Hoist by Their Own Petard

A funny thing happened at ALA Midwinter. What's more, it was fasci-
nating as well, for it was one of the loveliest examples of "communica-
tions dysfunction" I've ever seen. *(Dysfunction: impaired or abnormal
functioning.)*

Librarians—information scientists—have *always* been concerned with
the transfer of information. In recent times, this concern has been ex-
plicitly identified as constituting the major component of the profession's
domain. Whether one interprets information to be the book, and discusses
its transfer in terms of acquisitions, circulation, and interlibrary loan, or
one interprets information to be datum, and discusses transfer in terms of
access, retrieval, and transfer, the fact remains that information transfer
is *the* area of concern of the information profession.

Yet, as is already evident from the paragraph above, the medium being
used to relay the message, the unit which is basic to the process of infor-
mation transfer, i.e., the word, is a fractious thing. One would think that
informationalists would be among the most alert to this frailty of lan-
guage; yet, though the problem has been addressed at great length by a
great many, members of our profession have not been predominant
among them. We, too, use words ever more loosely, violate structure ever
more often, and transpose jargon ever more freely—unaware, and, appar-
ently, uncaring that in the process we are vitiating the very foundation of
our field.

And thus, at the Palmer House in Chicago, during a very balmy January
Midwinter Meeting of the American Library Association, a select group of
professional practitioners who had gathered together to work together
found themselves caught in their own trap. They were unable to commu-
nicate! Information specialists—listening without hearing, reading with-
out comprehending, talking without communicating.

It was almost frightening. "Network" concerns got defined in terms of
the need for reimbursement for interlibrary loan. The phrases "data base
interchange," "machine-readable record exchange," and "networking" were
being used interchangeably, engendering damaging misconceptions. The
distinction between "contract negotiation assistance" (which CLR will pro-
vide the Anable serials group) and "contracting" (which CLR is not doing
here) was not made. Legislative "networks" described procedural, not sub-
stantive, activity. The jargon of Internal Revenue Code section 4942 (j)

(3) (operating foundation) and the jargon of the technical sector (operations) were interpreted as being synonymous. And the word *standard* lost its identity altogether.

The irony is overwhelming. Like the old adage about the shoemaker's children who don't have shoes, it would appear that it is the information specialists who cannot communicate.—*Ruth L. Tighe, New England Library Information Network*