

# Pikestaff

## Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 29, July 2009

### No, Sir Humphrey

So began the press notice from the Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) announcing a 'public hearing on how government uses – and misuses – language'. It continues:

PASC is conducting a short inquiry into Official Language [note those Pompous Initial Capitals], which is exploring the use of language in government. This includes how well government bodies communicate with the public in day-to-day life, as well as how people within government communicate with each other.

The hearing, on 9 July, was opened by Tony Wright, chairman of PASC, with these surely-ironic words: 'Welcome stakeholders. We look forward to rolling out our dialogue on a level playing field so that going forward in a public domain we have a win-win step change.' 'He's thinking outside the box!' cried linguistics expert Professor David Crystal, one of the panel of plain-language experts.

One idea to come out of the event was to keep politicians' speeches to one minute each. Tory MP Charles Walker did not agree; nor was he in favour of the vogue among politicians for Twitter: 'This diminishes politics even more. Life is more serious than "I am sitting in a restaurant and John Prescott has walked past".' Wright replied: 'You could get rid of PMQs [prime minister's questions] and you could have Twitter Time.'

As Wright went on to observe, obscure language in politics is nothing new; George Orwell wrote in 1946: 'One ought to recognise that the present political chaos is connected to the decay of language and that one could bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end.' You can view the whole 80-minute meeting at <http://www.parliamentlive.tv/Main/Player.aspx?meetingId=4561>

[Sources: [http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary\\_committees/public\\_administration\\_select\\_committee/pasc0809pn43.cfm](http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/public_administration_select_committee/pasc0809pn43.cfm); and *The Times*, 10 July 2009; and <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article6677253.ece>]

### Tip of the month: ensure useless euphemism joins the choir invisible

#### The problem

Wikipedia describes 'euphemism' as 'a substitution of an agreeable or less offensive expression in place of one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant to the listener'. Sometimes this may be well intentioned – for example, if you were talking or writing to a recently bereaved person, you may use the gentler 'passed on' than 'died' – but sometimes euphemism can be intended to deceive. This type is sometimes called 'doublespeak'.

The problem with either type of euphemism is that it may be misunderstood or not understood at all. Even the apparently kind 'passed on' could be tricky,

especially for non-native English speakers, who may struggle with the often hard-to-deduce meanings of phrasal verbs (more on this in a future *Pikestaff*).

### Examples

Wikipedia lists various areas of everyday language where euphemism is particularly common, for example:

- excretion – for example, ‘manure’, ‘to powder one’s nose’, ‘to see a man about a dog’
- sexual behaviour – ‘to sleep with’, ‘to bat both ways’, ‘to get to third base’
- death – ‘to bite the dust’, ‘to pop one’s clogs’ (or more individual versions, for example as Betjeman wrote of a racehorse trainer in his poem ‘Upper Lambourne’: ‘paid the final entrance fee’)
- euthanasia – ‘to put to sleep’, ‘to put down’
- recession – ‘to downsize’, ‘to rightsize’ and ‘to re-engineer’.

But politicians and others are among the worst for using euphemism to conceal the unpalatable truth. Here are some real examples from the world of politics and other areas, sent to the email discussion group of the Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN):

- ‘dryness’ or ‘lack of rain’ (because ‘drought’ was making Australian farmers too depressed)
- ‘negative patient care outcome’/‘the patient failed to fulfil his wellness potential’ (death/the patient died)
- ‘sudden and unauthorised descent to an altitude below that of the runway’, ‘uncontrolled powered descent into terrain’ or ‘unscheduled contact with the ground’ (plane crash)
- ‘diminution of existing core service provision’ (service cuts)
- ‘human bodies in the post-mortal state’ (corpses)
- ‘he died in friendly fire’ (he was shot by his own side)
- ‘financially incentivising’ (bribing).

### Our advice

Unless you are sure that it will help the audience and that they will understand exactly what you mean, it’s better to avoid euphemism. For example, in the US, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Administration (WMATA) was recently criticized for describing the death of 9 people as a ‘situation’ and the injury of another 80 as a ‘disruption’. *The Baltimore Sun* writes:

As Washingtonians struggled to cope with the worst week in the history of the district’s subway system, WMATA put on a breathtaking show of obfuscation, spin and Orwellian use of the English language.

Certainly the folks at WMATA faced an unenviable task in the wake of the horrific collision of two trains on the Red Line. And allowances must be made for the confusion that exists in the immediate aftermath of a catastrophe.

But WMATA’s performance in communications last week could be used by public information professionals as a case study in how not to perform in a crisis.

The first lesson that should be learned is that words count. Plain, honest language is invaluable in times of tragedy. Euphemisms, rather than softening the blow, mock the gravity of the events.

[Sources: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euphemism>; and *The Baltimore Sun*, 29 June 2009: <http://www.baltimoresun.com/technology/bal-md.dresser29jun29,0,6965353.story>

Thanks to John Blois for passing us the link to this article.]

## Plain Language Commission news

### New article for The Ombudsman

August sees the publication of the second article in a series of 3 by our research director, Martin Cutts, for the newsletter of the British and Irish Ombudsman Association (BIOA). In the new article, Martin looks at 'how not to write like a barbarian: some common pitfalls and how to avoid them'. We'll add the article to our website once it's published, and the newsletter will also appear on the Publications page of BIOA's website at <http://bioa.org.uk/literature.php>.

Despite the BIOA's name, its newsletter is read far and wide: the first in this series of articles attracted an email from a lawyer in Bangkok expressing his company's appreciation for Martin's 'advocacy for plain English'.

### New StyleWriter editing software out soon

In *Pikestaff 9*, we reviewed StyleWriter: the Plain English Editor. We are an agent for this specialist software that catches thousands of style and usage problems missed by Word's proofreading tools. We recommend StyleWriter because it constantly encourages you to write in clear, plain English. Unlike Word's grammar checker, StyleWriter assumes you know how to write a sentence and doesn't give advice you can't understand or constantly flag correct English as dubious. With full-screen editing and all its advice displayed, the program is easy and quick to use.

We're pleased to announce that the designers, Editor Software, are releasing an improved version of StyleWriter in September. A new graded 200,000-word and phrase dictionary (the 'wordlist') gives a host of new editing features and proofreading tools and covers most of the words you will ever use in writing. All words in the list are graded from easy to difficult depending on their frequency and ease of understanding, and are given a category such as difficult or easy, formal or informal, jargon or non-jargon, poor or good style, technical or non-technical, and unusual or common. The word list and style categories add extra features, including the following:

- **The Bog index** measures readability; it's so named because a high Bog score means the style bogs down readers.
- **The Pep index** measures characteristics of good writing style that pep up your writing style.
- **New audience types and more writing tasks** make your StyleWriter scores and ratings more sensitive to the type of document you are writing and your intended audience. There are now 20 writing tasks to choose from and 3 audience types: public, in-house and specialist.
- **The spellchecker and questionable category** highlight words that often fool conventional spellcheckers, and offer advice on thousands of spelling-related issues, such as preferred spelling, and American or British spelling.
- **A Jargon Buster** highlights 90 per cent of all jargon found in business and government writing.
- **An advanced editing feature** highlights 'high bog' (difficult-to-read) and 'high glue' (wordy) sentences, and encourages you to edit them into a clearer and less wordy style.

Nick Wright, director of Editor Software and one of the main designers, believes StyleWriter Version 4 teaches people the art of editing and good writing principles: 'We've tested the new StyleWriter on thousands of

documents and the program always improves the style and clarity, typically cutting the waffle, jargon and other poor writing habits.'

You'll be able to download a free 30-day evaluation copy of the new version of StyleWriter from our website in September. Site licences will continue to be available too. In the meantime, if you'd like more information, please email Editor Software at [stylewriter@dsl.pipex.com](mailto:stylewriter@dsl.pipex.com).

### **EC's How to Write Clearly booklet**

In last month's *Pikestaff*, we reported that this booklet, available on the website of the European Commission's Fight the Fog campaign, was being translated into 23 languages. Emma Wagner emailed to correct various factual errors, for which we apologize:

- The Fight the Fog campaign, set up in 1998, will be replaced by a new Clear Writing campaign in 2010.
- The new campaign is run by several Commission departments, not just the translation service.
- Focusing on clear writing in any language (not just English), the campaign will include a new version of the booklet, translated into 23 languages.

### **New edition of Oxford Guide**

The third edition of Martin Cutts' *Oxford Guide to Plain English* emerges from its chrysalis on 27 August. Originally published in 1995 as *The Plain English Guide*, the book has been thoroughly updated and now extends to 270 pages. It has new chapters on writing for the Web, readability testing, writing for low-literacy readers, and proofreading. The layout chapter now includes numerous examples of well-designed documents. In response to (justified) criticism, the book has been typeset in more legible print. Price: about £8. ISBN: 978-0-19-955850-6.

### **Clearly clarified**

In this slot, introduced in the last *Pikestaff*, we quote examples of text before and after being edited into plain English. Sometimes (as last month), we'll analyse in detail the linguistic changes we've made; other times we'll look at particular issues in plain-English editing.

This month, we look at editing legal language, using this disclaimer from a council:

Please note that whilst the Council has made every effort to provide accurate information, you need to be aware that material containing asbestos may still be present in your property, which has not been listed on this page.

Please therefore be careful whilst carrying out any repairs or decorating your property, read and follow the advice in this leaflet and contact the Council if you have any questions.

The Council does not take any responsibility or liability for any errors or omissions in the information provided in this document, nor for any claim, loss, damage or inconvenience which may arise from the presence of any asbestos in your property, which is not recorded in this leaflet.

Editing legal documents into plain English requires special care, as it's important that the end result remains legally watertight. This was reflected in the customer's instruction to us: 'While I am happy with you making the disclaimer easy to read, there must be no change to the legal meaning or

implications.'

Our edited version read as follows:

The Council has done everything it can to give accurate information. However, material containing asbestos may still be present in parts of your property that are not listed above.

So please take care when doing any repairs or decorating your property. Read and follow the advice in this leaflet and contact the Council if you have any questions.

The Council is not responsible or liable for:

- mistakes or missing information in this leaflet, or
- claims, losses, damage or inconvenience that may arise from any asbestos in parts of your property that are not listed above.

We added a note to point out that we couldn't give an opinion on whether the Council was legally correct to exclude liability for matters in the second bullet. We were pleased to receive this positive feedback:

I have run your amendments past my legal team and they are happy with the suggested changes. They confirm that the words are clearer whilst retaining the full meaning that they wanted. With that agreed, I have amended the leaflet along your suggested lines and am returning for your final comments. Thanks for your help on this one. It is very important and sensitive at this moment.

## Readers write

### **An astronomical argument**

As 'an employee in an astronomy institution', Dave Brown begs 'to be allowed some pedantry' on the confusion caused by the use of 12am and 12pm (see *Pikestaff 28*):

The meridian, in this context, means noon (when the sun is at its highest). Twelve hours before the meridian (12AM) is the previous midnight, twelve hours after the meridian (12PM) the following midnight. Neither 12AM nor 12PM can refer to noon today.

Using noon and midnight, as suggested, does not entirely remove the confusion. Is midnight on the 30th June the moment when the 29th becomes the 30th? Or is it the moment when the 30th becomes the 1st July?

Taking Dave's word for it on this, we replied: 'Is there a solution, do you think? How can these times be most clearly expressed in writing?' Dave advises:

The simple answer is to use the 24 hour clock with the two midnights being 0000hrs and 2400hrs (though, properly speaking there is no such time as 2400hrs).

Our view? In most contexts, 'noon' or 'midnight' would be clear to most people, though using the 24-hour clock is certainly an alternative, which may be better suited to timetables, and to more formal or scientific texts.

### **An orthoepic\* article**

Uttara Ganguly emailed from India to ask:

Can you please tell me which is the correct article to use with USD (and why), for example in a sentence like this: 'Mexico plans to address a severe shortage of clean water by building a/an USD 800 mn water purification plant in Mexico City.'

We replied:

The correct article to use with 'USD' in your sentence is 'a'. The rule here is to think how you would pronounce the word following 'a'/'an'. As *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage* says, 'the rule depends on the sound not the spelling'.

Having said that, the phrase you mention would be better rewritten, as there's a lot of words before 'plant' that modify it. For example, you could say '...by building a water purification plant in Mexico City, at a cost of USD 800 million'.

Look out for more on nouns modified by other nouns – sometimes known as noun strings – in a future *Pikestaff*. [\*Correct or accepted pronunciation – Ed. (Who had to look it up.)]

Charlotte Townsend emailed with a query about sexist language:

I have recently had to edit standard letters which go out from our staff addressed to a firm of solicitors, rather than an individual. These are addressed "Dear Sirs". I've spent some time on the internet looking for any advice on this, and only found other people with a similar quandary. "Sirs [or 'Messieurs'] or Mesdames" sounds horrible, but if we don't want to be sexist by using "Sirs" I don't see much alternative.

Charlotte also wonders if this issue relates to plain English. We think ensuring equality in language is an essential part of plain language, because if a writer alienates part of their audience through using sexist language – or language showing any other kind of prejudice – those readers won't take in the message. Also, plain language is founded on the principle of being fair and respectful to all readers.

But what to do about 'Dear Sirs'? There are usually various alternatives. In *Talking About People: a guide to fair and accurate language*, Rosalie Maggio provides these examples:

A state commission on the economic status of women receives a surprising number of letters addressed "Dear Sir" or "Gentlemen." Pueblo to People, a nonprofit organization of craft and agricultural cooperatives run by low-income people in Central America and the Philippines, notes in their catalog under "When Writing to Us": "Please remember we are a cooperative of women and men. We prefer to be addressed in terms that include all of us, such as 'Friends,' 'Folk,' or 'People,' rather than exclusive terms such as "Gentlemen" and "Sir."

So maybe 'Dear [name of firm]', 'Dear Partners' or 'Dear Solicitors'?

### Linguistic link: Lexiophiles

Lexiophiles is a blog 'inspired by all the language lovers we encounter every day'. It features articles and posts by a range of writers, and also recommends other language blogs and podcasts, as well as language programmes to study abroad. The site holds an annual competition to find

the top 100 language blogs in 4 categories:

- Language learning: blogs about the language learning process, difficulties with or discussion about learning a language.
- Language teaching: blogs discussing languages from the perspective of a teacher.
- Language technology: blogs discussing technology as part of the language learning process.
- Language professionals: blogs by people using languages in their profession, such as translators or interpreters.

Among those in the running for the fourth category this year is Building Rapport, a plain-language site run by Canadian Cheryl Stephens 'advocating plain language, clear design, sensitivity to audience concerns, and civility'. Public voting is now under way: to register your vote, visit <http://www.lexiophiles.com/top-language-blogs-and-podcasts>.

Lexiophiles always features a lead article; this changes regularly. The current piece looks at the difficulties of translating from one language to another, due to cultural differences between countries. The article reports that a common proverb in Hindi is: 'Bhains ke aagey been bajana':

Translated literally, it means playing the flute for a buffalo. Apart from providing a comical image in your head it would make no sense, whatsoever. But if I were to replace the situation with another very similar situation, we would have; Pearls before swine. When we place each proverb in the right context, it indicates the same moral: Tailor your speech to your audience. The reason each proverb sounds awkward in the other language is because buffalo is considered stupid more in one region than the other. On the other hand, a swine would never be considered stupid in India.

## Lost in translation

But many odd-sounding translations can't be blamed on cultural differences; and this summer we again look at amusing foreign phrasings. In his column in *The Times*, Matthew Parris reports:

So many of the Dutch speak such near-perfect English that the tiny mistakes they do make can jar scarily — like when a Vulcan posing as a human gives the game away by a small but key failure to emote. Battling through the endless security checks, concrete barriers and razor-wire fences that must be negotiated before one gains access to any secure compound in Afghanistan, I was encouraged to see a spectacularly good-looking young Dutch soldier walking towards me with a most engaging smile. "I do apologise, but this is Afghanistan," he said. He came closer. "We have to take unusual measurements."

Meanwhile, our research director, dining in Madeira, found one menu item rather less engaging: 'Prick of Octopus'. And a reader's letter to *The Daily Telegraph* reported: 'A sign outside a Spanish restaurant read: "Try our sangria. You will never get better." We declined the invitation.'

Should such sangria bring on Spanish tummy, be sure not to visit the public conveniences spotted by Philip Yaffe:

A sign in a public loo said quite correctly in Spanish, "Please throw used paper towels into the bin." The English version said, "Please throw used toilet paper into the bin."

If you spot any amusing mistranslations on your travels this summer, please do let us know. *Pikestaff* will be taking its customary break in August, but we'll be back in September, when we'll include these.

[Sources: *The Times*, 10 July 2009: [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/matthew\\_parris/article6676972.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/matthew_parris/article6676972.ece); and *The Daily Telegraph*, 15 July 2009: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/letters/5827864/The-cost-of-a-mile-of-motorway-could-save-a-Servicemans-life.html>]

## 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). And do say if you'd prefer to remain anonymous if we include your contribution in a future newsletter!

## 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 Tel: +44 (0) 1663 733177