

## Text B

## Lost for Words

The broadcaster John Humphrys details the abuses which have driven him to write a book about the growing misuse of the English language



John Humphrys in the 'Today' programme studio

Our language is showing signs of obesity, which is the consequence of feeding on junk words. Tautology is the equivalent of having chips with rice.

We talk of future plans and past history; of live survivors and safe havens. Children have temper tantrums and politicians announce "new initiatives" – though maybe that is to distinguish them from the many "initiatives" that are recycled versions of failed old ones. We say "from whence" and "he is currently the chairman..."

You see signs along the road informing you of "delays due to an earlier accident", as though they could be due to a later one. Traffic warnings on the radio tell you roadworks are "still continuing", probably adding that they do so "at this moment in time", as though a moment could be in anything else.

Some of the obesity comes from our relatively recent tendency to sprinkle prepositions where they should not be. We attach them to verbs which are self-sufficient. We "test out", "raise up", "descend down", "revert back", "separate out", "free up", "enter in", "divide up", "exit out" and "feed into". It is not only estate agents who insist that a house "comprises of" three bedrooms. We write "all of" when we need no more than "all" and we even double up prepositions to be on the safe side. Things are "opposite to" (which compounds the felony), "up against", "off of" and "up until". And can anyone remember when we met people instead of "meeting up with"?

Then again, maybe I should chill out – or possibly just "chill".

Euphemism is another enemy of good, simple language. People who bought houses on a new development in Weston-super-Mare last year had terrible problems: uneven floors; dangerous wiring; windows and roof tiles that did not fit. In one case the entire front of a house had to be removed because the brickwork was so shoddy. When the builders finally got around to apologising this was how they put it: "We were aware of the build quality issues ...."

Here is a company building houses that make the buyers' lives a misery and they still cannot bring themselves to use that simple word, "problems". Instead there are "build quality issues".

The motivation for euphemism is usually pretty clear. "Slaughterhouse" gave way to "abattoir" because the sound of the French word had none of the savagery of "slaughter", with its reminder of what happened to the sweet little lamb that has ended up as chops on the butcher's shelf.

I guarantee that "butcher" will be the next to go. No doubt when all our local butchers have been driven out of business the supermarkets will find a cosier word for their rows of chill cabinets masquerading as a butcher's shop.

Our grandchildren will never see blood dripping from a butchered joint on a slab and they will be encouraged to think all meat comes naturally wrapped in cellophane. Did I say "meat"? Try "protein packs", maybe.

I spoke on *Today* to a man from Scottish and Southern Energy about what his company was doing to the countryside and he resolutely refused to use the word "pylon". Instead, he banged on

about "electrical transmission infrastructure". You can hear the PR consultant briefing him: "On no account use the word "pylon". It gives us problems." Not that he would have used the word "problems". It's "challenges" these days.

A businessman peddling an ambitious project for which he was trying to raise a lot of money exaggerated its potential earning power. When, some years later, he was tackled about it and asked if he had been dishonest. "No", he said, "I was telling future truths." I leave it to you to judge whether he was, in the euphemistic language of another of my interviewees "ethically challenged".

Euphemism has, I suppose, always been with us but what seems new today is the number of new words and phrases that add nothing to the language and simply sound pretentious: words such as "infotainment" and "infomediary"; phrases such as "paradigm shift" and "step-change". Business is mostly to blame – especially the so-called business gurus who come up with a new theory (and a new vocabulary) every five minutes. We have them to thank for needing to be proactive and think outside the box while we play hardball, simultaneously applying best practice to pluck the low hanging fruit and deliver client-focused solutions that give us win-win, result-driven, value-added bottom lines. But none of that will happen if we are out of the loop and fail to exploit synergies while touching base going forward.

Source: JOHN HUMPHRYS, adapted from *The Independent*, 8 November 2004  
Photograph Copyright © BBC