

Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 39,
June 2010

The logo for the Plain Language Commission, featuring the text "PLAIN LANGUAGE COMMISSION" in white capital letters on a dark blue rectangular background with a green corner cutout.

Pikestaff readers' survey

We'd like to know what you think of *Pikestaff*, so we can tailor its contents to your needs and interests. So we've designed a short survey using SurveyMonkey: with just 10 questions, it shouldn't take many minutes to complete.

As a thank-you, we'll be giving a book prize of Martin Cutts's *Oxford Guide to Plain English*. To enter the draw, you'll need to fill in your name and email address; but if you prefer not to give us this information, you can still participate in the survey – we'd rather have an anonymous response than none at all! Please visit <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/3DBWF9L> to complete the survey now.

Over-regulation conflagration: justification for celebration?

In the *Oxford Guide to Plain English*, Martin asserts that as well as UK laws needing to be written in clear English, there should be fewer of them, so that people have time to absorb them:

From 1992 to 2005, a total of 39 000 pages of new primary law and 133 000 pages of secondary law (regulations) were passed. So people have had to swallow 172 000 new pages of law in fourteen years, an average of 12 200 pages [a year].

The new coalition government has already lit its bureaucracy 'bonfire', with home improvement plans (HIPs) the first to go up in smoke: on 20 May, Communities Secretary Eric Pickles suspended the requirement for homeowners to provide HIPs when selling their homes. Housing Minister Grant Shapps commented:

This is a great example of how this new Government is getting straight down to work by cutting away pointless red-tape that is strangling the market. Rather than shelling out hundreds of pounds for nothing in return we're stripping away bureaucracy and letting home owners sell their properties.

Quite how fiery the blaze will get is unclear but cutting red tape could benefit lawyers as well as the public: in one case (*R v William Chambers*, 2008), 3 appeal court judges discovered by accident that an order they were about to make would be based on a regulation repealed 7 years earlier. Ken Clarke, the new Justice Secretary, was the Chancellor who found the money for the Tax Law Rewrite Project that began in 1995. It has since been trying to rewrite UK tax laws in English rather than what he called the original Swahili.

[Source: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/housing/1591781>]

Neilsen rates political e-newsletters

Usability consultant Jakob Nielsen has found the main British parties' email newsletters to be more usable than their US counterparts. Nielsen looked at the subscription and unsubscription processes, and the newsletter content over 2 weeks. Below are the 3 newsletters' average compliance ratings in the 4 guideline categories. (Nielsen notes: 'The overall usability rating is determined by averaging all 149 guidelines for newsletter usability. Thus, it's not simply an average of the 4 category scores, because there are different numbers of guidelines in each category.')

	Conservatives	Labour	Liberal Democrats
Subscription interface	55%	42%	47%
Newsletter content and presentation	68%	63%	66%
Subscription maintenance and unsubscribing	64%	63%	73%
Differentiating newsletter from junk mail	50%	50%	100%
All guidelines	63%	56%	62%

We summarize key guidelines in our tip of the month.

[Source: <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/uk-email-newsletters.html>]

Tip of the month: elect to enhance your e-newsletter

The issue

As Nielsen points out, newsletters are 'a superb mechanism for growing a relationship with customers'. When asked why they were visiting particular websites, users' most common response was, 'I was reminded to do so because I received an email newsletter from the site.' Representatives from all 3 main parties reported that they'd found newsletters more effective as a campaigning tool than Twitter or Facebook.

Neilsen's advice

Getting readers to subscribe

- Don't distract the reader from the sign-up page: Labour's includes a tablet showing the party's 'fans', which readers may decide to go off to look at instead.
- On the sign-up page, tell users about your privacy policy. Labour does, though it's 'one of the weakest privacy policies in history': 'The Labour Party and its elected representatives may use the data you have supplied.' The other 2 parties don't mention at all how they'll use subscribers' data.

Confirming sign-up

- On the confirmation page, make sure your message is concise and appropriate. The Lib Dems head their page 'Sign up for Email News'. Apart from the dodgy capitals, that's what the reader has just done, so the header doesn't fit. There's then a lot of waffle, so the new subscriber has to read right to the bottom to find confirmation that their details have been submitted.
- Send a confirmation email as soon as possible. Lib Dems did this more quickly than Labour, while the Conservatives didn't send any acknowledgement at all. There's a risk then that by the time the newsletter arrives, users will have forgotten that they'd subscribed and so delete the newsletter as spam.
- Ensure that the 'From' field of your welcome message is 'human-readable' (Lib Dems doing best on this, with 'Liberal Democrats' versus Labour's 'labourparty@email-new.labour.org.uk'). Make sure too that your subject line is as precise and descriptive

as possible to encourage users to open your messages: 'Thank you for signing up for Liberal Democrat email news' is better than 'Thank you for signing up' (Labour).

Writing your newsletter

- Make your newsletter scannable so busy readers can easily pick out the information they want. Here, Lib Dems did best, their newsletter being 'the only one truly designed for today's time-pressed readers'. The Tory newsletter does less well, while Labour's is 'one big wall of gray, undifferentiated text'.
- Write at an 8th-grade reading level (British reading age 13). Only the Lib Dems managed this, with the other 2 newsletters being at higher levels.

Sending out your newsletter

- Make sure you send newsletters at the frequency promised. Neilsen signed up for 'David [Cameron]'s weekly email' but received 4 in a fortnight.
- Send the newsletter from a recognized organization's or person's name. The Conservatives' newsletter came from George Osborne (now the Chancellor), though the sign-up page promised 'David's weekly email'.
- Again, make sure the subject line is meaningful. The sample of political newsletters contained a range of bad subject lines, including 'One simple word', 'Answer time', 'Can you help make it a fair fight?', 'Jakob, my take on week two of the campaign' and 'State of the Race memo 3'. There's a risk that readers may not even choose to open these. Better were 'Spread the word — The tax cut you can believe in' and 'Help elect a Lib Dem MP', both from the Lib Dems.

Neilsen scored the usability of US politicians' newsletters in 2004, when George W Bush was competing against John Kerry; Bush won Neilsen's review and the election. It's interesting that the Labour and Conservative parties' relative positions on newsletter usability were also mirrored in their election results: evidence perhaps that clarity really is power?

You can download the full (494-page!) report at <http://www.nngroup.com/reports/newsletters/>.

Readers write

Healthcare horrors

An anonymous editor passed us this emetic email from an NHS information manager:

Due to the level of concern and distress caused by the additional functionality provided by the cyberlab system it has been decided to limit all access to individual patient results viewing only, thus mirroring the previous processes imposed by the IHCS system.

The electronic acknowledgement functionality will be disabled as of **Monday 10th May**.

It has become apparent that the current working practices across the Trust cannot support the introduction of electronic acknowledgement without creating risk to patient care.

We will revisit the use of the extra functionalities of Cyberlab when the Organisation has had the opportunity to properly assess the diverse Clinical and Administrative processes across the Trust.

We believe that Cyberlab offers enhanced functionality for Clinical Staff and safer processes for our patients. Cyberlab will also facilitate the organisational desire to switch off paper reports.

This will be progressed as soon as possible through discussion with appropriate Clinical forums.

But gobbledygook isn't just an NHS problem; as well as the smoked-salmon sarnies, our healthcare correspondent had to swallow a lot of rhubarb on her recent visit to a BUPA (private-sector) hospital. On admission, the nurse enquired: 'Are you independent to mobilize?' The military metaphor turned out to mean: 'Can you get around without help?'

On leaving the establishment, our correspondent was asked for 'any feedback on your wellness experience'.

My, myself and I

Last month, we commented on the erroneous use of 'myself' in a local election candidate's invitation to 'come and hear what myself and the other candidates have to say on matters that effect [sic] you'.

Retired headteacher William Webber emailed with an interesting theory on why 'myself' is wrongly used so often these days:

I recognise only too clearly a desire to avoid the difficulty of deciding whether to use 'I' or 'me' in the context. It is a result, I feel certain, of the decision in the 1960s that the teaching of grammar, as it had been taught in the pre-war years when I was educated, was not relevant.'

At a recent high-school parents' evening, our education correspondent heard that English teachers are allowed to mark as incorrect only 3 errors in each piece of work, and this must be done in green – to avoid offending children's sensibilities. No wonder then that 17% of English 16- to 19-year-olds are functionally illiterate, according to new research by Sheffield University. And contrast these 2 letters to *The Times*:

My business advertised for a receptionist. We had 220 applicants. We asked every applicant for a handwritten letter stating why they should be employed. We rejected 190 because the applicants could not write, spell or construct a sentence in English. (St John Brown)

In the archives of a local school I came across a file of handwritten job applications dating from 1960. The neat writing, accurate spelling and punctuation, and the apt, even elegant – phrasing of these letters were all that St John Brown could have wished. The writers were applying for jobs as porters, carpenters and groundsmen. (Kath Boothman)

If it's all enough to give you an illness experience, why not cheer yourself up by watching comedian David Mitchell on his soapbox bemoaning 'myself', poor spelling and bad punctuation: <http://www.channelflip.com/david-mitchells-soapbox---series-1/spelling?>

[Sources: *Times Educational Supplement*, 7 May 2010: <http://www.tes.co.uk/Article.aspx?storycode=6042996>; and *The Week*, 12 June 2010]

Linguistic Link: The Times Spelling Bee

Yet all is not lost on the young-people-and-English front. Last year, *The Times* started an annual spelling championship. Attracting entries from more than 750 schools that competed in 100 events nationwide and supported by the Department for Children, Schools and Families, The Times Spelling Bee has run again in 2010. The final – involving 10 teams of 4 children (all aged 11 and 12) took place on 24 June in London, and the winners were the Queen Bees, an all-female team from the selective state school Newport Girls' High in Shropshire. Coming a close second (by just one point!) was Culcheth High, a non-selective state school in Cheshire.

James Harding, *The Times*' editor, said: 'We are thrilled to see that more and more schools are taking part, and hope that we have achieved our goal of inspiring children, teachers and parents alike to take pride in their spelling while having fun at the same time.'

The Spelling Bee's website includes lots of fun online games that youngsters (or adults: we couldn't resist having a go) can play at home to test and improve their spelling. See <http://www.timesspellingbee.co.uk/>.

[Source: *The Times*, 24 June 2010:
<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/education/spellingbee/article2570820.ece>]

Queen's English Society launches academy

France has L'Académie Française, Spain the Real Academia Española, and Italy the Accademia della Crusca. Well, as of June, the UK has the Queen's English Society's Academy of English. But whereas the other academies have official status as language regulators, the UK's version does not, though the society's members hope to win official recognition, or even a Royal Charter for their academy.

Media coverage has not been entirely favourable, with *The Times*, for example, pointing out:

The man behind the idea, a retired translator called Martin Estinel, has the good grace to describe himself as a "fuddy-duddy", to save others the trouble. For, while pedantic readers of *The Times* will yield to none in the demand for, and appreciation of, correct English, there is no point trying to alter the facts that, as Wittgenstein said, "meaning is use" and use changes over time.

There is always something forlorn about the demand for an official body to preside over language. This request too is accompanied by claims about the dreadful decline of English, the terrible state of apostrophes on market stalls and regrets that the word "gay" no longer simply means happy-go-lucky.

Meanwhile, Stephen Fry tweeted: 'Of all the foolish, ignorant, poxridden, pathetic and tragically misbegotten notions, this one beats them all.' Posting on the Inky Fool, a blog about 'anything to do with the English language with a particular concern for the contortions and convolutions of contemporary cliché and alliteration', Dogberry systematically demolishes the society's press release, including a 'turd of a paragraph' that contains many redundant words:

Other languages, French and Spanish for example, have ~~supreme~~ authorities that ~~try, while moving with the times, to~~ define what is good and acceptable usage ~~and what is not~~. They do not stop the language ~~from~~ changing ~~over the years~~, but they ~~do~~ provide a measure of linguistic discipline and ~~try to~~ retain ~~valid and~~ useful new terms, while rejecting ~~passing~~ fads.

It's easy to concur with Dogberry's overview: 'Sometimes I don't know why I continue with this whole breathing lark.' You can read the full piece at <http://inkyfool.blogspot.com/2010/06/academy-of-english.html>, and find out more about the academy at <http://www.queens-english-society.com/academy.html>. Do let us know what you think about the new academy.

[Source: *The Times*, 7 June 2010:
<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/leaders/article2543546.ece>]

Plain Language Commission news

Welcome to a new corporate member

We have a new corporate member – the Consumer Financial Education Body (CFEB) – which joined on its very first day.

The CFEB is a new, independent body established by the UK's financial regulator, the soon-to-be-abolished Financial Services Authority (FSA), a long-term corporate member of ours. Staffed by members of the FSA's Financial Capability Division, the CFEB will build on the work started by the FSA. It has a mandate from Parliament to develop consumer financial education in the UK, and is responsible for raising public understanding and knowledge of financial matters, and their ability to manage their own financial affairs.

CFEB has taken over the FSA's initiatives to improve financial capability, including:

- free, impartial information, resources and tools for consumers and those working with consumers
- a national money guidance service (Moneymadeclear) giving personalized help on money matters – face to face, over the telephone and online at www.moneymadeclear.org.uk
- the free, impartial programme of financial education in the workplace.

For more information on the CFEB, please visit www.cfebuk.org.uk, and for more on our corporate membership scheme, see <http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=15>.

Instructive feedback

Martin Cutts's mission to improve instructions continues. Having bought a new multi-purpose ladder, he found the instructions were no stairway to heaven: the language was dire and the illustrations confusing. At one point, the text advises: 'It is extremely dangerous to attempt to alter the positioning of The alter , hinges or operating joints while the alter is in use.' Does this make no sense, or does Everbuild Building Products also have a (misspelt) church-fittings arm?

Everbuild's marketing manager took 5 months to respond to our howl of complaint, and after prompting replied in deeply unimpressive style: 'Thank you for your email. I have filed it for future reference as we also believe that good instructions on products are relevant. However, the product you mentioned is no longer sold by Everbuild – we passed our entire tool range onto a customer who is now selling the BUILDERS BRAND range as part of their own products, under their own company name. Everbuild no longer have any involvement in this range of products.'

Which may encourage in uncharitable readers the suspicion that few companies give a stuff about whether instructions are clear as long as the merchandise is being sold.

Lost in translation

We appealed last month for amusing mistranslations and funny foreign English; thank you to Andrew McIlwraith and James Fisher-Martins for responding.

In Portugal, James spotted 'Sandwich with tune' (for those who like a musical accompaniment to their meal?), and a vampire's favourite: 'Stake sandwich'.

Meanwhile, in Italy, Andrew came across a truly amazing menu at the 091 restaurant, Palermo. Here, you could start your feast with 'Salad of sea' before progressing to a range of tempting fish courses such as 'Fished of the day', 'Fried mixed' (perfect for those who've entréed with 'Warm mixture'), 'Fillet of fish to the pink pepper' or 'Fish sword to the messinese'. But the meat dishes are where your meal gets really

interesting. If you can't stomach 'You jump in mouth to the roman' or the aromatic-sounding 'Risotto perfumes some gulf', why not try 'Cut of calf with rucola and nuisance'? And the perfect pud has got to be 'Soft to the cocoa and semifreddo'.

Back on home turf, the tennis player Jamie Murray writes in a *Times* column after his latest exertions at Wimbledon: 'I started feeling my groin and hamstrings straight after I came off the court, and my body was stiff within an hour.' Let's hope the rest of him is a bit more lively, otherwise he'll be a dead loss again in the mixed doubles.

[Source: *The Times*, 25 June 2010:
<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/sport/tennis/article2573258.ece>]

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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