JARGONTALK

Grokking the Zen of Mumblage and
Parsing Hackish

Computer Terminology Invades English

BY LINDA RICHARDS

Computing, like any popular pursuit, has its own language — the jargon that set enthusiasts apart. What's special about the language of computing is that words and phrases coined in the infant computer industry over the last 20 to 40 years have been creeping steadily — and in some cases stealthily — into our centuries-old English.

Many of the following words and phrases are already in popular useage at some level of non-hackish English. And I'm betting that the balance will be in a short time.

I leaned heavily on "The Jargon File" as a research resource. The Jargon File is a public domain document available by FTP at mit.edu. Two years ago, the file was published in book form by MIT Press. Called the New Hacker's Dictionary and published under ISBN #0-262-68079-3, the book is essentially The Jargon File in book form. Editor of both the book and the file is Eric Raymond. "I consider myself the keeper of the trust of The Jargon File," says Raymond. "Really, there were about 400 authors." Excerpts from the file are produced here with Raymond's permission.

As you read, please keep in mind that —

as with much that originates with true hackers — the tongue must never fully leave the cheek. It is this spirit of playfulness that has lent such animation to the industry they have grown.

automagically — Automatically: but in a way that is either too trivial or complicated to be easily explained.

back door — A hole in the security of a system deliberately left in place by designers or maintainers.

Bad Thing — Something that can't possibly result in an improvement of the subject. Bad Thing is always capitalized.

bandwidth — The volume of information per unit time that a computer, person, or transmission medium can handle. Can also refer to attention span or, on usenet it is a somewhat hypothetical measure of network capactiy.

barf — Ffrom mainstream slang, meaning "vomit." In hackish circles it's a term of maximum disgust. In hackish, you might hear someone say, "I loaded the newest version and the system barfed," meaning it didn't run properly. Or, a more mainstream useage in the same vein would be, "The

microwave barfed when I input the timing sequence."

beam — A transfer of a file by some electronic medium. Classically, you might, "beam that over to his site," via E-mail. Increasingly, you can hear "Beam me a copy of that on the fax."

beta — Officially, the second stage of software testing. But increasingly, anything new and experimental. "The soup was great, but I think the salad was still in beta." Since beta software is really pre-release software, it is notoriously buggy and unpredictable. Thus, the beta-stage is — in whatever context — likely to surprise, and not always pleasantly.

bletcherous — Disgusting in design or function; esthetically unappealing. This word is seldom used of people. "This keyboard is bletcherous!"

boat anchor — Implies that the offending hardware is irreversibly dead or useless. In post-hackish useage, this can be a car, camera or computer: anything that is essentially obsolete. Also, a person who just takes up space.

bogon — The elementary particle of bogosity. For instance, "the system is emit-

ting bogons again" means that it is broken or acting in an erratic or bogus fashion. Also used to refer to any bogus thing, as in "I'd like to go to lunch with you but I've got to go to the weekly staff bogon". A person who is bogus or who says bogus things.

From the Jargon File: The bogon has become the type case for a whole bestiary of nonce particle names, including the `clutron` or `cluon` (indivisible particle of cluefulness, obviously the antiparticle of the bogon) and the futon (elementary particle of {randomness}, or sometimes of lameness). These are not so much live usages in themselves as examples of a live meta-usage: that is, it has become a standard joke or linguistic maneuver to "explain" otherwise mysterious circumstances by inventing nonce particle names. And these imply nonce particle theories, with all their dignity or lack thereof (we might note parenthetically that this is a generalization from "(bogus particle) theories" to "bogus (particle theories)"!). Perhaps such particles are the modern-day equivalents of trolls and wood-nymphs as standard starting-points around which to construct ➤

explanatory myths. Of course, playing on an existing word (as in the `futon') yields additional flavor.

bogon filter — Any device, software or hardware, that limits or suppresses the flow and/or emission of bogons.

bogon flux — A measure of a supposed field of bogosity emitted by a speaker, measured by a bogometer; as a speaker starts to wander into increasing bogosity a listener might say "Warning, warning, bogon flux is rising".

bogosity — The degree to which something is bogus.

bomb — In hackish, a general synonym for crash.

bug — *From the Jargon File:* An unwanted and unintended property of a program or piece of hardware, esp. one that causes it to malfunction. Increasingly, a bug can also be found in a person or thing not related to computers. "I love that car, but the transmission is a bit buggy." In any of these cases, the word doesn't relate to insects.

cracker — Someone who breaks security on a computer system. The phrase was coined around 1985 to add nuance to the often misused hacker. Though most crackers like to describe themselves as hackers, most true hackers consider the cracker to

bogosity — The degree to which something is bogus

be a lower life form.

cyberpunk — William Gibson's 1982 novel Neuromancer launched the Science Fiction subgenre known as cyberpunk. Vancouver resident Gibson is known to be something of a technophobe and the prose resulting from his lack of knowledge of modern computers and computing is considered both naive and stimulating. Gibson's work has inspired imitation in film and literary forms as well as a fashion movement that calls itself "cyberpunk," and is associated with the rave and techno subcultures.

cyberspace — Gibsonian cyberspace is tied closely to virtual reality. Oddly, Gibson's naive plan has been the model for several virtual reality experiments. Increasingly, cyberspace is the place you are when you're online, as opposed to the place you are

where you are actually taking up space. If the Infobahn is a cyberhighway, then it's definitely located in cyberspace.

defenestration — *From the Jargon file:* 1. Proper karmic retribution for an incorrigible punster. "Oh, ghod, that was *awful!*" "Quick! Defenestrate him!" 2. The act of exiting a window system in order to get better response time from a full-screen program. This comes from the dictionary meaning of `defenestrate', which is to throw something out a window. 3. The act of discarding something under the assumption that it will improve matters. "I don't have any disk space left." "Well, why don't you defenestrate that 100 megs worth of old core dumps?" 4. [proposed] The requirement to

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support a command-line interface. "It has to run on a VT100." "Curses! I've been defenestrated!"

dongle — A piece of hardware that must be connected to an I/O port that serves no purpose besides one of copy protection. The ftware to be protected checks for the don before running properly. By extension, not in hacker parlance, a dongle can be piece of essentially useless hardware d with no obvious intent besides irritat- the final user.

down — Not operating or functional. he system will be down," in hackish. Now in mainstream, "I'm so tired. If I don't go down for half an hour, I'm gonna crash."

droid — A low-level bureaucrat or service-business employee with little or no interest in doing anything above or beyond the call of duty. "It's not my job, man" attitude.

From the Jargon File: Typical droid positions include supermarket checkout assistant and bank clerk; the syndrome is also endemic in low-level government employees. The implication is that the rules and official procedures constitute software that the droid is executing; problems arise when the software has not been properly debugged.

emoticon — An ASCII glyph used to indicate an emotional state in E-mail or news. There are lists of 100s of emoticons available. Here are some of the more common ones:

:) or :-) `smiley face' (for humor, laughter, friendliness, occasionally sarcasm).

:(or :-(`frowney face' (for sadness, anger, or upset).

;-) `half-smiley' ([ha ha only serious]); also known as `semi-smiley' or `winkey face'.

:-/ `wry face'.

At present, emoticons are popular on local boards, but use them with caution on usenet. Some discussion boards frown on them and others (alt.folklore.urban is one) actively discourage their use. To use one is to invite flamage.

The best idea is to treat emoticons like spices and use them with caution and at your own risk.

FAQ — On usenet, a Frequently Asked Question. These FAQs are usually compiled into some sort of file and made available through FTP at various storage sites.

feature shock — Originally a user or programmer's confusion when confronted with a package that has too many features and poor introductory material. Increasingly, what happens when we unpack a new VCR or toaster oven.

flame — Classically, posting an E-mail message intended to insult and provoke. Increasingly, a thought expressed in conversation in a manner meant to irritate is also called a flame.

flame war — An acrimonious dispute, especially when conducted on a public electronic forum such as usenet.

footprint — The floor or desk area taken up by a piece of hardware. Increasingly, used to describe this same type of space taken up by non-electronic devices. "I liked the Honda CRX. It cornered well and had a small footprint."

frobnicate — To manipulate or adjust. Thus, you can frob a program, a mason jar or a light switch.

From the Jargon File: Usage: frob, twiddle,

and tweak sometimes connote points along a continuum. 'Frob' connotes aimless manipulation; 'twiddle' connotes gross manipulation, often a coarse search for a proper setting; 'tweak' connotes fine-tuning. If someone is turning a knob on an oscilloscope, then if he's carefully adjusting it, he is probably tweaking it; if he is just turning it but looking at the screen, he is probably twiddling it; but if he's just doing it because turning a knob is fun, he's frobbing it. The variant 'frobnosticate' has been recently reported.

GIGO — Garbage In, Garbage Out and more recently, Garbage in, Gospel Out. The contexts are numerous.

gillion — Same as an American billion or a British milliard. The relative soft or hardness of the "g" is a matter of personal preference.

gonk — To embellish the truth beyond a big fish story. "Don't gonk me, I know a billable hour when I see one."

gonzo — Overwhelming; outrageous; over the top.

Good Thing — Capitalized, even in speech. A thing that is wonderful. Oppose Bad Thing. Tax reductions and mocha lattes are Good Things.

grep — To look for something electronically and by pattern. Increasingly, "I grepped through the bookstore for a copy of the OED, but they were back ordered."

grok — To understand in a global sense. Indicates intimate and exhaustive knowledge. (From Robert Heinlein's book *A Stranger in a Strange Land* — Ed.)

guru — An expert. Implies not only wizard skill but also a history of being a knowledge resource for others. Also sometimes used with a qualifier, "She's a Unix guru."

hacker — A person who enjoys exploring the details of programmable systems and how to stretch their capabilities, as opposed to most users, who prefer to learn only the necessary minimum. Increasingly, an expert or enthusiast of any kind. "He's a mountain biking hacker."

From the Jargon File: It is better to be described as a hacker by others than to describe oneself that way. Hackers consider themselves something of an elite (a meritocracy based on ability), though one to which new members are gladly welcome. There is thus a certain ego satisfaction to be had in identifying yourself as a hacker (but if you claim to be one and are not, you'll quickly be labeled bogus.

hackish — Said of something that is or involves a hack, hackers or the hacker subculture.

hyperspace — From the science fiction idea of a ship taking a shortcut through a different dimension in space, often with dire results. "That piece of code must have gone into hyperspace." Or, "He looked all right yesterday, but he must have gone into hyperspace before the party."

manularity — The manual labour required for a specific task. "There's a lot less manularity involved in writing a lot of letters with a computer than there was by hand."

marketroid — A sales demon. The term is derogatory. Other forms are marketing slime, marketeer and marketing droid.

mumblage — Mumblage can be used in place of a perjorative as in, "That mumble, mumble system is driving me crazy!" Also, when the topic of discussion is not quite clear.

neophilia — The trait of being excited ➤

and pleased by novelty. A hacker would be exhibiting neophiliactic traits if he started exuding happy signs over a new OS at Comdex.

newbie — A neophyte. Classically, a new poster to usenet or one of the local online services.

ooblick — *From the Jargon File:* A bizarre semi-liquid sludge made from cornstarch and water. Enjoyed among hackers who make batches during playtime at parties for its amusing and extremely non-Newtonian behavior; it pours and splatters, but resists rapid motion like a solid and will even crack when hit by a hammer. Often found near lasers. Here is a field-tested ooblick recipe:

1 cup cornstarch
1 cup baking soda
3/4 cup water
food coloring

This recipe isn't quite as non-Newtonian as a pure cornstarch ooblick, but has an

appropriately slimy feel.

Some, however, insist that the notion of an ooblick *recipe* is far too mechanical, and that it is best to add the water in small increments so that the various mixed states the cornstarch goes through as it *becomes* ooblick can be grokked in fullness by many hands.

parse — To understand or comprehend. If someone said, "Pass the glitch on the glokhand," you would likely reply, "I can't parse that."

pnambic — An acronym from a scene in the film version of "The Wizard of Oz." The line when the wizard is first discovered goes: "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain." Pnambic refers to a process or function whose operations are at least partly falsified. There are some who, when a certain next-generation operating system was first introduced, yelled pnambic quite loudly.

propeller head — Non-hackers sometimes use it to describe all techies. In hackish, the phrase is synonomous with computer geek.

quick-and-dirty — Something put together under pressure. Quick-and-dirty can refer a computer program; a brochure design or automobile rushed through R&D.

RTFM — Always spelled rather than spoken: Are-Tee-Eff-Em. Acronym for "Read The F***ing Manual." A UK variation — quite a bit more polite — is RTBM, or "Read The Bloody Manual."

samizdat — A Russian word that means, literally, "self publishing." In hackish, samizdat takes on the added meaning of distributing information and documentation through underground channels.

scanno — Analogous to a typo or a thinko. The error a scanner will sometimes make when going about its business.

smiley — See emoticon.

snail-mail — Traditional mail sent by peons, as opposed to electronic mail. "I'll snail you a copy of that article," or "Give me your snail mail address and I'll send it."

sneakernet — A term generally used with ironic intent for transfer of electronic information by physically carrying a disk from one computer to another.

studly — Impressive and powerful. "AcmeSoft's new grok parser is most studly."

unleaded — Decaffeinated coffee, lite beer, diet cola could all be said to be unleaded.

virtual — A common alternative to logical; often used to refer to the artificial objects. Thus a network might become a virtual playground in certain hands. Regular moo-ers are sometimes said to have virtual sex and someone who is perpetually unemployed might be said to have a virtual vocation.

wave a dead chicken — To perform a ritual in the direction of an operation that hasn't worked in the hopes that something — however unlikely it may seem — will happen. "I'll wave a dead chicken over the Ford, but I don't think anything short of a new motor will really help."

wonky — An approximate synonym for broken. A malfunction that creates a result slightly to the left of center. "The font lists went wonky. I was asking for Times Roman and got cyrillic glyphs!"

workaround — A temporary solution to the problem at hand.

YABA — How about another bloody acronym for Yet Another Bloody Acronym?

zap — Essentially, spiciness that can be applied equally to food and code. "Zap the chili. My nose didn't run." Or, to fry a chip or processor with electricity. "It's zapped. We'll have to replace it."

zen — Enlightenment by means of direct, intuitive insights. "How did you figure that out?" "I zenned it." Differs from grok in that there is no actual work involved: more intuition. ∎

...nda Richards is a freelance writer who nearly defenestrated this whole project while working on it. "A little frobnication and it was gonzo. And really zenned together in the end," she says, adding that she hopes it parses easily. Reach ...er at this publication or electronically at