



Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 46,
February 2011

Tip of the month: be nifty with netiquette

The issue

Last month, we looked at emoticons, concluding that, along with abbreviations – like asap (as soon as possible), wd (would), u (you), pls (please), thx (thanks) and fyi (for your information) – they're best avoided in business emails. But these aren't the only hazards; email might be a widespread and convenient means of communication, but it can go horribly wrong. As the synopsis of *Great Email Disasters* (by Chas Newkey-Burden, published by John Blake, 2007) warns: 'With an ill-considered click of the mouse, you can humiliate yourself in front of millions, lose your job or even end up in court.'

Examples

The book brings together over 100 of the 'funniest, scariest and weirdest stories of inbox ignominy', including these:

Headmaster Patrick Hazlewood and his school's bursar Barry Worth jointly received an emailed complaint from local pensioner Mary Kelly about some misbehaviour by their pupils. 'Tell her to get stuffed,' typed Hazlewood, thinking his response was only going to his colleague. Alas, he hit 'Reply All' so his message also went to Mrs Kelly.

When BBC Five Live acquired the services of football commentators Andy Gray and Jonathon Pearce for the 2002 World Cup, executive editor of BBC Sports News Graeme Reid-Davies jokingly emailed a colleague saying: 'I think they're both crap.' He accidentally copied his message to 500 members of the BBC sports staff – including Gray and Pearce. 'I can't believe I was such an arse,' he later reflected.

Devon schoolgirl Claire McDonald found herself receiving emails containing top secret information from the Pentagon after being accidentally added to a round robin list by a navy commander. One of them was offering advice to the UK on how to prevent secrets from being leaked.

As the World Trade Centre fell on September 11, 2001, Transport Secretary Stephen Byers' special adviser Jo Moore emailed colleagues saying it was a good day to bury bad news. She had to apologise after the email became public.

Those might be what jargonists would term 'worst-case scenarios', but even normal work emails can go badly awry. Here are our tips to prevent trouble.

Our advice

Our key tip comes from Martin Cutts's *Oxford Guide to Plain English* (Oxford University Press, 2009): 'Take as much care with email as you would with the rest of your writing.' And here's some more detailed guidance:

- Don't respond too hastily, especially if the email is an important one, or you're feeling angry or upset. By all means, draft a reply immediately but then leave it for a while (ideally overnight).
- Check carefully who you are sending and copying the email to. Remember that there may be other emails below yours (an 'email chain') – do you really need or want your recipients to see those too?
- To guard against sending the email by mistake before you're ready, leave the 'To', 'Cc' and 'Bcc' boxes blank until the end, inserting recipients' names as the very last stage.
- Proofread your email, and use the spellcheck feature that most email programs contain. Poor English gives a bad impression, even in emails. Be especially vigilant with dates, timings and amounts.
- If you're writing for a law firm, your emails are as much advice as your letters.

[Source: <http://www.thefirstpost.co.uk/7041,news-comment,news-politics,ten-great-email-disasters>]

Could try harder

A blundering email has put Gleed Girls' Technology College, Lincolnshire into the headlines. It contained about 15 mistakes – including 'requiriements', 'occaisions', 'ativities', 'everning', 'boardering' and 'modal' (for 'model') – and was sent by an unnamed teacher to the parents of a pupil, whose mother was not amused:

What concerns me most is that this teacher is supposed to be responsible for raising my daughter's educational standards. If her standards are that low, how can she expect my daughter's to be high? By the time I got to the third paragraph I'd noted five mistakes. I would always check an email before I clicked send.

[Source: *Daily Mail*, 1 December 2010: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1334361/Headteacher-forced-apologise-school-report-littered-spelling-mistakes.html#ixzz1EbaedZpy>]

From netiquette to Twetiquette

Meanwhile, *The New York Times* reports that Twitter is attracting 'grammar vigilantes' who object to error-strewn tweets:

A small but vocal subculture has emerged on Twitter of grammar and taste vigilantes who spend their time policing other people's tweets — celebrities and nobodies alike. These are people who build their own algorithms to sniff out Twitter messages that are distasteful to them — tweets with typos or flawed grammar, or written in ALLCAPS — and then send scolding notes to the offenders. They see themselves as the guardians of an emerging behavior code: Twetiquette.

The article goes on to observe that the number of Twitter accounts devoted to pointing out other people's language foibles is growing. For example, Tom Voirol, who runs the Twenglish Police from Sydney, monitors Australian tweets, joining other people's conversations to offer advice like: "Funnest' is not a word. Even if Apple used it. You're welcome." 'I don't want to get them worked up,' said Voirol. 'I just want to point things out.'

But of course recipients of such advice do sometimes get worked up. GrammarCop, 'one of several people who seem to exist on Twitter solely to copy-edit others', recently suggested to actor Kirstie Alley that she use a plural verb instead of a singular. 'Are you

high?' she wrote back. 'You really just linger around waiting for people to use incorrect grammar? you needs a life.'

[Source: *The New York Times*, 28 April 2010:
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/29/fashion/29twitter.html?scp=1&sq=john%20metcalfe&st=cse>

Thanks to Bill Lutz for telling us about this story.]

Clear English Standard for Scottish Social Housing Charter Discussion Paper

The Scottish Social Housing Charter, due to come into force next year, will list the results and standards that social landlords should achieve for their tenants, homeless people, and others who use their services. To make sure the charter reflects the views and priorities of these people, the government has been holding consultation events across Scotland.

The Scottish Social Housing Charter Discussion Paper – which has received accreditation with our Clear English Standard – summarizes messages from the events and suggests how the Charter might be developed. Alex Neil, Minister for Housing and Communities, writes:

We started this process with a blank sheet of paper, so that everyone would have an equal chance to say what they wanted to see in the Charter, and we remain committed to that spirit of openness. I hope that landlords, individual tenants, tenant groups and other stakeholders will take this opportunity to hold local debates about what social landlords should be achieving for their customers, and will then pass on their joint views to the Government. We will take account of these views in preparing a draft Charter for formal consultation later in the year.

To achieve this openness, the government was determined to ensure that the discussion paper was clear to its target audience. Displaying the Clear English Standard shows that the document has passed a rigorous check of clarity, grammar and layout. Ian Spence from the Housing Charter Team said:

Tenants told us that they wanted to get information about the Charter in a straightforward, jargon-free way that people who are not housing professionals could understand. We listened to their concerns and we're confident that with the help of Plain Language Commission (PLC), our discussion paper can be understood by a non-technical audience. PLC made the process painless, with good communication throughout, and they gave us an extremely fast turnaround at every stage.

For more information on the charter, and to add your own ideas or comment on others' views, visit the Housing Charter website at <http://housingcharter.scotland.gov.uk>.

What price quality?

Kathleen Lyle, a founder member of the Society for Editors and Proofreaders (SfEP), has compiled a report on the overseas outsourcing of editorial work by UK publishers. She writes:

With the increasing availability of fast internet access in many countries, geographical location seems increasingly irrelevant. What remain relevant are linguistic ability and editorial skills. The SfEP's concern is that some overseas

suppliers whose staff do not have English as a first language are now offering editorial services, often based on a rigid, rule-based approach.

In 2010, over 40 SfEP members contributed information on their experiences, and this report is the result. Overall, it paints a picture of an industry grappling with both the challenges and the opportunities of globalization. You can read the report at <http://sfep.org.uk/pub/news/outsourcing.asp>.

Associate becomes local editors' group leader

In more SfEP-related news, our associate Sarah Carr has become co-ordinator of the society's North West local group. The group runs quarterly meetings for local editors and proofreaders, organizes local courses, shares work leads, and has its own email discussion group. For more information on the SfEP's local groups (available in many parts of the UK), see http://sfep.org.uk/pub/mship/local_groups.asp.

Cameron concurs with clarion call for coalition clarity

In *Pikestaff 44*, we published research director Martin Cutts's letter to prime minister David Cameron, urging him to renew the work on plain language in government. We've now received the following response:

Thank you for your letter on renewing the work on plain language in Government. I believe that it is an essential duty of Government to ensure the information it provides is understood by the public.

Detailed guidance on the use of plain English is already available for members of the Government, departments, executive agencies and non-departmental public bodies through a variety of sources. Many departments also work with organisations such as yours to ensure that their communications are clear. For example both her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and Department for Work and Pensions have improved their customer material by involving customer groups and stakeholders in testing new leaflets and forms.

As you acknowledge in your letter, the Government also recognises the need to reduce the sheer volume of law and to simplify the policy it is based on. The Coalition Government launched 'Your Freedom' on July, with the purpose of enabling the public to have their say on repealing unnecessary laws, cutting red tape and restoring civil liberties. 15,238 ideas were submitted onto the site, as well as 95,095 comments. Each department, responsible for the policy area that the idea relates to, is currently in the process of analysing the ideas and deciding whether they can be repealed, reviewed or otherwise looked into.

We will continue to emphasise the importance of using plain language in government and value the work organisations such as yours are doing to encourage this.

The last sentence of the penultimate paragraph has gone awry; 'they' must refer to the laws rather than the ideas. But we thought it an otherwise lucid and positive response, albeit non-committal.

The letter will help us convince backsliding officials that it's important to write clearly, and it's introduced us to the new government early in its term. We hope it's the start of a fruitful dialogue that will help promote plain language in the UK.

Linguistic link: translating jargon

This month's linguistic link brings you no fewer than 4 websites that translate jargon (in the sense of technical terms) into plain English.

If you've found yourself puzzled by EU language, you may be interested in *Jargon Alert: Your guide to understanding Eurospeak*. This new guide is produced by *E!Sharp*, a bi-monthly journal offering 'lively analysis and provocative commentary on both European affairs and transatlantic relations'. The guide is available free of charge on line at <http://www.esharp.eu/Jargon-Alert>, where you can also order a hard-copy version for €10, including postage.

Latham & Watkins, an international law firm, has published 3 editions of *The Book of Jargon*, which aim to assist business and law students and recent graduates 'to 'talk the talk' of banking, capital markets and project finance':

- For *The Book of Jargon* (on US corporate and bank finance), visit <http://www.lw.com/BooksOfJargon.aspx?page=JargonDetail&bojbook=1>.
- For *The Project Finance Book of Jargon* (on US project development and acquisition), visit <http://www.lw.com/BooksOfJargon.aspx?page=JargonDetail&bojbook=2>.
- For *The European Book of Jargon* (on European capital markets and bank finance), visit <http://www.lw.com/BooksOfJargon.aspx?page=JargonDetail&bojbook=6>.

All are available online free of charge. You can also download them as iPhone, iPad or iPod Touch apps, from the iTunes App Store (again free); search for 'Book of Jargon'.

[Thanks to Bill Lutz for passing us the link to Latham & Watkins' website.]

Onliners enquire

Our regular slot 'Readers write' covers interesting letters from *Pikestaff* readers. We also receive many fascinating questions through the 'Contact us' form on our website, replying with free advice on a range of linguistic topics. In this new *Pikestaff* slot, we'll publish some of these.

Q: I would like your comments on the widespread use of the 'added r'. For example: 'His idear of lawr 'n order', 'She sawr it differently', 'The artist's drawrings', 'Australiar 'n' New Zealand'. This is common parlance on television and radio, often by educated people. I find the deliberate slurring a misuse of the language. Can I have your view please?

A: Our focus is on written English, so we wouldn't claim to be experts on spoken language. But I am aware, from studying linguistics, that a number of phonetic patterns are associated with the boundary between adjacent words. The phenomenon you mention is known as 'hiatus' and happens when 2 vowels come together across this boundary. It's not a deliberate slurring but a natural way of bridging the gap, and known as 'the linking /r/'. In *Patterns of Spoken English*, Gerald Knowles writes:

This 'intrusive' [r] takes speakers of rhotic dialects [eg those from Scotland and Ireland] by surprise, and seems very strange to them. Some people object very strongly to it, even though – if they but realized – they use it themselves. It is an established feature of British English, and must be counted as a characteristic of contemporary RP [received pronunciation].

There's also an article about it on Wikipedia: see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linking_and_intrusive_R.

Q: Which is more correct use of English: 'plain-clothed' or 'plain-clothes'?

A: Both 'plain-clothes' and 'plain-clothed' are correct, since you can use a noun (such as 'clothes') or an adjective (such as 'clothed') as a pre-modifier (a word or phrase that comes before a noun, say 'officer', to describe it).

Though both are correct, 'plain-clothes' appears to be the more usual form, according to the Oxford Dictionary. I've checked too on the British National Corpus (BNC – a 100-million-word collection of samples of written and spoken English). Although the BNC contains no examples of either phrase hyphenated, there is just one occurrence of 'plain clothed' to 72 of 'plain clothes'; not all of these pre-modify the noun but around a third do. One example even talks of a plain clothes car (I think I'd have said 'unmarked!').

What a bobby-dazzler!

Inspired by Julia Buckland's Derbyshire-dialect version of our Christmas competition bin notice (see *Pikestaff* 45), Michael Galley wrote in with this, which 'may (or may not) emanate from the Barnsley Council':

Sithee – we've teld yer all wuns. Don't leave thi bins in't yard. Stick em art bi roadside. Else they wint get picked up like. So gerrit reight, an save thissen some bother. An if thar still dunt gerrit, gi' us a bell an we'll soort thi art. Alright? Champion.

Michael ends: 'I think regional stuff should be a regular feature, 'cos it's usually very plain speaking. Innit?' If you have any ideas for articles on regional dialects, do let us know. Gorrit?

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