

# Pikestaff

## Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 16, May 2008

### 'My council is a strawberry so you're always in a jam'

In *Pikestaff 15*, we mentioned that officers at Northamptonshire County Council had warned senior staff to 'make sure [that they] know the taste of strawberry – develop pride in the brand, or leave'. *The Times'* Jargon Decoder concluded: 'What is it [the taste of strawberry] really? Absolutely no idea.' This month we bring you the full story of the fruity framework that's flummoxed staff and flustered the council.

It all started in January, when newly appointed chief executive Katherine Kerswell published a video on YouTube about the council's plans to restructure. This wasn't the council's first venture into modern methods of communications; it also used Facebook to consult people on how it should spend its budget.

As the *Local Government Chronicle* reports, Kerswell's piece 'became the eighth most watched clip on YouTube's news and politics category, with 1,000 hits in a day'. In the video, she says:

I want you to think about 'taste the strawberry' as a message, and that strawberry flavour will be the flavour that is Northamptonshire County Council. Sounds a bit weird and I hope I've got you interested in that, because we'll develop what that flavour really is that we get across to all our customers.

But the mysterious metaphor backfired rather, as her message not only left staff puzzled, but also inspired BBC Radio Northampton's 'Drivetime Bard', Martin Heath – a 'poet of a very rare quality' – to write and sing the less-than-flattering Strawberry Song:

Some councils are like lions, proud guardians of our land  
Some see themselves as angels, always there to lend a hand  
Some are just like soldiers – their courage we salute  
But I see mine as a strawberry and that's a kind of fruit.

My council runs the highways that go from A to B  
Past burnt out cars and landfill sites – our lovely scenery  
While other councils fix their roads and seem to give a damn  
My council is a strawberry so you're always in a jam.

Some councils run their schools well and teach all those that truant  
In maths they learn to calculate, in languages they're fluent  
Those youngsters pass exams and use the skills that they have shown  
But we let them pick strawberries down the local 'pick your own'.

Some councils love their heritage and celebrate their past  
With popular attractions and monuments that last  
Though we attack our history like a really hungry vulture  
We've got yoghurt full of strawberry so at least we have some

culture.

Some council bosses want to serve the public, so they say  
And make things run much smoother in each and every way  
Some say I took this job because the salary's a dream  
My council is a strawberry and I'm the cat that got the cream.

BBC Northampton followed the song by sending reporter Willy Gilder [that's his name, not a job description – Ed] to the council's HQ, the poetically named John Dryden House. Bearing strawberries (and some blueberries, since the BBC's politically neutral), he asked staff to taste the fruit and tell him whether any particular organization came to mind. They did but it didn't.

You can:

- watch the YouTube message at <http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=HniOvnWUzj8&feature=related>
- listen to the Strawberry Song at [http://www.bbc.co.uk/northamptonshire/content/articles/2008/01/22/drivetime\\_bard\\_strawberry\\_song\\_feature.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/northamptonshire/content/articles/2008/01/22/drivetime_bard_strawberry_song_feature.shtml).

[Sources: *Local Government Chronicle*, 18 and 25 January 2008: [http://www.lgcplus.com/News/2008/01/tasting\\_the\\_strawberry.html](http://www.lgcplus.com/News/2008/01/tasting_the_strawberry.html) and [http://www.lgcplus.com/News/2008/01/chiefs\\_strawberry\\_speech\\_turned\\_to\\_song.html](http://www.lgcplus.com/News/2008/01/chiefs_strawberry_speech_turned_to_song.html); and *The Times*, 18 March 2008: [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life\\_and\\_style/career\\_and\\_jobs/public\\_sector/article3562936.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/career_and_jobs/public_sector/article3562936.ece)]

## No masterstroke for FHD as consultancy offloads director

As we noted in *Pikestaff 10*, clear writing isn't just about language: many other aspects are important, including layout and design. And, as the Office of Government Commerce (OGC) has demonstrated this month, it's just as possible to achieve notoriety through dodgy design as loopy language.

Indeed, the OGC (the body 'responsible for improving value for money by driving up standards and capability in procurement') has followed Northamptonshire's example in gaining lots of publicity but little prestige. Feeling the need for rebranding (as you do), the OGC asked London-based design consultancy FHD to help them produce a new logo. But the exercise turned out to be a bit of a cock-up. To see why, view the logo at [http://www.theregister.co.uk/2008/04/22/ogc\\_logo/](http://www.theregister.co.uk/2008/04/22/ogc_logo/) (if in doubt, tip your head to the left). It even made it onto the telly, featuring on the BBC's *Have I Got News for You?*

It wasn't a great use of taxpayers' money, especially as the OGC had inscribed the logo on mousemats and pens before revealing it to staff, who took 'around 20 seconds to realise why this particular bit of joss-stick-driven madness was going to end in tears (of laughter)'.

Entering into the spirit, the OGC's spokesman claimed the logo 'is not inappropriate to an organisation that's looking to have a firm grip on government spend'. By complete coincidence, the 'Vacancies' page of FHD's website now shows an opportunity for a Director of Brand Consultancy.

Thick-skinned readers may enjoy this website, which celebrates other logos with a similar theme (but if you disliked Irvine Welsh's coarseness in a previous *Pikestaff* – on which, there's more below – you may feel the same about the language in this): <http://www.b3ta.com/features/phalliclogoawards/>.

[Source: *The Register*, 22 April: [http://www.theregister.co.uk/2008/04/22/ogc\\_logo/](http://www.theregister.co.uk/2008/04/22/ogc_logo/)]

## Tip of the month: avoid colonic irritation

Last month's *Pikestaff* looked at where to use the semicolon, noting its modern use as part of a cheeky emoticon. This time we focus on its straighter sibling, the colon. We'll save our comparison of the 2 for *Pikestaff 17*, where we'll analyse the nuances of meaning that each can bring to a sentence.

### Our advice

The colon:

- shows that what follows explains or elaborates on what has gone before
- never needs a space before it
- is almost always preceded by a complete sentence
- doesn't need a hyphen or dash after it (that's old-fashioned now)
- can be followed by another complete sentence, a list or even a single word or phrase
- isn't normally followed by a capital letter in British English, but may be in American English.

### Examples

In his book, *Penguin Guide to Punctuation* (which we'd recommend), RL Trask includes these examples:

She was sure of one thing: she was not going to be a housewife.

Several friends have provided me with inspiration: Tim, Ian and, above all, Larry.

I propose the creation of a new post: School Executive Officer.

The middle example here shows a colon followed by a horizontal list. Colons are used to introduce vertical lists too, for example with bullet points (as in 'Our advice' above). You can read about bullet lists in *Pikestaff 7*, which covered these in the tip of the month.

Other uses are in ratios ('Among students of French, women outnumber men by more than 4:1') and (in American English) in writing times (for example, 8:45 and 2:25). (British English uses a full stop here.) It's also used as a modern equivalent to the comma in introducing direct speech, especially in newspapers and magazines, for example:

*Pikestaff's* writer said: 'We use this style in our newsletter.'

## Readers write

### Falling foul of readers' feelings

Talking of punctuation, in *Pikestaff 15* we published Irvine Welsh's strong words on those who mourn the semicolon's underuse. One reader emailed to say this made *Pikestaff* unsuitable for her staff, to whom she usually forwards the newsletter. We replied:

We believe that asterisking out words or parts of words detracts from clear writing, as the reader has to work out what the writer meant. But equally, it's important not to offend readers, as this too distracts them from the message. In this case, we were quoting from *The Guardian*, which reproduced Irvine Welsh's

quotation without asterisks, and we decided that the unexpurgated version was more likely to amuse than offend readers.

Of course, you are the best judge of your readers' needs and sensitivities, so please feel free to warn them about the strong language (perhaps by noting in your covering email or subject line 'contains strong language in an article about curse words').

Although we've no immediate plans to include any more cursing quotations (and we don't expect ever to do so outside direct quotes), feel free to follow this advice should we fall foul of your readers' feelings in future.

### **There's ungrammaticalities in them there constructions**

Another reader wrote to share her irritation at a particular usage of 'there's':

My pet hate...is the use of 'there's' followed by the plural, eg 'there's 6 days to go' and 'there's several reasons'. The biggest offender seems to be the Radio 4 Today programme. I drive my husband mad with shouting 'There are' constantly at the radio.

Our line on this? It's true that 'there's' is often used with a plural noun. According to the *Longman Grammar*, this form is in fact more common than 'there are'. It's used especially with quantitative statements, like the 2 examples our reader gives. *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage* notes that this structure is working its way into standard English: 'It seems to be evolving into a fixed phrase, rather like the French *C'est...*, serving the needs of the ongoing discourse rather than the grammar of the sentence.'

So although it's technically wrong, we think we must accept this form in spoken English, as the language evolves. The idiom is certainly less acceptable in writing – so we'd still correct it in a document we were editing for a client.

### **Absolution from acquisition from aberrant apostrophe emporium**

A reader emailed to report a troubled conscience after buying 'some lovely furniture from an upholstery firm in Derby with a large window sign that has offended me for years advertising "custom-made sofa's".' Reader, you are forgiven; after all, if we resolved to buy nothing from shops with errant or missing apostrophes, we'd struggle (and, in particular, stand no chance of getting our 5 a day).

A related predicament for the punctuation pedants among us, however, is whether it's permissible to buy items that themselves contain apostrophe errors. Penitent at having purchased a Christmas table cloth covered with 'Santas little helper', *Pikestaff's* house and home editor went to it with a permanent marker, and felt much better afterwards.

### **Linguistic links: Typo Eradication Advancement League**

In treating our editor for hyperpedantry (signs and symptoms: red pens concealed in clothing; flaring of nostrils at sight of stylistic slips; grinding of teeth in presence of gruesome ungrammaticalities), we directed him to the website of Jeff Deck. If you too lie awake at night perturbed by your pedantic predilections, this chap will make you realize just how little you have to worry about. (Or on the other hand, you could just join him.)

Deck has 'deputized himself a grammar vigilante and set out to make the US "a safer place for spelling"'. Calling it the Typo Eradication Advancement League (TEAL, its mascot a duck named Gerund), this pedant extraordinaire has now visited 18 states to chronicle, and correct if possible, all types of

English errors. Should you decide to enlist, please bear in mind the occupational hazards: Deck was thrown out of a bar for pointing out that they'd misspelt 'margarita', and a shopkeeper called him something nasty when told his store was mislabelled a 'grocery'.

Read all about it in Jeff Deck's entertaining blog at <http://www.jeffdeck.com/teal/index.html>.

[Source: *The Seattle Times*, 23 April 2008:  
[http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/dannywestneat/2004367117\\_danny23.html](http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/dannywestneat/2004367117_danny23.html)

Thanks to Gary Larson for telling us about TEAL]

## News from Plain Language Commission

This month, you'll find 2 new features on our website, which we hope will make it even more user-friendly:

- We're launching a new 'Linguistic links' page, including all the links we've featured in *Pikestaff* and more too. We'll be updating this regularly as we find new links that we think you'll find interesting or useful. Check it out at <http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=47>.
- Several people have suggested that we create an index for *Pikestaff*, so you can easily locate tips, news and examples from past issues. We thought hard about how best to do this, and decided on a format that summarizes each month's content. You can see the new index at <http://www.clearest.co.uk/files/PikestaffIndex.doc>.

Also new this month are 2 articles, first published in issue 58 of *Clarity* (the journal of the international association plain legal language). In 'Keeping errors in Czech', Martin Cutts:

- reflects on his pipe dream of convincing lawyers to proofread their letters and emails before sending them to clients
- recounts some examples of poor proofreading
- offers practical hints to authors on how to proofread better.

The other article reports the salient points of a dialogue between Sarah Carr and Dr Robert Eagleson (a plain-language consultant and former professor of English language, in Sydney, Australia) on personal pronouns and gender – see 'Linguistic lingo for lawyers – personal pronouns and gender: a dialogue'.

## In your good books (we hope)

As well as writing articles for a range of publications, most of our people are published authors or editors. Our direct experience in this field gives you a level of quality assurance in our editing that's missing from many of our competitors. You can read about who's written what in the 'About us' section of our website (click on 'Who we are' or go to <http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=7>), and order some through our 'Books' page (at <http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=18>).

Here are some commendations for 4 of our books:

- Martin Cutts' *Oxford Guide to Plain English* (Oxford University Press, 2004): 'A provocative tome...anathema to a generation of pedants' – *Daily Telegraph*
- Judy Brown's *John Marco Allegro: The Maverick of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Eerdmans, 2005): 'This fascinating and informative biography of John Allegro will be of interest to specialists as well as to the general public'

- University of North Carolina
- Sarah Carr's *Tackling NHS Jargon: getting the message across* (Radcliffe Medical Press, 2002): 'This book should be on the desks of all NHS managers. They should consult it whenever they write anything' – *Nursing Times*
- Ruth Thornton's *Adult Learners' Writing Guide* (Chambers, 2006): 'highly commended' in the HRH The Duke of Edinburgh English Speaking Union Language Award 2006.

## Progress for citizen's summary project

In the first edition of *Lucid Law* in 1994, Martin Cutts called for a citizen's summary to go with every Act of Parliament. In relation to European law, he repeated this in 2001 in *Clarifying Eurolaw*, and again in 2002 in a follow-up booklet, *Clarifying EC Regulations*, co-written with Emma Wagner. Emma, who helped start the Fight the FOG campaign (<http://europa.eu.int/comm/translation/en/ftfog>), has continued to champion the citizen's summary project, with her former colleague Tim Martin.

So we were delighted to hear this month that the Secretary General of the European Commission had written to all directors-general and heads of service announcing that 'for 2008, all submissions to inter-service consultation for strategic and priority initiatives in the Work Programme' should be accompanied by a citizen's summary.

Limited to 2 pages, the summaries must use language that's 'extremely simple and clear, and the writer should take the standpoint that the reader could be any citizen, without specific knowledge on the subject matter. All summaries should follow a common structure, based on the '5 W rule':

- why the proposal is needed
- what the proposal is and its benefits
- who in the EU will benefit and why
- where and how the proposal will be applied
- when the proposal will take effect.

[Thanks to Emma Wagner for sending us this information]

## Nasty (or just plain nutty) nomenclature

### Don't sweat the small stuff

*Pikestaff's* beauty editor is all hot and bothered after reading in her local paper that she should consider an Underarm Perspiration Reduction (Hyperhidrosis) Procedure. Apart from the misplaced parenthesis (disconcerting in itself), the description of the technique (involving injecting Botox into perspiration glands) is rife with run-on sentences, spelling mistakes and mispunctuation. Wonder if the procedure's carried out in a sweatshop?

### To wait or not to wait: that is the question

When shopping online for Tesco groceries, our cookery editor was instructed: 'Please wait – if you are not redirected immediately please click on the link below.' Anyone for a game of patience?

### Library language languishes as laxity launched in lieu of literate lingo

In a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* on 21 April, C Williams comments: 'Over the past two years about half of the books in my local library have been removed and the shelves relabelled, so "Biography" becomes "Peoples Lives" (with no apostrophe).'

### **And now for a spine-chiller**

*The Times*' David Wighton (15 April) analyses the collapse of Erinaceous, the property services company once valued at more than £400m, identifying important lessons for investors, including on company names: Wighton advises:

1. Do not invest in a company with a whimsical name (except Google). Erinaceous sounds like a homoeopathic remedy but actually means 'like or pertaining to a hedgehog'. The founders say they chose it because they have always liked hedgehogs.
2. Do not invest in a company whose founders say they have always liked hedgehogs.

Odd names aren't always commercial death, of course. Number 9 in the pop album charts is a package of Gregorian chants by the Cistercian Monks of Stift Heiligenkreuz.

### **Contribute**

Have you recently come across 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](mailto:pikestaff@clearest.co.uk).

### **Back issues**

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

### **Tell a friend**

If you think friends or colleagues would enjoy *Pikestaff*, please feel free to forward the newsletter (or any part of 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**

*Pikestaff* is written by Sarah Carr and edited by Martin Cutts.  
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