

# *Academic Jibberish*

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“Some scholars have slipped so far into the stylized talk – excuse me, discourse – of academia that important ideas are rendered virtually incomprehensible to most people. Because it sometimes seems that scholarship is valued by other academics in direct proportion to its inaccessibility, some individuals may have an instinctive aversion to writing in simple sentences even if they could remember how to do so.”

(Alfie Kohn, 2003; Professors who profess. <http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/professing.htm>)

It is better for one's (academic) career to stay away from politics and wallow in the arcane world of departmental intrigue and academic jibberish (Chris Hedges, *The Death of the Liberal Class*, p.126).

I think the situation is worse than what Alfie Kohn describes: A great deal of academic writing is incomprehensible even to others in the same area of scholarship. Academic Jibberish may score points for the writer but does not help research or practice. (I focus here on prose jibberish, but it occurs in statistical analyses as well, the use of statistical tests that go far beyond what is necessary and that often neglect what is necessary, e.g. means and standard deviations.)

## ***Jibberish as a career strategy: it impresses those with little self-confidence***

Some people think that if they don't understand a lecture or text, it must be very profound, trusting the appearance rather than their own reaction.

A famous demonstration of this is the “Dr. Fox” study. Ware, Naftulin and Donnelly (1973) hypothesized that “given a sufficiently impressive lecture paradigm, even experienced educators participating in a new learning experience can be seduced into feeling satisfied that they have learned despite irrelevant, conflicting, and meaningless content conveyed by the lecturer.”

They hired a professional actor (“Dr. Myron Fox”), “who looked distinguished and sounded authoritative ... to teach charismatically and non substantively on a topic about which he knew nothing” (Mathematical Game Theory as Applied to Physician Education). His lecture contained “an excessive use of double talk, neologisms, non sequiturs, and contradictory statements.”

In other words, he was trained to give a bogus lecture.

Three groups of health professionals involved in education heard the lecture, either live or on video-tape. The bogus lecture was very well-received: Questionnaires revealed that for all groups, there were significantly more favorable than unfavorable reactions. Subjective responses included: Excellent presentation. Enjoyed listening. Lively examples. His relaxed manner of presentation was a large factor in holding my interest. Extremely articulate.

The authors concluded that satisfaction with a lecturer does not necessarily reflect learning. My conjecture is that the audiences were not only impressed with the actor's style, but also felt that he must be good because they didn't understand what he was talking about.

Evidence supporting my interpretation comes from Nell (1988). Nell asked undergraduates, librarians and university lecturers in English literature to rate passages for their literary merit (e.g. from “trashiest trash” to “highest merit”) and reported positive correlations between merit ratings and readability (measured by the “Fog Index,” based on word and sentence length) for all groups. In other words, harder was associated with better.

### ***Jibberish as a career strategy: It deflects criticism***

My first inkling of the power of jibberish to deflect criticism occurred when I was a graduate student in 1971. At a meeting of the Acoustical Society of America, one of my professors, Peter Ladefoged, was scheduled to give a 12-minute paper on an issue in phonetics. Before giving his presentation, Prof. Ladefoged announced that he would not take the full 12 minutes, but would instead summarize his points in seven minutes, in agreement with a resolution that had been passed by the society the day before. To do this, he said, he would not be able read his paper (this was the usual style of presentation) but would simply present his findings in ordinary talk.

Even though I was not a specialist in the area, Ladefoged’s talk was very clear; it was jibberish-free. He simply told us what he had done, illustrated his findings with slides, and discussed what the results meant for several important hypotheses. Ladefoged’s presentation was followed by far more discussion and more criticism (!!!) than any of the many talks I heard. His presentation was one of the few that his colleagues understood. I realized then that scholars take a big risk in making clear and comprehensible presentations (and in writing clearly).

Hedges (2010) accuses academics engaged in “radical analysis” of deliberately writing dense, long papers and publishing them in obscure journals and books, with “no attempt to reach wider audience or enrich public life” (p. 125) in order to gain academic prestige and avoid risk: “As long as academics write in the tortured vocabulary of specialization for seminars and conferences, where they are unable to influence public debate, they are free to espouse any bizarre or ‘radical’ theory” (p.125).

### ***The negative consequences of jibberish***

An obvious negative consequence of papers filled with unnecessary prose and analyses is that they are a huge waste of time. But there are less obvious dangers.

There is the danger that readers will simply skip most of the dense prose and unnecessary statistical analyses and simply accept the conclusions, assuming that the conclusions must be right because of the intimidating presentation. Thus, bad ideas have a better chance of surviving when protected by a mass of jibberish.

There is also the danger, as Alfie Kohn noted (see above), that some good ideas and important results will be lost when expressed or buried in jibberish.

### ***An observation***

I close with this observation. Occasionally, a colleague will tell me that a presentation was brilliant and the speaker exceptional, when in the past, I have found the speaker to be nearly

completely incomprehensible. When this happens, I ask my colleague to tell me what the speaker said. Invariably, my colleague can't.

## REFERENCES

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