

The Frog, the Ox, and the Sesquipedalian Individual

The sputtering voice on the other end of the line rose and fell with indignation. The author was outraged. How *dare* we hold him up to public ridicule by making such a demeaning change to his article? “You’ve made me sound as if I’m writing for the *Reader’s Digest*”, he harrumphed.

What was our editorial crime? We’d changed his “of insufficient magnitude” to “too small”.

Despite repeated calls for more clarity, directness, and economy in scientific writing, many authors appear to be aiming in the opposite direction. They seem to think that to be taken seriously they must use pompous, pseudotechnical language, inflating simple ideas to make them sound “scientific”, like the frog in Aesop’s fable who puffed himself up trying to be as big as an

Such authors never say “symptoms”, but always “symptomatology” (“individuals presenting with symptomatology consistent with bowel obstruction”). They reject “methods” in favor of “methodology” (“In order to test this hypothesis, we needed an appropriate methodology”). To such writers,

an effect is always an “impact”, no matter how slight; “utilize”, having more syllables, is obviously better than “use”; and a disease doesn’t have a cause—it has an “etiology” (or better still, “multiple etiologies”). Above all, “prior to” must always be substituted for “before”. It’s 2 words instead of 1, it’s Latinate, it’s legalistic, and it’s pretentious. If only it had a few more syllables, it would be perfect!

Such examples of language bloat abound in the medical literature. A recent check of MEDLINE for the past four and a half years turned up 6000 articles containing the word “methodology”. In how many of those, I wonder, did the authors actually mean “the branch of logic concerned with the application of the principles of reasoning to scientific and philosophical inquiry” (*Webster’s New World Dictionary*, Third College Edition)?

At our journal, we routinely stick a pin in “quantitate” (a fancy word for “measure”), “parameters” (for “limits” or “extent”—“the parameters of the problem”), and “modality” (for “method” or “approach”). Computer jargon—words like “input” and “interface”

and “feedback”—is a veritable cornucopia of bloat. Younger readers of this column may find it hard to believe that once, not so long ago, we managed to communicate with one another without saying “input”. In those days, we asked people not for their input but for their opinions, advice, or suggestions.

The bloated word that irritates me most is “individual”, used as an ugly polysyllabic synonym for “person”. “Individual” is a perfectly good adjective, of course, and as a noun it correctly refers to the individual person as opposed to some larger social group, as in “The Constitution balances the rights of the individual against those of society at large,” and “Risk factors that are unimportant for individuals may be important when the effect is multiplied over the population as a whole.” But when all that’s meant is “person” or “people”, the use of the longer word is absurd: “Eight hundred individuals were enrolled in the study,” or “One individual failed to comply with the regimen.”

Aesop’s frog, trying to impress his little son, swelled himself up until he burst. There’s a moral there somewhere.