



PLAIN  
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## New edition of Plain English Lexicon launched

Are you unsure whether people understand the legal use of 'determine' to mean 'terminate', whether 'perpetrator' is easier than 'wrongdoer', or whether 'while' is more common than 'whilst'? It's often hard to know what words your readers are likely to understand or to see regularly. The second edition of research director Martin Cutts's unique *Plain English Lexicon* enables you to make informed decisions about the familiarity and frequency of 2,700 words that sometimes occur in public-information documents – more than double the number in the first edition, published 3 years ago. The lexicon draws on 2 important pieces of research evidence: the US *Living Word Vocabulary* and the British National Corpus of 100 million words.

In her foreword to the lexicon, Christine Mowat, past chair of the Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN), writes: 'Specialists in our field believe that language is the property of the people: it is bound to be even more so with access to this lexicon on Plain Language Commission's website.' Described by Christine as an 'ingenious tool' and 'a fine gift to our field', the lexicon can be downloaded free of charge at <http://www.clearest.co.uk/?id=46>.

## Emergency services need plain words, recommends 7/7 inquest

The inquest into the London terrorist attack on 7 July 2005 ended in March this year with a plea for plain English from coroner Lady Justice Hallett (see *Pikestaff 47*). On 6 May, Lady Hallett returned to the Royal Courts of Justice to outline recommendations under rule 43 (of the Coroner's Rules 1984), which aims to prevent future deaths. Rule 43 allows a coroner to report, to the appropriate agency, circumstances in which further deaths could happen unless the agency takes remedial action.

Victims' families had made 32 recommendations to the coroner, including 'use of plain English by emergency services', and Lady Hallett's report included the following paragraphs:

### *The use of 'plain English'*

172. The bereaved families submitted that all the organisations which were represented in the inquest proceedings should give urgent consideration to the use of 'plain English' in managing major incidents. This submission reflected the fact that, in some places, the procedures and plans were bedevilled by jargon. I accept that the proper use of acronyms and mnemonics (such as 'CHALET' standing for Casualties, Hazards, Access, Location, Emergency and Type) contribute significantly to the important aim of communicating information speedily and helpfully. However, the use of complex acronyms and unnecessary jargon may also confuse and impede communication. It tends to undermine a proper understanding of the roles and intentions of members of the other emergency services, and so hinder the coordination of effort. In a life-threatening

situation everyone should be able to understand what everyone else is saying and what they are trying to do. This problem is not new. I note that in the course of his Rule 43 report arising out of the Inquest into the death of Jean-Charles de Menezes (January 2009), Sir Michael Wright observed that, in some areas, police terminology had tended to confuse rather than to clarify understanding. Even longer ago, Desmond Fennell QC recommended in his report that London Underground should rewrite its rule book and its appendices 'in plain English' (recommendation 93(i)).

173. When I raised this issue during the hearings it seemed to resonate in a number of quarters. The reasons are obvious. It might be thought, therefore, that organisations, for which communication is a vital part of their job, would demand from their staff the use of plain English and a fully reasoned justification for any change. The evidence before me suggested that is not the case. Easily recognisable and understood names or titles are changed, for no obvious reason, into ones which are not.

Disappointingly, Lady Hallett concluded that it would not be appropriate to make a rule 43 recommendation on clarity of language, but still sent a strong message to the organizations involved to brush up on this:

The confusing use and often mis-use of language does not here meet the legal criteria for a Rule 43 recommendation. It is not a matter, in any event, that is susceptible to being monitored. I prefer, having expressed my concerns, to leave the matter to the good sense of the organisations from whom I have heard, some of whom have already endeavoured to re-write their procedures, as part of their continuing review process.

You can see the whole of Lady Hallett's report at <http://7julyinquests.independent.gov.uk/docs/orders/rule43-report.pdf>.

[Source: *The Independent*, 6 May 2011: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/a-moment-of-closure-for-victims-of-terror-2279847.html>]

Thanks to Joanna Richardson for passing us this link.]

## How to write instructions

Martin Cutts has a particular interest in the clarity of instructions – see, for example, his article, 'Instructions for consumer products – as easy as 1-2-3?' (<http://www.clearest.co.uk/files/InstructionsForConsumerProducts.pdf>). The chainsaw manufacturers whose instruction manuals Martin examines – and finds worryingly wanting – should read this concise new ebook (of just 4,250 words). Written by Carol Johnston, Ginny Critcher and Ellis Pratt, and published by technical writing services company Cherryleaf), *How to write instructions* is aimed at anyone who needs help writing clear instructions for users, providing the key information needed to get started quickly and efficiently.

For more information and to download the ebook, which costs £3.59, visit [http://www.amazon.co.uk/How-to-write-instructions/dp/B004TTX3IO/ref=sr\\_1\\_2?ie=UTF8&m=A3TVV12T0I6NSM&s=digital-text&qid=1301163508&sr=1-2](http://www.amazon.co.uk/How-to-write-instructions/dp/B004TTX3IO/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&m=A3TVV12T0I6NSM&s=digital-text&qid=1301163508&sr=1-2).

[Source: *InfoPlus+*, May 2011]

## Readers write

### Going loopi

Commenting on the story in April's *Pikestaff* about the Society for Editors and Proofreaders advocating apostrophe abolition, Ray Ward emailed:

I must admit I was fooled by the scrap-the-apostrophe item until I saw the name Ralf Loopi – an anagram of – well, I'm sure you can work it out!

We can now, but we hadn't! Well spotted, Ray.

### Homonymous heist?

Also commenting on a story in last month's issue, Michael Gorman writes:

*Pikestaff 48* mentions the mistaken English of foreign self-service tills in supermarkets. But in England, in Sainsbury's, we get:

Question: "Have you swiped your Nectar card?"

Thinks: "No, I bl\*\*dy have not, it's my own!"

### Dickens of a designation

Finally, Bill Sanderson emailed to say:

I looked on a website to check progress with delivering something I'd ordered. The message read: "Your parcel has been received at our sortation hub" – presumably a modern version of the circumlocution office.

Although our Oxford Dictionary doesn't contain 'sortation', thefreedictionary.com defines the term as 'sorting, especially when mechanized or automated: the sortation of baggage; sortation of parcels'.

So if Hogwarts has gone high-tech, watch out for the sortationing hat when the final Harry Potter film is released in July! As well as sorting new students into houses, will it now also detect Parcelmouths?

## Wind of change blows through Africa (again)

A row has erupted in Malawi over its government's attempt to introduce a new criminal offence in the Local Courts Bill:

Any person who vitiates the atmosphere in any place so as to make it noxious to the public to the health of persons in general dwelling or carrying on business in the neighbourhood or passing along a public way shall be guilty of a misdemeanour.

The law is apparently aimed at curbing public pollution, but the way it is drafted means it could include flatulence. Two of the country's most senior judicial officials have opposing views of its application. Justice Minister George Chaponda, a trained lawyer, says the new bill would criminalize flatulence to promote 'public decency'. 'Just go to the toilet when you feel like farting,' he told local radio.

But he was directly contradicted by Solicitor General Anthony Kamanga, who says the reference to 'fouling the air' means pollution. 'How any reasonable or sensible person can construe the provision to criminalising farting in public is beyond me,' he said.

'Would you be happy to see people farting anyhow?' Chaponda asked on Malawi's Capital Radio. We're not sure 'see' is quite the right verb here, but we won't gas on.

[Source: BBC News, 4 February 2011: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12363852>

Thanks to Neil James for sniffing this one out for us.]

## Damaging obscurity in insurance language

We recently heard from a member of the public with an example of how unclear language can do real damage. The woman's partner had had an accident while driving the woman's car. The couple believed he was covered on his own car insurance policy, but when they tried to claim, the insurer said he was covered to drive any other person's car except his partner's.

The relevant sentence on the man's insurance certificate says:

Provided the policyholder is aged 25 or over, and not employed in the motor trade, he/she may also drive, with the owner's permission, a motor car not belonging to, nor hired or leased to them or their partner.

The couple had assumed this meant that he couldn't drive a car that was 'hired or leased to them or their partner'. In our view, the main difficulties for a reader who is not an insurance specialist are that the sentence:

- is complicated because it has 5 commas
- uses an unusual word order (syntax) that tends only to be seen in legal and insurance texts
- goes against the reader's reasonable expectations because most people would expect to be covered for driving their partner's insured vehicle
- leads the reader up the garden path with the phrase 'he/she may also drive', which sounds like good news, then goes in the opposite direction with the negative phrase 'not belonging to'
- separates 'not belonging to' from 'them or their partner' by an intervening phrase, which makes it harder to understand, and
- is badly drafted in at least one other way, which is that there should be another comma after 'leased to'. The lack of that comma means that the policy holder (as the consumer) is entitled to put the comma where it gives the most favourable meaning to them. This doesn't really help, though.

Martin Cutts told the couple:

My feeling is that, unfortunately, the sentence means what the insurance company says it means if we are looking for a precise legal interpretation. But it is a shockingly bad piece of writing in a document intended for consumers. It could have been written in a much clearer way and I feel you have a good case for claiming it was so hard for the ordinary person to understand that it misled you.

It is possible that the sentence would be caught by the Unfair Terms in Consumer Contracts Regulations, which require standard-form consumer contracts to be written in 'plain, intelligible language'. If so, it is possible to complain to the Office of Fair Trading and they can strike out clauses that are not plain and intelligible.

Faced with a bill of up to £10,000 to cover damage to the woman's own car and 2 others, as well as the risk of prosecution for being uninsured, the man is currently going through the insurance company's complaints procedure. If his final appeal is rejected, the Insurance Ombudsman Bureau is another possible avenue.

## Reading as a teenager gets you a better job

Research has shown that teenagers who read for pleasure are more likely to end up in a professional or managerial job than those who don't. A long-running sociological study by Oxford University has tracked 17,000 people born in the same week in 1970, identifying their progress over time. The research found there was a 39% probability that girls would have professional or managerial posts at 33 if they'd read books at 16, but only a 25% chance if they hadn't. For boys the figure rose from 48% to 58% if they'd read books.

These results will no doubt please Education Secretary Michael Gove, who has suggested that children as young as 11 should be reading 50 books a year. But critics – including children's laureate Anthony Browne – have said Gove's aims are at odds with the library closures happening under his government's watch. Browne added: 'It's always good to hear that the importance of children's reading is recognised – but rather than setting an arbitrary number of books that children ought to read, I feel it's the quality of children's reading experiences that really matter. Pleasure, engagement and enjoyment of books is what counts – not simply meeting targets.'

Browne's views were echoed by others, including Alan Garner, author of children's classic *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, who asked:

Is any number a useful guide? The important aim should be a reading that is wide and deep rather than numerical. In my own primary school years I read everything I could find, which amounted to at least four books a week and as many comics as possible. *The Beano* and *The Dandy* were equal with *Tarzan of the Apes*, Enid Blyton, HG Wells, Kipling, wildlife books, fairy tales, encyclopaedias. This resulted, painlessly, in a large vocabulary, an awareness of differences of style, the absorption of grammar and syntax and an ability to spell.

But maybe these 2 creative authors are being a bit too literal minded, for once. Surely Gove just meant that children should be reading lots of books and other stuff – and one a week doesn't seem excessive.

[Sources: *Telegraph*, 8 April 2011:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/8435031/Reading-as-teenager-gets-you-a-better-job.html>; *The Guardian*, 22 March 2011:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/mar/22/gove-50-books-children-laureate>]

## Linguistic link: Google Books

Since December 2010, Google Books has been searchable, meaning you can look for certain words and phrases, and see how their prevalence has changed over time.

The new tool, developed with scientists at Harvard University, claims to allow users to probe the 'genome' of English words for cultural trends over the past 200 years. The large searchable database – of 5 million digitized books, both fiction and non-fiction, published between 1800 and 2000 – represents around 4% of all the books ever published. Supporters claim it is the key to 'culturomics' (a new area of research in the humanities, linguistics and social sciences), enabling researchers to answer questions such as the following:

- How many words in the English language never make it into dictionaries?
- How has the nature of fame changed in the past 200 years?
- How do scientists and actors compare in their impact on popular culture?

Jean-Baptiste Michel, one of the Harvard scientists who developed the tool, said:

Interest in computational approaches to the humanities and social sciences dates back to the 1950s. But attempts to introduce quantitative methods into the study of culture have been hampered by the lack of suitable data. We now have a massive dataset, available through an interface that is user-friendly and freely available to anyone.

In their initial analysis of the database, the Harvard team found that around 8,500 new words enter the English language every year and the lexicon grew by 70% between 1950 and 2000. But most of these words do not appear in dictionaries. 'We estimated that 52% of the English lexicon – the majority of words used in English books – consist of lexical 'dark matter' undocumented in standard references.'

You can search Google Books at <http://books.google.com/>. There's also a tool – available at <http://ngrams.googlelabs.com/> – for seeing how often a word or phrase has appeared in the scanned literature and how its usage has changed over time.

[Source: *The Guardian*, 16 December 2011:  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2010/dec/16/google-tool-english-cultural-trends?INTCMP=SRCH>]

### Wish to see delights?

Finally, as promised last month, here's the second of James Fisher's photos of menu choices at a restaurant in Portugal.

SERVIÇO DE SNACK	
Francesinha Simples	5,00€
Francesinha Especial	7,00€
Cachorro Simples   Hot Dog	2,80€
Cachorro Especial   Special Hot Dog	4,00€
Tosta Mista   Mixed Biscotie	1,85€
Tosta Mista Especial   Special Mixed Biscotie	4,00€
Prego em Pão   Beef in Bread	2,80€
Prego em Prato   Beef on Plate	5,00€
Hamburguer em Pão   Burguer	2,50€
Hamburguer em Prato   Beef Burguer on Plate	4,50€
Baguete de Atum   Bread With Tuna	2,50€
Baguete Delicias do mar   Bread With Sea Delights	2,50€
Baguete Mista   Mixed Bread	2,50€
Sandes Americana   American Sandwich	2,50€
Sandes Mistas   Mixed Sandwich	1,50€
Sandes de Fiambre   Ham Sandwich	1,40€
Sandes de Queijo   Cheese Sandwich	1,40€
Sandes de Presunto   Baked Ham Sandwich	2,50€
Omeleta em Pão   Mixed Eggs in Bread	2,00€
Omeleta em Prato   Mixed Eggs on Plate	4,50€
Panado em Pão	1,50€

If you've any example of foreign funnies, do send them in to [pikestaff@clearest.co.uk](mailto:pikestaff@clearest.co.uk).

### **Back issues**

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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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