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A CLOSER LOOK AT MANIPULATIVE RHETORIC IN PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The study singles out the key features of buzzwords to investigate their manipulative potential in professional communication. To that end, the study explores the linguistic environment of the term "buzzword" found in research and newspaper titles, as well as constructions and patterns incorporating the term. Research material was obtained using the Google Scholar search engine following the methodological procedure where both singular and plural forms of the term "buzzword" were included in the incognito mode search query with no search filters implemented. The retrieved data was analysed to identify nine semantic groups that further laid the foundation for the inferences to be made regarding the characteristics assigned to buzzwords as well as the prevailing attitudes towards them. The study makes conclusions about the manipulative potential of buzzwords in professional communication and substantiates the reasons as to why and how the representatives of the professional communities should master them as instrumental communicative tools.

Keywords: Buzzword, manipulative rhetoric, professional communication, title, term

1. Introduction

The extensive research on professional communication as an interaction of the representatives within a specialist field has pointed out its key focus on achieving a communicative goal, whereas securing an intended result often tracks closely with the practical implementation of manipulative rhetoric (Böttger & Költzsch, 2021; Glazko, 2021; Malyuga et al., 2016; Malyuga & McCarthy, 2020; Peluso, 2021). Manipulation through speech has long been the subject of study in various disciplines, from rhetoric and argumentation theory to cognitive linguistics (Vinnichenko & Radyuk, 2018).

This article considers a specific instrument of manipulative rhetoric registered in professional communication – the so-called "buzzwords" defined as important-sounding words or phrases that most often bear no semantic load that can be challenging to decipher, come into widespread acceptance through repeated use, and are employed predominantly to impress the recipients whose expertise lies beyond the realm of the corresponding specialist field (Hunger & Paxton, 2021).

Whenever buzzwords are observed as an object of scientific scrutiny, be it in the framework of language-related aspects attributed to them or the general theoretical observations associated with their inception or circulation, the key conclusions derived from the results of the research are governed by the laws of rhetoric: eloquence, which ultimate goal lies in persuasion, is founded on the harmony of content and form. If elaborate manipulation is put in place without compromising the laws of language, impressive "glamorous" words become resourceful tools that help convey both sincere and veiled intentions of the speaker, which can prove a powerful tool in the context of professional interaction.

2. Problem Statement

The existing research on buzzwords, rather scarce considering their extensive and varied use, has focused almost exclusively on specifying the key characteristics of individual language units meeting the corresponding definition, offering largely the functional-pragmatic analysis thereof.

For example, Cunningham and Greene (2013) consider "leverage", "paradigm shift" and "synergy" as buzzwords suggesting that their critical strength and pragmatic efficacy lies in their ability to put a spotlight on the subject under discussion and capture the attention of the recipients.

Cluley (2013) investigates archaic buzzwords to explore the timeline through which certain language units "buzz" and suggests that impermanence should be acknowledged as one of the main features of buzzwords, meaning that they all endure within a limited lifespan. The study sustains this hypothesis by looking into buzzwords such as "management by objective" and "vertical integration", both widely used in the 1980s and 1990s, respectively, after which time they discernibly fell into disuse.

Baker and Sangiamchit (2019) address the origins of individual buzzwords as stemming from a specific professional field and devised by the representatives of the corresponding professional community. Predictably, as the new term enjoys longstanding implementation within the professional community, it gains ground and ultimately spreads to be further used by people outside of the specialist field. While it still commonly retains its "buzzworthy" characteristics, its meaning may gradually go through some changes to fit the needs of the new user community. For example, as noted by the authors, "iterate" used to refer to a repetition of sequential steps as part of a systemic process design or

mathematical formula. However, it could later be used to mean "to say or do something over and over again".

Rist (2007) examines the semantic vagueness of "development" used as a buzzword in political discourse mainly to designate and set apart the so-called "developing countries" in aid of deliberate exploitation in speech for political purposes. The fuzzy meaning of "strategy legitimization" is also discussed in Mjøs et al. (2014), who point out the intentional use of the buzzword as part of a communicative strategy designed as a bluff tactic.

Individual buzzwords have also been investigated as tools of pushing the current agenda. For example, Prasad et al. (2011) offer a statistical research stating that "diversity" was mainly exploited in the corporate discourse to control operationalization of business and built on a reputation while having little to do with what the idea behind the term actually suggested.

Without downplaying the importance and viability of the above reviewed research, looking into a single buzzword or a set of individual buzzwords can only yield restricted findings applicable only to a specific context and to a specific buzzword(s) under consideration. This means that an approach where a certain linguistic item falling under the definition of a buzzword is considered as a standalone token for the purposes of unveiling its functional capacity (let alone when restricted to a specific type of discourse) can hardly offer a nuanced picture of buzzwords' overwhelming potential and manipulative force. Thus, the research problem lies in finding a way of providing a more comprehensive and full-scale description of buzzwords as communicative tools. In order to narrow down the scope of the research, the study focuses on eliminating the key features of buzzwords as applied to interaction in professional contexts.

3. Research Questions

The study poses the following research questions.

1. Can the data retrieved via the analysis of the linguistic environment of the term "buzzword" be suggestive of the characteristics assigned to buzzwords?

2. Can the proposed methodology be instrumental in deducing the generally prevailing attitudes towards buzzwords as communication tools?

3. What is the manipulative potential of buzzwords as strategic linguistic instruments used in professional communication and how can this potential be realised?

4. Purpose of the Study

In contrast to the studies that consider cases of employing individual language units falling under the definition of buzzwords, this article aims to investigate the cases where the term "buzzword" itself is being used. The hypothesis of the study is that the linguistic context of the term "buzzword" itself, revealing the features of its use along with various language units, patterns and constructions, will highlight the characteristics assigned to buzzwords allowing for conclusions to be made regarding the prevailing attitude towards them. This, in turn, would help us to describe the manipulative potential of using buzzwords in professional interaction and substantiate the need for prospective and current representatives of the professional communities to master them as instrumental communicative tools.

5. Research Methods

The study employs the material of a self-devised corpus of data retrieved from titles found in Google Scholar to look into the immediate linguistic environment of the term "buzzword" and the constructions and patterns it is being used in. The deliberate choice to opt for research and newspaper titles is due to several reasons. First, titles are more likely to contain the term "buzzword" itself rather than or in addition to mentioning the specific language unit or units under consideration. Second, since titles are designed to contain the most essential information (the gist) related to the content and encapsulate the most important keywords that are integral to disclosing the content of the text (Soler, 2007), their language tends to contain indicative descriptive linguistic environment, which is integral to this study. Third, seeing that titles are often formulated so as to attract the readers' attention (Chen et al., 2015; Ellis, 2001; Saxena, 2006), they tend to build on impactful constructions and patterns that can be analysed to detect the underlying attitudes attributed to buzzwords by the authors compiling the titles. Lastly, looking for titles only will help broaden the scope of the research in terms of the specialist fields being discussed, so that a bigger picture of the features of buzzwords could be put into place.

In using Google Scholar as the source of the material gathered, the study nuanced the methodology by (1) searching for both singular and plural forms of the term in question, (2) intentionally omitting any kind of filters so as to put no restrictions on the data collected, and (3) using the incognito mode to make sure that the retrieved data could not be compromised by previously conducted searches.

The analysis of the term "buzzword" based on the sample of 696 examples allowed us to identify 9 semantic groups. We consider these groups according to the degree of representativeness, from the least numerous to the most widely represented.

6. Findings

6.1. Positive Evaluation

The least representative was the "Positive Evaluation" group, which included only 17 examples and made up 2.4% of the sample. This group includes linguistic units functioning as attributes (for example, "important buzzword", "well-known buzzwords", "effective buzzword", "good buzzword", "a buzzword worth remembering") and endowing the term "buzzword" with a distinctly positive connotation. In other words, a positive assessment of the term is the least common in the sample, which indicates that a positive opinion about its content is not widespread.

6.2. Appeal to Renounce a Buzzword

The "Appeal to Renounce a Buzzword" group included 29 units and made up 4% of the sample. The term "buzzword" was accompanied by a verb or verbal construction that explicitly called for refusal to use buzzwords. Thus, headlines of the imperative type urged the reader to "forget", "ban", "stop using" or "stay away" from buzzwords. At the same time, some cases of imperative use resembled slogans that could be part of a campaign, as in "Say No to Buzzwords". The examples that make up this semantic group indicate some degree of stigma that can be caused by the abuse of buzzwords.

6.3. Altered Perception or Meaning

The group reflecting the idea of "Altered Perception or Meaning" included 50 examples, which accounted for 7% of the sample. This group is represented by the "from – to" pattern, suggesting that the buzzword is undergoing a certain transformation, whether in terms of the meaning attributed to it, or its status in a particular area of use. For example, "From Buzzwords to Strategies", "From Buzzword to Reality", etc. Examples of this group indicate the dynamism of buzzwords' semantic content and emphasize the variability of attitudes towards them within individual professional communities.

6.4. Need for Clarification

The "Need for clarification" group included 54 examples, which amounted to 7.5% of the sample. Examples of this group conveyed the idea of the need to clarify the meaning of the buzzword, which can be seen in expressions like "sorting out a meaning for", "finding a way to define" or "rethinking buzzwords". This group also included examples with the lexemes "guide", "dictionary" and "glossary", which refer to the need to define and explain the buzzwords in question due to the vagueness of their meaning. For example, "A Quick Guide to Social Change Buzzwords", "A Dictionary of Business Buzzwords", "A Buzzword Glossary".

6.5. Downgrading and Criticism

The next group, containing 87 examples and constituting 12.1% of the sample, was labelled "Downgrading and Criticism" and consists of occurrences that implied varying degrees of negative connotation attached to the term. The group is represented by such units as "just another", "yet another", "simply another" and "merely", conveying the semantics of the inferior status of the buzzword. The same group also includes linguistic units that convey a critically coloured assessment of the abuse of fashionable words (for example, "overused buzzword", "overhyped buzzword", "swarm of buzzwords", "beset by buzzwords"), the blurring of their meaning (for example, "fuzzy buzzword", "ambiguous buzzword", "meaningless buzzword", "confusing buzzword"), as well as their general critique (for example, "annoying buzzword", "ugly buzzword").

6.6. Implication of a Wider Semantics or Greater Significance

The next group labelled "Implication of a Wider Semantics or Greater Significance", includes 123 examples, which amounted to 17.1% of the sample. The group is represented solely by three recurring patterns that accompany the term "buzzword": "more than", "behind", and "beyond" (for example, "Knowledge Management: More than a Buzzword", "Wellbeing: The Simple Truth Behind This Latest Buzzword", "Beyond the Buzzword: The Three meanings of Grand Strategy"). Such formulations suggest that there is more to a buzzword than its superficial attributes, and that its deep meaning or its real significance can only be understood via a more detailed study.

6.7. Opposition to a Better Concept

The "Opposition to a Better Concept" group included 156 examples, which accounted for 21.7% of the sample. In terms of frequency of occurrence, examples of this group take the third place among the entire set of detected semantic groups. The examples included in this group are represented by bipolar oppositions in which "buzzword" is contrasted with another member of the opposition that carries a more positive connotation. For example, in "User Experience: Buzzword or New Paradigm", the token "buzzword" clearly loses out to the token "New Paradigm", as it is automatically discarded as something "not new" and "failing to meet the parameters of the paradigm". The same applies to "Ontology Simplification: New Buzzword or Real Need" since the title unflatteringly suggests that "buzzword" should be contrasted with something "real" and truly "necessary".

6.8. Application Domain

"Application Domain" proved to be one of the most representative groups, including 177 examples, which accounted for 24.6% of the sample. The group comprised entries related to buzzwords used in individual institutions (for example, "management buzzword", "business buzzword", "marketing buzzword", "retail buzzword", "Internet buzzword") or communities (for example, "expert buzzword", "online buzzword", "office buzzword", "student buzzword"). This indicates the strict correlation of the fashionable word with the professional sphere of its use, which served as the source of its appearance.

6.9. Life Cycle

The most widely represented group was "Life Cycle", referring to the "expiration date" of a fashionable word from the moment of its inception to degradation. This group also includes examples that characterize buzzwords as temporary phenomena strongly governed by current trends. The group is represented by 198 examples, which is 27.5% of the sample.

6.10. Discussion

So, with the approach used, the key characteristics of buzzwords are largely determined by the scope of their use, as well as their life cycle. At the same time, the attitude towards such linguistic units can be best described by examining the place of the term "buzzword" in oppositions: as the study has shown, such oppositions most often reflect the idea of "inferiority" of buzzwords in contrast to more favourable concepts.

Considering the results of the study, we can describe the manipulative potential of using buzzwords in professional communication, as well as justify the need to introduce such words into the professional communication training program.

1. Firstly, the vagueness of the meaning of buzzwords makes them an effective tool for smoothing the semantic load of the whole statement. In this case, a kind of "free" semantic boundaries of fashionable words make them nominees for abstract concepts, depriving the statement of a clear meaning. With a conscious setting of the appropriate goal, the strategic use of buzzwords can yield the desired manipulative effect, in which abstractness becomes a tool for conveying ideas in an implicit form.

Examples are such units as "proactive" or "synergy", the use of which in many contexts is associated with an obvious ambiguity of meaning.

2. Secondly, buzzwords can become a tool of manipulation when their use is aimed at drawing attention to the subject of discussion. Units such as "incentivize" or "robust" serve as good examples here. Their manipulative potential is evident when compared with less semantically coloured synonyms, such as, for example, "stimulate" or "solid".

3. Thirdly, since buzzwords arise within a separate professional sphere, their use can be an indicator of the speaker's belonging to a particular professional community. Used for this purpose, fashionable words become elements of a common language, allowing one to manipulate the mind of the addressee, in whose perception the speaker's status changes from "alien" to "insider".

4. An important aspect when considering the manipulative potential of buzzwords is taking into account their life cycle, since language units become "fashionable" only for a while, after which time their popularity and, accordingly, the expediency of using them gradually decrease. Thus, for example, the buzzwords "management by objective" and "vertical integration" were especially popular in the 70s and 90s of the last century, respectively (Alderman, 2011). However, their use in the framework of modern professional communication carries a minimal manipulative potential due to the completeness of their life cycle as buzzwords.

5. Another important characteristic of buzzwords for the purposes of this study is their ability to level critical judgment. This effect stems not only from the vagueness of their meaning, but also from their ability to evoke positive emotions, favourable connotations and automatic approval – something scientific literature refers to "the feel-good factor" (Standing, 2007). A good example is "diversity". Statistical studies have confirmed that managers include the buzzword "diversity" in speech practice in order to justify some of decisions they make and to protect themselves from potential criticism (Prasad et al., 2011).

6. When considering the manipulative potential of fashionable words, it is crucial to note that despite the blurring of semantic boundaries such units, nevertheless, must have at least a minimum semantic content, since otherwise the addressee is more likely to end up confused rather than interested. Awareness of such semantic content or the ability to recognize it is the key to the effective use of buzzwords as components of manipulative rhetoric. So, for example, the word "engagement" might be difficult to define precisely, yet it still conveys a recognizable meaning – how much a person loves their job. A number of studies have documented productivity gains after the introduction of the concept of engagement at the organizational level, which also included the introduction of the term "engagement" into the professional everyday life of employees (Huppke, 2015): the ideological and linguistic designation of the concept of contribution to one's work helped motivate employees to meet new expectations.

7. Conclusion

The study investigated the peculiarities of buzzwords as applied to their application in professional interaction and in view of their manipulative potential. The approach proposed in the study allowed us to highlight the key features of buzzwords as components of manipulative rhetoric in professional

communication. By looking into the linguistic environment of the term "buzzword" and the constructions and patterns it is being used in, the study identified nine semantic groups disclosing the main characteristics of buzzwords as well as the prevailing attitudes towards them. Among the nine semantic groups ("Positive Evaluation", "Appeal to Renounce a Buzzword", "Altered Perception or Meaning", "Need for Clarification", "Downgrading and Criticism", "Implication of a Wider Semantics or Greater Significance", "Opposition to a Better Concept", "Application Domain", "Life Cycle"), "Application Domain" and "Life Cycle" proved the most representative, which suggests that the key characteristics of buzzwords are largely determined by the scope and timeliness of their use.

The manipulative potential of buzzwords identified in the study, as well as the abundance of parameters and prerequisites for their use in professional communication, proves the expediency for the representatives of professional communities to gain greater awareness of the specifics of their application in speech. At the same time, the key skills that require cultivation should be the skills of using actual buzzwords in order to smooth out the semantic load of the statement, attract the attention of the addressee, designate oneself as a member of the professional community and protect oneself from potential criticism. However, an equally important skill is the ability to use trendy words in a balanced way, since the abuse of such units can become a factor that complicates professional communication

Acknowledgments

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