

Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 20, October 2008

Non possumus, says Bournemouth council on Latin

So read the headline in this week's *Sunday Telegraph*, reporting that Bournemouth Council has asked staff to avoid using 19 Latin words and phrases in council communications. You can see the full list – which includes some common terms, such as eg, etc, and ie, and other more unusual ones, like prima facie and inter alia – at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/3362155/Councilspeak-how-to-avoid-Latin.html>. According to the *Daily Mail*, the council claims the terms are 'elitist and discriminatory'.

Classics fans have criticized the move, with Mary Beard, a Cambridge professor, commenting: 'This is absolutely bonkers and the linguistic equivalent of ethnic cleansing.' Plain English Campaign Limited, meanwhile, congratulates the council: 'If you look at the diversity of all our communities you have got people for whom English is a second language. They might mistake eg for egg and little things like that can confuse people.'

Our view? No eg on our face: ever pragmatic, we take the middle ground. Here's what we advised in *Pikestaff 10*'s tip of the month:

An important plain-language guideline is to use words that are familiar to your readers. So in general, we do advise against using foreign words and phrases, which can be unfamiliar, and so hard to understand. Short English words are usually the clearest.

But the Latin abbreviations 'etc', 'eg' and 'ie' are fairly well understood, 'etc' probably most so. They're probably harmless when used with most audiences, though if we were editing a document for low-literacy readers, we may well change them – say to 'and so on', 'such as' and 'namely'. Some other foreign terms are much less common, so get rid of them if you can; and if you really need to keep them, explain them briefly in brackets the first time they appear.

As it happens, Bournemouth's move is hardly cutting edge. Several government departments and agencies, many local authorities, and even some newspapers have given similar guidance for many years though they rarely impose an outright ban.

[Sources: *Sunday Telegraph*, 2 November 2008: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/main.jhtml?xml=/opinion/2008/11/02/dl0203.xml>; and *Daily Mail*, 3 November, 2008: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1082427/Town-halls-ban-staff-using-Latin-words-case-confuse-immigrants.html>]

Management buzzwords squeezed by credit crunch

The world economy may have stumbled but Lucy Kellaway, management columnist on the *Financial Times*, has found light amid the gathering gloom:

Another market has crashed, bringing to an end one of the longest bull runs ever. The bottom has fallen out of management bullshit. In the past three weeks I have not received one daft e-mail or daft invitation to attend a management training course based on a study of ancient tribes. No stupid theories, no strategy trees, no new management jargon, no nonsense of any sort. Since I started monitoring these things 15 years ago I have never known such a scarcity of silliness.

Kellaway claims that the 'bull run in management nonsense' started 26 years ago with Tom Peters' book *In Search of Excellence*: 'The book sparked a whole movement of gurus and charlatans, and resulted in managers saying things like "we need to relentlessly leverage customer delight" as if it made perfect sense.'

Although the 'bullshit market' has previously resisted recession, which has even led to new jargon – like 'downsizing' and 're-engineering' – it seems to be suffering this time. This is due partly to lack of cash but also to managers' fear, says Kellaway: 'If you are fighting for survival you focus on essential things. You want clarity; whereas management fads thrived on obfuscation.'

Whether the change is permanent remains to be seen. Kellaway reckons that even when the money's back and the fear's gone, management language may still be clearer. She has mixed feelings about this: 'The return of sense should be something that every worker – and every investor – must relish. But...I have made a living lampooning this stuff...'

Somehow we doubt that she or we will ever find ourselves without management material – in her case to mock, and in ours to clarify.

[Source: *Financial Times*, 6 October 2008:
http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f48a5ee4-933e-11dd-98b5-0000779fd18c.html?nclick_check=1

Thanks to Sarah Hunter for passing us the link to this article.]

Tip of the month: zap the buzzwords and rightsize your writing repertoire

The issue

Management buzzwords, virus-like, change often and spread rapidly. Wikipedia defines 'buzzword' (which it adds can also be called a 'fashion' or 'vogue' word) as 'a vague idiom, usually a neologism [more on neologisms in a future *Pikestaff*], that is common to managerial, technical, administrative, and political work environments'. The entry continues: 'Buzzwords differ from jargon; the speaker tries to impress the listener with obscure meanings, while jargon (ideally) has a defined technical meaning – if only to the given specialists...' As the *Oxford Dictionary* points out, the term 'buzzword' covers not just individual words but also phrases.

Examples

Buzzwords are often made up of everyday, simple words but their combined meaning tends to be obscure. That makes them rather dangerous, since your understanding of a buzzword may be quite different from your reader's. Wikipedia states: '...buzzwords render sentences opaque, difficult to understand and question, because the buzzword doesn't mean what it

denominates, yet does mean other things it ought not to mean.'

The source of buzzwords often reflects the image their users wish to convey. For example, there's a strong presence of sporting jargon (such as 'team player', 'key player', 'arena', 'to row in the same direction', 'to step up to the plate' and 'to have the ball'), which carries images of teamwork, vitality, exertion and action.

Sometimes old buzzwords become part of ordinary language. For example, you'll now find some of the older chestnuts (such as 'ballpark' and 'window (of opportunity)') in an ordinary dictionary. Where they do join the everyday language, they are usually thought of as clichés, and may be used to parody stereotypical managers. For example, a hospital manager in *Coronation Street* asked a grandfather whose new-born grandchild had just been snatched whether he is 'up to speed on developments'.

Another made-for-TV manager – who liked to invent his own buzzwords – was *Drop the Dead Donkey's* Gus Hedges:

- There's just something I'd like to pop into your percolator, to see if it comes out brown.
- We do rather appear to have an ongoing underwear entanglement situation.
- We've got to downsize our sloppiness overload.
- Could we interlock brain spaces in my work area?
- Coach, if I could input into your mental mainframe for a moment...
- Morning, talent base. Are the afterburners on full thrust?
- We're merely running our bulletins through the cappuccino machine of innovation, see if it comes out frothy.
- I'm reading this great new book on the benefits of reciprocal social integrational relationships within the work environment.

You can see more examples of buzzwords in the BBC's article *50 office-speak phrases you love to hate* at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/7457287.stm>.

Our advice

Ditch 'em! Most buzzwords can easily be replaced by words and phrases whose meaning is much clearer to most people, including those who use them.

Readers write

Talking Heads or Take That?

Stephen Day wrote to tell us about Results Accountability, a new method of planning and working from the US. Its originator, Mark Friedman, claims that his method is 'jargon-free' (apart from the title, as Stephen notes). Stephen adds: 'He has tried to simplify the language but, to me, his vocabulary smacks more of the "dumbing down" that plain language campaigners are often accused of [we tackled this in *Pikestaff 14*] rather than a clearer way of communicating.' You can read more about Results Accountability at <http://www.resultsaccountability.com/> and <http://www.raguide.org/>.

In her article mentioned above, Lucy Kellaway writes about management methods: 'Total Quality Management was the equivalent of the Rolling Stones: solid with staying power. The more recent fads, such as Loyalty Management, are the equivalent of HearSay – derivative, somewhat naff, gone before many people have even heard of them.'

Tell us what you think of Friedman's approach to language: fad or the

future? And which pop group do you think the method equates to? Email us at pikestaff@clearest.co.uk with your views and ideas.

There's over one way to skin a cat

Another reader wrote:

In the most recent issue of *Pikestaff* (the first I've ever read and which I thoroughly enjoyed), I was slightly frazzled at the use of 'over 2,100' clichés, which should have read 'more than 2,100' to be grammatically correct, in the first article... My question is whether this use of 'over' rather than the (correct!) 'more than' is one of those changing rules...in using...'plain language' – using the shorter version, thereby making it 'plainer' (or should I use the alternative spelling: 'planer'?).

We replied:

Our using 'over' rather than 'more than' wasn't about plain language, as we think either phrase would have been easy for *Pikestaff* readers to understand. The *Oxford Dictionary* includes 'higher or more than' as one definition of 'over', and we believe both phrases are equally correct: it's a matter of style choice rather than grammar. While the difference between 'less' and 'fewer' is covered in most style guides, few contain entries on 'over' versus 'more than' at all. One university website (<http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/nonerrors.html>) lists the issue as a language myth, saying 'over' has been used in the sense of 'more than' for over 1,000 years.

The Grammar Girl website says the myth arose in the US in 1877, with the editor of the *New York Evening Post*, William Cullen Bryant. He didn't like people to use 'over' before a numeral, and although he gave no reason for his disapproval, the rule made its way into many American newsroom style guides. *Merriam-Webster* sums up the situation by saying that the disapproval of Bryant and other journalists is 'a hoary American newspaper tradition'. The site adds that British journalists tend to be happy to use 'over' in this sense.

Cliché begins at home

Thanks to new reader John Pare, who good-humouredly pointed out that *Pikestaff's* very title is based on a cliché! We replied:

When we started the newsletter, some people seemed not to have heard of the underlying simile – a few wrote in asking why it was called 'Pikestaff'. So maybe it's less of a cliché for people below a certain age and in other English-speaking countries. But the saying may still not be forceful or novel if they don't know what a pikestaff is or why it was ever considered plain. I think it may be time for another short piece on this in the next issue!

Admitting he was over 'a certain age', John added: '...presumably [a pikestaff is] just the rather large broomhandle, with a nasty sharp metal bit...on top, in which case you can't get much plainer.' That's quite right: in British English, something's said to be 'as plain as a pikestaff'. The saying may have started as 'as plain as a packstaff', the pole that pedlars used to carry their pack – no doubt similar to a pike handle. Pikes had removable staffs so the wood could be replaced when broken, and the weapon transported easily. Another plausible explanation is that pilgrims carried one to announce plainly their devotion.

Cliché corner uncut

Talking of clichés, last month we reproduced the first of 5 pieces on these, originally written for *The Independent* by our research director, Martin Cutts. Here's the second in the series. The paper published this largely as written, but here's Martin's original version:

'Washed down with...'

It was hard not to be gleeful when a newspaper's leader column criticizing 'fundamentally flawed' as a hideous cliché appeared next to an article condemning a government policy as, er, fundamentally flawed. Journalists regularly trot out clichés like 'grinding poverty', 'mass exodus' and 'innocent victims', and 'he didn't suffer fools gladly' (a staple in obituaries of irascible civil servants and military leaders). Yet there's one, above all, that brings a shudder. (No, not 'They've got a yen for...' in articles about Japan, though that's grim enough.) It emerges whenever a good meal's the focus of the story. Unfailingly, the authors will say it was 'washed down' with some fabulous bottle of wine. Washed down, as if they were hosing their Fiat Puntos. Washed down, as all those millions of food particles were sluiced through the oesophagus. Disgusting. Or, as cliché mongers would say: 'It's a nightmare.'

Linguistic links: Simple Language

The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) has launched a new campaign to improve the EU's communication with citizens. The *European Weekly* reports:

The campaign is aimed at all who work for and with the European Union, in Brussels and beyond, with the objective of encouraging the use of simple and clear language in all EU documents, official or not. The campaign centres around a dedicated website...where individuals can post examples of complex sentences or jargon that they have encountered in EU documents. Although not compulsory, contributors will be encouraged to suggest a citizen-friendly alternative.

ALDE's group president Flo Clucas, Deputy Leader of the Liverpool City Council, said:

We have seen time and time again that the EU struggles to make itself understood. We live in a complex world, but we don't help ourselves or our citizens if we express ourselves in obscure language. Citizens find the language which emanates from Brussels impenetrable, but so too many politicians and officials in national, regional and local authorities. There is an urgent need to change this and that is why we are launching this campaign.

The campaign's web page is advertised on a huge banner across the rue Beliard in Brussels, and you too can participate by visiting www.SimpleLanguage.eu.

Some people are concerned that using 'simple' is a mistake – since, as mentioned above, plain language is about clarifying, not dumbing down. But it's still an encouraging development, and one we'll be watching and reporting on in future newsletters.

[Source: *The European Weekly*, 22 September 2008:
<http://www.neurope.eu/articles/89841.php>

Thanks to Edward Seymour for passing us this link.]

News from Plain Language Commission

High-street bank commends editing turnaround time

Pikestaff 15 reported that the Northern Ireland PCA [Personal Current Account] Banking Market Investigation Order was coming into force in Northern Ireland on 1 July this year. You can read the order – which requires that PCA communications are certified by an independent organization specializing in plain English (or are tested with customers and found to be easily understandable) – at http://www.offt.gov.uk/shared_offt/monopolies/NI-PCA-banking-IO.pdf.)

We've since helped a high-street bank review the information it provides to customers about PCAs. A senior manager commented: 'Particular thanks must go to Martin Cutts of the Plain Language Commission for turning around the volume of items so quickly and to my own team...you have all done a fantastic job.'

You'd think a lawyer would of known better

We mentioned last month that a shortened version of Martin Cutts's article on legal proofreading (already available on our website) had been published in the *Law Society Gazette* as 'Keeping errors in cheque' (<http://www.lawgazette.co.uk/opinion/comment/keeping-errors-cheque>). Rachel Turner, of Price Evans in London, wrote to the *Gazette* to comment:

I was interested to read the article by Martin Cutts concerning the increasing number of errors, both grammatical and semantic, appearing in letters and other legal documents...

I was recently horrified to receive a letter from a fellow solicitor that repeatedly used the word 'of' instead of 'have'. This raised the worrying possibilities that either the solicitor in question was experiencing serious difficulties with basic English grammar, or that the letter had been typed and then not checked before it left the office. I consider it unlikely that this was a one-off event.

Solicitors have always been able to claim (and rightly so) a high level of professionalism. It is sad to see what could be the beginning of a slide in our shared standards.

Have you spotted any linguistic errors in a legal letter or document? If so, do write and tell us.

Spelling like you speak: chic or shriek?

University lecturer Ken Smith may be more forgiving to the solicitor writing 'of' for 'have': in *Pikestaff 19*, we reported he had grown so tired of correcting his students' spelling that he believes the best way forward is to declare an amnesty for the most common mistakes, to be accepted as 'variant spellings'.

We added that Smith's suggestion was welcomed by the Spelling Society (<http://www.spellingsociety.org/>), which has advocated a simplified, more phonetic, approach to spelling since 1908. Its research has identified 3,695 common words that contain 'spelling traps', while other languages have far fewer. The society believes this is partly because other countries have done more to tackle the problem:

Other countries with alphabetic writing systems started improving theirs long before they got into the chaotic state that English spelling is in now, and consequently none has as many

functionally illiterate adults as the English-speaking ones, or as many highly educated people continuing to commit spelling errors... Finland, Korea, Spain, Sweden, Germany and many others...have kept their spelling systems more learner-friendly with regular spelling reforms.

But Philip Howard, in a series in *The Times* on spelling, lambasts the Spelling Society's proposal:

- Words are pronounced differently between places: just whose pronunciation would phonetic spelling represent?
- The connections between word families would be destroyed, for example in nation/national, sign/signature and adore/adoration.
- The cost of republishing literature would be huge.
- It would be necessary to re-educate everybody above school age.

Howard concludes: 'Spelling is beautiful. Believe it.' (We do.)

Ironic that the newspaper boomed in an article advertising its new national Spelling Bee championship:

The online games are free to play and can be used to practice spelling in the classroom...

[Source: *Yorkshire Post*, 28 August 2007; *The Times*, 5 October 2008: http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/court_and_social/article4886764.ece; and *The Times*, 29 September 2008: http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/education/spelling_bee/article4801360.ece]

From the apostrophic to the prophylactic

Hat-trick for Tesco on text trouble

In the Christmas issue of *Pikestaff*, we featured an unclear notice by Tesco, and last month we covered their till text tangle as they tried to tackle the technically troublesome 'ten items or less'.

This month, Peter Neill emailed to report a printed notice he'd seen in Tesco, Borehamwood: 'CCTV Cameras's are in use for our customers security'. Peter suspects it was a notice that had been printed 'in-store (another hated expression)' rather than issued by head office, leading him to comment:

I firmly believe that no-one should be able to buy a word-processing application, or, indeed, a printer without production of at least a GCSE English certificate. We learn correct English by hearing and reading it as much as from grammar books, and new technology gives the tools to disseminate mistakes to the illiterate. [Would GCSE English be high enough? – Ed.]

Look out for more on the hazards of word processors for the grammatically or orthographically challenged in a future *Pikestaff*.

Safe-sex instructions, warts and all

Our health editor has been checking out the NHS Immunisation Information's website at <http://www.immunisation.nhs.uk>. He noticed many errors including:

- 'How dangerous is Tuberculosis? Is it life threatening or is it something that can easily be cured?' (Read: 'threatening'. And why do they cap up the names of diseases?)
- 'Are vaccinations free at local doctors surgery's?' (Read: 'doctors')

surgeries'.)

- Do you have to have to have sex with a lot people get HPV [human papillomavirus]? (Read '...have to have sex with a lot of people to get...'.)
- 'You get HPV by being sexually active with someone else who has it.' (Read: '...with someone who has it'; as it stands, the text implies the reader already has it too.)

And this advice on safe sex contains a triple negative, while giving an unusual impression of what people do with condoms:

Using condoms does reduce the risk of getting HPV. However it doesn't mean you can't get HPV because some areas of the body are not covered by condoms.

When we wrote to point out how odd this sounded, they made only a condominimal change: 'However it doesn't mean you can't get HPV because the virus can be spread from areas of the body that a condom doesn't cover.'

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.

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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