



Fox's weasel words play politics with the passive

As defence secretary Dr Liam Fox sought to explain his controversial friendship with Adam Werritty, his remarks made interesting language-listening. Asked in the Commons whether Werritty had profited financially from attending high-level meetings, Fox responded: 'When it comes to the pecuniary interests of Mr Werritty in those conferences, I am absolutely confident that he was not dependent on any transactional behaviour to maintain his income.'

Fox's resignation statement to the Commons was similarly tortuous. Radio 5 Live even asked listeners to offer translations, and the Guardian observed:

If the first casualty of war is the truth, then an early victim of scandal is always language. Those in trouble routinely resort to euphemism and obfuscation, and yet Liam Fox's crimes against syntax still stand out as in a class of their own.

In a separate statement, Fox began: 'I accept that it was a mistake to allow distinctions to be blurred between my professional responsibilities and my personal loyalties to a friend.' As the Guardian observed, the use of the passive voice ('to be blurred') is a nifty way of not saying who committed the blurring:

Distinctions to be blurred. What a choice phrase that is, its use of the passive voice so deliberate and so telling. Fox did not say: "I blurred the distinction." Instead, by using the passive, he picked up his offence with a pair of sterilised tongs, sealed it in a plastic bag and placed it as far away from himself as he could. That use of the passive turned his sin from one of commission to omission. "You know what distinctions are like," he was saying. "They're always itching to be blurred. My error was not to stop them." I had a flatmate back in my student days who, rather than admit he'd not done the washing-up, would say: "Dishes have been left." The passive is grammar's way of telling you somebody is hiding something.

The story shows why plain English matters: not just because it saves people and organizations time and money but, more important, because it encourages openness and honesty. As our research director Martin Cutts writes in the Oxford Guide to Plain English: 'What has motivated me and others to work in the plain-English field is that clearer documents can improve people's access to services, benefits, justice and a fair deal.'

[Source: The Guardian, 11 October 2011:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/11/cameron-should-fire-liam-fox>]

Private Eye Excels itself

It was Martin's desire for a fair deal for consumers that encouraged him to enter (and win) an 18-month battle against Excel Parking Services, as reported in Pikestaff 52. Private Eye picked up the story – which it entitled 'Daylight robbery' – reporting the judge's views as follows:

The judge suggested that Excel's real interest in the car park was not in the small parking fees, but the substantial charge notices it tries to levy later on (it doesn't have legal powers to fine drivers), based on having caught cars on camera.

"The lettering about failure to comply is about four times larger than the lettering saying it is a pay and display car park, which tells me the real interest is in failure to comply," said the judge.

Private Eye also reveals that Excel refused to waive parking tickets for a woman who returned late to her car because she was restraining someone who threatened to jump off a bridge (for which she had police evidence) or for a man who had stopped in one of its car parks to await help while having an angina attack.

See NEWS & VIEWS at <http://www.clearest.co.uk/pages/home> for the latest updates on this story.

[Source: Private Eye, issue 1299: 14 October 2011; thanks to Paul Affleck for sending us a copy of this article]

Our new website goes live

We're pleased to relaunch our website, which features a number of new pages, including:

- news and views – links to serious stories in the media that relate to plain language
- jottings – our commentary on lighter linguistic snippets
- our style guide – a free 8,000-word booklet giving our detailed recommendations on house style, which is also the style we try to follow in our own writing.

Do let us know what you think of the new site. And we're counting on you to let us know if you find mistakes. So, whether its a (non-deliberate) missing or extra ap'ostrophe, a Miss Pelling, a spurious capital letTer, an otiose extra word word reiterated time and time again, or a factual terror, please email us at mail@clearest.co.uk. Thanks.

Events for International Plain Language Day

The first International Plain Language Day (IPLD) took place on 13 October. The date was chosen in honour of the Plain Writing Act of 2010, a bill signed by US President Barack Obama on 13 October last year. Interesting activities took place around the globe – see the dedicated Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/internationalplainlanguageday>.

And for those who couldn't make it to an event, Cheryl Stephens, a Canada-based expert in plain legal language, suggested various ideas on how to spend IPLD, including:

- Read a newspaper with your cup of coffee. Use a red pen to circle tired, trite phrases, mixed metaphors, bafflegab, and other writing offences. Submit those to the collection on [LinkedIn.com/PlainLanguageAdvocates](https://www.linkedin.com/company/plainlanguageadvocates).
- Phone the paper's editorial offices and advise them to use plain language.

- Send a message to a friend; review it and rewrite those parts that could be misunderstood.
- Send another message, to many friends, and ask them to join the largest, international network of Plain Language Advocates, a LinkedIn group.
- Select an important piece from your morning mail: a consumer contract, a bank statement, a credit card statement, something from an insurance agency or car rental company, or local gym, and actually read every word of it. Call the company and ask them to explain the meaning of each sentence that is not clear and the circumstances under which each sentence would be used.
- If anybody asks, tell them: Plain language is clear, straightforward expression, using only as many words as are necessary... It is not baby talk, nor is it a simplified version of the language. (Robert Eagleson)
- Post your experiences on Twitter with the hashtag #iplday

[Source: <http://plainlanguage.com/buildingrapport/2011/how-to-spend-international-plain-language-day-october-13/>]

WriteMark New Zealand Plain English Awards 2011

Each year, organizations and members of the public are invited to submit documents and websites they think are outstanding examples of plain English – or of gobbledygook.

Organized 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 organizations 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. Our research director, Martin Cutts, chaired the judges for the best plain-English document and Brainstrain awards. The former was won by Elections New Zealand for its election enrolment form, with the judges commenting:

The language is generally very clear and the form is likely to be well suited to its audience. The layout is straightforward and easy on the eye, with good use of graphic devices such as arrows to direct the reader's attention.

The Brainstrain award, meanwhile, which 'reveals, in good humour, the document most notable for confusing and dumbfounding its target audience with obscurity and gobbledygook', went to Capital & Coast District Health Board (DHB) for an information letter sent to a patient awaiting cataract surgery. Here are the first three paragraphs:

Dear X

Re: LEFT CATARACT

We are pleased to tell you that we have scheduled a **PRE-ASSESSMENT** date for you for the above operation. **You need to confirm on [phone no.] your date below as soon as you receive this letter, that you are able to come on this date. If you do not confirm your theatre booking may be cancelled.**

Prior to your operation, you will need to attend a Pre-admission Assessment Clinic appointment, at which you will be checked to ensure you are fit for surgery, and given information to help prepare you for your treatment, recovery and discharge. It is important that you attend this appointment, as your operation may have to be cancelled if you do not.

Your Pre-admission Assessment Clinic appointment is at the:

Level 9, Grace Neil Block (GNB) Wellington Regional Hospital

Day/Day: Tuesday, 13 September 2011 Time 9:30AM

The person sending in the entry said: 'I was very confused when I got this letter as it talks about pre-assessment but also says that my theatre booking may be cancelled. Then I couldn't tell if the letter was about an appointment or the actual surgery. I had to get my son to sort it out.'

Simple ideas have been over-complicated, eg:

- 'You need to confirm on [phone no.] your date below as soon as you receive this letter, that you are able to come on this date.'
- 'Also, additional instructions are given at this time and the opportunity exists to have your questions answered.'

Also, different words are used to mean the same thing, which is bad practice, ie: 'PRE-ASSESSMENT', 'Pre-admission Assessment Clinic appointment' and 'pre-Assessment appointment'.

The organizers commented:

The ideal entry for the 'Brainstrain' document award is a publicly available or widely used document that causes problems for many people. By putting these confusing documents under the spotlight, we hope that the organisations responsible will rewrite them in beautifully plain English.

There's evidence that this approach works: last year's Brainstrain winner was this year a finalist in the best-organization category. Gregory Fortuin, Chair of the WriteMark Plain English Awards Trust, observed:

The Commerce Commission used last year's booby prize as a spur to action, and it has embraced plain English with fervour. That's why these Awards are so worthwhile – they really do make a difference, by turning the spotlight on how well organisations are communicating with the people they need to reach.

To help them improve, Capital & Coast DHB wins a single-user licence for the latest StyleWriter plain-English editing software and a place on any of Write Limited's one-day public workshops. And the third part of the prize – the famous Brainstrain rubbish bin filled with sour worms – may deter them from further obfuscation!

For a full list of the WriteMark Plain English Awards winners and the judges' comments, go to www.plainenglishawards.org.nz.

Clarity breakfast

The next Clarity breakfast meeting will be held on 6 December at the City Remembrancer's office in London. Keith Hutcheson, a solicitor in Nabarro's commercial property team, and Clive Ashcroft, Head of Legal Services for Land Securities, will speak on the Clearlet project, which involves innovative work to develop short, customer-focused, plain-English leases. To reserve a place, email daphne.perry@clarifynow.co.uk. Non-members are welcome to try one meeting before they join Clarity (at <http://www.clarity-international.net/join.html>), but Clarity members have priority when booking.

Electoral advice

The Electoral Commission has again sought our advice on the wording of referendum questions, this time for referendums on changes in 'local authority governance', ie local authorities changing between mayor, leader or committee systems of leadership. It will now carry out research with voters to test our suggestions.

You can see the Electoral Commission's assessment criteria for referendum questions at http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/82626/Referendum-Question-guidelines-final.pdf. This guidance states that a referendum question should:

- be easy to understand
- be to the point
- be unambiguous
- avoid encouraging voters to consider one response more favourably than another
- avoid misleading voters.

Exam boards ordered to use proofreaders

Following 12 separate blunders in this year's GCSE, AS and A2 exam papers, Ofqual has announced that exam boards must:

- hire professional proofreaders to eradicate errors in their papers
- sign a pledge that their question papers are free of errors before sending them off
- ensure that a second check of every paper is carried out by a specialist in the subject who was not involved in producing the exam.

[Source: The Independent, 1 November 2011:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/exam-errors-lead-to-call-for-external-proofreaders-6255409.html>]

Need for truth on broadband speed

A report by Ofcom into broadband speeds has shown that although the average broadband speed has increased by over 25% in the past year, a growing gap exists between the advertised and actual speed delivered to UK customers. Adverts often claim that the service speed is 'up to' a certain number of megabytes per second, yet there may be many customers receiving a much slower speed – for example, because of the distance between their homes and the exchanges, heavy internet traffic at peak times, and the type of computers they use.

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) has therefore asked the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP), which produces the Advertising Code, to review broadband speed claims in adverts. The aim is more clarity for consumers.

[Sources: <http://media.ofcom.org.uk/2010/07/27/ofcom-research-reveals-increase-in-uk%e2%80%99s-average-actual-broadband-speed-but-consumers-still-not-achieving-advertised-speeds/>; and <http://www.asa.org.uk/Resource-Centre/Hot-Topics/Broadband-advertising.aspx>]

Readers write

Winning (or woeful) websites

Paddy Campbell emailed to suggest we start a Good Website Campaign, asking readers to let us know of good – or bad – websites you have encountered. Do tell us if you've come across any especially clear or particularly impenetrable sites.

No clarity in place with this

Taking of impenetrability, Andrew Block contacted us with an email from the London Borough of Barnet. Andrew, who lives in a controlled parking zone, recently bought a car; the council gave him temporary dispensation from needing a parking permit while he gathered the relevant paperwork. As Andrew's insurance company was taking its time to send him what he needed, he asked the council for an extension. Here's its reply:

Dispensations are specifically given for change of vehicle scenarios or if there has been an issue from our side, they are not given whereby the customer has not or can not supply the correct information however.

Although you were given this prior to this, this shouldn't have been given and there is no discretion in place with this.

So that clears things up then.

Calling all whizzes at language quizzes

Following our piece in Pikestaff 53 on the Bulwer-Lytton prize, Ray Ward emailed:

It [the prize] is named after Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Lord Lytton, author of *The Last Days of Pompeii*. I do many quizzes and also write quiz questions, and I recently wrote a language and literature quiz including the question: What connects Lord Lytton and Snoopy?

Ray has kindly sent us a number of language-related quiz questions; we'll reveal the answer to this one – and set you another – in Pikestaff 54.

Facebook

Pikestaff has its own page on Facebook, thanks to colleague James Fisher, who has kindly set this up for us and is posting regular features there. So visit <http://www.facebook.com/PikestaffNews> and have a look for yourself. What's not to 'like'?

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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