

Media release

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Worst Words of the Year 2020

It's hardly surprising that COVID-19 featured in the 2020 list of worst words and phrases. While the crisis generated some essential and even amusing words, other Covidspeak was less welcome.

Plain English Foundation also identified more of the usual suspects in poor public language during 2020: from political spin and doublespeak to made-up Frankenwords. And this year's mixed metaphor and non-apology examples are particularly poor.

Winner

Vertical consumption

When South Australia announced it would ease coronavirus restrictions and allow people to drink in bars while standing up, it was cause to celebrate. When the SA Government decided to describe this as "vertical consumption", we thought they'd started their own tipple a tad too early.

Covidspeak

Discretionary essentials

The oxymoron of the year emerged from the retail trend of the pandemic, where people working from home or in isolation spent big on home renovation and office supplies. Apparently these were "discretionary essentials". A retail category we can all do without.

Zump

Zumping refers to dumping a romantic partner on Zoom. With luck, a COVID vaccine will also cure this practice.

Frankenwords

'She'-session

Because the COVID recession is disproportionately impacting women, someone had to invent an ugly word for it: "She-session". Another reason to push for an early economic recovery.

Hipsturbia

Our non-COVID Frankenword this year described a predicted real estate trend, in which some suburbs were set to attract 'hip' residents. Hipsturbing indeed.



Mixed metaphor of the year

A magnetic building both lyrical and euphonic, driven by pizzazz and charm

Real estate also generated the mixed metaphor of the year.

We are used to property descriptions getting out of hand, but this breathless sequence for a new apartment block apparently involves taking a drive with musical magnets.



Doublespeak

Withdrawn as a matter of priority

Need to stop a wild animal from harassing people at a lakeside resort? When a boar was doing just that in Berlin, the head of the Forestry Office noted it would have to be “withdrawn as a matter of priority”.

That means kill it.

Sensitive receivers

The Environmental Impact Statement for the Western Harbour Tunnel project in Sydney described how it would deal with “noise abatement”:

“Proposed construction support sites and activities have been designed to minimise noise and vibration impacts on sensitive receivers.”

“Sensitive receivers” means places such as homes, schools and hospitals. It doesn’t sound so bad when you get technical.



Political spin

Reverse pork-barrelling

Cabinet Minister Bridget McKenzie defended some of her decisions to allocate sports grant money to projects in “targeted” (marginal) seats as “reverse pork-barrelling”.

Over 70 per cent of grants overturned the recommendations of the independent body Sport Australia.

Efforting outreach

White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany told Fox and Friends that President Donald Trump and his administration were trying their best to contact the family of police shooting victim Jacob Blake:

“We are efforting outreach, have not been able to connect yet.”

The family’s lawyer noted his office “had received no calls to set up any kind of meeting”.

Worst Words of the Year 2020

Health dictatorships

Former Australian PM Tony Abbott railed against COVID “health dictatorships”, saying the economic cost of lockdowns meant families should be allowed to consider letting elderly relatives die.



Non-apology of the year

'We haven't apologised for the event itself, per se, but apologised for the distress the event caused.'

When Rio Tinto senior executive Chris Salisbury was recorded commenting on the destruction of two 46,000-year-old landmarks in the Juukan Gorge, he gave the game away when it comes to the sincerity of corporate apologies.

Some senior Rio Tinto executives later resigned.