

Euronext/Recontres traduction financière conference 2003

Business jargon

Business reports are jam-packed with jargon. **Lucy Kellaway** breaks the codes and shows translators how to stay in the 'loop and drive forward'



Lucy Kellaway writes a widely-read management column in *The Financial Times*. Plus on 20 June, 2003, she was a featured speaker at the 8th Paris Bourse seminar on financial translation, addressing an issue that plagues translators in many language combinations and countries: business jargon.

I'd like to take this opportunity to come out of the closet. What I am going to tell you has been a closely guarded secret up to now. And in sharing it with you I feel a bit sweaty palmed. But here goes.

As well as being Lucy Kellaway, journalist on the *Financial Times*, I am also a 43-year-old man. His name is Martin Lukes; he is Director of Special Projects of the UK arm of an American multinational called a-b global.

Every Thursday, the *FT* publishes the emails Martin has written that week. These are about office politics, about how stressed he is and his latest management initiatives. A-b global is a world-class company. When it comes to slavishly and pointlessly following the latest management fad, a-b global is ahead of the curve.

You may wonder why I am telling you about this satirical character, and his ghastly made-up company. The reason is that Martin writes in the worst jargon ever invented. His jargon is best of breed. It is better than excellent. It is paradigm shifting. It is top decile. It pushes the envelope until it falls off the table.

In many ways what you do, as translators, and what I do, as a satirist, are completely opposite. You take some dreadful business writing and try to make sense of it. I do the reverse. When I am writing the Martin Lukes column, I take a thought, and then try to express it as badly as possible in the most terrible words and convoluted phrases I can think of.

When people find out that I am the author of Martin Lukes, they often ask how did a nice girl like me come to talk so dirty. The reason is that for the last 17 years on the *FT* I have been writing about business, and

during that time I have been exposed to more jargon than a body can bear.

Before I get any further, I suppose we should ask: what exactly is business jargon?

People often think that business jargon is about new ugly words. About business process reengineering. About paradigm shifts. That sort of thing.

Here is an ugly example. 'A future-proof asset that seamlessly empowers your mission-critical communications.' Here is another: 'A leverageable global knowledge repository.'

Although these are horrible, this stuff is the tip of the iceberg. Outrageous talk like this may attract a lot of attention, but it isn't the real problem.

The jargon that interests me more are the words we are familiar with in one context, suddenly cropping up in another.

Think of this phrase. 'We drive performance at every point on the value chain.' This is the sort of thing that companies say all the time. Each word is innocent enough, yet the whole is horrid jargon.

Drive is not jargon if it is about cars, performance is fine if you're in a theatre: 'This performance will start in two minutes'. Value is fine as in 'worth', and chain is fine as in what you wear round your neck.

But 'we drive performance at every point on the value chain' is not fine at all. What it means is anyone's guess.

In fact the more subtle the jargon, the more pernicious it is.

The other week I did a very odd thing. I went to work for just one day as HR manager at Microsoft. My very job title – Head of Great Company – gives one a clue about the sort of insidious jargon I was dealing with.

During meetings I had to say things like, 'We push the boundaries'. 'We have a work-hard-play-hard culture.' 'We are passionate about our jobs.' 'We take the best and leave the rest.'

Again, there is nothing wrong with the words themselves. It is the context that makes them so unpalatable. In business, these phrases are clichés with meanings that have left the words long behind.

In the end, of course, what counts as jargon and what doesn't is a subjective matter.

One man's normal speech is another man's jargon. If you say 'I'm heading up this project' – you may not consider that to be jargon at all. But I'm a stickler and I think it is. I know almost everyone says 'to head up' now but I am still holding out. To lead, to run, to be in charge of, sound so much better.

So what is my definition of business jargon?

I think jargon means any sort of business language that you would rather not use yourself. This definition accounts for why no one considers themselves to be a world leader in jargon. How often have you heard someone say 'I always try to speak as much jargon as possible'? Never. But how often do they complain about the jargon used by others? All the time.

So we are in a nonsensical position. Everyone agrees that business jargon is bad. But everyone uses it, without being conscious of what they are doing. Why?

Martin Lukes is a typical heavy user of jargon. He uses it for at least seven different reasons.

n First he uses it because he thinks it sounds good. He will say 'this breakthrough initiative will

enhance business performance'. He says that because it makes him feel grander and more important than if he just said 'this plan may help us increase profits'.

n **Secondly, he may use it because it is deliberately vague.** He says something will 'enhance business performance' because it is less precise than saying it will increase profits. To say that might well give him a nasty hostage to fortune. In business, vagueness has a lot to be said for it.

n **Thirdly Martin uses jargon because it shows he belongs to the club.** 'I'll keep you in the loop.' 'Thanks for the heads up.' This is sort of business locker-room talk. It's a bonding thing. Harmless, if a bit naff.

n **The fourth reason he uses jargon is to make something horrid sound less so.** Jargon covers a wealth of euphemism. This comes in handy when something unpalatable – like mass redundancies – is going on. It may not help the workers to talk about 'involuntary separation', but it makes the managers feel a whole lot better.

n **Fifthly, jargon is also used as an alternative to thinking.** If Martin has not really thought about what he means to say (which, frankly is a lot of the time) the best course of action is to string a lot of words together that sound about right, and hope no one will notice.

n **Reason number six. Jargon is simply habit.** Martin uses it because he can't help himself.

n **Seven. Very occasionally he uses a jargon word because there isn't a normal one that does the job so well.**

Outsourcing. Benchmarking. That sort of thing.

If you are unlucky enough to be attempting to translate a document bristling with jargon, it is quite important to have some idea about why so much of it is being used. I don't want to teach my grandmothers to suck eggs, but I suspect that the last reason is, oddly, the least difficult. If you are trying to translate benchmarking or outsourcing, all you need do is hope that a similar word exists in the other language and off you go.

The difficulty with all the other sorts of reasons for jargon is that in

translating you need to preserve the tone and feel. You need to be as true to the intention of the writer as to the meanings of the actual words that he has chosen.

Sometimes this can be very important indeed. If, say, you are translating a memo about redundancies which uses the dreadful jargon phrase 'involuntary separation' or 'forced reductions' – some parallel clumsy euphemism needs to be found in the other language. Talking bluntly about job losses will not do.

I've given seven reasons, but really life is more complicated than that. Most really peachy examples of jargon are motivated by two, three, even four of the reasons.

Take this real sentence from an internal memo of a vast US company on the subject of pay rises – or rather, the lack of pay rises.

'Once we attain our stretch performance goal with consistent momentum going forward, we will reopen our salary review process for all non-commissioned employees and make additional adjustments at that time.'

This uses jargon because the author likes the sound of it, because euphemism helps soften tough decisions, and because the jargon adds some helpful vagueness.

A rough translation would be: no one gets a rise now. But when we start doing better, maybe some people will get rises then.

Notice how carefully hedged the language is. There is no mention of what the targets are, and it doesn't commit itself to any sort of pay rises. The 'additional adjustment' may turn out to be tiny. So the jargon makes the promise sound copper bottomed, but when you take it to pieces it turns out to be anything but.

Now take this example. This, believe it or not was a taster advertising a speech at a recent HR conference. 'For HR to succeed it must re-equip itself through its own competence, capabilities,

governance, delivery systems to enable managers to build the organisation capability needed to succeed. HR practices need to move beyond people management and become increasingly focused on deliverables such as capabilities and intangible competencies'

The man is straining to sound knowledgeable. He is being a member of a club. He's using the language as a crutch.

I can't translate that into English, and I'm not the only one. I once put this sentence into a column, and invited readers to write in with suggestions. I received about 100, none of which convinced me they had any idea what the man was on about. Which suggests if the original is as impenetrable as that – there is no right answer – so the translator can write almost anything.

I would now like to 'keep you in the loop' by giving you a 'heads up' on some of Martin's favourite words.

n His favourite noun is geographies. Geography, singular, was a subject that I hated at school. Geographies plural has come to mean countries, and very regrettable it is, too.

n His second favourite is solution. Have you noticed how everyone talks of solutions now – even when there is no solving going on at all. Solutions are what used to be called products. Solutions are the new goods and services. There is a sign up in the local Tesco over what I call TV dinners. Only Tesco calls it 'ready meal solutions.'

There is an ad campaign running in Britain at the moment for a chain of opticians. And what are they selling? Not glasses but 'eyecare solutions'.

There are lots of verbs that Martin loves.

n **To drive.** In management speak, this involves no steering wheel. Instead it means to make something happen. 'I drive performance' is the sort of silly thing people say. Usually though it

'To drive. In management speak, this involves no steering wheel. Instead it means to make something happen. 'I drive performance' is the sort of silly thing people say. Usually though it means just the reverse.'

means just the reverse. Anyone who says this is probably completely useless and should be sacked.

- n **To buy into something.** It isn't just Martin who uses this – everyone does. I even caught my 80-year-old mother saying she bought into something the other day. But I am still holding out – I urge you to do the same.
- n **To own.** I'm not talking about owning a car or a house. I'm talking about owning management projects. 'The whole team owns the change initiative.' Ghostly. Almost bound to be fudge.
- n **To grow** as a transitive verb. This one has been irritating me for a very long time. I grow tomatoes; Martin grows the bottom line. Actually he does nothing of the sort because he's so stupid.
- n **To deliver.** This does not involve a van or any goods. Martin might say he delivers added value. I might express the same thought by saying I try to do my job well.
- n **There are more verbs.** Many more. To leverage. To harness. To unveil. To unleash. To task. Martin loves this. 'I have been tasked by the CEO to drive this project.' Which means 'I'm in charge - you do what I say'.
- n Then there are the nice little phrases, every one a crashing cliché. Going forward. Push the envelope. Push the boundaries. Blue sky thinking. Thinking out of the box.

When the best won't do

There is another subtler sort of jargon that I find even more distasteful – which involves a kind of upping of the ante.

Have you noticed that there is no such thing as good any more? There is only better-than-excellent, leading-edge, ahead of the curve. You see this in CVs and job ads all the time. Everyone has to have unrivalled skills, or unparalleled ones. Or pre-eminent, even.

Not only are positive words hyped out of all proportion. Negative ones have disappeared altogether. So you don't say 'I'm furious you haven't

finished the report.' You say 'I am disappointed', or 'surprised'. You don't say X is useless; but that he 'has opportunities for improvement.'

Worst of all is the emotional inflation of business language. It is most apparent in the use of the words 'passion' and now 'love' in business culture. These words aren't jargon in themselves. But when people say 'I feel passionate about this company', it is pretty close.

So I like my job. Martin is passionate about his.

I tell you something. Martin shares it with you.

Martin's tip-top favourite adjective is relentless. This is a taste he shares with all leading-edge companies. Practically anything that you approve of benefits from having the word relentless stuck in front of it.

Take this example I got from an AT & T mission: 'we are the pre-eminent networking and telecoms services company in the world, with a relentless focus on meeting customer needs'. Relentless focus?? I don't think so.

A few months ago, I wrote an entire column in the *FT* on the latest Accenture annual report. This was a state-of-the-art document on the butchering of the English language. All the words I've talked about today were there. Look how many delivers there are on this page. I've highlighted all of them.

But there is much more in this document. Now that I look back on it, it offers proof that what seems like the worst jargon can be pretty benign. What seems benign can bite you on the ankle. Take these three cheesy little slogans.

'Our capabilities are global. Our track record is proven. Our passion is relentless.'

In three short sentences you have the three great pitfalls of jargon: one sentence doesn't make sense, one is a tautology, and one is just guff.

n Our capabilities are global.

This simply does not work. I'm not totally sure what capabilities are in this context but I know they can't be global.

n Our track record is proven.

I love this. Note the way you

never get a record. Always a track record. And then, to tell us that it is proven is not really helpful. All records are proven, that is what they are. As it doesn't actually say what the record is for, it could be for its relentless focus on meeting needs....or for being champions of jargon.

n And finally: Our passion is relentless. This is best of all.

This is what passion means; 'having easily roused emotions, ardent, intense, easily angered, sexually ardent.'

This is what relentless means: 'pitiless, merciless'.

Put them together – have you ever met a management consultant that fits that description? For your sake, I do hope not.

At the beginning I said that Martin Lukes' jargon was world class, better than excellent, paradigm shifting.

That was lie. The thing about jargon is that it nearly always is boring. The main effect on a normal person of heavy doses of jargon is to turn off mentally. That is just what you don't want if you are writing a column that is meant to be entertaining.

So I have to tone it down a bit. In truth, Martin Lukes' jargon is exceptional in the real world. But then that is the point about those jargon phrases. You say paradigm shifting. It's world class. But no one is convinced. We know it probably means just mean ordinary, too.

Open debate

ITI member Chris Durban opens the discussion for delegates on translating in the business world

Chris Durban: One of the problems facing translators is deciding whether the pompous or uneven writing we are sometimes asked to translate was produced by default or is intentional. Or perhaps it means that it's getting late in the annual report season, so the translator herself is tired and everything is starting to sound the same. Lucy Kellaway mentioned the ubiquitous 'solutions'; in French, the overuse of *outils* comes to mind...

Philip MacDonald: An American economist once explained how Milton Friedman's concept of a natural

'I grow tomatoes; Martin grows the bottom line. Actually he does nothing of the sort because he's so stupid.'



rate of unemployment in the sixties never caught on until some genius rebaptized it 'NAIRU' (for Non-Accelerating Inflation Rate of Unemployment) – which sounds like a Pacific island! – at which point it took off like mad. No doubt the 'technical' sound helped this term catch on...

LK: ...which demonstrates the power of the catch phrase. And although I have been very unkind about catch phrases, that is a brilliant example showing that sometimes, if you can invent a really powerful bit of jargon, it does wonders for you.

Pieta Monks: I work at London Metropolitan University and completely agree about how insidious and pernicious business jargon is. But in education the situation is equally bad, if not worse. There are certain phrases that come into fashion and we have no choice: we must follow them because they are acceptable to our quality control units and colleagues in university. So it's not just business that suffers.

LK: I do sympathize, and that's what I meant when I said that jargon is used to make you part of the club. If you choose to say 'well, I'm not in this club' that raises the question: 'well, what the hell are you doing here, then?' So you quite often just have to hold your nose and comply.

Rupert Swyer: I admire your fastidious approach to these issues, but I also have a confession to make: I use a lot of jargon in my translations. And I find that the more I use, the more clients appreciate them. Indeed, I often... creatively strive to do my translations out of the box. (As you can see I am an avid reader of Martin Lukes, and am inspired by him at times.)

John Rynne: I work in Spain. A reflection more than a question: if you were here in 20 years' time, how many of the phrases you've cited as bad examples would trigger looks of incomprehension, with people saying 'Oh, that's perfectly normal, that's normal usage'?

LK: It can work either way. They might enter normal language, but remember that jargon is a fashion thing, too, so a lot of them will probably have withered away. It is quite similar to the way teenagers talk. For example, I don't think anybody will be saying 'keep you in the loop' in 20 years' time; it's related to 'groovy' text-speak. So some terms will stick around, but I think

'All new sorts of language comes from America, we don't seem to be very good at inventing our own. Perhaps we should feel good about that!'

a lot will be replaced, perhaps by even more hideous examples.

CD: One of our other speakers mentioned earlier that it is a good idea to compare a report you are working on with competitors' reports already published. And if you translate eight annual reports back to back, it's interesting to analyze the chairman's letter, because the jargon is so much in evidence. The structure of the letter itself may be different (Peter Prowse has pointed out that a French chairman's letter tends to be two to three times longer than in English), but you do feel as if you are drowning in formulae.

LK: Indeed. I should probably do a column at some point, looking at all those chairmen's letters, because they are so formulaic. Sometimes it seems you might be able to simply swap over the company name and chairman's name – although you'd probably need to be industry specific.

Françoise Massardier: Most of the examples you gave moved from the concrete to the abstract, from the general to the pseudo-scientific. One of the reasons for the use of jargon may be to establish business as a field that is legitimate, as opposed to being irrational or unnecessary. So the jargon develops this way because the irrationality of the market has to be hidden. As an academic, I do a little literary theory and you see it there, too: to justify the field as a specialised area you have to invent a language that people won't understand so that you can then claim you have a true profession. Would you agree with that analysis?

LK: Yes, and in business I think that some of the most insidious examples are specifically related to management fads that have spuriously borrowed from other disciplines. 'Business process reengineering' is an example – something that is actually quite loose and flabby, with a pseudo-scientific phrase slapped on top of it.

Peter Prowse: Most of the examples you quoted seem to be migrating from west to east. Are we suffering from a globalization of jargon? Where does jargon come

from and how does it end up here?

LK: Well you've already spotted where it comes from – and you are absolutely right, nearly all of it is American. Yet many English business practices have come from the US, too, so it's not just the jargon, it's a broader way of doing business.

But I do think Americans are better at inventing jargon terms in general. For example, these days British teenagers talk like American teenagers, all new sorts of language comes from America, we don't seem to be very good at inventing our own. Perhaps we should feel good about that!

Peter Letley: I find my Canadian colleagues slip into an absolutely excruciating additional form of jargon built around home-style folksy remarks. These tend to imply that we are in some way working on a farm rather than in a bank, eg, 'let's plough a straight furrow'...

LK: It's hard to know which is more ghastly – the pseudo-scientific phrases or the toe-curling homespun ones. Actually, I find the homespun ones particularly inappropriate, because business simply is not homespun. Perhaps someone is convinced that such terms somehow make business warm and cuddly...

PL: ...especially when you are ploughing a straight furrow about the downsizing exercise.

Melissa Desprets: You've translated a number of awful English expressions into plain English for us. As there are a lot of books with idioms translated from French to English, I wonder if there is a market for business people and linguists to produce a bilingual collection of dreadful expressions in English and French – might this be a project for you?

LK: My French is not up to it, so this will have to be done by someone else! But there might be a market.

CD: Joking aside, translation offers an opportunity to re-examine a text. And I think translators can and should take the initiative to force their authors to look at what they've written. Coming from another culture, we can criticize a text and be heard



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more than the staff members hovering around the chairman who spend their time feeding in jargon without even realizing it. So we can suggest better solutions.

David Poppleton: But bearing in mind what was said this morning – that companies should look at their competitors and comparable annual reports – perhaps we should nonetheless be using at least some jargon to ensure that the work we are producing for our customers is similar to, say, a UK annual report.

LK: True. And it's worth noting that if you try and boil everything that appears in an annual report down to its core meaning, you'll find that it is so bald, so blunt, that it just doesn't look right. Your clients would be very unhappy if you did that, I'm sure.

DP: So we have a duty, in fact...

LK: Yes, that was partly what I

meant. That you have to be true to the intention of the original as well as to what it actually means.

Dominique Jonkers: French speakers might want to consult *L'Hexagonal tel qu'on le parle*, a French 'bilingual' book with columns setting out what French people say and what they mean. It's along the lines of what you've just said to us.

LK: It's a humorous book, is it?

DJ: Well, that's how I understood it. But I live in Belgium, so of course I have a different view...

Marian Greenfield: I come from the US, the birthplace of jargon – and the ultimate birthplace of jargon, because I used to work with JP Morgan. In my department we regularly received jargon-laden analysts' reports and would call the authors up to ask what they'd really meant to say. Some could explain what they

meant, but many could not.

LK: Which is particularly depressing if you consider how much they were paid.

CD: A question to our audience: what do you think about the perception that French readers will tolerate a higher degree of abstraction in a written text? Is that true?

LK: But is there a difference between abstraction – which I think of as being a more respectable philosophical concept – as opposed to just whiffle?

CD: It's a fine line. But this is a debate that comes up every year, particularly in annual report season, when you realise that the French texts you're dealing with tend to be more abstract than a well-written English equivalent might be – this is certainly the case for the documents that Bob Blake and I work on. At this point, you realise that you are doing your authors a favour when you pull their texts towards the concrete, eliminating some of what otherwise would pass for froth and frilliness, even silliness, in English. (Taking care to charge by a source-text word-count rather than target text!)

Larry Cohen: The different level of abstraction between French and English is one problem, but there is also a literary tradition in France that is apparently not so strong in English-speaking countries – certainly not in the US.

Part of the challenge in French to English translation – particularly in the chairman's letter – is not so much abstraction as a French tendency toward what you might call 'lyrical flight'.

In that case, the problem for the translator working into English is to find an equivalent level of communication. Not the equivalent sentences, or sentence length, or even imagery, but an equivalent style of communication. A text that will establish the same rapport, the same sense of communication and closeness with the reader, that the French chairman is trying to achieve. There is no simple answer, eg 'we Britons or Americans like plain down-to-earth short sentences so everything's going to be expressed like that'; it is far more complicated. On the other hand, if you were to translate a French business text in a more literal way, you'd often come up with something that no British or American businessperson would be capable of reading or understanding.

NOTIFICATION OF NATIONAL PROCUREMENT OF INTERPRETATION AND TRANSLATION SERVICES BY NHS DIRECT

The NHS Plan states that by 2003 a National Interpretation and Translation Service will be provided by NHS Direct. A number of options for the provision of this service have been considered. It has been decided that the following services are to be procured:-

- A nationally based telephone based interpretation service
- A nationally based video conference based British Sign Language/English interpretation service
- A national translation service

The first stage of a procurement of this size is to "advertise" in the Official Journal of European Community (OJEC) to invite companies to receive the Tender documents. The OJEC advert contains a number of conditions that must be met by suppliers prior to receiving the Tender. The OJEC Advert can be viewed on line at <http://ted.publications.eu.int> : this is the OJEC web site . To access the advert Select "en" (for English), then select "search for tenders". Enter 139660-2003 in the 'Doc number' field.

Copies of the OJEC are also normally available in local reference libraries.

NHS Direct is keen to encourage and support a wide range of companies to tender for this contract either own their own or as part of a consortium. A letter has gone out to all organisations known to NHS Direct currently involved in the provision of languages services within the NHS. Please feel free to pass the information on to other organisations.

If you have any further queries please contact Jessica Flower or Frances Chinemana (see contact details below).

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