

Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 30,
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A sneaking success

In *Pikestaff 27*, we mentioned that Tesco's online grocery service was offering shoppers the chance to 'see cheaper alternatives' – like a 220g tin of baked beans for one penny less than a tin twice the size: not our idea of a bargain! We argued that 'alternative' implied a reasonable degree of similarity, particularly in size, but our letter of complaint to chief executive Terry Leahy got short shrift:

Your concerns have been discussed with our commercial marketing team who have advised me that the 'Cheaper Alternatives' on our Grocery website are suggested products to help you spend less. There may be quality, size, health and ingredient differences between the products suggested. Therefore you are under no obligation to select an alternative.

So imagine our surprise on seeing that Tesco had sneaked in these extra words:

Cheaper alternatives are items we think might help you spend less. They aren't always exactly the same product [well if they were, they wouldn't be alternatives, would they?], they might even be a different size, but they could help you manage your budget!

Report launched on testing phase of Information Accreditation Scheme

We reported earlier this year (in *Pikestaff 25*) that the Department of Health was testing its Information Accreditation Scheme (IAS) with 40 organizations from the voluntary, public and commercial sectors. Commissioned to carry out research into how the scheme affects the quality of information and information production processes, the Picker Institute has recently published its report (although this is dated February 2009): see http://www.pickereurope.org/Filestore/PIE_reports/project_reports/Information_Accreditation_Scheme_Testing_Phase_Assessing_the_Impact_Final_report_June_09.pdf.

If your organization is planning to seek accreditation, why not ask us to help you fulfil the plain-language part of the standard? We're also ideally placed to complement the scheme's accreditation of systems and processes by accrediting – with our Clear English Standard – individual health information leaflets.

Plain Language Commission news

Successful application to join new board

Talking of health information, we're pleased to say that associate Sarah Carr has been selected to join the Patient Information Forum's new Advisory Board. Made up of voluntary members, the board will 'keep the Non-Executive and Operations Boards abreast of the key issues affecting the sector and advise on the development of products

and services that meet the needs of members and others'. The first meeting takes place in London soon.

Third edition of Oxford Guide to Plain English published

This new edition of research director Martin Cutts's popular paperback provides 25 guidelines on clear writing and has new chapters on writing for the web, low-literacy plain English, proofreading, and pitching your writing at the right level. Martin has also reworked several other chapters.

The book is published by Oxford University Press, with a recommended price of £7.99 sterling. If you want to buy through Amazon – where it's just £4.79 and already has 6 customer reviews, all awarding 5 stars – please make sure you get the new edition and not the second edition, which Amazon is also displaying. The ISBN you want is 978-0-19-955850-6. This number is correctly shown under 'Product details', though the table of contents is for the second edition.

Plain-language practitioner speaks at EU seminar

Sandra Fisher-Martins of Português Claro, in which Plain Language Commission invests, gave a well-received presentation at a recent seminar held by the Swedish Presidency of the EU, in Stockholm, entitled Transparency and Clear Legal Language in the EU. The seminar was intended for officials from EU institutions and Member State administrations, academics and others. Sandra spoke on plain-language developments in Portugal; you can see her presentation, and the rest of the seminar at http://www.se2009.eu/en/meetings_news/2009/9/8/transparency_and_clear_legal_language_in_the_eu.

Conference of Society for Editors and Proofreaders

This annual conference has just taken place in York, and Plain Language Commission was represented. Sessions covered various aspects of editing, and running an editing business. It's a great way for editors and proofreaders to keep up to date with professional developments, and to help ensure they offer excellent service to all their customers. More at <http://www.sfep.org.uk>.

Linguistic link: Health Literacy and Plain Language Resource Guide

Health Literacy Innovations, a US-based company that 'creates innovative tools to enhance health literacy' has produced this comprehensive guide to available resources on health literacy. The author, Aracely Rosales, writes:

As an important tool, we trust this guide will help educate the health care industry about health literacy as a dangerous and growing public health issue, and one that, if left unmanaged, will continue to affect health outcomes, costs, and, most importantly, consumer health. We believe that by sharing a wealth of knowledge, research, and collaboration, we are taking a key step in helping the nation's consumers better read, understand and act on their health care information.

Pity about that dangling construction (it's rather self-deprecating to call yourself a tool), but it's a good guide: you can download a copy at <http://healthliteracyinnovations.com/information/RGdownload>. And for more on the perils of dangling constructions, you may like to watch this video clip of a BBC news broadcast: www.youtube.com/watch?v=loWFypHb48k.

For another useful report on health literacy, *Improving Health Begins with Understanding*, see http://newsroom.cigna.com/images/56/812520_Health_Literacy_Report.pdf.

[Thanks to Cheryl Stephens for the link to the guide, and to Deborah Bosley for the link to CIGNA's report.]

Readers write (some from the closet)

Two eagle-eyed readers – Lynda Hance and Mark Adler – wrote in about our use of the singular verb with ‘a lot of’ in the following phrase in July’s *Pikestaff*: ‘...there’s a lot of words...’. Both express concern that they may be being pedantic (not a trait we’d recognize, of course)! ‘Surely this should have been: “...there are a lot of words...”?’ asks Lynda, while Mark comments: ‘I know this construction is very common now, but it still jars on us closet prescriptivists. Do you recommend it or was it a slip?’ We initially replied:

On ‘there’s a lot of words’, this is correct as ‘a lot’ is singular. But it would also be OK to use the plural ‘are’; *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage* says: ‘Noun phrases that act as quantifiers can take either singular or plural agreement.’ It goes on to explain that ‘the singular verb seems to invoke the set, whereas the plural verb makes us aware of the individual items in it’. This is rather like the situation with collective nouns, where you can use singular or plural verbs to express subtly different meanings.

The Cambridge Guide gives the following examples:

A total of 192 cars was banked up behind the accident.
A total of 192 cars were banked up behind the accident.

Having said this, we then found some more information on ‘a lot of’, in the same book:

Many a noun phrase has a hierarchy of two (or more) nouns within it, as in *a lot of questions* or *a book of answers*. The following verb will *agree* with whichever noun is the *head*. In *a lot of questions*, the word *questions* is the head...and so plural **agreement** is called for: *A lot of questions need to be asked*.

However, the book goes on to mention that when the verb precedes the noun phrase (as it did in our original phrase), it’s common to find ‘proximity agreement’, that is the verb agrees with the noun it’s closest to rather than the true subject. This is what’s happened here, and it’s a common feature of speech, and of informal written English. The results of a search on Yahoo News (which includes only professionally edited content) include the following examples, all in quoted speech:

- There’s a lot of quite painful lyrics and a lot of slightly twisted Gothic fairy-tale moments on the record. (Reuters)
- There’s a lot of people who’ve said way worse. (Sky News)
- There’s a lot of people in Portugal who might have evidence, that believe Madeleine is dead. (ITN)

So Lynda and Mark were right, but we were just trying to be informal – which is often desirable when writing in a plain-language style. Well, that’s our story and we’re sticking to it!

Tip of the month: don’t confuse your customers with colloquialisms!

The problem

Apart from the danger of annoying closet prescriptivists and pedants, informal language

can be hard for non-native speakers of English to understand. This is true for any informal words, but multi-word verbs are among the trickiest.

The 2 main categories of multi-word verbs consist of a verb and a particle (which may be an adverb, a preposition or a combination of these). In *A Student's Grammar of the English Language*, Greenbaum and Quirk include these examples:

- How are you *getting on*?
- Did he *catch on*?
- The prisoner finally *broke down*.
- He can't *live down* his past.
- She *turned up* unexpectedly.
- When will they *give in*?
- The tank *blew up*.

Multi-word verbs lend writing a more informal style, and tend to comprise short, familiar words (both positive features of a plain-language style), but it's almost impossible to work out their meaning from their component parts. So if you're a non-native speaker of English, they can be trickier than longer single-word verbs.

Also, multi-word verbs can be ambiguous for any reader. The context may make the meaning clear, but not necessarily so. For example 'The 2 girls used to be friends but then fell out' is clear. But 'The 2 girls were riding together on the bus but then fell out' is less so. The same applies to 'He brought up politics at the dinner table' and 'He brought up food at the dinner table'.

Example

We spotted this on a Walkers crisps packet:

Our spuds usually make fab crisps, if not they're on us. If you don't think these crisps are top taters, tell us why, where you bought them, and send them back to us (with the bag) to: [address].

As well as the first statement being a run-on sentence (which is grammatically wrong), the paragraph could be tough for non-native English speakers: 'spuds', 'fab' and 'top taters' are colloquial terms, and 'they're on us' could be confusing. Even for native English speakers, equating crisps with 'taters' is obscure.

Our advice

It's vital always to consider who you are writing for. If your audience is likely to include non-native speakers of English (as most general-public audiences will), then try to use words that are short and familiar, but have a clear and unambiguous meaning. For example, you could rephrase the crisps text as follows:

Our potatoes usually make great crisps; if not, we'll refund your money. If you don't think these crisps are top quality, tell us why, where you bought them, and send them back to us (with the bag) to: [etc]

Clearly clarified

In this slot, introduced in *Pikestaff 28*, we quote examples of text before and after being edited into plain English. Sometimes 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 have a beauty from an actuary in charge of an occupational pension scheme. Our correspondent had asked the actuary what benefits his wife would get from the scheme if he died prematurely.

We typically calculate the adjustment at the time of death rather than at the time of retirement, so we cannot give a definitive reduction in advance, but using the current assumptions, should the member die at age 80, the reduction would be of the order of 10%. The reduction increases with age, so a smaller reduction would apply in the event of earlier death. However, the actual reduction will depend on conditions at the time of the calculation, so could be higher or lower at that time.

The Scheme's Rules state in Rule 12.5(b) that the reduction is "*by such amount as the Trustee, in its discretion, but with the advice of the Actuary, may decide*".

The calculation is intended to leave the Scheme financially neutral to the payment of the spouses pension when the spouse is more than 10 years younger than the member.

The calculation compares 2 values. The first is the expected value of the future payments payable to the spouse based on the spouse's actual age at the date of death of the member. The second is the expected value of future payments to a spouse who is 10 years younger than the member.

The ratio of these values is determined, which gives the factor which should be applied to reduce the spouses pension. The expected cost of the reduced pension payable to the younger spouse is then expected to be the same as the cost of the normal spouse's pension to a spouse who was exactly 10 years younger than the member.

Our correspondent remarked: 'I hope it makes more sense to you than it does to me'. Well, it didn't, and David Carr, a rather less rhubarb-tastic actuary commented: 'When teaching communications to actuarial students, I stress the importance of focusing on the implications for the reader ("What does it mean for me?") rather than explaining the underlying actuarial method.' He gave the following explanation (noting that to provide this illustrative draft, he had to make some assumptions about numbers):

Special rules if your spouse is more than 10 years younger than you

After your death, the scheme will pay a pension to your spouse. This is usually calculated as 50% of your pension, but special rules apply if your spouse is more than 10 years younger than you. These rules help us to be fair to all members by allowing for the fact that pensions to younger spouses are likely to be paid for longer.

There's no reduction to the pension if your spouse is exactly 10 years younger than you. As a rule of thumb, the pension might be reduced by around 2% for every year if your spouse is younger than this. For example, the pension might be reduced by 4% if your spouse is 12 years younger than you, or by 10% if your spouse is 15 years younger than you. When calculating the reduction, the scheme actuary is simply allowing for the fact the pension is likely to be paid for longer. As a result, the total cost to the scheme should be broadly the same and other members aren't disadvantaged.

We can provide illustrative figures to help you understand your benefits, but we don't usually calculate the exact reduction until the spouse's pension first starts to be paid. We do this because some members will remarry after retirement, and because the age of your spouse when the pension starts (eg 40, 60 or 80) will

affect the calculation a little. But our rule-of-thumb figures should give you a good idea of what to expect.

This is a good illustration of the fact that editing isn't always enough to clarify text: sometimes it's necessary to extract the information and start again from scratch. Our confused customer was pleased anyway:

Many thanks for your comments. As a result, everything is much clearer now. Thanks again for your kind help and long may your good work continue.

Stupid letter of the week

This new slot in *Private Eye* recently brought this amazing example of ineptitude, from none other than BT:

After wrangling with BT customer services last year, Adam Kimmel was promised that a proper apology would be sent to his mother, who was cut off in error when transferring an account into her name after her husband died. Instead, the masterpiece of copy-and-pasting that arrived in the post read:

*Dear Sir/Madam,
Customer lost her husband and while trying to sort out his funeral she was disconnected mor than four times she has been to a number of times that she would get a rebate that she has not recived and customer is very upset at all the people t
Yours faithfully,
British Telecom Plc*

Though it's hard to compete with this, a *Pikestaff* reader sent in another example of an awful letter, this time a feat of misspelling. When his wife had been overpaid for the second month running, the payroll department sent her the following email:

I have a big apology to make i have been looking back over the ovepyament recovery that we had discuse last week unfortunatley an error has ocured and instead of deducting the overpyament it has been paid to you again. I understand that this may casued too much inconviene for it to be dedcuted in one month so our normall policy is to deduct the overpayment over the same period of time as what it was paid ie 2 months.

If you have any dire letters, do send them in for our new occasional slot: Stupid letter of the month.

[Source: *Private Eye*, no 1242, 7–20 August 2009]

A roaring success

Last month, we appealed to readers to spot any amusing mistranslations on their travels this summer. Gael Spivak wrote to tell us about dinner at a restaurant in Cuba, where the dishes included 'grilled lion of pork' and 'fried lion of pork'. Meanwhile, in Malta, Elizabeth Stanton Jones enjoyed some 'cauliflower o'gratin'.

But most Brits' command of foreign language is worse than foreigners' command of ours. *The Week* reports that a British tourist found herself locked in a French town hall for the night, after thinking 'Hôtel de Ville' was the name of a hotel. She entered the town hall and went to the toilet before looking for someone to ask about a room. In the meantime,

all the staff left the building and locked the front door. The story continues: 'Finding herself trapped, she left a message in broken French, glued to the window of the door, which read, "Je suis fermer ici. Est ce possible moi la porte ouvrir?"' She didn't get out until the next morning, when a local chemist spotted her note.

Tony Blair may sympathize: in the early days of his premiership, he attempted to show off his linguistic skills by taking a joint conference with France's then prime minister, Lionel Jospin, reports *The Times*. When asked what he thought of Jospin, Blair tried to respond, in French: 'I admire Lionel Jospin, although we have differing views.' Pity then that his lingo actually translated as: 'I desire Lionel Jospin in many different positions.' Finally – and a good illustration of our tip of the month – *The Financial Times* tells of an embarrassing mistranslation of Harold Pinter's work into German:

Harold Pinter's obsession with cricket was extreme even by the standards of English playwrights. This could be particularly baffling to foreigners. In one German production of *The Birthday Party*, his line: "Who watered the wicket at Melbourne?" was translated rather literally as: "Who pissed against the city gates at Melbourne?"

Sources: *The Week*, 29 August 2009; *The Times*, 24 July 2009: http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/women/celebrity/article6725184.ece; and *The Financial Times*, 6 January 2009: http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/ffac0412-db91-11dd-be53-000077b07658.html?nclick_check=1]

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. 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

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