

Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 14, March 2008

Future is bright as fight for right oversight gets green light

In the US, the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee has passed a bill to require federal agencies to use plain language in their common official forms.

The bill was introduced by Representative Bruce Braley, who 'wanted to cut through the indecipherable, bureaucratic gobbledygook he found when he arrived in Washington'. It requires the government to use 'clear, concise and well-organized language'. The changes will affect only documents and communications widely available to the public.

After passing the bill unanimously on 13 March, the committee added several amendments intended to help departments like the Internal Revenue Service, Medicare and Social Security to make the changes. For example, the Government Accountability Office will evaluate existing plain-language guidelines and recommend any changes within 6 months.

Congratulations go to all who have worked hard to achieve this latest success.

But what about that contronym, we hear you ask

We couldn't help wondering why the committee's name includes the contronym 'oversight'. Contronyms – also known as autonyms, antagonyms, Janus words (after the 2-faced Roman god) and self-antonyms – are words with 2 opposite meanings. Here are some examples of contronyms, with sentences from the British National Corpus to illustrate their opposite meanings:

- 'To cleave' – which can mean to split apart from or to stick to:
 - The boy grabbed the axe his father used to cleave wood for the fire and chased the bully down the street.
 - Until a certain age many children cleave to the conviction they will live for ever.
- 'To dust' – which can mean to remove or add dust:
 - She straightened the skirt that Thérèse had lent her, dusted it with both hands, then descended the stairs.
 - Thinly roll out the icing on a surface dusted with icing sugar.
- 'Fast' – which can mean moving quickly or not at all:
 - There are fundamental limits to how fast a conventional computer can go.
 - Susan's wooden leg splintered through a hole in the stage and stuck fast.

Often, as Wikipedia notes, 'one sense is more obscure or archaic, increasing the danger of misinterpretation when it does occur'.

The everyday meaning of 'oversight', which the public is likely to be more familiar with, is 'a mistake caused by not noticing'. The other meaning ('the

act of overseeing something') is used, as Pam Peters notes in *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage*, in 'bureaucratic management'. But the public may well be unaware of it, and so have a distorted view of what the US committee's about.

British bureaucrats are partial to a bit of oversight too: searching the Directgov website for the term gives 6 results over several government departments, and the Department of Health's own produces 54. So much governmental oversight? To use another contronym, we think that's wicked. Wicked too was HW Fowler's sense of humour many years ago, when he noted the related contronym 'overlook':

Thus there is now an unfortunate ambiguity in the notice
Gentlemen are requested not to overlook the Ladies' Bathing Place.

[Sources: *Courier*, 14 March: <http://www.wfcourier.com/articles/2008/03/14/news/politics/10196359.txt>; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Contronym>; and *Fowler's Modern English Usage*, Oxford University Press, 1965]

News from Plain Language Commission

Martin Cutts runs masterclasses for health professionals

The Patient Information Forum recently organized its third annual conference, entitled 'Producing Effective Information for Patients: The Key Issues'. Our research director, Martin Cutts, presented 2 masterclasses on achieving clarity in health information through the written word. They attracted some 90 people. Martin covered 3 topics:

- What do we know about our readers? In this section, Martin looked at reading abilities, and people's familiarity with health words. He used examples from our new *Plain English Lexicon*, featured as *Pikestaff 13's* linguistic link, showing that laypeople may not understand many health words, or (worse still) misunderstand some: as Martin notes for 'stool', 'Could be unhappy consequences if confused with what is sat upon.'
- What can help readers' comprehension? For this, Martin drew upon our *15 Tips on Writing Plain English*, which you can read on our website at <http://clearest.co.uk/files/15TopTips.pdf>.
- What can hinder readers' comprehension? The group looked at examples from 2 patient information leaflets: one whose ailing English had been rewritten clearly and another that was in great need of the same treatment.

How to save money on our editing

Last month's *Pikestaff* reminded you about our editing service, which is provided by published authors and editors at what we hope is a reasonable cost. Here are a few guidelines to help you get the best value when you use it.

Do

- Email us as soon as you can when you expect to send us a document. We understand you're often working to a tight timescale, and we'll always do our utmost to give you our first edits in 3–5 working days. But the sooner we know you'll need our services, the more efficiently we can plan our time.
- Send us your document in Word first if you can. It's harder to edit in Acrobat, so we charge 20% extra for working with pdf files in the first round. (After we've made edits to your Word file, a pdf is fine for final checking; and we don't charge any more for this at that stage.)

- After you've incorporated as many of our Word edits as you can, please use 'track changes' if you alter or add to the document and decide to return it to us for a second check. This makes it quicker for us to spot and check the new bits.

Don't

- Send us your document for editing until you're pretty sure it's finished. If you're still changing the content while we're editing it, you'll end up with edits to an old document, and we'll have to spend extra time comparing versions and editing your changes.
- Put fancy pictures or logos in your Word documents. The resulting files are huge, making them slow to work with.
- Expect us to edit embedded graphs and tables on screen. You'll need to give us the source files – or we can print off the graphs or tables and mark them up manually. If we do this, we'll fax or post them back to you.

Squaring the swearing circle

Last month's *Pikestaff* included a piece on rude words. Now a research study has found that 'regular use of profanity to express employees' feelings such as frustration helped develop social relationships'. The researchers – from the University of East Anglia, Norwich – suggest that swearing serves the needs of people to develop and maintain solidarity and a coping strategy for stress. Inventive headlines for the story included:

- Swearing's bloody good for you (*Daily Star*)
- We've got to think outside the swear box (*Sunday Telegraph*)
- 4-letter blast 'good for staff' (*Mirror*)
- Hey-ho...it's eff to work we go (*Sun*).

But before you get carried away, the research team does add that 'in the presence of customers or senior staff, swearing is discouraged'.

[Sources: *Ziggurat*, Spring/Summer 2008; and <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/norfolk/7047536.stm>]

Dealing with critics of plain English

So, you believe in plain English but your colleagues are sceptical. What can you tell them to convince them of its benefits?

We hear and read various objections to plain English, and from time to time in *Pikestaff* we'll focus on one of these. A common criticism – often from those of a literary bent – is that plain English dumbs down our language and fails to use its richness. This is far from the truth. Plain-English guidelines aren't intended to apply to literary writing (which is about more than just getting a factual message across), but aim to help authors use the language fully to make their message clear to the audience.

Here's a comment we recently received about a course at Pendle Borough Council in East Lancashire: 'I found it useful and not what I had expected. I had envisaged a general attack on the English language, which it clearly was not. It was supporting the basics of our language but making better use of the words we have at our disposal. [The presenter] used good examples which made sense and that helped in the broader understanding of the wider issue.'

The communications team at Pendle Borough Council is keen to make the council more accessible and understandable through adopting plain-English standards. The team also believes it can improve the Council's image by

showing that it cares about clear and effective communication.

We offer our courses at a sensible cost – rather less pricey than one teacher of literary English, the novelist Martin Amis, who is said to have been paid nearly £3,000 an hour for teaching creative writing at the University of Manchester. At £900–1,100 (depending on the type of organization) for a full day for up to 12 participants, our courses are a relative snip! And included in this price are comments on up to 4 pages of each participant's writing, something Martin Amis doesn't indulge in: *Private Eye* reports that he declared his students were 'nice' but he doesn't actually 'look at any of their creative stuff'.

Martin Amis's brother also writes, but on complex philosophical matters. Though doubtless proud of both her sons, their mother disliked Martin's subject matter, remarking rather grandly: 'One son I can read but can't understand; the other I can understand but can't read.'

[Sources: *The Week*, 2 February 2008; and *Private Eye*, number 1203]

Unenthused by theological thickets

Dr Rowan Williams' 'unclarity' in a speech about sharia (*Pikestaff 13*) also drew the ire of Matthew Parris in the *Spectator*:

I keep reading that the Archbishop delights in 'studied ambiguity', but all we can find in his speech is a tendency...to shy at philosophical fences, taking refuge by diving back down into detail. We encounter, too, a prolixity all too common among academics: a wallowing around in clauses, sub-clauses, circumlocutions and academic jargon which is not an indication of intellectuality but a substitute for it. It is rude and lazy to write sloppy English at self-indulgent length: it shows disregard for the reader, and tends to shield the argument – if there is one – from examination, lost in thickets of verbiage.

[Source: *Spectator*, 8 March 2008: <http://www.spectator.co.uk/the-magazine/columnists/503011/another-voice.html>]

Linguistic links: Great Books Online

So reads the subtitle of Bartleby.com, which describes itself as 'the pre-eminent Internet publisher of literature, reference and verse providing students, researchers and the intellectually curious with unlimited access to books and information on the web, free of charge'.

The site includes full versions of several classic books on English usage, including *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White, *On the Art of Writing* by Quiller-Couch, and *The King's English* by Fowler (he of the Ladies' Bathing Place). You can find this website at <http://www.bartleby.com/>, and the usage books at <http://www.bartleby.com/usage/>.

One is amused

Pikestaff 12 mentioned the train company 'one'. First Great Eastern had changed its relatively clear ordinal number to the confusing cardinal 'one' when it merged with 3 other train companies. As Andrew Martin commented in *The Guardian*: 'Commuters must have scratched their heads when told of "the seven-thirty 'one' train"; posher passengers ("one takes one's 'one' train at one") would have been equally perplexed.'

So one was amused (in a 'to laugh or to cry' sort of way) to read that 'one' has now changed its name to 'National Express East Anglia' (possible slogan: we'll get you NEEA your destination). We wonder how much all that rebranding has cost them. As Andrew Martin adds: 'If we hadn't turned a natural monopoly into a series of private businesses, there'd have been no squandering of money on relaunches and rebrandings, and we could have stuck with a still simpler, more elegant and unpretentious name: "British Rail".'

Tip of the month: don't improvise when you apostrophize; be wise and follow the rule that applies

Many of our tips of the month are about areas of language where there isn't one correct way of writing, so we offer you advice on which option to choose. But there are definite rules on where to use an apostrophe.

Apostrophes have 2 main uses: to show that one or more letters are missing (for example **I'm**, **he's**, **we've**), and to show possession. It's usually the possession ones that people get wrong, but if you follow one simple rule, you can't go far wrong. Ask yourself: who does it belong to? Then put the apostrophe after your answer. Here are some examples, showing that this easy rule always works:

Phrase without apostrophe: The managers computer

Who does it belong to? The manager

Phrase with correct apostrophe: The manager's computer

Phrase without apostrophe: Several writers books

Who do the books belong to? The writers

Phrase with correct apostrophe: Several writers' books

Phrase without apostrophe: The peoples decision

Who does it belong to? The people

Phrase with correct apostrophe: The people's decision

Phrase without apostrophe: The childrens toys

Who do the toys belong to? The children

Phrase with correct apostrophe: The children's toys

If the owner is a named person whose name already ends in **s**, think how you would say it. If you'd say it with another **s** sound, then add one in writing; if you wouldn't then don't: **Jo Bloggs' article**, **Keats's poems**.

Be aware too that the possessive apostrophe may express relationships other than literal ownership. Bill Sabin uses these examples in *The Gregg Reference Manual* (McGraw-Hill Irwin, 2005):

- IBM's product line (meaning the product line *made or sold by IBM*)
- Faulkner's novels (meaning the novels *written by Faulkner*)
- Matisse's paintings (meaning the paintings *created by Matisse*)
- Frank's nickname (meaning the nickname *given to or used by Frank*)
- A two weeks' vacation (meaning a vacation *for or lasting two weeks*).

A common mistake with the apostrophe is in confusing the words **it's** and **its**. **It's** is only ever short for **it is**; **its** means **belonging to it**. An easy way of remembering the latter is that its follows the same (apostrophe-free) pattern as its masculine and feminine equivalents, **his** and **hers**: you'd never write **hi's** or **her's**.

But these rules don't stop linguists arguing about apostrophes in some cases.

Private Eye readers will have seen the ongoing argument about whether there should be an apostrophe in *Pedants Corner*. One contributor thought it should include an apostrophe after the **s** (*Pedants' Corner*) to show the corner belongs to pedants; another possibility would be *Pedant's Corner*, the singular making it seem more personal, rather like *Patient's Charter*. One reader asserted that **pedants** in this context is a descriptive rather than possessive form so *Private Eye* was right not to include an apostrophe (though Bill Sabin's approach, above, would suggest it still should). A like-minded reader concluded: 'Hurrah for the incipient death of the apostrophe, touted by Bernard Shaw but still to be attained.' In the meantime, Ian Hislop has plumped for various interesting alternatives, such as *Ped'ants Corner* and *P'edants Corner*. Greengrocers all over Britain will be proud of him.

[Source: *Private Eye*, numbers 1201–4]

Which profession prevails in piffle production prowess?

Perhaps not surprisingly, politicians and lawyers are commonly associated with long-winded language. For example, the Risk and Regulation Advisory Council's web page reports that Gordon Brown has 'committed to taking the Better Regulation agenda to a new level by focusing upstream at where policy-making engages with risk'. And a legal notice in *The Times* announces: 'A copy of the said petition will be furnished to any such person requiring the same by the undermentioned solicitors on payment of the regulated charge for the same.'

But it's remarkable how often travel workers and organizations have featured in *Pikestaff* too; we're not quite sure why transit inspires tripe. In a letter to *The Times*, Anne McCall reports that on a flight to Boston, she was told a 'beverage' would be served. This promise was downgraded to 'we intend to beverage' before turbulence brought about a definite 'we are unable to complete beverisation'. Another luckier reader replied to say: 'During an extended delay at Atlanta airport we were cheered by the announcement that the captain had decided to "groundfeed" us.'

Even more worrying is some teachers' inability to communicate clearly. If your educational establishment's epistles make you edgy, do scratch that itch by sharing them with *Pikestaff*. The head of a local primary school recently wrote to parents as follows, about a literacy parents' evening:

This meeting will last about an hour and the main focus will be to help parents to understand the way I which we teach reading, spelling and handwriting in school and thus enabling parents to support their children at home in these three areas.

The letter continued: 'We have included a slip at the bottom of this letter so that you can let us know what your expectations / preferred outcomes will be.' The bottom of the letter – unlike the rest – was entirely slip-free.

We hope you enjoyed an Easter break, and succeeded in completing chocolatzation. See you in April.

[Sources: <http://www.berr.gov.uk/about/economics-statistics/rrac/index.html> ;

The Times, 23 February 2008:

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/letters/article3418950.ece> ; and

The Times, 26 February 2008:

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/letters/article3433726.ece>]

Contribute

Recently encountered any rampant rhubarb or troublesome tripe? If so, we'd love to hear from you. Email us with your views, examples, and ideas for future stories at pikestaff@clearest.co.uk.

Back issues

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

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