Tools.h++ and Math.h++ ... Exclusively from The Programmer's Shop

It has to be exclusive. No other company could type a phrase like that.

Of course, computer officials don't talk the way they write.

"At Seybold, we will be demonstrating a modular Autokon and a PC Script-Setter," stated Jeff Aghjayan, manager, price list of used computers? The BoCoEx Ind of course.

at we have is people speaking their own language," says Matthew Dickerson, a computer-science professor at Middlebury College, in Middlebury, Vt., who teaches English literature on the side.

"Unfortunately, rather than the computer industry learning to speak English, they are try. Too few computer people are trained in the liberal arts, such as logic and writing, or even in computer science, he

C'mon, computer industry! Don't intimidate people. Start a revolution for plain English. You could even call it something. Let's see.... How about CompuEase A-B-C? (Version 1.0, of course.)

— Laurent Belsie

Scaling the High-Tech Tower of Babel

By Simson L. Garfinkel

THE 1969 edition of the "American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language" listed the definition for "computer" as "a person who computes." These days, 10 years after the birth of the personal computer, it's hard to imagine any dictionary making a similar mistake. Just as computers have permeated our lives, the language of the technology – "computerese" – has infused our spoken words and thoughts.

"Technobabble" is a serious and thoughtful, albeit humorous, chronicle of the computer industry's language and of that language's infiltration into our daily lives. John A. Barry illuminates the genesis of technobabble, explores the ways that new words are coined and proliferate within the industry, and attempts to discern the rules of the technobabble's style and grammar.

Technobabble arises out of necessity, writes Barry: It's a shorthand for commonly used phrases or concepts.

There is a logic to technobabble, he adds: With technobabble, verbs are freely turned into nouns and nouns into verbs. The act of installing software on a new computer is called "the install." Across the country, third graders are taught "keyboarding" and "mousing" in addition to reading and writing.

Familiar words take on new meanings. In technobabble, "couple" and "dope" are both verbs, respectively meaning "to join together" and "to treat silicon with arsine or phosphine to alter its electrical properties." A "bug" is a problem with a program. "Floppy" is not an adjective but a noun describing a rectangular object used to store information.

For neophytes, the hardest part of technobabble to learn is the vast collection of "TLAs" and "FLAs" (three- and four-letter acronyms). Once coined, an acronym takes on a life of its own, freely used both as verb and noun, or as the root for other words. Some acronyms, such as "SPOOL" (Simultaneous Peripheral Operations On Line) and "Modem" (Modulator/-Demodulator), have been used for so many years that few people realize the words' origins.

Barry also follows the way that words in their own right have been twisted into

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being acronyms: IBM's new line of workstations are described as "POWERstations," the letters in "POWER" allegedly meaning "Performance Optimization With Enhanced RISC." (RISC itself is another acronym, meaning Reduced Instruction Set Computer.) He pokes fun at the industry's lawyers and copywriters, who insist on using acronyms in ways that make no linguistic sense when the acronyms are spelled out (for example, calling the new POWERstation a "RISC computer.")

These days, technobabble allows companies to describe products that do not exist with such unintelligible precision that customers delay purchasing the products of the babbler's competitors. If you had the choice of purchasing a word-processing program today or waiting two months for an "integrated, solution-based text-management and document retrieval system," what would you do?

But the most revealing part of "Technobabble" is its chronicle of the way that all of us, from the most computer literate to the most technophobic, have been influenced by technobabble:

■ The 1980s saw the rise of "networking" as a social phenomenon, as people sought to make new friends and interconnect within the business community much as their computers do.

■ With its heavy reliance on "smart bombs" and "C3I" (command, control, communications, and intelligence), the war in the Persian Gulf was accurately nicknamed "The Nintendo War."

■ People no longer tell their problems to their friends, they "brain-dump." People do not take vacations, they take "downtime." People do not chat, they "interface."

"Technobabble" is a remarkable opus, categorizing and tracing the etymology of literally thousands of computer terms now in common use. In the process, Barry gives the reader an eclectic lesson in the history of the computer industry and a revealing look at the way that techies think.

Gleaned in part from Barry's article "Computer Illiteracy," which appeared in InfoWorld, and column "/lex," which appears in SunWorld magazine, "Technobabble" is an insightful and humorous reference that would make a welcome addition to any computer bookshelf.

■ *Simson L. Garfinkel is a freelance writer who specializes in science and technology.*