

One person's googly is another's gobbledegook



Janet Holmes

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

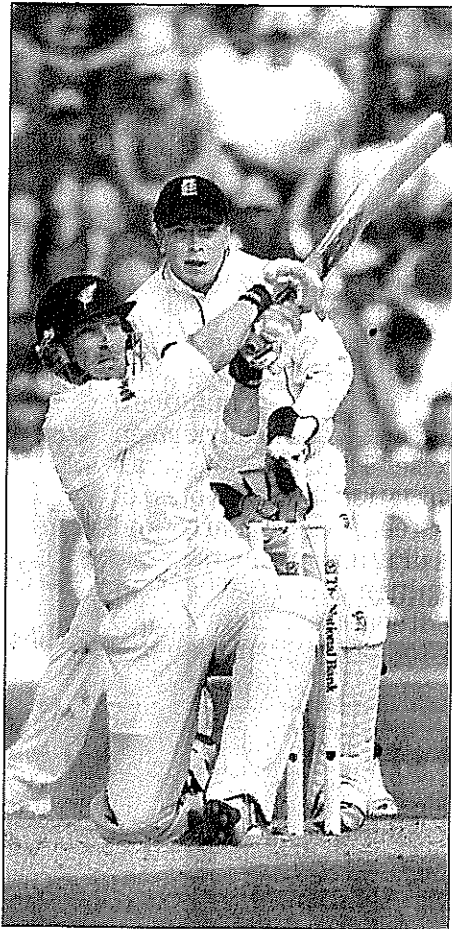
A RECENT article in *The Dominion Post* described the increasing pressure on business and government departments to "break the bureaucratic language barrier" and use "plain English" (*The War on Words*, July 12). Opening with an example of unintelligible jargon, full of currently fashionable bureaucratese, including phrases such as "key enabler" and "sub-optionally configured", the article made a strong case for clear written communication.

Writer Nikki Macdonald also noted that Britain's Local Government Association had even gone so far as to ban the use of words such as "stakeholder" and "synergies", and indicated that a local lobby group hoped to persuade New Zealand to legislate that government agencies should write in plain English.

Sociolinguists start to twitch uneasily when people begin to talk about banning anything to do with language. Modelling good usage is fine, but banning features of language you don't approve of can herald a slippery road to autocracy. One person's jargon is often another's specialist terminology.

While it is hard to imagine that anyone would wish to defend the use of "inshore aquatic environment" to refer to a beach, or "ambient replenishment controller" for supermarket shelf stacker, there are cases in which, I am sure we would all agree, specialist language can be justified.

I do not understand terms such as silly mid-on, square leg, or the covers, for instance, to describe positions in cricket, or off break, googly and leg break, which I gather refer to methods of delivering the ball. But I certainly would not advocate banning such terms, or insisting that they be paraphrased for the benefit of those "educated laypeople" who have not learned the jargon of cricket.



Testing the boundaries: To some, silly mid-on is a specific and useful phrase; to others, it's meaningless jargon.

They have developed, among those who are specialists in this area of sport, to enable them to talk more precisely about the game.

The truth is that we often don't recognise our own jargon. Jargon is just a label for the in-group language of experts, and it usually helps make their communication more precise and hence clearer.

The Dominion Post article identified lawyers, scientists and academics as "prime offenders" in producing jargon-ridden texts and complex structures.

But these are exactly the groups who need to use very precise language in order to avoid ambiguity or confusion. Their "jargon" includes precise, specialised vocabulary for specific concepts.

In my own discipline, "diglossia" is a

very useful term which I can roughly gloss as "societal bilingualism", but in order for the educated layperson to thoroughly understand it I would need to provide at least a couple of pages of text, and ideally some examples as well.

In other words, it is not only writers but also commentators who need to take account of the intended audience of a piece of writing before passing judgment. As sociolinguists constantly say, context is crucial. So while I agree that plain English is desirable in communications aimed at the general public, I would argue that specialised language is necessary in textbooks and academic theses, and in many legal documents.

There is even a case for complex grammar when the ideas expressed cannot be encoded in simple active clauses. And while such complexities can often be avoided or simplified in documents intended for non-specialists, the results are often longer documents with more explanations. That's the cost of abandoning the shorthand of using specialist terminology or "jargon".

Linguists can also demonstrate that legislation cannot determine usage. The French language academy, *L'Académie Française*, has been fighting a losing battle for centuries against English incursions such as "le weekend", "le football" and "swap". Proposals to establish a similar academy in England never came to anything, despite the support of such respected writers as John Dryden and Jonathan Swift.

Language changes and, as Laurie Bauer illustrated in an earlier column, English speakers are always willing to borrow from other languages if "le mot juste" for their purposes is not readily available in English. Telling people that some words and phrases are "legal" and others "illegal" simply does not work.

People don't consult the legal statutes, or even the dictionary, when they are engaged in conversation; and, even when they are writing, many cannot be bothered checking whether they are using words in ways that lexicographers have noted. It is people in the wider community — not lawyers and lexicographers — who determine what is linguistically acceptable.

■ Janet Holmes teaches sociolinguistics at Victoria University. Send your questions about language to words@dompost.co.nz