



### Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 40, July 2010

#### Office of Tax Simplification launched

In the next stage of the bureaucracy 'bonfire' (see *Pikestaff 39*), the Chancellor and Exchequer Secretary have launched the Office of Tax Simplification (OTS) to 'unravel the spaghetti bowl' of complex tax laws. But, asks *Pikestaff*, will the mixed-metaphor move lead to anything better than burnt bolognese?

Chancellor George Osborne said:

Two years ago I promised to create the Office of Tax Simplification. Today, we're delivering on that promise. With its independent, expert advice it will be a permanent force for a simpler tax system. Simpler, more competitive taxes will help us show the world that Britain is open for business.

Over the last 10 years, the UK tax code has doubled to more than 11,000 pages and the country has slipped from seventh to thirteenth in the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index. In its first year, the OTS will review tax reliefs and small-business tax.

The business world seems to have welcomed the OTS although many are sceptical that real change will occur. For example, tax lawyer Robert Macro said the new body 'will certainly help trim the fat around the edges but it won't in any way make Britain a low-tax jurisdiction'. And condemning as foolish the reaction of the Trades Union Congress that it might be a 'softening-up exercise for tax cuts for the rich', the Times objects to the Chancellor adding 'an extra wing to Britain's bureaucracy' by creating a new office.

For more information, see the OTS's website at <http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/ots.htm>.

[Sources: *The Times*, 21 July 2010; *The Independent*, 21 July 2010; <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/osborne-sets-up-office-for-tax-simplification-to-review-reliefs-and-business-taxes-2031200.html> and *Telegraph*, 21 July 2010; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/financetopics/financialcrisis/7901340/Office-of-Tax-Simplification-head-John-Whiting-to-unravel-spaghetti-bowl-of-UK-taxes.html>]

#### Plain Language Commission news

Hope you like our new *Pikestaff* logo. Recent subscribers may not know that our newsletter takes its name from the British-English phrase 'as plain as a pikestaff'.

But what's so plain about pikestaffs? Well, 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. A pikeman ('twas the days before pikepeople) could also use

the staff alone, without the relatively valuable point, to display his victim's head. Of course, we're relatively really rather friendly, though we do like to think we're at the cutting edge of incisive reporting.

The logo was designed by Frost Design Consultants, whose partners Mike and Irene Frost are longstanding friends of Plain Language Commission. By clicking on the pictures on their home page (<http://www.mimfrost.com/Home.html>), you can see some of their typographic design for local authorities, charities, Winkworth, the Housing Ombudsman Service, and us.

### **No-go for logo**

Talking of logos, we've persuaded a company to remove a Clear English Standard logo they shouldn't have been using. We accredited a version of the document a few years ago but the company then altered the text so it made little sense, while keeping our logo in place. So it looked as if we were accrediting a bad document, which could have undermined readers' confidence in the accreditation scheme.

If owners of accredited documents wish to retain the Clear English Standard, they need to tell us when they make changes other than trivialities (eg, names and dates). We're always happy to recheck a document, and will usually charge only for editing the new bits. And if we do less than half an hour's work, we won't charge at all.

A whistleblowing member of the public drew our attention to this case. So do let us know if you ever spot the Clear English Standard on a document that doesn't seem to deserve it.

### **Associate contributes to new publications**

Sarah Carr has written sections for 2 new books:

- *Amtsdeutsch a. D.? Europäische Wege zu einer modernen Verwaltungssprache*, edited by Hans-R Fluck and Michaela Blaha (Stauffenburg, 2010) – this German book (literally translated as 'Official German Retired? European ways to a modern administrative language') brings together papers presented at a European conference held in Bochum, Germany, in August 2008. Sarah's chapter (in English) looks at the UK situation; you can see the paper on which the chapter is based on our website at <http://www.clearest.co.uk/files/18Months.pdf>.
- *Plain Language in Plain English*, edited by Cheryl Stephens (Plain Language Wizardry, 2010) – as part of a group of international contributors, Sarah has written and edited parts of this manual on 'how to produce business, government, and educational communications in an understandable and clear style, and a usable format'. The book describes a step-by-step process for important communication projects, and includes case studies. For more details, visit <http://www.PlainLanguageInPlainEnglish.com>. And what's more, until 15 August, Pikestaff readers can get 15% off at <http://www.lulu.com/product/paperback/plain-language-in-plain-english/11770154>: just enter coupon code BEACHREAD305.

### **Pikestaff readers' survey**

Many thanks to those who have already completed our survey. As a thank-you, we'll be giving one respondent a book prize of Martin Cutts's *Oxford Guide to Plain English*. To enter the draw, you 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! We'll announce the winner in September, when we'll also be analysing responses, so there's still time to respond if you haven't already: with just 10 questions, the on-line questionnaire shouldn't take many minutes to complete. Please visit <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/3DBWF9L> to complete the survey **by 3 September**.

## WriteMark New Zealand Plain English Awards

Each year, organisations and members of the public are invited to submit documents and websites that they think are outstanding examples of plain English — or of gobbledygook. Organised by the WriteMark Plain English Awards Trust, the awards aim to:

- improve government and business documents so that all New Zealanders can understand them
- raise public awareness of the need for, and benefits of, plain English
- create a public preference for organisations that choose to communicate in plain English.

Independent panels of plain English experts and advocates judge the entries and decide the finalists and winners in each category. This year, there are 6 separate judging panels, each with one international judge, to judge 13 awards in 6 categories:

- plain-English champion (best organization, project, and individual or team)
- best plain-English document (public and private sector)
- best plain-English website (public and private sector)
- best plain-English sentence transformation
- best plain-English technical communicator – a new award for 2010
- people's choice (best plain-English document and website, and worst 'brainstrain' document and website).

Our research director, Martin Cutts, is on the people's choice judging panel. The awards will be presented by Hon Christopher Finlayson – Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage; Minister for Treaty of Waitangi Negotiations; and Attorney-General – in Parliament's Banquet Hall on 3 September.

## StyleWriter article and demonstration

In *Pikestaff 38*, we reviewed StyleWriter 4, the latest release from Editor Software, which produces specialist software that encourages people to write in plain English. Plain-English consultant Daphne Perry of ClarifyNow has just had her review of this program published in *Computers & Law* journal. Visit <http://www.scl.org/site.aspx?i=ed16558> to read what this program can and can't do for legal writing, in 1448 words with an impressive average of 16 words per sentence and only 6% passive verbs!

Daphne will be demonstrating StyleWriter 4 at the next breakfast meeting of Clarity (the international association promoting plain legal language) on Thursday 30 September in London. Daphne will also describe how one law firm has been using the software, and there'll be a discussion on members' experiences of using this or other style-checking software. The meetings are free for Clarity members; guests are welcome but must join Clarity if they come a second time. For details on time and venue, please see <http://www.clarity-international.net/Conferences/conferences.htm>.

There's also an article on StyleWriter 4 on our website, in which Nick Wright, who co-designed the software, describes its new readability measure – the Bog index. See <http://www.clearest.co.uk/files/TowardsABetterReadabilityMeasure.pdf>.

## Tip of the month: decline to decline 'who'

### The issue

A common enquiry we receive – which we also answer on our grammar courses – is when to use 'whom'.

Traditional English requires 'who' to be used when it's part of the grammatical subject of the clause (that is, the word or words that name who or what performs the action of the verb), and 'whom' when it's the object (the word or words that name the person or thing receiving the action). 'Whom' is a remnant of the case system in English – once much more extensive. Case distinctions are more obvious in languages like German – and those who studied Latin will remember being called upon to 'decline' nouns (form nouns according to case): mensa, mensa, mensam and all that.

'Whom' is also used after prepositions (words like 'to', 'at', 'up', 'for', 'on', 'in' and 'out').

### Examples

Here are some examples of traditionally correct usage, taken from *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage* (by Pam Peters, published by Cambridge University Press, 2004):

- Who is calling?
- A caller who gave his name as Steve just hung up.
- Whom did she marry?
- They asked to whom I was speaking.

### Our advice

'Whom' in writing is becoming rare, and you hardly ever hear it in spoken language. Its decline is even more marked in the US than the UK.

In fact, the use of 'whom' was questioned as early as the end of the eighteenth century, when Noah Webster argued that people should write 'Who did she marry?' because 'whom' was not what people actually said. Peters continues: 'He deplored the efforts of those who rewrote passages of Shakespeare and other classical authors to ensure that **whom** appeared according to the grammatical rule.'

Because plain-English guidelines support a style that's modern and informal, making the writer sound approachable and friendly, we suggest avoiding 'whom'. In most cases, it's fine just to use 'who' instead: 'Who did she marry?' The only place that this would sound wrong is immediately after a preposition, for example 'They asked to who I was speaking'. But this is easily solved by moving the preposition to the end, which has the added benefit of producing a more colloquial word order: 'They asked who I was speaking to.'

## Linguistic link: Local Government Improvement & Development

Local Government Improvement & Development – previously the Improvement and Development Agency – 'supports improvement and innovation in local government, focusing on the issues that are important to councils and using tried and tested ways of working'. The organization is one of 6 national bodies that form part of the LGA Group, which also includes the Local Government Association, for which we run courses. The organization's website includes a large 'Knowledge' section, pulling together lots of information on good practice in local government. This includes an excellent resource on plain English in local government, which offers:

- advice on how to write and edit
- advice on how to manage colleagues' writing
- features and case studies on developing plain English personally and in the organization
- tips on how to deal with tricky grammar and syntax and avoid common mistakes
- tests to gauge plain-English ability
- a crash course in plain-English basics
- useful resources on this and other websites.

The features and case studies include an interview with Professor David Crystal (Honorary Professor of Linguistics at Bangor University) on his evidence last summer to the Public Administration Committee on the use of language in government (see *Pikestaff* 29). Crystal answers questions on the history, the future and the present challenges of using plain English.

You can find the plain-English resource at <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelId=8021380> and Crystal's interview at <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelId=16268570>.

## Readers write

### Plain language – some like it not

Thank you to Malcolm Sturges for alerting us to this letter in *The Independent*, from Jane Gregory of Dundee:

#### Lost elegance

Today I posted a bill payment to Thames Water in the envelope provided. The familiar, elegant wording "Please affix correct postage" had been replaced by "Stick stamp here". Where will it all end?

Which version do you prefer? In our view, it's a tricky case, as the plain-English translation does lose part of the information – the new instruction could encourage people to use too little postage (especially as it invites them to use a single stamp), and the 'please' is more polite. The only problematic part of the original is the archaic 'affix'. But changing this word to 'stick' would sound odd without adding 'here', so you'd end up with an extra word, which may be hard to fit in the space in a big-enough font: 'Please stick correct postage here.' You could lose a couple of characters by using 'right' instead of 'correct', but 'stamp(s)' would be no shorter than 'postage'. Do let us know what you think: email [pikestaff@clearest.co.uk](mailto:pikestaff@clearest.co.uk).

### How to make an impact

Jo Dicks spotted this classic notice in the back window of a vehicle run by a coach-hire company:

PLEASE LEAVE SUFFICIENT SPACE BEHIND THIS VEHICLE, TO ALLOW SAFE INGRESS AND EGRESS OF MECHANICALLY PROPELLED, SEATED POSITION, AMBULATORY DEVICE, BY MEANS OF AUTHORISED LIFTING EQUIPMENT THANK YOU.

[Source: *The Independent*, 7 July 2010:

[http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/letters/letters-schools-staff-and-asylum-seekers-2019811.html?bcsi\\_scan\\_16ACB235AE1CF5E3=2C6XHENh2NpM456i/T1Y5hAAAADcF1QH&bcsi\\_scan\\_filename=letters-schools-staff-and-asylum-seekers-2019811.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/letters/letters-schools-staff-and-asylum-seekers-2019811.html?bcsi_scan_16ACB235AE1CF5E3=2C6XHENh2NpM456i/T1Y5hAAAADcF1QH&bcsi_scan_filename=letters-schools-staff-and-asylum-seekers-2019811.html)]

## Lost in translation

Thanks too to reader Carolyn James who has sent in more examples of funny foreign English:

- Crab in a pink dress (spotted in a restaurant in France)
- Tomatoes in cold cream (in a parador in Spain)
- Ladies thighs meats balls (in Greece)
- Fish in lesbian sauce (also in Greece – we assume this should have had a capital 'L': for more on Lesbian/lesbian, see *Pikestaff* 18)

And *The Week* reports that the Latvian tourist board scrapped a publicity campaign after its slogan was mistranslated into: 'Easy to go, hard to live!' The half-million-pound campaign, aimed at attracting English-speaking visitors to Riga (the capital city), was meant to read: 'Easy to go, hard to leave!' Meanwhile, officials in Yunnan province, China, issued guidelines for English-speakers on how to survive an earthquake:

If you are in a restaurant, you can squat down on the spot or grovel under a table. Grovel if you are in a karaoke bar. Or grovel beside a solid counter, and use newspaper to protect your head. After the shake stops, you must continue to grovel, then withdraw from safety passage orderly. Avoid jumping from a window or building by all means. This will cause pain.'

Back in the UK, Professor David Crystal tells in his blog of a recent New York Magazine contest in which readers were asked to take a well-known expression in a foreign language, change a single letter, and provide a definition for the new version. Here are some of Crystal's favourites:

- Harlez-vous français? – Can you drive a French motorcycle?
- Ex post facto – Lost in the mail
- Veni, vipi, vici – I came, I'm a very important person, I conquered
- Répondez s'il vous plaid – Honk if you're Scottish
- Pro bozo publico – Support your local clown
- Felix navidad – Our cat has a boat.
- Haste cuisine – Fast French food
- E pluribus anum – Out of any group, there's always one asshole

We're with Crystal (whose books include 'Language Play' – Penguin, 1998): 'It's good to see ludic linguistic ingenuity alive and well, and engaging with foreign languages.' For more fun and frolics – as well as serious stuff – look out for September's *Pikestaff*. As usual, we'll be taking a break in August: happy holidays to those who are taking them, and do let us know if you spot any good stories on your travels.

[Source: *The Week*, 21 November and 5 December 2009; and DCBLOG, 30 May 2010: <http://david-crystal.blogspot.com/2010/05/on-foreign-ludicity.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

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