Jabberwocky Junkies:
Why we're hooked on buzzwords-- and why we need to kick the habit
By Tony Proscio

Many smart people in civic and philanthropic organizations of all kinds say, persuasively, that they find it forbiddingly hard to write more clearly. The problem is not that they don't know any better, but that they find it painful, and sometimes even unwise, to avoid the buzzwords and clichés that make their field seem impenetrable and off-putting to others. It's useful to understand why they feel that way—why so many writers, scholars, and activists bewail jargon in theory but revere it in practice.

Within their field, these writers say, the obscure and stuffy phrases enjoy too much prestige, and encapsulate too many subliminal allusions, to be avoided or omitted entirely. It is simply not the same, they say, to write that some program "helps" parents "deal more effectively" with the school system, when what they want to say—need to say, for subtle reasons of protocol and professional bona fides—is that the program "empowers" parents.

The word empowers is over-used and vainglorious, they concede. But it also encapsulates a view of the world, shared by like-minded people and institutions, that casts the parents as the heroes of a specific drama, in which the struggle for power is the chief plot element. It is a drama, moreover, whose cult following includes many of the committed and influential people to whom the writer wishes to appeal.

"If you want to preach in this church," said one nonprofit official, "you've got to sing these hymns."

When foundation writers and scholars are dealing only with one another, and by extension with their ideological brethren, the hallowed old expressions probably do serve a purpose—especially if the author isn't trying to say anything particularly new. But those expressions, precisely because they are so enthusiastically received among the faithful in the pews, quickly become habit-forming. In time, through overuse, the popular words come not to express serious thinking, but to replace it.

So when a foundation officer writes—as one actually did—that "a geographically targeted effort will benefit from synergies," the writer evidently wants the initiated to envision the careful process that adepts understand as targeting, and to expect the calculated chain reactions that

social scientists like to call synergy. The implied meaning comes off looking quite grand, really: "We will pick such ingenious locations for our grants that all the healthful vapors will gather like clouds of angels about our cause." Yet what the sentence actually says is so vague as to defy paraphrase. Incredibly, the writer never goes on to describe what synergies might be involved, or how they would bestow their benefits. It's all incantation with no point.

The writer no doubt had a point. But because of the soothing, almost narcotic effect of the jargon, she or he was evidently unaware that the point was never made. Even the old hands who know these words well will gain no insight from reading this sentence (though they may glide right past it, mollified by the murmur of reassuring sounds). Yet in fact, it was written for publication far beyond the philanthropic cloister. Those helpless lay readers who don't spend their days talking about synergies and targets could only be baffled— or, in a worse but likely case, annoyed.

A few lay people, grappling with the sentence about synergies, might silently defer to the author's superior expertise, assuming that the writing expressed something important but beyond their ken. That misimpression might even have been intentional, but probably it wasn't. Most foundations don't set out to intimidate, overwhelm, or befuddle their public. Most, in fact, seem eager to be better understood, and even to endure the self-exposure that clarity and understanding entail. Foundation conferences for some years have been consumed with a search for greater accountability, for a philanthropic bottom line, for metrics of achievement, and so on. Foundation leaders insist they want dialogue and partnership with their grantees, and feedback from their stakeholders. From all this earnestness (however much weighed down with jargon of its own), we can only conclude that foundations are trying to own up to their ambitions, and to be held to account when they fail. Why, then, does their speech so thoroughly belie those good intentions?

The only charitable answer is that they don't realize what they're saying and writing. All that leaden verbiage means something to them, or so they believe, so it comes to them as a bit of a shock when no one else can guess at their meaning. A less charitable corollary, though, may be that the mystifying vocabulary produces pleasant side-effects. Warding off criticism is a happy achievement, even if the price is warding off understanding.

What follow are some of the verbal gargoyles lately glowering down at anyone who dares to join the American civic debate. Some of these expressions meet the classic definition of "jargon"—the peculiar vocabulary of a technical

field—but others are not really technical; they're just obscure, evasive, or vague. In any case, all of them aspire, in their daily labors, to fit the newer and much harsher definition of jargon that The American Heritage Dictionary places first on its list: "nonsensical, incoherent, or meaningless talk."

"At-Risk"

This mystifying expression owes its popularity to one embarrassing fact: The phrase almost always designates a category of people of whom it is awkward to speak honestly. Almost every branch of charity or human service uses at-risk to describe the people whom its practitioners are... well, worried about. Here is one sample definition, from Education Week: "At-risk describes a student with socioeconomic challenges, such as poverty or teen pregnancy, which may place them [sic] at a disadvantage in achieving academic, social, or career goals. Such students are deemed 'at risk' of failing, dropping out, or 'falling through the cracks'."

Generalize from education to other fields of social concern, and at-risk becomes simply the polite euphemism for "headed into trouble." But in today's etiquette of upbeat and respectful neutrality, it would be considered grotesquely prejudicial, not to say hostile, to describe people that way. At-risk, however, is regarded as abstract enough to be polite, even in mixed company.

Yet if those who use this word are honest, they must admit to being perfectly comfortable classifying people according to a vast realm of unspecified problems that those people do not even have yet. Many people therefore read with scant discomfort that a program "addresses the needs of at-risk youth," never demanding the least description of what the youth are at-risk of. Everyone presumably already knows: The youth are headed into trouble.

Now, we are not so coarse as to suggest describing troubled people as "troubled." But surely there are some descriptions slightly more explicit than at-risk that do not offend the sensitivity gendarmes. The sibling euphemisms "disadvantaged" and "underserved" are admittedly overused, but unlike at-risk, they are at least not transparently unfinished thoughts.

Even when a writer decides that no other expression but at-risk could possibly do, it may be healthy at least to spend a moment asking, of what? If

it is possible to answer that question concisely—as in "of violence," "of pregnancy," or "of dropping out of school"—then it would be a step in the right direction simply to finish the thought that at-risk begins. "This program addresses the needs of youth who are at risk of dropping out of school" or "who may be drawn into gangs" or "who risk early pregnancy."

In some cases, of course, the writer genuinely may not know what a person's real risk is. That is a sad fact—not about writers, or about jargon, but about life. Often, people really are simply headed into trouble, and we can't say exactly what that trouble might be. Would that it were different. But when it's not, perhaps at-risk truly is the best we can do.

"-Based"

On Sunday mornings, fresh from my faith-based institution, I stop at the community-based deli for a caffeine-based beverage. After a thought-based interlude, I select an information-based publication from the rack, and the knowledge-based attendant accepts an income-based emolument in exchange for his customer-based service. I return to my home base wishing I could de-base this language for good. But in at least one sense, it is already as debased as it can be.

Where did all these -bases come from? When did things cease to have qualities of their own and start being merely based on other things? In the field of urban development, there was once such a thing as a community development corporation. Now they're all community-based development corporations. Groups of very smart people used to be proud of being learned or expert; now they hide their diplomas behind the lifeless claim of being "knowledge-based." Why are synagogues, churches, and mosques not fighting to regain their sacred charter as religious institutions? Are they content to have it said that they are merely based on faith—perhaps the way Velveeta is based on cheese—and not aflame with the genuine article? Why are the clergy not marching on Washington over this? Where is the outrage?

The answer is that this dodgy game of base-running is actually useful in the sneaky political realms where such coinages proliferate. The Constitution may look askance at alliances between government and religion, but it might be said to be silent on faith-based activities. Community organizations might be expected to demonstrate actual support from their neighbors—something

many of them enjoy, but not all. Yet if they're community-based... well, all they really have to do is be based there.

"Community"

In English, community has applied for centuries to practically any association among people, whether profound or superficial. The almost boundless vagueness of this word is therefore not a new invention, an affectation, or a subterfuge. Jargon it's not. But vague it is, and therefore an invitation to mental sloppiness.

In some recent expressions like "community development" or "community organizing," the word started off as real jargon—trendy and obscure, with multiple meanings—but it has gained a certain practiced precision, built up over time. Community now means, in these contexts, a group of people living near one another who share, by reason of their common residence, some political or economic interests. In this sense, the word can actually be preferable over more precise words like "neighborhood," because some such communities aren't urban enough to be clustered into neighborhoods.

But more often, in phrases like "the intelligence community," "the arts community," or "the child-welfare community," the word drops a deliberate scrim in front of a bunch of shadowy people whom no one is expected to identify. Most of the time, those who use such phrases really mean to say "people in these fields whom I consider important, but can't or won't name." Used that way, the word falsely pretends to give information, while actually blotting out important details.

Worse, that use of community is sometimes deliberately misleading. It implies a unanimity among members that rarely occurs in reality. These communities that speak so conveniently in unison may suit the polemical purposes of some writers, but not without seeming a little fraudulent. When "the Harlem community" supports or opposes a new shopping center, it is a near certainty that a group of individuals, and not all the residents of Harlem, share one view of the development. Used this way, as with site, the word may be just the result of careless diction, but it exposes the writer to suspicions of dishonesty.

There is another way this word has muddied philanthropic discourse—in its plainest and most generic sense. For example, "mentally ill people should live

in the community," "service should be provided in the community," and "the community must decide how to respond." Should elderly people be helped to remain "in the community" (meaning, we presume, somewhere this side of Antarctica), or would it be more to the point to say "at home"?

There may well be a difference between those two ideas, but if there is, the word community does not convey it. When mental health programs are told that their work should be done "in the community," they are probably being told that their hospitals and clinics are too far away from where their customers live. But the word doesn't say that, unfortunately.

"Empowerment"

Here is an example of that most pernicious of all forms of jargon: the ideological shibboleth. To establish one's bona fides as a person concerned about the poor, the disenfranchised, or even ordinary people in general, it is essential in every setting to use empowerment—as early (and, in some circles, as often) as possible.

The coiners of empowerment invested it with only the broadest meaning, perhaps to make it usable in nearly every context—or anyway, that has been the effect. Foundations now must be careful to empower grantees, communities, individual residents of those communities, voluntary and civic associations, the poor, those who help the poor, and even those who do not help the poor, but would if they were empowered. Scarcely a grant is made anymore without someone or something being solemnly empowered, normally with a timely infusion of money.

The word is a synonym, says The American Heritage Dictionary, for "authorize," but you wouldn't guess it from the way empower is used. People are not "authorized" by community development organizations, but they are apparently "empowered" in the hundreds of thousands. No one is "authorized" by public opinion polls, the Internet, charter schools, community policing, a Patient's Bill of Rights, civilian review boards, tax cuts, after-school programs, competition in the telecommunications industry, or community colleges. Yet every one of these things, and many more besides, has been described in recent public-policy or foundation writing as "empowering" people.

This empower-surge makes at least one thing clear: The American Heritage Dictionary has it wrong. In the ideological camps where empower is a ritual incantation, the word doesn't mean "authorize," it means "give people some ability to influence something they cannot already influence, or do something they cannot already do." But that definition is so broad that it can apply to almost anything that is not an absolute impediment. (One might argue, just to be churlish, that even an impediment empowers people to impede things.)

Try this exercise, which we might call an empower-outage: Find five or six instances of empower among recent memos and papers, and mentally blot them out. Then re-read the paper, with the empower switched off. Most times, the meaning won't have changed a whit. But the paper may grow shorter.

"Metrics"

Change one or two words, and the following sentence will nestle snugly into the writing of any branch of the human services: "The failure of the mental health industry to devise adequate metrics to capture long-term outcomes has resulted in confusion as to appropriate timing and levels of intervention." The phrase "to devise adequate metrics" is apparently the universal choice to replace the hopelessly outdated and déclassé verb "to measure." We no longer count anything in the digital age. We now devise metrics.

"Without metrics of success," says a recent foundation paper, "it is impossible to say with certainty whether the results of neighborhood redevelopment in the past 20 years justify the level of investment." The sentence is remarkable not so much for its use of metrics—it would be much more remarkable to find a piece of foundation writing that does not use the term—but for its specific application to the field of neighborhood development. Here, one might have supposed, is a branch of American philanthropy and social policy that is among the most metricked civic activities in history.

Neighborhood development groups in the past 20 or 30 years have made an art of counting new houses, refurbished apartments, reclaimed blocks, numbers of investors and lenders, square feet of renovated commercial space, and (with a more fanciful standard of reckoning) the number of jobs added to the neighborhood employment base. Compared with neighborhood development, only professional baseball is more awash in metrics. So what more is the author of the quoted sentence looking for?

The key is in the seemingly innocent word "success." In modern philanthropic usage, what distinguishes metrics from mere measurement is that the fancier word gauges success—or, as the mental health writer would have it, "long-term outcomes." Metrics are contemporary social policy's equivalent of the Philosopher's Stone—an elusive but potent medium that transforms the base metal of mere results into the unalloyed gold of "long-term outcomes." Building houses and treating illnesses are fine, but will they permanently solve the deeper problems? Seek ye the metric that will pierce that mystery. And be prepared for a long search.

"Stakeholders"

In most civic and charitable projects, the people with a "stake" in the results are legion. When people try to improve schools or health care or Social Security, who has a "stake" in the results? Answer: All of us—every last woman, man, and child. Half the time, stakeholders is a passable substitute for "all the living, and even a few of the dead." As such, in any practical context it is useless noise.

The only explanation for the spectacular success of stakeholders in the philanthropic demimonde is that the word sounds tantalizingly like its cousin "stockholders." For those with a painful, gnawing envy of Wall Street and all its blandishments, the desire for stockholders must have the merciless pull of an addiction. (Funny, that: Most actual denizens of Wall Street would be delighted to give their stockholders the heave-ho, as long as they could hold on to the capital.) Among Wall Street wannabes, a word that gives the thrilling feeling of stock without the nuisance of actually paying dividends would naturally be a big hit. For those with a chemical dependence on the gibberish of high finance, stakeholders is something like methadone: It eases some of the craving, without inflicting the harmful side effects of the real thing.

"Throughput"

Born in the corridors of industrial engineering before World War II, throughput traveled back and forth a few times between descriptive neologism and itinerant metaphor. After some years of disciplined life describing the pace and scope of work on old-fashioned assembly lines, or the

delivery potential of fuel systems, the word made a mid-life career change and became a journeyman metaphor in the infant computer industry. It was such a hit there that it quickly grew to be a precisely defined technical term in its new field, infused with a tight new range of meanings.

That was the word's first definitional leap, but it was a small one. Its original meaning was in most senses still intact: The processing of information really was a new application of the ideas of productive engineering and fuel delivery; the new meaning was not a metaphor but simply a new use for the original concept. Instead of people assembling machinery or pipes delivering fuel, machines were moving and assembling information. The point, though, remained a combination of transportation, assembly, and production.

But the computer pioneers soon lost control of the word (as of most of their once-specialized vocabulary, starting with throughput's parents, input and output). Throughput is now the universal metaphor for any interval between the moment anything is put into anything else and the moment it re-emerges, presumably altered.

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