

WORST WORDS

Media release

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“Integrity issue” named Worst Words of 2022

Plain English Foundation has chosen “**integrity issue**” as its worst word or phrase of 2022. This phrase came up when lions escaped their enclosure at Taronga Zoo. Explaining the incident, the zoo said that the fence had an “integrity issue”. While the zookeepers did an excellent job of coaxing the lions back to their exhibit and moving visitors out of harm’s way, the zoo’s statements were less than transparent.

“While technically correct, this language is very vague and downplays the seriousness of what happened,” said Foundation spokesperson Greg Moriarty. “It is something we commonly find people doing when they want to gloss over something negative.”

Former PM Scott Morrison took unclear language about a controversial topic to the next level. When asked why he had secretly appointed himself to 5 ministries, Morrison explained: “The authorities were established as a **dormant redundancy** and where enlivened relevant Ministers and officials were engaged.” We agree with MP Julian Hill’s assessment of this gobbledegook as “a word salad farrago of ... nonsense”.

Mr Morrison also gave us other political spin this year, including the confusing but scary-sounding concept of “**public autocracy**”. Another MP lamented his party’s “**sincerity deficit**”. But from Russia, President Vladimir Putin’s description of the Ukraine invasion as “**peacekeeping duties**” takes the cake for shameless doublespeak.

“Most of us are pretty good at working out what politicians really mean,” said Mr Moriarty. “But language like this is often designed to confuse the reader or help the politician avoid admitting an ugly truth.”

Each year, Plain English Foundation gathers dozens of examples of the worst words and phrases to highlight the importance of clear public language. And it isn’t only politicians who make the list.

In the US, telco Verizon used language to distract customers, adding an “**economic adjustment charge**” to its plans rather than admitting it was increasing prices.

Aside from misleading words and phrases, the Foundation also looks out for new buzzwords, jargon and Frankenwords. This year “**quiet quitting**” – meaning **not** quitting – confused us all, and “**community contingency caches**” became the jargon nobody needs.

Our full shortlist of the worst words and phrases of 2022 is attached.

For interviews or for more information, contact our spokesperson, Greg Moriarty.

On air, Greg is clear, engaging and funny. He is a published crime novelist and expert communicator, and he regularly speaks about why plain language is important.

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Worst Words of 2022

Winner

Integrity issue When lions escaped their enclosure at Taronga Zoo, the zoo gave us a prime example of spin. When is a broken fence not a broken fence? When it's merely an "integrity issue".

Despite this less-than-transparent language, we're pleased to report that zoo staff did an excellent job of keeping everyone safe.

Spin and doublespeak

Economic adjustment charge Lions and tigers and bears (oh my!) may frighten Dorothy. But for the rest of us, inflation is this season's big concern.

To protect their bottom line without scaring consumers, American telecommunications company Verizon added an "economic adjustment charge" to all its plans.

And while the price of the plans did increase, a spokesperson clarified, "This is not a price plan increase."

Peacekeeping duties It wasn't just businesses indulging in doublespeak this year, politicians were at it too. Russian President Vladimir Putin described the invasion of Ukraine as "peacekeeping duties". We're reminded of a commandment from the Ministry of Truth in George Orwell's dystopian novel 1984: "War is peace."

Given that Ukrainian Prime Minister Volodymyr Zelensky is Jewish and had relatives killed in the Holocaust, Putin's classification of the war as "denazification" is also disturbing.

Dormant redundancy Former PM Scott Morrison secretly appointed himself to 5 ministries, an act that an inquiry later found was likely to undermine public trust.

To address the issue, Morrison put out a statement that is a masterclass in officialese. Our pick of the gobbledegook: "The authorities were established as a dormant redundancy and where enlivened relevant Ministers and officials were engaged."

Anyone feeling more inclined to trust politician-speak after this?

Public autocracy

The then PM also warned us that a national anti-corruption commission could turn Australia into “some kind of public autocracy”.

To be clear, an “autocracy” is a country run by a single powerful person – such as a monarch. A “public autocracy”, where everyone has the power, is what we’d call a democracy. But “democracy” just doesn’t do the trick when trying to scare us off an anti-corruption commission.

Sincerity deficit

Another politician using language easy to misunderstand is former MP Dave Sharma. When discussing his party’s work on climate change, he noted, “We had a sincerity deficit on this issue.”

That’s a brand new way to say someone lacks honesty.

Buzzwords and jargon

Community contingency caches

Starting our list of buzzwords and jargon is a newly prominent term from the Victorian Government. As we face increasingly severe flood and fire seasons, the government is ensuring communities have access to the equipment needed to set up an emergency base. But they’ve dubbed these resources “community contingency caches”.

Surely “emergency supplies” is easier to say on a radio in a disaster.

Employee-like workers

Speaking of new phrases, the Australian Government has added a new term to the industrial relations landscape, an area already brimming with jargon. It has flagged its intention to protect the rights of “employee-like workers”.

While this might be good news for gig-economy workers, it’s bad news for those of us who long for a simple definition of “workers” and “employees” that everyone can understand.

Quiet quitting

Gig-economy workers can be glad they miss out on this particular bit of corporate-speak. This buzzword is as widespread as it is confusing because no one is actually quitting. Instead, employees are simply working to rule: completing their contracted duties during their contracted hours.

Given the massive shift in work culture over the last few years, let’s drop the buzzwords and talk about what’s really happening: a push for better work–life balance.



Frankenwords

Shrinkflation

Consumers may start pushing for better product–price balance with “shrinkflation” becoming a very hot topic this year.

Reducing the size of a product while keeping the price the same is not a new concept. But with more and more companies using the technique to protect their bottom lines, the word has come to prominence for all the wrong reasons.



Mixed metaphor of the year

Fill in the dots

Before we had inflation to worry about, the United States’ political climate was a cause for concern.

Discussing the events of 6 January 2021, historian Doris Kearns Goodwin said she hoped that the House Select Committee would uncover the facts of what happened that day and “fill in the dots of that story”.

Let’s hope this story is just the facts, ma’am.



Non-apology of the year

I regret the impact of my words if that’s upset the community

It seems those in power rarely understand that an apology must admit a mistake. Western Australia Police Commissioner Col Blanch’s non-apology is an example of what not to do.

Apparently apologising for insensitive comments about the alleged murder of an Indigenous teenager in Perth, Blanch said, “I regret the impact of my words if that’s upset the community.”

Apologising for the offence caused is not the same as apologising for the act that caused the offence.