

## Speaking to be understood

You may be used to writing in plain English, but can you speak plainly too? If not, you risk confusing or boring your listeners. Sarah Carr from the Plain Language Commission looks at the art of plain speaking.

There are two main types of spoken communication.

The first is planned, which includes speeches, presentations, video commentaries and audio recordings. Planned speech gives you time to prepare your piece. This is probably best done in note form rather than full sentences, as reading out a written piece sounds stilted and boring.

In the second type, spontaneous speech, you have to think on your feet, for example at public meetings, or in question-and-answer sessions.

Each of these situations brings its own challenges, especially in dealing with one of the main pitfalls of local government communication – tackling jargon.

### Jargon and her ugly sisters

Jargon tends to get a bad press, but it's good to use technical terms or 'shop talk' to communicate with others in the know. It's a valuable professional shorthand. You can also use it with laypeople, so long as you explain it clearly. Examples from local government include 'carbon reduction commitment', 'local strategic partnership' and 'modernisation agenda'.

In spontaneous speech, it's easy to forget that some of your audience may be unfamiliar with the terms. These are often made doubly impenetrable by being abbreviated – so watch your ALMOs, CAFs and SEAs.

But jargon's ugly sisters – gobbledegook and buzzwords – have no redeeming qualities. Communication is always clearer without them.

Gobbledegook – sometimes known as 'bureaucratese' or 'officialese' – is language that uses unnecessarily long words and complex sentence structures. Luckily, these features make it so hard to speak that only a rare few – such as Sir Humphrey Appleby, of 'Yes, Minister' – can manage it. For example:

"In view of the somewhat nebulous and inexplicit nature of your remit, and the arguably marginal and peripheral nature of your influence within the central deliberations and decisions within the political process, there could be a case for restructuring their action priorities in such a way as to eliminate your liquidation from their immediate agenda."

Buzzwords, or 'vogue words', are those fashionable words and phrases that everyone loves to hate but many still use. Examples of these include 'ballpark figure', 'window of opportunity' and 'pick the low-hanging fruit'.

Buzzwords often occur in spontaneous speech, because they're relatively informal. You may recall 'Drop the Dead Donkey's' Gus Hedges, whose novel phrases included:

- "There's just something I'd like to pop into your percolator, to see if it comes out brown."
- "Morning, talent base, are the afterburners on full thrust?"
- "We've got to downsize our sloppiness overload."

To make sure your audience understands you, ditch the buzzwords. You can easily replace them with words and phrases whose meaning is much clearer. And explain any technical jargon you need to use.

Try to think before you speak, bearing in mind constantly the audience you are talking to and what they will understand.

Encourage your audience to speak up if they don't understand anything you say. Or, if this is unrealistic, why not ask along someone assertive from outside the field – say a journalist or local activist – to challenge any unfamiliar language?

Consider providing a written glossary of technical terms – which you should still explain the first time you use them – for listeners to refer to later.

## **Speaking to be attended to**

Speaking in a way that your audience understands will go a long way towards capturing and keeping their attention. But what if you really want to put the stylistic icing on the cake?

The real experts in public speaking were the Greeks and Romans, whose political decisions were made through open debate. Many techniques from ancient oratory live on in public speaking these days. Here are some examples.

### **Tricolon or 'three clauses'**

This is a sentence with three clearly defined parts of equal length and increasing power. One example of this is Julius Caesar's:

"Veni, vidi, vici." – "I came, I saw, I conquered."

Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address uses this technique in the phrase:

"We cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow..."

And it appears again in his Second Inaugural Address:

"...with malice toward none, with charity toward all, with firmness in the right..."

### **Paralipsis or 'omission'**

Paralipsis is a relative of irony. The speaker brings up a subject by discounting it. At the 2004 Democratic Convention, Barack Obama said:

"Tonight, we gather to affirm the greatness of our nation, not because of the height of our skyscrapers, or the power of our military, or the size of our economy..."

Obama uses this technique, which contains a tricolon too, to remind us subtly how important it is that the US is highly developed.

### **Epistrophe or 'returning'**

This is where the speaker repeats a phrase at the end of a sentence for emphasis. In 'Pirates of the Caribbean', Jack Sparrow says:

"She's safe, just like I promised. She's all set to marry Norrington, just like she promised. And you get to die for her, just like you promised."

If adopting these techniques sounds rather daunting, don't worry: as the Roman politician Cato said:

"*Rem tene, verba sequentur.*" – "Know your subject, and the words will follow."

While Obama's oratory is all very well, the most important aspect of business speaking is ensuring that the content is relevant, and so interesting, to your audience. It's not without reason that 'Slate' magazine included the term 'Barocrates' in its dictionary of 'Obamaisms':

"an obscure Greek philosopher who pioneered a method of teaching in which sensitive topics are first posed as questions and then evaded".