A decade ago, a Dutch friend recommended that I read an online "Anglo-Dutch translation guide". Written by Nannette Ripmeester, an expert in labour mobility, this list illuminates the pitfalls that emerge when the British and Dutch talk in what is supposed to be the same tongue, namely English.

British people, Ripmeester explains, often use words in a manner so riddled with ambiguity that the sense can only be understood if both the speaker and listener share an implicit cultural frame. The Dutch, however, tend to speak in a far more direct and logical way, with fewer hidden meanings.

For example, when the British begin a sentence saying, "With all due respect," they actually mean "I think you are wrong". But a Dutch person would hear this phrase and take it literally, thinking, "She respects my view". Similarly, if a British person says, "That is an original point of view", a Dutch person might assume they were being praised, when in British parlance the phrase tends to imply, "That's a stupid idea!"

> **Ambiguity and double talk do not emerge by accident. Their function is often to mask some of the ugly realities of business life or office hierarchies**

All this can create embarrassing misunderstandings. In fact, a miscommunication was why my Dutch friend pointed me to this guide. But aside from the personal impact, these linguistic twists have an important implication for public life. Globalisation and the borderlessness of the internet mean that more of us communicate with people from other countries. English remains the lingua franca for large parts of the business world, with the English Proficiency Index estimating that 2.5bn people use the language, of whom only 400mn are native speakers.

Apart from the Anglo-Dutch split, there are additional nuances in how English is spoken in Canada, the US or Australia (to name but a few). So if we want to build a more effective, democratic and trusting world, we would do better by using language more directly and logically. It is time for us to all speak more like the Dutch; even (or especially) when using English.

To understand why, it is worth pondering a new book by the business writer Kevin Duncan. Five years ago, Duncan started a crusade against what he describes as "bullshit" in corporate and financial life — language that is excessively ambiguous, contradictory or hypocritical. His *The Business Bullshit Book: A Dictionary for Navigating the Jungle of Corporate Speak* lists phrases he thought should be excised from the office, such as "incentivising", "get your ducks in a row", "thought leadership" and so on.

Now he has released a follow-up, *The Bullshit-Free Book*, which tries to replace those hated phrases with better words. In many ways his recommendations amount to turning British English into the Dutch version. Consider the phrase "reach out". Duncan says this first cropped up in 1966 in a Four Tops song ("Reach Out I'll be There"), and was then used in an ad from AT&T, the telecoms group. Now it is ubiquitous in corporate life since the idea of "reaching out" to colleagues creates "an element of vulnerability and softness" or "an emotional, or even spiritual, component to proceedings", Duncan says.

But if you stop to think about the meaning of those words, they are ridiculous. Nobody in corporate life is actually extending their hand or even wanting to be fuzzy. Duncan suggests we should replace the words with a simpler one: "talk". He also hates the phrase "singing from the same hymn sheet", arguing it is better to just say "agree and portray a united front". He wants "push the needle" (which comes from car speedometers) expressed as "work as hard as we can". "Gut feel" and "de-staffing" would be more honestly translated as "instinct" and "redundancies".

To take Duncan's own advice, I will be honest and say that these recommendations are not particularly original. Former FT columnist Lucy Kellaway wrote a piece as early as 1994 mocking business jargon. Yet it is worth revisiting the subject of corporate "guff" and asking why it hasn't gone away. The answer is partly that ambiguity and double talk do not emerge by accident. Their function is often to mask some of the ugly realities of business life or office hierarchies. Familiar idioms, like nicknames, can create a shared cultural base and reinforce our sense of belonging.

But when you need to be an insider to understand what is going on, you have a problem. And that is why it pays to reduce the bullshit. A world of clubby speech creates barriers to entry, particularly for those 2bn-odd non-native speakers of English (or any other language). It is also a place that tends to breed cynicism and distrust — precisely what the business world does not need today.

So the next time you read a corporate leader's memo or listen to a politician's speech, think of that Anglo-Dutch guide. Then try to imagine what might happen if you were to replace the "bullshit" with straightforward speech. Call it, if you like, a dose of double Dutch — albeit not in the usual English sense of the word (since the 17th century, the phrase has been slang for "gibberish"), but in the "logical" sense, ie, twice as direct. Most of us would cheer.