

**“Can you put it in plain terms?”: A Look into Corporate Speak in Western Corporate  
Spaces**

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## **Statement of Research Area**

Corporate speak includes jargon, euphemisms, idioms, and other hybrid language that obscures meaning (Fiset et al., 2023; Vecchi, 2014; Zamfir, 2025). Corporate jargon, another term specific to this field, often encompasses all of these forms of language. The topic for this paper struck me at my summer internship before my senior year. I found myself trying to communicate with a member of the corporate staff and discovered a barrier: a gap in our communication knowledge. I noticed he used corporate jargon and metaphors to speak with me, and as an intern, I did not understand what he was saying. Vecchi (2014) explains that “new staff members are puzzled by” euphemisms, jargon, and other unfamiliar expressions, and that “new employees cannot become part of the community” without learning this terminology (p. 72). Likewise, unfamiliar jargon can cause emotions such as anger and anxiety in the receiver (Fiset et al., 2023). That was the case for myself as I felt frustrated, confused, and excluded.

My research discusses the impact of corporate jargon on interpersonal relationships within western corporate spaces. Corporate jargon is tied to social groups in organizations and can signify in-groups and out-groups (Pop & Sim, 2014; Fiset et al., 2023). This study investigated real world experience of corporate jargon through interviews with corporate professionals. My goal was to determine how proficiency with this language contributes to belonging and identity in social groups within the organization, as well as learn how this phenomenon can impact interpersonal relationships.

## Significance

My study seeks to understand the impact of corporate speak on interpersonal relationships, belonging, and identity within Western corporate spaces. Business jargon often overcomplicates things, creates unnecessary confusion, and is “annoying,” (Kapralikova, 2025, p. 124). My research hopes to find the relationship between corporate speak, belonging, and identity. Additionally, I hope to determine what impact corporate speak has on interpersonal relationships and what its function is within the organization. What does it mean for employees?

There is literature demonstrating that corporate speak has an impact on interpersonal relationships, highlighting its role as an elitist and exclusionary communication style (Pop & Sim, 2014). Yet, an academic gap appears when looking specifically into personal experiences. Existing scholarship, including studies conducted by Rittenburg et al. (2016) and Pop and Sim (2014), employed surveys to analyze this phenomenon. Taking inspiration from Denker and Dougherty’s (2013) study utilizing interviews, I took a similar approach with my population. My study serves as an opportunity to learn about more specific experiences through rich description within semi-structured interviews with Western corporate professionals. The purpose of this study is to close this gap in the scholarship of organizational communication.

The rationale behind my research is to find better ways to communicate within the corporate world. Seeing as the literature points towards corporate speak being an exclusionary and confusing business tool (Vecchi, 2014), my research will hopefully fill the gap in determining corporate speak's more specific impact on interpersonal relationships within organizations. In this case, it is vital that we study this phenomenon due to its effect on belonging and social groups within the company. Likewise, we see organizational communication and cultural norms come together through the use of corporate speak. I argue

that corporate colonization, the broader term encompassing the integration of corporate values, norms, and ideologies into everyday life, acts as an umbrella term that includes corporate speak (McClellan, 2017). Corporate colonization demonstrates the urgency of my research as well. Corporate culture is infecting all areas of life (Denker & Dougherty, 2013), not just language. Seeing as corporate values are being enacted outside of the corporate world, it is not surprising that corporate speak has become a more popular topic in existing research. Within my literature review, I reference seven studies discussing corporate language that were published within the last five years, three being published in 2025. This concept is gaining the attention of scholars due to its prevalence in the workplace. It is crucial we follow in their footsteps and shine light on corporate speak to learn not just its impact on corporate employees but also to determine how corporate professionals can communicate better within the workplace.

## **Literature Review**

### **Corporate Colonization & Identity**

An important framework that is vital to discuss when examining corporate speak is corporate colonization. Within the International Encyclopedia of Organizational Communication, McClellan (2017) defines corporate colonization as “the unobtrusive ways corporate meanings, instrumental logics, and managerial values come to dominate the ways we understand, think, and act in everyday life” (p. 1). Corporations emerged as a site where meanings of the self and the world are produced (McClellan, 2017). The current study aligns with McClellan’s (2017) framework and seeks to understand how corporate colonization affects interpersonal relationships, belonging, and identity through language. Organizations in the modern era have a “quiet influence” upon people, and the integration of the “corporate mindset” indicates that

corporate colonization has pushed into the lifeworld and society at large (Denker & Dougherty, 2013, p. 243). In a 2020 Vulture article written by Molly Young, she identifies the different corporate speak she encountered while working within various startups. She describes corporate speak as having a “contaminating quality,” aligning with Denker and Dougherty’s (2013) conclusion that corporate colonization is infecting employees lives outside of work (Young, 2020). Corporations colonize the ways of living, and corporate colonization examines the connections between the ways corporate meanings shape the world and the self-identity of those living in it (McClellan, 2017). The discourse utilized to perpetuate corporate colonization exists as a constructed phenomenon using language and reasoning (Svenningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Corporate colonization demonstrates how corporate ideologies and ideals have come to not only dominate the ways people move throughout the world, but also how they construct and engage with their identity.

## **Identity**

There are established norms in Western culture indicating the ‘right’ way to do something, which has implications for the construction of identity (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002). Norms, in this case, refer to the principles established by the organization to govern proper and improper behavior and subsequent punishment, either covertly or overtly (Zamfir, 2021). The present study’s focus on corporate speak highlights the covert and overt role these norms play. Researchers argue that corporate norms, values, and behaviors influence people's everyday life, including their identity (Denker & Dougherty, 2013; Tracy & Tretheway, 2005). Norms affect identity, demonstrating how corporate values have impacted identity construction. Identity work, a term closely related to identity construction, shows how people define who they are, and how they maintain this construction within social interactions (Brown, 2021). Brown (2021) indicates

that the construction of one’s ‘self’ does not just come from their culture or history, but from their organizational and professional work as well. Building off of this, Alvesson and Wilmott (2002) describe how employees are encouraged to “develop self-images and orientations that are deemed congruent with managerially defined objectives” (p. 619). They go further, explaining that organizational control is enacted through identity regulation and identity work (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002). Much of the interdisciplinary literature, such as Alvesson and Wilmott’s (2002) work, do not explicitly focus on communication in conjunction with identity. The present study emphasizes how identity and corporate speak are interconnected. Tracy and Tretheway (2005) explain that Western American society integrates organizational control over the modern worker, encouraging employees to build identity in conjunction with the goals and aims of the organization. There is pressure for employees to develop identities in line with that of the organization.

Concepts like managerialism have come to dominate how people construct identity (McClellan, 2017). Managerialism is a concept defined by control of employees through “rationalized thoughts,” “emotional displays through emotional labor, and control of interpersonal interactions through limiting conflict” (Denker & Dougherty, pp. 243-244). Managerialism’s influence on identity construction highlights how poorly organizational norms function, and reaffirms how interpersonal communication could be impacted. Workers view organizational values as their own, and act in accordance with them, going as far as to view choices that align with corporate values as the correct, natural choice (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). This concept is vital because interpersonal communication can be impacted by how these values function in organizations. Notably, there is a real self—fake self dichotomy appearing in society, where individuals are separating their identity into their fake self, that which replicates

organizational values, and their real self, formed outside of the organization (Brown, 2021; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). The real self—fake self dichotomy is maintained by managerialism which “functions as an ideology whose central motif is control,” (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005, p. 176). The managerialist perspective perpetuates “the norm of rationality” which becomes standard within the organization, removing emotionality from organizational discourse (Denker & Dougherty, 2013, p. 244). By centering rationality, managerialist norms control workers by influencing the ways they “think and talk about the organization,” (Denker & Dougherty, 2013, p. 245). Rationalizing thoughts perpetuates the managerialist perspective and highlights corporate norms within workers. The “norm of rationality” contributes to identity control in the present study, allowing us to look closer at this control in interpersonal contexts (Denker & Dougherty, 2013, p. 244). When examining identity control, we can use social identity theory as a guiding principle in our analysis.

### **Social Identity Theory**

Social identity theory influences the way scholars look at identity in organizations. Scott (2007) explains that “SIT claims the social categories in which one belongs are an important part of one’s self concept” or positive social identity (pp.124-125). Tajfel and Turner (1986), the authors of the theory, describe positive social identity as the ways individuals utilize favorable comparisons from the in-group to the outgroup to positively differentiate themselves. Likewise, SIT exists as a way to explain how people categorize themselves and others into groups, forming in-groups and out-groups based on salient beliefs and behaviors (Brown, 2021). SIT’s role in organizational communication research lends us the ability to determine the connections between work and identity, giving us the language to explain employees’ need for belonging in the workplace (Scott, 2007). McClure and Brown (2008) discuss how “belonging is a key group

maintenance function” and that it behaves as a process to develop social relationships and understanding group dynamics (p. 6). Through their study of belonging at work, they discovered that acceptance and understanding of the work culture allows employees to begin forming trusting relationships, increasing values-based connections and open communication (McClure & Brown, 2008). The current study uses SIT to deepen understanding around how work culture and identity are impacted by corporate speak. This study will also explore the experiences of Western corporate employees who engage in corporate speak daily. Looking at SIT in organizations remains important because social identification patterns predict behavior. Haslam (2004) states: “people think in terms of their group membership when the context ... is defined along groupbased lines” (p. 23). Current research illustrates that organizations through the lens of SIT and belonging creates a better understanding of how social groups form. The present study seeks to deepen this understanding and unravel the relationship between corporate speak and SIT.

## **Language**

In many cultures people speak the same language, but it does not mean that everything is understood (Vecchi, 2014). Research indicates that problems in business communication typically derive from unsuccessful communication attempts (Pop & Sim, 2014). Fiset et al. (2024) describe two types of language: standard and hybrid. Standard language refers to language that has significant ties to relevant institutions, with an emphasis on grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. People can alter or modify standard language, creating hybrid language. An increase in hybrid language, described as informal language like jargon or slang, could create misunderstandings (Fiset et al., 2024). The current study seeks to understand how these misunderstandings are impacting employees’ feelings of belonging within the organization. These misunderstandings can spark relationship conflict, which emerges from interpersonal



disagreements, indicating that transparent communication is key to maintaining healthy work environments (Yue & Thelen, 2023). Within Pop and Sim’s (2014) study, they found that to maximize effectiveness in their communication, one should limit the jargon used in business functions, whether in conversations or meetings. The current study examines why corporate speak and jargon are so prevalent in the workplace, even as the literature emphasizes this as an ineffective language style. Likewise, Rittenburg et al. (2016) supports the argument that transparent communication maximizes proficiency within internal business communications. The literature establishes that transparent communication is the most effective way of communicating in business contexts.

Within the scholarship, there is discussion on how the use of jargon and other hybrid language indicates social status, sparking conversation of in-groups and out-groups (Fiset et al., 2024). Pop and Sim (2014) concluded that “social groups create special language, jargon... to clearly delineate who is a member and who is not,” (p. 113). They go further, explaining that jargon is “elitist” (p. 111) and that members must “understand the lingo and learn to use it frequently” (Pop & Sim, 2014, p. 113). Kapralikova (2025) explains that jargon overcomplicates communication and reframes it in an unnecessary and confusing way. These scholars demonstrate how jargon impacts social groups and communication effectiveness. Following the same logic, Vecchi (2014) notes that when joining a company, new employees cannot always understand the language and jargon of older employees. New employees are sensitive to this language; they cannot assimilate to the culture and fully join the community with this disconnect in knowledge (Vecchi, 2014). Similarly, Fiset et al. (2024) explains that merged teams who use different jargon had a weaker performance caused by inefficiency in their communication. Not only are new employees ostracized by this language, but it impacts efficiency when working

with different groups who have different ‘languages.’ So, “jargon may be meaningless to those who do not use it” but “it becomes a working tool for those who do use it,” (Vecchi, 2014, p. 70). Likewise, the language of business rhetoric or jargon maintains corporate norms, values, and power (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Notably, “corporate rhetoric makes extensive use of imagistic metaphors” and “idiomatic expressions” (Zamfir, 2025, p. 273). Zamfir (2025) explains that in order to effectively communicate in appropriate business contexts, one must learn specific idioms, euphemisms, and phrases. The phrases described by Zamfir (2025) and the “business speak” described by Stanley and Neck (2025) make up corporate speak and jargon (p. 723). In all, jargon works as a tool for indicating social status, creating exclusionary groups, and can overcomplicate general business communication.

## **Aims and Research Questions**

The scholarship demonstrates that corporate jargon affects relationships and social groups. The aims of the current study are to better understand how corporate speak and jargon is experienced in organizational and interpersonal communication and draw conclusions about how to best communicate in the corporate world. I conducted a qualitative study relying on semi-structured interviews to investigate this.

My research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How does corporate speak and jargon impact interpersonal relationships in Western corporate spaces?

Aligning with work done by Denker and Dougherty (2013), Pop and Sim (2014), and Vecchi (2014), my study looks at interpersonal relationships in the context of corporate speak and jargon. Leaning on prior research, I investigated how social groups exist in Western

corporate spaces and what effect specific jargon and corporate speak have on them. The literature indicates that this type of language is socially exclusive and contributes to the formation of in-groups and out-groups. I intend to determine how this phenomenon manifests in the world of Western corporations.

RQ2: How are identity and belonging experienced through corporate speak and jargon in Western corporate spaces?

Leaning into works authored by Scott (2007), McClure and Brown (2008), and Alvesson and Wilmott (2002), I investigated identity and belonging in Western corporate spaces. Determining the significance of corporate speak and jargon’s impact on identity is a major aim of my research. There is overlap between questions one and two, especially in the case of belonging. But, framing the research through the lens of social identity theory and identity regulation through organizational control will allow me to explore belonging in relation to identity. Utilizing this framework allows me to investigate the world of corporate speak as it relates to identity and belonging in Western corporate spaces.

## **Methods**

### **Recruitment**

To recruit participants, I intended to rely on a snowball sampling method, although that approach was less successful than I anticipated. I took inspiration from Denker and Dougherty’s (2013) work and tried a “multiple start snowball sample,” leaning into my personal, educational, and professional connections (p. 247). I received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for this study, with an approval number of STUDY00024867. I originally recruited from big box retail stores specifically but had to open it up due to difficulty in finding participants. I met with

two participants who worked in big box retail but then had to pivot to recruit from Western corporate spaces as a whole. I contacted the Communication department at the University of Washington to collaborate with staff with the intention of expanding my reach to the University’s alumni network. This proved partially successful as I was able to recruit one participant from the alumni network. I also intended to utilize my contacts in the Foster School of Business at the University of Washington but was unsuccessful in recruiting any participants through this avenue. In addition, I approached my personal connections, both professional and relational. This route was successful and resulted in three participants. I created a flyer (see appendix A) and a recruitment script (see appendix B) to aid in my recruitment efforts. This flyer linked to a demographic survey (see appendix C) which provided more information about the study. I created this demographic survey through Qualtrics and shared it with participants through email. I communicated with potential and active participants primarily through email, which granted me the ability to easily send the consent form (see appendix D), administer the demographic survey, and stay in contact. An anticipated boundary I encountered was described by Vecchi (2014) where he stated that “companies do not open their doors easily,” exhibiting that this population can be difficult to access (p. 66). I was aware that nondisclosure agreements (NDAs) and legal commitments could be a boundary for this population but continued recruiting despite these setbacks.

I distributed recruitment criteria (see appendix E) explaining the aims of my research as well as requirements to participate in my study to potential participants. My original recruitment criteria included:

Participants must be 18 and older to participate in my study.

Participants must work at a large corporate office within big box retail.

Participants must have worked for the company for at least 1-2 years.

After struggling with recruitment, I distributed a new recruitment criterion which included a few changes to broaden the scope of the recruitment, but retained the 18 and older provision:

Participants must currently work or have worked in a large corporate office.

Participants must have worked in that office for at least a year.

Opening this up granted me the ability to broaden the scope of my study, giving me access to more potential participants.

## **Participants**

I recruited six participants from five different companies. I had a predominantly female identifying sample (n=4) with 2 male identifying participants. The age range for my study was 26-52 years old, with an average age of 33. Four out of the six participants were between the ages of 26-28, and all made under \$100,000 a year. Meanwhile, my two participants aged older than 28 made over \$100,000 a year. The five companies represented included: Dell, Costco, Nordstrom, Amazon, and CVS Health Corporation.

## **Semi-structured Interviews**

For my research, I relied on semi-structured interviews to gather data. Semi-structured interviews provided me an opportunity to gather rich, thick descriptions of participants' experiences with corporate speak. They, when possible, maintain the casual aspects of unstructured interviews (Berger, 2014). While still using an interview protocol guide, utilizing semi-structured interviews provided me with the flexibility to pivot or ask follow-up questions. Also, although I guided the interview, I gave interviewees the opportunity to respond in great detail, building off questions in a way that further expanded on corporate speak and its

implications in the workplace. Berger (2014) explains that by talking to participants and asking the right questions, I can determine their “ideas, thoughts, opinions, attitudes, and what motivates them” (p. 161). Seeing as I investigated corporate jargon’s impact on identity, belonging, and interpersonal relationships, I utilized an interview structure that allowed me to engage deeply with participants. I conducted all my interviews through Zoom, a videoconferencing platform, which gave me the opportunity to talk with a variety of people in different locations and the flexibility to work around their schedules. Interviews provided me with a wide view of how corporate professionals are speaking at work, and how they make meaning through corporate speak.

Knowing the corporate norms and culture helped when navigating interactions with participants. It was vital for me to understand corporate norms to effectively communicate with potential participants. When scheduling interview sessions, I noticed that many participants only had an hour available to participate, so I had to be cognizant of their time constraints during the interview. On the other hand, I thought scheduling the interview would be difficult due to conflicts with the typical corporate working hours of 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. The majority of participants scheduled their interviews during the typical corporate workday and took the call from work. In this case, scheduling did not act as a limitation.

Tracy (2013) discusses respondent interviews as a style of interview where participants hold similar positions and exist in a similar group or social setting. This aligned with my intention both on sampling and the structure of my interview guide. When starting the interview, I collected verbal consent (see appendix D) to conduct and audio-record the interview. I then emphasized my commitment to anonymity. As noted by Vecchi (2014), the struggle with recruiting a corporate sample is often the potential for job insecurity when speaking about their

corporate experience. With that in mind, I began my interview with rapport-building questions. I sectioned my interview protocol (see appendix F) into two segments, aligning them with my research questions. My first section asked questions about interpersonal relationships and how corporate jargon impacts both the participants' relationships and personal experiences. For example, I asked questions relating to how corporate jargon impacted understanding of interpersonal interactions and job-related tasks. Within my second section, my questions surrounded identity and belonging. An example would be asking participants to describe their identity both at home and at work. After my fourth interview, I added a question to the protocol which asked if participants use corporate speak at home.

After completing the interviews, I transcribed them and began to categorize and classify the information gathered within them. Then, “by looking for patterns, classifications, themes, and categories in the material,” I coded the transcribed interviews using phronetic iterative data analysis with the SIT framework in mind (Berger, 2014, p. 170). Tracy and Hinrichs (2017) describe a phronetic iterative data analysis as an analysis structure that takes a practical problem identified by the researcher and uses a “systematic, repetitive, and recursive process” to investigate qualitative data (p. 1). This approach allowed me to immerse myself in the data as I did first, second, and third round coding in accordance with Tracy and Hinrichs’s (2017) technique. The phronetic iterative analysis facilitated my understanding of the data and helped me identify patterns which informed the corroborated themes addressing my research questions.

## **Results**

Three themes emerged through the coding of interviewee transcripts using phronetic iterative analysis: exclusion, enmeshment, and culture. These themes are sequential as they all build upon each other. I will discuss all three themes in more detail in the following sections.

## Exclusion

I identified exclusion as my first major theme. Exclusion refers to how corporate speak, especially at the start of employment, exists as an exclusionary language style. Corporate speak creates a barrier to entry for employees, where they must navigate the learning curve of this new “language” to become part of the in-group. The main codes I discovered within my data were “learning curve,” “barrier to entry,” and “adjustment or onboarding period.” Exclusion demonstrates how employees construct in-groups and out-groups based on proficiency with corporate speak. Katie, a 26-year-old female employee at Costco, explained how corporate speak impacted her interpersonal relationships:

So I was, like, starting off, and I... I think it was hard for me to build those interpersonal relationships, because I was trying to understand what they were, like, hinting at with these, kind of, these jargons that they were using.

At the start of her employment at Costco, Katie felt the exclusionary aspects of corporate speak. Here we see how corporate speak affects interpersonal relationships, as Katie states that she did not understand what the jargon meant. While fostering new interpersonal relationships, corporate speak can create tension and barriers. Exclusion, as a theme, reveals how employees experience belonging, especially at the beginning of employment. In Katie’s case, her lack of understanding of the language detracted from her ability to create interpersonal relationships and foster feelings of belonging within the organization. Kirk reiterates these aspects of exclusion in corporate spaces. Kirk, a 28-year-old male employee at Costco, said:

If someone said, ‘you should know that, or how do you not know that? You've been here for X long’ that can make you feel like you're not a part of the team, just because you don't know a certain piece of language that... in 40, 50, 60 years of your life outside of here, you'd never encounter.

Kirk’s comment illustrates how asking questions about the meanings of corporate jargon can feel discouraging, exemplifying how exclusionary the language is. Kirk described this exclusionary



facet of corporate speak as feeling like “you are not part of the team.” This signifies that aspects of belonging are tied to interactions surrounding corporate speak. He highlighted that this language is common in Western corporate spaces but not often heard outside of them, guiding our understanding of how language proficiency is crucial to feelings of belonging in these spaces. Corporate speak contributes to the formation of in-groups and out-groups in organizations, illuminating how the exclusionary aspect of corporate speak shows up in the broader culture of Western corporations. Exclusion aligns with and begins to showcase how enmeshment occurs for individuals in organizations.

### **Enmeshment**

Enmeshment, my second theme, indicates that there is a spectrum of involvement with an organization, from separate to enmeshed. Enmeshment refers to the level under which an individual aligns their own communication style, values, and identity with the organization. Enmeshment also delineates how one's organizational identity can begin to permeate and overcome their personal identity. The main codes I identified for enmeshment included: “separation or no separation,” “in-group,” and “out-group.” The data demonstrated that proficiency and frequency of use can denote one's level of enmeshment in an organization. For example, ML is a 36-year-old female employee at Amazon. She stated how work impacts her identity.

I want to take the good things out of work, but I don't want Amazon to define me, and it's so easy for it to do that so quickly. So I, yeah, I definitely find it shaping my identity outside of work.

ML described her enmeshment in the organization through her understanding of Amazon's culture. She noted that she found it shaping her identity outside of work, implying high enmeshment in the organization. Her fluency in and propensity of using the language correlates

to her enmeshment. ML expressed throughout her interview that she uses the language of Amazon’s leadership principles outside of work. Her familiarity with the corporate speak of the organization has led her to blend her organizational identity with her personal one. Likewise, Katie, a 26-year-old female employee from Costco also experienced high enmeshment in the organization. She said:

It's not something that's well, like, talked about, and really well known prior to getting here, right? And then you start using it in your personal life... it's so interesting, because you don't know until you're kind of in it, I think.

Here, Katie explained how she uses corporate speak in her personal life, with her friends. This suggests high enmeshment in the organization due to her propensity to use the language both inside and outside of work. This blending of organizational and personal identity occurs through the use of language, and Katie’s experience affirms how that blending of identity impacts her own identity construction. She claims that “you don’t know until you are kind of in it,” signaling how she has become part of the in-group, almost unknowingly, by using and understanding the language.

In contrast, Becky, a 52-year-old female employee at Nordstrom, recounted how she experiences the Western corporate space. She said:

Sometimes I, question whether... I...can fit that mold, and whether I want to fit a mold in terms of the way that folks are communicating. It makes me question sometimes, like, do I need to conform to that, or, will I be accepted just the way I speak?

Becky’s comments demonstrate how she experiences a lack of enmeshment in the organization. There is a push for conformity within this organization, and she expressed how she questions whether she “can fit the mold.” Becky’s communication style differs from that of the organization; she leans more toward a direct style, whereas the organization takes a softer approach. In this case, she is less enmeshed as she is hesitant to conform to the corporate speak

of the organization. Becky’s experience details a different side of the enmeshment spectrum. Whereas ML and Katie are enmeshed in the organization, Becky approaches communication differently within the Western corporate space. Becky’s inclination to question conformity in communication style at work suggests her awareness of her work identity.

Both ML and Katie experience enmeshment in the organization. This can be attributed to their proficiency and propensity to use the language both inside and outside of work. Conversely, Becky notices the culture of conformity within her organization, and questions it. Her lack of conformity suggests she is less enmeshed in the organization. All three of these participants experience the culture of their organizations in different ways. This concept ties in closely with my third theme, culture.

## **Culture**

Culture refers to how assimilating to corporate cultures, including their language, norms, and values, is essential to fostering feelings of belonging within the organization. I determined a range of options for how participants engage with corporate cultures. From being completely unengaged and separate to being involved and over-invested in corporate spaces, this theme exemplified another spectrum to understanding corporate engagement. The codes I identified for this theme include: “perception and visibility,” “direct communication style,” “suppressing emotions or personality,” and “lack of clarity.” Corporate culture impacts how participants act both inside and outside of work. To begin to explain this phenomenon, Rick reflects on his relationships at work. Rick is a 28-year-old male employee at Dell, and he said:

I would describe them as very surface level, I think everyone's very nice, but ... even though I'm in sales, like, I'm not there to chit-chat. I'm kind and, welcoming when people talk to me, but I don't go there searching for conversation... typically just within the office, I keep those relationships.

Rick described his engagement and involvement with the organization as very “surface level.” Within both this quote and his interview, he highlighted his position, implying that his work identity is tied more to his position as a sales professional than the organization itself. Rick is an example of separation from corporate culture, and how it impacts the employee. He experiences the range of engagement in an interesting way. He can construct his identity separate from the organization as he engages with the culture sparingly. When describing Dell’s culture, he stated that it is welcoming and something that they pride themselves on. His lack of engagement is intentional; he stated that he “doesn’t go searching for conversation,” indicating that he chooses not to engage in the culture. This demonstrates how Rick has constructed his work and personal identity separately, and how he engages with the corporate culture aligns with this identity. In contrast, Claire, a 28-year-old employee at CVS, highlighted how she engages at work:

I help with the engagement activities. I form, like, really good relationships with my colleagues ... I love going to in-person events, and whenever we have conferences, and I love interacting with people in person.

Claire established that she is very engaged and involved with the organization outside of her formal job responsibilities. She has assimilated to the corporate culture and chooses to nourish her work relationships. Her involvement with in-person events, and her excitement at interacting with people from work exhibit her investment in the corporate culture. This aligns with how she constructs her personal identity in conjunction with the culture of the organization; she is proud of this, indicating positive social identity. Claire experiences the culture from the in-group, and her positive social identity enables her to express pride and excitement around engaging with the corporate culture.

All three themes speak to engagement in corporate spaces. Exclusion delineates how at the start of employment, there exists a barrier for new employees to engage within the corporate

space. Likewise, engagement within an organization correlates to employee experience on the spectrum of enmeshment. Lastly, culture connects with both themes, as engagement with corporate cultures can predict feelings of belonging in organizations. All these themes are connected and build off of each other, allowing us to better understand how corporate speak shows up in Western corporate spaces.

## **Discussion**

The present study investigated corporate speak in Western corporate spaces utilizing a qualitative, semi-structured interview approach. I examined two research questions: RQ1 explored how corporate speak and jargon impact interpersonal relationships, and RQ2 implored how identity and belonging are experienced through corporate speak and jargon. Through conducting semi-structured interviews and a phronetic iterative analysis, the study resulted in three themes: exclusion, enmeshment, and culture. These three themes aided my understanding of these research questions. Within this section, I will discuss answers to the research questions, theoretical contributions, limitations, and implications.

### **Research Questions**

#### **RQ1**

My first research question surrounded interpersonal relationships and how they are impacted by corporate speak. My two themes of exclusion and enmeshment answered this question best. Corporate speak exists as an exclusionary form of language, and that exclusionary aspect contributes to difficulty in forming interpersonal relationships when employees first join an organization. The barrier to entry in understanding the jargon and terms leads to feelings of concern and worry. Participants noted that asking questions about corporate speak could be daunting as it is an exclusionary tool, reinforcing in-groups and out-groups. This indicates that corporate speak acts as a barrier to entering the in-group and forming interpersonal relationships.

Both Kirk and Katie revealed that asking questions and expressing confusion surrounding the language could be frowned upon within the organization. This illustrates how interpersonal relationships are affected by corporate speak. Likewise, the theme of enmeshment showcases how employees engage with their colleagues. When on the spectrum of enmeshment, those who are more enmeshed in the organization typically create more interpersonal relationships within the office. Rick, for example, has low enmeshment in his organization. This could explain why he does not have many deep interpersonal relationships within the company. Interpersonal relationships through the lens of corporate speak exist on a spectrum.

Another concept contributing to our understanding of interpersonal relationships and corporate speak is the idea of nonverbal corporate speak. A term I coin for this phenomenon, nonverbal corporate speak refers to the behaviors and nonverbal actions associated with corporate speak. By heavily aligning with the organization and entrenching themselves in the language, some participants utilize corporate speak as a form of non-verbal communication, impacting their interpersonal relationships. Although largely a language, corporate speak also exists as a pattern of behavior. Participants' behaviors often mimic corporate speak, leaning into the norms created by corporate speak. For example, asking questions around the language is frowned upon and can lead to feelings of incompetence or inferiority. We see this exhibited by Kirk as he explains that asking questions is often discouraged. This discouragement is an example of nonverbal corporate speak being communicated by the people around him. It is highlighting the exclusionary aspect of corporate speak by emphasizing differences: the concept of being in, by knowing, and out, by not knowing. Exclusion and the spectrum of enmeshment correlate to how corporate speak is impacting interpersonal relationships within an organization, through both verbal and nonverbal uses of corporate speak.

## **RQ2**

My second research question investigated how identity and belonging are experienced through corporate speak and jargon. My themes of enmeshment and culture answered this question best. Identity is greatly impacted by the level of enmeshment an employee has with an organization. Personal and organizational identity can blend the more enmeshed an employee is. Proficiency and frequency of use with corporate speak greatly impacts the ways employees construct their identity in accordance with the organization's values. ML mentioned how Amazon has shaped her identity outside of work and conveyed to me that she is both proficient in and consistently uses the corporate speak of her organization. In fact, when scheduling my interview with ML, she sent Amazon specific materials to me so I could familiarize myself with the language of the organization before our session. Even within non-work contexts, she brought in work terminology, culture, and norms before we spoke. In terms of culture, Claire exemplified how engagement with the culture leads to greater feelings of belonging. Claire's experience assisting with company functions and forming close interpersonal relationships demonstrates how assimilating to and engaging with the culture impacts how employees can create relationships. This allows employees to integrate into the in-group and increase their sense of belonging in the organization. The level of enmeshment in the organization and assimilation to the culture can predict how belonging and identity are shaped by corporate speak for employees in organizations. That said, belonging and identity construction are complex topics, and through corporate speak, we begin to unravel how the language affects these two aspects of employees' lives.

## **Social identity theory**

Social identity theory (SIT) was the primary theory I utilized in this study. It framed my understanding of the literature, the data, and my analysis. The theory helped explain how in-groups and out-groups as well as positive social identity interact in the Western corporate space. For example, I identified codes of “in-group” and “out-group” within my interview data which helped inform my understanding of all the themes but primarily contextualized my theme of enmeshment. Enmeshment, as well as culture, exists on a spectrum, breaking away from traditional SIT frameworks. My study gave SIT the opportunity to be flexible.

In-groups and out-groups, a main facet of SIT, exhibit how identity and belonging are experienced in Western corporate spaces. Participants described the feelings of belonging either being strengthened by their proficiency with corporate speak or being weakened by their lack of proficiency. SIT displays the need for belonging in the workplace, allowing us to draw conclusions around interpersonal relationships and engagement with workplace culture. My study proposes how belonging can look different for employees based on their engagement and level of enmeshment in an organization. Social identity theory emphasizes how people categorize themselves into in-groups and out-groups, and this is evident through corporate speak. Proficiency with the language can lead to one’s “membership” in the in-group and also convey how one will construct a positive social identity through their assimilation to corporate culture.

Positive social identity describes how in-group membership can lead to positive comparisons in relation to out-groups; it requires distinctiveness in one’s own membership to the in-group (Turner and Reynolds, 2001). What I discovered through this study is that a positive social identity is not one-size-fits-all in corporate cultures. There exists a range of positive social identities in relation to how participants construct their own identity with respect to the in-groups



and out-groups in corporate spaces. It illustrates the nuanced identity work at play in corporate spaces. In relation to corporate speak, this looks like threats to positive social identity through engaging with an organization’s vision of a positive social identity. Corporate and employee’s visions do not always align, either intentionally or unintentionally. Positive social identity is reinforced through corporate speak and in-groups and out-groups. In this case, SIT acted as guiding framework to understand how in-group membership relates to my themes of exclusion, culture, and enmeshment. Social identity Theory explains how the Western corporate population understands their own self-concept and experience belonging in organizations. It tells us how employees seek to belong and how they, depending on their engagement with the organization, construct their identity in accordance with their behaviors and beliefs around the organization. Identity is emphasized through SIT, leading to the spectrum of enmeshment and culture, which correlates to how employees construct identity.

### **Limitations and Implications**

The limitations of this study came primarily from recruitment and literature. My original intention was to limit the scope of the companies represented to those of big box retail corporations. Corporate professionals, not just those in big box stores, were difficult to reach. I needed to widen the scope of my sample to recruit. Although I anticipated the limitations for recruitment in my study, I still encountered many challenges. Originally, both the time commitment and scheduling difficulties were my primary concerns. The time commitment was a limitation as my original estimation of time for the interview was 60-90 minutes. Many participants were unable to set aside longer than an hour for the interview, so I had to pivot and send the questions through email prior to the interview. Scheduling difficulties did not end up being a limitation. I also encountered participant hesitancy due to fear of legal ramifications and

non-disclosure agreements (NDAs). In this case, opening up the study outside of big box retail was essential to recruit participants. My goal was to have 10-12 participants, but recruitment limitations did not allow that to happen, as it was extremely difficult to find participants.

Likewise, another limitation arose when conducting my literature review. Finding literature for this study proved difficult. Many of the studies I found were survey based, so I did not have many qualitative, interview-based studies to model the current study on. Conversely, the implications of this study demonstrate that further study is needed on this topic, and we must understand how employees can engage with corporate cultures in a variety of ways. There are more options for corporate engagement besides intense and enmeshed. Employees who work in Western corporate spaces would benefit from the findings in this study as it can provide a different perspective on corporate engagement, identity, and culture.

## **Conclusion**

This study investigated corporate speak and its impact on interpersonal relationships, identity, and belonging in western corporate spaces. The data exemplifies that corporate speak is an exclusionary language style, and one's proficiency with the language can indicate their level of enmeshment within the organization and their level of engagement with the culture. Future researchers should look at how this language impacts employees' day-to-day lives, both inside and outside of work. Corporate speak has infected the lifeworld, and through interviews with corporate professionals, this study begins to unravel the mystery of corporate speak and its ramifications.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

**Do you currently or have you ever  
worked for a big box retailer?**

**Do you know someone who has?**

**Do you have the  
capacity to take this  
offline and touch base?**

**My bandwidth is  
running low. Let's  
circle back on this next  
week.**

**Heard this before?  
I invite you to  
participate in my  
study!\***

**Scan here!**



**Email [rrowell@uw.edu](mailto:rrowell@uw.edu) for more information.**

\*Participants must (1) work for or previously worked in a large corporate office within big box retail, (2) must be 18 years of age or older, and (3) have worked for a big box retail company for at least a year.

**W**

## **Appendix B: Recruitment Script**

Hello!

Do you currently work at a big box retailer? Have you ever heard buzzwords like “circle back” or “low hanging fruit” at work?

My name is Rachel Rowell and I am an undergraduate researcher and student at the University of Washington. I am researching corporate speak, which includes the use of buzzwords, jargon, and euphemisms in business communication. I want to invite you to participate in my study. Your responses will be used to build an understanding of how corporate speak impacts interpersonal relationships, belonging, and identity. To participate in this study, (1) you must work for or previously worked in a large corporate office within big box retail, (2) you must also be 18 years of age or older, and (3) have worked for a big box retail company for at least a year.

If you would like to participate, please follow this link for more information: [link](#). The demographic survey should take less than 5 minutes to complete. If you are willing to participate, I will contact you at the e-mail address you provide to schedule a 90 minute time block for an interview. The Interviews are expected to last between 60 minutes to 90 minutes, depending on how much you wish to say. Your identity will not be revealed during this process to anyone besides the primary researcher and faculty advisor.

There is no compensation for participating in the study. However, your contribution will be a valuable addition to our research and understanding of corporate speak and its impacts on interpersonal communication. Your participation is voluntary, and you may quit at any time during the interview or refuse to answer any question. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask. Thank you!

Rachel Rowell  
Department of Communication  
University of Washington

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Savaughn Williams



### Appendix C: Demographic Survey

My name is Rachel Rowell and I am an undergraduate researcher and student at the University of Washington. I am researching corporate speak, which includes the use of buzzwords, jargon, and euphemisms in business communication. **Specifically I am looking at corporate office spaces such as Dell, Amazon, Apple, etc.** I want to invite you to participate in my study. Your responses will be used to build an understanding of how corporate speak impacts interpersonal relationships, belonging, and identity.

This demographic survey should take less than 5 minutes to complete. If you are willing to participate, I will contact you at the e-mail address you provide to schedule a 90 minute time block for an interview. The Interviews are expected to last between 60 minutes to 90 minutes, depending on how much you wish to say.

1. What is your gender identity?
  - Female
  - Male
  - Non-binary
  - Other (blank)
2. What is your age?
  - (blank)
3. Do you currently or have you previously worked in a corporate office space?
  - Yes
  - No
4. How long have you worked for that company?
  - 1-2 years
  - 3-5 years
  - 6-10 years
  - 11-20 years
  - 21 or more years
5. How many hours a week do you work on average?
  - 25-32
  - 32-39
  - 40
  - 41-50
  - 51-60
6. What is your role at the company?
  - (blank)
7. What is your annual salary?
  - Less than \$25,000
  - \$25,001-\$50,000

- \$50,001-\$75,000
- \$75,001-\$100,000
- \$100,001-\$200,000
- Prefer not to say

## **Appendix D: Consent Form**

### **Consent Form: Interview**

Project Title: What Are We Talking About?: A Look Into Corporate Speak in Big Box Retail

Researcher(s): Rachel Rowell, a fourth-year undergraduate student in the Department of Communication at the University of Washington

Dr. Savaughn Williams, the faculty adviser, is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Washington.

### **KEY INFORMATION**

- This project is researching how corporate speech in Big Box and other environments (i.e. Dell, Nordstrom, Amazon, etc.) impacts interpersonal communication around belonging, identity, relationships.
- Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You may quit at any time and you may refuse to answer any question without consequence. All questions are voluntary, and you can skip questions at any time.
- Your participation should take between 60 -90 minutes total depending on how much you choose to share.
- You will be asked to do the following procedures: answer a short online survey about your demographic identity (10 minutes), and participate in an audio-recorded interview about your experiences in corporate organizations (60-75 minutes).
- There is minimal risk involved with the study, no more than you would encounter in your daily life. Great care will be taken to safeguard your confidentiality (discussed below).
- The results of this study will help to better the understanding of corporate speech in interpersonal relationships. This study will also benefit participants by offering a platform to share experiences verbally in their own words.
- Your alternative to participating in this research study is not to participate.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how corporate speak is impacting interpersonal relationships, belonging, and identity at big box corporations through the use of interviews.

**Rationale:** The effect of corporate speak within big box retail is an important topic to explore as learning about its effects can allow us to find better ways to communicate within corporate spaces.

**Criteria:** To participate in this research, you must be 18 years of age or older, you must work for or previously worked in a large corporate office within big box retail, and have worked for a big box retail company for at least a year

- Time:** The interview should take 60-90 minutes, depending on how much you wish to discuss.
- Procedures:** If you choose to participate, you will first complete a short demographic survey. Following the survey, the researcher may contact you to give you the option of participating in an audio-recorded interview. During this time you will be asked to discuss corporate speak.
- Risk:** There are minimal risks to this study.
- Resources:** If you feel upset or uneasy following our interaction, please consult counseling services. You can access free and confidential counseling support over the phone by calling the King County Crisis Line at 1-866-427-4747 for 24/7 support from trained professionals, or by calling the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. After participating in the study, you will be given a sheet of resources that are available to you, for free, as a college student and non-institutional participant as well. If you wish to have a copy of the resources before you participate, please request this document from the primary researcher.
- Benefits:** The potential benefits of this study include providing a better understanding of how corporate speak is impacting interpersonal relationships, belonging, and identity. After the study results are completed, you may ask for the completed document to review.
- Confidential:** Your identity will not be revealed in transcripts, written documents, or verbal presentations of the data. The following steps will be taken to protect your identity and confidentiality:
1. Consent will be obtained verbally
  2. Personal identifying information will be eliminated from the transcripts and any reporting of the data.
  3. You may refuse to answer any questions asked.
  4. Digital files will be kept on a password-protected computer.
- Contact:** If you have any questions about the study, please contact the primary investigator, Rachel Rowell at [rrowell@uw.edu](mailto:rrowell@uw.edu). You may also contact the faculty advisor of this research, Dr. Savaughn Williams at [savaughn@uw.edu](mailto:savaughn@uw.edu).
- Questions:** If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, or if you feel that you are at risk, please contact the Office of Research Misconduct at the University of Washington by email at [ormp@uw.edu](mailto:ormp@uw.edu).
- Voluntary:** Your participation is voluntary. You may quit at any time or refuse to answer any questions.

*Please orally state one of the two following statements:*

- Consent: I am qualified and agree to take part in this study as a research participant. I agree to have this interview audio-recorded and maintain the right to stop recording at any time.
- Decline: I do not agree to have this interview audio-recorded and I withdraw from this study.

Thank you for your interest and consideration,

Rachel Rowell

### **Appendix E: Initial Recruitment Email**

Hi (Participant),

Thank you so much for your interest in my study! My name is Rachel Rowell and I am an undergraduate researcher at the University of Washington. I am conducting an honors thesis throughout my senior year looking at how corporate jargon impacts interpersonal relationships, identity, and belonging within corporate spaces. To participate in my study, there will be a brief demographic survey and an interview. Interviews have been averaging about 45 minutes in length. If this is of interest, I have attached some more information below.

This study has been approved by the UW's institutional review board (STUDY00024867). Please reach out to [hsdinfo@uw.edu](mailto:hsdinfo@uw.edu) for any questions regarding the ethics of the study. You can also reach out to my faculty advisor, who can be reached at [Savaughn@uw.edu](mailto:Savaughn@uw.edu) for any additional information. Great care will be taken to protect your anonymity, so please think of a pseudonym prior to our interview. I have also attached a link to a demographic survey. I have been having a few technology issues with it, so please let me know if it gives you any trouble.

Thank you for your interest! I am excited to hear more about your experiences. I have attached the consent form as well which has more information about the study. I have also attached the interview questions for you to look over in the meantime.

Looking forward to hearing from you,  
Rachel

Survey link: [https://uwashington.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_4ZxzoszQBawW8Ky](https://uwashington.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_4ZxzoszQBawW8Ky)

## **Appendix F: Interview Protocol**

### **Interview Questions:**

Topic: Effect of corporate speak/jargon on interpersonal relationships/belonging

1. What is your role at the company?
2. Describe your job and responsibilities.
3. How would you describe your work relationships?
4. Where do you hear corporate speak or jargon in your day to day activities? (be prepared to give examples here)
5. Do you find yourself using it when communicating at work?
  - a. If so, why do you use it in those circumstances? Give an example.
  - b. If not, what deters you from using it? Give an example.
6. Tell me about a time when corporate jargon impacted your understanding of a personal interaction.
7. Tell me about a time when corporate jargon impacted your understanding of a job-related task.
8. How does corporate speak/jargon make you feel?
9. When you joined the company, did you notice an adjustment period where you had to learn the company "language?"
  - a. If so, can you tell me about it?
  - b. If not, what made the transition smooth? Was there no difference in jargon/language used?

### **Identity and Belonging:**

1. How would you describe your company culture?
2. How does the company describe the company's culture?
3. Describe your communication style at work.
4. Describe your communication style at home.
5. How might your identity be impacted by communication at work?
6. How would you describe your identity at work?
7. How would you describe your identity at home?
  - a. Is there any overlap between them?
    - i. No- give me an example of ways you keep them separate.
8. Have you had an experience where your communication impacted feelings of belonging within the organization? Tell me about it.
9. Do you notice corporate values showing up in the formation of your identity? Explain.
10. Do you find that corporate values are mirrored in corporate speak in your organization?
11. Do you use corporate speak outside of work?

Is there anything else you would like to discuss?

Would you know of anyone else who would be eligible to participate in my study?

If not, that wraps up our interview and I am so grateful for your time today.