

# Pikestaff

## Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 19, September 2008

### Tip of the month: avoid clichés like the plague

Reader Laura Berryman, of Enfield Council, wrote to *Pikestaff*:

I am tired of receiving information about 'ground-breaking' initiatives, 'state-of-the-art' buildings, 'mouth-watering' food and events where 'a good time was had by all'. These are all empty phrases which mean nothing. Few people seem to know a good metaphor these days and fall back on meaningless claptrap to convey information.

We're singing from the same hymn sheet as Laura, so here's a ground-breaking tip that addresses clichés.

#### The issue

Wikipedia defines 'cliché' as 'a phrase, expression, or idea that has been overused to the point of losing its intended force or novelty, especially when at some time it was considered distinctively forceful or novel'. The entry continues: 'The term is most likely to be used in a negative context.' Clichés can be hard for non-native speakers of English to understand.

#### Examples

Clichés include 'it's raining cats and dogs', 'bold as brass', 'cool as a cucumber', 'charged with emotion', 'hive of activity', 'rolling hills' and 'all's fair in love and war'. You can find lots more – over 2,100 – sorted into categories, at <http://www.clichesite.com/index.asp>. The website assures visitors: 'Finding what you're looking for is As Easy as Pie.' There's even a cliché of the day, and, because clichés can vary between countries and cultures, a note of its origin and meaning.

In his *Good Word Guide*, Martin Manser divides clichés into 4 categories:

- overworked metaphors and similes, such as 'leave no stone unturned' and 'as good as gold'
- overused idioms, eg 'add insult to injury' and 'a blessing in disguise'
- clichés about public speakers – for example 'someone who needs no introduction' and 'in no uncertain terms'
- quotations (or usually misquotations) from the Bible or Shakespeare, such as 'pride goes before a fall' and 'a poor thing, but mine own'.

#### Our advice

It's almost impossible to avoid using clichés occasionally, but if you want to write as clearly as possible, follow Manser's advice to avoid 'those that are inefficient in conveying their meaning or are inappropriate to the occasion'. You can usually either delete clichés altogether or translate them into plain English.

#### Clichés cornered

In February 2007, *Pikestaff 2* reported that *The Independent* was publishing a 5-part guide, 'Improve Your English'. Each part featured a short piece on clichés, written by our research director, Martin Cutts. Here we reproduce the first; we'll publish the others in the next 4 issues of *Pikestaff*.

### *Cliché Corner 1: 'It's not rocket science'*

'All the clichés,' Churchill reputedly murmured after enduring a particularly drivelling speech, 'except "God is love" and "Gentlemen: please adjust your dress before leaving".' Lesser phrasemakers sometimes find the lure of well-worn expressions irresistible. 'Sick as a parrot' and 'over the moon' (which in Botswana means 'pregnant', so be careful there) have almost been sneered to extinction, but 'It's not rocket science' is now zooming past other contenders for Top Cliché of 2007, finding itself in the mouth of many a politician alongside 'I think we should put this into perspective' and 'That's a very good question'.

### **Truely an arguement for spelling reform?**

News stories of young people's poor writing skills seem increasingly common. For example:

- *The Sunday Times* reported that a survey by the Institute of Directors found '71% of its members believe the writing abilities of new employees had worsened'
- publisher Felix Dennis commented on Radio 4's *Bespoken Word*: '...I have got children who are totally illiterate. They're illiterate; they cannot write...they think they can write because they're very clever at using the numeral '4' for the word f-o-r, 'for.'

Why the education system is failing to teach so many youngsters how to write standard English is unclear; but failing to correct misspellings – or even including a wrong spelling in a school spelling test, as in one case we came across – is unlikely to help. Unclear too is how to tackle the problem; but we don't believe that altering standards to accommodate failure is the solution.

University lecturer Ken Smith disagrees. He's grown so tired of correcting his students' spelling that he believes the best approach is to declare an amnesty for the most common mistakes. In a letter to *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, Smith has called for common misspellings to be accepted as 'variant spellings', for example:

- arguement for argument
- ignor for ignore
- occured for occurred
- opertunity for opportunity
- que, cue or kew for queue
- speach for speech
- thier for their
- truely for truly
- twelfth for twelfth.

Smith's suggestion was welcomed by Jack Bovill, chair of the Spelling Society, which has advocated a simplified, more phonetic, approach to spelling since 1908 (more in a future *Pikestaff*), but others are less keen. John Simpson, the chief editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, said:

There are enormous advantages in having a coherent system of spelling. It makes it easier to communicate. Maybe during a learning phase there is some scope for error, but I would hope that by the time people get to university they have learnt to spell.

And in a letter to the paper, Keith Haines wrote: 'So Ken Smith thinks we should accept spelling errors. He is mistaken – a word that is, curiously, an

anagram of his own name. Well, not quite; but it is only one letter out, so presumably it does not matter that much.'

In another example of shifting standards, Peter Buckroyd, chief examiner of the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance, awarded 7.5% to a pupil who wrote 'Fuck off' as an answer in an English GCSE exam paper. The marks were for spelling the expletive correctly and conveying a meaning. Adding the correct punctuation – an exclamation mark – would apparently have raised the score to 11%.

[Sources: *The Sunday Times*, 10 August 2008: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/education/article4492122.ece>; BBC Radio 4's *Bespoken Word*, 16 July 2008; *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 7 August 2008: <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=403092>; *The Times*, 7 August 2008: [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life\\_and\\_style/education/article4474181.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/education/article4474181.ece); *The Times*, 8 July 2008; and *The Times*, 30 July, 2008: [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life\\_and\\_style/education/article4237491.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/education/article4237491.ece)]

## Money watchdog publishes results of 'wake-up' pack review

In *Pikestaff 18*, we reported that the quality of literature issued to pension customers as they approach retirement age – often called 'wake-up' packs – was being scrutinized by the Financial Services Authority (FSA), one of our corporate members. The regulator's review is part of its 'treating customers fairly' programme, with which financial services firms must comply by the end of this year. The FSA has now published its full report – *Results of the FSA's work on Open Market Options [OMO] under maturing personal pension and stakeholder pension schemes* – which you can see at [http://www.fsa.gov.uk/pages/Library/Other\\_publications/Pensions/2008/omo.shtml](http://www.fsa.gov.uk/pages/Library/Other_publications/Pensions/2008/omo.shtml).

The FSA asked all insurance companies that write pension annuity business to provide examples of their wake-up and reminder packs. It reviewed and scored around 80 packs from 55 firms or groups of firms, including against its Principle 7: 'A firm must pay due regard to the information needs of its clients, and communicate information to them in a way which is clear, fair and not misleading.' The review found that:

- 38% of material did not meet the relevant rules and principles
- 44% met the minimum requirements
- 18% exceeded minimum requirements, demonstrating best practice in such literature.

The review found no link between the quality of a provider's OMO literature and the level of annuity rates it offered. Nor did it find any link between the quality of literature and the type of firm; for example there was no link to small/large, closed/open or mutual/proprietary types of firm.

The full report includes detailed areas for improvement and examples of good practice. The FSA has given individual feedback to all firms involved in this part of its review, setting out its views on their OMO literature. Where remedial action is required, firms are expected to complete this by December 2008.

Nigel Callaghan at adviser Hargreaves Lansdown commented: 'The FSA is to be applauded for calling time on the insurers' gravy train.'

[Source: *The Sunday Times*, 3 August 2008: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/money/pensions/article4448533.ece>

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

## Readers write

### Seven of one, and half a dozen of the other

Legal eagle Mark Adler [watch your clichés, Ed] spotted a mathematical glitch in the FSA's Sarah Wilson's speech, quoted in *Pikestaff 18*: 'I hate to be pedantic...but if more than 60% complied with FSA rules how could 40% have failed to do so?' We checked with the FSA, which explained that the word 'almost' should have preceded '40%'.

### Vergin' on the ridiculous

A reader sent us a letter from Virgin Media, in which the company confirmed his decision to continue using its services. Choice phrases included: 'We're chuffed to bits that you're staying with Virgin Media', and 'To find out exactly what we're on about, rock on over to virginmedia.com...'. Presumably people in the company are being taught how to write VirginSpeak – robbed of their linguistic innocence at an early age.

### Unease over 'standees'

Dave Brown wrote in to comment on a phrase in a notice on his local bus: 'five standees for one wheelchair':

Standees? Not a word that appears in my *Collins New English Dictionary* so let me attempt to fathom its meaning by analogy. Employee means 'one who is employed' so perhaps standee means 'one who is stood'. That is OK for an inanimate object – a vase which I have stood on the mantelpiece could correctly, if unnecessarily, be described as a standee. But the only usage of stood for a person that I can recollect is the phrase 'stood up' referring to a person on a date whose paramour thinks better of turning up.

However...I searched the Internet and found that the noun standee also means 'a large self-standing display promoting a movie, typically made of cardboard'. So it would appear that before a wheelchair user can board a Bower's bus he must either eject five lovelorn youths or ransack several cinema displays.

Another similar example we'd noticed is 'attendees' (for example talking about conference delegates). Again, the 'ee' ending suggests a passive meaning – that the person or thing is having the action done to them, not by them – in which case it would be the conference, not the delegates, that was really the 'attende'. But *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage* notes that '-ee words are not necessarily passive, as is sometimes said', giving as examples various newish words (including 'standee' and 'conferee') but also some more conventional ones, like 'escapee' and 'absentee'. Strange, though, that the word 'stander' (as in 'bystander') didn't develop instead.

## Linguistic links: George Orwell diaries

As we mentioned in *Pikestaff 6*, George Orwell was an early supporter of plain-English principles. In *Politics and the English Language* (1946), he listed 6 rules based on his belief that language is 'an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought'. [No more skulking behind pseudonyms, then? – Ed.]

Now The Orwell Prize, awarded for political writing, is publishing George Orwell's diaries as a blog. From 9 August 2008, Orwell's domestic and political diaries (from 9 August 1938 until October 1942) are being posted in real time, exactly 70 years after the entries were written. Read the Orwell Diaries at <http://orwelldiaries.wordpress.com/>.

[Thanks to William Lutz for passing us this link.]

## Tesco taken to task over till text tangle

'Ever queued at the "ten items or less" checkout at Tesco and found yourself muttering about the appalling grammar in the sign above your head?' asks the *Daily Mail* of 1 September. Well, enough people have criticized the signs that Tesco recently agreed that less is no more: they will change the signs in new stores. But rather than choosing the grammatically correct equivalent, 'ten items or fewer', Tesco chiefs heeded the batty advice of Plain English Campaign Ltd, which suggested 'Up to ten items'.

Trouble is, 'up to ten items' is ambiguous. As Robin Garside observed in a letter to *The Times*:

Tesco appears to have swapped poor English for poor maths...

'Ten items or less' may be grammatically incorrect, but at least everyone knew what it meant. Does 'up to ten items' mean a maximum of nine or are ten items still permitted?

Since many people (especially those in front of you in the queue) seem unworried by exceeding the limit anyway, perhaps it doesn't matter greatly. But it does show that even text containing only simple words – like 'up to ten items' – isn't necessarily plain: to make your meaning properly clear, it's vital to avoid ambiguity. The moral of the story? Let the buyer – of plain-language services as well as groceries – beware.

(Watch out for a future tip of the month on 'less' and 'fewer'.)

[Sources: *Daily Mail*, 1 September 2008; and *The Times*, 2 September 2008]

## News from Plain Language Commission

### Mischief – Your Identity for Sale

If you saw this recent programme on BBC3 (11 September at 9pm) – in which Rebecca Wilcox tries to turn the tables on the marketeers who have been profiling her – you may have spotted our name on your screen. The BBC commissioned us to report on the readability of Facebook's Principles and Terms of Use. We found that the reading age required to understand the Facebook Principles is 18.8 (university undergraduate level), while you'd need reading ability at university postgraduate level (23.7) to get to grips with the even more complex wording of the Terms of Use – yet they are aimed at children as young as 13. We commented:

Facebook's Terms of Use – and, less so, its Principles – are poorly written in almost every way. If you're writing for teenagers, and adults with average reading ability, it makes no sense to produce text pitched at university students.

Plain-language lawyers all over the world have shown that legal documents can be worded clearly for the public. There's no reason why a company as profitable as Facebook can't employ a plain-English editor and proofreader to ensure its documents are clear, consistent and correct – and so that it's being open and

honest with its customers.

If you missed the programme, you can see it through BBC iPlayer at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b00ddwmf/b00ddwlc/> (our bit's at about the 20-minute mark). And you'll soon be able to see our full report on our website (click on 'Articles'). If you'd like a readability report on one of your documents, do send the document for an estimate of the cost. We'll use software tools and our skills in analysing style and language to assess the clarity of your text.

### **European conference on clear administrative language**

In August, our associate Sarah Carr attended a conference at Ruhr University in Bochum, Germany, where she presented on 'Administrative language in the UK: 18 months in *Pikestaff* headlines'. The conference brought together representatives from the various European initiatives for clear language in administration, and featured speakers from politics, business, administration and academia. Covering good and bad news stories in UK national and local government, Sarah's paper will soon be available on our website (click on 'Articles').

### **Publishing news**

The latest issue of *Clarity*, the journal of the international association promoting plain legal language, includes:

- Martin Cutts's article 'Writing by numbers: are readability formulas to clarity what karaoke is to song?'
- the latest in Sarah Carr's series, 'Linguistic lingo for lawyers', which looks at word classes. We'll be uploading this to our website soon, too.

A shortened version of Martin Cutts's article on legal proofreading (already available on our website) has been published in the Law Society Gazette as 'Keeping errors in cheque'. See <http://www.lawgazette.co.uk/opinion/comment/keeping-errors-cheque>.

A favourable review of Martin's book, the *Oxford Guide to Plain English*, appears in *InfoPlus+*, the newsletter of the Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators. Reviewer Marian Newell concludes:

This is an excellent little book: only 172mm x 110mm and yet packed with useful pointers on writing plainly and clearly. Along with New Hart's Rules, itself a little book, this title more than earns its place on a technical author's bookshelf and is almost indispensable to anyone compiling a style guide. The multitude of real-life examples demonstrating the practices described make the book equally useful to experienced writers checking specific points and to novices needing broader guidance.

### **Online poker marketing could spell the naked end of Viagra journalism as we Lohan know it**

So reads the headline to a recent article in *The Guardian*, in which Charlie Brooker reports that the use of attention-grabbing keywords is becoming standard practice. 'Search engine optimization' is 'the journalistic equivalent of a classified ad that starts with the word "SEX!" in large lettering, and "Now that we've got your attention..." printed below it in smaller type'.

According to *Private Eye*, Brooker reports, journalists writing articles for the *Telegraph* website are being actively encouraged to include popular phrases in their copy. So an article about shoe sales among young women would open: 'Young women – such as Britney Spears – are buying more shoes than ever.' Brooker continues:



On the one hand, you could argue this is nothing new; after all, for years newspapers have routinely jazzed up dull print articles with photographs of attractive female stars...But at least in those instances the actual text of the article itself survived unscathed. There's something uniquely demented about slotting specific words and phrases into a piece simply to con people into reading it.

This trend seems badly at odds with the principles of plain language, which advocate honesty and the omission of redundant words.

[Sources: *The Guardian*, 21 July 2008: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/jul/21/charliebrooker.pressandpublishing>; and *The Week*, 26 July 2008]

## **Funny foreign features (not sent in by Brad, Bruni or Beckham)**

In July's *Pikestaff*, we asked those seeking the sun in non-English-speaking countries to write with amusing translations into English that they spotted on their summer travels.

Karen Hampson emailed to report that the signs on the toilets in Amsterdam Schiphol airport read 'Female toilet' and 'Male toilet'. We'd noticed this new way of labelling toilets in this country too, including at the Manchester Velodrome. Karen admits: 'I then spent a happy half hour wondering what a male toilet would look like...'. [It would look like the one without a queue outside or the one with George Michael inside, phenomena that may sometimes be connected – Ed.]

And Elizabeth O'Shea reported the availability of a 'gratuitous ironing board' at a hotel in Nice. Although, as Elizabeth notes, this is technically correct – the *Oxford Dictionary* listing the second meaning of 'gratuitous' as 'free of charge' – this sense is rare enough to sound quite odd. But busy readers may find its first and main meaning ('having no justifiable reason or purpose') applicable to ironing boards anyway, especially on holiday.

Of course there's nothing gratuitous about chocolate, particularly in Sweden, where *Pikestaff's* roving reporter used his accrued kronor to buy a bar of the stuff with the appetizing epithet 'Plopp', made by Cloaca (sorry, Cloetta). Other interesting foreign names for confectionery include Asse (a chocolate bar from Japan) and Israel's Must Be Sexy chewing gum.

Meanwhile, at home, the *Telegraph* of 21 July reports that 'the word on the street is Ponglish, a hybrid of English and Polish, thanks to an influx of migrants'. Words include 'szoping' (shopping) and going for a 'drinkowac' at their local pub, while London-based Poles take the 'tuba' to avoid the 'trafik'. Although Ponglish is bigger in the UK, young Poles in Warsaw are quickly adopting the new vocabulary, and the slang is reported to have become a secret language that infuriates older Poles back home who can't understand what they are saying.

'We mix the two languages together all the time,' said Magda Pustola, from the Polish Cultural Institute in London. 'It's absolutely common to blend words and phrases. We find that more and more English is creeping into our Polish – even in meetings at the institute.' But it's not just a one-way street, as cliché-mongers would say. 'At the institute we are always trying to smuggle Polish words into English,' she added, pointing to a recent campaign to promote Poland's favourite drink: 'There is No V in Wodka.' 'We spell vodka with a W,' said Pustola, 'so we campaigned to change all words with

'v'. So British people, as the Telegraph observes, 'might soon be "wacuuming" or watching "wideos".'

Finally, returning to toilets (recommended for weak-stomached travellers steering clear of Palma Airport's 'Ars' restaurant), we can report an interesting use of English from the foreign climes of East Yorkshire. In the 'female toilet' at Fort Paull, *Pikestaff's* roving reporter (a woman this time) found a sign warning visitors not to put 'items of a personnel nature' into the loo.

So if your HR policies are sending you round the u-bend, or your staff procedures have got you pooped, don't flush 'em away; send them to us for editing instead!

## Contribute

Have you 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'). 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

*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