CHAPTER 10

JARGONITIS

Every discipline has its own specialized language, its membership rites, its secret handshake. I remember the moment when, as a PhD student in comparative literature, I casually dropped the phrase "psychosexual morphology" into a discussion of a Thomas Hardy novel. What power! From the professor's approving nod and the envious shuffling of my fellow students around the seminar table, I knew that I had just flashed the golden badge that admitted me into an elite disciplinary community. Needless to say, my new party trick fell flat on my nonacademic friends and relations. Whenever I solemnly intoned the word "Foucauldian," they quickly went off to find another beer.

In its most benign and neutral definition, *jargon* signifies "the technical terminology or characteristic idiom of a special activity or group." More often, however, the jingly word that Chaucer used to describe "the inarticulate utterance of birds" takes on a pejorative cast: "unintelligible or meaningless talk or writing"; "nonsense, gibberish"; "a strange, outlandish, or barbarous language or dialect"; "obscure and often pretentious language marked by circumlocutions and long words."[1] So when does technical terminology cross over into the realm of *outlandish, obscure,* and *pretentious?* And how can academics communicate effectively with one another without exposing themselves to the

contempt, derision, or irritation of those who do not understand them?

Many thoughtful and eloquent academics have defended the use of jargon in appropriate contexts. Derek Attridge observes that jargon makes transparent what other modes of critical discourse seek to hide, namely, the contingent and contextualized nature of language itself.[2] Roland Barthes describes jargon as "a way of imagining" that "shocks as imagination does."[3] Jacques Derrida, whose exuberantly neologistic prose has charmed and exasperated several generations of humanities scholars, dwells on the material pleasures of difficult language, noting that words like *jargon* and its cousin *argot* are chokingly ugly yet bizarrely sensual: "They both come from the bottom of the throat, they linger, for a certain time, like a gargling, at the bottom of the gullet, you rasp and you spit" ("Ils sortent tous deux du fond de la gorge, ils séjournent, un certain temps, comme un gargarisme, au fond du gosier, on racle et on crache").[4] What these commentators have in common is a deep respect for language that engages and challenges. None of them advocates lazy or pretentious writing—which, all too often, is what disciplinary jargonizing amounts to.

In his classic 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell demonstrates how any writer can turn powerful prose into mushy pablum—"modern English of the worst sort"—by replacing evocative nouns and resonant cadences with impersonal, abstract terminology:

> I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all. (Ecclesiastes 9:11)
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> Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account. (Orwell's translation into standard bureaucrat-speak)[5]

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MARJORIE GARBER

Shibboleth thus came to mean a word used as a test for detecting foreigners and also, by extension, a catchword used by a party or sect to identify members and exclude outsiders. In this sense academic jargon itself functions as a kind of shibboleth. . . . Jargon is any kind of language that has been overused and now substitutes for thought, a mere container for thinking, a verbal gesture rather than an idea, whether highly technical or highly banal. . . . Jargon marks the place where thinking has been. It becomes a kind of macro, to use a computer term: a way of storing a complicated sequence of thinking operations under a unique name.

In *Academic Instincts,* a study of academic versus journalistic discourse, literary critic and cultural theorist Marjorie Garber offers a nuanced and largely sympathetic analysis of scholarly jargon. She echoes Aristotle's advice that poets should not balk from using "unusual words" and notes that "a difficult text may be worth the trouble of deciphering." For her, the question at stake is not how to avoid jargon altogether, but "how to keep language at once precise and rich."

Garber's discussion of jargon models the judicious use of jargon. Describing jargon as a *shibboleth,* she defines a resonant historical term even while appropriating it for her own purposes: any reader previously unfamiliar with the concept has just acquired a new vocabulary word, a new nugget of knowledge, as well as a new way of understanding the cultural complexities of jargon. Next, she uses concrete images *(container, gesture)* to explain the abstract workings of jargon. Finally, she offers a compelling metaphor ("jargon is like a computer macro") that carefully incorporates a clear, precise definition of the specialist word *macro.* Her language is indeed "at once precise and rich," studded with anecdotes, allusions, examples, quotations, figurative language, and subtle humor.

The annals of academe are filled with examples of hoaxes based on parodies of scholarly discourse, from the fake "Spectrism" poetry movement of the 1920s to the infamous Sokal Affair of the 1990s, which reached its apogee when physicist Alan Sokal successfully placed "an article liberally salted with nonsense" in the cultural studies journal *Social Text* and then publically boasted about his feat.[6] As Sokal demonstrated, a satirist with a finely tuned ear can simulate the signature style of just about any academic discipline. So, indeed, can a cleverly programmed computer. The following passages were automatically generated by online "chatterbots" designed to parrot the prose of postmodernists, computer scientists, and the linguist Noam Chomsky, respectively:

> The main theme of von Ludwig's analysis of postsemioticist rationalism is a mythopoetical totality.
>
> After years of theoretical research into flip-flop gates, we prove the analysis of massive multiplayer online role-playing games, which embodies the confirmed principles of fuzzy networking.
>
> Note that the speaker-hearer's linguistic intuition does not readily tolerate nondistinctness in the sense of distinctive feature theory.[7]

Based on fairly simple algorithms, each of these programs conjures up the kind of muddy, obscurantist prose that Orwell likened to the defensive response of "a cuttlefish spurting out ink."[8] But it is their heavy-handed jargon—*postsemioticist, mythopoetical, flip-flop gates, fuzzy networking, nondistinctness, feature theory*—that most clearly marks these sentences as "academic."

In my survey of one hundred recent writing guides, I found that twenty-one of the guides recommend against disciplinary jargon of any kind; forty-six caution that technical language should be used carefully, accurately, and sparingly; and thirty-three make no comment on the subject. I have yet to discover a single academic style guide that advocates a freewheeling embrace of jargon. Nevertheless, academic journals are awash in the stuff:

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MIKE CRANG

The centrality of visual depiction to student imaginations of geography was brought home to me when some years ago—presumably, back then, as a symbol of a "youthful" department—I was posed for a photo intended for use in the prospectus, lecturing a class that had been helpfully herded from the back of the hall to fill the front rows. The photographer positioned me standing behind the vast laboratory desk, while they provided a wall map of—I think I recall—Latin America, and to finalise the piece requested that I fast-forward to my most colourful slide to have it projected behind me. So in order to symbolise the classroom experience, we had audience, authoritative lectern, map—and, yes, slide. This, then, was geography as 17-year-olds would grasp it.

In an article memorably titled "The Hair in the Gate: Visuality and Geographical Knowledge," geographer Mike Crang offers a highly visual anecdote to illustrate the importance of visual symbols in the geography classroom. The abstract concepts around which his article revolves—"visuality and geographical knowledge"—are brought to life through concrete details: the photographer, the prospectus, the students "helpfully herded" to the front rows of the lecture, the "vast laboratory desk," the wall map of Latin America, the colorful slide.

In the very next paragraph, Crang shifts into standard academese:

An examination of this constellation of representation, power and knowledge seems all the more imperative as the rising hegemony (and, I am tempted to say, epistemological monopoly) of Microsoft's PowerPoint reinforces the interchangeability of content within the single (re)presentational system.

This is a monstrous sentence, filled with weighty abstractions—"constellation of representation," "rising hegemony," "epistemological monopoly," "(re)presentational system"—leavened by just one proper noun ("Microsoft's PowerPoint"). Yet Crang gets away with it because his descent into jargon is brief, lively ("I am tempted to say"), and to the point. Within another sentence or two, his prose is back on track again: vigorous, varied, and concrete.

Tomita extended LR parsing, not by backtracking and lookahead but by a breadth-first simulation of multiple LR parsers spawned by nondeterminism in the LR table. [Computer Science]

Moreover, central aspects of Holland's theory are structurally represented in the RIASEC interest circumplex wherein an explicit set of relations between variables in the interest domain are specified. [Psychology]

By bringing deconstructive techniques to political philosophy, a theoretical discourse of rationality and self-control is forced to come to terms with the metaphorical, catachrestical, and fabulistic materials buried within it. [Literary Studies]

These extracts all appeared in articles with "jargonicity ratios" of 1:10 or higher; that is, their authors employ specialized terminology on average once in every ten words, if not more. Only the first example, a vigorously phrased if otherwise incomprehensible sentence from a computer science article, stands up to syntactical scrutiny. In the other two sentences, jawbreakers such as *circumplex* and *catachrestical* momentarily distract us from serious grammatical errors: in the psychology article, a singular noun *(set)* is modified by a plural verb *(are)*, while the literary studies extract opens with a dangling participle *(by bringing*—who brings?) and closes with an ambiguous *it* (*philosophy* or *discourse?*). If the authors of these sentences are so intoxicated by big words that they cannot keep their own syntax walking in a straight line, what chance do their readers have?

In many academic contexts, jargon functions as a highly efficient form of disciplinary shorthand: phrases such as "non-HACEK gram-negative bacillus endocarditis" (medicine) or "unbounded demonic and angelic nondeterminacy" (computer science) may be unintelligible to ordinary mortals, but they facilitate efficient communication among disciplinary experts (or so I am assured by the latter). Sometimes, however, the line between technical precision and intellectual pretension becomes a fine one. Take, for example, the word *Foucauldian,* which I employed satirically at the beginning of this chapter as an example of potentially off-putting

jargon. In my one thousand–article data sample, I found eighteen articles from humanities and social science journals that mention the cultural theorist Michel Foucault at least once within their first few pages. Seven of these articles contain the F-word in its adjectival form, variously invoking: from higher education, "Foucauldian theory," "a Foucauldian analysis of power," and "the Foucauldian interplay between 'constraint' and 'agency'"; from literary studies, "a Foucauldian understanding of the operations of power and the repressive hypothesis" and "Foucauldian assumptions about genre as an agentless discourse"; and from history, "the Foucauldian concept of 'discourse'" and a "Foucauldian direction" of thought. Four of the articles lay claim to Foucauldian ideas, while the other three challenge Foucauldian paradigms. Only two of the seven articles, however, actually engage with Foucault's work in any meaningful way: in one, the authors claim that "Foucauldian theory lays the groundwork for the methodological approach used in this investigation," but it turns out that their understanding of "Foucauldian theory" has been gleaned almost entirely from a 1994 book on Foucault and feminism; in the other, the authors repeatedly refer to Foucault's work on imperialist discourse, but only as refracted through the writings of Edward Said. None of the seven articles provides evidence that its authors have actually read and engaged with Foucault's work themselves. Far from being wielded by these scholars as a precision instrument to facilitate a nuanced understanding among experts, the word "Foucauldian" becomes a sort of semantic shotgun, scattering meaning in all directions.

Stylish academic writers do not deny the utility of jargon, nor do they eschew its intellectual and aesthetic pleasures. Instead, they deploy specialized language gracefully, cautiously, and meticulously, taking care to keep their readers on board. For example, when educational researchers Ray Land and Siân Bayne appropriate the Foucauldian term *panopticon* in a discussion of disciplinary surveillance in online learning environments, they provide a succinct historical overview of the concept, grounded in

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MICHEL FOUCAULT

In order to be exercised, this power had to be given the instrument of permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible. It had to be like a faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes posted everywhere, mobile attentions ever on the alert, a long, hierarchized network which, according to Le Maire, comprised for Paris the forty-eight commissaires, the twenty inspecteurs, then the "observers," who were paid regularly, the "basses mouches," or secret agents, who were paid by the day, then the informers, paid according to the job done, and finally the prostitutes. And this unceasing observation had to be accumulated in a series of reports and registers; throughout the eighteenth century, an immense police text increasingly covered society by means of a complex documentary organization.

Where have all those self-proclaimed Foucauldians picked up their love of jargon? Certainly not from Foucault himself, whose influential writings on discipline, power, sexuality, and other weighty matters are rhythmically compelling, relentlessly concrete, and almost entirely jargon-free.

In this passage, Foucault analyzes an abstract concept, *power,* via the physical trope of *surveillance,* which he animates with three perfectly pitched adjectives *(permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent)* and a spooky corporeal metaphor *(faceless gaze, social body, thousands of eyes)* before going on to document the long reach of various surveillance instruments into the lives of real people (commissaries, inspectors, observers, secret agents, informers, prostitutes) in a specific time and place (eighteenth-century Paris). Like many writers alert to stylistic nuance, Foucault alternates long sentences with short ones, building and maintaining a dynamic rhythmic flow. He tells stories: his book *Discipline and Punish,* for example, opens with a harrowing account of a criminal being drawn and quartered, an image that sticks in the reader's mind long afterward. He weaves one concrete example after another into his densely analytical but richly textured prose. And he quotes from primary sources only if he has actually read them himself.

Foucault's own writings.[9] When literary critic Peter Brooks imports the Russian formalist terms *fabula* and *sjužet* into his book *Reading for the Plot*, he deftly glosses both terms and explains how they contribute to a deeper understanding of stories and plots.[10] When philosopher Jacques Derrida coins a new word, *différance*, to signify semantic differences that lead to an endless deferral of meaning, he explains at length the thinking behind his neologism.[11] These authors hand their readers complex tools—but always with instructions attached.

Academics turn to jargon for a wide variety of reasons: to display their erudition, to signal membership in a disciplinary community, to demonstrate their mastery of complex concepts, to cut briskly into an ongoing scholarly conversation, to push knowledge in new directions, to challenge readers' thinking, to convey ideas and facts efficiently, and to play around with language. Many of these motivations align well with the ideals of stylish academic writing. Wherever jargon shows its shiny face, however, the demon of academic hubris inevitably lurks in the shadows nearby. Academics who are committed to using language effectively and ethically—as a tool for communication, not as an emblem of power—need first of all to acknowledge the seductive power of jargon to bamboozle, obfuscate, and impress.

THINGS TO TRY

- If you suspect that you suffer from jargonitis, start by measuring the scope of your addiction. Print out a sample of your academic writing and highlight *every word* that would not be immediately comprehensible to a reader from outside your own discipline. (Alternatively, you can ask such a reader to do the highlighting for you.) Do you use jargon more than once per page, per paragraph, per sentence?
- Next, ask yourself some hard questions about your motivations. Do you employ jargon to:

- impress other people?
- signal your membership in a disciplinary community?
- demonstrate your mastery of complex ideas?
- enter an academic conversation that is already under way?
- play with language and ideas?
- create new knowledge?
- challenge your readers' thinking?
- communicate succinctly with colleagues?

Retain only those jargon words that clearly serve your priorities and values.

- For every piece of jargon that you decide to keep, make sure you give your readers a secure handhold: a definition, some background information, a contextualizing word or phrase. By the time you have clarified your usage, you might even find that you can let go of the word itself.