

pkestaff

PLAIN
LANGUAGE
COMMISSION

Pikestaff 57
July 2012

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Language and ethics in the private parking industry

In our running (and driven) campaign against obscurity in private parking signs and systems, it's emerged that misleading numbers were used to convince the UK government to change the law in favour of private parking companies. The British Parking Association (BPA) told the government that 2–5% of its private parking members' tickets were contested in court – equating to 36,000 to 90,000 a year – and that this would fall if registered keepers became directly liable to pay the tickets (usually £60–150 each). Clearly, the courts were being swamped by this colossal number of cases. But after a Freedom of Information request, it's now clear that in 2011 only about 845 cases from BPA private members went through the court system, and only 49 of these went before a judge for a final hearing. Of these, the companies lost more than half. Yet the new law is still due to come into effect in October. In the light of the BPA's behaviour, we've written to the Transport Secretary asking for the new law to be withdrawn.

On 10 July, research director Martin Cutts spoke at Parking Review magazine's 'Enforcement Summit' in London.

Martin concluded his speech with this message to the private parking industry:

“...no more squalid deals, no more chicanery, no more ripping off the public. It's time you found some moral and ethical values and went straight.”

You can download Martin's hard-hitting speech, called 'Language and ethics in the private parking industry', from our website under 'Publications > Articles > Parking'. There's been much discussion of the speech on the forum of MoneySavingExpert.com – where it's been lauded as 'absolutely brilliant', 'really well written' and 'very well researched' – see

<http://forums.moneysavingexpert.com/showthread.php?t=4065637>.



This sign near Taunton begins 'If you park you agree to pay first two hours free'. The sentence starting '£80' is also a car crash.

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Martin was also the guest speaker at Clarity's most recent London breakfast, examining the problem of the private parking industry's small print, cunning terms and aggressive letters, and asking why it hasn't yielded to consumer protection legislation.

Going forward in a step change – or a backward move?



Tory minister of state (MoS) Alan Duncan (pictured) has issued a stern memorandum to officials at the Department for International Development (DFID), banning jargon such as 'going forward', 'leverage' and 'mainstream'. 'Happy to describe himself as a grammar fascist', Duncan accuses his staff of damaging the department's worldwide reputation by using 'language that the rest of the world doesn't understand'. The memo sets out his particular stylistic gripes as follows:

Officials are therefore required to express themselves in sentences which can be parsed and with grammar that sets a high standard. It irks when nouns are used as verbs, apostrophes are left off (or misplaced), compound adjectives (such as UN-led) are not hyphenated, and sentences are begun with "But" or "However".

The MoS would prefer that we did not "leverage" or "mainstream" anything, and whereas he is happy for economies to grow, he does not like it when we "grow economies". Nor is he impressed with the loose and meaningless use of "going forward", either at the beginning or the end of any sentence.

Thus we do not ever "access", "catalyse", "showcase" or "impact" anything.

Nearly as depressing for him is reading about DFID's work in "the humanitarian space".

He finds it annoying when conjunctions such as "which" or "that" are inexplicably dropped in a way which ruins the flow and logic of a sentence. He would also prefer to meet someone than "meet with" them. Likewise, a sentence which begins "Grateful for your ..." would appear to be lacking the prefix "I would be ...".

The constant repetition of a word such as "resilience" as a substitute for saying what is meant, risks rendering a submission purposeless.

Duncan concludes his memo with a disclaimer: 'MoS is always willing to be challenged about his judgments on grammatical standards and will not take offence at a properly reasoned opinion.' That's good ... so here goes, Mr Duncan:

- All sentences (even ungrammatical ones) can be parsed, as parsing just means splitting a sentence into parts and describing the grammar of each word/part.
- The process of nouns (and adjectives) becoming verbs (sometimes called 'verbification' or 'verbing') is part of the natural evolution of English, as Wikipedia

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points out (see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conversion_\(linguistics\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conversion_(linguistics))). Thousands of now-mainstream (don't panic, Mr Duncan, that's an adjective) verbs apparently started life as nouns or adjectives, for example host, chair, email, strike, talk, switch, bed, ship, stop, drink, cup, lure, mutter, dress, dizzy, divorce, fool and merge.

- It's fine to start sentences with 'But' or 'However', as Martin Cutts confirms in Myth 1 of his chapter 'Six writing myths exploded and exploded' of the *Oxford Guide to Plain English* (Oxford University Press, 2009). As Martin points out, the idea that sentences should not begin with 'But' is 'neither a rule of grammar nor even a widely observed convention', with most influential writers in the last few hundred years – including Jane Austen, Mary Wollstonecraft and old-time grammarian J C Nesfield – ignoring the myth.
- 'Which' is not a conjunction; it's a relative pronoun and a determiner.
- 'I would be' isn't a prefix (which is a letter or group of letters placed at the start of a word to alter its meaning, such as 'un-' or 're-').

The Daily Telegraph comments: 'Mr Duncan is not the first minister to complain about grammatical standards in his department. Last December it emerged that the Department for Transport had issued a 1,500-word report listing ministers' pet grammatical hates.'

Regrettably, language is a favourite area for 'pet hates': but where's the intellectual rigour in such an approach? Duncan's list does seem particularly prescriptive, an approach to language that academic linguists generally consider rather misguided. The Anti-Queen's English Society – a group of researchers of the English language – writes about the nature of language in its position statement:

Many of the debates surrounding English relate to concerns over falling standards associated with regional, 'lower register' (or 'low English', as the QES [Queen's English Society] call it) and international English forms, which tend to be juxtaposed with notions of inferior culture, education and general intelligence ... Narrow prescriptions of a universal 'standard British English', 'received pronunciation' and 'BBC English' have only served to disadvantage certain cultural groups and classes, both in high-stakes domains such as assessment, citizenship and employment and in levels of community and political inclusion/exclusion. We seek to highlight that when the terms 'proper English', 'standard English' and any related variants are used, social judgements are covertly, and overtly by the QES, placed on the language of those deemed 'improper', 'non-standard' or 'deviant'. We see it as our duty to emphasise the socio-cultural nature of such judgements, and how far these fall from majority perspectives in linguistics (and other areas).

For the rest of the position statement, see <http://antiqueensenglishsociety.com/our-position-statement/>, and for more on the demise of the QES, see http://www.clearnest.co.uk/archive/2012/6/3/qes:_rip.

[Source: Daily Telegraph, 22 June: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/9349970/Alan-Duncan-issues-memo-at-DFID-banning-jargon-words-like-going-forward.html?goback=.gde_1991065_member_127265804]

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Readers write

History of the English Language

Recommended by Pikestaff reader Nev Metson, 'History of the English Language' is one of 82 films in the British Council Film Collection. Released in 1943, the film is described as 'an excellent layman's introduction to the origins of one of the most common languages on the planet'. It 'demonstrates how language changes over time, and presents England as being multicultural right down to its roots'.

Originally entitled 'Origin of the English Language', the film was written by Dr Harold Orton of the University of Sheffield. Expecting a five-page work, the British Council received over 30 pages of notes. Initially, there was much more focus on the Germanic aspect of English, but much of this was cut out – supposedly due to 'time constraints' but more likely as it was wartime – leaving the original blurb to read as follows:

English was brought to Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries. Already it contained words taken from other languages, and it has never ceased to borrow. Its rich vocabulary, now totalling about half a million words, included additions from all the chief languages of the world, though most come from Latin, Greek, French, Italian and Dutch. Maps and diagrams show the growth of this mother-tongue of millions.

You can view the 14-minute film at <http://film.britishcouncil.org/history-of-the-english-language>.

Plain English and the financial crisis

Economic historian Professor Niall Ferguson is presenting the 2012 BBC Reith Lectures, *The Rule of Law and Its Enemies*. In four programmes, Ferguson explores the role of man-made institutions in global economic growth and democracy.

James Fisher-Martins – who manages Pikestaff's Facebook page – has emailed to recommend the second lecture: 'It is specifically about banking and how the complexity of regulations makes the whole system even more fragile. During the questions and answers at the end Ferguson gives a glowing eulogy about simple language.'

To download the podcast, visit <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/radio4/reith/rss.xml>. The questions and answers are just after the 34-minute point of the 26 June lecture.

(Our congratulations to James and to Sandra at Português Claro in Lisbon; their first baby – a boy, Dylan – was born on 16 May.)

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The bank done good

Associate Ian Hembrow received the email shown below from NatWest about its recent computer problems – termed by US business and financial magazine Forbes 'the worst computer system outage the UK financial system has ever seen'. Ian comments: 'In the circumstances, I reckon this is quite a good effort at saying sorry and reassuring customers in a personal, clear and easy-to-read way.'



Delivering on our promises

Dear Mr Hembrow,

We have fixed the underlying technical issue and are now working hard to help our customers that have been affected. I wanted to get in touch to let you know what we are doing to deliver on our promises.

Putting things right

For the vast majority of our customers who have raised a concern we have resolved it straight away. Those that need more attention are being handled directly by our dedicated response team, who have so far resolved over 90% of the 21,000 cases received.

Reimbursing our customers

We made a promise that no customer will be left permanently out of pocket and we intend to keep it. We will automatically reimburse all of our customers' fees, charges and interest on their current accounts, credit cards, mortgages and loans where they have been charged or overcharged as a result of the incident.

Here to help

You can find the latest information, answers to common questions and help to resolve any outstanding queries by visiting [Help Point](#), the dedicated area on our website. Or feel free to go into any of our branches, or call our 24/7 UK call centres free on **0800 656 9639** (minicom: **0800 404 6161**).

Thank you for your understanding during this period and again we're sorry for any issues that we've caused.

Yours sincerely,

Chris Popple
Managing Director, Retail Banking

Visit our [Help Point](#) if
you need any more
assistance

[Click here >>](#)

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Meanwhile, the sixth Financial Times Bowen Craggs Index of corporate web effectiveness ('which with 1,000 man hours of work and 800,000 words is by far the most detailed analysis of giant web estates') has shown that Barclays has 'decided to reinvent the way people get around their sites; and ... botched it'. The other UK bank to feature in the analysis is HSBC. UK non-banking businesses have fared rather well, with the index topped by Royal Dutch Shell and BP. UK-based Unilever and British American Tobacco also made the top 10. To see the index and analysis, visit <http://www.bowencraggs.com/ftindex>.

[Source: Forbes: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/timworstall/2012/06/25/rbsnatwest-computer-failure-fully-explained/>]

Collective wisdom

Following the publication of Pikestaff 56, another reader wrote to say: 'I keep thinking I must be wrong – surely I've not found a (tiny) error in Pikestaff ... but on page 3 isn't "SRA (Solicitors Regulation Authority)" singular ... so it has, not have, produced a glossary?'

We replied:

According to the grammar book we use (Greenbaum and Quirk), collective nouns are 'ordinarily singular ... though in British English are often treated as plural aggregate nouns: "The committee were unanimous"'. Pam Peters and the Guardian style guide support this view (see excerpt from our style guide below).

So we think it's OK either way. Having said this, we notice now that we used a singular verb in respect of the DVLA. So we're certainly guilty of the inconsistency we bemoan in the style guide: Muphry's law strikes again!

And here's the excerpt from our style guide (see <http://www.clearest.co.uk/pages/publications/styleguide/>):

5 Collective nouns

Explaining the jargon Collective nouns are singular in form but refer to a group of people, animals or objects, for example council, government, team and organization.

The issue It can be hard to know whether to use singular or plural verbs (and pronouns) with collective nouns.

Our advice In general, it's best to make the verb agree with the noun, but if the collective noun is thought of as a collection of individuals, it's OK to use the plural. The Guardian's online style guide gives these examples:

*[Using a singular verb and pronoun] The committee gave its unanimous approval to the plans.
[Using a plural verb and pronoun] The committee enjoyed biscuits with their tea.*

Another option Some people use a plural verb with names of organizations, eg Tesco have done well this quarter. Pam Peters reports that this is more common in British than American English. It's OK to do this if you wish, but please be consistent: we see a lot of documents that contain a mixture of singular and plural verbs with the organization's name.

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In other error-related emails, Graham Horn and Lesley Smith noticed that Pikestaff 56 referred to Ray Ward being Brain of Britain 21012. Having mentioned Muphry's law earlier in the issue, we of course just wanted to demonstrate this in action!

Sometimes readers who write in about errors or inconsistencies that they've spotted are worried we'll take offence. Far from it: we always welcome constructive criticism, so keep those comments coming!

ClearMark awards 2012



The ClearMark and WonderMark awards – organized by the US-based Center for Plain Language – recognize the best and worst in plain language (writing, graphic design and testing) each year from government, non-profit, and private companies. The 2012 winners were announced at an awards ceremony on 22 May at Clarity's 2012 conference. Find out more at <http://centerforplainlanguage.org/awards/>.

[Thanks to Thomas Bohm, who sat on the international judges' panel for the awards, for sending us this news.]

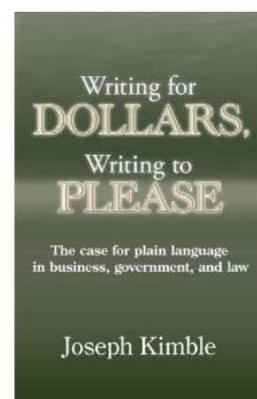
Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please

In 1997, USA-based Professor Joseph Kimble published a collection of 28 studies from a range of countries, showing that plain language is more persuasive and saves money in business, government and law. Now he has increased this to 50 evidence-based studies in a hardback book. This is available from Amazon's American site at

http://www.amazon.com/Writing-Dollars-Please-Language-Government/dp/1611631912/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1342183921&sr=8-1&keywords=writing+for+dollars or you may be lucky enough to pick up a copy from Amazon Marketplace through the UK site: http://www.amazon.co.uk/Writing-Dollars-Please-Language-Government/dp/1611631912/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1342184090&sr=8-1. The latter is likely to cost you less in postage, but note that it lists the publication year wrongly as 2008.

The original (1997) version of *Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please* is available free online at <http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/kimble/dollars.html>.

[Thank you to Daphne Perry for telling us about the book.]



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Following our last quiz question (Which common English word means 'twice cooked'? Answer: biscuit), Jenny Harris emailed to mention that 'ricotta' has a similar meaning of 'recooked' (reflecting the process of making this Italian cheese). She added that French people don't shout for an 'encore' at the end of a performance (despite this being a French word); instead, they say: 'Bis. Bis!'

Ray Ward's quiz question for this edition maintains the Mediterranean theme:

What is the French phrase for words that are similar to those in another language and therefore may mislead people into thinking they have the same meaning when they in fact don't (for example, the French 'libraire', meaning bookshop, not library)?

As usual, you'll find the answer right at the end of the newsletter.

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(Click on any item to view online)

16 July	Parking language roasted at Clarity breakfast
14 July	Misleading court-case figures conned Government into changing private parking law
10 July	Private parking 'bloodsuckers' flayed in conference speech
8 July	Linguists flock to EC's Clear Writing seminar
8 July	Private parking chicanery: talks at the DVLA
7 July	Council eats its words after schoolgirl's eggcellent English goes global
6 June	Parking meeting at the DVLA
3 June	QES: RIP
2 June	Dagenham, close to barking

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Facebook

Pikestaff has its own page on Facebook, thanks to colleague James Fisher-Martins, 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

Pikestaff is written by Sarah Carr and edited by Martin Cutts.
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Let's get quizzical: answer

Faux amis (which translates as 'false friends').