
Leverage

This article was originally circulated on the LAGB contact list. It looks at a word that has been in use for many years in the computer industry, but which suddenly seemed to leap in popularity around the turn of the millennium.

Leverage has entered business-speak on both sides of the Atlantic, and is particularly common in a project I am currently working on. Is it just jargon, or a term developed to perform a particular task; does it just add complication, or does it allow new language strategies? Some examples of usage are given below, with their apparent meaning in the square brackets following.

1. Once implemented, the system will allow [the company] to leverage best practices...
[Introduce / Use]
 2. Leverage experience from multiple global clients. **[Gain / Apply]**
 3. We're working with the business leaders and leveraging our knowledge from the legacy systems... **[Updating / Renewing]**
 4. What facilities and equipment are available? Can these be leveraged for the project training?
[Used / Adapted]
 5. What documentation tools are currently utilized and will be utilized in the future? Can these be leveraged for the project documentation? **[Used / Adapted]**
 6. The conversion method was chosen to best leverage the programming skills and experience of the team members... **[Use / Adapt / Update]**
 7. Minimize the potential effort of reports / customization / development by leveraging reports currently in use... **[Adapting / Reusing]**
 8. For any requirements not met by using or modifying an existing report, the technical team will attempt to leverage a vanilla report **[Use / Adapt / Reuse]**
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From these eight examples we can see that the verb has a full set of inflections (*leverage, leveraged, leveraging*), and is used both actively and passively and in infinitives. It would appear to be a bog-standard new verb, but it does have some interesting features.

The first feature is that *leverage* is a portmanteau word. Just as *whatsit* can be used in place of any other concrete noun, so *leverage* can be used in place of almost any activity verb. This, of course, can lead to confusion (as is the case for *whatsit*): if an organisation is "leveraging a project" we cannot know, without other defining reference, whether they are starting it, ending it, or performing some intermediate process. But, at the same time, this obfuscatory aspect of the verb is an important part of its function and meaning. There is the apocryphal story of the company which informed employees that it was "leveraging their synergies" when it made them redundant (*Computing*, BackBytes, 5 April 2001). *Leverage* allows the writer to imply change without specifying what the change may be. It therefore fits in with the series of dynamic business verbs, which allow minions to satisfy the current managerial demand for the appearance of achievement. Other dynamic business verbs include *utilize, enable, capture* (as in data), and *work at doing* instead of just *doing* - "we're also working at charting the 'to-be' processes".

The second feature of *leverage* is its field of use. It is used mainly in speculative documents like business plans, general training requirements, project proposals; it is rarely used in specifying documents like program specifications, notes of meetings, manuals (no examples have been found). In addition it usually takes an amorphous subject, either a non-personal noun or an unspecified *we*, and it is usually either a plural or a group noun. No examples have been found of *leverage* used with a first person singular subject. These characteristics contribute to a feeling of abstraction, speculation and non-ownership in the meaning of the word.

A final feature of *leverage* is that it is mostly used by subordinates in reports to superiors, it is rarely used by superiors in communication with subordinates (once again, no examples have been found, other than the apocryphal *Computing* example). It therefore reflects a deferential

register in Business English which is often used but seldom noticed. Another example of deferential register is the use of passives, or the unspecified *we*. In fact, I have often found that a business discussion can be controlled by the use of the first person singular. Even if the user is low in the hierarchy it indicates ownership of issues that others prefer not to own, and therefore expertise and power in that issue.

One question that must be asked is: why *leverage* and not *lever*? Possibly this is because of the perceived concreteness of the two words. *To lever* is to use a lever, a physical object. *To leverage* is to apply leverage, or to use a lever's abilities; it is a process and therefore more amenable to a metaphorical application. Of course, the term comes from the USA, so it may just be another example of syllabic incrementalisation.

Thus what at first seems a useless piece of jargon turns out to be a useful tool in the linguistic armoury of the business minion. It allows non-specific reference which does not immediately raise redefining questions from superiors; it acts as a keeper-word in text for actions to be later defined; and it allows ownership of the actions to be deferred. In practical terms it allows reports to be written to the deadlines set by management, while allowing the deadlines imposed by reality to actually run the project. It is one of the useful little white lies that allow the business world to keep turning.

Martin Edwardes, January 2001

Postscript

Now that the project has moved from theory into definition, the use of the word has dropped away to nothing among minions. No cases have been seen since the specification stage began and the team-building phase completed. This tends to support the idea that it is a place-marker word, used unselfconsciously and replaced naturally by more specific terms when they become more definite and available.

However, contrary to the observation above, Managers have now started using the word in relation to a specific task: training. Two forms have been noted:

- «» We are trying to leverage people with the required skills set... [Recruit / Train / Find]
- «» We are trying to leverage the skills required... [Find / Acquire]

The direct message in both these constructs is the same: the new skills are sought after. The metessages are that any retraining is our responsibility to organise, and that we should do it within the existing limits of the project, both time and money.

There is thus the same degree of non-specificity in the usage, but in this case it allows ownership of the actions to be devolved. This second usage may explain why managers allow the word to be used unchallenged: there is a phatic collusion between the two sets of users, whereby each accepts the non-specific nature of the word as an indicator of specific intention. Neither side will challenge the usage of the other because both are gaining from the use of the word. It may also explain why some British members of the team, who are not part of the collusion, object to the term being used.

Martin Edwardes, March 2001

Some Comments

Andy Cunningham:

I've just read the linguistics comments on your website about the use of "leverage". Interesting reading, though an observation at our company: the word leverage is almost always heard by a superior - since the folks in the US use the word extensively, but here in the European trenches, we avoid it....

Chris Pollock:

I found the link to your page in Computing's Backbytes column. Very interesting. I've a couple of

points to make:

1. In IBM, my experience has been that it has spread from the top of the organisation. I have no concrete evidence to back this up, so maybe all I am saying is that in my area the word has come in from outside. As I have worked in training and now in technical editing of manuals, perhaps these are areas that are more sensitive to words and their meanings so tend not to introduce new ones lightly.
2. When you use the term "portmanteau word", you seem to be echoing Humpty Dumpty saying 'when I use a word it can mean whatever I want it to mean' -- whereas I think you'll find that the generally accepted meaning of the phrase is a word constructed by "merging" two or more others -- there are several examples in Jabberwocky, so Humpty Dumpty is involved here too! I'm stuck for my own example, so I'll fall back on that provided by Atomica courtesy of the American Heritage Dictionary: 'chortle' from 'chuckle' and 'snort' (also from Jabberwocky).

Larry Trask:

Martin Edwardes writes: [on the term 'leverage']:

One question that must be asked is: why leverage and not lever? Possibly this is because of the perceived concreteness of the two words. To lever is to use a lever, a physical object. To leverage is to apply leverage, or to use a lever's abilities; it is a process and therefore more amenable to a metaphorical application. Of course, the term comes from the USA, so it may just be another example of syllabic incrementalisation.

Hey; let's watch it! It is, after all, Britain which has given the English-speaking world such gems as 'orientate' for traditional 'orient' (the second is still universal in American English) and 'preventative' in place of 'preventive' (the second is, I think, still usual in American English). And don't even think of getting me started on all those polysyllabic British formations like 'make (someone) redundant' for US 'lay (someone) off'. ;-)

Theresa O'Brien:

I forwarded your piece to my niece who works for Accenture aka Andersen Consulting. She wrote the following. I haven't posted it to the list.

I thought you might decide whether it made any difference to your analysis.

Best wishes,

Teresa

----- Forwarded message follows -----

With regards to the final point 'It is one of the useful little white lies that allow the business world to keep turning.' - I would disagree. The only people I have heard using the term have been less productive than other employees and may have been using the term to pull the wool over other people's eyes, but in all cases they fail. Blaggers sometimes survive but no-one respects them, they just ask 'why on earth hasn't this person been sacked yet?'....My last manager would be just the kind of person to use the word. It's interesting that most of the examples given are from IT systems related projects - I wonder if there are more free-loaders in IT because of the skills shortage?

Comments on the Comments

It seems that the answer is more complex than my analysis makes it appear. *Leverage* is an imported term which has somehow managed to annoy British English speakers. It is seen as a low-status word, and its non-specific meaning is viewed as obfuscatory and deceptive. These are views that I can corroborate from my own experience in my current project - indeed, it was the British reaction to a word used unselfconsciously by the Americans that interested me in the first place, along with the profile of the British people who took up use of the word.

And yes, a portmanteau word is a blend word; when I mean polysemy I should say it. As for syllabic incrementalisation, I have to admit to my share of additions to the language...

Martin Edwardes, October 2001

Leveraging Linguistic Opinions (from Computing, 29 November 2001)

The debate rages, well, whinges anyway, over the use of the word 'leverage'.

'It's a word; get over it,' says John Caldwell, from Birds Eye — though he admits that he hates it.

Although according to the excellent linguistic analysis at:
<http://website.lineone.net/~martin.edwardes/linguistics%20leverage.htm>, [old site] it's a word that can mean introduce, use, reuse, gain, apply, update, renew, adapt, recruit and find, depending on context.

'Leverage allows the writer to imply change without specifying what the change may be. It therefore fits in with the series of dynamic business verbs, which allow minions to satisfy the current managerial demand for the appearance of achievement,' says the author.

He points out that it's almost always used by subordinates to superiors. We take it back, it's useful for our readers after all.

Further Comments, November 2003

Frank Kuchynski:

Hello Martin :

I was just alerted to the existence of your web-page on the use (mis-use ?) of the word "Leverage" in business today. Since this web-page was written in 2001, I realize that I am very late to the party, but what the heck. I am delighted that there are some people out there who are as amused as I am (actually, "dismayed" is the better term) at the devolution of the English language within the business community. I now refer to this concoction of words as "Bus-Nish", rather than English. (By the way, while I agree that the source of this widespread trend is the U.S.A., I have found that within the organization, it is initially used by middle to senior management, who are eager to appear plugged in to the latest business trends; this has the effect of proliferating downward to the minions, who are equally eager to communicate to the boss on the correct level.)

I am writing this simply to provide some updates to your catalogue. (Regrettably, the situation continues to spiral downward into hysteria).

I believe that this trend began with the re-appropriation of nouns to be used as verbs : "We will target the 18-to-39 year old market" "Can we leverage our experience to sell this proposal ?" "Let's get the technical folks to solution this problem" Now I am seeing regular use of verb-forms as nouns : "What's the ask here ?" (meaning, "what is the client actually requesting ?") "What's the spend ?" (meaning, "how much is this going to cost us ?") "This will improve our go-to-market position" (still trying to figure that one out) I'm sure that I could provide more (and funnier) examples, if you haven't already received plenty of them.

Keep up the the good work ("Vive la Resistance" !)
