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## TALKING THE TALK: THE CONFUSING, CONFLICTING AND CONTRADICTIONARY COMMUNICATIVE ROLE OF WORKPLACE JARGON IN MODERN ORGANIZATIONS

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TALKING THE TALK:  
THE CONFUSING, CONFLICTING AND  
CONTRADICTORY COMMUNICATIVE ROLE OF  
WORKPLACE JARGON IN MODERN  
ORGANIZATIONS

BY

NEAL LLOYD JONES

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
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MASTER OF ARTS THESIS

OF

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## **ABSTRACT**

The use of jargon or buzzwords, as they are popularly known, in modern corporate organizations is well known, yet little research exists to shed any communicative light on this linguistic phenomenon. While it is commonly derided among business journalists, “communications consultants” and others within the organizations themselves, whether or not this specific form of language has any proven and demonstrable positive or negative effects on organizational communication or broader organizational culture has yet to be determined. Also, given the documented and important role of language in shaping the culture of an organization and the function of language in instilling organizational identification among members, understanding the specifics of this language at work could provide a new mechanism by which to study and understand the function, role and effect of language and communication in organizations and broaden our understanding of organizational culture, its formation and management.

This study explores the use of this jargon in a modern, global corporation to shed new light on the role of this shared, jargon-ripe language in a modern organizational setting. Using ethnographic observation of routine organizational member conversations and meetings, usage of this language is recorded and analyzed. A survey is used to gauge frequency and familiarity of specific words and phrases. Q-sort methodology is also employed to determine if shared understanding of specific words and phrases exists. Post-Q-sort interviews further explore the participant’s understanding, usage and perceptions of this language, its role in their day-to-day

organizational functions, and the effects of this jargon on both communication and the speakers who use it.

A thorough review of literature highlights existing research on the role of language and shared languages in organizational settings. This review also explores previous studies on the role of jargon in facilitating communication among organizational members in individual, group and computer-mediated settings, paying particular attention to the functional role of language in these various scenarios. The function of language as an artifact by which to study, understand and identify organizational culture is also discussed. The role of language in shaping organizational culture and instilling and maintaining organizational identification among members is also explored.

In analyzing the results, research reveals that the use of this jargon is overwhelmingly commonplace among organizational members and its use has a positive effect on communication within the organization. While results show these words and phrases are rarely used outside of the organizational or corporate setting, research reveals that this jargon is routinely used across organizations and corporations, either in day-to-day communication with members of other organizations or to describe, market and sell products or services to other corporations who share usage and familiarity of this language.

However, despite its widespread use and acknowledged effectiveness, research shows that organizational members share negative opinions of the language itself. Further analysis demonstrates that this negativity permeates organizational member perceptions of the speakers who employ it, though those who decry it also readily

admit to using it and are quick to acknowledge its effectiveness. Role and status within the organization are also shown to be important aspects in understanding the use of jargon, the perceptions its usage creates, and the specific messages imbedded within the words and phrases that comprise this language.

The implications of these and other findings are discussed against the backdrop of the topics outlined in the literature review, and areas for future study are identified.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

“...the language is part of the process, part of the technology. The language is the machinery of the new age. It is also the ideology, endlessly evolving new means of self-justification, *going forward*, as they say.”

- Watson, 2004, p. 44

“The role of the corporate center is to worry about talent and how people do relative to each other. Workers build a set of intangibles around who they are. If they are not appreciated for their value-added they will go somewhere else.”

- Unnamed corporate management memorandum, Watson, 2004, p. 49

“Newspeak was designed not to extend, but to diminish the range of thought.”

- Orwell, 1948, *The Principles of Newspeak*

A recent study by British corporate think tank, “Investors in People,” found that the proliferation of workplace jargon is “baffling employees and widening the divide between management and staff.” The survey noted that about a third of the 3,000 polled said they felt “inadequate” when jargon was needlessly used, and that “others believed bosses were being untrustworthy or hiding something. “If used inappropriately,” said the researcher, “jargon can be an obstacle to understanding, which can ultimately impact...an organization’s productivity” (BBC News, 2007).

The Miriam Webster dictionary (2011) defines jargon as:

1 a: confused unintelligible language b: a strange, outlandish, or barbarous language or dialect c: a hybrid language or dialect simplified in vocabulary and grammar and used for communication between peoples of different speech

2: the technical terminology or characteristic idiom of a special activity or group

3: obscure and often pretentious language marked by circumlocutions and long words

For purposes of this study, we will use the second definition, that jargon is “the technical terminology or characteristic idiom of a special activity or group.” It is important to note that while the denotation of the second definition is relatively value neutral, the connotations of definitions one and three are negative, the definitions themselves contributing to the general perception of jargon as a bad thing.

Notable within the British think tank study is the use of the term “used inappropriately” and the implication that somehow, in some way, workplace jargon can not only be an obstacle to understanding, but have a similar negative impact on the

organization as a whole by hindering overall productivity. After reading this and myriad other articles where corporate jargon is decried, derided, debased and denounced, one could easily conclude that business jargon has no friends and many enemies. But if this language is so bad, why do companies—and most of the people speaking it—do so good?

That this jargon is so prevalent in corporations today that it merits a survey by an esteemed British corporate think tank suggests it is time this phenomenon is deemed worthy of study by communication researchers. However, this also brings to light several possible areas of study and hypotheses that are explored further in this paper.

First, the article suggests that there are instances when jargon can be “inappropriately used,” which, though unstated, implies that there are instances when this jargon can instead be used appropriately. Rather than serving as an obstacle to understanding, jargon, at the very least, in some instances, does not get in the way. Extrapolating further, this would suggest that workplace jargon actually facilitates communication and understanding among organizational members.

Secondly, this research suggests that the use of jargon has both a direct effect on perceptions of the speaker and, at the same time, has an effect on the receiver of the message. Workplace jargon can simultaneously elicit negative feelings, such as inadequacy in organizational members who may be at a loss to understand its meaning. At the same time, the use of this language has a negative impact on the perceptions those members have of the organizational members, notably the bosses

(managers, leaders etc...), who use jargon in their conversations with their subordinates.

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, when improperly applied or “needlessly used,” workplace jargon has negative communicative effects—it leads to a lack of understanding among organizational members—which in turn, hinders the productivity of the organization as a whole. This statement not only points out the potential downsides of jargon usage in modern corporations and organizations but places communication, and the specific language that is being employed in modern corporations, on a level of prime importance in the broader success of an organization and would suggest that language is a key component in the cohesion, function and productivity of the organization as a whole (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Barker, 1993; Bormann, 1985; Boje, 2004; Disanza & Bullis, 1999; Gouran & Hirokawa, 1983; Hackley, 2003; Hallet; 2003; O’Neill, Beauvais & Scholl, 2001; Schein, 2004; Schrodts, 2002; Tompkins & Cheney, 1995). With so much riding on this language, its time we start talking about how today’s organizational members are talking.

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF BUZZWORDS**

Born out of the business management schools, self-help books penned largely by self-proclaimed business gurus and communication consultants, a new vocabulary has emerged; what has been termed the “global language of business,” which now echoes throughout the board rooms and cubicles of corporations across America and, increasingly, the world (Dearlove & Crainer, 2006, p.3). Comprised largely of buzzwords, euphemisms, metaphors and phraseology that turn nouns into verbs and verbs into nouns, this language is now employed routinely within modern corporations. Its usage has become so widespread, that numerous Web sites have been developed where corporate denizens can tout the latest and greatest phrases they have heard their peers expound. Satirical news organizations such as The Onion (The Onion, 2008) have mocked its usage, and several reputable magazines and newspapers, both inside and outside of the business realm, have written articles noting its usage in corporations. Among them, Forbes, which now publishes an annual list of the “Greatest Buzz Words” of the past year (Forbes, 2010).

Whole books have since been written about workplace jargon, mainly deriding it as the “impenetrable, lifeless babble” (Watson, p. 37) of a soulless corporate world. It has been likened to Newspeak, the language and vocabulary created by George Orwell in his 1948 novel *1984*, a language that was designed “not to extend, but to diminish the range of thought” (Orwell, 1948).

Words and terms like “moving forward,” “actioned” “deliverable” “value add” and “baked” are now common in the corporate canon. This vocabulary morphs words and phrases from different sectors, borrowing words like “offline” and “bandwidth”

from the technological realm, for example, or transforming common phrases like “circle the wagons” or “run it up the flagpole” into action and task oriented directive statements with specific meanings and tasks. These words and phrases alter existing definitions to impart explicit meanings to keep the business of business in business. To outsiders, it sounds like gibberish, to insiders within corporations who employ it on a daily basis, “it is a new code that is the essence of pure information, so long as one masters the key” (Maier, 1).

As more words are added to the lexicon and more and more managers discuss the “value add” of their employees and the “core competencies” crucial to providing “deliverables” to create “shareholder value,” a rebellion of sorts also is underway. The imposition of this language has created a backlash against it, with more and more decrying it as a language without any real meaning; it is “dispassionate, purged of all imagination” (Maier, 1).

“Newspeak was designed to provide a medium of expression for the world-view . . . but also to make all other modes of thought impossible” (Orwell, 1). Orwell’s ominous vision of an industrialized language devoid of warmth and humanity was a work of science fiction. But for some, Newspeak has arrived, and workplace jargon is the Orwellian language incarnate in today’s cold, calculated corporate linguistic reality.

But reality would indicate that something greater and less nefarious is at work, that this workplace jargon serves a specific purpose in today’s modern corporate settings. By understanding this language, its effectiveness or ineffectiveness, and the impacts it has on corporate culture, productivity and the workers who are subject to it

and employ it in their daily corporate lives, we can better understand the role of language in today's modern corporations, and the broader effects that this specific language has on communication in today's modern workplace.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### **THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN THE ORGANIZATION**

Schein (2004) noted one of the main difficulties in studying and then creating unified cultural typologies of organizational culture is that “different organizations will have different paradigms with different core assumptions” (p. 21) and these differences make it difficult to discern commonalities or draw overarching conclusions about organizational culture as whole. Language, however, “is an observed behavioral regularity in interaction, an espoused value and part of the climate of an organization—a linguistic paradigm” (p.13). While common paradigms may have thus far proved elusive, today, one such organizational paradigm exists—the language being spoken in modern corporations. If we can begin to identify and understand common paradigms when and where they reveal themselves, we can then begin to discern the commonalities that have thus far proved elusive, which would provide a powerful tool in the tedious task of critically engaging organizational culture. Understanding the language being used in today’s corporations—a language they all have in common—could reveal additional links that chain all modern organizations together and further our development of a more unified view of today’s modern organizations and the culture within. Schein (2004) goes on to say that “culture will manifest itself at the level of observable artifacts and shared and espoused beliefs and values” (p. 36)—language is one such artifact.

Research on workplace jargon focuses, primarily, on the communicative efficacy of jargon, in general, and the potential effects it can have on speakers and

listeners. Research has also focused on the importance of language in developing shared meanings among organizational members as well as the role of language and communication, in a more generalized fashion, in encouraging organizational identification and effective decision making.

Several researchers have focused on the roles of communication in generating organizational identification (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985; DiSanza & Bullis, 1999; Schrodt, 2002; Barker, 1993, 1999; Fairhurst, 1993; among others). Tompkins and Cheney (1985) acknowledged “identification...as inherently communicative” (p. 195), and that the “collective formulation of alternatives will necessarily involve communication” (p. 196). Research has continually supported Tompkins and Cheney’s (1985) original role of communication in facilitating organizational identification and that “it is through subtle, ongoing communication interactions that members are adapted to the organization” (DiSanza & Bullis, p. 350).

Schrodt (2002) noted that “modern organizations seek to control organizational environments through the subtle and systematic manipulation of the rhetorical environment” (as cited in Myers & Kassing, 1998, p.2). Barker (2006), in his “An Attitude Towards Organizations,” expounds upon the function of rhetoric, and, specifically, language, indicating that “all organizational activity is rhetorical, is problem-solving directed, *and language is the tool of such rhetoric*” (p. 1, emphasis added). He goes on to say that “essentially, rhetoric was, and still is, *the* organizational theory—the persuasive process of turning our abstract shared values into rational collective practice” (p. 1). A rhetorical critic, therefore, “takes on the belief that the

organization and its members can find mutually beneficial ways of working together through the creative use of language” (Barker, 2006, p.2).

Some researchers, while not touching upon the use of language or jargon specifically, have echoed the idea that to encourage identification or influence organizational culture an organization must create systems, processes and cultural mechanisms, many focusing on the function of these mechanisms in reducing uncertainty or equivocality among members (O’Neill, Beavais & Scholl, 2001). “If an organization is to direct behavior toward the accomplishment of a strategic mission...mechanisms must be created for reducing this variability among individuals focusing employee efforts on the accomplishment of strategic goals” (p. 131). Schein (2004) echoes this idea, noting that “groups learn that certain beliefs and values...work in the sense of reducing uncertainty in critical areas of the group’s functioning” (p. 29).

Barker (2006) discusses language as one such mechanism, stating that “collaborative work systems...revolve around the creation of shared discourses as a means of controlling work activity” (p. 1) and that “people in collaborative organizations use language to create ways of working together” (p. 1).

Corporations today face many challenges, not the least of which is bridging the cultural chasms created by globalized markets or the increasingly decentralized nature of business units and disparate business functions operating under the umbrella of one organization or coming together in one room as a group. In certain instances, the focus has been on the role of shared language in serving as one such bridge.

Many researchers acknowledge the importance and difficulties of knowledge sharing and dissemination across today's increasingly "temporally and culturally dispersed workspaces" (Farrell, 2004, p. 390) and the role of communication in creating commonality for which to facilitate knowledge dispersal, sharing and dissemination. Farrell (2004) stated that "the communication of knowledge across globally dispersed workspaces is fundamental to the healthy functioning of an organization" (p. 390). "Knowledge," she continued, "relies on community; it relies on...a world we find in common" and it is through communication that we must look as one way to create such a community and find our common ground (p. 482).

Herrgard (2000) took this idea further, and discussed knowledge diffusion and its role in increasing the quality of work and efficiency. He noted that "perception and language are considered the main difficulties in sharing tacit knowledge" (p. 359) for today's globally dispersed and time-constrained corporations. Finding a common language is crucial to knowledge diffusion and, therefore, effective and efficient workers, he said. "A sharing of all forms of knowledge depends on a joint language" (Herrgard, 2000, p. 359).

Dunckner (2001) proposed the idea of "interlanguages" which are a way in which cooperating disciplines, such as a collection of group members from different business units, "develop, more or less, elaborate, mutually comprehensible languages" (p. 350) as a means to increase homogeneity and "enable organized action within a given group or community" (p. 355).

Schall (1983, p. 559) noted that "cultures would be revealed through patterned speech and behavior. Speech patterns reflect and reinforce values and beliefs of the

interactors complying with them.” Hallett (2003) placed language among a number of items that a member places into their “toolkit” noting that “people bring their culturally inscribed dispositions and toolkits with them into an organization, linking organizational culture to the broader social order” (p. 131).

Regardless of the theory you ascribe to, one thing that cannot be denied is the idea that when it comes to organizational culture, language matters. Whether it is simply serving as an artifact that can help us peer into the existing culture of an organization or trying to discern and dissect the formation, installation and perpetuation of organizational culture.

Because “culture has to do with certain values that managers are trying to inculcate in their organizations” (Schein, 2004, p. 7), the link between language, the imposition of culture and the idea of control cannot be overlooked. “Culture is a mechanism of social control and can be the basis for explicitly manipulating members into perceiving, thinking and feeling in certain ways” (Schein, p. 19). Language can be both an artifact that indicates culture and a mechanism by which culture is instilled among organizational members,

Crucial to the theory of Unobtrusive Control (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985), the concept of enthymeme describes the underlying value systems at work in an employee from which they draw decision making premises. Tompkins & Cheney (1985) define enthymeme as “*A syllogistic decision making process, individual or collective, in which a conclusion is drawn from premises (beliefs, values, expectations) inculcated in the decision maker(s) by the controlling members of an organization*” (p.189). The enthymemes in Unobtrusive Control theory (E1 and E2) are the two separate behind-

the-scenes value systems that are at work focusing these premises—one generated and brought into the organization with the individual (E1), the other imparted in the individual unobtrusively by the specific organization to which they belong (E2). Unobtrusive control links enthymemic decision making intricately to the concept of organizational identification, and posits that, “the act of identification leads the decision maker to select a particular alternative, to choose one course of action over another” (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985, p.190). Tompkins and Cheney (1985) also note that “a decision maker identifies with an organization when he or she desires to choose the alternative that best promotes the perceived interests of that organization” (p.194). Control becomes unobtrusive, “invisible, submerged in the structure of the firm” (p.196). Tompkins and Cheney place communication and communicative acts, interactions and messages as crucial to this process, stating that “identification and enthymeme [are] inherently communicative” (1985, p.195).

Other research has given credence to the importance of communication in creating organizational identification and instituting unobtrusive control, finding that often “inculcating premises involves simply communicating values and facts to individuals” (Disanza & Bullis, 1999, p. 349). They also found that it is through “subtle, ongoing communicative interactions that members are adapted to the organization” (p. 350) and noted the lack of specific research into the “subtle communication processes through which employees come to internalize and/or reflect decision premises” (p. 348).

Whether it is serving as an artifact to indicate organizational culture, a means to bridge cultural gaps in a globalized corporate world, or a mechanism by which to

instill values, organizational identification or unobtrusively controlling workers, the important function of language in an organization is well documented.

As Schein (2004) notes, when researchers and organizational theorists talk about defining an organization's culture, "we agree that 'it' exists, but we have completely different ideas of what 'it' is. A set of communication rules—the meaning of acronyms and special jargon developed within the culture—is one of the clearest ways that a group specifies who is *us* and who is *them*" (p. 115 ). The common linguistic paradigm of workplace jargon which is currently at work in almost all corporations provides a new window to look at the "us" of all organizations. As such, studying workplace jargon could help to create "an extensive theory of organization in which "communication would occupy a central place" (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985, p. 204) by acknowledging that "the structure, extensiveness and scope of organizations are almost entirely determined by communication techniques." Capitalizing on this common linguistic paradigm will steer us toward a deeper understanding of the modern organization. As Schein (2004) concluded, "a common language and common conceptual categories are clearly necessary for any other kind of consensus to be established and for any communication to occur at all" (p. 117).

### **THE ROLE OF JARGON**

While several scholars (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Barker, 1993; Bormann, 1985; Boje, 2004; Disanza & Bullis, 1999; Gouran & Hirokawa, 1983; Hackley, 2003; Hallett, 2003; O'Neill, Beauvais & Scholl, 2001; Schein, 2004; Schrodt, 2002;

Tompkins & Cheney, 1995) have written on the role of language in an organization, only a handful have focused specifically on the phenomenon of workplace jargon.

Researchers (Barker, 1993; Dearlove & Crainer, 2006; Farrell, 2004; Herrgard, 2000) also have focused on the use of jargon, in general, in an organizational setting. Dearlove and Crainer (2006) posited that workplace jargon has, at its core, “an emphasis on process” (p.3) by serving solely to impart action in the listener or receiver. Maier (2005) adds that the global language of business turns language into “a mere tool” (p.1) by stripping the relevant vocabulary of any emotional context, leaving little to no ambiguity or needed interpretation by the receiver. With the need for emotional and personal interpretation or connection diminished, this language becomes “a new code that is the essence of pure information, so long as one masters the key” (Maier, 2005, p.1).

Fairhurst (1993), in a study of the implementation of the system of “Total Quality” in a large company, explored the implementation of a “vision” within a corporation and the role of leadership, and, more specifically, leadership communication and framing in implementing that vision. Communicating via the vocabulary of jargon developed around the TQ system, she posited, “should begin to get others to begin framing the work context in terms of TQ. One type of framing device, therefore, would be to use the jargon terms to frame issues and events so that the talk functions as a lens” (p. 337). Her research revealed that the use of TQ jargon “moves the vision from a packaged, technical glossary of terms and ideas...to make them a part of the standardized usage of its members” (p. 337). A standardized usage “is a relatively persistent and frequently used set of rule-governed meanings that users



have found especially useful in coordinating their behaviors on some task” (p. 356). Through the use of jargon, “leaders and members become catalysts for change by framing the work context in TQ terms” (p. 357).

Though not supported by any specific research, Dearlove and Crainer (2006) proposed that the language of new business is one such mechanism and had its “greatest influence by subtly altering how managers thought about the world” (p. 6). This vocabulary creates “a vacuum of meaning wrapped around neat phraseology” (p. 6) that allows businesses across the world to communicate with each other using a common language. The permeation of this language allowed for a common vocabulary to bridge cultural and spacial gaps. “It was the first time that managers as far apart as Cleveland and Cleethorpes . . . could have a conversation using a common language” (p. 3).

A handful of researchers outside the discipline of communications have focused on the potential negative consequences of the adoption of such a jargon-filled vocabulary and the effects that using certain terminology can have on reducing— not facilitating—shared meanings. This research and their observations into the potential negative consequences of using jargon highlight the ongoing debate concerning the effectiveness of such a vocabulary, and call to mind the sarcastic and deriding denunciations that appear with regularity in business journals and on the World Wide Web.

Cornwall and Brock (2005) studied the effects of buzzwords on the meaning of poverty, arguing that “buzzwords are useful in policy statements because they are fuzz-words. Their propensity to shelter multiple meanings with little apparent

dissonance makes them politically expedient, shielding those who use them from attack by lending the possibility of common meaning to extremely disparate actors” (p. 16).

Richman and Mercer (2004) examined the increasing use of jargon in the field of nursing and nursing administration, indicating there exists a “fundamental tension between those who do and those who talk” (p. 291) because there was little action on the part of those who “talked a good game” (p. 291).

Like the word “rhetoric,” jargon has gotten a bad rap, and its existence is often shunned as ineffectual. But while many judged jargon guilty of a host of linguistic crimes, the actual jury is still out and deliberating, its efficacy remains unclear. Several scholars have noted the beneficial effects that jargon can have on communication, both in and out of the organizational setting.

Through jargon, Elder (1954) found that “a single term—a word or phrase—can be made to stand for a whole paragraph of description” (p. 536) and this simplification has positive impacts. Gibson (2001), in a discussion of the role of the phases of collective cognition in groups, noted that in initial phases of group formation “groups acquire knowledge and information” and, as they do, jargon is created. “Jargon and categories convey appropriate attributes or behaviors and groups draw upon them in order to define experience and develop meaning for those experiences” (p. 124). She also noted that the higher the task uncertainty, the more time groups will spend to reduce task uncertainty (p. 128), which suggest that jargon is not only created to assist in the acquisition of knowledge, but used to focus members on the task at

hand to positive results. “When groups knew what was required to perform a task the relationship between group efficacy and group effectiveness was positive” (p. 121).

Just as the British study hinted, the use and misuse of jargon has implications on the perceptions of the speaker and, in turn, the effectiveness of their communication. Cornwall and Brock (2005) in their study of the effects of jargon on the meaning of poverty, argued that jargon or buzzwords were useful when the speaker wanted to avoid confrontation, or disguise negative messages under the cloak of ambiguous phraseology. “[Jargon’s] propensity to shelter multiple meanings with little apparent dissonance makes them politically expedient, shielding those who use them from attack by lending the possibility of common meaning to extremely disparate actors” (p. 16). Elsbach and Eloffson (2000) found that the use of hard-to-understand language or overly jargon-laden speech gives the impression that “the decision maker is intentionally obfuscating the decision process in order to make it difficult to refute” (p. 81) and appears “cold and calculated” (p. 87). Their research on jargon in educational settings has shown that “jargon-laden language led to significantly lower ratings of evaluators than did recommendations written in jargon-free language” (p. 81). In a group setting, Elsbach and Eloffson (2000) note that the use of hard-to-understand language can lead members to “tune-out” as soon as the language is employed (p. 83). “Individuals evaluate targets with less or no vigilance as soon as they can adequately identify or categorize the targets on the basis of message cues” (p. 83). An audience member will first evaluate the comprehensibility of the language used and, depending on their level of understanding, make decisions on trustworthiness of the speaker and the credibility of their speech

Applbaum (1999) posits that the appearance of workplace jargon represents one of the ways in which corporations are attempting to come to terms and maintain control over the often uncontrollable global market and their employees, “to manage society itself as an environment for business” (p.155). In the context of managerial requirements and the need to control decision making in diverse organizations, “language may be a uniquely suited, naturalizing means with which to influence employees” (p. 160). The implications for groups is that this language is an attempt to create a broader value system based on capitalism and corporate/managerial culture, which will trickle into the ways in which groups formulate decision making. The “terminology is becoming a global lexicon of managerial culture and the process in which firms adopt from outside themselves techniques, theories, practices and language, is also the process of the expansion of managerial capitalism” (Applbaum, 1999, p. 164).

While several researchers have focused on the role of jargon and its communicative function and role both individually and within organizations without specific and focused research on workplace jargon, we are still in the dark as to how it functions. While workplace jargon’s usage could have profound implications on the structures and culture of an organization, it also could be as simple as Elder (1954) concluded, “that jargon is good when the reader can reasonably be assumed to know what it means” (p. 536).

## **THE GROUP SETTING**

One of, if not the, most common settings in which jargon usage is prevalent is in a group setting. In modern organizations, meetings and less formalized but still structured group discussions are one of the most common interactions among organizational members.

Much group research has an emphasis on the structure of groups, the systems within them and the role of communication as it relates to those various factors. While this emphasis has brought several revelations, what is less researched is a study of the specifics of communication acts themselves as they occur in a formalized group setting. Specifically, the function of language, a shared language, and an understanding of the role its creation, adoption and usage plays in facilitating, reinforcing or discouraging group effectiveness in a complex, nuanced and structured system such as the modern corporation. This is somewhat surprising given that it is through language and common understanding of a language—through utterances, acts and interactions—that we most often actually communicate. Process, systems and structure is well and good, but it's largely when and how group members actually speak to each other that they are in the process of communicating and it is through language and a common understanding of that language that their messages are sent and received and these processes, systems and structures created, reinforced, altered or broken down. In short, when it comes to group communication research in a modern organizational setting, we talk a lot about talk in modern organizations without talking about how people in modern organizations are actually talking today.

While there is little research from a communication perspective on workplace jargon, there are smatterings of research and scholarly opinion that begin to shed light on the different shades of the effects of this jargon on group decision making. Acknowledging that “communication plays a key role in determining whether a group will arrive at a low- or high-quality decision” (Goruan & Hirokawa, 1983, p. 168), the functional perspective provides a theoretical framework to begin to examine the specific function of jargon in groups. Functional theory states that “group decision making performance is not affected by the production of certain types of communicative behaviors, per se, but rather by the extent to which those communicative behaviors allow group members to satisfy certain preconditions for successful group decision making” (Goruan & Hirokawa, 1983, p.169). Though not the end-all-be-all of group communication theory, functional theory is nonetheless widely accepted and employed, and provides a good starting point in the examination of the role of jargon in the group process.

While functional theory has been criticized for its lack of real-world application (Propp, 1996, p. 1), it “can go a long way toward making group communication theory meaningful to the practitioner” (Poole, 1990, p. 239). In functional theory, a promotive influence is when the communicative behaviors of the group “serve to help the group satisfy one of the requisites for group decision making” (Gouran & Hirokawa, 1983, p. 177). The requisites as summarized by Propp (1996, 2) are:

- 1) Assessment of the problem or task
- 2) Identification of the requirements for an acceptable choice/criteria

- 3) Evaluation of the positive qualities of possible choices/alternatives
- 4) Evaluation of the negative qualities of possible choice/alternatives
- 5) Establishment of operation procedures or orientation

It is noted that scholars indicate that the requisites do not encompass all of the communicative behaviors present in group discussions (Hirokawa, et al., 1990). To that list was later added “idea development,” which represents “communication that develops a selected course of action” and “social talk,” which is “communication not directly related to the task of the group” (Propp, 1996, 3).

“Any exchanges between group members that call attention to and fulfill any of the five requisites (understanding the problem, generating the criteria for a high quality solution, amassing a set of possible solutions, assessing the positive features of each solution, assessing the negative features of each solution) can be said to function as a promotive influence” (p. 177).

Previous research provides some clues as to the promotive effects of workplace jargon on groups. In a study of the importance of communication in crisis and emergency response, it was noted that “effective communication requires the parties involved have a shared and clear understanding of the various definitions and parameters about which information and data are being exchanged. Here, language, and in particular, jargon, has a key role to play” (Baldi & Gelbstein, 2004, para.2). They defined jargon as “an abbreviated form of language that encapsulates tacit knowledge,” and found it “removes much information redundancy” especially when, just as it has been in the corporate world, it “becomes incorporated into what is best described as mainstream language” (para. 2). Prior to its widespread use today, this

notion of the effectiveness of jargon and common language was applied in modern business, notably, “the lack of a widely shared and understood language is a liability that business policy has yet to overcome” (Leontides, 1982, p. 45).

Barker (2006) in his “An Attitude toward Organizations,” who also discusses language and its role in facilitating group communications, states that “collaborative work systems...revolve around the creation of shared discourses as a means of controlling work activity” (p. 1) and that “people in collaborative organizations use language to create ways of working together” (p. 1). However, as the British think tank survey would indicate, just as it has been adopted, this workplace jargon also has created a negative reaction, a backlash, with more and more decrying it as a language devoid of any real meaning.

In functional theory, communicative behaviors of group members function as a disruptive influence when they inhibit successful group decision making (Gouran & Hirokawa, 1983, p. 177). In these instances, communication, the use of jargon, for example, “retards progressive movement along the path, or diverts the group from the path in a direction away from their desired destination” (p. 177). Specifically, “the utterance of [a] member...functions as a form of disruptive influence because it acted against the group’s efforts to satisfy a requisite condition” (p. 177). Jargon is acting as a disruptive influence when it has served to “diminish the group’s capacity for dealing with the requisites of a decisional act” (p. 178).

Adams, Bitetti, Janson, Slobodkin and Valenzuela (1997) discussed the potential downsides to using jargon to achieve effective group communication and understanding in the realm of ecology by studying the “audience effect,” which occurs



when message senders use terminology or jargon that is common to different disciplines and, as such, has multiple meanings and possible interpretations (p. 632). As is the case with workplace jargon, which takes common words and phrases and ascribes specific meanings in the corporate realm, “the problem is made worse because many of the terms . . . are borrowed from common, everyday speech, and thus have preexisting definitions which do not conform, in detail, to their technical definitions” (p. 635). In order to be used effectively, one must take care to ensure all members of a group agree and understand what particular definition is being used (p. 635).

To summarize, group communication is one of the most common occurrences in today’s modern organizations. While this study did not focus solely on the role or impact of jargon in specific group settings, it would be remiss if we did not go into some detail on the role of language and jargon in group settings. Functional theory, though not the only theoretical approach by which to study communication in group settings, provides a solid and tested theoretical foundation to begin to try and understand the role of workplace jargon and its communicative implications in a group setting. Using that, previous research has demonstrated that jargon can serve as both a promotive and disruptive influence in group communication.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW SUMMARY**

In Summary, while numerous studies exist on the role of language in today's organizations, the function of language on organizational identification and culture, and the positive and negative effects of jargon as a linguistic mechanism, little light has been shed on the language most commonly used in today's modern corporations. Just as "the lack of a widely shared and understood language is a liability that business policy has yet to overcome" (Leontides, 1982, p. 45), many readily acknowledge that a lack of common paradigms among organizations has been an impediment to developing wider and broader theories of organizational culture. This paper identifies workplace jargon as a common linguistic paradigm, and while it barely scratches the theoretical surface, it brings a focus that has been heretofore lacking. To do so, this paper sets out to answer the following questions:

- 1) How prevalent is the use of workplace jargon?
- 2) What functions does workplace jargon perform?

Within these questions, several additional questions or areas of focus exist and are also highlighted.

## CHAPTER III

### PROCEDURES

This study set out to gauge the use of the jargon in a modern organization in order to shed light on the surface level and deeper organizational communicative implications its use may have. To do so, several research methods were employed.

First, a two week ethnographic observational study was conducted in a modern corporation to record instances of workplace jargon use as they occur in the day-to-day interactions of members in both individual and group settings, gather notes and observations on those conversations, and see if any conclusions on its usage could be drawn.

Secondly, a brief survey was distributed to a pool of organizational members to gauge the level of familiarity with workplace jargon, and to elicit initial observations about its effectiveness, usage and member attitudes toward it and the speakers using it.

Third, a series of Q-Sort sessions and in-depth follow-up interviews were conducted to further delve into participant's understanding of jargon, the meaning behind specific words and phrases this vocabulary contains, and glean further feedback on the role of workplace jargon in the participant's day-to-day routines, as well as the broader effects its usage has on their workplace and peers.

A detailed description of the setting, participants and methodologies employed in each aspect of this study follows.

## **Data/Subjects**

The study population is a pool of workers in a modern, Fortune 1000 property insurance corporation based in Johnston, R.I., USA. The company was formed in Rhode Island in 1835, and is now #545 on the Fortune 1,000 listing, with offices in more than 60 countries around the world. The company provides property insurance, risk management and loss prevention engineering services to large, commercial and industrial clients including one-third of the Fortune 500. The corporate offices where the study took place are located in Johnston, R.I., USA. The setting is a traditional corporate office structure, with a series of cubicles, offices, meeting rooms, a cafeteria, gym and additional amenities. The office is home to approximately 800 of the company's more than 5,000 employees and houses senior/executive management, middle-management, general office workers, and support staff. The setting allowed for a diverse pool of potential participants, with a good mix of gender, age and race. The participant pool is also comprised of different aspects of functional areas of the business (Information Technology (IT), Marketing, etc.), each with their own unique cultures and role-specific lexicons. Because the global language of business is not unique to one field or discipline within a corporation but rather exists within the "corporation" as a whole, exploring the presupposed permeation of this language across role-based boundaries would be an especially informative aspect of future studies.

It is important to state that the researcher is also an employee of the company. As an eight-year employee, issues of pre-determined conclusions and bias existed and were addressed, including reactive tendencies based on my familiarity with the setting,

subjects and subject matter, as well as the potential for perceptual and interpretive distortions. Apart from outward and routine acknowledgement of this potential for bias and insider influence, interviews, survey questions and study methods were routinely examined by outside sources, including the major professor, to ensure this bias did not influence the studies, questions or elicited responses. I also guarded against injection of bias and opinion and the steering of participant responses by employing consistent questioning methodology and standard question/interviewing techniques.

Permission to conduct this study was secured through an established process. Firstly, for the ethnographic portion of the study, permission was received through the corporate human resources department. One limitation was placed on this portion of the study which was a stipulation that research not interfere with day-to-day activities of the company or the participants. I was not instructed to inform participants of my ethnographic activities, however, on several occasions, my activities were known to participants. I did not find this had any influence on the participant behavior, though this could not be concretely verified.

For the subsequent electronic survey and Q-sorting phases of the study, permission was first received from the manager at each department in which potential participants were identified. Due to the nature of their work which created limitations on availability, certain departments were immediately excluded. This included the claims and finance departments as well as senior management. Secondly, the corporate human resources department was again contacted, and permission to conduct the survey and interviewing portions of the study confirmed. The same stipulation applied,

and an additional stipulation added that the electronic survey, Q-sorting and interviewing not be conducted during normal business hours. I was granted permission to utilize company electronic communication channels such as e-mail, provided the communication was sent before or after normal business hours and these e-mails met corporate electronic e-mail usage policies and codes of conduct. I also was given access to meeting rooms before and after identified “core hours” of 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., as well as during the established lunch time, which was 12 p.m. to 1:30 p.m.

### **Ethnographic Observational Study**

The ethnographic component of the study took place over two weeks from July 19 to July 30, 2010. This study included systematic ethnographic observation of employee conversations and other talk in action; either as it occurred in the normal routines of the workers and workplace or as occurred in routine meetings on varying topics. Rules and guidelines for what counts as data were developed based on identified words and phrases that comprise the new language of business (see Appendix A). Apart from my existing knowledge of this vocabulary, several supplementary data sources were used to assist in developing this typology prior to the commencement of the study, and also provide methodological triangulation to reinforce the existence of the phenomenon. These included the Dilbert cartoon series/books, as well as a series of Web sites and Internet posting sites on the subject matter. These sources provide listings, usage and comment on the global language of business garnered from actual organizational member input and experiences. Archival

records, including company newsletters, memorandum and other printed and electronic communications were also utilized as needed and appropriate.

Only words or phrases specifically identified as instances of workplace jargon were studied and instances where these words and phrases were used recorded. While a long list of words and phrases common to the workplace jargon lexicon was developed, new phrases, words and metaphors, if any, that emerged throughout the study were to be cataloged, and included in the dictionary/typology, however, this did not occur.

As part of my daily activities, I was often an attendee at several meetings each day involving several different members of varying departments and was also provided access to attend several meetings as a guest. In some instances, I was a participant in the meeting and conversations. I did not include those instances in my observations, focusing instead on those meetings in which I was a passive participant or invited guest. I attended seven such meetings a week for each of the two weeks in the study period. Meeting duration would vary, from one hour to four depending on the subject being discussed.

Though meetings proved to be the most fertile ground to collect data and the most efficient, conversations happen routinely at any location around the office setting, and when I was present at these conversations, I would continue my ethnographic observations. The combination of meetings and routine conversations meant frequency was not an issue. During and immediately following an identified use of workplace jargon, field notes were developed, recording the speaker's gender, role within the organization, approximate age, context/subject matter and, most

importantly, the utterances in which workplace jargon appeared and the statement in which the specific word or phrase was used.

These instances were primarily logged by the observer in notebooks as tape recording was determined to be a potential distraction or could have additional influence on participants. Tape recording for the ethnographic portion of the study would also unnecessarily extend the length of time available to complete the study. When possible, the causes, consequences, actions, inactions and outcomes of the use of workplace jargon were also noted. This included instances where participants would immediately discuss tasks or direction received through workplace jargon words or phrases. Observations as these acts and interactions occurred around the office were recorded immediately or promptly by a developed and consistent field note-taking methodology. This included noting the speaker, date, gender, role within the organization, context of the utterance and the utterance or series of utterances. Following the conversation, additional observations were quickly highlighted, such as additional details on the subject matter or context to paint a more holistic picture of the use of workplace jargon and the context in which it is placed. Divergent talk in action or instances where the global language of business was specifically discussed were to be specifically noted, however, this did not occur in the ethnographic portion of the study.

### **Initial Electronic Survey**

An electronic survey designed to gauge participant familiarity with words and phrases known to be part of the workplace jargon vocabulary was developed and



administered over one week from November 8 to November 12. The survey was also designed to determine base levels of perceived effectiveness or ineffectiveness of workplace jargon, as well as delve into questions of frequency and context of usage among participants.

Subjects were selected based on previously indicated willingness to participate, which was determined during the course of the ethnographic observational period through direct communication between myself and the individuals. In all, 35 individuals indicated a willingness to be included in the additional phases. An electronic invitation to participate in the survey was delivered to all 35 individuals. Of them, 17 took the survey.

The survey was developed using free, online software and consisted of seven questions. The first question consisted of a listing of selected words and phrases from the workplace jargon lexicon. The words and phrases were selected randomly from the previously developed taxonomy. Participants were asked to rank their level of familiarity with each word or phrase ranging from the highest, “very familiar,” to lowest, “unfamiliar.” The next series of five questions were designed to gauge frequency and context of usage as well as perceived effectiveness, asking participants to rate these metrics using a scale ranging from “Always” being the highest to “Never” being the lowest. The final question asked participants to rate their reaction to hearing these words or phrases in use on a scale of “positive” “negative” or “neutral” and also asking if effectiveness “varies based on speaker” or “varies based on context.”

For several questions, participants were provided the option to explain their answers and several chose to do so. Survey responses were collected as they were

completed. The online software utilized provided data analysis tools which were used. Additional insight provided when participants chose to explain their answers was collected and recorded using desktop publishing software.

### **Q-Sorting and in-depth interviews**

The final component of the study involved a series of focused Q-sort and in-depth interview sessions with selected participants which took place over the course of three weeks from November 22, 2010 to December 13, 2010. All 17 subjects who participated in the initial survey were again invited to participate in this phase. Of them, six were available within the given time frame and agreed to participate. The six again represented a good cross-section of departments, genders, roles within the organization and experience levels. Sessions averaged 45 minutes and were held in meeting rooms within the corporate offices. During these sessions, participants were given a stack of 44 note cards containing words and phrases identified as part of the workplace jargon vocabulary. They were then asked to arrange these note cards into stacks based on any criteria in which they chose by the statement “please take a moment to look at the words and phrases that appear on these note cards.” Following their initial review, participants were then asked to “sort these words and phrases into piles based on any criteria you deem appropriate.” If a participant asked for clarity or an example, the researcher would state the words “strawberry, grape, banana, apple, blueberry, raspberry, orange and cherry.” The researcher then stated that a participant asked to sort these words could do so in a variety of ways, be it by color, taste preference, shape, or some other criteria which they deemed appropriate. This

example proved to be effective and further instruction was not necessary. Participants would then proceed to sort the cards into stacks. Following their initial sorting, they were asked if they would like to review their piles and conduct any further sorting however, none chose to do so.

To ensure stacks would not be mixed, the participants identifier, which included the first four letters of their last name and a number based on the order in which they were interviewed, was written on the note cards, and the stacks numbered based on the number of stacks created. With the sorting complete, participants were then asked to discuss their sorting logic, rationale and engage in a broader discussion of these words and phrases and their understanding and usage. These in-depth interviews would often take many directions, and were the primary goal of this portion of the research.

Standard questions included:

“What led you to sort these words and phrases as you did?”

“Can you describe the similarities, if any, you see in this pile?”

“Can you describe the differences you find between this pile and the other piles you created?”

“What are the commonalities you find among the words and phrases in this pile?”

Additional questions included:

“What is your familiarity with this term?”

“How often, if ever, do you hear these words or phrases used in your day-to-day activities?”

Throughout the course of the post-sorting interviews, the discussion was allowed to follow its natural course. This in-depth interviewing technique proved fruitful in garnering specific opinions on the individual piles, as well as insight into participant perceptions of workplace jargon and its effectiveness.

The main purpose of the Q-Sort study component was intended to encourage participants to think in greater depth and detail as to their usage, perceptions and reactions to workplace jargon. While Q-Sort analysis is a valuable quantitative tool, its purpose here was primarily to solicit discussion and stimulate in-depth conversation rather than serve as merely a quantitative analysis tool. The post Q-Sort interviews proved to be fruitful sessions in which participants offered a host of meaningful insights into their usage, perceptions and opinions of workplace jargon. By first asking them to sort these words and phrases, they began to think on a deeper level than would have been possible if no sorting had taken place. The sorting forced them to think about these words and phrases in terms of how they function in their day-to-day workplace, and then to set aside, for the moment, their pre-conceived notions and instead look at these words and phrases on a functional level rather than mere gut reaction. Once in that frame of mind, the interviews allowed them to open up on their perceptions of effectiveness and usage and then connect those thoughts to their existing opinions of workplace jargon. This deeper level of thinking was a direct result of the preliminary Q-Sorting process they undertook and, as such, the Q-Sorting sessions proved to be an effective quantitative catalyst for a host of valuable qualitative insights.

In all phases of the study, data is discussed in aggregate, so anonymity is maintained. No names or identifying characteristics are discussed in the analysis, and when selected examples or comments are used, anonymity is protected. All participants in the electronic survey and Q-sort portions of the study were required to indicate their consent electronically.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

As previously discussed, this paper attempts to answer two fundamental questions regarding the use of workplace jargon:

- 1) How prevalent is the use of workplace jargon?
- 2) What functions does workplace jargon perform?

A detailed discussion of these questions follows.

## **How prevalent is the use of workplace jargon?**

In order to understand the function of workplace jargon in a modern organizational setting, we first set out to understand how widespread its usage actually is. If you based decisions and opinions of workplace jargon solely on British corporate think tank surveys, one would expect to find office buildings full of managers speaking gibberish with cubicles brimming with baffled employees, plagued by feelings of inadequacy and a growing detest for their Newspeaking bosses. But while there may be some truth to those perceptions, the reality is not so bleak.

As Schein (2004) stated “culture will manifest itself at the level of observable artifacts and shared and espoused beliefs and values” (p. 36) and language is one such artifact. Understanding the level and breadth of usage of a certain and seemingly unique language within an organization would be a natural first step on the path to understanding the deeper and broader implications that language may have on organizational culture. We can then understand whether or not this language is baffling or beneficial.

Findings from all phases of this study confirm that workplace jargon is indeed prolific and has permeated into all facets of the organization. All respondents in the electronic survey and Q-sort/interview phases indicated at least a basic level of familiarity with the majority of the words and phrases and all stated that they have used it, to varying degrees, in the workplace. All respondents indicated the level of usage within the workplace is high, with no respondent indicating they never hear it. During in-depth interviews, all respondents indicated the common use and acceptance of workplace jargon as a means of communication within the organization. Only one

respondent indicated they did not have some level of familiarity with the words and phrases utilized during the Q-Sort process.

When asked the level of frequency at which they hear these words and phrases employed at work or in the context of work, 64.7 percent indicated they “often” heard these words and phrases, 23.5 percent “always.” While instances of usage occur outside of the working environment, these instances were few and far between.

Analysis of the frequency of usage during the ethnographic phase of the study supports the notion that workplace jargon is now a commonly accepted and employed language. Of the 14 meetings attended during the ethnographic study, workplace jargon was utilized at least once during the course of conversation in every meeting attended. In many instances, there were multiple occurrences of workplace jargon throughout the course of the meeting. For example, in one meeting called to discuss the details of a new Web-based product under development, a male, mid-level manager stated:

“That stuff is *out of the box*, and if it’s a *value-added* product, I think we need to have more of a *high level* discussion to *iron out* what the *win win* is in that situation. It does us no good to *get all our ducks in a row*, *bake it all in there* and then not get any *buy in* on the actual *deliverable* to the *end user*.”

Based on the developed taxonomy, that statement includes ten instances of workplace jargon usage in one utterance, and that is just one example. Usage in a non-meeting environment was less pronounced, and only five instances of two employees engaging in conversation in which workplace jargon was used were observed. This lower frequency could be attributable to a lack of participation during routine



conversations, which occur randomly and often outside of the researcher's line of observation and, as such, were more difficult to capture during ethnographic observation.

While this study focused on one corporation, interviews suggest that the use of workplace jargon across organizations is also present. In the words of one respondent:

"I see these words as tools to communicate the benefits of our products and services to the people and the businesses I am trying to sell to because they all understand them, they all use them. I would use them on slip sheets, marketing brochures, stuff like that, because everyone is going to know what I'm trying to say."

While familiarity with specific words and phrases varied among study participants, all phases of the study confirm that workplace jargon is a common and accepted language within the modern corporate setting. In fact, its widespread usage and acceptance seems so commonplace, findings suggest workplace jargon is now simply a commonly accepted means of communication among organizational members.

"I think by now everyone knows or should know the meaning of most of these words in the context of work," said one participant.

**Table 1**  
**Total familiarity**

Unfamiliar: 5.45%  
Somewhat Unfamiliar: 4.79%  
Somewhat Familiar: 7.19%  
Familiar: 13.73%  
Very Familiar: 68.85%

This table shows the total levels of familiarity among all 27 words and phrases included to gauge familiarity with common workplace jargon terms. Terms were selected at random from the developed taxonomy.

**Table 2**  
**Usage at work**

	Response Percent	Response Count
Never	0.0%	0
Rarely	11.8%	2
Sometimes	11.8%	2
Often	52.9%	9
Always	23.5%	4

This table shows responses to gauge levels of respondent usage of workplace jargon in the work environment.

**Table 3**  
**Others usage**

	Response Percent	Response Count
Never	0.0%	0
Rarely	0.0%	0
Sometimes	5.9%	1
Often	64.7%	11
Always	29.4%	5

This table shows responses to gauge the frequency of workplace jargon usage by others in a work environment.

## **Who is using it?**

Schein (2004) noted that “culture has to do with certain values that managers are trying to inculcate in their organizations” (p, 7), and, as the British study suggests, management is often seen as the most common purveyor of workplace jargon in today’s corporate settings. Findings indicate that everyone, at some point, employs it as a linguistic mechanism. But while results of all phases of this study reveal the use of workplace jargon is commonplace among all members, ethnographic observations do show a higher frequency of usage among managers.

Initially, using data from the electronic survey, one might conclude that the notion that management is the most common purveyor of this jargon is false, and that given the overwhelming acknowledgement of usage among non-management participants in this study, this is simply a misperception. However, when analyzing this idea against the backdrop of recorded ethnographic observations, analysis shows those in management positions are the most common users. It could be that in these ethnographic observations, it is management who often is doing the speaking due to the nature of hierarchy in corporate and group settings. This would explain the high level of recorded instances. Meetings and group settings often are led by the person in authority, and in all meetings I attended, at least one mid-level manager or higher was present.

It is important to restate the limitation that during ethnographic observation, only instances where jargon usage occurred were noted and notes were taken primarily in the group or meeting setting. Further studies would do well to avoid the limitations revealed from this observation in future ethnographic study. Instead, researchers

should focus on recording and analyzing entire conversations that occur throughout the entire organization over an extended period of time rather than those snippets that contain only the subject under scrutiny, in a limited time frame and in the context of a group/meeting setting. As a result, one could delve further into the idea that management is the most frequent purveyor of jargon.

Workplace jargon usage was not as prevalent during conversations occurring outside of the meeting setting, with only five recorded instances over the course of the two week period. However, study participants indicated during both the electronic survey and in-depth interviewing sessions that workplace jargon usage occurs routinely in all of their day-to-day activities, whether it's the group setting or on a one-on-one basis.

"I hear this stuff all the time. I would say in the corporate world you hear this all the time, whether it's in a meeting or just talking to people at work," said one interviewee.

Findings demonstrate that the use of workplace jargon is widespread among organizational members. While the frequency and familiarity with specific words or phrases can vary among participants, data reveals that workplace jargon is a commonly accepted means of communication.

## **What functions does workplace jargon perform?**

With the widespread usage of workplace jargon now confirmed, attention can focus on the function of this language as it relates to members of the organization and the potential implications this has on organizational culture as a whole.

### **Workplace Jargon is effective**

As findings in all phases of the study indicate, workplace jargon is seen as an effective means of communication. Only one participant indicated workplace jargon was “never” effective. The majority, 58.8 percent, indicated that workplace jargon usage is “sometimes” effective, 29.4 percent said it is “mostly” effective, and one participant said it was “always” effective. As a whole, 94 percent of those surveyed rated workplace jargon “sometimes” effective or higher.

Interviews reveal that workplace jargon has a particular role to play in providing clarity to organizational members and reducing task uncertainty. As Barker (2006) noted, “collaborative work systems...revolve around the creation of shared discourses as a means of controlling work activity” and that “people in collaborative organizations use language to create ways of working together” (p. 1).

Respondents indicate that workplace jargon reduces the need for message receiver interpretation, instead, providing clarity on tasks and goals. As the British study hinted, workplace jargon can be used appropriately and inappropriately. Its effect—positive or negative—depends on the appropriateness of its usage.

“I react positively...when the speaker uses them appropriately and when they help to add clarity to the speaker’s point,” wrote one respondent.

The positive effects of workplace jargon are particularly prominent in the group or meeting setting. As one participant noted:

“When a meeting is wrapping up, I can understand exactly what is being asked of me. It seems a good way to end a meeting, especially if no clear decisions have been made. It helps me to understand what my role is if someone tells me I need to run it up the flagpole and then circle back so we can figure out the next steps.”

This supports O’Neill, Beavais and Scholl’s contention (2001) that “If an organization is to direct behavior toward the accomplishment of a strategic mission...mechanisms must be created for reducing this variability among individuals focusing employee efforts on the accomplishment of strategic goals” (p. 131).

This also would demonstrate that workplace jargon serves to help the group satisfy one of Gouran and Hirokawa’s five requisites (1983, p. 177) and that, as such, jargon can be said to function as a promotive influence. Perhaps the biggest implication of these results is that workplace jargon is an effective method of communication. The popular perception that workplace jargon is a mind-numbing and ineffective method of communication is, in actuality, incorrect.

**Table 4**  
**Effectiveness**

	Response Percent	Response Count
Never effective	0.0%	0
Rarely effective	5.9%	1
Sometimes effective	58.8%	10
Mostly effective	29.4%	5
Always effective	5.9%	1

This table shows responses designed to gauge respondent perceptions of workplace jargon effectiveness.



### **Workplace Jargon has negative effects**

Harkening back to the think-tank study, psychologists have found that the way people package decisions affects the way audiences perceive them, and the “language and labeling of the decision affected perceptions of a decision-maker’s competency-based trustworthiness” (Elsbach & Eloffson, 2000, p. 80). They also found that when “easy-to-understand language” was employed, perceptions of the decision maker were positively higher, as were perceptions of the decision (p. 80). Their research did not study workplace jargon, and noted several disadvantages to using jargon-heavy language depending on the understanding of that language among the members, but, given a common understanding, “the sophistication of the language used in decision explanations may affect perceptions of the decision maker by signaling his or her abilities and motivation” (p. 81).

Despite its acknowledged effectiveness, research shows that while a mass baffling of employees may be far fetched, workplace jargon does have negative effects. Elsbach and Eloffson (2000) found that the use of hard-to-understand language or overly jargon-laden speech gives the impression that “the decision maker is intentionally obfuscating the decision process in order to make it difficult to refute” (p. 81), and interviews supported that idea.

“It seems to cushion the blow of negativity, it’s like a way of saying no without just saying no” said one interviewee.

Similarly, just as previous research on jargon in educational settings has shown that “jargon-laden language led to significantly lower ratings of evaluators than did recommendations written in jargon-free language” (Elsbach & Eloffson, 2000, p. 81),

respondents also indicated that speaker perceptions can be negatively affected if workplace jargon is overly used in communications.

“While they can be useful, because we generally understand what they mean, these phrases seem to imply a lazy uniformity of thinking,” wrote one respondent. “Some people love to use these catch phrases all the time and it gets a little annoying. I want to tell them ‘just say what you mean!’” wrote another.

These and other statements seem to support the idea that there is “fundamental tension between those who do and those who talk” (Richman & Mercer 2004, p. 291) and confirm previous research which suggests that the perception of the speaker can be negatively influenced by the inappropriate or over use of workplace jargon.

**Table 5**  
**Reactions**

	Response Percent	Response Count
Positive	5.9%	1
Negative	11.8%	2
Neutral	23.5%	4
It varies based on context	47.1%	8
It varies based on speaker	11.8%	2

This table shows respondent reactions when hearing workplace jargon. Additional explanations of answers are included below.

**Additional Explanations:**

- Depends on the word but most of the words listed would have a positive effect.
- I use the words above which I marked "very familiar" often in a work environment, and sometimes outside of work. I react positively when inside a work environment when the speaker uses them appropriately and when they help to add clarity to the speaker's point. I would react negatively if the speaker used these words inappropriately or if there were other word choices available that were more widely known by the audience
- While they can be useful, because we generally understand what they mean, these phrases seem to imply a lazy uniformity of thinking.
- Overused but descriptive and the meaning is understood. Would be negative but they get the job done.
- when everyone in the conversation understands what the phrase refers to it's fine. when there is ambiguity these phrases cause more problems
- Often it makes sense to use, often they are used for a lack of other words
- Some people love to use these "catch phrases" all the time and it gets a little annoying. I want to tell them "just say what you mean!"
- Dependent on the relationship with the speaker
- I think it varies on both the context and the speaker but chose the speaker because you can automatically react positive/negative or neutral depending on the speaker regardless of what they say.
- Most of these sorts of phrases don't impress me. They say to me, I'm competent but I can't articulate the situation in my own original way.
- If we don't speak like this outside of work, why do we need to at work?

## **Workplace Jargon Could be Related to Power**

Schrodt (2002) noted that “modern organizations seek to control organizational environments through the subtle and systematic manipulation of the rhetorical environment.” Research reveals that power and control could be elements functioning behind workplace jargon and may be a ripe area for future research (p. 2, citing Myers & Kassing, 1998).

Several interviewees noted that many of the words and phrases used carry with them the messages and marching orders of middle and senior level management. One described it as such:

“Its not necessarily referring to them, but it’s the idea that senior management is in the context of the conversation. When someone says that we need to get “buy-in from the c-suite,” it’s implicit that they are being referenced when those words are being used, justification almost, that somewhere down the line you have to prove something to someone and get the green light.”

As Applbaum (1999) noted, “Language may be a uniquely suited, naturalizing means with which to influence employees” (p. 160) and it may be that workplace jargon is serving as in that capacity.

The findings suggest that workplace jargon’s widespread usage in modern corporate and organizational settings may not be an entirely accidental or incidental phenomenon. Whether it is serving as a clear and easily interpreted method of communication or reducing uncertainty among group members, research shows that workplace jargon has a positive and effective role to play in organizational communication. As a method or mechanism to instill control among workers or

convey messages of authority, workplace jargon also may be functioning as one such mechanism. While its usage can instill negative reactions among workers, workplace jargon's positive effects seem to outweigh the potential downsides.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS

Workplace jargon's widespread usage and familiarity among members, its positive and negative effects, and the varying functions it serves highlighted in the research and outlined in this paper indicate that further exploration into the deeper functioning of workplace jargon could assist in understanding larger aspects of organizational culture and the role of communication within it.

This paper also highlights that extensive research exists into the effects of language in organizational settings and the crucial role of language and communication in creating, shaping and instilling organizational identification. Research also has delved deeply into the communicative effects of the use or misuse of jargon and the importance of shared languages in organizational success. Specifically, this paper has found that:

#### **Workplace jargon use is widespread.**

While this finding is not surprising given the existence of articles, research studies and Web sites discussing and often mocking it, this study does confirm that the use of workplace jargon is a widespread linguistical phenomenon that merits communicative attention.

#### **Workplace jargon is effective**

Given the mocking, derogatory tone that often surrounds workplace jargon, it is perhaps most important to discover that its usage is considered an effective means by which to communicate within a modern organization. Study participants overwhelmingly indicated that the use of workplace jargon can be an effective means

in which to deliver or receive messages. In the group setting, the use of workplace jargon often was serving in a promotive role, reinforcing its perceived effectiveness by members of the organization.

### **Workplace jargon has negative effects**

Research confirms previous studies, which found that the use of jargon or jargon-laden speech can have negative effects, specifically as they relate to perceptions of the speaker who is using it. Participants also indicated that workplace jargon usage can instill in them a sense of annoyance when it is overly used or used out of context. Research also reveals that when workplace jargon is used on those who are unfamiliar with it, it can be seen as disrupting the flow of communication within the organization.

### **Workplace jargon usage is perceived to be more common among management**

The underlying irony revealed in this study demonstrates that while everyone perceives everyone else is using workplace jargon, everyone is in fact using it. The common perception is that workplace jargon is most often associated with management, and ethnographic observation, particularly within the group setting, confirms this to be the case. However, management is more often than not leading discussions in a group setting. While instances of jargon usage diminished in individual one-on-one communications, workplace jargon was still found to be in use. This, combined with findings that indicate everyone is using it, would seem to give less weight to the perception that management is the sole purveyor of workplace jargon. While they may be one of the more frequent users, management does not have a monopoly.

### **Jargon usage occurs more often in the group setting**

Ethnographic observation reveals that workplace jargon is most commonly found within the group setting. Limitations of this study, discussed in detail later in this paper, could reveal this is not the case; however, workplace jargon usage was most prevalent in the group setting during the ethnographic portion of this study.

Subsequent member checks of these findings confirm the study results. Two participants who reviewed the findings agreed with the conclusions. The idea that “everyone else is using it” was of specific interest to these participants. Both acknowledged that they frequently employ workplace jargon in their day-to-day functions. At the same time, both acknowledge their initial perception that they were a less frequent user than their colleagues. In discussing this, one member noted a potential reason for this contradiction.

“I think we all talk this way a lot more than we realize because it’s just how we talk here. There’s a tendency to think everyone else talks that way but I don’t. But, when you step back and think about it, I can’t think of a day when I don’t talk like that. I guess I like to think I don’t, but the reality is, I use it just as much as everyone else, maybe more sometimes.”

Additionally, member checks revealed that the perception that management is the most frequent purveyor of workplace jargon are real, yet both members acknowledge the use of workplace jargon is likely as commonplace among non-management workers. In the words of one member:



“People tend to reflect what their managers do, so I think it starts at the top—you hear it first from your manager. But, before you know it, you’re saying the same things.”

## LIMITATIONS

There are a few limitations of this study that merit attention. Firstly, the total number of participants was limited. In this case, time allotted to conduct the various phases of the study did not allow the researcher to secure a large amount of subjects during the electronic survey and Q-sorting phases. Flexibility in study scheduling should have been built into the process, and would have allowed more time to secure more participants when initial responses proved lower than expected or needed.

Secondly, during the ethnographic portion of the study, notes were only taken in instances where workplace jargon was specifically used. This limitation does not allow any detailed or definitive analysis of the overall frequency of usage within the organization. Future research could focus on recording and analyzing entire conversations and meetings rather than only noting and analyzing those snippets that contain the subject under scrutiny. This would provide the ability to delve further into frequency, as well as develop a detailed picture of who is the most common purveyor of workplace jargon. Conversations in which jargon is not employed could be as important as those in which it is, and lead to a much deeper understanding of the organizational use of jargon among all workplace members.

Thirdly, time and resource constraints prevented a detailed statistical analysis of the Q-Sort data. The Q-sorting process was instrumental as a catalyst for the in-depth interview processes and the combination of the three phases of the study

provided fertile ground and plenty of data to achieve the goals of this paper. A rudimentary analysis was conducted, however, detailed statistical/factor analysis of Q-Sort responses would provide additional insight into the function of workplace jargon, and allow us to discern commonalities or differences among interpretations and definitions of the specific words and phrases at play. This more detailed analysis was always considered a secondary goal of this study; however, future research should include this process.

#### FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study does shed light on the linguistic phenomenon of workplace jargon and its usage and potential workings, there are areas for future study and additional research avenues to be taken.

Firstly, metaphorical theory has been applied to the study of organizational culture on numerous occasions so it would seem any discussion of the language used in organizations—a language that is ripe with metaphorically laden words and phrases—would be incomplete without including the role of metaphor in its scope and understanding the specific metaphorical constructs at play.

The purpose of this study was primarily to determine the usage, efficacy (or lack thereof) of workplace jargon and the role it plays in facilitating communication across a modern organization.

This paper also attempts to connect the existence and use of this language to elements of deeper organizational culture, its formation, perpetuation and reinforcement. While metaphor is clearly an integral component of that, it is, in this instance, better put to the side to be picked up later. As Dillard and Nehmer (1990)

observed, metaphorical analysis alone does not subject deeper organizational goals and structures to further scrutiny. As they noted, “the foundations upon which organizations are built are not adequately critiqued by comparing organizational metaphors” (p. 44), however, an in-depth metaphorical approach would be beneficial.

Also, a detailed and quantitative analysis of the Q-Sort data would help to shed additional light as to the embedded meanings and functions of specific words and phrases that comprise the lexicon of workplace jargon. This paper used Q-Sorting as a catalyst to generate more qualitative insights from study participants. Future research, or iterations of this paper, could combine the qualitative insights gleaned from the Q-Sort sessions with the quantitative insights garnered by analyzing the specific relationships, or lack thereof, that would be revealed by a true quantitative Q-Sort analysis.

As Schein (2004) stated, difficulties abound in studying organizational culture, not the least of which is that “different organizations will have different paradigms with different core assumptions” (p 21).

Given its frequency of use, and the (albeit sometimes begrudging) acceptance among organizational members, workplace jargon may have become or is, at least, on its way to becoming, “invisible, submerged in the structure of the firm” (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985, p.196) and, as such, could present one common paradigm to help break down the barriers of creating more unified theories of organizational culture.

Understanding this common linguistic paradigm now engrained throughout today’s corporations could further our development of a more unified view of today’s modern organizations and the culture or cultures within.

Given the frequency and widespread usage of a shared language—workplace jargon—among today’s modern corporations, and given the inherent communicative nature of the processes of unobtrusive control and the instillation of culture within an organization, workplace jargon could also be a new linguistic mechanism at work and could represent a new level of enthymeme at play in all corporations. If so, its widespread usage makes it particularly critical to examine. Tompkins & Cheney (1985) acknowledged that the means of control have and will continue to change over time in response to changes in society (p.195). Is it possible that today’s globally dispersed workforces and the increasing complexity of modern corporations and organizations is yet another change to which controlling mechanisms must adapt? If so, perhaps workplace jargon can provide insight into that adaptation.

Up until this point, researchers have spent a lot of time talking about how people talk, but its time we start talking—and thinking— about the way people in modern organizations are actually talking.

## **Appendix A: Detailed Taxonomy of Workplace Jargon**

Above Board  
Action  
Actionable  
Action Items  
Agent of Change  
Agreeance  
All Hands  
Air it out  
Arrows in the quiver  
At this juncture  
Back Burner  
Bag of Snakes  
Baked-in  
Ballpark  
Bandwidth  
Band-Aid  
Bang for the buck  
Behind the eightball  
Belts and Suspenders  
Beef up  
Best practice  
Blamestorm  
Bleeding Edge  
Blue Sky  
Boil the frog  
Boil the ocean  
Bottom line (it)  
Brandatory  
Brain Dump  
Brass Tacks  
Bricks and mortar  
Brown Bag (it)  
Bubble it up  
Buckets  
Build  
Burn Rate  
Business End  
Buy In  
Buzzworthy  
C-level/suite  
Call on the carpet  
Carrots/Sticks  
Champion  
Change management  
Circle Back  
Close the loop  
Come to Jesus  
Common Plate  
Connect the dots  
Conversate  
Core Competencies  
Criticality  
Cross pollinate  
Dashboard  
Decision Latitude  
Deck  
Deep Dive  
Deferred Success  
Deliverable  
Dinosaur  
Dog and Pony Show  
Dovetail  
Drill Down  
De-integrate  
Deep Six  
Deliver the goods  
Disambiguate  
Dial In  
Dialogue  
Drive beyond the headlights  
Due Dilligence  
Elevator speech  
Face Pressed against the glass  
Face Time  
Fish or cut bait  
Food Chain  
Foreseeable future  
Front Burner  
Game Plan  
Gatekeeper  
Get our Ducks (in a row)  
Granular  
Hand Holding  
Head Count

## Appendix A. Continued

Heavy Lifting  
Herding Cats  
Human Capital  
Impactful  
Interface  
Keep the powder dry  
Key Deliverables  
Knowledge transfer  
Leave behind  
Leverage  
Loop-in  
Low-Hanging Fruit  
Magic Bullet  
Meat and potatoes  
Mickey Mouse  
Mission Critical  
Moving Forward/Going Forward  
Net-Net  
Off the shelf  
Offline  
Onboard  
One throat to choke  
Outside the box  
Ownership  
Pain Points  
Parking lot (it)  
Peel the onion  
Percussive Maintenance  
Ping (someone)  
Populate (a form)  
Post Mortem  
Prethink  
Put to bed  
Resources  
Resource Intensive  
Resonate  
Ride Herd  
Road Map  
Robust  
Rubber Stamp  
Run it up the flagpole  
Scope creep  
Sanity Check  
Seat at the table  
Spend  
Silos  
Skill Set  
Soup to Nuts  
Stakeholder  
Stir Fry  
Synergy  
Thought Leader  
Time-poor  
Traction  
Transitioning  
Value Proposition  
Value Add  
Value Stream  
Vanilla  
Wallpaper  
Win-Win  
Zero-Sum Game  
Zombie Project

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