



Media release

19 December 2011

## “Fugitive emissions” tops the list of 2011’s worst words

The Plain English Foundation has voted **fugitive emissions** the worst words of 2011.

Chemical company Orica used the phrase during the year to downplay what were in fact gas leaks of highly polluting ammonia from its plant near Newcastle.

According to Foundation Executive Director Dr Neil James, “describing highly toxic pollution as a “fugitive emission” breathlessly spins a serious environmental incident to conveniently minimise scrutiny and accountability.”

The term emerged a clear winner ahead of a dozen examples of spin doctoring, clichés and suitspeak, of mixed metaphors, marketing and Manglish.

At the start of the year, Nicole Kidman euphemistically described the surrogate mother of her baby as a **gestational carrier**. A dental industry spokesman used doublespeak to describe the damaging effects of teeth whitening as a **negative good**.

“In the information age, we are constantly bombarded with words, so it is easy to miss how the political and corporate worlds manipulate language,” Dr James said. “Their words at best soften the reality of a problem; at worst they are so vague or impenetrable that they deliberately mislead.”

A chicken producer advertised that its birds are **free to roam**, when its barns have as many as 20 birds per square metre. When a local council defended the removal of a dolphin from its logo, it turned to marketing speak to explain that “dolphins are a **niche experience**”.

“Then there are the words that become so devalued they lose their meaning altogether,” Dr James said, “moving from an effective usage to cliché or sensationalism.”

A **hero** used to be something special, but now Masterchef identifies the “hero” in a dish. The media looking to sensationalise the Queensland floods latched onto the term **inland tsunami**.

Given the events of the year, it is no surprise that economic terms also featured, with the emerging cliché **two-speed economy**, the ugly initialism **MYEFO** and a failed prospectus title **accelerated non-renounceable pro rata entitlement offer**.

The United States rugby coach contributed the year’s **epic mixed metaphor**, the academic world regurgitated **antinomies**, and the teenage **chillax** crossed into mainstream use.

The full list of the Plain English Foundation’s worst words and phrases of 2011 follows.

*Dr Neil James is Executive Director of the Plain English Foundation and co-author with Harold Scruby of the recently released book Modern Manglish.*

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

**neil.james@plainenglishfoundation.com**

# The worst words and phrases of 2011

---

## Spin-doctoring and doublespeak

---

### fugitive emissions

The ammonia that ran away. Manufacturer Orica was in trouble several times during the year for leaks of polluting chemicals like hexavalent chromium and ammonia. But the company can't bring itself to use the word "pollution":

Where specific emissions are not measured at a site level, the NPI provides Emission Estimation Technique Manuals. Using these manuals, companies such as Orica estimate their **fugitive emissions** for substances such as ammonia.

### negative good

When Choice magazine raised the damage done by teeth whitening, a spokesperson for the dental industry described it to the ABC as a **negative good**.

### gestational carrier

Nicole Kidman welcomed a new family member with the year's worst euphemism:

Our family is truly blessed . . . to have been given the gift of baby Faith Margaret. No words can adequately convey the incredible gratitude that we feel for everyone who was so supportive throughout this process, in particular our **gestational carrier**.

## Marketing spin

---

### niche experience

The City of Holdfast Bay in South Australia decided to take the dolphin off its logo. When asked to explain why, it dropped into impenetrable marketing lingo:

Dolphins are a **niche experience**, along with European settlement and Aboriginal heritage.

### free to roam

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission called it misleading for poultry producers to say their chickens are "**free to roam** in large barns". It is suing Baiada for using the term when there can be as many as 20 birds per square metre.

## Suitspeak

---

### 4 for 7 accelerated non-renounceable pro rata entitlement offer ...

This is just part of the title of the West Australian Newspapers prospectus to buy the Seven Group. Even Kerry Stokes admitted he didn't understand the prospectus, which is probably why only 14% of retail investors took up the offer.

### two-speed economy

Academics were writing about the **two-speed economy** back in 2006, but in 2011 the term became a cliché. We heard of two-speed rental markets, two-speed business, two-speed Europe and even a two-speed design philosophy! Julia Gillard tried to spin the term into the "patchwork economy", while a CommSec report argued for a "three-speed economy".

## New clichés

---

### hero

The term **hero** used to mean something. Now almost anything can be a hero, particularly on reality television. On the Renovators, we had a hero rug, or hero carpet, or even hero lighting. On Masterchef, Matt Preston found a hero in almost every dish:

The hero of that dish, the thing that stands out, is that ice cream ...

### inland tsunami

The media latched onto any term they could to sensationalise the Queensland floods:

Officials in the Australian state of Queensland say at least 72 people are missing after flash floods which have already claimed eight lives. Queensland Police Commissioner, Bob Atkinson, compared it to “an **inland** instant **tsunami** with a massive wall of water”.

## Text language and teenspeak

---

### MYEFO

The ugly-initialism-of-the-year award goes to **MYEFO** (mid-year economic and fiscal outlook). No-one actually knows how to pronounce it, but every journo wanting to seem up with the latest on the economy sprinkled it liberally throughout their text.

### chillax

The ugly combination of “chill” and “relaxing” has until now been safely confined to the teenage world and a few permissive dictionaries. But in 2011, it started to cross into the mainstream. Instead of dying its well-deserved death, companies advertised:

Chillax Natural Sleep and Relaxation Drink

Chillax Tours is proud to support Greenfleet to offset carbon emissions

## Academese

---

### antinomies

Complex language can be useful in an academic work. But when used when writing to a broader audience, it comes closer to showing off **antinomies** unnecessarily:

At the center of this resituation of critical theory is a normatively reformulated interpretation of Martin Heidegger’s idea of ‘disclosure’ or ‘world disclosure’. ... His innovative and original argument will serve to move the debate over the future of critical studies forward—beyond simple **antinomies**’.

## Mixed metaphor of the year

---

As Greg Crowden reported, the rugby world cup brought us a mixed metaphor on an epic scale when United States coach Eddie O’Sullivan assembled the best clichés coaches can buy:

... we **play from start to finish** and that we **stick to our plans** and our systems and, when we’re **under pressure**, we **don’t abandon ship**. Particularly **staying within striking distance** over the last 20 minutes as long as we can and **staying on the horse** as for long as we can... The tier-one nations are going to come **out of the starting blocks** and **throw the kitchen sink at us**. At times we’re going to **be a bit punch drunk** probably, but we **need to just hang in there** and **keep swinging** and **stay in the game** over the last quarter.