Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 44, December 2010

Call for clarity from coalition

Not people to delay our good resolutions to the new year, we've written to prime minister David Cameron urging him to renew the work on plain language in government:

> You may recall that, when she was prime minister, Margaret Thatcher issued a booklet to civil servants requiring them to use clear English in their forms, leaflets and other documents. This followed the issuing of a booklet called 'The word is plain English' to Cabinet Office staff, calling for the same thing.
>
> Plain language is an important tool of good government. Ken Clarke began the Tax Law Rewrite project in 1995 and this continued during the Labour years. On 26 November the European Commission will launch its own Clear Writing Campaign.
>
> It would be good if you could renew the impetus for plain language in UK government administration by re-issuing Mrs Thatcher's guidance, perhaps in an updated booklet.
>
> People say that in times of difficulty, plain language is a luxury they can't afford. Yet there is a noble precedent for saying they are wrong. On 9 August 1940, Churchill issued a memo called 'Brevity' to his staff, which told them in typical fashion: 'To do our work, we all have to read a mass of papers. Nearly all of them are far too long. This wastes time, while energy has to be spent in looking for the essential points…Let us not shrink from the short expressive phrase, even if it is conversational…The saving in time will be great, while the discipline of setting out the real points concisely will prove an aid to clearer thinking.'
>
> Simplifying and clarifying the policy that lies behind laws and regulations is crucial, too, if people are to understand their rights and responsibilities as set out in government documents. Your Government has made some important moves in this direction already. Also vital is a push to reduce the sheer volume of law. In the 14 years from 1992, the UK parliament enacted 172,000 pages of primary and secondary law, an average of 12,200 pages a year. This, I hope you will agree, is too great a burden on society.

We'll let you know when we hear back from the PM's office.

Clear Writing throughout Europe

It was at this European Commission conference, held in Brussels on 26 November to launch the Clear Writing Campaign, that research director Martin Cutts announced we'd written to Mr Cameron. Martin's talk – Reaching out to citizens: clarifying bureaucratic language to help the UK public – mentioned people who'd said or done something inspiring to improve written communications, including:

- Alfred the Great, the ninth-century Saxon king of Wessex – who, to help unify England, used not Latin but English, and started a policy to broaden the clear understanding of certain important books
- Alcuin of York, the eighth-century teacher – whose lucid writings helped to popularize every reader's favourite punctuation mark, the full stop
- Geoffrey Chaucer, the fourteenth-century author of *The Canterbury Tales* – in *The Clerk's Tale*, the poem's narrator demands of the story-teller: 'Speketh so pleyne at this time, I yow preye / That we may understonde what ye seye.'
- Winston Churchill, the wartime prime minister – who, in the crisis of 1940, found time to write a memo called 'Brevity' ordering his civil servants to write shorter, clearer jargon-free reports.

You can read Martin's full talk at http://clearest.co.uk/files/ReachingOutToCitizens.pdf.

Another article that's well worth a look – and also mentions Churchill – is 'Language and Leadership', by Sara James. Published on The Performance Collective, the piece asks: 'Some exceptional leaders have transcended the problem of bad language. How have they done it?' To find out, visit http://www.theperformancecollective.co.uk/articles/35-language-and-leadership.html.

Other speakers at the European conference came from Sweden, Germany, Poland, Italy, France and Portugal, describing developments in clarifying administrative and legal language in their countries. Martin was the only external speaker invited from the UK.

Português Claro set to make a mint?

Congratulations to our colleagues at Português Claro, who, with the Portuguese Teachers Association (APP) and Lawyers Bar Association of Lisbon, have just launched c*laro!*, a project to promote clear language and accessible design in public communication.

Literacy levels in Portugal are low: 80% of the population struggles to read contracts, official letters and even information pamphlets. *Claro!* aims to make the public aware of their rights and give them the confidence to demand clearer communication. It will also work with public bodies to convince them of the benefits of communicating clearly with their citizens. There are already laws stating that public documents should be written in 'linguagem clara'. *Claro!* will campaign to have them enforced.

To achieve these things, c*laro!* will do the following:

- Certify documents that are in clear language. The first stamp of approval (as shown – the black text means 'For the right to understand') was awarded to ZON, one of the largest telecommunications companies in Portugal, for their new customer service letters.
- Write plain-language guides for non-governmental organisations (using funding from the certification service).
- Host an annual awards event for the best and worst documents.
- Manage a website and blog about the latest developments.

If a recent letter to *The Guardian* is anything to go by, the initiative's name should help assure its success. Writing to offer his explanation of supermarket giant Tesco's business success, Tony Morgan observes:

> 30 years ago, before [Harry] Whewell [a motoring journalist] and his mates in the snug had set eyes on the newly launched Metro, they were unanimous that it would be a commercial hit, in keeping with other great British success stories… Polo, Oxo, Bisto, Brillo, Tango, Milo, Rinso, Aero, Rolo, Omo, Vimto, Paxo…Tesco – Bingo!

So here's to *claro!*; may it be numero uno for Portuguese lingo!

[Source: *The Guardian*, 11 June 2010: http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2010/jun/11/local-impact-of-tescos-success]

A reader writes

Last month's *Pikestaff* featured a politicians' argument over the correct plural of 'referendum'; we noted that 'referendums' is not only a correct but also a plainer alternative to 'referenda'. Reader Iain Shaw responded:

> You may know Fowler's view on foreign plurals, but if you don't, you may like his encouragement of those pretentious pedants who think that we should be saying 'stadia', 'fora' etc, to debate the plural of 'octopus'. Usually they favour 'octopi' rather than 'octopuses', and it is always a delight to explain that 'octopi' cannot be correct, as the word is Greek not Latin, and the correct form in the native tongue is actually 'octopodes'.

Now, there's an argument that's got legs.

Four quenelles on breakfast-show menu

The use of a taboo word on BBC Radio 4's Today programme gave the nation an early-morning giggle on 6 December. Trying to explain that Jeremy Hunt, the Culture Secretary, would be on the programme later, presenter James Naughtie's consonants became lasciviously entangled with the wrong vowels. To hear what all the sniggering was about – and Naughtie's aghast reaction to his blunder – go to http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PdyW9AfVSvE. Police minister Nick Herbert uttered the same word a few hours later in the House of Commons when mispronouncing 'cuts', though this may have been an attention-seeking cunning stunt.

In the *Telegraph*, Christopher Howse dryly commented: 'There may be only one Hugh Jarce on the electoral roll, but hundreds called Mike Hunt. As with fork handles, we hear what we want to hear.'

Christmas competition

As for the last 3 years, we're offering a book prize to the reader who sends us the best edit of this piece of rubbish text. Thank you to Sarah Margetts for emailing it to us.

WARNING
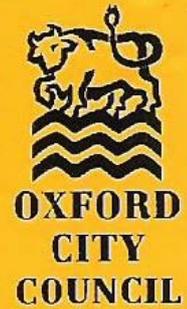
Your bin was not presented in the correct location today. Our operatives have emptied the bin and returned it to the correct location where it should be presented for future collections. However, our operatives will only put one foot onto your property to collect the receptacle in future. If your recycling and waste receptacles are not presented correctly they will not be emptied.

Your containers should be clearly visible and accessible to our crews and presented where your property meets to publicly adopted highway/pavement or where your property meets the agreed private road. For more details visit www.oxford.gov.uk/recycling or call 01865 249811.

www.oxford.gov.uk

OXFORD CITY COUNCIL

To enter, rewrite the text in clear English and email the result to pikestaff@clearest.co.uk, with 'Competition' in the subject line (deadline 5pm, 7 January 2011). If you find any ambiguities, please follow our usual practice: try to work out what it means but if you can't be sure, add a note to the author. The winner will receive a book; they can choose between the new edition of Martin Cutts's *Oxford Guide to Plain English* and Martin Manser's *Good Word Guide*. We'll announce the winner in *Pikestaff 45*.

Three (more) fabulous festive features

As if our Christmas competition wasn't exciting enough, we bring you a triumvirate – not of wise men, but of something just as seasonal.

Evolving English: One Language, Many Voices
If there's time to spare over the holiday period, you may like to visit this new exhibition at the British Library. Looking at how English has developed over the centuries, the exhibition opened on 12 November and runs to 3 April 2011; it's free to visit. The British Library's website describes it as follows:

> In this ground-breaking exhibition, the roots of Old English, slang dictionaries, medieval manuscripts, advertisements and newspapers from around the world come together – alongside everyday texts and dialect sound recordings. Follow the social, cultural and historical influences on the English language…and see how it's still evolving today.

Star items include:

- an Anglo-Saxon chronicle (from the eleventh century), which gives us an insight into the changing nature of Old English and records Scandinavian influences on it
- *The Regiment of Princes* (1412), in which Thomas Hoccleve describes Chaucer as 'the firste fyndere of our faire langage'
- *A True Relation* (1608), a description by John Smith of coastal Virginia, its local peoples, and the colony, illustrating how the English language travelled beyond Europe and how easily it absorbs words from other languages
- a nineteenth-century poster telling people about the Riot Act
- *Modern Flash Dictionary* (1835), a pamphlet by George Kent, covering criminal cant, sporting slang and 'flash phrases now in vogue'
- an 1855 insight by *Punch* into 'h-dropping', with which the British are preoccupied as a mark of lower-social-class speech (hence, perhaps, the current vogue for over-compensating by pronouncing the letter 'aitch' as 'haitch')
- *Broadcast English* (1929), published by the BBC to give guidance on pronunciation.

For more details, see http://www.bl.uk/evolvingenglish/.

I write like… (a light-hearted linguistic link)
Discover which famous writer you write like with this statistical tool, which analyses your word choice and writing style, and compares them with those of famous writers.

Any text in English will do: your latest blog post, journal entry, comment, chapter of your unfinished book, etc, but not tweets. The site advises that you use at least a few paragraphs. Simply copy your text, then paste it into the box and click 'Analyze'. When we pasted in Martin Cutts's letter to David Cameron, we were excited to find it in the style of Dan Brown, apparently.

Of course, the tool's all rather basic really. Editor Software's Nick Wright tried putting in nonsense text, and showed that it simply counts full stops and the number of characters separated by spaces. As Nick observes, 'This is typical of the problem associated with simplistic readability formulas. The designer has simply taken a readability formula and reduced the great writers to a readability statistic. Then it boldly states your writing sample shows your style is the same as the famous author if your statistic is close to the writers.'

But it's good fun anyway. Try it out at http://iwl.me/.

[Thanks to Carolyn Wilby for telling us about this site.]

Bathetic Word List: another Christmas competition with book prizes
Our Canadian colleague Cheryl Stephens has identified 500 words 'so exhausted that they must be retired before 2011 arrives'. Cheryl writes:

> Some words are so misused and abused that their meanings have suffered. Other words are so overused, their expressive ability has withered. Marketing hype annoys readers daily. Writers in other industries lazily rely on stale phrases.
>
> What is the 'value proposition' in calling ordinary things 'unique'? Can you 'visualize' a 'win-win' situation without doing some 'horizon scanning'? Could you 'tease out' the 'takeaway' in being 'thrown under the bus'? Does your favorite 'thought leader' usually 'target' a 'total solution'?
>
> This gobbledygook has to end! It's time to retire the sloppy writer's tools: trite phrases, annoying superlatives, and worn-out words.

There's no sympathy for resisters: 'Some people are saying, "But I like those words." Too bad: you are not writing for yourself but for the reader or listener. And you will lose their attention if you write for your own ear.'

The collection is called the Bathetic Word List because these words 'convey only bathos', described as 'a descent from the sublime to the ridiculous'. The list links words to online sources for the arguments against using the words, from writers in the industries that spawned or abused the words in the first place.

You can send Cheryl any other words that you think deserve a place on the list, and the best contributions will win a variety of books. The deadline is 31 December; for full details of how to enter, see http://plainlanguage.com/decembercontest.html.

Neologism nudenda

If Cheryl does succeed in retiring all those tired old words, fear not: the *Oxford English Dictionary* has a secret vault of millions of new ones going spare. Graphic designer Luke Ngakane uncovered the words when doing a project for Kingston University. He said:

> I was fascinated when I read that the Oxford University Press has a vault where all their failed words, which didn't make the dictionary, are kept. This storeroom contains millions of words and some of them date back hundreds of years. It's a very hush, hush vault and I really struggled to find out information about it because it is so secretive. But when I spoke to them they were happy to confirm its existence and although I didn't actually get to see the room they did send me some examples. I picked out the words that resonated with me and really seemed to fit the purpose they were intended for.

Ngakane researched hundreds of these 'non words' before choosing 39 to etch onto a metal press plate and print onto A4 paper for his graphic design degree. His favourites include:

- furgling – fumbling in your pocket for keys or loose change
- dringle – the watermark left by a glass of liquid
- earworm – a catchy tune that frequently gets stuck in your head
- sprogging – running more slowly than at a sprint but faster than a jog
- scrax – the silver foil coating on scratch cards.

These words and others – including 'wurfing' (surfing the internet at work), 'polkadodge' (the strange little dance 2 passing people do when they try to avoid each other but move in the same direction) and 'nonversation' (a pointless chat) – have been submitted but so far rejected for use in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. They will remain dormant unless they enter common parlance in the future. Fiona McPherson, senior editor of the OED's new words group, said:

> They are words which we haven't yet put in. I don't like calling them reject words because we will revisit them at some point and they may well go in.
> They are not yet considered suitable for the dictionary because there's not enough evidence that people are using them.
> If a word does come to our attention, we can come to this room and check if it's here. A lot of times people say these words but they are not written down or published.

For more of the 'non words' – older ones of which are written on cards and stored alphabetically in 50 huge filing cabinets, and newer ones of which are digitized – see http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/7926646/Secret-vault-of-words-rejected-by-the-Oxford-English-Dictionary-uncovered.html. [A 'nudenda', by the way, is an unhidden agenda.]

Lest we give you 'museum head' (a feeling of mental exhaustion, being no longer able to take in information) or 'xenolexica' (a grave confusion when faced with unusual words), we'll close now and wish you happy holidays and a successful 2011. As usual, instead of sending cards to our customers, we'll be making a donation to Plan International, for its projects in India and Peru. We'll be back in 2011!

[Thanks to Mark Adler for bringing this story to our attention.]

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.

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Rolling the credits

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