

Media release

23 December 2015

Worst word or phrase of 2015 announced

Plain English Foundation has voted **possible emissions non-compliance** as the worst word or phrase of 2015.

Volkswagen's CEO used the phrase to describe what was actually cheating when regulators tested how much pollution its cars emit.

"2015 was a particularly bad year for corporate spin doctoring," said Dr Neil James of Plain English Foundation.

"While Volkswagen was admitting its **possible emissions non-compliance**, BHP Billiton was reassuring us that mining tailings from a collapsed dam were **relatively inert** and Nurofen packaging apparently provided **easier navigation of pain relief options in the grocery environment**."

"When corporations use this kind of language, it is a sure sign they are looking to shape public perception in their own financial interests," Dr James said.

Each year, Plain English Foundation collects dozens of examples of doublespeak, jargon and fancypants language. Its staff then vote on the shortlist and winner.

Not surprisingly, military doublespeak also featured on this year's list. In February, Barack Obama extolled the virtues of **lethal defensive weapons**, while Australia's Defence Minister talked up our **precision guided weapons**. To the rest of us, these are bombs.

"The list also includes politicians from all persuasions putting their feet in their mouths," Dr James said. "The UK Prime Minister described refugees escaping Syria as a **swarm of people**. The federal Opposition Leader explained **the future is happening now** and the Immigration Minister complained that **the law is an arse**."

The worst euphemisms came from PR and real estate. A lie is now apparently an **over-firm denial**, while a galley kitchen is a **socially conducive kitchen**, and a snake bite has become a **snake-related injury**.

"While the English language is constantly evolving, it doesn't mean every new word is fit for the future," Dr James said. "Please let's not start to **rejourney** as **reducetarians** having a **bedgasm** after visiting a **giftorium giftician** for Swiftmas."

The list rounds out with the **mixed metaphor** and **worst sentence** of the year.

Plain English Foundation's full list of 2015's worst words and phrases follows.

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

Email: Neil.James@plainenglishfoundation.com

Phone: 0416 001 500

Worst Words 2015 short list

Winner

Possible emissions non-compliance

After a long investigation, Volkswagen finally admitted some of their cars cheated the vehicle emissions testing system. The Volkswagen CEO explained:

In the spring of 2014 when the West Virginia University study was published, I was told that there was a **possible emissions non-compliance** that could be remedied.

These “possible emissions non-compliances” were in fact small pieces of computer code written into cars’ computers. The code worked out when the car was being tested by an environmental agency and reduced vehicle emissions during the test.

Corporate spin

Relatively inert

When the Samarco dam in Brazil failed in November, sending a torrent of mud and mining tailings into the local environment, a dispute over the toxicity of the torrent began. But in trying to reassure us that the tailings were not toxic, BHP Billiton could only come up with phrases like “relatively inert” and “chemically stable”.

The villages buried under the sludge saw the “release of the tailings” as anything but “inert”.

Easier navigation of pain relief options in the grocery environment ...

The ACCC took legal action this year when it discovered that the only difference between Nurofen’s expensive products for the relief of back pain, period pain, migraines and tension headaches was the packaging. Nurofen offered this helpful explanation:

Nurofen disputes any allegation of contravention of consumer law in relation to its pain-specific packaging. [...]

Nurofen pain-specific products **provide easier navigation of pain relief options in the grocery environment** for consumers who are experiencing a particular type of pain.

In December, Nurofen was ordered to remove these “pain-specific” items from shelves.

Military doublespeak

Lethal defensive weapons

In February, the US government was under pressure to support Ukraine against the Russian military intervention. With some deft doublespeak, President Obama said that “The possibility of **lethal defensive weapons** is one of those options that’s being examined”.

There are some weapons that are mainly defensive, such as minefields and fixed gun emplacements. But what the US was considering – including anti-tank weapons and ammunition – doesn’t fall into that category.

Worst Words 2015 short list

Precision guided weapon

Military jargon is nothing new. But beware when it is used to obscure something unpleasant.

Interviewed by ABC Radio after Australia's first bombing in Syria, Defence Minister Kevin Andrews explained what "air strikes" with "precision guided weapons" really were.

Andrews

This was done from a distance or height that preserved the safety of the Australian aircraft so – and they deployed ... **a precision guided weapon** to destroy the target.

Reporter

Is that a missile rather than a bomb?

Andrews

It's a bomb, yes.

(Not so) great moments in politics

We know the future is happening right now

Opposition Leader Bill Shorten deserves a mention for his exceptional forward thinking. Speaking at a launch at Parliament House, he said:

We know the future is happening right now.

As government MP Christopher Pyne gleefully explained, "The future cannot be happening right now – it has to be the present".

The law is an arse

To be politically even-handed, we also couldn't go past Immigration Minister Peter Dutton putting a new spin on the famous quote "the law is an **ass**". This quote traditionally means that the law, like a donkey, is stubborn and inflexible.

When Dutton disagreed with a court overturning a murder conviction, he made the quote a little less elegant. His comment that the law is an **arse** turns the proverbial donkey into an Australian rear end. We make no comment about its stubbornness.

Swarm of refugees

Commenting on the refugee crisis in Europe, many people used the terms "flow", "flood", or even "tsunami" of people. But British PM David Cameron took things one step too far.

I accept that, because you have got **a swarm of people** coming across the Mediterranean, seeking a better life, wanting to come to Britain [...]

An opposition MP quickly pointed out that Cameron "should remember he's talking about people and not insects".

Worst euphemisms of the year

Over-firm denial

We've heard many euphemisms for fibbing over the years. "Over-firm denial" might just be our new favourite.

The UK's Tory party chairman was found to have worked a second job under another name while he was a serving MP. When asked why he had previously denied this, he admitted that his denials were "over-firmly" stated.

Worst Words 2015 short list

Socially conducive kitchen

One of our team spotted this puzzling phrase on a real estate sign – a “socially conducive kitchen”. Is that a kitchen that helps the owner make friends? Or perhaps one that is good for parties?

In the apartment in question, it meant that you could open the fridge door and operate the dishwasher while sitting at the dining table.

Snake-related injury

When does a snake bite become a “snake-related injury”? When the media speak to a public sector organisation.

The *Canberra Times* reported that the Therapeutic Goods Administration posted warnings about snakes around its building. A TGA spokesperson breathlessly reassured us that “No **snake-related injuries** have been sustained by staff or visitors”. We think they mean no one has been bitten. Perhaps the snakes in Canberra have other lethal defensive weapons.

Buzzwords and jargon

Rejourneying

The people behind business jargon have come up with a new word this year: rejourneying. As in, “We’re **rejourneying** the business to focus increasingly on mobile devices”.

We’re not sure why you wouldn’t just say “We’re switching our focus”, or even “on a new journey”, but nobody said corporate speak had to make sense.

Reducetarian

This seemingly sensible word means people who are willing to reduce their meat intake, but not stop it completely. It’s unclear why this needs a whole new word, given that there’s no lower limit on meat eating for an omnivore. Also, “semi-vegetarian” and “flexitarian” already exist (sadly), so this one just seems unnecessary. Don’t get us started on “kangatarian”.

Authorised unavoidable impacts

This actually means the environmental damage that the Carmichael mine operators are allowed to do to “Matters of National Environmental Significance”. We wonder what they can do for authorised avoidable impacts.

Frankenwords

Giftorium gifticians

Myer created a dedicated Mother’s Day giftorium this year, a space full of pink pyjamas and hot water bottles. In November they went a step further, offering a Christmas giftorium staffed by a troupe of gifticians to help you select the perfect present. Giftastic!

Swiftmas

Singer Taylor Swift is getting into the holiday spirit by trademarking “Swiftmas”, a combination of her name and Christmas. This relates to her practice of sending gifts to fans unexpectedly. If anyone else was planning on surprising someone with a quick gift this year, please check with Swift’s lawyers first.

Worst Words 2015 short list

Bedgasm

Ever wished there was a single word to describe the euphoria of falling into bed at the end of a long day? We present to you the bedgasm.

Drop it into conversation – along with its compatriots the nerdgasm, the eargasm, the foodgasm and the shoegasm – to make your friends feel mildly uncomfortable or downright icky.

Mixed metaphor of the year

The avalanche, the die and the chips

The award for worst mixed metaphor of the year goes to Jack Warner, Vice President of FIFA, for his confusing combination. Discussing his part in revealing the corruption at the sporting body, Warner explained:

Not even death will stop the avalanche that is coming. The die is cast. There can be no turning back. Let the chips fall where they fall.

Honourable mention goes to Laura Tingle of the *Australian Financial Review*:

The high moral ground has become such a tiny wedge in the ocean for the government to stand on.

And to the Welsh Tory Leader Andrew Davies for this effort:

The fig-leaf they are trying to pull over people's eyes just won't wash.

Worst sentence of the year

The Heydon decision

Normally a double negative like this one from Dyson Heydon, explaining why he won't step down as Royal Commissioner, would take the prize for the worst sentence:

I have concluded that it is **not** the case that a fair-minded lay observer might apprehend that I might **not** bring an impartial mind to the resolution of the questions which the work of the Commission requires to be decided.

The Paris Agreement

But this year, nothing comes close to a single sentence of 20 pages and 16,600 words that is meant to save the world: the draft UN document for the Paris Agreement on climate change. Here's just one clause:

Decides that the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Paris Agreement shall hold its sessions starting in 2016 in conjunction with the sessions of the Convention subsidiary bodies and shall prepare draft decisions to be recommended through the Conference of the Parties to the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement for consideration and adoption at its first session;

So that's a group preparing decisions to be recommended **through** the parties, **to** the parties and to serve **as the meeting** of the parties. It's nonsensical.

The agreement also exhorts the world to "facilitate clarity, transparency and understanding", and suggests that some information should be "available in a user-friendly online format". Unlike the agreement itself.