

# p kestaff

PLAIN  
LANGUAGE  
COMMISSION

Pikestaff 69  
September 2014

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## Loose chippings from the Tower of Babel

► **The cricket no relief** The England and Wales Cricket Board is looking for a 'people and culture director', reports Nick Hault in the Daily Telegraph. The role involves 'driving a talent acquisition strategy and the implementation of a people agenda geared around ensuring attraction and retention of the best people including succession planning and talent pipelining'. It goes on: 'There is now an opportunity to elevate the function to one that helps the organisation enhance engagement with its people [and] develop a common culture.' Thus are revealed two of the purposes of obscure language: it excludes the riff-raff from job opportunities, and extends a covert welcome to fellow jargonauts.

► **Ball-cocks to writer's block** Authors who plead writer's block for their lack of output will get short shrift if they bleat about it to Philip Pullman, author of His Dark Materials. He says: 'Do plumbers get plumber's block? What would you think of a plumber who used that as an excuse not to do any work?'

► **For want of a full stop** A sign in Normanton, Derby caught the eye of Pikestaff reader Julia Buckland: 'No Fly Tipping Offenders Will Be Prosecuted.'

► **Laconic landlord** Talking of notices, another reader was attracted by this sign behind a pub bar: 'A pint, a pie and a friendly word.' Ordering a pie and a pint, which the landlord served with a scowl, our reader remarked: 'What about the friendly word?' To which mine host, in a solid Yorkshire accent, responded: 'Don't eat t'pie.'

► **For want of a comma and some capitals** A newspaper's In Memoriam notice says: 'John, 222 Squadron, Spitfires, one of the few killed in action over Maidstone.' Acute readers will know that this refers to 'the Few', the RAF crews whose courage Churchill praised in his 'Never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to so few' speech. Churchill was probably echoing the pre-battle speech of Shakespeare's Henry V: 'And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by, From this day to the ending of the world, But we in it shall be remember'd; We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.' The notice would have been better as: 'John, 222 Squadron, Spitfires, one of the Few, killed in action over Maidstone.'

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► **Impersonal passive** How bureaucrats and jobsworths love the impersonal passive. After a neighbour reported a burglary, the police sent her an email saying: 'It has been concluded at this time unfortunately there is insufficient information to proceed, and that the specific investigation into your crime will now be closed.' Not only does this conceal who is doing the concluding and who the closing of the 'specific' investigation, it conceals the fact that there was probably no investigation at all.

► **Scotland vote** Will the UK need a name-change if Scotland votes for independence? One idea mooted by the actor Joan Collins is 'Former United Kingdom', on account of the charming abbreviation. But 'Untied Kingdom' may be a better option, enabling us to keep the 'UK' even if Scotland departs.

► **Sunny Ireland** The next conference of the Plain Language Association InterNational, aka PLAIN, will be held in Ireland 17–19 September 2015. One of Ireland's greatest exports has been Brendan O'Carroll's Mrs Brown's Boys sitcom series and films, noted for the joyous crudity of their humour. PLAIN folk will need to take their umbrellas if one of his Bible-themed jokes is anything to go by: 'It rained for 40 days and 40 nights and they call that a disaster. Here in Ireland we call that a feckin' summer.'

► **Decoding financial jargon** Generally, the use of jargon (technical terms) is all right among consenting adults, for whom it can save time. But a Daily Telegraph piece (1 June) by Tim Steer, manager of Artemis Growth Fund, is all about 'IPOs', a bit of jargon the article does not explain despite using it umpteen times. Apparently it means 'initial public offering', the first sale of stock to the public by a private company.

A new book by John Lanchester (his third on the 2008 financial crisis – it's an ill wind) may help with this kind of problem. Called 'How to Speak Money' (Faber, £17.99), the book provides a lexicon of common financial terms alongside an acerbic commentary on their meaning. The Guardian's review [<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/04/how-to-speak-money-john-lanchester-review>] on 4 September says:

*'The important question thrown up by the crisis...is "whether a society should arrange itself primarily for the convenience of its richest citizens and its richest, most powerful economic sector, irrespective of the consequences of that for everyone else". He notes that a robber baron's castle can be full of sumptuous art, lavish food and drink and wonderful music but can only shine brightly because it destroys the landscape in which it sits. "The City of London," he writes, "is a robber baron's castle." Lanchester thinks the robber barons get away with it because of the big gap that exists between the people who understand money and the rest. And the reason there is a big gap, he says, is that the money folk speak their own esoteric language that sets them apart. That explains why economics feels so alienating to outsiders.'*

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Lucy Kellaway of the Financial Times also admires the book, though for different reasons:

*'What also qualifies [Lanchester] for the job of translator is that he likes the language. The son of a banker, he doesn't find it heartless: he finds it bracing. Neither does he subscribe to the easy view that money is hard to understand just because evil bankers are trying to trick us. When they talk about a "vanilla mezzanine RMBS synthetic CDO", some wool may be being pulled over eyes but mostly the language is hard to understand because the subject is complicated.*

*'In studying the words, Lanchester made the odd discovery that many of them have come to mean the opposite of what they sound like. A hedge fund has nothing to do with a thing that marks out the edges of a field, nor with the idea of hedging bets. Instead, it is a pool of largely unregulated money, taking vast risks and usually going bust. A bailout is not about throwing water out of a boat, it's about putting money in. A Chinese wall is not something large and physical that can be seen from space. It is something intangible and only too easy to permeate.'*

► **Plain Words renewed** Ernest Gowers was a bit of a jargon-hater in his day, too. He wrote 'Plain Words' in 1948, part of a doomed mission to persuade British civil servants to write in plain English. His great-granddaughter Rebecca Gowers has revised and updated the book, which is published by Penguin at £14.99.

► **Glass claim shattered** Google has already trademarked 'Google Glass', the name of a wearable computer. But the megacorp's application to trademark the word 'Glass' has been refused by the US Patent and Trademark Office, which says it is 'merely descriptive' and could cause confusion with other companies' trademarks such as Glass3D and Teleglass. Google's trademark attorneys have disputed the refusal in a 1,928-page letter. Maybe they used very big print.

► **Misled** Confusion between 'lead' and 'led' is widespread. A newspaper says: 'Schools in North Korea teach children that the battle [of Pochonbo] was a glorious victory against Japan lead by Kim Il-Sung.' So that would be 'led' as all the past tenses of 'lead' are 'led', eg were led, was led, been led.

► **Superlative juice, inferior grammar** Albert Gifford, a Somerset teenager, has been in the news for persuading Tesco to change the labels on its own-brand orange and apple juice packs, which declared they were 'the most tastiest' on the market. Tesco could have used the Shakespeare defence by quoting Mark Antony in Julius Caesar: 'For Brutus, as you know, was Caesar's angel. Judge, O you gods, how dearly Caesar lov'd him! This was the most unkindest cut of all.' What an opportunity missed for the middle-brow retailer to show a bit of class!

► **Brindled** Now that's a rare word, so the newspaper that published this might have checked it first: 'Did Rubenfeld fear being caricatured as a powerless (for which read spineless) bystander? He brindles with suppressed irritation...'. That

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would be 'bridled', meaning to show resentment or anger, whereas 'brindled' is an adjective meaning tawny or grayish with spots or stripes. As everyone knows, Gerard Manley-Hopkins used it in his 1918 poem *Pied Beauty*, when he praised God for dappled things, eg: 'For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow.'

► **Harrumphing Humphrys** Two stalwarts of BBC Radio 4 have been feuding, somewhat playfully, over the historic present tense, much used by academics to add immediacy to their contributions in 'In Our Time', Melvyn Bragg's long-running series on cultural-historical themes. Humphrys said he disliked its guests saying things like: 'So Shakespeare buys a house in Stratford' when telling a story about the Bard. It should be 'bought', claimed he. Bragg countered that the tense had been used since the seventh century and had been much used by Hilary Mantel in her novels *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies*. Humphrys retorted that academics used the historic present to tell the audience, 'We're smarter than you'. He said: 'Melvyn's programme is magnificent, but when they do that they are excluding ordinary Joes.' Which just shows how out of touch Humphrys can sometimes be, as most conversations in the pub with 'ordinary Joes' will include statements such as, 'And so he turns rounds to me cool as you like and says...'

► **n is a no-no at Newsnight** Signs of slackening standards at *Newsnight* on BBC2 after Jeremy Paxman's departure, as a reporter on 9 September describes one interviewee, Asif Ali, as a 'restauranteur'. The on-screen caption also gives 'restauranteur'. The word is, of course, 'restaurateur', based on the Latin for 'restore'. If you've attended one of our writing-skills courses, you will know this as it turns up in a quiz.

► **Surveyors' English** You'd think any surveyor worth their fee would be able to recognize and write a well-built sentence, but who would trust this one to spot a bad case of rising damp: 'Further to my earlier correspondence dated 1st June, I apologise for the oversight with regards to the rental which should have been, and of course was agreed and confirmed by my client Mr Pepperton that for year 1 would be £1,750 rising to £1,875 for year 2 and £2,000 for year 3.' Apart from the general grammatical chaos, this contains 'with regards to' (quelle horreur) instead of 'as regards' or 'with regard to'; and the redundant 'earlier', now so common in travel reports, eg 'Police have cleared an earlier accident at Leyton crossroads.'

► **Contronyms** As any fule no, two well-known examples of words that embody opposite meanings are cleave (to split apart and to stick fast) and sanction (to allow and to disallow or apply a penalty). Another example is to dust, meaning to remove dust and to apply dust as a powder. So now there are three.

► **Homophonics** Pikestaff 68 said triple homophones (soundalikes with different meanings) like pear/pare/pair were rare. Several readers remarked they could rattle off about six without much difficulty. Fair enough, but that still makes them rare in our book. For even rarer rarity, there's the sextuple homophone. Only one springs to mind: ewe, hew, you, u, yew, hue. Any others out there?

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► **Helping children to read** A dozen charities, publishers and educational bodies have launched the 'Read On. Get On.' campaign to help ensure that by 2025 all 11-year-olds can 'read well', by which they mean being able to read, understand and discuss books such as the Harry Potter series or Treasure Island, as well as newspapers, websites, letters and dictionaries. They want volunteers to get involved by helping individual children to read.

► **Bookless in Britain** Save the Children, the charity, has released the results of a research study, Reading for a Fairer Future, that says nearly half of poor children are unable to read by the time they leave primary school at 11 years old. Text messages have overtaken books as the most common material read by children aged 8 to 11, the study says. A quarter of 11-year-olds come from a home where there are fewer than 10 books. The study found that white working-class children often fared worse than those for whom English was a second language.

► **Reading backwards** Another research study, published by Renaissance Learning, says the pressure to focus on other subjects means children's reading often regresses at secondary school, with older pupils, especially boys, turning to non-fiction books about sport rather than more challenging texts. The report says the most-read author is Jeff Kinney for his Wimpy Kid series. Other popular authors are Roald Dahl and David Walliams.

► **Readability levels** In our editorial work for customers, we often try to ensure the text is at a readability level that will suit an average 13-year-old. National Adult Literacy Trust research, available on its website, shows this is roughly the average level for adults. We tend to discount from our calculation people who have virtually no reading skills in English. For example, the 2011 census shows that 800,000 immigrants in England and Wales (1.7% of the population) have little or no English, with 60% of these being female.

► **English in schools** Teachers at the City of Leeds School, a 314-pupil secondary, plan to teach English as a second language to all pupils, including those born in the UK, in a radical attempt to improve standards after Ofsted, the education watchdog, said it 'required improvement'. The school has children of around 55 nationalities. The head, Georgina Sale, said: 'Many of our pupils are not only new to English but they are not even literate in their own language. In some cases we are the first people to put a pen in their hand.' English is no longer the mother tongue (first language) for the majority of pupils in more than one in nine schools in England, according to Department of Education data. Around 1.1million school-age children have English as a second language. At Maidenhall primary school in Luton, 98.9% of children have a non-English mother tongue. Such developments show what efforts will be needed to bring children up to a good standard of English – as well as the need for clarity in public information written in English.

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## Wonga's bent for straight-talking money

Payday-lending company Wonga sent debt-chasing letters to 45,000 customers using fake law firms, says the Financial Conduct Authority. The regulator has ordered it to pay £2.6million compensation. Criminal charges may follow.



Wonga: shirt sponsors of Newcastle United football club

From 2008 to 2010, Wonga staff used the names of their fellow employees to construct non-existent debt-recovery firms like 'Chainey, d'Amato & Shannon'. They put pressure on customers to pay up or face court action. In some cases Wonga added extra charges to cover the cost of the letters from the fake firms.

Wonga is well known for charging an annual percentage rate of nearly 6,000% for short-term loans. It also professes plain-language credentials with the slogan: 'Straight talking money', used in thousands of TV commercials and newspaper adverts. The slogan's fate is now unclear. Wonga could opt for something genuinely straight talking, like 'dubious deceitful dealing'.

## 'Gibberish' parking sign laughed out of court

Private parking companies are notorious for erecting misleading, confusing and ambiguous signs, but this one from UKCPS must be in a league of its own. At Bradford county court on 4 July, UKCPS sought to enforce a £100 'parking charge' (in reality, a phony penalty or fine) against a motorist who'd fallen foul of the car-park rules. But the judge chucked out the case after five minutes, saying the misspelt and nonsensical sign was 'gibberish'.



According to the sign, the only people allowed to park in the entire car park are disabled drivers parking in a disabled bay with a badge showing – non-disabled motorists are supposedly not allowed to park anywhere at all in the car park. The sign also displayed terms conflicting with other signs, and the penalty was inadequately highlighted.

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## Subject-verb distance signals heavy load ahead

When authors put distance between the subject of a sentence and its verb, they give their readers a hard time, mainly because there's a bigger load on the short-term memory.

Here's an example from a law firm's promotional booklet – ie, a document where the firm is trying to sell its services, in this case to headteachers. The subject-verb distance is not enormous at 28 words but the verb is in the passive voice, which tends to muddy the waters, and there's a fairly complicated structure with two parenthetical phrases ('if any' and 'amongst others'):

*'The view [subject] by some critics of the academy programme such as the teaching union NASUWT, amongst others, that academy schools will have minimal impact, if any, on pupil outcomes is not shared [verb] by a majority of primary and secondary academy school headteachers themselves.'*

This is followed by an even worse effort where there's a double passive-voice verb and no sign of any doer for the verb 'said' (actually the doer was 'headteachers').

*'Nearly a quarter of all academy conversions were said to be driven by the opportunity to raise pupil outcomes.'*

## Parking pirates savaged by Daily Mail

In a fine series of campaigning articles, the Daily Mail has savaged the vicious and predatory private-parking 'industry'. Readers of our news items and Pikestaff will be familiar with the main themes, including ambiguous signs and misleading documents, but the Mail goes into some new topics. These include firms targeting cancer sufferers by hanging around the hospital car parks they patrol, ticketing overstayers undergoing chemotherapy. Meanwhile, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency continues to act as the parking companies' back office by pumping out drivers data for a fee and saying they have 'reasonable cause' to get it. Many of the stories are available online:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2707810/Menace-new-parking-cowboys-Drivers-fined-100-overstaying-minutes-fast-food-chains-shops.html>

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2709056/Parking-cowboys-hit-cancer-victims-Now-scandal-disgraceful-fines-spreads-NHS-hospitals.html>

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<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2710175/Hospitals-send-parking-bully-boys-hound-sick-grieving-NHS-spends-cash-dodgy-debt-collectors.html>

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2710215/NEIL-HERRON-We-saw-rogue-clampers-Now-let-s-purge-parking-ticket-pirates.html>

The Daily Telegraph has also weighed in with an online guide to fighting parking tickets:

[http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/personalfinance/money-saving-tips/10995722/Do-you-have-to-pay-car-park-fines.html?utm\\_source=dlvr.it&utm\\_medium=twitter](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/personalfinance/money-saving-tips/10995722/Do-you-have-to-pay-car-park-fines.html?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter)

## Unclear consumer contract spells trouble for local council

Plain Language Commission has complained to a local council for producing one of the longest and most obscure consumer agreements of recent times. We allege it falls foul of the regulations requiring 'plain and intelligible language' in all standard-form consumer contracts.

The 27-page, 70-clause document comes from Wycombe District Council in Buckinghamshire. It purports to form a contract between the council and every individual who parks a vehicle in its car parks. In fact, no driver is ever likely to get a copy of the contract before supposedly becoming bound by it, as the contract is available only as a downloadable document from the council's website.

The council has written the contract after taking the strange decision to designate most of its car parks as private land and bring in a private contractor to run them. So instead of issuing statutory civil penalties for parking contraventions as a council normally would, the contractor is issuing 'standard charge tickets' for £60. The council says it will enforce these in court if people don't pay up, presumably alleging breach of contract and using the agreement as the basis of its claim.

However, following complaints from us and other anti-rip-off campaigners, the government's Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) has taken the rare step of suspending the council's access to drivers' details.



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## Slew of slatterns and sluts on slippery slope

Quite a media storm over whether Michael Fallon, the newly appointed male defence minister, called the Daily Telegraph's female columnist Bryony Gordon a slattern or a slut at a party in the Houses of Parliament a few years ago. 'Resign, you sexist brute' has been the cry from some on the moral high ground.

Gordon first wrote about the incident in 2010 without naming her accuser. At the party, it seems Fallon didn't recognize her and asked whether she knew the slut who wrote the Single Girl About Town column, which chronicled her activities between the sheets with every kind of Single or Married Man About Town. Yes, she said, it's me (or possibly, it's I, if she was trying to disarm him with grammatical virtue). A certain chill fell over the conversation at this point.

## Consumer contracts: how to complain if they're unclear

When a standard-form consumer contract is hard to understand, you're entitled to complain because the law requires it to be in 'plain, intelligible language'. This applies throughout the European Union. But where do you complain?

If it's a UK financial services contract, the best place is the Financial Conduct Authority, now that the Office of Fair Trading has been abolished. It's easy enough: there's information and a form to complete on the [FCA website](#).

## Ward's words

Ray Ward (Brain of Britain 2012) tests you with this quizzicality:

Is a mondegreen:

- a) a ballad
- b) a mishearing
- c) a type of lawn?

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## Rolling the credits

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### Answer to quiz:

#### Mondegreen

*b) a mishearing: The American writer Sylvia Wright said that when she was a girl her mother sang her the Scottish ballad ending 'They have slain the Earl o' Moray/And laid him on the green.' She thought the last line was 'And Lady Mondegreen', and suggested that such a misunderstanding be called a mondegreen, a term now immortalised in the online OED. Perhaps the best-known is a line from the Jimi Hendrix song Purple Haze, 'Excuse me while I kiss the sky', which nearly everybody (including me) thought was 'Excuse me while I kiss this guy' (and to add to the confusion, when Hendrix learned this he would sometimes sing it that way!). My favourite, however, is the story of the very respectable organisation whose members were shocked to see in the committee minutes that it would be presenting 'nudist plays'. Alas, all that was planned was new displays...*