

Of Gobbledygook and Bafflegab

We hereby give you notice that Bank of Scotland have retrocessed, reponed and restored Executors and Assignees, in and to their own right and place in the undermoted policy of Assurance by our Office, Videlicet . . .

Bank of Scotland, from a “Letter to Scottish Widows and a Customer”, 2004

A colleague’s recent message prodded me to research the word *gobbledygook*, which the *American Heritage Dictionary, Fourth Edition, 2000 (AHD4)*, says is “unclear, wordy jargon, imitative of the gobbling of a turkey”. Because this column appears near Thanksgiving, the subject seemed both interesting and seasonally appropriate.

I’m a big fan of Bryan A Garner (*A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, 1998). *ADMAU* contains the following entries—there are probably others—all of which bear upon the subject of *gobbledygook*:

- *Abstractitis*.
- *Bureaucratese*.
- *Jargon*.
- *Latinisms*.
- *Legalese*.
- *Obscurity*.
- *Officialese*.
- *Plain language*.
- *Woolliness*.

Although all are worth reading, Garner’s essay on plain language navigates the main current of his thoughts on the topic as well as any. In it, he poses the questions, “Shouldn’t learned professionals be allowed complex verbiage? Shouldn’t they express themselves in more sophisticated ways than nonprofessionals do?” His answer comprises four main points (pp 498-9):

First, those who write in a difficult, laborious style risk being unclear not only to other readers but also to themselves. When you write obscurely, you’re less likely to be thinking clearly.

Second, obscure writing wastes readers’ time—a great deal of it, when the sum is totaled. An Australian study conducted in the 1980s found that lawyers and judges take twice as long deciphering legalistically worded statutes as they do plain-language revisions.

Third, simplifying is a higher intellectual attainment than complexifying. In fact, the hallmark of all the greatest stylists is precisely that they have taken difficult ideas and expressed them as simply as possible.

Fourth, the very idea of professionalism demands that writers not conspire against non-specialists by adopting a style that makes their writing seem like a suffocating fog.

Garner ends by quoting Richard Grant White (*Words and Their Uses*, 1870): “As a general rule, the higher the culture, the simpler the style and the plainer the speech.”

Etymology of *Gobbledygook*. Both Garner and Michael Quinion (“World Wide Words”, www.worldwidewords.org/weirdwords/ww-gobl.htm) trace the word’s coinage to Texan Fontaine “Maury” Maverick, Sr (1895-1954).

Sidebar. Maury Maverick’s grandfather, Samuel Augustus Maverick, apparently bequeathed the world the term *maverick* for an unbranded range animal. Because Sam would not mark his cattle, his contrariness as someone who “refuses to abide by the dictates of or resists adherence to a group” (*AHD4*) earned him the eponym.

See also “Recipe for Gobbledygook: Add One Part Turkey Noises To One Part Used Motor-Oil. Stir Well”, at sbm.sbmin.com/asp/DisplayArticles.asp?ArticleId=983&CatId=62.

Tower of Gabble. A word not listed in *ADMAU* is *bafflegab*, a close cousin to *gobbledygook*. According to Quinion,

bafflegab was the early-fifties coinage of Milton A Smith, a Washington lawyer at the US Chamber of Commerce (www.worldwidewords.org/weirdwords/ww-baf1.htm). Smith coined the term for what he gloriously described as “multiloquence characterized by consummate interfusion of circumlocution or periphrasis, inscrutability, and other familiar manifestations of abstruse expatiation commonly utilized for promulgations implementing Procrustean determinations by governmental bodies”.

LLNL Takes On LLabspeak. On 29 March 2002, *Newsline*, the weekly newsletter of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL), ran an article titled “Laboratory employees sound off on Labspeak” (www.llnl.gov/pao/employee/articles/2002/03-29-02-newsline.pdf).

Jargon that knitted the LLNL workers’ brows included these terms for measurements:

- *shake*—10 nanosecond increment of time. So if you’re “back in shake” you are pretty fast.
- *gillette*—pulsed laser energy required to pierce 1 razor blade.
- *jerk*—1,000,000,000 joules.
- *kruger*—1 megaton per second (after LLNL scientist Hans Kruger).
- *mcnamara*—400 megatons (after then-Secretary [of Defense] McNamara).
- *sun*—0.1 watts per square centimeter.

The LLNL article also identifies “a long list of acronyms” that cause meaning meltdown at the site. It concludes by saying, “Only at the Lab could you be asked: ‘Is that IWS from LSED on NIF, a DUSA, UCNI or SRD? Don’t know? Check with your ADC.’”

Don’t Make Your Professor an Aggressor. Most professionals speak or write the way their professors did—and their professors before them, and their professors before them. . . . One reason some writers stiffen their necks when they get our editing is that we are posthumously poking their mentors in the eye. “You mean dear Professor Gabbenfuss was *wrong* when he told me never to say ‘I found’ rather than ‘It was found’ in my research reports?”

Arguments for directness, clarity, and brevity are difficult to assail if you present them in the right way. Quoting an authority to a highly sensitive client or audience can help ground some of the lightning. The foreleaf of ADMAU contains a handy “Quick Editorial Guide” that consists of 100 “common editorial comments” keyed to the pages in the book to which the comments refer.

Garner suggests, “If you’re an editor or teacher, this list of 100 common editorial comments will save considerable time in marking text. Rather than explaining the need for various edits in marginal comments, just key your edits to the discussion in this book by circling the appropriate number beside the edited passage. The writer will then be able to consult this guide and the relevant pages. In this way, you’ll economize in marking pages while still providing an explanation for your edits.” (For example, circling #91 will direct the reader to consult the entry *That & which* on pages 647-9.)

Of course, that means that your reader will have had to buy “this guide” beforehand.

Chuckle of the Month. *Resumania.com* Hall of Fame entry: “**Skills:** Excellent memory; strong math aptitude; excellent memory” (www.resumania.com/fameindex.html).