

CHAPTER 10

JARGONITIS

Every discipline has its own specialized language, its membership rites, its secret handshake. I remember the moment when, as a PhD student in comparative literature, I casually dropped the phrase “psychosexual morphology” into a discussion of a Thomas Hardy novel. What power! From the professor’s approving nod and the envious shuffling of my fellow students around the seminar table, I knew that I had just flashed the golden badge that admitted me into an elite disciplinary community. Needless to say, my new party trick fell flat on my nonacademic friends and relations. Whenever I solemnly intoned the word “Foucauldian,” they quickly went off to find another beer.

In its most benign and neutral definition, *jargon* signifies “the technical terminology or characteristic idiom of a special activity or group.” More often, however, the jingly word that Chaucer used to describe “the inarticulate utterance of birds” takes on a pejorative cast: “unintelligible or meaningless talk or writing”; “nonsense, gibberish”; “a strange, outlandish, or barbarous language or dialect”; “obscure and often pretentious language marked by circumlocutions and long words.”¹ So when does technical terminology cross over into the realm of *outlandish*, *obscure*, and *pretentious*? And how can academics communicate effectively with one another without exposing themselves to the