

# Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 18, July 2008

## Money watchdog studies clarity of pension 'wake-up' packs

The quality of the literature issued to pension customers as they approach retirement age – often called 'wake-up' packs – is under scrutiny by the Financial Services Authority (FSA). In a speech at the Institute of Economic Affairs and Marketforce, Sarah Wilson, FSA Director and Insurance Sector Leader, said:

Importantly, we found that more than 60% of the 'wake-up' packs sent by 55 insurance companies provide information that complied with our Principles and rules – that is it was clear and enabled customers to make informed decisions about their retirement options. However, a disappointing 40% of the wake-up packs we reviewed failed to meet regulatory requirements. Combine this with research suggesting a gap of around 20% between the top and bottom annuity rates (not including enhanced and impaired annuity rates), and the potential for customer detriment is evident.

The FSA, a corporate member of ours, will publish the full results shortly, and we'll be reporting on these in *Pikestaff 19*.

[Source: [http://www.fsa.gov.uk/pages/Library/Communication/Speeches/2008/0515\\_sw.shtml](http://www.fsa.gov.uk/pages/Library/Communication/Speeches/2008/0515_sw.shtml)]

Thanks to Sarah Hunter and Adam Richards-Gray at the FSA for passing us this link.]

## It's no mirage: fromage is on the rampage

In last month's *Pikestaff*, our editor reported that the new and deadly FROM virus was 'sweeping through the newspapers, inserting itself into otherwise healthy sentences'. Not having enough to do, he's since spotted yet more examples:

- The All England Club has tightened security this year to prevent players' entourages *from* gaining access to insider information... (*The Sunday Times*, 22 June)
- The children's minister, Kevin Brennan, has called for secondary pupils under the age of 16 to be locked in school grounds at lunchtime to stop them *from* stocking up on sweets, fizzy drinks and takeaways. (*The Observer*, 6 July)
- More than that, there was the odd bit of tomfoolery too, such as when Andrew Strauss feigned a sliding stop in order to con the batsman [sic] and prevent them *from* taking a second run. (*The Times*, 14 July)

Concerned that he'd contracted the complaint, US reader Bruce Corsino wrote to us: 'From reading *Pikestaff*, I learned of my disabling case of the FROM virus. I need help and treatment. Please advise me how to get that.' We replied:

Dear Bruce (Worried of Washington)

On the FROM virus, I can assure you that by recognizing the affliction, you have already taken the hardest step towards cure. You are not alone: many professional writers find it hard to prevent themselves from using this redundant word.

As for treatment, I have consulted our resident Professor of Prepositional Virology (who has an increasingly heavy workload: more on FROM-related ailments in a future newsletter). She advises that although antibiotics are generally ineffective against viruses, in this case a course of red penicillin should solve the problem.

We hope this allays your concerns, and wish you a full and speedy recovery.

Bruce responded: 'I'm much sicker than you think. Antibiotics on their own just won't do. I need retraining, so that the "FROM" sentence constructions used as examples in *Pikestaff 17* no longer look acceptable to me.' Another reader, Kari Koonin, made a similar observation, asserting that using 'from' with 'stop' and 'prevent' is the more common usage. In *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage*, Pam Peters writes:

Research by Mair (1998) shows the second construction [without 'from'] is relatively recent, established in late C20 British English, but not yet in American English.'

This difference between British and American usage should reassure Bruce that he's not too sick after all. And there are cases where it's a good idea to include 'from', for example when writing for readers with low literacy, who may find 'cue' words – like 'from' in this context – useful to alert them to what's coming next.

So in short, if there's a reason for including 'from', then we do so. But if a word's redundant, we believe in leaving it out. The result's less formal too, which usually fits well in a plain-English style.

Despite our pedantic proclivity – an occupational hazard – we never mean to sound prescriptive, trying hard to be open-minded and flexible about all matters linguistic. Although there are definite rights and wrongs in grammar and punctuation, it's far less clearcut in other areas of language usage, where it's mainly a matter of style preferences.

## Tip of the month: don't mourn the moribund gerund

### The problem

Eagle-eyed readers may have spotted that deleting 'from' in sentences like those listed above leads to grammar that some may regard as ungrammatical:

- The All England Club has tightened security this year to prevent players' entourages ~~from~~ gaining access to insider information...
- The children's minister, Kevin Brennan, has called for secondary pupils under the age of 16 to be locked in school grounds at lunchtime to stop them ~~from~~ stocking up on sweets, fizzy drinks and takeaways.

In these sentences, the '-ing' words – gaining and stocking – are gerunds. Apart from being a cute name for a duck (the mascot of TEAL: see *Pikestaff 16*), a gerund is a verbal noun. Some people think you should always use possessives with gerunds, for example:

- The All England Club has tightened security this year to prevent players' *entourages*' gaining access to insider information...

- The children's minister, Kevin Brennan, has called for secondary pupils under the age of 16 to be locked in school grounds at lunchtime to stop *their* stocking up on sweets, fizzy drinks and takeaways.

### **Our advice**

Both constructions are common these days. We advise using the form without the possessive as it's more informal, and so in better keeping with plain English, which aims to sound friendly and approachable. Also, using the possessive form can lead readers to think you've made an apostrophe mistake (and so distract them from your message), for example: *The manager values her employee's coming in early*. This sentence would refer correctly to a single employee arriving early, but could be taken as a plural with a misplaced apostrophe.

A third argument in favour of the form we recommend is that those who aren't linguists but write documents for organizations may not spot every place they should use the possessive construction, and therefore apply the rule inconsistently or with incorrect apostrophes. The construction without the possessive comes more naturally to most writers, as it's the form people use when speaking and writing informally.

### **Tory working group proposes tax simplification office**

The report of a tax working party headed by former chancellor of the exchequer Lord (Geoffrey) Howe is recommending that the next Conservative government (if ever there is one) radically change the way new tax law is drawn up. *Making taxes simpler* proposes an Office of Tax Simplification, staffed by HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) and academics, as well as 'individuals from the tax professions to provide expertise and a fresh perspective'. [And maybe a few ordinary taxpayers who'd like to see tax law clarified? – Ed.]

The working party was set up last year by the shadow chancellor, George Osborne, to take forward the recommendations of the Forsyth Tax Reform Commission on the making of tax law. The Chartered Institute of Taxation (CIOT) has commented that the report has addressed 2 of its major concerns: simplification of the tax system and detailed consultation.

[Source: Accounting Web, 4 July 2008: <http://www.accountingweb.co.uk/cgi-bin/item.cgi?id=185784&d=1025&h=1019&f=1026>]

### **News from Plain Language Commission**

#### **PLC wins government contract**

The UK department that spearheads the government's anti-poverty drive will soon be putting many of its high-profile booklets through the Clear English Standard scheme now that Plain Language Commission has won a contract to work on them.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) provides information online and issues millions of leaflets and letters in direct-mail campaigns and via post offices, Jobcentre Plus offices and advice centres.

As well as helping unemployed people find work, the DWP helps people in the greatest need to claim the benefits they're entitled to, with a particular focus on relieving poverty among children and pensioners.

In its contract documents, the department sought a supplier offering:

- editorial skills
- staff with the necessary experience and training to meet its

requirements

- a recognized symbol to place on documents accredited by the supplier
- the ability to handle a high volume of documents and respond on time
- plain-English training for DWP staff.

Value for money was also considered in making the final decision.

The DWP stated: 'It's important the information we produce for our customers is as clear as possible. To make sure it is, we try to use plain English. By this we mean using the simplest words that fit, and words that we think all our customers will understand.'

Martin Cutts, research director of Plain Language Commission, said: 'We're looking forward to working alongside DWP staff on some of the most important documents published by any government office.'

You can read more about our:

- editing services at <http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=16>
- accreditation mark, the Clear English Standard, at <http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=28>
- on-site courses at <http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=26>
- distance-learning courses at <http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=27>.

### **Corporate Responsibility Group takes gold with Winning Website**

We're pleased to announce that we've awarded a gold standard to the website of the Corporate Responsibility Group, a learning and development network for corporate responsibility professionals. The gold standard requires that 'all pages are clear, well written and free of obvious errors of grammar, spelling and punctuation. Proofreading errors and broken links are rare. The site is highly accessible, broadly equivalent to W3C standard (see w3.org for more details, though we don't insist on W3C accreditation). Page layout is consistently excellent. Overall, the site is a pleasure to read and use.'

Under our Winning Website scheme, websites can also be awarded a bronze or silver standard. We'll clarity-check your site and, if it meets the criteria for one of these standards, you can display the web version of the Clear English Standard. This shows your customers you've put your site through a demanding external check of language and layout.

A unique feature of our scheme is that we'll continually monitor your site, making frequent and regular checks and reporting to you any problems we find. The logo will tell your site visitors they're viewing a Winning Website; and when they click on the logo, the link will tell them what we monitor and what's excluded.

As you may want to alter your website often, the logo will say we're monitoring its clarity rather than give the impression every detail's been checked.

See CRG's gold-standard website for yourself at <http://www.crguk.org>.

### **Fragments that flow**

This was the title of the latest seminar of the Information Design Association, which our associate Sarah Carr attended in London earlier this month. The talk, by Matt Jones and Matt Biddulph, focused on the website design of Dopplr (<http://www.dopplr.com/>), an online tool to help frequent business travellers arrange to meet their friends while away.

## Linguistic links: Global Language Monitor

*The Times* of 7 July reports:

The English language will celebrate its one-millionth word within a year, experts say. At present, there are 995,844 official words, with the millionth word predicted to arrive on April 29, 2009. Paul Payack, founding president of the Global Language Monitor, said that the average person uses fewer than 14,000 words. Even a linguistically gifted person would use only about 70,000 words, he said.

Based in Texas, the Global Language Monitor (GLM) is a company that documents, analyses and tracks trends in language usage worldwide. Founded in Silicon Valley in 2003, the GLM is supported by a worldwide group of linguists. On its website – at <http://www.languagemonitor.com/> – you can see a countdown towards the one-million-word mark.

The site includes lots of other linguistic bits and bobs, including 2 of the newest additions to the English language:

- staycation (noun) – a holiday close to home, because of economic conditions or the cost of petrol
- e-vampire (noun) – electric equipment that consumes energy while in standby mode.

## An end to nutty nomenclature

We've covered various examples of nutty nomenclature in recent issues; this feature concludes with 3 more stories about names.

### **Court is a brick to Swedish parents who named son Lego**

A Swedish couple has won the right to name their baby Lego after a legal battle with government bodies. The *Daily Telegraph* reports:

Couples have previously run into trouble with the names Ikea, Veranda, Metallica [a rock band] and the use of Elvis [a name deemed to be 'of a masculine type'] for a girl. The Swedish Administrative Court of Appeals overruled an earlier decision to stop them naming their child after the brightly coloured plastic building blocks. In Swedish law, offensive, unsuitable or inappropriate names are all forbidden, as well as names that could embarrass the people they are given to...In 1996, a little boy was named Brfxccxmxmnpccclllmmnprxvclmncckssqbb11116 (pronounced Albin) in protest at the law.

On Lego, Wikipedia notes: 'The Lego Group's name has become so synonymous with its flagship toy that many refer to the bricks themselves (collectively) as 'Lego' or 'Legos' (the latter term being common only in US English).' But the Lego Group considers such uses to be 'trademark dilution', and includes the following guidance (aka self-serving wiffle) on its website:

Please be sure to spell the brand name "LEGO" in capital letters and use it as an adjective and not a noun. For example you should write "Models built of LEGO bricks" and not "Models built of Lego". The first time you use the word "LEGO" it should be followed by the "®" symbol for registered trademark.

Whether the LEGO® Group will require full LEGO style to be applied to the little boy's name remains to be seen.

Meanwhile, in New Zealand, a court has put a 9-year-old girl into public

guardianship so that she can have her name changed. At school the name so embarrassed her that she was known to classmates merely as 'K'. Her parents had called her Talulah Does the Hula from Hawaii.

### **Love score in Lesbian action**

Lesbians – campaigners on the Greek island of Lesbos – recently took legal action to try to make the Homosexual and Lesbian Community of Greece change its name. The BBC News website reported:

The issue boils down to who has the right to call themselves Lesbians.

Is it gay women, or the 100,000 people living on Greece's third biggest island – plus another 250,000 expatriates who originate from Lesbos? The man spearheading the case, publisher Dimitris Lambrou, claims that international dominance of the word in its sexual context violates the human rights of the islanders, and disgraces them around the world. He says it causes daily problems to the social life of Lesbos's inhabitants.

In court papers, the plaintiffs alleged that the Greek government is so embarrassed by 'lesbian' that it has been forced to rename the island after its capital, Mytilini. The islanders said that, if they were successful, they may start to fight 'lesbian' internationally.

The term 'lesbian' originated from the poet Sappho, a native of Lesbos in the seventh century BC. Sappho wrote poetry expressing her love of women, but, according to Lambrou, new historical research has shown she had children (probably not by IVF), and committed suicide for the love of a man.

But an Athens court has just ruled that their claim to feel slighted was not justified and that the word did not define the islanders' identity. 'This is a good decision for lesbians everywhere,' said Vassilis Chirdaris, lawyer for the Gay and Lesbian Union of Greece. The plaintiffs must now pay court expenses of 230 euros (about £172, making Greece look like a good place to have a lawsuit), although they could appeal the decision.

### **Fame or shame for those with inane domain name?**

In these technological times, naming domains can be just as hard as naming children. Pity these folks got it wrong (unless, of course, they thought the publicity was worth it):

- Experts Exchange, an 'online information and resource portal': <http://expertsexchange.com>
- Therapist Finder, a database of therapists: <http://www.therapistfinder.com>
- Pen Island, a pen shop: <http://www.penisland.net>
- Who Represents?, a database of agencies to the rich and famous: <http://www.whorepresents.com>.

Another titter-inducing site was that of an Italian battery company, Powergen Italia: <http://www.powergenitalia.com>. But the company soon got embarrassed and changed its website address to: <http://www.batterychargerpowergen.it>. (You can still see an archived copy at [http://web.archive.org/web/20011116004812/http://www.powergenitalia.com/.](http://web.archive.org/web/20011116004812/http://www.powergenitalia.com/))

If you're choosing a domain name, you may like to take Language Log's advice:

Always get your proposed URL analyzed for double entendres by

fully qualified linguists before setting up your site. Just call the main switchboard at Language Log Plaza and ask for the Uniform Resource Locator Morphological Analysis Division [URLMAD – geddit?].

[Sources: *The Daily Telegraph*, 7 June 2008: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newsttopics/howaboutthat/2090401/Swedish-parents-win-legal-battle-to-name-their-children-Lego%2C-Elvis-and-Metallica.html#continue>; *The Guardian*, 24 July 2008: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2008/jul/24/familyandrelationships.newzealand>; BBC News, 1 May 2008: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7376919.stm>; BBC News, 22 July 2008: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7520343.stm>; and Language Log, 25 July 2006: <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/language-log/archives/003388.html>]

## For retired Rutgers professor, new role not lost in translation

So reads the headline to an article in *The Star-Ledger* announcing that William Lutz, emeritus English professor and securities lawyer, has been put in charge of a project at the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) to revamp the way companies provide information to the investing public. Lutz, who has 6 months to devise a plan to reshape disclosure, said:

The technical term is 'blow up all the forms'...If I pull this off, I can have a significant effect on disclosure not just in the United States, but in all those countries that follow the United States. Wow.

Lutz, who wrote *The New Doublespeak: Why No One Knows What Anyone's Saying Anymore*, has been tracking the growth of doublespeak, language that's deliberately unclear. The title of one article he wrote takes Ben Franklin's famous phrase about death and taxes and translates it into doublespeak: 'Nothing in Life Is Certain Except Negative Patient Care Outcome and Revenue Enhancement.'

We'll report on the results of Lutz's work at the SEC in a future issue.

[Source: *The Star-Ledger*, 5 July 2008: [http://www.nj.com/business/index.ssf/2008/07/for\\_retired\\_rutgers\\_professor.html](http://www.nj.com/business/index.ssf/2008/07/for_retired_rutgers_professor.html)]

Thank you to Cheryl Stephens for passing us this link.]

## Don't dangle your partner by his participles

*Pikestaff* congratulates plain-language practitioner Sandra Martins of Português Claro: she married James on 12 July at Motrinos, near Monsaraz, 200km south of Lisbon. Sandra may enjoy this letter from Deb Atkinson to *The Times*:

Sir, I was most interested in Mark Henderson's article on the fact that men think differently (June 20). Especially fascinating was that "men are more proficient at visualising objects when rotated in space". I am now trying to work out a way of rotating my husband in space in the hope that he will be able to visualise such objects as an iron, an ironing board and a dishcloth.

Look out for more on Sandra's work at Português Claro (<http://www.portuguesclaro.pt>) – and on dangling participles (the grammatical glitch that makes the above sentence ambiguous) – in a future *Pikestaff*.

[Source: *The Times*, 20 June 2008: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/letters/article4182150.ece>]

## Next Pikestaff: September

As usual, *Pikestaff* takes a break in August; we'll be back with more plain-language news, novelty and nuttiness in September. Enjoy the summer, if your country has one at this time of year. And for those seeking the sun in non-English-speaking countries, we'd love to hear from you with any amusing translations into English that you spot on your travels. Email us at [pikestaff@clearest.co.uk](mailto:pikestaff@clearest.co.uk). As always, we'll publish your name only if you say we can.

## Back issues

You can see back issues of *Pikestaff* on our website (click on 'Newsletter'). Here you'll also find a table that summarizes each month's content.

## 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

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