

Media release

19 December 2019

“Freedom gas” named Worst Words of the Year

Plain English Foundation has voted **freedom gas** as the worst word or phrase of 2019.

The term comes from the United States Department of Energy, which rebranded natural gas as “freedom gas” and boasted about bringing **molecules of US freedom** to the world.

“When a simple product like natural gas starts being named through partisan politics, we are entering dangerous terrain,” said the Foundation’s Executive Director, Dr Neil James. “Why can’t natural gas just remain natural gas?”

Each year, Plain English Foundation gathers dozens of examples of the worst words to highlight the importance of clear and ethical public language.

In Australia, Victoria Police made the list after it tried to play down the apparent punching of a protester. It described this as a **palm strike** that is a “commonly applied clearance move in dynamic public order scenarios.”

Further north, the engineer for Sydney’s sinking Mascot Towers reported the apartment was simply **moving in a downward motion**.

“These are classic examples of spin that downplay a far less pleasant reality,” Dr James said.

Insurer NIB also tried to deflect some poor publicity by explaining its illegal rejection of health insurance claims was simply **not aligned to the legislative requirements**. And Ford Europe rounded out the corporate doublespeak by labelling job cuts as **voluntary employee separations**.

The Jeffrey Epstein case generated several candidates for the 2019 list. Media outlets used euphemisms such as **non-consensual sex** (rape) and **underage woman** (girl) to soften a much darker situation. And Prince Andrew took out the year’s non-apology by describing his ill-advised association with Epstein as **too honourable**.

“These words seem safe and innocuous,” Dr James said. “But they also serve to sanitise offences, shield the offenders and excuse those who ought to be held to account.”

The Foundation also found rich fodder in the buzzwords category. Tourism Australia’s new slogan hinged on the Frankenword **philausophy**, while Amazon’s Jeff Bezos announced his marriage break-up as a **long period of loving exploration**. Elsewhere, retailers were seeking **frictionless customer experiences** and **cleanfluencers** promoted tidiness.

Heading back overseas, the mixed metaphor of the year went to New Jersey’s Governor for **drawing a line in the sand** and **putting Band-Aids on our fiscal house**.

The full list of 2019’s worst words and phrases follows.

Dr Neil James, Executive Director, Plain English Foundation is **available for interview** over the Christmas and holiday period.

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To celebrate the 10th anniversary of our worst words lists, the Foundation will release the Worst Words of the Decade in 2020.

Full 2019 shortlist

Winner

Freedom gas As the moves toward cleaner energy gained momentum in 2019, the US Department of Energy decided to ramp up the spin. It rebranded natural gas as “freedom gas” and trumpeted its efforts to help export “molecules of US freedom” to the world.

1 Spin doctoring

Palm strike In Australia, a protest saw Victoria Police in strife when an officer appeared to punch a female protester in the head. Police said the move was not a punch but a “palm strike”. Their spokeswoman explained: “This is a commonly applied clearance move in dynamic public order scenarios ... ”

Non-consensual sex Back in the United States, media outlets reporting the Jeffrey Epstein case were criticised for softening the accusations made against him. Stories used terms such as “non-consensual sex” (rape), “underage woman” (girl) and “sex with a minor” (child sex trafficking) to play down a much darker reality.

Moving in a downward motion Meanwhile, when Sydney’s Mascot Towers apartment building started to crack, the engineer’s update to owners and residents was a masterclass in understatement. He advised, “It appears the building is moving in a downward motion.” This means it’s sinking.

2 Corporate doublespeak

Not aligned to the legislative requirements Insurer NIB drifted into obfuscation when it illegally rejected thousands of health insurance claims. Rather than it breaking the law, the company admitted its processes were just “not aligned to the legislative requirements”.

Voluntary employee separations Over in Europe, when car manufacturer Ford announced it would be cutting labour costs, it joined a long line of corporations hiding behind doublespeak. Ford staff would not be made redundant. They would just go through a “voluntary employee separation”.



3 Non-apology of the year

Too honourable In November, Prince Andrew gave a train-wreck television interview that explained why he had stayed at the house of Jeffrey Epstein even after Epstein was a convicted sex offender:

It was definitely the wrong thing to do but at the time I felt like it was the right and honourable thing to do and I admit fully that my judgement was probably coloured by my tendency to be too honourable but that's just the way it is.



4 Frankenwords

Philausophy When Tourism Australia launched its new marketing campaign, it wanted a memorable slogan. But with reactions ranging from muted embarrassment to sheer confusion, “Come live our philausophy” had people talking for all the wrong reasons.

Cleanfluencers “Cleanfluencers” are people who have gained a significant following by turning tidying or cleaning into an artform. Two leading cleanfluencers – Marie Kondo and Sophie Hinchcliffe – have even inspired their own Frankenverbs: “Kondoing” and “Hinching”.



5 Buzzwords

A long period of loving exploration Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos and his novelist wife MacKenzie referred to their separation as “a long period of loving exploration”. It unfortunately ended with their divorce.

Frictionless customer experience With “frictionless customer experience”, “friction” became one of the buzzwords of the year at a major retail conference in New York. We can only hope that it slips out of use without resistance.



6 Mixed metaphor of the year

Band-Aids on our fiscal house New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy took out the mixed metaphor category with this conceptual clangor:

The line in the sand is without question. Enough of the old stumbling ways of putting Band-Aids on our fiscal house.

But an honourable mention goes to President Trump for this anatomical muddle when announcing a plan to tackle kidney disease.

You’ve worked so hard on the kidney. Very special. The kidney has a very special place in the heart. It’s an incredible thing.