Attack of the Weasel Words

In a witty polemic, best-selling Australian author Don Watson says it’s time to protest the mind-numbing business jargon that infests our schools, churches and political speech.

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July 8 - Does the idea of a water-cooler company saying that it sells “workplace refreshment solutions” seem ridiculous? Does it infuriate you that everyone, from the local pastor to your kid’s school principal, seems to have a “mission statement” touting their “core values.” If so, you’re not alone, says Australian author Don Watson. His book “Death Sentences: How Clichés, Weasel Words and Management-Speak are Strangling Public Language,” became a surprise bestseller in Australia last year and prompted a flood of mail from other frustrated language lovers.

Watson, once a speechwriter for former Australian prime minister Paul Keating, elicits howls of laughter from audiences simply by reading obtuse corporate-speak from company manuals and school brochures. He laments the fact that librarians are now referred to as: “information needs identifiers,” and that his 12-year-old granddaughter’s report card said that she had “developed a variety of products” in history class. He cites a John Deere tractor safety notice that warns customers to lock the brake or “unexpected non-powered tractor movement may occur.”

The essayist and historian says it’s time we stop pretending we understand this babble and declare that the emperor has no clothes—or decent verbs. He insists however, that his book, published in the United States in May, is not a curmudgeonly cry for old-fashioned English. Rather, Watson argues that when politicians and public institutions adopt slick corporate marketing language, they are converting us from citizens into customers. NEWSWEEK’s Susanna Schrobsdorff spoke with Watson about his crusade against weasel words and about what it was like to bring his book to the United States—a country that might be considered the epicenter of business jargon. Excerpts:

NEWSWEEK: What are some examples of the way business-speak has spread beyond the corporate world?
Don Watson: My granddaughter Sophie has been asked to write her English essays in PowerPoint. It’s shocking and terrible. And maybe when she grows up she’ll get married in PowerPoint: “Point one: Do you take this man for your lawful husband?” And maybe when she dies, she’ll even have her funeral in PowerPoint. [Laughs.] Her class spent their last week of primary education writing their “personal mission statement”—their “core values and key goals going forward.” And then there was an example from a Houston newspaper review of my book where births [at a hospital] were referred to as OB [obstetrics] product. Now we can say I was a seven-and-a-half pound OB product, which is a measurable item, not just a child.
What are the “weasel words” you dislike most?
"Implemented." You'll see implemented everywhere. In this language, you “implement” rather than speak or do. And then there is enhanced. Everything is being enhanced. That word is being used in place of other more precise and descriptive words. You can enhance your marriage or your job. You can even implement your enhancements. And "input" is another good one. Companies talk about “input into our people.” This reflects technology and accounting [ideas]. It all has to do with input and outcomes.

How has business-speak changed society?
We are all customers. Even the CIA talks about having internal clients. I’m quite sure that in another iteration, the Army will talk about enemy clients. Once they decide we’re all customers then the consequences for basic relationships in civil society are not good. I think the old civilities will do, and I don’t know why we all have to be customers, let alone valued customers. It’s even gotten into religion. St. Martin-in-the-Fields [the Anglican church] in London now has a two-point mission statement out front on the wall. Their first point is the duty to God and Christian charity and the second is to provide excellence in hospitality. For [centuries] they’ve been doing charity and now it’s “excellence in hospitality.”

How has this language spread to our private lives?
I think it happened when we decided to a greater or lesser extent that we live in an economy, not a society. It’s become badge of honor for people in their professional lives so they’ll bring it home with them. Soon they’ll be saying: “We’re going to watch ‘The Wizard of Oz’ together in a family scenario.” [It happens] because language is so addictive and we use it as we hear it.

What are the consequences of politicians speaking in what you call "clichéd, lifeless babble?"
I think it has repercussions for a democracy. If we can't trust the words of our leaders then we're that much diminished. And politicians are determined to say as little as possible. It seems to me that one of the purposes of political life is to actually talk to people as if you understand them. And it’s very unusual now that the politician has the ability to say something and to make it seem that there’s a direct line between what he thinks and what he says. To speak not of outcomes and impacts but of consequences and causes and all the other words that we use to describe the great mysteries of life.

In the book, you quote President George W. Bush as saying: “We need to counter the shockwave of the evildoer by having individual rate cuts accelerated and by thinking about tax rebates.” What is it about the way he speaks that bothers you?
Bush has got a few catchphrases in his mind and he tacks them together whether they make sense or not. His problems and gaffes with the language illustrate where this kind of language leads you, which is a succession of abstractions pulled together by more abstractions.

What kind of reaction have you been getting to the book?
I was answering letters of frustration and despair every week from people who say everything is infested with marketing language. Teachers have resigned because of it. They say how much
they hate their work because they have no idea what's being said to them. I’ve collected examples that people have sent in on the Web site [www.weaselwords.com.au]. One of my favorites is from a high-school [evaluation]: “Just as the skill and processes are not compartmentalized in the creation process, the evaluation of outcomes will occur against a background of understanding that separation of outcomes into discrete components is subordinate to the evaluation of the total process as a comprehensive outcome.” Nobody has any idea what that means.

Is America's global business culture responsible for this degradation of the language?
Even after all the harm that American corporations have done to the language, there's still Mark Twain. Americans do great good for the language; they keep it alive and moving. However, insofar as America has been behind the great force in the growth of the modern corporation, then I suppose that America can take a fair amount of the responsibility.

How do we fight this abuse of language, or as you say, become a “refusenik?”
When people use this jargon, ask them what they really mean. And, when someone starts talking [that way] from a call center or some place like that, ask them where they are. It drives them mad, poor people because they want to get back to their spiel. But they do rather like it at the same time. And if they say, “New Delhi, Sir,” then ask them what the weather's like over there. They might say, “Very hot sir.” And then ask how’s the cricket going? You don’t want to persecute them. You do it sort of nicely and you try and disarm them.

Could we expect any reform from corporations themselves?
If companies are serious about their "corporate social responsibilities" they should make the language one of them. They could put "saying what we mean and meaning what we say" into their mission statement. They could employ in-house editors. And journalists should go after these [weasel] words, too.

Why should we be vigilant about language?
When you turn language into an assembly line, you take all the potential out of it. You can't write a poem in this language. You can’t tell a joke, you can't convey feeling. You can't discover new meanings. This writing is incapable of taking you anywhere. It's deliberately circumscribed. It's almost an abuse of human rights.

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