

# Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 10,  
November 2007

## Linguistic links

This month, we introduce a regular feature for Pikestaff: a link to a language-related website that you may find useful or entertaining. We'd love to receive your suggestions for this slot: please email [pikestaff@clearest.co.uk](mailto:pikestaff@clearest.co.uk).

This month's link is <http://www.freerice.com>. Paid for by sponsors who advertise on the site, FreeRice has 2 goals:

- to provide English vocabulary to everyone free
- to help end world hunger by providing free rice to the starving.

The site uses multiple-choice questions (so even if you don't know, you can guess), and there are 50 levels. It's rather like snakes-and-ladders – you gradually ascend as you get questions right but slip down when you don't. Perhaps the best thing about it is that you can pass off your new addiction (ahem, educational pursuit) as a selfless act to tackle world famine. But please don't put your newly acquired words in the documents you send us for accreditation: it is customary for our corporation to repudiate supererogatory multisyllabicism.

## Scottish voters 'treated as an afterthought'

In *Pikestaff 5*, we reported that the ballot papers used in the Scottish parliamentary and local government elections on 5 May had been heavily criticized after 147,000 of them were rejected as spoiled. In some constituencies, rejected ballots outstripped the victorious party's majority. The final result gave the Scottish National Party (SNP) a historic but slender (one-seat) lead over Labour.

As a result, the Electoral Commission set up a review, led by Ron Gould (a Canadian elections expert), to independently report on the administration of both elections. Public consultation closed in August, and the final report was published in October, just after *Pikestaff 9* was put to bed. The review team found, among other problems, 2 that relate clearly to plain language:

- 4% of parliamentary ballots cast were spoiled because voters were confused by a new ballot paper. *The Guardian* reports: 'He [Gould] said the Electoral Commission [itself] had been "very much remiss" in ignoring a study of the new ballot paper before the election, which found that 4% of voters – a figure identical to the level of spoilt papers – were too confused to correctly use it.'
- Voters were unfairly influenced by the naming and positioning of candidates on ballot papers. Parties had been allowed to use non-party titles to 'sloganize' their campaigns, for example the SNP put 'Alex Salmond for first minister'. And alphabetical listing of candidates and parties led to bias in favour of names higher up the list. The Zacs and Zaras among *Pikestaff* readers will be pleased to hear that in future, candidate and party lists will be randomized.

The SNP is now working towards its goal of an independent Scotland. So it's quite possible that the United Kingdom will be broken up because of a bungled official form. Shades of Florida's 'butterfly' ballot paper that handed the 2000 US election to GW Bush.

You can read the full report at <http://www.electoralcommission.gov.uk/elections/scotelectionsreview.cfm>.

[Source: *The Guardian*, 24 October 2007]

## A hard rhyme's a-gonna fall

Continuing our pop-song theme from *Pikestaff 9*, news this month includes the launch of an education pack for secondary schools that explores the lyrics of Bob Dylan. Yes, whether he likes it or not, Dylan (who renamed himself after Dylan Thomas) has entered the canon. The pack invites pupils aged 11 to 16 to study a selection of the master's songs and compose a Dylan-inspired ballad on the theme of dreams. *The Guardian* reports: 'The suspicion will be that curriculum managers are making a cheap bid for popularity. But some of the works students will be reading were written 45 years ago, and a more plausible concession to adolescent fashion...would have been to study Dizze Rascal.'

If the spelling of Dizze Rascal's name (not to mention his record label Dirtee Stank and songs *Hold Ya Mouf*, *Stop Dat* and *Wot U On*) makes the stickler in you angree, remember this is just the tip of the linguistically lax iceberg. *The Times* has published letters from several readers who give examples of ungrammatical lyrics, many less contemporary, including:

- *Sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home* (Wallis Willis)
- *I can't keep my eyes off of you* (Andy Williams)
- *I ain't never did no wrong* (Elvis Presley)
- *The world in which we live in* (Paul McCartney)
- *Get off of my cloud* (Mick Jagger)
- *Oliver's army is here to stay, Oliver's army are on their way* (Elvis Costello).

Does it matter that songwriters use non-standard spelling and grammar? Well, the dood in us wld luv 2 say no. And plain-English guidelines aren't meant for literary writers, whose purpose is more than to simply communicate facts to their audience. But there are many Englishes and 'standard' is only one of them. Deviations from the norm help to make life fun, and most people switch readily and easily between the different Englishes they know. It's the old mantra: 'horses for courses'.

[Sources: *The Guardian*, 8 September 2007; and *The Times*, 9, 12 and 13 November 2007]

## Tip of the month: *ceteris paribus*, give your writing that *je ne sais quoi* and relieve your readers' *angst* – bid *adieu* to foreign words and phrases

Last month, we issued the *caveat* to writers: Latin is lazy when used *ad infinitum*. But laziness aside, is it OK to use foreign words and phrases in writing English?

An important plain-language guideline is to use words that are familiar to your readers. So in general, we do advise against using foreign words and phrases, which can be unfamiliar, and so hard to understand. Short English words are usually the clearest.

But the Latin abbreviations 'etc', 'eg' and 'ie' are fairly well understood, 'etc' probably most so. They're probably harmless when used with most audiences, though if we were editing a document for low-literacy readers, we may well change them – say to 'and so on', 'such as' and 'namely'. Some other foreign terms are much less common, so get rid of them if you can; and if you really need to keep them, explain them briefly in brackets the first time they appear.

Remember: if in doubt about what your readers will understand, test the document with them. Next month's tip of the month will cover testing.

## Readers write

Brace yourselves for more Latin... A reader wrote in to say he'd spotted an error in a piece we quoted in *Pikestaff*, where a spokesperson referred to 'data is'. Explaining that we prefer to treat 'data' as singular, we acknowledged that the Latin plural of 'datum' is indeed 'data' (the same goes for 'medium' and 'media'). But the style guide of the Information Commissioner's office (which enforces and oversees the Data Protection Act) treats 'data' as singular, like a collective noun, as do many other style guides these days.

Pam Peters' corpus-based *Cambridge Guide to English Usage* confirms this trend: the ratio of singular to plural constructions for 'data' in the corpora it uses is 4:7. Dictionaries support this, with both *New Oxford* and *Merriam-Webster's* noting that the singular construction is now as much standard English as the plural. 'Agenda' and 'stamina' are 2 other Latin plurals that have become purely singular nouns in English.

Note too that it's clearer to use the English plural of Latin nouns. So, for example, prefer 'formulas' to 'formulae', 'forums' to 'fora', 'focuses' to 'foci', and (as above) 'corpuses' to 'corpora'. It's good to know the original Latin plurals, but it's never clever to confuse your readers.

## News from Plain Language Commission

### High Peak aims for summit of clear communication

About 50 staff at High Peak Borough Council in Derbyshire have received a day's training from Plain Language Commission to help them clarify communications with residents and reports to councillors.

Emily Thrane, executive member for corporate services, joined one of the courses: 'Although I am committed to plain language, I know only too well how easy it is to use professional jargon that other people do not understand. The training session was a very useful reminder of those pitfalls – and how to avoid them. It was great fun as well!'

Martin Cutts, who presented the courses, said: 'Plain language is fair language because it informs and empowers people instead of baffling and oppressing them. People have the right to understand decisions and information that affect them; local government needs to make documents accessible to all. Many councils, including High Peak, publish committee reports on the web so they need to be clear.'

[Source: *Buxton Advertiser*, 18 October 2007]

### Christmas book for language lovers

All who attend our courses have been getting a copy of the excellent *Good Word Guide* edited by Martin Manser. His new book has just come out in time

for the Christmas rush: *Buttering Parsnips, Twocking Chavs: The Secret Life of the English Language* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007). Highly recommended.

### **Tangled web award**

So reads a headline to a piece in *Private Eye* (6 December 2007), based on Martin Cutts' article, 'Plain English Awards scandal', which we announced in *Pikestaff 8*. The piece reveals the £600,000 worth of commercial connections between the event's promoter and several of the winners. You can read Martin's article at <http://www.clearnest.co.uk/files/PlainEnglishAwardsScandal.pdf>.

So far, Lord Gnome's august organ is the only media outlet to expose this extraordinary story to a national audience. When will the rest of the street of shame wake up?

### **Aural wallpaper**

One star of the 'Plain English Awards scandal', Harriet Harman MP (Leader of the House of Commons and deputy leader of the Labour Party) featured recently on Radio 4's *Today* programme. Announcing her wish to review the formal language of parliament and use 'plain English', she read out some traditional rhubarb about 'proroguing parliament'. *Pikestaff* wishes her well in this noble endeavour. The times being turbulent, will Harman keep her job long enough to have any effect?

Parliament remains wedded to silly language: Lords debates seem to consist almost entirely of people saying, 'My noble Lady will be pleased to hear..' and 'Noble Lords will want to join me in paying tribute...'. Commons debates, meanwhile, are littered with such formulas as 'My learned and right honourable friend the member for Yawnsville', and 'Honourable and right honourable members will wish to know that...'. The main purpose of these phrases seems to be to give the speaker time to think.

In the unlikely event that noble readers wish to find out more about proper forms of address in the House of Commons, they may direct their goodselves to a factsheet on the topic at <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/upload/G07.pdf>.

### **New Simplification Centre launched at the University of Reading**

Despite its name, plain language isn't just about language: many other aspects of a document are important to us too, including structure, content, layout and design. Some people use the term 'information design' to cover all this.

The Simplification Centre will tackle the problem of over-complex information by providing evidence-based advice (using existing knowledge and new research) on information design. See <http://simplificationcentre.org.uk/> or email [info@simplificationcentre.org.uk](mailto:info@simplificationcentre.org.uk) for more information.

At the same time, the Information Design Association (IDA) has recently re-formed. David Dickinson (formerly of *Consumer Which?* and now head of the company Consumption) gave a fascinating talk to the IDA on 'Medicines, information design and people's health' at the Design Council on 21 November. He showed how badly some pharmaceutical companies and hospital trusts communicate with customers, explained how they could do better, and suggested that edicts from the medicines regulator sometimes

impose bad writing and design practice. There's more at <http://www.informationdesignassociation.org>.

## Rhubarb, redundancies and Roman rubbish

### Needing to address a failure to deliver

The novelist Jeanette Winterson reports in *The Times* of 13 October that a friend who had just moved into an apartment in Canary Wharf, King Frederick IX Tower received a phone call saying her new bed couldn't be delivered because there was no such place as 'King Frederick Icks Tower'. Her friend explained that 'IX' was Roman numerals. After a long pause during which she heard the tap-tap of keystrokes on the driver's sat-nav, the reply came: 'Madam, very sorry, there's no King Frederick the Roman Numerals Tower.'

### Pedantic about PIN numbers

Reader David Carr wonders why people say 'PIN number' instead of 'PI number' or just 'PIN'. Why not ask next time you're withdrawing cash at the ATM machine or GPO office? (Use your GPS system to get there.)

### Unplainly painful

Geoff Carr [probably no relation, *Ed*] emailed us a letter from McCarthy & Stone. Telling his father about the benefits of their retirement homes, the letter includes the line: 'If the thought of moving seems daunting then we urge you not to worry. We have helped over 40,000 people move to one of our apartments...'

Realizing the queue for the bathroom might be a bit long, Mr Carr senior declined the offer.

Similarly disconcerting is the notice on Marie Dunne's local hardware shop: 'Keys cut and heels while you wait'. Ouch.

### Euphemisms R US

When a B52 bomber recently flew across America carrying 6 nuclear-armed cruise missiles, the US military called the errant flight 'an erosion of adherence to weapons-handling standards'.

BBC radio news reported that the culprits had been 'relieved of their duties'. This sounded quite comforting: people had been sacked and would never get near President Bush's 'nuclear' weapons again. But had they? What does 'relieved of their duties' really mean? The BBC didn't explain. Press reports have since suggested that the guilty people were merely shunted off to other tasks. When Armageddon threatens, the human race's first weapon will be euphemism.

Here at *Pikestaff*, we're keen not to experience any erosion in our adherence to newsletter-writing standards. So please email us ([pikestaff@clearest.co.uk](mailto:pikestaff@clearest.co.uk)) with your views, examples, ideas for future stories, and in particular any:

- scarilee ungrammatical lyrics that make you uneasee or sicklee
- Christmas-related rhubarb and linguistic balls-ups that are snow joke.

## Back issues

You can see back issues of *Pikestaff* on our website (click on 'Newsletter').

## Tell a friend

If you think a friend or colleague would enjoy *Pikestaff*, please feel free to

forward it to them.

### **Spread the word**

We're happy for you to use any of our articles to promote plain language, provided you acknowledge *Pikestaff* as the source.

### **Rolling the credits**

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