

Science-Speak Goes Oulipo

Jargon, the cognoscenti's verbal equivalent of a secret handshake, is the bane of the science writer (SW). Confronted with the opacity of this linguistic shortcut, the mournful SW has two choices: ignore it or learn it; the former untenable, the latter distasteful, given the risk of becoming part of the problem. Hopefully, every nascent SW opts for the only honorable choice, on the grounds of knowing thine enemy. But the impossibility of really knowing jargon soon reveals itself.

Steve Bunk



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That realization awakens the problem-solver in the SW, who mutters, "If I can't master the jargon, I'll change it." Tentatively at first, a few acronyms are eliminated and arcane words replaced with plain ones, in the eager expectation that this will contribute to clarity. Soon in full slippery slope mode, the SW tosses out more and more unfamiliar diction, until only a few seemingly indispensable, largely mysterious, technical phrases remain. And somewhere within this great sluice of discarded bathwater rides the baby.

Frustrated now, and goaded by the same humiliation of every locked-out John and Jane Doe who doesn't want to take it anymore, the SW opts for revolution. What's needed is replacement of the old order with a new linguistic superstructure, a complex system of mathematical precision and impenetrability, in short, an edifice of Oulipo. Frenchmen Raymond Queneau and Francois Le Lionnais cofounded OuLiPo (Oulipo) in 1960. It stands for *Ouvroir de Litterature Potentielle* (Workshop for Potential Literature), and its goal is to impose constraints on language that force it into a new structure, thus enhancing creativity while exposing pretensions. Inspired by words from

Queneau, a novelist and poet who also made contributions to the mathematical field of combinatorics, the SW vows to become "the rat who builds the labyrinth from which he plans to escape."

A widely used Oulipian constraint involves replacing every noun in a work of prose with the seventh noun after it in the dictionary. To target scientific jargon for such treatment, a few special constraints are called for. But first, a sample sentence from a scientific paper is needed, randomly selected, of course. Here's one, found on the printed side of the used computer paper upon which this column is being scribbled:

"We currently lack information on the polygenic basis of covarying traits because few organisms have the experimental versatility to allow an accurate mapping of quantitative trait loci (QTL), the cloning of potential candidate genes, and a sufficient quantity of DNA sequence data to allow tests of association between molecular variants and phenotypes."

The first step is to identify all the jargon, which isn't so easy. For instance, to understand the foregoing sentence requires knowing what is meant by two apparently common words: *versatility* and *association*. Jargon often performs such a function, cloaking everyday words in an imposing ruffle of caveat and nuance that ultimately transforms them.

But on to the constraints: Any word classified as unmistakable jargon will be replaced, regardless of part of speech; its replacement must be the same part of speech, with the same number of syllables and accenting; the first (not the seventh) word found after it in a standard English dictionary that fits these requirements will be chosen. Those parameters established, the experiment yields this result:

"We currently lack information on the polyhedral basis of cradle-snatching traits because few organisms have the experimental versatility to allow an accurate marring of questionable tram lockers (QTL), the clonking of potential candidate gents, and a sufficient quantity of DNA sequin data to allow tests of association between molybdenous varices and pheromones."

Promising. Best to run the experiment again, with a new sentence from the recycling pile:

"Populations of epithelial cells and lymphocytes were enriched to greater than 97% purity, as verified by reactivity with monoclonal antibody (mAb) G8.8, a marker of murine epithelial cells, and a mAb to the CD45 leukocyte-common antigen (LCA), a marker of nucleated hematopoietic cells."

It becomes:

"Populations of equatorial Celts and lyricists were enriched to greater than 97% purity, as verified by reciprocity with monohydric antimatter (mAm) G.8.8, a market of murky equatorial Celts, and a

mAm to the CD45 lucoplast-comose antilog (LCA), a market of nugatory hetero-chromatic Celts."

Reinvigorated, the SW follows classic form in turning to an authority for a closing bon mot. Italo Calvino, the late, great Italian novelist and Oulipian, once wrote: "It is pointless searching in the depths of the opaque for an escape from the opaque."

Who could take issue with that beautiful statement? Even jargon-free, who knows what it means?

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