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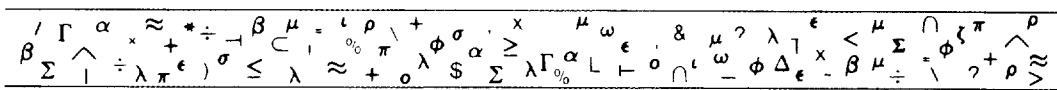


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Editorial: The Importance of Words in Communicating by Language

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The title of this editorial is the verbal equivalent of $p \Rightarrow p$. Obviously, words are necessary for language. Nevertheless, we ought to remind ourselves of the importance of these linguistic forms that we make out of 26 letters. Whenever we invent or add new meaning to a word we are engaged in an important act. How many times do we labor to explain our profession that we call either "management science" or "operations research"? How often do we have to explain that we are not the physics of management or that we do more than research operations? Most important, we are not a science, since science focuses on discovery. We are really management engineers because we invent ways for organizations to do their jobs better.

When someone invents a word like *far-klung*, the national sport of Moosylvania,

little damage is done because the reader does not rely on an existing meaning to understand its use. However, when we give an existing word a new meaning, problems can arise. Sometimes this happens by bad luck. For example, how often do we tell someone that we do linear programming and get the response "Oh, computers?" We beat computer scientists to the word *programming*, but we lost the popularity contest.

Most of the time the word selected for a new meaning is a bad choice. I am desensitized to most of our own jargon, but when I read in other areas, like artificial intelligence, I see word choices that would cause Alexander Haig, the master of Pentagonese, to blush. My nomination for the worst artificial intelligence word is *disambiguate*. If I were a manager reading this word, I would take it to mean "to undo an

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ambiguity that should not have existed in the first place." My managerial response would be to demand clarity from the beginning rather than fix an ambiguity. In the field of semantics the meaning of *dis-*

We are really management engineers.

ambiguate is "to establish a single semantic or grammatical interpretation." This is the meaning in natural language processing.

As originally defined, the word was already jargon, probably invented by some self-important academic trying to make the trivial profound. We suspect this is the case because the errant professor took a perfectly good word and turned it into a humorless oxymoron, unlike that wry invention, sophisticated moron or *sophomore*.

Using someone else's jargon is not quite as serious as making it up—it is trotting along with the herd as opposed to leading with the bull. However, people in artificial intelligence have started to use the word *disambiguate* to mean "choose" or "specify," replacing understandable, single syllable words with one having five syllables. It is this use of the word that offends.

The desire to seem profound and important lies behind this example and behind a lot of word redefinition. One distortion that is appearing more frequently in our literature involves the word *algorithm*. In mathematics it means "any special procedure for solving a problem." Now take the word *heuristic*, which means "providing aid or direction in the solution of a problem." A heuristic does not guarantee a solution while an algorithm does. A term

that is now creeping into our literature is *heuristic algorithm*. This is another oxymoron. The authors should be using the phrase *heuristic procedure*, since a procedure is just "a manner of proceeding in some course of action." However, a procedure is less grand than an algorithm.

Some of our colleagues do not understand the precise meanings of words, nor do they realize that word can have multiple definitions. How many know that "graphic description" does not necessarily mean a description that employs graphs? To most people, it would mean "a clear and lively description," something that rarely appears in academic journals outside of *Interfaces*.

I have to admit that when the subject of word choice comes up, the name of this journal poses something of a problem to me. The word *interfaces* has been so corrupted that I now think of two upwardly mobiles driving their BMW's, talking on their carphones, synchronizing their Rollexes, and scheduling a lunch of aragula and mineral water (no Perrier, please, remember the recall for benzene contamination) so that they can "interface."

If we demand mathematical precision from others, we should provide verbal precision ourselves. Here are some tests that may help you to decide whether you are perpetuating jargon or a useful new word. —Would an outsider to our field be able to understand the gist of your writing if he or she relied on dictionary definitions of the words?

—To sell your idea, did you make sure the existing meaning adds a good connotation? Remember, doctors only postpone deaths; they do not save lives. But think of the

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mileage they have gotten out of their choice of words.

—Does your word or phrase feed a need for self-importance?

—How many prefixes and suffixes have you added to the original word? Adding large numbers has earned Alexander Haig his place in history, but we do not have his publicists.

—How would you feel if you used the word outside your in-group, especially with a close relative?

Let me mention another word that should never have been added to our language: *instantiate*. This word is used in the

Decide whether you are perpetuating jargon.

phrase *instantiate a model* to mean “replace the symbols used for coefficients with data.” The only good thing about this word is at least no one has used the phrase *data-ize the model* until now.

Send me your most despised bit of jargon with an explanation, and I will compile a list for publication. My Bitnet address is v5256e@templevm.