

## Compensatory conspicuous communication: Low status increases jargon use

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## A B S T R A C T

Jargon is commonly used to efficiently communicate and signal group membership. We propose that jargon use also serves a status compensation function. We first define jargon and distinguish it from slang and technical language. Nine studies, including experiments and archival data analyses, test whether low status increases jargon use. Analyses of 64,000 dissertations found that titles produced by authors from lower-status schools included more jargon than titles from higher-status school authors. Experimental manipulations established that low status causally increases jargon use, even in live conversations. Statistical mediation and experimental-causal-chain analyses demonstrated that the low status → jargon effect is driven by increased concern with audience evaluations over conversational clarity. Additional archival and experimental evidence found that acronyms and legalese serve a similar status-compensation function as other forms of jargon (e.g., complex language). These findings establish a new driver of jargon use and demonstrate that communication, like consumption, can be both compensatory and conspicuous.

## 1. Introduction

Why do business people describe their abilities as their tendency to synergistically leverage strategic competitive advantages? Why do lawyers lean on statutory instruments to explain how laws work? Why do academics describe their research as elucidating the antecedents of upright striding vertical bipedality on horizontal terrestrial substrates by non-human primates instead of describing why primates walk on the ground?

As these questions highlight, the use of jargon is commonplace across disciplines and industries. Like all forms of language, jargon is used both to communicate directly with others and also to convey more than just the underlying meaning of the words. In the present work, we consider when and why individuals choose to use jargon in their communications with others. We contend that the use of jargon is not merely an exercise in efficiently communicating information, but is also a conversational tool that individuals can use to signal their own aspirational status to others.

Our core proposition is that low-status individuals will be more likely to use jargon compared to high-status individuals. That is, having low status leads individuals to be concerned with signaling high status to others and to see jargon use as a path to achieving higher status. To test our hypotheses, we analyzed thousands of academic dissertation titles and conducted multiple experimental studies. We find that low status leads to greater jargon use because it increases the communicator's concern with audience evaluations (versus a concern with conversational clarity). Further, we demonstrate that low status increases jargon use across three different forms of jargon (linguistic complexity, acronyms, and legalese). By connecting low status to jargon

use, we establish a compensatory function of conspicuous communication and make key contributions to both the social hierarchy and conversations literatures.

## 1.1. Definition of jargon

The Oxford English Dictionary defines jargon as “special words or expressions that are used by a particular profession or group and are difficult for others to understand”. This definition overlaps substantially with previously held definitions of jargon (e.g., see [Cremer, Garicano, & Prat, 2007](#); [de Burgh-Woodman & Brace-Govan, 2008](#)) and analyses that document the use of jargon in business ([Ettorre, 1997](#)), trucking ([Runcie, 1969](#)), nursing ([Wolf, 1989](#)), library management ([Naismith & Stein, 1989](#)), and academia ([Armstrong, 1980, 1989](#)). This definition highlights two important features of jargon: (a) jargon is used and understood by a particular linguistic community but not by others and (b) the words or expressions themselves are confusing or impenetrable to individuals who are not members of that particular linguistic community. We extend this definition of jargon to include a third core feature – i.e., the substitutability of jargon for broadly accessible alternative words or expressions. This final feature of jargon is important for our purposes because we are interested in understanding whether a sense of low status causes individuals to *choose* to use jargon instead of a more broadly accessible alternative word or expression.

Accordingly, we define jargon as *socially learned words or expressions used by a particular profession or specialized group, which are used in place of more broadly accessible and less formal alternatives, and are difficult for outsiders to understand*.

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Our definition of jargon is distinct from two other relevant constructs – slang and technical terms – neither of which share all of jargon’s core definitional features. Slang is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “very informal words and expressions used by a particular group of people.” Thus, slang and jargon both involve a specific linguistic community as well as words or expressions that may be communicated in more than one way. However, slang emerges from social groups whereas jargon emerges from professional groups. Because jargon is associated with professions, it implies greater formality than slang does.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, *technical* words or phrases (i.e., technical terminology) reflect “special and usually practical knowledge especially of a mechanical or scientific subject.” Thus, jargon and technical terminology both relate to words or expressions that may be confusing and/or impenetrable to some audiences and that may be uniquely relevant to a particular community. However, a broadly accessible alternative word or expression may not exist for many technical terms. For example, in the context of solar system dynamics, the technical term “*nutation*” refers to short-period oscillations in the motion of the pole of rotation of a freely rotating body that is undergoing torque from external gravitational forces (see <https://ssd.jpl.nasa.gov/?glossary&term>). Importantly, there is no reasonably succinct less formal, or broadly accessible alternative to using the word “*nutation*” for those wishing to communicate the technical definition of *nutation*.

The differences between jargon, slang, and technical terminology can be seen clearly across four key dimensions. The first dimension is permanence. Both jargon and slang are faddish and change more often than technical terms in their usage. For example, “bleeding edge” is replacing “cutting edge” in current usage while describing the same underlying quality. Technical terms are generally less susceptible than slang and jargon to swings in popular use as their appeal is based more on the efficiency with which they describe the underlying concept. A second dimension is the method by which they are learned. Appropriate usage of technical terms can be learned asocially through a dictionary or through exposure to the underlying concept. Both slang and jargon, however, are primarily learned in the context of socialization processes (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). A third dimension is the primary context of use: professional vs. social. Jargon and technical terms are both used more commonly in professional settings, whereas slang is used more socially. A final dimension relates to formality; jargon and technical terminology are more formal, whereas slang is more informal. Overall jargon occupies a middle ground between the rich social functions that slang performs and the more formal and precise functions that technical terminology offers (see Table 1).

1.2. Forms of jargon

Given the definitional considerations we outlined above, we next turn to the forms that jargon can take. In the current research, we focus on linguistic complexity, acronyms, and legalese.

Linguistic complexity captures the difficulty in understanding a given speech act. Not surprisingly, jargon often takes the form of linguistic complexity in academia. Some scholars assess linguistic complexity on the basis of opacity, regularization, or syntagmatic redundancy (Trudgill, 2011). Others define it from the perspective of a

language learner (Kusters, 2003) and relate it to the difficulty of a newcomer acquiring the language (“the amount of effort an outsider has to make to become acquainted with the language in question”; Kusters, 2003; pg.6). Linguistic complexity fits with our definition of jargon in that using linguistically complex language (e.g., *upright striding vertical bipedality on horizontal terrestrial substrates*) highlights one’s membership in a specific linguistic community (i.e., primatologists, or academics more generally), makes it difficult for people outside of that community to understand, and is done in place of using broadly accessible alternative words or expressions (e.g., *walking on the ground*).

An acronym refers to a sequence of letters (typically capitalized) that are formed from the initial letter or letters of each of the successive parts of a compound term. In an exploratory vein, we asked 215 MBA students to list any jargon words or expressions they had heard in their previous work experience. Overall, 58.6% of students included at least one acronym in their list of jargon, suggesting that business professionals consider acronyms to be a form of jargon. Although acronyms are simplifying terms that decrease linguistic complexity, they align perfectly with our definition of jargon. Consider the acronym OBHDP: it is unique to a specific linguistic community (i.e., organizational behavior scholars), is difficult for people outside of that community to understand, and is used in place of broadly accessible alternative words or expressions (i.e., *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*).

Legalese refers to specialized language of the legal profession that is often hard to understand. Thus, legalese is simply the name for a domain specific form of jargon. In the current research, we focus on one specific type of legalese – Latin words and phrases used in the legal context. The use of Latin in the legal context fits with our definition of jargon. Specifically, legalese (e.g., *nemo dat quod non habet*) highlights one’s position in a specific linguistic community (i.e., the legal profession), is difficult for people outside of that community to understand, and is used in place of broadly accessible alternative words or expressions (e.g., *you can’t sell what you don’t own*).

1.3. Functions of jargon

To understand why people use jargon, we need to understand why people use language more generally. A vast amount of work has focused on the role language plays in social interactions and how speakers and audiences interact to signal and interpret meaning. This work has revealed that individuals approach communication situations with a variety of conversational motives (Rubin, 1979, 1981; Rubin, Perse, & Barbato, 1988).

One primary motivation for many communicators is conversational clarity or effectively conveying one’s intended meaning to an audience. Influential work by Grice (1975) highlighted four maxims (i.e., of quantity, quality, relation, and manner) and a “cooperative principle”, which specify that speakers generally follow well-understood rules in conversation in order to effectively convey meaning to their audience (Grice, 1975; Grice, Cole, & Morgan, 1975).

Other research has explored how language is embedded within social systems and can facilitate group bonding (Chaika, 1980; Fishman, 1970; Labov, 1972; Malinowski, 1923). This social perspective on language argues that language is used to not only convey the literal meaning of words, but also to reflect and guide social relationships (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). Thus, language also serves a signaling function that can reflect the social needs and/or aspirations of the speaker. In this way, conversations may be used as vehicles for satisfying the fundamental human needs for belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and status (Anderson, Hildreth, & Howland, 2015).

Building off these functions, we discuss how jargon can serve both communicative and signaling functions. First, jargon can increase conversational clarity by serving as a form of efficient communication. As groups form and knowledge develops, specialized words are often needed to adequately and efficiently communicate with fellow group members (Cremer et al., 2007; Solomon, 1990). Because our definition

Table 1  
Definitional distinctions between Slang, Jargon, and Technical Terms.

	Slang	Jargon	Technical terms
Permanence	Faddish	Faddish	Enduring
Learning process	Social	Social	Asocial
Context of use	Social	Professional	Professional
Formality	Informal	Formal	Formal

of jargon highlights its use within a specific linguistic community, jargon can hinder communication clarity and create disfluency among audiences who are not part of the relevant community. Thus, within a group, jargon can satisfy the Gricean maxims, but these same maxims may be violated among non-group members. However, even within the relevant specialized group, jargon can potentially result in confusion. Indeed, a number of organizational, government, and academic leaders have called for limitations on the use of jargon within their industries (Spicer, 2018; Green, 2011; Rakedzon, Segev, Chapnik, Yosef, & Baram-Tsabari, 2017; Wright, 2015). Despite these calls, the proliferation of jargon in organizations has continued (e.g., see Burton, 2018; Spicer, 2017), suggesting that jargon may serve other functions beyond efficiency of communication.

Jargon can also serve signaling functions because jargon indicates to listeners that the speaker is a member of a specific linguistic community (Runcie, 1969). Chao and colleagues (Chao, O'Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, & Gardner, 1994, pg. 732; see also Manning, 1970) identified learning a “profession's technical language as well as knowledge of the acronyms, slang, and jargon that are unique to the organization” as a crucial step in the newcomer socialization process. Using group-specific jargon affirms one's connection to others in that community, reinforcing shared categorizations and understandings while facilitating social bonding (Echterhoff, Higgins, & Levine, 2009; Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Higgins & Pittman, 2008; Rossignac-Milon & Higgins, 2018). Uncertainty identity theory holds that when one's group membership is in question, one will engage in prototypical group behavior (Grant & Hogg, 2012; Hogg, 2000, 2007; Hogg & Abrams, 1993). Given that jargon is, by definition, connected to prototypical group behavior, we would expect group members who are unsure of their membership within a group to use more jargon.

#### 1.4. Jargon use as a novel form of low-status compensation

Beyond signaling that the speaker is a member of a group, we propose that jargon can also be used to signal a speaker's status within a group, i.e., that the speaker is a *well-respected* group member. Status refers to the amount of respect and admiration individuals have in the eyes of others (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Research has demonstrated the value of high status. For example, compared to those with low-status, high-status group members are afforded more influence over group decisions (Bales, 1950; Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch Jr, 1980; Blau, 1964), evaluated more favorably (Webster & Foschi, 1992; Fragale, Overbeck, & Neale, 2011; Kilduff & Anderson, 2009), and experience greater well-being (Anderson, Kraus, Galinsky, & Keltner, 2012). Occupying a low-status position, in contrast, is inherently threatening. Low-ranking employees often suffer various forms of abuse (e.g., see Tepper, 2000, 2007) and are at an increased risk of suffering from negative psychological and physiological health outcomes (Cundiff & Smith, 2017; Singh-Manoux, Marmot, & Adler, 2005).

As a result, individuals engage in a variety of behaviors designed to increase their status. The most direct way to increase one's status within a group is to exert more effort (Kilduff, Galinsky, Gallo, & Reade, 2012; Shepard, 1954; Sutton & Hargadon, 1996) and exhibit more pro-social behavior and generosity toward group members (Barclay & Willer, 2006; Baumeister, 1982; Flynn, Reagans, Amanatullah, & Ames, 2006; Gottlieb & Carver, 1980). Individuals can also try to increase their status by promoting and highlighting their contributions to the group (Baumeister, 1982; Leary, Jongman-Sereno, & Diebels, 2014; Leary & Kowalski, 1990).

Besides directly contributing to one's group, there are other indirect and symbolic ways that individuals can attempt to signal higher status to fellow group members. A robust line of research has found that lower-ranked individuals will compensate for their lower status by using conspicuous consumption to signal higher status (Veblen, 1899). For example, lower social class individuals have a stronger desire to obtain status objects than those from higher social class backgrounds

(Caplovitz, 1967). Charles, Hurst, and Roussanov (2009) found similar effects for members of lower-status racial groups (African Americans and Hispanics), who spent more of their disposable income on highly visible consumer goods such as clothes, cars, and jewelry, but not on less visible objects like household appliances (see similar results Kaus, 2013; Mazzocco, Rucker, Galinsky, & Anderson, 2012). Similarly, lacking power increases individuals' willingness to pay for high-status objects and more conspicuous product logos, but not for objects that lack status (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008, 2009; Rucker, Dubois, & Galinsky, 2010).

We have argued that jargon is a specific form of language that can be used to not only communicate efficiently with other group members, but also to signal information about one's standing within a group. Additionally, we have argued that people find low status to be aversive and are motivated to engage in behaviors designed to elevate their status in the eyes of others, both directly by contributing more to the group and symbolically by acquiring visible status symbols. Integrating these arguments, we propose that low-status individuals will be more likely than high-status individuals to use jargon as a unique form of status signaling.

Our prediction is grounded in findings that leaders and other high-status members tend to use prototypical language of the group (Hogg, 2001). As discussed previously, jargon is, by definition, prototypical of the group. Furthermore, experts and high-status professions are associated with the use of jargon (Brown & Galinsky, 2020). Just as an expensive car is associated with financial success, the use of jargon is associated with status both through its connection with experts – who often signal their expertise to others through the use of linguistic signals (Carr, 2010) – and its broader association with high-status professions. Thus, since people associate jargon use with high status, we predict that individuals will use more jargon when motivated to signal high status to others (e.g., when one has low status).

We propose that jargon use can be viewed as a communicative form of conspicuous consumption. It can be conspicuously deployed in conversational exchanges, which represent crucial self-presentational opportunities. Thus, we predict that low-status individuals compared to high-status individuals will be more likely to use jargon in their communications due to their strong motivation to signal higher status to others.

*Hypothesis 1: Lower-status individuals will use more jargon in their communications than higher-status individuals.*

A number of scholars have begun to consider the role that verbal signals may play in compensatory status signaling. For example, Rozin, Scott, Zickgraf, Ahn, and Jiang (2014) found that lower-status universities are more likely to include the term ‘university’ on their website than higher-status universities, students from lower-ranked (vs. higher-ranked) Ivy League schools are more likely to use the phrase ‘Ivy League’ when describing their school, and smaller (vs. larger) international airports are more likely to describe themselves using the term ‘international’. Similarly, Harmon-Jones, Schmeichel, and Harmon-Jones (2009) found that lower-status (vs. higher-status) university departments were more likely to include the terms ‘doctor’, ‘professor’, or ‘PhD’ in their faculty directories and lower-status (vs. higher-status) faculty members (i.e., those with fewer citations and publications) were more likely to include the terms ‘PhD’ or ‘Dr.’ in their email signatures.

Although these findings are theoretically consistent with our predictions, they primarily focus on behaviors that signal formal and factual credentials, whereas our studies examine the more informal and subtle signaling function of jargon in the status compensation process. We next turn our attention to articulating a mechanism for why low status leads to greater jargon use.

#### 1.5. Communication goals as a mediator of the low status → Jargon use effect

We propose that high and low-status speakers use different amounts of jargon in conversation because they have different communication

goals. We draw on two relevant frameworks to provide theoretical support for this claim. Barry and Crant (2000) distinguish between two types of dyadic communication motivations: instrumental (i.e., related to meeting role demands and making progress toward organizational goals) and expressive (i.e., related to fulfilling one's own social-emotional needs). In a complementary vein, Kunda (1990) distinguishes between reasoning on the basis of an accuracy goal versus a directional goal (e.g., people motivated to convey a certain impression to themselves and others).

These frameworks offer insights into the underlying motivational goals that high and low-status speakers are likely to possess. Specifically, high-status individuals are more likely than low-status individuals to be concerned with engaging in clear, goal-directed conversation given that status is typically conferred on the basis of contributing to group goals (Anderson et al., 2015; Griskevicius et al., 2009; Ridgeway, 1982, 1987; Willer, 2009). Thus, high-status individuals will likely have a communication goal characterized by clarity and accuracy, using the most appropriate language to clearly communicate in a conversation. In contrast, low-status individuals are more likely to be focused on how the audience is evaluating them—which we term *evaluative concern*—than high-status individuals given their elevated social concerns (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Thus, we predict that heightened evaluative concern versus a concern with communication clarity will mediate the relationship between low status and jargon use.

*Hypothesis 2: The relationship between low status and jargon use will be mediated by evaluative concern (versus a concern with communication clarity).*

## 1.6. Overview of studies and theoretical contribution

We report nine studies using both archival data and experiments to test our main hypothesis that low-status individuals will be more likely to use jargon in conversation than high-status individuals. Studies 1a and 1b analyzed over 64,000 dissertations and master's theses to test whether titles produced by authors from lower-status schools include more jargon in the form of both linguistic complexity and acronyms than authors from higher-status schools. In Studies 2a and 2b, we manipulated participants' status relative to their competitors in a pitch competition and assessed whether they selected a high-jargon or low-jargon description for their start-up pitch. Study 2c tested our hypotheses in live, synchronous conversations. Study 2d replicated our experimental findings with jargon in the form of acronyms. Studies 3a–3c were designed to examine a mechanism driving the effect of low status on jargon use. Specifically, in Studies 3a and 3b we measured and in Study 3c we manipulated our proposed mediator: evaluative concern versus concern with communication clarity.

## 2. Study 1a: Status as a predictor of jargon use in dissertation and master's thesis titles

Study 1a tested Hypothesis 1 using a large sample of dissertation and master's thesis titles. We predicted that the titles generated by authors from lower-status schools versus higher-status schools would include more jargon. Dissertation and thesis titles are an ideal context in which to study compensatory status signaling because a compelling title is essential to generate interest in one's work. Low-status authors may believe that inserting jargon into their title will attract attention and respect from their professional peers. By testing our hypothesis among individuals at the same career juncture, we are able to hold the experience level of the authors constant.

In the current study, we focused on the linguistic complexity form of jargon. Academics have long been critiqued for using less readable language than may be necessary to communicate their ideas (Armstrong, 1980; Plavén-Sigray et al., 2017; Tourish, 2020), leading some scholars to call for simpler writing across disciplines (Hartley,

Trueman, & Meadows, 1988; Kincaid, Fishburne Jr, Rogers, & Chissom, 1975; Sawyer, Laran, & Xu, 2008; Zimmerman, 1989). The impenetrability of some academic writing may have emerged from a desire to signal intelligence and group membership (e.g., the idea of “speaking” to a particular literature), making academic writing an ideal context in which to test Hypothesis 1.

### 2.1. Sample

Using ProQuest's Dissertations & Theses database, we downloaded information about all of the doctoral dissertations and master's theses from universities included in the US News and World Reports rankings from 2016 and 2017. All data were downloaded in February of 2018. Our final sample included information on 64,956 dissertations and theses.

### 2.2. Independent variable: status measure

To assess author status, we used *The US News and World Reports* university rankings, which are published annually or every other year, beginning in 1986. While the US News and World Reports university rankings, like all university rankings, are an imperfect indicator of university quality, we contend that the rankings are taken seriously as a legitimate status signal within academia. Universities rely heavily on such ranking systems as they reflect and affect the number and quality of the applications a university receives (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; Griffith & Rask, 2007) and even influence university strategic disclosure tactics (Luca & Smith, 2015).

US News and World Reports has continually expanded its list of schools such that by 2016 the list included 232 universities. Thus, our status variable ranges from 1 to 232 corresponding to the ranking of the author's university with higher-status schools ranked lower (e.g., Princeton as number 1, etc). Some schools are listed in the US News world ranking in 2017 but not in 2016, or vice versa. For these cases we used the ranking for the year in which the school was ranked on the list. As a robustness check we also performed analysis with a weighted average of 3 years of ranking scores, ending with the year in which the dissertation was published. We also conducted sensitivity analyses by re-running our analyses using only the top 200, 150, 100, and 50 schools.

### 2.3. Dependent variable: linguistic complexity as a form of jargon

We operationalized jargon as the readability of each dissertation/thesis's title. Readability – as an index of linguistic complexity – refers to the estimated number of years of education required to understand a text (DuBay, 2004). Higher readability scores (less readable texts) are characterized by more multisyllabic or obscure words and longer, more complex sentences.

Because we did not have an ex ante theoretical reason for preferring any particular readability measure, we utilized a combination of six widely accepted measures: the Coleman Liau Index, the Spache Readability Score, the Dale Chall Readability Score, the SMOG Index, the Gunning Fog Score, and the Flesch Kincaid Readability Score. Each formula utilizes some function of syllables per word, the inclusion of various particularly easy or complex words within a text, and sentence length (for an overview, see DuBay, 2004). Scholars have used these measures to explore a wide range of texts in past research (Courtis, 1998; Dale & Chall, 1948; Davenport & DeLine, 2014; Ertugrul, Lei, Qiu, & Wan, 2017; Flesch, 1948; Fry, 1968; Hartley et al., 1988; Li, 2008; Mc Laughlin, 1969; Pires, Cavaco, & Vigário, 2017; Shuptrine & Lichtenstein, 1985; Zamanian & Heydari, 2012). We generated the readability scores in R using the “Quantenda” package (Benoit et al., 2018; Michalke, 2014) after removing all irrelevant characters from the titles (e.g., “@”, “#”, “\*”, etc.). We standardized and then averaged the readability scores of the six measures ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ).



**Table 2**

Descriptive statistics and correlations for variables used in Studies 1a and 1b.

No.	Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1	Readability Jargon Measure	−0.0009	0.76				
2	Acronym Jargon Measure (Yes/No)	0.10	0.30	0.028**			
3	Status Rank	87.21	58.01	0.051**	0.008*		
4	Number of Pages	157.14	95.78	0.062**	−0.033**	−0.11**	
5	Year 2016	0.63	0.48	0.013**	0.014**	−0.041**	−0.003

Note \*  $p < 0.05$ . \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

## 2.4. Control variables

We controlled for a number of relevant variables including the number of pages and year of publication. We also included fixed effects for the degree type (e.g., Ph.D., Psy.D., Ed.D, etc.). Finally, our analysis strategy involved fitting a fixed-effects regression model with primary topic area (e.g., mechanical engineering, geography, sociology, etc.) as the grouping variable to account for the nestedness of dissertations within certain topics.

## 2.5. Results and Discussion

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for and correlations among the variables in Study 1a (and Study 1b). Table 3 includes our primary regression results and Table 4 includes sensitivity analyses.

Supporting Hypothesis 1, dissertation/thesis titles produced by authors from lower-status schools contained more jargon in the form of linguistically complex language,  $b = 0.00052$ ,  $SE = 0.00005$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . This effect remained significant when controlling for the number of pages, degree type, and publication year,  $b = 0.00066$ ,  $SE = 0.00005$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . When we ran the same analysis with a three-year weighted average of the US News and World Reports ranking scores, the results remained significant.

We also conducted sensitivity analyses by re-running our statistical models on dissertation/thesis title data from just the top 200, top 150, top 100, and top 50 schools and found the same pattern of results. Specifically, the effect of school status on jargon use was significant when using the top 200 schools without controls,  $b = 0.00055$ ,  $SE = 0.00005$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , and with controls,  $b = 0.00071$ ,  $SE = 0.00006$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; the top 150 schools without controls,  $b = 0.00059$ ,  $SE = 0.00007$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , and with controls,  $b = 0.00079$ ,  $SE = 0.00008$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; the top 100 schools without controls,  $b = 0.00114$ ,  $SE = 0.00013$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , and with controls,  $b = 0.00131$ ,  $SE = 0.00013$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; and the top 50 schools without controls,  $b = 0.00273$ ,  $SE = 0.00033$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , and with

controls,  $b = 0.00294$ ,  $SE = 0.00034$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Taken together, these results demonstrate the consistency and robustness of the effect of author status on jargon use.

Study 1a found that authors from lower-status compared to higher-status schools included more jargon in the form of complex language in the titles of their dissertations/theses. Next, in study 1b, we tested whether authors from lower-status compared to higher-status schools also use more jargon in the form of acronyms.

## 3. Study 1b: Status as a predictor of acronym use in dissertation and Master's thesis titles

Our next study used the dataset from Study 1a but tested a different form of jargon – acronyms. Acronyms, like other forms of jargon, are often used by a particular profession or group and are difficult for others to understand. Furthermore, acronyms can be used both to communicate directly with others and also to convey more than just the underlying meaning of the letters. Unlike linguistic complexity, acronyms are often used to simplify language. We predicted that students from lower-status schools would be more likely to use an acronym in their title than students from higher-status schools.

### 3.1. Sample

We used the same dataset from Study 1a.

### 3.2. Independent variable: status measure

We used the same measure of status from Study 1a.

### 3.3. Dependent variable: acronym use

We created a function in R that identified all titles in the dataset that contained an acronym, which we operationalized as two or more concurrent and capitalized letters. Our final DV was a binary variable (1/0)

**Table 3**

Regression results for Studies 1a and 1b:

Study	Study 1a				Study 1b			
	DV = Readability Measure (Higher scores indicate less readable text)				DV = Acronyms in Title (1 = Yes, 0 = No)			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
Variable	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE
Ranking of Author's School	0.00052***	(0.000049)	0.00066***	(0.000051)	0.0011	(0.00024)	0.00084***	(0.00025)
Number of Pages			0.00050***	(0.000036)			−0.00015	(0.00019)
Degree Date (Ref 2016)			−0.010	(0.0057)			0.080**	(0.029)
Fixed Effects for Degree Type	No		Yes		No		Yes	
Constant	−0.046***	(0.0051)	−0.15	(0.12)	−2.48***	(0.28)	−3.78**	(1.19)
N	64,956		64,956		64,956		64,956	

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ .

Results for Study 1 were produced using the xtreg command in Stata with primary subject area as the grouping variable, results in study 1b were produced using GLM in R.

**Table 4**  
Sensitivity analyses for Study 1a.

DV = Readability score of title (higher scores indicate less readable text)								
Sample Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	Top 200 Schools		Top 200 Schools		Top 150 Schools		Top 150 Schools	
Variable	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE
Ranking of Author's School	0.00055***	(0.00005)	0.00071***	(0.00006)	0.00059***	(0.00007)	0.00079***	(0.00008)
Number of Pages			0.00049***	(0.00004)			0.00047***	(0.00004)
Degree Date (ref. 2016)			–0.00805	(0.00585)			–0.00213	(0.00631)
Fixed Effects for Degree Type	No		Yes		No		Yes	
Constant	–0.04803***	(0.00524)	–0.14052	(0.13079)	–0.05346***	(0.00585)	–0.20741	(0.22995)
N	62,201		62,201		53,924		53,924	
Sample Variable	Model 5		Model 6		Model 7		Model 8	
	Top 100 Schools		Top 100 Schools		Top 50 Schools		Top 50 Schools	
Variable	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE
Ranking of Author's School	0.00114***	(0.00013)	0.00131***	(0.00013)	0.00273***	(0.00033)	0.00294***	(0.00034)
Number of Pages			0.00046***	(0.00004)			0.00038***	(0.00006)
Degree Date (ref. 2016)			–0.00429	(0.00723)			–0.00093	(0.00992)
Fixed Effects for Degree Type	No		Yes		No		Yes	
Constant	–0.07583***	(0.00698)	–0.21159	(0.22897)	–0.11139***	(0.00963)	–0.29692	(0.22894)
N	40,215		40,215		21,007		21,007	

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ .

All results were produced using the xtreg command in Stata with primary subject area as the grouping variable.

indicating whether or not the title contained an acronym.<sup>1</sup>

### 3.4. Control variables

We used the same controls as in study 1a: number of pages and year of publication. We also included fixed effects for the degree type (e.g., Ph.D., Psy.D., Ed.D, etc.) and primary topic area (e.g., mechanical engineering, geography, sociology, etc.).

### 3.5. Results and discussion

We performed a logistic regression with the status of the author's school as the independent variable, the presence of an acronym in the title (coded 1 = acronym present in title; 0 = otherwise) as the dependent variable, and fixed effects for the topic area. As predicted, titles produced by authors from lower-status schools were more likely to contain an acronym,  $b = 0.0011$ ,  $SE = 0.0002$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . This effect remained significant when controlling for the number of pages, degree type, and publication year,  $b = 0.0008$ ,  $SE = 0.0003$ ,  $p = 0.001$ . Study 1b provides initial evidence that the experience of low status is associated with increased acronym use.

Taken together, Studies 1a and 1b demonstrated that authors from lower-status schools included more jargon in the titles of their dissertations/theses than authors from higher-status schools. This jargon took the form of both complex language and acronyms. Importantly, we accounted for the topic area of the dissertations/theses in our analyses and held constant the experience level of the scholars. However, the correlational nature of the data is open to alternative explanations. Thus, in subsequent studies we present experimental evidence in support of our hypotheses.

## 4. Study 2a: Causal evidence that low status increases jargon use

Study 2a was designed to establish experimental evidence that low status causes an increase in jargon use. To do so, we experimentally manipulated relative status and observed its effect on preference for

jargon use in entrepreneurial pitches. We collected data from a sample of individuals with significant amounts of work experience across a wide range of industries.

### 4.1. Participants and design

Five-hundred and fifty-six students enrolled in a MBA program at a university on the East Coast of the United States completed this study as part of their course requirements ( $M_{age} = 27.68$ ,  $SD_{age} = 2.16$ ; 56.83% male).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three status conditions: lower status, same status, or higher status condition.

### 4.2. Procedure

Participants were told they were competing in a start-up pitch competition with two classmates from their MBA program and read a description of their start-up idea. Then, participants learned that acceptance into the next round of the competition would be based on an evaluation of a brief description of their start-up idea. They were then told that their two teammates had each chosen one potential pitch description and that it was their job to cast the deciding vote to determine which pitch description would be submitted for consideration.

### 4.3. Status manipulation

Prior to the pitch description selection, we manipulated participants' sense of relative status by describing the other pitch competition participants as recent MBA graduates and entrepreneurs who have already established their companies (lower-status condition), first year MBA students (same-status condition), or undergraduate students (higher-status condition).

### 4.4. Dependent variable: Jargon use

Participants viewed and selected one of two pitch descriptions that were functionally equivalent but varied in their level of business jargon. The *high-jargon pitch* read:

*FurnitureHub*

*We plan to leverage the anticipated disruption in the retail furniture*

<sup>1</sup> We also created a variable to indicate whether the entire title was in caps, in the event that a whole title had been entered as such ( $N=6$ ). Results did not change when excluding these from the analysis.

industry space and obtain a first mover advantage by disintermediating existing physical retail channels and selling directly to customers online.

The low-jargon pitch read:

*FurnitureHub*

*We plan to take advantage of the anticipated changes in the retail furniture industry and become one of the first companies to bypass existing physical retail channels by selling directly to customers online.*

#### 4.5. Control variables

We controlled for participant age, gender, experience with startups (1 = yes, 0 = no), and native language (native English speaker, 1 = yes, 0 = no).

#### 4.6. Results and discussion

Overall, 34.0% of participants selected the high-jargon pitch. Importantly, however, the high-jargon selection rate varied by condition. Those in the lower-status condition chose the high-jargon pitch at a higher rate (40.8%) than those in the same-status condition (32.1%) or the higher-status (29.2%) conditions. A chi-square test of independence examining the relationship between relative status and the likelihood of selecting the high jargon pitch was significant,  $\chi^2(2, N = 556) = 5.96, p = 0.05$  (see Fig. 1). To further examine the relationship between status condition and jargon use, we performed a logistic regression with pitch selection as the dependent variable (coded 1 = high-jargon pitch selected, 0 = low-jargon pitch selected) and status condition as a continuous independent variable (coded 1 = low-status condition, 2 = same-status condition, 3 = high-status

condition). As predicted, participants' relative status was negatively associated with their likelihood of choosing the high-jargon pitch,  $b = -0.26, SE = 0.11, p = 0.019$ . This effect remained significant after including our control variables,  $b = -0.27, SE = 0.11, p = 0.017$ .

The results of Study 2a provide causal support for Hypothesis 1. Using an experimental manipulation of relative status, we found that lower-status participants selected entrepreneurial pitches that included higher levels of jargon compared to same and higher-status individuals.

#### 5. Study 2b: Replication study showing that low status increases jargon use

Study 2b was designed to replicate our hypothesized main effect and address two limitations of the previous study. First, we included a manipulation check to confirm the effectiveness of the status manipulation. Second, we specified and held constant the composition of the audience to ensure all participants had the same audience expectations.

##### 5.1. Participants and design

Three hundred and eighty students enrolled in an undergraduate business program at a university on the West Coast of the United States completed this study for course credit. Two students failed an attention check question and were excluded from all analyses, resulting in a final sample of three hundred and seventy-eight ( $M_{age} = 20.85, SD_{age} = 2.00$ ; 40.61% male).

Participants were randomly assigned to a lower-status or higher-status condition.

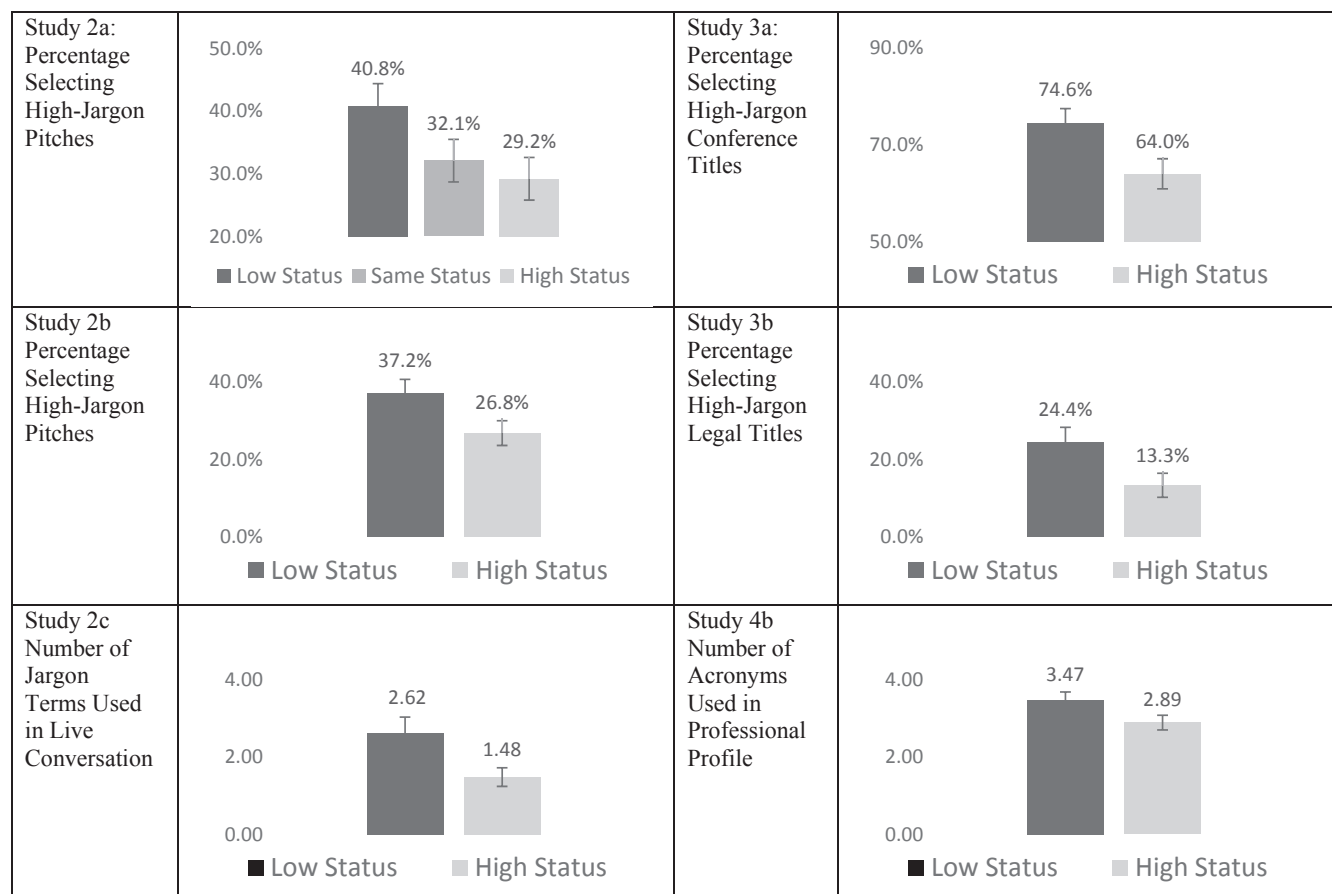


Fig. 1. Use of jargon by status condition across experiments. Error bars represent  $\pm 1$  SE.

## 5.2. Status manipulation

Prior to the pitch selection, we manipulated participants' sense of relative status by describing the other pitch competition participants as recent MBA graduates and entrepreneurs who have already established their companies (lower-status condition) or local high school students (higher-status condition). To hold constant the audience, subjects in both conditions were explicitly told that a panel of faculty members from their school would serve as competition judges.

## 5.3. Dependent variable: Jargon use

Participants viewed and selected one of the same two pitch descriptions that we described in the previous study that were either high or low in jargon use.

## 5.4. Manipulation check

To confirm that our manipulation induced a sense of low status, we had participants complete a three-item measure related to their perceived relative status. The three items were (1–7 scale,  $\alpha = 0.92$ ): “I feel that the other competitors have more status than I do”, “I feel that the other competitors are more respected than I am”, and “I feel that the other competitors are more well regarded than I am.”

## 5.5. Control variables

We assessed the same set of control variables used in the previous study: participant age, gender, experience with startups (1 = yes, 0 = no), and native language (native English speaker, 1 = yes, 0 = no).

## 5.6. Results and discussion

### 5.6.1. Manipulation check

As expected, participants assigned to the low-status condition perceived the other competitors as having more status than them ( $M = 4.56$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ) compared to participants assigned to the high-status condition ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ),  $t(376) = 8.96$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Our manipulation effectively created differences in perceived status.

### 5.6.2. Jargon use

Overall, 32.0% of participants selected the high-jargon pitch. Those in the lower-status condition chose the high-jargon pitch at a higher rate (37.2%) than those in the higher-status (26.8%) condition,  $\chi^2(1, N = 378) = 4.69$ ,  $p = 0.030$  (see Fig. 1). Additionally, we performed a logistic regression while including the control variables in the model and the effect of status remained significant,  $b = -0.51$ ,  $SE = 0.23$ ,  $p = 0.027$ .

Study 2b replicated the results that we observed in study 2a, while holding the composition of the audience constant. This study also established the validity of the status manipulation. The next study tested Hypothesis 1 during live conversational exchanges.

## 6. Study 2c: Low status increase jargon use during a synchronous conversation

Study 2c sought to extend our findings by testing Hypothesis 1 in the context of a live, synchronous conversational setting in which subjects freely interacted with one another. Specifically, we manipulated the status of one member of the dyad and then gave that participant an opportunity to use jargon while chatting with another participant electronically.

## 6.1. Participants and design

Two-hundred and forty-four participants were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk to participate in an experiment involving an online conversation platform called Chatplat, which has been used in a variety of human interaction studies in the past (Huang, Yeomans, Brooks, Minson, & Gino, 2017; see also Blunden, Logg, Brooks, John, & Gino, 2019; Brooks & Schweitzer, 2011; Vuillier, Brooks, & Norton, 2018). Prior to performing any analyses, we excluded dyads in which the focal participant (i.e., the one who received the status manipulation) failed an attention check question ( $N = 10$ )<sup>2</sup> or did not follow the instructions (e.g., by pasting the instructions into the chat window instead of actually chatting;  $N = 4$ ), resulting in a final sample of 216 subjects across 108 dyads ( $M_{\text{age focal participant}} = 36.27$ ,  $SD_{\text{age focal participant}} = 11.20$ , 56% focal participants female).

## 6.2. Procedure

We created an opportunity for two individuals to have a conversation with each other by randomly assigning participants to either an Academic Researcher or a Non-Profit Representative role within a dyad. Each dyad was comprised of one of each role. Participants assigned to the Academic Researcher role were then randomly assigned to a lower-status or higher-status condition.

## 6.3. Status manipulation – academic researcher role

We designed the study so that only the Academic Researcher role received the status manipulation (lower high). The Non-Profit representative was given status-neutral instructions and was included in the study only as a conversation partner.

Academic Researcher role participants assigned to the *low-status condition* read:

You are an academic researcher. You've been working at a small community college in the US for most of your career and generally enjoy what you do. Your college is not very well respected in your field and generally people in your industry look down upon you and your work. This week you are attending a research conference where you will present your research and meet other researchers. Overall, when you attend these types of conferences you are looked down upon.

Academic Researcher role participants assigned to the *high-status condition* read:

You are an academic researcher. You've been working at a very prestigious Ivy League university in the US for most of your career and generally enjoy what you do. Your university is very well respected in your field and generally people in your industry highly respect you and your work. This week you are attending a research conference where you will present your research and meet other researchers. Overall, when you attend these types of conferences you are very highly respected.

Participants in each condition were asked to write three potential downsides (low status condition) or upsides (high status condition) of being from their community while attending this conference.

Next, we presented Academic Researcher role participants with a summary of their research findings and told them that they had recently emailed this summary to a non-academic friend. Since the friend was not an academic, we explained that the participant included both academic jargon and their lay person equivalents in their email.

<sup>2</sup> An additional six participants did not complete the attention check question. However, none of the results reported below substantively change when excluding these additional six participants from the analyses.



Specifically, participants read the following email text (emphasis added on first jargon use for clarity):

*My research focuses on non-human **primates**, commonly referred to as apes and monkeys. I currently have two research projects. The first focuses on **upright, striding, vertical bipedality**, commonly called walking on one's hind legs. My work highlights that non-human primates exhibit **bi-pedal locomotion**, or two legged walking movements. They do this on both **arboreal and terrestrial substrates** (in trees and on the ground). I've learned that these primates **ambulate** (walk) differently on arboreal and terrestrial substrates and my research helps to **elucidate** (explain) the **antecedents and consequences** (causes and effects) of this behavior.*

*My second project focuses on non-human primate **metatarsals**, commonly called the fingers of apes and monkeys. I specifically focus on metatarsal **fractures**, or broken fingers and toes. I've learned that primates without **prehensile** tails (tails that can grab things) will engage in **pedal grasping** (or grabbing things with their feet) when they have a metatarsal fracture.*

We had participants read about two different research projects instead of one in order to expose them to a sufficiently large pool of jargon (and non-jargon equivalents) to potentially use in their subsequent chat. We also paired each jargon term with its non-jargon equivalent to provide participants a clear choice of which to use, if any, in the conversation. This design choice is consistent with our definition of jargon, which involves the existence of broadly accessible alternative words or expressions.

After reading about their research, participants in the Academic Researcher role were asked to imagine that they were at a conference and about to have a conversation with another attendee. Participants were told to introduce themselves and discuss their research. Specifically, participants read the following, which also served to reinforce our low-status [high-status] manipulation:

*Imagine that you are at an academic conference. Someone else has just come up to you to learn about you and your work. They have seen on your nametag that you work at an unknown community college [a very prestigious Ivy League university].*

Participants were then directed to a chat window that was embedded in the Qualtrics survey, asked to wait up to three minutes for their partner to arrive, and shown their research summary again below the chat box (displayed as an image so they could not cut and paste the text into the chat window). To motivate participants to take the task seriously and to encourage a healthy back and forth conversation, we further told participants that if they successfully answered all of their partner's questions and have a conversation of at least six exchanges (three each), they would earn a 20% bonus payment.

#### 6.4. Non-profit representative role instructions

Participants assigned to the Non-Profit Representative role were given the following role summary:

*You are the head of the research unit of a large, non-profit organization tasked with studying and preserving the habitat of Non-Human Primates, commonly referred to as apes and monkeys. Within your organization, you have various researchers who study topics related to primate physiology and behaviour. These topics include diet, group size, bipedal evolution (the evolution of walking), metatarsal evolution (the evolution of hands), and lifespan. You are always seeking to learn about new and relevant research and to potentially recruit researchers to your organization. You decided to attend this conference to learn what scholars in the field are researching.*

*Please take five minutes to have a conversation with this person in which you ask the person about their research. Your goal is to understand their general research topic. Once you feel you understand, you can end the*

*conversation by saying "thank you, it was a pleasure meeting you, and goodbye!"*

As stated previously, those assigned to the role of Non Profit Representative did not undergo any status manipulation. Participants were then directed to a chat window that was embedded in the Qualtrics survey, asked to wait up to three minutes for their partner to arrive, and shown their role summary again below the chat box (displayed as an image so they could not cut and paste the text into the chat window). They were given the same bonus plan to motivate their active participation.

#### 6.5. Dependent variable: Jargon use

We intentionally paired jargon terms with their non-jargon equivalents in the research summary to give participants a choice of which to use in their conversations. Our main dependent variable was the number of jargon terms that the participant assigned to the Academic Researcher role used across all of their speech acts. For example, if 'arboreal' was used 5 times it would count as 5. However, if the participant defined the jargon term using its non-jargon equivalent in the speech act immediately preceding or following the use of jargon, the jargon term in that instance would not count toward the construction of our dependent variable. For example, "arboreal, i.e., in trees" did not count as jargon use whereas using just "arboreal" did count as jargon use. Thus, if "arboreal" was used 5 times but the first time it was qualified by "i.e., in trees", then it would only count as 4.

We chose to construct our main dependent variable this way on theoretical grounds. Our definition of jargon involves using jargon *in place of* broadly accessibly non-jargon equivalent words or phrases. Using jargon while simultaneously clarifying its meaning violates the spirit of our definition of jargon. Using jargon as a standalone communication act, on the other hand, is consistent with our definition. Thus, we view these two communication acts as theoretically distinct and focus our analysis on the latter.

We also report an alternative measure of jargon that only counted the number of *unique* jargon terms used that were never qualified by their non-jargon equivalent, which is also consistent with our definition. Only the first use of any jargon term was counted toward the construction of the dependent variable, unless the term was explained in any of its uses, in which case it would never be counted. Thus, if 'arboreal' was used 5 times it would only count as 1. However, if it were ever qualified by "i.e., in trees", then it would count as 0.

The jargon terms were drawn from the research summary we gave subjects and included the following: primates, upright, striding, vertical, bipedality, bi-pedal, locomotion, arboreal, terrestrial, substrates, ambulate, elucidate, antecedents, consequences, metatarsals, fractures, prehensile, pedal, grasping.

#### 6.6. Control variables

We controlled for participant age and gender (all participants were native English speakers). We also controlled for the number of non-jargon equivalent words or phrases used from the research summary: ape, monkey, walk, movement, leg, legged, tree, walk, ground, explain, cause, effect, fingers, toes, feet, hands, broken, and grab.

#### 6.7. Results and discussion

Our dependent variable is an overdispersed count variable. The likelihood ratio test that alpha equals zero was rejected,  $p < 0.001$ , indicating that a negative binomial model was more appropriate than a poisson model<sup>3</sup>. We first tested our main hypothesis that participants in

<sup>3</sup> Robust standard errors are reported.

the low-status condition would use more jargon (not qualified by their non-jargon equivalents) than participants in the high-status condition without any controls. As predicted, participants assigned to the low-status researcher role ( $M = 2.62$ ,  $SD = 3.11$ ) used more jargon terms than participants assigned to the high-status researcher role ( $M = 1.48$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ),  $b = -0.571$ ,  $SE = 0.224$ ,  $p = 0.011$  (see Fig. 1). The effect of status on jargon use remained significant after including our control variables,  $b = -0.596$ ,  $SE = 0.221$ ,  $p = 0.007$ .<sup>4</sup>

As a robustness check, we also tested whether participants used more unique jargon terms that were never qualified by their non-jargon equivalents. As predicted, participants in the low-status condition ( $M = 1.83$ ,  $SD = 2.21$ ) used more unique jargon words not qualified by their non-jargon equivalents than participants in the high-status condition ( $M = 1.12$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ) without controls  $b = -0.490$ ,  $SE = 0.235$ ,  $p = 0.037$ , and with controls,  $b = -0.493$ ,  $SE = 0.230$ ,  $p = 0.032$ .

The results of Study 2c replicate and extend the pattern of results observed in the previous studies by establishing the ecological validity of our hypothesized effect. Low-status participants used more jargon than high-status participants when freely interacting with a partner.

## 7. Study 2d: Low status increases acronym use

Study 2d was designed to provide an experimental test of our hypothesis that low status increases acronym use. We predicted that aspiring business professionals who experienced low status would use more business acronyms in their written communication.

### 7.1. Participants and design

Five-hundred and ten students enrolled in an undergraduate business program at a university on the West Coast of the United States participated in exchange for course credit.

Prior to analyzing the data, we excluded participants who did not follow instructions ( $N = 63$ ; e.g., those who did not write anything in the text area, or who wrote something completely unrelated to the background information that we provided) and/or those who did not accurately identify the scenario context ( $N = 50$ , did not correctly identify the target audience of the online platform discussed in the scenario), resulting in a final sample of three hundred and ninety-seven participants ( $M_{age} = 20.9$ ,  $SD_{age} = 1.74$ , 46.6% female).

Participants were randomly assigned to a higher-status or lower-status condition.

### 7.2. Procedure

Participants – all of whom were current undergraduate business students – were asked to imagine that the business school plans to launch an online professional networking initiative called [*business school name*] *Connect*, which aims to help university members connect and network with other members of the campus community who share common professional interests and/or backgrounds. Participants were further told that the business school is compiling a set of student profiles that will be posted on the school's website as part of this initiative. Participants read that they had heard about the initiative and would like to create an online profile.

### 7.3. Status manipulation

We manipulated participants' sense of status by altering the types of online profiles that would be featured on the [*business school name*]

*Connect* website. In the *low-status-condition*, we informed participants that the website would include a mix of profiles featuring current Master's of Business Administration (MBA) students and undergraduates, but that the majority of profiles would feature current MBA students. In the *high-status-condition*, the website would include a mix of profiles featuring current undergraduates and incoming undergraduates who will matriculate as freshmen business majors next Fall (i.e., current high school seniors), but that the majority of profiles would feature incoming freshmen. In this way, we led participants to believe that they would be part of a low-status [high-status] minority in relation to the other students featured on the professional networking website.

### 7.4. Dependent variable context

After receiving the status manipulation, participants were informed that they would need to submit a brief professional summary to be included in their online profile and were given role information on which to base their summary. Specifically, we displayed an image of the following block of text – which included twelve acronyms – to participants (so that participants could not simply copy and paste the text) and asked them to imagine that they have the professional background described in the text:<sup>5</sup>

*You began your career with an internship in the user experience (UX) and user interface (UI) space before transitioning into your current internship, where you have contributed to various business-to-business (B2B) as well as business-to-consumer (B2C) operations. As part of this work, you meticulously track, summarize, and communicate key performance indicators (KPIs) to the relevant stakeholders. You have also spearheaded request for proposal (RFP) and request for information (RFI) initiatives on behalf of the organization. Finally, you have taken advantage of opportunities to have an impact outside of your immediate role in the organization. For example, you recently designed and helped launch a successful word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM) campaign and played a key role in facilitating the transition from a last in, first out (LIFO) to first in, last out (FIFO) inventory cost method. Overall, your greatest strengths are that you are reliable and able to work effectively under time pressure. If there is a task that needs to be completed by end of day (EOD) or end of month (EOM), others can count on you to get it done.*

Next, participants typed out their preferred professional summary into a text box before advancing to the final screen where they responded to several demographic questions.

### 7.5. Dependent variable: Number of acronyms used in professional summary

We designed the professional background information to include acronyms that are commonly used in professional settings. Importantly, for each of the twelve acronyms included in the professional background text, we included both the long-form equivalent (e.g., *key performance indicators*) and acronym (i.e., *KPI*) versions of the text. Thus, for each of the twelve acronyms, participants had the choice of using the acronym, its long-form equivalent, neither, or both. Participants also had the discretion to discuss as many or as few of the acronyms as they wished in their professional summary.

We followed the same procedure from Study 2c to construct our primary dependent variable: a count of the number of acronyms used in the participant's professional summary that were not presented

<sup>4</sup> Low-status participants ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 3.28$ ) did not use more non-jargon equivalents in their conversations compared to high-status participants ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = 3.58$ ),  $b = 0.070$ ,  $SE = 0.184$ ,  $p = 0.702$ .

<sup>5</sup> To clarify the nature of the task, participants read further that “Your professional summary should be based entirely on the role information provided below. That is, please do not write about professional experiences that are not described below. You may craft your summary however you would like to as long as it draws on your role information.”

alongside their long-form equivalents (e.g., “key performance indicators (KPI)” was not counted whereas “KPI” was counted toward our DV). We also used the same alternative DV used in Study 2c: a count of only *unique* acronyms that were not qualified by their long-form equivalents (e.g., only the first use of “KPI” was counted toward the construction of the dependent variable as long as its long-form equivalent – “key performance indicators” – was not presented anywhere in the text).

## 7.6. Control variables

Given the nature of the task and data collection procedures, we included several control variables. We controlled for the same control variables used in Study 2c – i.e., the number of long-form acronym equivalents that participants included in their professional summaries, as well as participant age, gender, and whether English was their native language (1 = yes, 0 = no).

## 7.7. Results

The dependent variable is an overdispersed count variable and the likelihood ratio test that alpha equals zero was rejected,  $p < 0.001$ , indicating that a negative binomial model is more appropriate than a poisson model<sup>6</sup>. We tested our main hypothesis that status would be negatively associated with the number of acronyms participants used to describe their professional experiences. As predicted, participants in the low-status condition ( $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = 3.06$ ) used more acronyms (not qualified by their long-form equivalents) in their professional summaries than participants assigned to the high-status condition ( $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = 2.78$ ),  $b = -0.182$ ,  $SE = 0.093$ ,  $p = 0.049$  (see Fig. 1). The effect remained significant when we included our control variables,  $b = -0.196$ ,  $SE = 0.086$ ,  $p = 0.023$ .<sup>7</sup>

As a robustness check, we also tested whether participants used more unique acronyms that were never qualified by their long-form equivalents. As predicted, participants in the low-status condition ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = 3.04$ ) used more unique acronyms not qualified by their long-form equivalents in their professional summaries than participants assigned to the high-status condition ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $SD = 2.69$ ), without controls  $b = -0.194$ ,  $SE = 0.092$ ,  $p = 0.036$  and with controls  $b = -0.211$ ,  $SE = 0.085$ ,  $p = 0.013$ .

The results of Study 2d provide causal evidence that low status increases acronym use.

## 8. Study 3a: Evaluative concern as a mediator of the low status → Jargon use effect

Study 3a sought to provide evidence for why low status increases the use of jargon. Specifically, we tested Hypothesis 2, that evaluative concern (versus a concern with conversational clarity) will mediate the effect of low status on jargon use.

### 8.1. Participants and design

Five-hundred and forty-nine subjects participated through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Eighty-two participants were excluded from the analysis for failing at least one of two attention checks, resulting in a final sample of four-hundred and sixty seven participants ( $M_{age} = 36.78$ ,  $SD_{age} = 11.34$ , 49.46% female).

Participants were randomly assigned to a high status or low status condition.

### 8.2. Procedure and status manipulation

Participants were put in the role of an academic researcher who studies non-human primates and randomly assigned to either a low-status or high-status condition in which they read that they work at a “very low-status [high-status] school and the topic you work on is looked down upon [highly respected] in current academic circles.”

Next, we presented participants with a summary of their research findings and told them that they had recently emailed this summary to a non-academic friend. Since the friend was not an academic, we explained that the participant included both academic jargon and normal terms in their email. Specifically, participants read the following email text:

*My research focuses on upright, striding, vertical bipedality, or walking on one's hind legs. My work highlights that non-human primates (i.e., monkeys and apes) exhibit bipedal locomotion, or walking movements. They do this on both arboreal and terrestrial substrates (in trees and on the ground). I've learned that these primates walk differently in trees than they do on the ground and my research helps to explain why.*

In the low-status condition, participants further read:

*You are about to submit an application to be considered to give a talk on your research to an academic audience at a very prestigious international conference with others in your field. You will be primarily competing against academic researchers from higher-status, Ivy League and international schools. You feel that many of them look down upon and do not respect your type of research.*

In the high-status condition, participants further read:

*You are about to submit an application to be considered to give a talk on your research to an academic audience at a little known regional conference with others in your field. You will be primarily competing against academic researchers from lower-status, local schools. You feel that many of them admire and respect your type of research.*

### 8.3. Dependent variable: Jargon use

Participants were then asked to choose one of two titles for their research presentation that, if accepted, would be printed in the conference program that is distributed to all conference attendees. The titles differed in the amount of academic jargon they contained. The order of the titles was counterbalanced. Title selection served as our dependent measure. The two titles that participants chose between (with the high-jargon version listed first) were:

*An Exploratory Analysis of Upright Striding Vertical Bipedality on Horizontal Terrestrial Substrates in NonHuman Primates*

*An Exploratory Report of How Apes and Monkeys Walk on Two Legs on the Ground*

### 8.4. Mediator: Communication goal

After participants selected a title, we assessed our hypothesized mediator by asking participants why they selected the title they did (in an open-ended manner). Three coders who were blind to condition coded these comments for how much they focused on evaluative concern vs communication concern, i.e., the extent to which participants were focused on the evaluative judgements of the audience vs. accurately conveying their message. Specifically, the coders read the statements generated by participants and responded to two questions (statements were coded on a scale of 1 = not at all to 7 = very much): “How much did the speaker choose the title because s/he was concerned with looking good in the eyes of the audience, because s/he cared about being respected by the audience?” and “How much did the

<sup>6</sup> Robust standard errors are reported.

<sup>7</sup> Low-status participants ( $M = 2.58$ ,  $SD = 2.72$ ) did not use more long-form acronym equivalents in their professional summaries compared to high-status participants ( $M = 2.38$ ,  $SD = 2.84$ ),  $b = -0.081$ ,  $SE = 0.113$ ,  $p = 0.474$ .



speaker choose the title because s/he was concerned with accurately and effectively conveying the essence of the research to the audience?” The inter-rater reliability for the focus on audience concerns vs. accuracy was 0.93 and 0.92, respectively. As the two scores were highly negatively correlated ( $r = -0.81$ ), we reverse-coded ratings for the clarity question and averaged the two ratings to create a single variable reflecting the level of evaluative concern expressed by the participant. Eight Subjects did not include any text data for the mediator, and they were excluded from the mediation analysis.

### 8.5. Manipulation check

To confirm that our manipulation induced a sense of low status, participants responded to the following three items (1–7 scale,  $\alpha = 0.93$ ): “I feel that the other attendees at the conference are more qualified than I am”, “I feel that the other attendees at the conference have more status than I do”, and “I feel that the other attendees at the conference are more experienced than I am.”

### 8.6. Control variables

We controlled for age, sex, previous research experience (1 = yes, 0 = no), familiarity with academic conferences (1–5 scale), and English as a native language (1 = yes, 0 = no).

### 8.7. Results and discussion

#### 8.7.1. Manipulation check

As expected, participants assigned to the low-status condition perceived the other conference attendees as having more status than them ( $M = 4.91$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ) compared to participants assigned to the high-status condition ( $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ),  $F(1,465) = 272.7$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Thus, our manipulation effectively created differences in status.

#### 8.7.2. Jargon use

As predicted, more low-status participants selected the high jargon title (74.6% of the time) than high-status participants (64.0% of the time),  $\chi^2(1, N = 467) = 6.08$ ,  $p = 0.014$  (see Fig. 1). We also ran a binary logistic regression including our control variables and the results remained significant,  $b = 0.50$ ,  $SE = 0.20$ ,  $p = 0.014$ .

#### 8.7.3. Mediation through evaluative concern

Participants assigned to the low-status condition reported higher levels of evaluative concern ( $M = 5.13$ ,  $SD = 2.09$ ) than participants in the high-status condition ( $M = 4.23$ ,  $SD = 2.14$ ),  $t(465) = -4.58$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Furthermore, a bootstrapping mediation analysis revealed that evaluative concern mediated the effect of status on jargon selection (bias-corrected 95% CI =  $[-0.11, -0.05]$ ) such that individuals in the low-status condition compared to the high-status condition showed a stronger preference for a high jargon title due to greater evaluative concern (see Fig. 2). These findings provide support for Hypothesis 2.

Study 3a replicated our previous findings while identifying evaluative concern as a mediator of the effect of low status on jargon use. Specifically, lower-status individuals focused more on how they were being evaluated by the audience than higher-status individuals, which led them to increase their use of jargon.

## 9. Study 3b: Replication study involving mediation in the context of legal jargon

Study 3b was designed to demonstrate that low status causally increases the use of legal jargon, i.e., legalese. We again tested for whether evaluative concern mediated this effect.

### 9.1. Participants and design

Two hundred and sixty subjects participated through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Prior to analyzing the data, we excluded participants who did not accurately identify the scenario context ( $N = 17$  did not correctly identify the scenario was in a legal context), with a final sample size of two hundred and forty-three subjects ( $M_{age} = 39.10$ ,  $SD_{age} = 12.70$ , 54.73% female).

Participants were randomly assigned to a high-status or low-status condition.

### 9.2. Procedure and status manipulation

Participants were put in the role of a trial lawyer and were randomly assigned to either a low-status or high-status condition in which they read that they work at a “very high [low] status law firm and the type of law you practice is [not] highly respected in current legal circles.”

Participants then responded to the following question: “How might others treat you when you have such a high [low] status job? Please write two things that might happen when interacting with others.” Next, we presented participants with a summary of their legal practice and told them that they had recently emailed the summary to a non-lawyer friend. Since the friend was not a lawyer, we explained that the participant included both “standard industry jargon & acronyms and also more basic terms.” Specifically, participants read the following email text:

*My legal practice focuses on cases relating to nemo dat quod non habet, (“you can’t sell what you don’t own”). Specifically, I work on cases where there is a false consensus ad idem (“meeting of the minds”), which means that both sides of a deal think they have agreed on the main terms of a deal but actually have not. This often happens because one side is not bona fide (“good faith”), or is misrepresenting themselves. This usually nullifies, or cancels, the deal entirely.*

In the low-status condition, participants further read:

*As part of your job, you have been asked to give a talk next week at a prestigious international conference. Two of your colleagues have come up with potential titles for your talk and you must pick one of these titles. Which one would you choose?*

In the high-status condition, participants further read:

*As part of your job, you have been asked to give a talk next week at a little known, local conference. Two of your colleagues have come up with potential titles for your talk and you must pick one of these titles. Which one would you choose?*

### 9.3. Dependent variable: Legalese use

Participants were then asked to choose one of two titles for their talk. The order of the titles was counterbalanced. Title selection served as our dependent measure. The two titles that participants chose between (with the high-legalese version listed first) were:

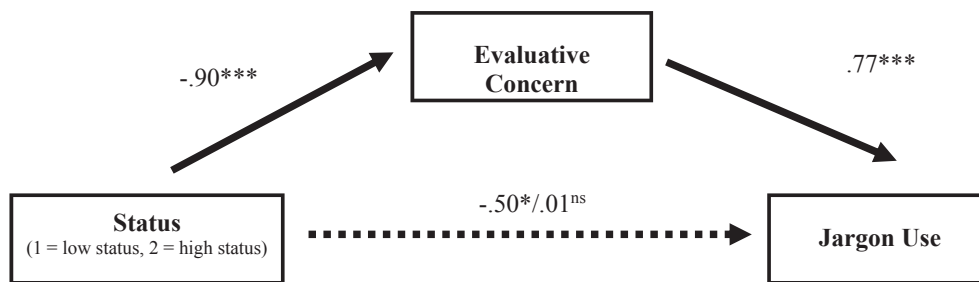
*When non-bona fide consensus ad idem results in nemo dat quod non habet outcomes*

*When acting in bad faith results in misunderstanding key deal terms, nullifying deals where one party sells what they do not yet own.*

### 9.4. Mediator: Communication goal

After participants selected a title, we asked participants why they selected the title they did (in an open-ended manner). As in Experiment 3a, three coders who were blind to condition coded these comments for





A bootstrapping mediation analysis revealed that evaluative concern mediated the effect of status on jargon selection (bias-corrected 95% CI = [-0.11, -0.05])

**Fig. 2.** The effect of status on jargon use is mediated by evaluative concern, Study 3a. A bootstrapping mediation analysis revealed that evaluative concern mediated the effect of status on jargon selection (bias-corrected 95% CI = [-0.11, -0.05]).

how much they focused on evaluative concern vs communication concern using the same measures as Experiment 3a. The inter-rater reliability for the focus on audience concerns vs. accuracy was 0.74 and 0.79, respectively. As the two scores were highly negatively correlated ( $r = -0.62$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), we reverse-coded ratings for the clarity question and averaged the two ratings to create a single variable reflecting the level of evaluative concern expressed by the participant.

#### 9.5. Control variables

We controlled for age, sex, past experience working in the legal industry (1/0), and native language (native language English, 1 = yes, 0 = no).

#### 9.6. Results and discussion

##### 9.6.1. Jargon use

Those in the low-status condition chose the high-legalese title at a higher rate (24.4%) than those in the high-status condition (13.3%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 243) = 4.84$ ,  $p = 0.028$  (see Fig. 1). We performed a logistic regression with title selection as the dependent variable (coded 1 = high-legalese selected, 0 = low-legalese selected), while including our control variables and the observed pattern of results remained significant,  $b = 0.77$ ,  $SE = 0.35$ ,  $p = 0.027$ .

##### 9.6.2. Mediation through evaluative concern

Participants in the low-status condition reported higher levels of evaluative concern ( $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ ) than participants in the high-status condition ( $M = 2.19$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ),  $t(241) = -2.97$ ,  $p = 0.003$ . Furthermore, a bootstrapping mediation analysis revealed

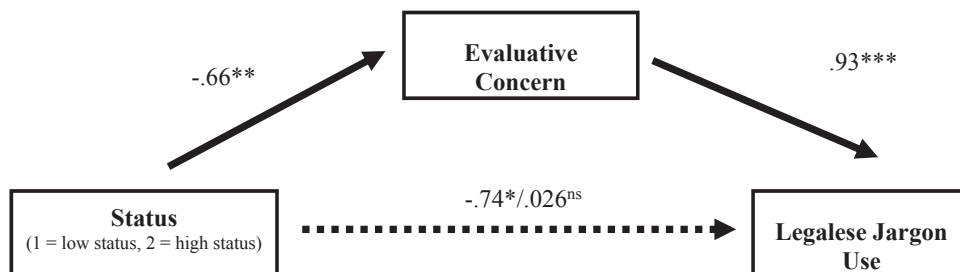
that evaluative concern mediated the effect of status on jargon selection (bias-corrected 95% CI = [-0.16, -0.03]) (see Fig. 3). Individuals in the low-status condition showed a stronger preference for legalese because their low status increased their evaluative concern. In our next study, we manipulated communication motivations to further establish support for this mechanism using an experimental-causal-chain analysis.

#### 10. Study 3c: Manipulating the mediator of evaluative concern

Studies 3a-b provided initial support for the role of evaluative concern as a mediator of the relationship between low status and jargon use using statistical mediation. In Study 3c, we adopted an *experimental-causal-chain* approach to demonstrate mediation by directly manipulating the mediator—communication motive—and testing its causal effect on jargon use. Combining statistical measurement and experimental mediation approaches allows researchers to provide comprehensive evidence for a psychological process (e.g., see Sigall & Mills, 1998; Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005). Specifically, we directly manipulated whether participants were motivated by evaluative concern or communication clarity, predicting that participants in the evaluative concern condition vs. the communication clarity condition would use more jargon.

##### 10.1. Participants and design

Five-hundred and thirty-six subjects participated through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Fifty-three subjects were excluded from the analysis for failing an attention check, resulting in a final sample of four-hundred and eighty-three ( $M_{age} = 38.95$ ,  $SD_{age} = 12.62$ , 41.82% male).



A bootstrapping mediation analysis revealed that evaluative concern mediated the effect of status on jargon selection (bias-corrected 95% CI = [-0.16, -0.03])

**Fig. 3.** The effect of status on legalese jargon use is mediated by evaluative concern, Study 3b. A bootstrapping mediation analysis revealed that evaluative concern mediated the effect of status on jargon selection (bias-corrected 95% CI = [-0.16, -0.03]).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two communicative motive conditions: evaluative concern vs. communication clarity motive.

### 10.2. Procedure

Participants read an academic scenario similar to the one used in Study 3a in which participants were put in the role of an academic researcher who studies non-human primate behavior. Participants were shown the same research summary from Study 3a and read, “Next week you are visiting a very prestigious, Ivy League school to give a talk. This school is ranked in the top 10% of schools in your field.” Unlike Study 3a, their own status was not mentioned. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two communicative motive conditions (evaluative concern vs. communication clarity motive) and were then asked to select a title for their talk.

### 10.3. Manipulating the mediator: Evaluative concern vs. communication clarity concern

In the *evaluative concern condition*, participants read:

*Your goal for this talk is for those who see it to really respect you and your research. Please take 30 s to write three reasons why it might be important to you and your career as an academic for the audience to clearly respect you and your research.*

In the *communication clarity concern condition*, participants read:

*Your goal for this talk is for those who see it to really understand you and your research. Please take 30 s to write three reasons why it might be important to you and your career as an academic for the audience to clearly understand you and your research.*

Participants then wrote for at least 30 seconds in a text response box.

### 10.4. Dependent variable: Jargon use

Participants were next asked to choose between one of two titles for their talk. The titles were identical to those used in Study 3a.

### 10.5. Control variables

We controlled for age, sex, previous research experience (yes/no), and native language (native language English, 1 = yes, 0 = no).

### 10.6. Results and discussion

Participants selected the high jargon title 64.6% of the time. As predicted, participants in the evaluative concern condition selected the high jargon title at a higher rate (70.2%) than participants in the communication clarity condition (58.3%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 483) = 7.41$ ,  $p = 0.006$ . We ran a binary logistic regression with our control variables included and the relationship between communication motive and jargon use remained significant,  $b = 0.52$ ,  $SE = 0.19$ ,  $p = 0.007$ .

In the context of an *experimental-causal-chain* analysis, we manipulated communication goals to establish our proposed mediator as a causal driver of jargon use, providing further evidence in support of Hypothesis 2.

## 11. General discussion

Across nine studies involving archival data and experiments, we identified a critical predictor of jargon use – the status level of the speaker. We found that low-status individuals compared to high-status individuals are more likely to use jargon in their communication and conversations with others. We also identified a theoretically motivated

mechanism driving this effect – the communication motive of the speaker. Overall, we found support for our core proposition that jargon use is a novel form of status compensation which we refer to as *compensatory conspicuous communication*.

We began our exploration in Studies 1a and 1b by conducting archival analyses of over 64,000 dissertations and master's theses and found that authors from lower-status schools used more jargon in the form of linguistic complexity and acronyms in their titles compared to authors from higher-status schools. Studies 2a–2d established causal evidence that occupying a low-status position leads people to use more jargon in their communications, including in live conversations. In Studies 3a–3c, we presented statistical mediation and experimental-causal-chain reasoning to demonstrate that evaluative concern with audience reactions over concern with conversational clarity is one mechanism that drives low-status group members to use more jargon than high-status group members. Our analyses span multiple operationalizations of jargon, including linguistic complexity, acronyms, and legalese.

### 11.1. Theoretical contributions

The current research makes a number of contributions to the social hierarchy and linguistic literatures. First, we offer a theoretically novel and useful definition of jargon and distinguish jargon from both slang and technical language. Second, with respect to the social hierarchy literature, we identify a novel route through which low-status individuals can compensate for and try to boost their level of status. Although some work in the social hierarchy literature has examined paralinguistic effects – from vocal features to hesitations – of power and status (e.g., see Erickson, Lind, Johnson, & O'Barr, 1978; Fragale, 2006; Gallois, Callan, & Palmer, 1992; Ko, Sadler, & Galinsky, 2015), no experimental work has captured how status affects the use of group-specific language. Third, with respect to the linguistics literature, we highlight a unique function of jargon that goes beyond the communication clarity and group bonding functions. Our research builds upon previous textual analysis literature that explores linguistic correlates of various personality, relationship, status, and motivational factors (Ireland et al., 2011; Kacwicz, Pennebaker, Davis, Jeon, & Graesser, 2014; Niederhoffer & Pennebaker, 2002; Pennebaker & King, 1999; Pennebaker & Lay, 2002; Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2003). However, little research in linguistics has experimentally captured the role of social hierarchy in driving language use. In doing so, we show how the pragmatic and symbolic value of words matter over and above their semantic meaning.

### 11.2. Limitations

We also recognize several limitations of the current work. First, despite the strengths of Studies 1a and 1b including the vastness of the dataset, relevant control variables, and reported sensitivity analyses, the results should be interpreted with caution given their correlational nature. For example, one possible alternative explanation for our findings is that higher-status schools are likely to attract more competent students, who may use less unnecessary jargon in the titles of their dissertations. Second, Studies 2a, 2b, 3a, 3b, and 3c utilized a forced choice binary dependent variable which inherently constrained the range of possible response options participants had. This may have led some participants to select an option that did not fully and accurately reflect their true preference for jargon use. However, we address this limitation in Studies 1a and 1b by analyzing previously published dissertation and thesis titles, in Study 2c by using an unconstrained conversation, and in Study 2d by allowing participants to communicate with as many or as few acronyms as they wanted.

### 11.3. Future directions

Our findings highlight a number of interesting future directions for scholars to consider pursuing. While our results support the view that status is inversely associated with jargon use, it is possible that the relationship between status and jargon use is non-linear (e.g., an inverted U-shape). That is, employees who possess extremely low levels of status and have not yet been fully socialized into the community (e.g., a new summer intern at a company) may be unfamiliar with the relevant jargon they could potentially use. Those at the highest levels might address broader audiences and as such might avoid jargon in favor of more broadly accessible language. High-status individuals might also use less jargon in order to violate language norms and purposefully signal their status, consistent with other forms of high status norm violation (Bellezza, Gino, & Keinan, 2013).

Future research could also explore when the desire to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) is more strongly predictive of jargon use than the desire for status (Anderson, Hildreth, & Howland, 2015). We believe that jargon may be used to satisfy both of these fundamental needs by signaling one's desired standing in a group and group membership more generally. However, future work could prioritize disentangling these motivations more thoroughly. Relatedly, scholars could also consider the effect of audience composition on jargon use. It is possible that low-status individuals are more likely than high-status individuals to misperceive or be indifferent to the composition of their audience and use an inappropriate level of jargon as a result. For example, low-status individuals may not consider whether out-group members who would not understand the jargon are present in the audience. Thus, understanding how a heterogeneous vs. homogenous audience (Fleming, Darley, Hilton, & Kojetin, 1990) affects jargon use is an interesting future direction.

Another logical extension of the current work is to study the downstream effects of jargon use, i.e., how or when might jargon use undermine a speaker's message or broader communicative goal. Prior work has highlighted that in-group specific language can negatively affect broader inter-organizational communication and lead to negative outcomes (Weber & Camerer, 2003). More work is needed in this vein to understand how and why jargon use may undermine team and organizational functioning.

Jargon, like other characteristics of speech, may also affect how an audience evaluates a speaker. For example, previous work (Reyt, Wiesenfeld, & Trope, 2016) has found that speaking more abstractly (vs. concretely) influences how an audience evaluates speaker expertise and advice (see also recent work on linguistic “concreteness”, Yeomans, 2020). Others have found that specific verbal labels with broader social acceptance are viewed with greater credibility by an audience. This suggests that the use of community specific language may affect audience perceptions of a speaker's message (Hemmatian & Sloman, 2018) and help an audience identify whom to trust within their communities of knowledge (Sloman & Fernbach, 2018). Together these previous findings suggest that jargon use may affect audience judgments of both speakers and their messages.

It is possible that in-group audience members may perceive jargon use by low-status members with a jaundiced eye. That is, jargon use may have the opposite of its intended effect and actually lower the status of the speaker. Consistent with this perspective, Oppenheimer (2006) found that the authors of disfluent compared to fluent messages were judged as less likable and intelligent. Furthermore, Garcia, Weaver, and Chen (2019) recently found that individuals believe that displaying high-status markers and products will make them more attractive to potential friends, but displaying such markers actually makes them less desirable as a potential friend. Low-status actors may commit a similar error with respect to jargon use. Some recent work speaks to this possibility. Tan, Wang, and Yoo (2019) found that investors with high levels of industry knowledge (i.e., higher-status audience members) were less likely to invest in business model

descriptions that used needlessly technical jargon. More generally, understanding when audiences are most and least receptive to jargon use by low-status speakers could be a fruitful future direction (Berry, Pennebaker, Mueller, & Hiller, 1997). Another interesting contextual variable for researchers to consider is the status of the group to which members belong. It is possible that high-status members of low-status groups are more receptive to jargon use than high-status members of high-status groups. Overall the aspects of the relationship between speaker and audience, signaller and perceiver, offer many areas for future exploration.

While previous literature has explored linguistic predictors of deception (Newman, Pennebaker, Berry, & Richards, 2003; Trivers, 1991, 2011), future work could also examine how jargon may be intentionally used to obfuscate. For example, Laksmiana, Tietz, and Yang (2012, pg. 185) found that the readability of the Compensation Discussion and Analysis (CD&A) section in firm proxy statements was positively correlated with the proportion of CEO pay not related to the economic determinants of compensation, suggesting that “top management tends to cloak its compensation practices” in impenetrable language. Other work has relatedly explored obfuscatory language use in financial disclosures (Bushee, Gow, & Taylor, 2018; Courtis, 1998) and used jargon measures in creating ‘obfuscation indexes’ to predict fraud in scientific publications (Markowitz & Hancock, 2016). Thus, future work could examine other contexts in which jargon and other forms of linguistic complexity may be intentionally used to facilitate unethical behavior.

## 12. Conclusion

Developing a robust understanding of the psychology of conversation requires considering not only the semantic meaning of spoken and written words, but also the underlying social and motivational influences that affect their pragmatic and symbolic use. The present studies provided consistent and converging evidence that a speaker's status drives their use of jargon. The current research has strategically leveraged and synthesized a myriad of literatures to elucidate antecedents and consequences of jargon usage in dyadic and multi-interlocuter linguistic interactions, both synchronous and asynchronous, disambiguating the precipitates of social verticality on semiotic vernaculars. Overall, our findings establish that communication, like consumption, can be both compensatory and conspicuous.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Zachariah C. Brown:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Writing - original draft. **Eric M. Anicich:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Writing - original draft. **Adam D. Galinsky:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - review & editing.

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