

## Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 17,  
June 2008

### Help needed for Small Print Bill (he's the bloke with the magnifying glass)

*Pikestaff 15* reported that Nottinghamshire MP Nick Palmer was putting forward a Small Print Bill in the Commons to 'make requirements regarding the minimum size of print in certain documents, including those relating to advertising and contracts; and for connected purposes'. At its first reading, he said:

The Bill's objective is simple: it is not to impose any additional regulations on the content of terms and conditions in advertisements or contracts, but to ensure that customers are reasonably able to read what they say. It is easy to say "Let the buyer beware", but if the buyer cannot read the contract, how is he or she supposed to beware?

The MP has since met a Minister from the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, to see whether small print could be tackled as part of the new EU directive on consumer protection. Palmer tells us that the Minister expressed sympathy and willingness to look at concrete cases that have eluded the existing rules, to see whether they need to be changed.

Palmer is therefore looking for examples of people losing money through small print and having no legal remedy. If you know of any case studies that would help, please let us know and we'll pass them on to him.

[Source: <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2007-08/smallprint.html>]

### Quickie guide to Wiki words

The English version of the well-known web source Wikipedia started in 2001 and contains almost 2.5 million articles. But how did it get its name and how are its content and language policed?

'Wikiwiki' – an adaptation of 'quick quick' – is thought to mean 'fast' in Hawaiian Pidgin English. The term was first used on the Internet in 1995 by Ward Cunningham, an American computer programmer, when he started a website to help programmers exchange ideas. Cunningham wanted to make his website quickly editable by its users, so he called it WikiWikiWeb after a Honolulu airport employee told him to take the Wiki Wiki Shuttle, a bus that runs between terminals.

Wikipedia can be edited by any registered user, of which there are nearly 7.5 million for the English version (with many more using the site without registering). There are 263 other Wikipedias, in different languages (including Tokipona, a constructed language inspired by Taoist philosophy – the smallest Wikipedia, with just 84 registered users). Factual errors can arise, though Wikipedia has systems to catch and control substandard and vandalistic edits. A study by the journal *Nature* in December 2005 of 42

entries in Wikipedia showed they were of comparable quality to those in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, though the latter had slightly fewer errors (2.91 per article versus Wikipedia's 3.62).

Wikipedia also has a Manual of Style, a style guide for users that aims to make the encyclopedia easier to read in English. As the site says: 'One way of presenting information is often just as good as another, but consistency promotes professionalism, simplicity and greater cohesion in Wikipedia articles. An overriding principle is that style and formatting should be applied consistently throughout an article, unless there is a good reason to do otherwise (except in direct quotations, where the original text is generally preserved).'

Most editors of the English Wikipedia live in the US (52.1%), UK (15.9%), Canada (7.3%) and Australia (4.4%). Because of its wide range of editors, whose first language may not be English, the language of Wikipedia articles is variable. *English Today* summarizes the situation:

On the whole an encyclopedic tone is adopted, and the house style rules are sensible and widely acceptable, but many articles have no consistent style. Some have British style and spelling, some American, and many have a mix of the two; some will suddenly switch because the latest editor so decided (although such changes are deprecated). Some articles, especially on international current affairs and the arts, are in poor English because they have never been revised by an English-speaking editor. And some additions are made by children or others who haven't learned to spell and punctuate.

There's more about Wikipedia's:

- history at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia>
- statistics at [http://s23.org/wikistats/wikipedias\\_html.php?sort=good\\_desc](http://s23.org/wikistats/wikipedias_html.php?sort=good_desc)
- editorial systems at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Editorial\\_oversight\\_and\\_control](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Editorial_oversight_and_control)
- style guide at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Manual\\_of\\_Style](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Manual_of_Style).

Watch out for more on style guides in a future issue of *Pikestaff*.

[Source: *English Today*, April 2007]

## News from Plain Language Commission

Martin Cutts travelled northwards this month to speak at Laws for Citizens, a Nordic-Baltic seminar on clear legal language, organized by Sweden's justice ministry. In June, the Stockholm sun rises at 3am having set at 10pm, leaving our research director 'sleepless in Saltsjöbaden'.

The 2-day conference was opened by Beatrice Ask, Sweden's justice minister, who said: 'Laws should be written in such a way that difficult issues become understandable. It must be easy [for people] to do the right thing.' She mentioned that if the courts didn't write their judgments clearly, it would be left to the media to do the job for them, with the risk of misunderstandings and inaccuracies.

Sweden's approach to law-writing differs from that of most other countries. In the justice ministry, linguists and lawyers cooperate in a team called the Division for Legal and Linguistic Draft Revision to vet all government bills after Parliament has approved them. 'No Government Bill (including Acts), Government Ordinance or Committee Terms of Reference can be sent to the

printers without the division's approval,' says a ministry leaflet called 'The Swedish Government promotes clear drafting'.

Martin's paper, 'How to make laws easier to read and understand' (<http://www.clearest.co.uk/index.php?id=34>), commented on the clarity of recent UK laws and suggested ways of clarifying the law, based on the facts that readers (of legal and other documents) have been shown to prefer documents that have a:

- clear title and purpose
- clear structure: headings and subheadings, numbering, grouping of like with like, bullet lists, and summaries of main points
- clear style: short sentences, good and thorough punctuation, everyday words, explanations of technical terms when such terms are necessary, active voice, conciseness, and straightforward sentence construction.

He described a UK statutory instrument designed to restrict farmwork in parts of the Peak Park as 'short but almost entirely in legal jargon: ghastly sub-English like "being satisfied that it is expedient", "hereafter mentioned", "comprised in a national park", "hereby", "said land", "hereto", and "pursuant to". Martin added: 'I believe that legal writers can do better than this. The UK is making progress with primary law. But all legislators – especially MPs and government ministers – need to think much more about their audience.' He also criticized the sheer volume of law that had been enacted in the last 14 years: 172,000 pages of it, or about 12,200 pages a year. 'Neither the authorities nor the people can cope with such a flood of new regulations.'

### Tip of the month: Don't get your colons (and semi-colons) in a twist

A twisted colon (or *colon volvulus* for Latinophiles) is a nasty medical complaint. And since the last thing you want is a nasty complaint from your readers that your punctuation's confusing, our tip of this month summarizes the key differences between the colon and semicolon.

In the *Penguin Guide to Punctuation*, RL Trask uses these 2 sentences to explain this:

Lisa is upset. Gus is having a nervous breakdown.

As Trask points out, the use of 2 separate sentences suggests that these facts aren't particularly linked. But if we change the full stop to a semicolon, the meaning changes:

Lisa is upset; Gus is having a nervous breakdown.

The semicolon suggests that the 2 facts are linked. As Trask comments: 'The likeliest inference is that the cause of Lisa's annoyance and the cause of Gus's nervous breakdown are the same. Perhaps, for example, both are being disturbed by building noise next door. (Remember, a semi-colon connects two sentences which are related [see *Pikestaff 15*].)'

With a colon, the meaning changes again:

Lisa is upset: Gus is having a nervous breakdown.

The sentence now implies that Lisa is upset because Gus is having a nervous breakdown (since a colon explains or elaborates what has come before, as we saw in *Pikestaff 16*).

Trask summarizes the uses of colons and semicolons as follows:

- Use a colon to separate a general statement from following specifics.
- Use a semicolon to connect two complete sentences not joined by *and*, *or*, *but*, *yet* or *while*.

## Linguistic links: Language Log

Language Log – at <http://languageblog.idc.upenn.edu/nll/> – is a collaborative language blog run by University of Pennsylvania phonetician Mark Liberman, with multiple guest linguists. Most of the posts are on language use in the media and popular culture. William, James & Company, the publisher behind *Far from the Madding Gerund*, a compilation of posts from the blog, describes Language Log as ‘a site where serious professional linguists go to have fun’. Language Log is now one of the most popular linguistics blogs (receiving about 9,500 visits per day, Wikipedia reports).

The site also awards the Becky Award, named after the sixteenth-century humanist, Johannes Goropius Becanus, who claimed to have proved that the language of Eden was Flemish (which just happened to be his mother tongue). The award goes to ‘people or organizations who have made outstanding contributions to linguistic misinformation’.

A recent award went to Louann Brizendine for her bestseller *The Female Brain*, which makes 2 principal claims: that women use language very differently from men, and that the causes of these differences are neurological. As *Fresh Air*, a radio programme on Washington DC-based station National Public Radio (NPR), commented: ‘Brizendine herself has charged that her critics are angry because her conclusions aren't politically correct. Actually, though, you can leave out the “politically” part. The reviewers for the British science journal *Nature* described the book as “riddled with scientific errors.”’

Brizendine wrongly claims that women on average use 20,000 words a day while men use only 7,000, and speak twice as fast as men. As we’ve mentioned before in *Pikestaff*, research studies generally show that:

- men talk slightly more than women or that the 2 sexes talk about the same amount, or
- men on average speak a bit faster than women.

In a related story published in *The Week*, a psychologist has found that while men overestimate their brain power, women are generally cleverer than they think – underestimating their own intelligence by about 5 IQ points. (What some women will do to get a date – Ed.)

Other contenders for the Becky award included:

- Paul JJ Payack, who announced that using a secret algorithm, he had worked out that the English language contained exactly 986,120 words (a claim reported by sources like the *New York Times*, Reuters, and NPR)
- a publicist for the British dairy industry who managed to get the BBC to run a story reporting that cows from the English West Country moo with a distinct regional accent
- a story, again reported by the BBC, that research showed British teenagers to have become so inarticulate that nearly a third of their speech consists of just 20 simple words like ‘yeah’ and ‘no’. As experts pointed out, that figure is probably about right, but it sounds a lot less alarming when you realize the 20 most frequent English words account for around a third of British adults’ speech too.

[Sources: <http://people.ischool.berkeley.edu/~nunberg/beckies.html>; and *The Week*, 26 January 2008]

## Readers write

### Transportational trials for trenchant travellers

In *Pikestaff 16*, we revealed a reader's secret shame at having purchased sofa's with aberrant apostrophes. At the time we couldn't contact her to ask permission to use her name, but Julia Buckland (the sometime plain-language guru at Derby City Council) has since been in touch to agree to this and to warn that poor punctuation can add to your journey time as well as your stress levels:

The showroom is on a really busy road in Derby and I've often missed my chance of a right turn from the road opposite by stopping to be offended by 'sofa's' in their window. Similarly, for at least ten years I've been nearly missing a set of nippy traffic lights on Triumph Road in Nottingham due to hesitating to be offended by a 30' high revolving sign advertising 'MOT's' on a garage forecourt. The garage is derelict so even if I wanted to I couldn't point it out. And there isn't a Ministry of Transport any more anyway, so even the acronym isn't correct, is it, though we use it commonly?

Perhaps as well as boxes for 'Avoid toll roads' and 'Avoid motorways', satnavs should include an option to 'Avoid poorly punctuated routes'. We see a new business opportunity in creating the necessary maps.

### One for all or all for one: citizen's or citizens' summary?

Last month, after we reported progress on the Citizen's Summary project, reader Liz Riches wrote to ask:

Could you please clarify if the summary project for citizens is going to provide a summary for one citizen (citizen's summary project, as in the newsletter), or for many citizens (citizens' summary project)? Is the apostrophe before the letter 's' because there is going to be one copy of the summary with each copy of an Act of Parliament, to be read by one citizen?

We replied that the project leaders do indeed use the singular form: citizen's. We believe it's a similar case to the Patient's Charter, which is how the NHS has always written this. Although the summaries (like the charter) are of course for many more than one person, organizations sometimes use the singular to help convey the message that the item is there for each individual citizen (or patient). Another example we came across recently when editing an information leaflet for patients was the job title Patient's Advocate, again reflecting the individualized nature of the service this person provides.

Talking of apostrophes, we reported in *Pikestaff 14* that *Private Eye* readers were arguing about whether – and where – there should be an apostrophe in Pedants Corner. Since then, editor Ian Hislop has adopted a reader's idea to rename the column: it's now Pedantry Corner.

### Badinage in homage to the spread of fromage

And talking of pedants, the editor writes:

The new and deadly FROM virus is sweeping through the newspapers, inserting itself into otherwise healthy sentences. This morning's *Times* (26 June) has 3 of them:

- Suzanne Murphy, 29, visited a surgeon in desperation because her obesity was stopping her *from* doing the things she wanted to with her five-year-old son Jacob.
- A late rebellion has failed to prevent Ann Widdecombe *from* making history by becoming the first woman to be accepted as a full member of the Carlton Club.
- He is the youngest of 124 young people...who have been selected by police forces for close contact work to try to prevent them *from* being groomed for terrorism.

So many broadcast journalists have caught the bug that BBC news bulletins could soon consist only of Fiona Bruce intoning FROM in the droning style of a Buddhist chant.

Have you spotted any redundant froms? Email us with details.

### **Eagle-eyed legal reader strikes counter-blow for lawyers**

Retired lawyer Mark Adler (sometime editor of *Clarity*) wrote to sympathize with our correspondent who was enraged by 'there's' followed by a plural noun (see *Pikestaff 16*). He also admitted he daren't so much as look at the website of the Typo Eradication Advancement League: 'I'd be awake all night fulminating.'

We knew trouble was ahoy when we spotted Mark's attachment: 'Whoops.pdf'. The file highlighted a slip we'd made (forgetting to insert 2 web links, leaving our internal note 'insert hyperlink, once we know it') and our later reference to Martin Cutts's 'pipe dream of convincing lawyers to proofread their letters and emails before sending them to clients'. Touché, Mark, but of course, as non-lawyers, we're excused from following our own advice and wholly free of sin.

Seriously, though, thanks to Mark for pointing this out: if you spot a fishcake we'd rather know, so we can correct it straight away for other readers.

### **More nutty nomenclature**

#### **All is not lost**

A local school's newsletter refers to its 'lost' property cupboard. Writers use these inverted commas – sometimes known as 'scare quotes', 'sneer quotes', 'shudder quotes' or 'cute quotes' – to distance themselves from a word or phrase because they feel it's not quite right in some way. For example, as Trask puts it: 'Possibly you regard it as too colloquial for formal writing; possibly you think it's unfamiliar or mysterious; possibly you consider it to be inaccurate or misleading; possibly you believe it's just plain wrong.'

You could argue that the school's facility could more accurately be described as a misplaced property cupboard. And lost property's not the only case where the literal and common meanings of a word are at odds. When cars or aeroplanes almost collide, we know it as a near-miss. But a true near-miss would be a collision. It's a bit like the misnomer 'joyriding' – in preference to which, the *Manchester Evening News* has tried unsuccessfully to popularize 'griefriding'.

#### **An Ugley rumour**

Bernard Ward wrote this letter to *The Independent*:

Your article on strange village names included Ugley, in Essex. Just over the border, in Hertfordshire, is the village of Nasty. It is rumoured that years ago, the local newspaper was able to print the headline: 'Nasty man marries Ugley woman.' We should also remember Idle, near Bradford, famous for its Idle Working

Men's Club.

### **How Prez-I-Dent Bush reads a speech**

TheFirstPost.co.uk reports:

He may be leader of the Free World, but he still needs help reading aloud. It turns out that George W Bush has his scripts marked with phonetic spellings so that he is able to pronounce names correctly.

When White House staff showed journalists a draft of the speech Bush gave yesterday to the UN General Assembly, they mistakenly handed out the marked up version, revealing such helpful tips as: the President of France [sar-KO-zee]; the President of Zimbabwe [moo-GA-bee]; the capital of Venezuela [kah-RAH-kus]; and that tricky nation in West Africa [moor-EH-tain-ee-a].

That's all for now, folks, from the PLAYN LANG-widge Com-MISH-un. We'll be back next month.

[Sources: *The Week*, 31 May 2008; and *TheFirstPost.co.uk*, 26 September 2007: <http://www.thefirstpost.co.uk/8834,life,people-here-there-and-everywhere>]

### **Contribute**

We came across the phrase 'incurtilage hardstanding' recently. Have you other examples of 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. Published by Plain Language Commission (clearest.co.uk Ltd). [mail@clearest.co.uk](mailto:mail@clearest.co.uk) Tel: +44 (0) 1663 733177