

A free newsletter that provides hints and tips, links to language-related websites, amusing sidelines, updates on our services, and short news articles.

p kestaff

PLAIN
LANGUAGE
COMMISSION

Pikestaff 63
July 2013

In this issue:

(click a link)

[It's Pikestaff, readers, but not \(quite\) as you know it](#)

[Pick of the Pikestaff pops: fave raves from the early years](#)

[Missing, if not actually lost, in translation](#)

[Readers write](#)

[Typographical titillation](#)

[Let's get quizzical](#)

[New on our website since Pikestaff 62](#)

[Conferences, events and journals](#)

[Links and credits](#)

It's Pikestaff, readers, but not (quite) as you know it

Since Pikestaff began in January 2007, it's gradually evolved, adopting new regular slots and improved designs, and reducing in frequency as our website developed. Six years ago, our website (like others at the time) was much more static; we added Pikestaff monthly, and new articles now and then. Social media was in its infancy; for example, Facebook had around 20 million users worldwide, compared to its current figure of over 1,000 million!

Pikestaff 1

Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 1, January 2007

We've made a (rather belated) New Year's resolution. We'll be sending you a monthly bulletin with snippets from the UK and beyond about clear writing. Some of them will show why clarity is important for organizations, others will be more light-hearted, and a few will be both.

We'll also give you news about us, and remind you how we can help you and your organization to communicate even better.

In November 2011, we launched our new website, with features including 'News & views' (links to serious stories in the media that relate to plain language, and a few that don't) and 'Jottings' (our commentary on lighter linguistic snippets). We list all new items in these sections towards the end of each Pikestaff, and have recently added a 'newsfeed' to our home page. Just click the newsfeed link (at the bottom of the 'News & Views' menu) to see all new items. It also gives you a searchable archive of all 188 stories we've written so far.

As we'd like to encourage more people to follow these online features, through visiting our website more often, we've now decided to make Pikestaff an occasional rather than regular publication. So far scribed by Sarah Carr, it will now be written mainly by Martin Cutts with contributions from others.

So, since it's (kind of) the end of an era – and it's summer hols, and a heatwave – we thought we'd make this issue of Pikestaff a bit different, with the emphasis on more light-hearted language stories.

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but not (quite) as you
know it**

**Pick of the Pikestaff
pops: fave raves from
the early years**

**Missing, if not actually
lost, in translation**

Readers write

**Typographical
titillation**

Let's get quizzical

**New on our website
since Pikestaff 62**

**Conferences, events
and journals**

Links and credits



Pick of the Pikestaff pops: fave raves from the early years

Pikestaff has always tried to entertain as well as inform. Here are some of our favourite linguistic bloomers from 2007–9, many of them spotted by readers:

Spar supermarket, near the till:

'Our staff are fully trained in credit card fraud'

Men's toilets at Bristol Airport:

'In case of terminal evacuation, red lights will flash'

Advert for spray tans in a local newspaper:

'Visit us with your friend and you can both get spayed for half price'

Urinals at a law school:

'Chewing gum and other rubbish can cause a blockage'

Daily Telegraph front-page headline:

'Act now to beat young thugs'

Scanomat Drinks System:

'Advanced whipping system'

Picture in The Times:

'ARMISTICE DAY: WW1 veterans laid reefs at Cenotaph' (to coral singing?)

Categories on an evaluation form at a seminar:

'Very good', 'Good', 'Less than satisfactory' and 'Poo'

Boxes of Fabulous Bakin' Boys' Triple Chocolate Cupcakes:

'4King Cupcakes'

Banner outside a pub:

'Live on Plasma'

Sign outside a shop:

'Eat healthy – Eat Polish'

Sign in window of hardware shop:

'Disappearing loft ladders – only two left'

Sign in clearance shop:

'We limit the number of shoes and boots to 3 per customer per day'

Headline in the Daily Express:

'Can Dec anally match Ant?' (Meant to read 'Can Dec finally match Ant?')

Headline in local newspaper:

'Penisoner takes on intruders'

(A tendency to lavatorial humour? Nah, not us.)

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lost, in translation

Readers write

Typographical
titillation

Let's get quizzical

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since Pikestaff 62

Conferences, events
and journals

Links and credits



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Another common theme has been confused English from abroad, though we've always acknowledged that foreigners often make a better job of using our language than we do of theirs. (We reported, for example, Tony Blair's French announcement, which – rather than the intended 'I admire Lionel Jospin, although we have differing views' – translated: 'I desire Lionel Jospin in many different positions.')

So, since the summer season is again upon us, here's a fresh selection of exotic offerings.

Dubya's Franglais

In a letter to the Daily Telegraph, Steve Howe writes: 'I was interested to read of the latest efforts by the French to resist the incursions of the English language into their native tongue. I wonder what French terms the Académie Française would suggest for use in place of Anglicisms such as *bête noire*, *raison d'être* and *cul-de-sac*?' Steve Masters replied: 'Steve Howe ... should remember George W. Bush's famous statement that "the French don't have a word for entrepreneur".'

Sources: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/letters/10071837>
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/letters/10079660>

Beef with long words

Germany has officially abolished its longest (63-letter) word: *Rindfleischetikettierungsüberwachungsaufgabenübertragungsgesetz*, introduced in 1999 to describe the law that delegates the monitoring of beef labelling, now repealed after the EU lifted a recommendation to carry out BSE tests on healthy cattle.

German is famous for its compound nouns, often so cumbersome they have to be reduced to abbreviations – with even *Lastkraftwagen* (lorry) becoming *Lkw*. The long-word law itself is commonly transcribed as the 'RkReÜAÜG'.

Source: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany>

Designer umlauts

Continuing on the Germanic theme, Hannah Booth, writing in the Guardian, notes that 'the gratuitous umlaut is back'. A British kitchen utensils company has called itself 'üutensil': 'Without the double letters and umlaut, it's just "utensil", which probably won't shift many whisks.'

London-based dessert-brand Gü has also appropriated the umlaut. Having played around with the French word 'goût' (taste), it decided people might think it was called 'gout' (not an image you'd ideally associate with your strawberry mousse) and chose the seductive 'Gü'.

Source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/shortcuts>

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**Missing, if not actually
lost, in translation**

Readers write

**Typographical
titillation**

Let's get quizzical

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**Conferences, events
and journals**

Links and credits



Readers write

It's been good to receive so many readers' emails, and here's a selection of different types:

The language query

A reader asked, via Facebook:

Is there a rule that governs the position of the word 'also' in a sentence? I can determine four patterns of use:

- 1) *First position – Also expected to attend are ...*
- 2) *After the verb – These are also mine.*
- 3) *Between the auxiliary and the verb – They have also answered.*
- 4) *Before the verb – I also sent them.*

What is behind these variations? Why can I say 'I have also answered' but not 'I also have answered'?

We replied:

It seems to us to relate to which word it's most relevant to, if you're being very careful about language use. For example, in your very last sentence, 'I have also answered' suggests that the writer may be the only one to answer, but has done something else too (eg 'I have seen the invitation, and I have also answered'), whereas 'I also have answered' (which is grammatically correct too) suggests that the writer has done just this one thing, but that someone else has done it too (eg 'He has answered and I also have answered').

In your list, 1), 3) and 4) are in fact the same, as in each case 'also' comes before the main verb. In 2), the emphasis is on 'mine', implying that the writer has various possessions, including the one referred to.

In reality, most people aren't nearly this careful about the placement of 'also' (we see the same problem with 'only'), but most of the time it doesn't matter greatly as the intended meaning of the sentence is clear anyway, especially in context. It's most important to be accurate with this (and indeed everything else) in formal writing, where a nuance is likely to matter much more.

The suggestion for improvement

We're always pleased to hear from readers with ideas for improvement, and last month a reader requested: 'I wish you'd ensure that embedded links open in new windows, instead of replacing Pikestaff on my screen.'

Our technical wizard has looked into this, but there's no practical and reliable way of achieving it. While he expects Adobe may eventually respond to the pressure to remedy this situation, he meanwhile advises: 'While you can view the Pikestaff PDF online, URL links to other websites will disconnect you from it. If you wish to view the URL links without reloading the PDF every time, we suggest you download it and view from your PC, where this will not happen.'

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the early years

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lost, in translation

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Typographical
titillation

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Conferences, events
and journals

Links and credits

The tip-off on a new resource

Steve Watt kindly messaged us on Facebook with the link to a new publication by the Translation Directorate of the European Court of Auditors. **A Brief List of Misused English Terms in EU Publications** is introduced as follows:

Over the years, the European institutions have developed a vocabulary that differs from that of any recognised form of English. It includes words that do not exist or are relatively unknown to native English speakers outside the EU institutions and often even to standard spellcheckers/grammar checkers ('planification', 'to precise' or 'telematics' for example) and words that are used with a meaning, often derived from other languages, that is not usually found in English dictionaries ('coherent' being a case in point). Some words are used with more or less the correct meaning, but in contexts where they would not be used by native speakers ('homogenise', for example).



The response to an article

In Pikestaff 61 and 62, we discussed unusual hunger-related sayings (it all started with a piece about the derivation of 'I could eat a horse', in light of the European meat-adulteration scandal).

This issue, we've more contributions to the theme, with Andrew McIlwraith telling us of one he remembers from his youth in Australia: 'I'm so hungry I could eat the crutch out of a low-flying crow'. David Brown, meanwhile, writes: 'A Liverpudlian friend of mine used to use the expression "I could eat a cow between two mattresses" when he was very hungry. It sounds even better in the original Scouse.'

The 'Pikestaff has been censored' report

We've managed to worry your email filters now and then over the years, not least when we explained (in Pikestaff 13) why we – like the Guardian – believe asterisking out words or parts of words detracts from clear writing (as the reader has to work out what the writer meant). In line with this policy, in Pikestaff 15 we quoted Irvine Welsh's strong words on those who mourn the semicolon's underuse.

Pikestaff 62 seemed to have a similar effect, with a reader emailing: 'I read the new edition with particular interest after it was blocked because of "inappropriate content". Sadly, I couldn't find any, although it was a particularly good read. Perhaps you hid some naughty words to ensure closer reading?' We could only put it down to the hunger-related expression 'eat the arse out of a dead skunk'.

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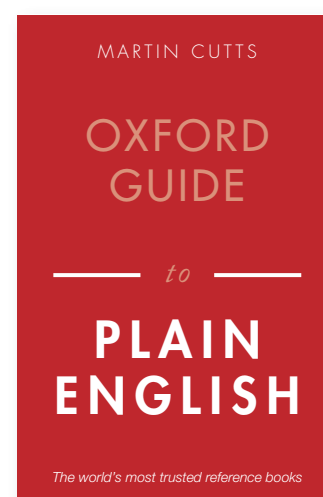
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We're always keen to emphasize that plain language is not just about writing but also about layout and design. Indeed, in the *Oxford Guide to Plain English*, Martin Cutts defines 'plain language' as 'the writing and setting out of essential information in a way that gives a cooperative, motivated person a good chance of understanding it at first reading, and in the same sense that the writer meant it to be understood'.

So, in other words (and as the newsletter of the Institute of Internal Communication puts it): 'As if it's not enough that you have to tell a story clearly and succinctly, you also have to worry about how it looks on the page.' It continues: 'If you've committed a juxtaposition error in your company magazine or a headline howler in your weekly managers' update, having a laugh at the bloomers made by others may cheer you up – a bit. There are some crackers among these **28 newspaper and magazine layout disasters**.

By the way, the much-revised and long-awaited (at least by the author) fourth edition of the *Oxford Guide to Plain English* will hit the bookstores on 15 August, price £7.99, and the new front cover will look like this ...



Let's get quizzical

Rather than just one quiz question, we've three for you in this summer special, all related to words from other countries:

1. Which former Japanese province gives its name to a fruit?
2. Which word meaning to follow a winding path come from the name of a Turkish river?
3. Which word for a luxurious car comes from the name of a region of France?

Thanks go to our regular quizmaster, Ray Ward, for these. As usual, you'll find the answers at the end.

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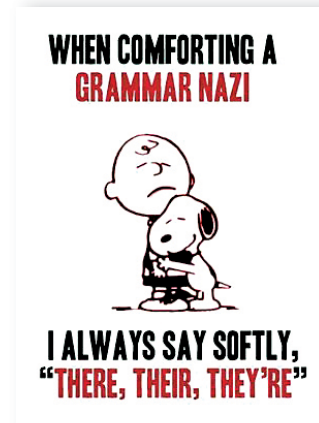
**Conferences, events
and journals**

Links and credits

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The next issue of Pikestaff will be with you before too long. In the meantime, have a great summer, and don't forget to visit our website for up-to-date news, views and jottings. (For those without internet access during their hols, opposite are some words of comfort from **Charlie Brown**.)

(Click on any item to view online)



- | | |
|---------|---|
| 10 July | Aberdonian windbaggery |
| 10 July | From split-infinitive terror to unsplit error |
| 10 July | From the CQC, commandments that don't command |
| 10 July | K for Murray? What a racquet |
| 10 July | Letter-writing skills of abducted teenager |
| 10 July | Parking penalties and other traffic rip-offs |
| 10 July | Pedent's paradise: resent errors spotted in the press |
| 10 July | Sorry state of State affairs |
| 10 July | Sponsoring language |
| 30 May | Hand-selected, sustainable, prestigious, free-range ... but Virgin's food is still inedible |
| 29 May | Czech out those Chechens |
| 29 May | Currently in the process of effecting subediting |
| 29 May | Dead unusual word wins sack race at HSBC |
| 29 May | False sentences |
| 29 May | Lord Sugar regrets |
| 29 May | Miliband slips on negative banana skin |
| 29 May | Tense future as 'going forward' marches on at RBS |

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Links and credits



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In this slot, each issue, we update you on future plain-language conferences, events and journals.

PLAIN conference (10–13 October 2013, Vancouver, Canada)

The full conference programme is **now available**.

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 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 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, who thanks Sarah for the well-researched and lively articles that have graced the first 63 editions of the newsletter.

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Sarah Carr

Let's get quizzical: answer

1. Satsuma
2. Meander (from the Menderes river, historically the Maeander or Meander)
3. Limousine (from the Limousin region)