

p kestaff

PLAIN
LANGUAGE
COMMISSION

Pikestaff 58
September 2012

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From gaffes to Gamesish

Since the Pikestaff team can only dream of accomplishing the physical feats of the Olympians and Paralympians, forgive us while we wield our own athletic prowess in professional pedantry.

Indeed, the language of the Games has attracted attention in various respects. We've heard of linguistic slips – like the case of Derby torch bearer Jerri Peterson, whose tattooist, adding a permanent memento to her arm, wrote 'Oylmpic Torch Bearer'. (Mrs Peterson was magnanimous, declining the artist's offer to correct it saying the tattoo makes her laugh and is 'as unique as I am'.)



In another gaffe, Westfield (the official shopping centre of the 2012 Olympics) put up 'Welcome to London' banners in Arabic that read backwards and had spaces between the letters. At first glance, the signs appeared so alien to some Arabic speakers that they thought they were written in Farsi. 'It would be like a sign in English reading "NODNOLOTEMOCLEW"', commented Chris Doyle, director of the Council for Arab-British Understanding. Doyle blamed the error – which also occurred in multi-language security posters at train stations – on computer software.

Aside from spelling cock-ups, the Telegraph's parliamentary sketchwriter, Michael Deacon, commented on Olympic jargon – in both its senses: technical language and gobbledegook. Of course, the latter is often political – hence its synonyms 'doublespeak' and 'bafflegab' – with its perpetrators obfuscating in order to hide an unpalatable truth. For this, Deacon coins the term Gamesish ('a clumsy, cumbersome name...[that]...therefore reflects the language perfectly'), giving these examples from a press briefing on Olympic security:

Gamesish: *The vast majority of our asset will be out in the public space.*

English: *Most of the policemen will be in the street.*

Gamesish: *The London operation is supported by significant mobile reserve capability.*

English: *We've got lots of policemen, and some of them have cars.*

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Gamesish: Private security man-guarding component.

English: G4S security guards.

Gamesish: We're reinforcing performance on the ground.

English: We're training the security guards.

Gamesish: The reason for this decision is to absolutely de-risk any element of the programme.

English: After the G4S shambles, we're calling up anyone who's ever so much as worn a pair of khaki trousers.

Gamesish: The net outcome is that you end up with an even better security force qualitatively.

English: Soldiers make better security guards than G4S staff do.

Gamesish: All the queue-modelling is generally calibrated by the ability of the transport hub to absorb people.

English: When you're leaving an event, you'll find the Tube and railway stations quite busy.

Deacon concludes: 'See? Simple. You'll be speaking it in no time. Or, to put it in Gamesish, you'll be conversant in the relevant terminology within a reasonably limited time-period.'

As for technical jargon, our vocabulary has certainly been broadened by the complex commentary – for example, in diving, 'big tariff dives', 'the reverse 3.5' and 'pike position'. Deacon observes:

To the novice, so complex and strange is the lexicon of the diving board that you wonder whether anyone else out there understands it either. If the commentators made it all up as they went along, would any of us be able to tell the difference?

'There's the spatchcock. A 12.4 on the bantam. Quick off the candle, nice wide bishop, couple of big sardines...and into the hat-rack for a textbook blow-dry and finish! They spun off the turret like a dog at a book fair! From start to finish, a classic Black and Decker!'

[Sources: BBC News, 18 July 2012: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-derbyshire-18890901>;
Telegraph, 24 July 2012: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/olympics/9423946/How-to-speak-the-official-language-of-the-Olympics.html>;
Herald Sun, 27 July 2012: <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/business/breaking-news/westfield-makes-olympic-spelling-mistake/story-e6frf7ko-1226436256996>;
Telegraph, 31 July 2012: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/9440635/Olympics-on-TV-Tom-Daley-plunges-into-the-surreal.html>]

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An enormous error?

We might be pedants, but we're not prescriptive pedants, plenty of whom came out of the woodwork recently to criticize the language of US Vice President Joe Biden. In his speech at the Democratic National Convention, Biden commented: 'One of the things I learned about Barack is the enormity of his heart.' (Hear it for yourself at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOLzm_qazOg.)

As Martin Cutts commented on our website last December, 'the traditional meaning of "enormity" – extreme wickedness – is gradually falling out of fashion, much like that of "refute"'. Indeed, it's common these days to see newspapers using the word to mean 'great size', ie enormousness. In fact, it's become such an accepted usage of the word that it now appears in the Oxford dictionary as the second definition: '2. great size or scale: *he shook his head at the enormity of the task*'.

As with many other debated points of style – like split infinitives and using 'they' as a singular pronoun to cover both sexes – 'enormity' meaning 'hugeness' was happily used years ago (as early as the eighteenth century in fact). *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage* comments: 'The distinction [between 'enormity' and 'enormousness'] is rather difficult to maintain when the adjective *enormous* can now only mean "huge". Writers reaching for its abstract noun not surprisingly tend to harness **enormity** rather than the cumbersome **enormousness**, and in fact the latter makes no showing at all amid 100 million words of the BNC [British National Corpus].'

It concludes by advising: 'Those who need to communicate a sense of outrage should not put too much faith in **enormity**, and would be wise to seek an alternative.' We'd add that those who need to communicate a sense of hugeness should not put too much faith in 'enormity' either – nor in its cumbersome cousin 'enormousness'. There are clearer (and often shorter) words to express the meaning.

Clarity conference and meeting

Clarity – the international association promoting plain legal language – held its two-yearly conference in Washington DC in May this year. Non-members can see back issues of



on Clarity's website, but you'll need to join if you want to see the conference issue as soon as it's published in November. See <http://www.clarity-international.net/join.html>.

The next Clarity conference will be held in 2014, probably in Belgium. In the meantime, the Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN) is planning a

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conference for next year – likely to be held in Canada – and Clarity holds an evening meeting, jointly with the Statute Law Society, in London.

The free event – entitled 'Public and Private drafting: contrasts and similarities' – will take place on 15 October, from 6pm to 7pm, at the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies. It features speakers Sir Geoffrey Bowman KCB QC (former first parliamentary counsel) and James Kessler QC (Tax Chambers, Lincoln's Inn). To book, email Richard Castle at schlossmeister@gmail.com with your name, organization, position and email address.

International Plain Language Day

On October 13, people will celebrate International Plain Language Day (IPLDay) by hosting events online, in offices and on the streets to mark their support for putting readers first in communication using plain language. The date of this annual event was chosen last year to mark the anniversary of the US Plain Writing Act.

This year, there'll be a virtual conference – comprising seven presenters from four countries (including two from the UK). Video and slide presentations will be online for all to use, share, and celebrate on 13 October. The organizers – Cheryl Stephens and Kate Harrison Whiteside – are appealing for donors to sponsor the event. They would also like people to get IPLDay declared in their cities, organize simple celebrations or plan a meet-up for plain-language supporters.

You can follow the news, view abstracts of conference talks and donate money – as well as buy 'swag' (from bumper stickers to pyjamas) – at <http://www.IPLDay.org>.



Readers write

This month, we bring you two more questions on language usage, with our answers.

Q *I have recently made two changes to a document which a team member has said are wrong. They are: **We have 30 days' notice** and **If you mature your policy in five years' time**. I've added the apostrophes as I believe if the numbers were singular there would be an apostrophe before the 's', eg **a day's notice, a year's time**. Could you tell me if I'm correct or direct me to a website which clarifies the grammar rule for me please?*

A Yes, you're right, though these terms are now so widely used without apostrophes that many of us think this particular use of the apostrophe is in

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terminal decline. It's possible to rewrite most sentences to avoid the problem, if you wish, eg **If your policy matures in five years**. There are various grammar websites, Oxford Dictionaries (<http://oxforddictionaries.com/words/grammar>) being one. Martin Cutts's *Oxford Guide to Plain English* covers the point too. Issues 14, 15, 16, 17 and 23 of Pikestaff – which you can download from our website – all cover apostrophes. I believe there's also an Apostrophe Protection Society!

Q *I am trying to get my head around the 'value for money' hyphenation rules: 'We developed our website further to improve the information we publish on value for money. We include information about our value-for-money performance including our income and how we prioritise our expenditure. We also included good practice we have implemented to improve value for money for customers.' Have I got it right?*

A Yes, that's right. When the phrase 'value for money' precedes the noun it affects, it needs hyphens. When the phrase follows the noun, it doesn't need hyphens. To complicate matters, some other phrases of this kind are always hyphenated wherever they appear, but a dictionary will show a phrase as hyphenated if this is the case.

And finally, on a less serious note, Stephen Day wrote in having spotted this on the BBC website (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/4313210.stm): '...were lashed publicly in the Khyber region in May'. (Clue: think Cockney rhyming slang – 'Khyber Pass'. More mature (in years) readers may also remember the film *Carry On Up the Khyber* starring Kenneth Williams).

Let's get quizzical

As usual, we end our newsletter with some linguistic lightheartedness. This month, we have a two-piece quiz (clue to the first answer there).

First, quizmaster Ray Ward asks: 'What common English word, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, first appeared in print in *The Daily Telegraph* in 1947 defined as "a large explosion" – very different from its current meaning?' As usual, you'll find the answer at the end of this newsletter.

Second, we bring you a quiz that tells you what your favourite punctuation mark says about your personality. We won't spoil it by giving too much away here. Suffice to say that Pikestaff's writer is well-read and urbane, while its editor is a helpful and fun peacemaker (not all results are as benign, so participate at your peril!). Simply choose your favourite punctuation mark and then check out your personality type at <http://bryanthomasschmidt.net/2012/06/11/guest-post-your-punctuation-personality-type-by-leah-petersen/>. Let us know what you think of your results!

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18 September	MP's speech spotlights parking signs rip-off
17 September	MP introduces ten-minute rule Bill on parking signs
16 September	Small signs of success in parking campaign
15 September	e for edible, a for aargh
15 September	Money tap turned off by firm's misleading car-park signs
15 September	Red-hot Currie
15 September	Not cheesy but very fruity
13 September	Subtitles for the English of the English
28 August	DVLA says inspection process 'not corrupted' but nonsensical signs deemed clear by BPA
28 August	Land bridge to Australia
28 August	Lion of few words enlivens damp Sunday in Essex
27 August	Cutts to address Sign Design Soc, 6 Sept
27 August	'Fifty Shades' presenter left tongue-tied by new verb
16 August	Secret email shows how Government was misled in law-change bid
5 August	Ambiguous certificate costs insurer £12,000
4 August	QES - phoenix arises
29 July	Chance to comment on plans to protect consumers from unfair contract terms
28 July	Circle lines a boon for Olympic travellers

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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, as well as an index showing 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

Bikini.

(The first true bikinis appeared around the time the USA tested an atomic bomb at Bikini atoll in the Pacific, and were first called 'atome', implying 'very small', but then someone had the idea of calling them bikinis, perhaps because the prefix 'bi-' means 'two', though that is not the derivation. The Oxford and Chambers dictionaries suggest the name is based on the garment's 'devastating' or 'explosive' effect on men.)