

International Leadership Institute

A Lesson on English



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The Language of Business

Every group, or segment of society, has its own special language. This “lingo” or “jargon” (*see box below for definitions*) has special words to fit the needs of the group. The special language also separates those who understand it, the insiders, from the outsiders, making it easier to decide who should be allowed into the group.

BUSINESS BUZZWORDS

Business, of course, has its own jargon. In fact, it has a special word that means “jargon”: *buzzword*.

A buzzword is a word or phrase that suddenly becomes wildly popular for describing some current event or concept. Here are some examples from the past 30 years in American business:

1. **Push the envelope**—to develop an idea to its maximum potential.
2. **At the end of the day**—focusing attention on the results of an action or policy.
3. **Hit the ground running**—an admiring phrase for someone who needs little training or preparation time to act decisively and successfully.
4. **Win-win**—a situation that seems to be favorable for everyone concerned.

THE LANGUAGE OF MANAGEMENT

Not all businesspeople are managers, but most will deal with management staff in meetings and planning exercises. Management jargon is pervasive in business. Examples from American business include these:

1. **Best practices**—accepted industry standards for particular tasks, processes and production methods.
2. **Core competencies**—describes those abilities and skills that are the essence of a company’s qualifications.
3. **Sustainability**—denotes the capacity to endure.
4. **Right-sizing**—laying off employees to cut costs.
5. **Herding cats**—getting people with very diverse goals and methods to agree on a course of action.
6. **Knowledge process outsourcing (KPO)**—using outside companies or subsidiaries to carry out knowledge- and information-based activities such as accounting, customer service and marketing.
7. **Paradigm shift**—a significant change in how a product or service is thought of or perceived by a company or its customers.
8. **Drinking the Kool-aid**—blindly trusting in the words and promises of management

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Lingo: “foreign speech,” 1650s, possibly a corrupt form of [lingua franca](#) (q.v.), or from Prov. lingo “language, tongue,” from O.Prov. lenga, from L. lingua “tongue” (see [lingual](#)).

Jargon: mid-14c., “unintelligible talk, gibberish,” from O.Fr. jargon “a chattering” (of birds), ultimately of echoic origin (cf. L. garrere “to chatter,” Eng. gargle). Often applied to something the speaker does not understand, hence meaning “mode of speech full of unfamiliar terms” (1650s).

From the Online Etymology Dictionary (<http://www.etymonline.com>).



Sara and Jarda Tusek in Prague

“A Lesson on English” is a series of short lessons created for people who want to become fluent in conversational English. The lessons are practical and useful for students learning English in a traditional classroom setting or on their own.

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THE LANGUAGE OF FINANCE

Chief Financial Officers (CFO’s), accountants, and other “money people” have their own jargon, including the following phrases.

1. **Return on investment (ROI), rate of profit** or sometimes just **return**, is the ratio of money gained or lost on an investment relative to the amount of money invested.
2. **Short sale**: this is a sale in which a stock is borrowed from its owner, sold, then bought back at a lower price, with the seller taking the profit. Stockbrokers do this with stocks from their clients’ portfolios, with their permission. If it’s done without their permission, it’s illegal.

3. **Commercial paper**—unsecured, short-term loan given by a corporation rather than a bank. **Unsecured** means that there is no collateral for the loan—**collateral** is property or other items of value that insure repayment of the loan if it is defaulted (not repaid by the borrower).
4. **Benchmarking**—comparing one set of results to another, similar set of results to see similarities and differences.
5. **Go off-line**—have a private, unannounced discussion with one person about an idea or problem.
6. **CFNO**—a CFO who always says “no” to any request for money.

THE LANGUAGE OF TEAMWORK

The idea of working as a team is basic to business. Instead of **putting all your eggs in one basket** (counting on one person or concept for success), smart companies gather teams of people to assess ideas before they are **on the launch pad** (ready to be put into practice).

Here are some team buzzwords:

1. **Sync-up**—share information with another person.
2. **Bandwidth**—the amount of time, ability and resources that a person, team or company possesses.
3. **Airball**—person who makes a lot of noise and demands attention but produces nothing of value. The word combines **hot air** (meaningless talk) with the useless hairballs a cat coughs up.
4. **Run it up the flagpole**—make others, some of whom are above you in the business hierarchy, aware of a situation.
5. **Cookie cutter**—unoriginal and boring proposal.

6. **Synergy**—the idea that people spark each other’s creativity and energy, resulting in better solutions than one person can come up with alone.

HAZARDS OF JARGON

It’s essential to understand the jargon of business if you want a business career. Some words you will learn in your university courses, such as Macroeconomics and Financial Accounting; some you will learn from colleagues and by making inferences when you hear the word.

If you don’t know the lingo, you’ll look out of place and feel stupid. But beware of using buzzwords yourself! Often they are considered stale and overused, and you might be judged as someone with few ideas and poor verbal skills!

So be sure to keep up with the latest buzzwords, but be very sparing in how you use them when you talk to business people.

At the end of the day, the **ROI** on jargon is not **win-win**.

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