

Communication or Obfuscation?

Years of working as a business analyst and project manager have shown me time and again how important it is to communicate effectively. Yet I hear around me all manner of poor attempts to get a message across.

Those who know me are well aware that I can be a pedant with language. In truth I am nowhere near as good with words as I would like to be but the other morning I heard a radio programme that asked listeners for examples of imported American words that annoyed them. I did not hear the listeners' comments but it triggered thoughts about how language changes, how that can affect the efficacy of communication, both spoken and written, and how that can create problems when we really need to be precise.

So, for no better reason than I enjoy being grumpy every now and again, here are a few of my pet dislikes about how we communicate these days.

Firstly, imported or made-up words:

- Why do so many people use 'on-going' rather than 'continuing'?
- Why use 'ahead of' when you really mean 'before'?
- 'Complete' is so much more attractive a word than 'finalise', or even 'finalize'. (Yes, I know that 'ize' endings are acceptable English, but 'ise' is so much more attractive.)
- When did stations become 'train stations'? When I was young, station meant railway station, not train, and was used by itself. It needed no further explanation. If you meant bus station then you said so; station by itself meant trains. Even Paul Simon sang of a railway station not train.
- What is the 'top of the hour'? Since when did time have height?

Secondly, plain old misuse of words:

- Does no-one else find it annoying that 'alternative' has all but been replaced by 'alternate'? What word are we to use now if alternative is denied us? Eric Partridge, in *Usage and Abusage*, reminds us that choice is not a substitute, being applicable to selections from any number of possible courses of action, whereas alternative is a selection from just two. Amusingly, he then almost renders 'alternate' redundant by pointing out that it relates to 'twos'. Is this another example of VHS beating Betamax?
- Can someone tell TV and radio commentators, traffic reporters, in fact everyone, that 'both' does not mean 'each'. I caught a ball in each hand – two balls, two hands. I caught a ball in both hands – one ball using two hands. Traffic can never be slow in both directions on a motorway because vehicles do not travel in two directions on a single carriageway. What fun if they did. No, the correct statement would be that traffic is slow in each direction, but don't hold your breathe waiting to hear it. (Actually I just have, but one swallow ...)

And so to punctuation, or ignoring it, poor sentence construction and inflection:

- I expect that broadcasters always feel under time pressure but how often have you had to do a double-take because something sounded wrong or made no sense? I am sure that news bulletins, weather reports, traffic summaries, sports updates ... are scripted and punctuated, and that the readers are intelligent and articulate. But give some of them a short script to read and it's as though they had never seen it before – they had of course, fifteen minutes previously when they read the same text and made the same mistakes.

Punctuation is there for a reason; no, it really is. Full stops separate information into meaningful chunks, so why ignore them by running the end of one sentence straight into the beginning of the next? And why then pause part way through a phrase? Was there a comma there, or was it just that breath was short?

- Please stop the habit that Margaret Thatcher was so good at – lifting the voice at the end of a sentence so that interviewers would not interrupt. If the next sentence is on a different subject, signpost it by a drop of the voice.
- Do not arbitrarily or randomly emphasise words by speaking them more loudly. We want to know what is important in the communication and this does not help.
- Please, please remember what you were taught at school about where to place clauses in a sentence. "Sitting in a tree at the bottom of the garden was a huge black bird with long blue tail feathers" makes sense. "A huge black bird was sitting in a tree at the bottom of the garden with long blue tail feathers" makes a lot less, but I keep hearing sentences very similar to this.

I could go on and on, perhaps I already have!

Am I just being grumpy? Yes, to an extent. Am I making too much of situations where we would actually understand what was intended? Probably. Shouldn't a language evolve and am I just being ridiculously conservative? Yes again, but there is a serious point lurking in here somewhere.

All communication depends on a shared understanding of the rules of the medium we are using. We learn to speak a language, its words, grammar and syntax, so that others who have learned the same rules will understand. In business analysis we use a combination of the spoken and written word, sometimes supplemented by diagrams, to document and confirm requirements. Whatever approach we employ we need to work to the rules because our audience should be interpreting what we show them based on those same rules.

Most of us, and I am no exception, need help to make sense of communications. What I do not need is a mismatch between my understanding of the rules of the communication medium and those of the other party. Use new words and phrases, even American ones if you must, but think about your audience and don't get ahead of them.

I feel much better now. Of course, anyone who would like to add their own pet hates to my rant is more than welcome to email me at info@stehle.co.uk. It can be good to moan!