

Big words don't impress anyone - they're just confusing

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I overheard this conversation on the 8:30 Norwich to Liverpool Street train the other week: "I'm not alighting at Liverpool Street today - change of routine, I'm alighting at Diss". "Bit different for me too this time, I'm alighting at Stratford - a lot of people will be alighting there today".

Well of course I didn't overhear that at all. Any reader of this column can tell immediately that I made that up. Normal people don't alight from trains. They get off. Nobody ever uses the verb "alight". Never. Nobody, that is, except the people who make the announcements on trains. It's not their fault, I know. They don't normally say it either. They are just reading out what they have been told to read out by their bosses.

But I wonder why their bosses tell them to say that? Do they really think visiting businessmen from Japan or tourists from Germany or even five-year-old children from eastern England are going to understand what 'alight' means? And why don't they care that people won't understand?

■ Train passengers have enough to worry about without trying to work out what on earth the announcements mean.

It's for the same reason that airline staff are made to tell passengers that "we are about to commence our descent". Do you ever commence anything? I don't think I do. I reckon I normally start or begin something. And that's not just because I'm from Norfolk. English-speakers all round the world avoid the word "commence" in normal speech. I don't descend either - I go down, don't you?

What's going on here is all part of a let's-try-hard-to-be-impressive syndrome. These people seem to think it's more important to impress the general public with how you say something than to help them to understand what you are saying by using simple, every day language.

It's rather important for foreign visitors

who are not very good at English to know they have to get off at Stratford if they want to change onto the Jubilee Line. But none of that matters to these bosses. They think there's something a bit infra-dig about using the word "get". They don't get at all bothered that people get confused and don't get the message and get into a muddle if you don't get your language right.

The rest of us know that it's much more important for listeners to get what you are saying, rather than get a good impression of how clever you are. But I doubt if these bosses will ever get that.

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