. Apparently this hybrid of Kiwi and Aussie describes Barnaby Joyce's dual citizen dilemma. But no-one except the dictionary had heard of the word, which just isn't how language works.

WAxit

West Australian separatists tried to ride the Brexit wave by coining the term "WAxit". When three of the first four search results for "WAxit" lead to a car wash, it's time to rethink the name of your movement.

3 Buzzwords and jargon

Uncommanded engine operations

In Australian skies, Regional Express had problems when a propeller fell off a REX plane. The pilot reported: "We've just had uncommanded engine operations and then our propeller has just sheared off."

Did air traffic control really need to know a lost propeller wasn't a "commanded" action?

Co-living

While the English language is always evolving, sometimes we already have a useful word for a concept. A lifestyle blog described the "millennial innovation" of "co-living" as follows:

> You've heard about co-working spaces where several businesses or entrepreneurs get together to work, but have you ever heard of co-living? … It's another real Millennial innovation from the generation who are always rewriting the rules of the game.

We used to call this "flatting".

The same people tried to convince us that living can be a service:

> As we decouple the function of living from the physical location, we need to help positively curate more communities. Eventually, we will move to a model of subscription homes or providing living as a service.

We used to call this "renting".

Optimised non-linear trajectory

Other jargon proved much harder to decipher this year, particularly anything to do with electricity. When the Turnbull government asked the Energy Security Board for detailed modelling of its National Energy Guarantee, the board outlined "an optimised non-linear trajectory" for reducing emissions.

Any idea what this actually means? We don't know either, and that's probably the point.

4 Tautologies, non-apologies and other cacologies

Fabricated lies made up by the #FakeNews media

While tautologies are reasonably common, a quadruple tautology is rare. That's why this Trump tweet takes the tautology prize for 2017:

> It is my opinion that many of the leaks coming out of the White House are fabricated lies made up by the #FakeNews media.

To be fair, honourable mention also goes to former First Lady Michelle Obama, speaking about social media:

> You don't just say what's on your mind. You don't just tweet every thought. Most of your first initial thoughts are not worthy of the light of day.

Worst Word of the Year 2017

I might have terrified a few people, or whatever

2017 was also a rich year for non-apologies. After the Grenfell Tower fire in London, the local mayor reluctantly resigned with this classic non-apology:

> I have to accept my share of responsibility for these perceived failings.

Disgraced movie mogul Harvey Weinstein opted for denial of sexual harassment ("all of these relationships were consensual") before veering into vague language about "the community" and "second chances".

But the worst non-apology of the year comes from Australian television personality Don Burke when confronted by evidence of sexual harassment:

> I might have terrified a few people, or whatever, and I shouldn't have done that, but these sort of things bear no relation to me and what I am about.

Fixacious

A reliable contributor of mispronunciations is Senator Pauline Hanson, who said she found the covert recording of one of her staff "very fixacious."

A vexatious fix?

No fixing of restraints to the handrail stanchions

Speaking of fixing, our winner of the worst sign of the year goes to the local council that produced this cryptic notice.

When we asked the public for help translating this, interpretations included:
* no chaining your bike to the fence
* no attaching rock climbing gear
* bungee jumping strictly forbidden
* "Hey cops: don't handcuff folks to the railing posts without asking us first, as the skeletons are bothersome".