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Media release

The worst words and phrases of 2010

Every year, the Plain English Foundation collects hundreds of samples of jargon, spin and obfuscation in our public language. This year, we've decided to exact some revenge by nominating the 'worst words and phrases of 2010'.

2010 was a rich year for manglish and gobbledygook.

There was new business jargon, such as 'thought showers', 'strategic staircases', and 'disintermediation'. There was classic spin doctoring, such as 'removal pathways' (deportation) and the 'investment in human capital' (a new tax). Our teenagers contributed 'maggoted' and text initialisms such as 'HMU'. And not to be outdone, the academics this year came up with 'agonistic respect' and 'flexibilising'.

According to Foundation Executive Director Dr Neil James, "The best you can say about these words is that they dress up something simple just to sound impressive. At their worst, they are deliberately trying to obscure reality or paper over the unpleasant."

This year, the Foundation also decided to nominate a winner—a word or phrase that encapsulates the worst elements of our public language.

"For our inaugural worst word or phrase of the year, we couldn't go past the main slogan of the Australian Labor Party's Federal election campaign: 'moving forward'," Dr James said.

"Just when we thought this business cliché had dropped from use, Julia Gillard robotically repeated the phrase 'moving forward' more than 20 times during her announcement of the election," Dr James said. "It showed how the election was driven more by focus-group research than political leadership. The public can tell the difference."

"The problem with a phrase like this is that it hints vaguely at progress without committing to anything concrete. Politicians can sound positive without being held to account for breaking a promise."

'Moving forward' was a narrow winner in a strong field. See below for the full list of the Plain English Foundation's worst words and phrases of 2010.

For further information

Dr Neil James is available for interview over the Christmas period.

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The worst words and phrases of 2010

Clichés new and old

Moving forward

Moving forward tops our list because it reinvented a cliché that was beginning to fade out. As the communication centrepiece for Labor's Federal campaign, it made sure 2010 will be remembered for the election of the ventriloquist's dummies.

Strategic staircase

Strategic staircase is new business cliché that is set to replace 'forward plan' (itself a tautology). In 2010, business gurus seemed to need a future in 3-D. So a strategic staircase allows us to move both onwards *and* upwards! Moving forward, of course.

Spin-doctoring

Removal pathway

Senator Christopher Evans gave deportation an Orwellian touch with this euphemism:

Well these people are different in the sense that they've finished their processing and they've been found not to be refugees. They're on a **removal pathway**, and we'll be looking to move them on as quickly as possible.

Investment in human capital

Not to be outdone, Opposition spokesperson for the status of women Sharman Stone tried her best to paper over the reality of the Liberal's paid parental leave scheme:

Well, we don't call it a tax, we're calling it an **investment in human capital**.

Vessels of opportunity

BP gets a dishonourable mention for trying to spin their self-made environmental disaster. Under the vessels of opportunity program, boat owners whose jobs were destroyed by the disaster were employed to help in the Gulf of Mexico oil spill cleanup.

Manglish

Refudiate

A mangling of 'refute' and 'repudiate', Sarah Palin coined the word during a TV appearance in July. She demanded that US President Barack Obama 'refudiate' claims that the Tea Party movement is racist.

Great big new tax

Boring, repetitive and redundant, Tony Abbott's slogan was the tautology of 2010. He was hardly going to get attention from a great small old tax, was he?

Most outstanding mixed metaphor

Tennis commentator Roger Rasheed was unchallenged for 2010's best mixed metaphor:

Lleyton's a person who's on heat during a grand slam and there's not quite the stigma that surrounds Federer that there was at his peak, when he was untouchable. A few more guys have got wings, and Lleyton's just got to find a way to get in his kitchen.

Political correctness

Thought shower

Want to brainstorm some ideas? Forget about it! Employers in the UK now ask staff to take **thought showers** instead because ‘brainstorm’ might be offensive to people with epilepsy.

‘Blue Gum’

NSW police inadvertently used ‘Blue Gum’ as the operation codename for protecting Barack Obama when he visited Australia. Much to their embarrassment, ‘bluegum’ is offensive slang in the United States for a lazy African-American who refuses to work.

Academic language

Flexibilize

This monstrosity was coined in an advertisement for a recent lecture on political economy:

Since the 1990s, both the Japanese and the Korean governments have made significant attempts to **flexibilize** their labour market through employment deregulation.

Agonistic respect

The following passage won the NZ Plain English Awards people’s choice ‘Brain Strain’ award. The text is from a course description that is enticing students to study communications:

Although the culturally sedimented practices precluding the possibility of a different inter-field dynamic are considerable, I conclude by ‘visualising’ an alternative relationship, one constituted, on all sides, by what Williams Connolly (2005) characterises as a properly democratic ethos of ‘**agonistic respect**’ across difference.

Teenspeak

Maggoted

Our teenagers didn’t disappoint in 2010 either. Maggoted is new teenspeak for getting drunk to the point of incapacitation. Teenage obfuscation of binge drinking to the point of looking like a corpse.

HMU

We aren’t generally too worried about initialisms from our teenagers. Adults do it all the time and call them acronyms. But the problem with **HMU** (Hit Me Up) is it doesn’t actually make sense. Who would know it means ‘Contact me’?

Business-speak

Disintermediate

This economic term simply means cutting out the middleman. Unfortunately crossing over into the mainstream.

‘Ambient’ sausage rolls

British consumers were perplexed when they found their supermarket sausage rolls labelled as **ambient**. They may be forgiven for thinking this was some new-fangled process for producing sausage rolls using New Age music, mood lighting and sandalwood incense. Alas, ambient is just food industry jargon for ‘can be consumed at room temperature’.