

Media release

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“Conscious uncoupling” judged worst words of 2014

The Plain English Foundation has voted **conscious uncoupling** the worst words of 2014.

Gwyneth Paltrow and her husband Chris Martin used the phrase earlier this year when announcing they were separating.

“Why do celebrities play these kind of dress ups with the language?” asked Dr Neil James of the Plain English Foundation. “There are perfectly good words for what the couple went through: ‘separation’ or ‘divorce’. It isn’t any less painful for putting a New Age gloss over it.”

Each year, the Plain English Foundation collects dozens of examples of doublespeak, jargon and fancy pants language. Staff then vote on the shortlist and winner.

2014 year was a particularly notable year for euphemism and spin.

One corporation described a mine fire as an **open cut event**. Another explained its exploding airbags were merely experiencing **rapid disassembly**. Microsoft took 11 paragraphs of jargon about its **appropriate financial envelope** to tell 12,500 people they would lose their jobs.

“People rightly distrust euphemisms because they deliberately downplay reality, like a fire or an explosion or the loss of a job,” Dr James said. “The softer version may be convenient for corporations, but the public just want them to get to the point.”

“Of course, euphemism can be humorous, such as Qantas explaining how a **pavement failure** (pothole) delayed a flight. But when politicians talk about **high value targetting** (assassination) or **efficiency dividends** (funding cuts), there is something more unpleasant at play.”

At other times, we fancify our language to make it sound impressive. A coastal council put up a warning sign about the **potential for dangerous aquatic organisms** (sharks) and the world of fashion extolled the virtues of **normcore** (normal clothing).

The selfie phenomenon continued to generate some ugly words, such as **couplie** and **legsie**. But **collabition** (a blend of collaboration and competition) sounded a bit too close to the collusion you can have when you are not having collusion.

“We usually feature a verbal slip of the year, but in 2014 it was hard to go past the store apologising for **any incontinence caused** by its freezers not operating,” Dr James said. “And while on the subject of apologies, sport gave us the non-apology of the year when footballer Luis Suarez explained how **the physical result of a bite** was not, in fact, a bite.”

Rounding out the list was the **mixed metaphor of the year**, where we learned how to fix our budget problems by repairing our roofs under the sun while we are hitting the rocks.

The Plain English Foundation’s full list of 2014’s worst words and phrases follows.

Dr Neil James, Executive Director, Plain English Foundation is available for interview over the Christmas break: Neil.James@plainenglishfoundation.com or 02 9290 1288.

Worst Words 2014 short list

Winner

Conscious uncoupling

Gwyneth Paltrow and her husband, Chris Martin, didn't decide to separate. Instead, they experienced a "conscious uncoupling". Recent sightings of the pair together have prompted speculation about a "conscious recoupling".

Corporate spin

Appropriate financial envelope

Microsoft emailed its employees to explain that the company's "device strategy must reflect Microsoft's strategy and must be accomplished within an appropriate financial envelope. Therefore, we plan to make some changes." Finally, in the eleventh paragraph, the email got to the point: 12,500 Microsoft employees were going to lose their jobs.

Open cut event

Residents of Morwell, Victoria, were left breathing foul-smelling smoke for over two weeks due to a month-long fire, or should we say "open cut event", in a nearby mine. "Inversion conditions" led to a "reversion" in air quality, while fire fighters struggled to bring the fire "to its totality".

Euphemism

Rapid disassembly

14 million vehicles were recalled this year because their Takata airbags had an unfortunate tendency towards "rapid disassembly". In plain English, that means some of them exploded.

Pavement failure

When a recent Qantas flight was delayed by an hour, the explanation was as baffling as it was frustrating for passengers. There had been a "pavement failure", which meant that a pothole on a runway had to be filled-in before the plane could take off.

Political spin

High value targeting

"High value targeting" is a more pleasant way to describe killing an enemy of importance. This term hit the news in December, when WikiLeaks released a CIA report on the practice. This came the same month a US Senate Intelligence Committee report highlighted the use of "enhanced interrogation techniques"—which most of us would think of as torture.

Efficiency dividend

Senator Mathias Cormann told Australians that the cut in ABC funding was an "efficiency dividend". "We are not making cuts", Senator Cormann explained. "The ABC has been exempted from efficiency dividends for the last 20 years, efficiency dividends which apply to every other department in government." The government later admitted that funding was, in fact, cut.

Worst Words 2014 short list

Non-apology of the year

The physical result of a bite

Uruguayan footballer Luis Suarez issued a non-apology for biting his Italian rival in a world cup soccer game: “The truth is that my colleague Giorgio Chiellini suffered the physical result of a bite in the collision he suffered with me.”

Silly sign of the year

Potential for dangerous aquatic organisms

Gold Coast City Council erected some helpful warning signs about the “potential for dangerous aquatic organisms”. According to Daryl McPhee of Bond University, this means the waterways could be “physically penetrate[d]” by bull sharks. Luckily, the sign included a picture.

Frankenwords

Collabition

An awkward mangling of the words “collaboration” and “competition”. Not to be confused with its close cousin, co-opetition, which describes businesses working with their competitors, to everyone’s advantage. Neither case is supposed to be confused with “collusion”.

Couplies

Selfies are so 2013. This year it’s all about the “couplie” (a self-portrait with your significant other) and the “footsie” or “legsie”, (a photo of your suntanned legs and manicured feet against a scenic backdrop). Something to shake your selfie stick at.

Marketing buzzword of the year

Normcore

Normcore is a fashion term that describes wearing unpretentious, plain, average-looking clothing. Like normal clothing, but more fashionable. Apparently, “Normcore seeks the freedom that comes with non-exclusivity. It finds liberation in being nothing special, and realizes that adaptability leads to belonging. Normcore is a path to a more peaceful life.” If only the Buddha knew.

Mixed metaphor of the year

Let’s fix our roof while the sun is shining because we’re on a course to hit the rocks and we have to fix it.

The Australian National Commission of Audit member Amanda Vanstone helpfully clarified Australia’s “budget emergency”. A close winner ahead of sport show co-host Paul Kent’s explanation that next year the Cronulla Sharks “will hit the ground with a bit of wind in their sails”.

Grammatical error of the year

Sorry for any incontinence caused

An East London Tesco store made the news last July when its management posted an unusual apology for its broken freezers: “We are trying to get this problem fix as soon as possible and are really sorry for any incontinence caused. Management”.