

Media release

20 December 2016

Worst word of 2016 announced

Plain English Foundation has voted **Brangelexit** as the worst word or phrase of 2016.

The word describes the divorce of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie by combining their celebrity moniker “Brangelina” with the recent “Brexit” vote.

“Brangelexit combines a compound with a compound, creating a rather ugly word,” said Dr Neil James, Executive Director of Plain English Foundation.

“More importantly, it captures the shallowness of our current culture when a celebrity separation is elevated to the status of a world event of genuine political importance.”

“In 2016, the world entered a ‘post-truth’ era,” Dr James said, “and we became increasingly resigned to shameless euphemism and buzzwords, doublespeak and spin.”

When phones start exploding or shutting down unexpectedly, their manufacturers shrug this off as a **battery cell issue** or due to **controlled ambient air**. A baby formula producer spins its freefalling sales as a **temporary volume dislocation**.

“And in 2016, companies went to great lengths to avoid using words such as ‘job cuts’, preferring to **disestablish** or **deactivate** their employees instead,” Dr James noted.

This was a particularly bad year for euphemism. Resurgent white nationalists sounded more respectable as the **alt-right** movement. Taxes became **revenue measures** and casinos became **integrated resorts**. The mass slaughter of greyhounds was callously dubbed **wastage**.

“For a nation that prides itself on calling a spade a spade,” Dr James said, “it seems that Australia has started to call a spade an articulated portable digging implement.”

We also heard about **cultural externalities**. We used to call these books. A local council posted a sign describing falling tree branches as a **risk of tree failure**. Then the fatal injuries at Dreamworld were apparently **injuries that were incompatible with living**.

The list rounds out with the new Frankenwords **bigly** and **woke**, along with the **mixed metaphor** and **non-apology of the year**.

Each year, Plain English Foundation collects dozens of examples of the worst words and phrases to highlight the importance of clear public language. Foundation staff select the final shortlist and vote on the winner.

Plain English Foundation’s full list of 2016’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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Worst words 2016 short list

Winner

Brangelexit

When supercouple Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie decided to split, it spawned one of the ugliest frankenwords of all time, combining “Brangelina” with “Brexit”.

Apart from being inherently ugly, elevating a celebrity divorce to the level of a major world event was a poor reflection on 2016.

Corporate spin

Battery cell issue

Samsung kicked off a year of poor communications from mobile phone manufacturers. When its phones started catching fire, it said they had a **battery cell issue**:

Samsung is committed to producing the highest quality products and we take every incident report from our valued customers very seriously. In response to recently reported cases of the new Galaxy Note7, we conducted a thorough investigation and found a **battery cell issue**.

Samsung just edged out Apple, which had to explain why its phones were suddenly turning off. Apparently it was all due to “controlled ambient air”.

We found that a small number of iPhone 6s devices ... contained a battery component that was exposed to **controlled ambient air** longer than it should have been before being assembled into battery packs. As a result, these batteries degrade faster than a normal battery and cause unexpected shutdowns to occur.

It didn't really explain what “controlled ambient air” actually is.

Disestablished

Every year, organisations prove themselves incapable of using two clear and simple words: “job cuts”. In 2016, a New Zealand university explained:

It is proposed that 16.28 full-time equivalent staff are **disestablished**.

Meanwhile in the UK, Uber lost a case where it claimed it did not actually employ anyone, so it just “deactivated” drivers it no longer wanted. Judges scolded the company for “twisted language” and ruled that Uber drivers should receive the national living wage.

Temporary volume dislocation

When baby formula business Bellamy's Australia hit some problems with Chinese regulators, its sales and share prices plummeted. The company spin noted it was simply experiencing a **temporary volume dislocation**.

Worst words 2016 short list

Euphemism

Wastage How do you talk about the mass killing of greyhounds that are not able to race? You turn to a bland euphemism: **wastage**. And they wondered why the NSW government wanted to ban the sport.

Alt-right As we find ourselves in a “post-truth” world, a new political force is making its way to the fore: the **alt-right** or “alternative right”. As many are realising, this is actually a euphemism for what is better labelled the “far right”, “extreme right” or “white nationalism”.

Revenue measures In April, Treasurer Scott Morrison tied himself in linguistic knots trying to avoid the word “tax”.

It's not to say there won't be **revenue measures** in the budget, of course there'll be **revenue measures** in the budget. But what we're saying, is where will apply those **revenue measures**, is to reducing the tax burden in other parts of the economy wherever possible to drive down the deficit.

Integrated resorts Then there is this classic euphemism from the gambling industry. Apparently, they don't build casinos any more. They build **integrated resorts**.

Buzzwords and business jargon

Cultural externalities The Productivity Commission report on the publishing industry talked a lot about **cultural externalities**. We used to call these “books”.

Risk of tree failure A big storm in Sydney prompted a local council to post signs saying:
For your safety we advise you not to visit the park during or just after heavy rain and strong winds because of the **risk of tree failure**.
This turned out to mean we need to watch out for falling branches.

Injuries incompatible with living After the tragedy at the Dreamworld theme park in Queensland, a senior Queensland Ambulance Service officer reported of the victims:
They were assessed by Queensland Ambulance personnel and had all sustained **injuries that were incompatible with living**.
Another way of saying this would have been “fatal injuries”. While the circumstance was sensitive, surely that would have been sufficient.

Worst words 2016 short list

Frankenwords

Bigly

Although the Trump camp denied he ever said this, the first presidential debate coined an ugly new adverb:

I'm going to cut taxes **bigly**, and you're going to raise taxes **bigly**.

Whether he actually said “big league” or “bigly”, this frankenword deserves to be attacked ruthlessly by a pitchfork-wielding mob.

Woke

While a new word for being socially and politically aware might be useful, surely we can come up with something that actually uses English grammar correctly. “Stay **woke**, dude” does not.

Mixed metaphor of the year

Hurtling through quicksand

Experts often use metaphor to explain complex concepts. But they don't always think it through. Health care law expert Larry Levitt warned that repealing the US's Affordable Care Act would mean that:

As the car is hurtling towards the cliff, it's driving on quicksand.

A close runner up was this gem in the *Adelaide Advertiser*:

The writing was on the wall that a changing of the guards was on the cards after Thompson won last month.

Non-apology of the year

Locker room talk

How can you apologise without apologising? You say sorry for lewd and misogynistic comments but then pass them off as **locker room talk**.

At least, that's what you do when you're the next president of the United States.