Pikestaff

Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 27, May 2009

Supermarket giants defiantly uncompliant on clear language

Tesco's online grocery shopping service risks misleading shoppers through a clickable link next to many products that says: 'See Cheaper Alternatives!' But the 'alternatives' shown are often cheaper only by being smaller in quantity. For example, the 'cheaper alternative' to a 420g tin of baked beans costing 29p is a 220g tin costing 28p!

A careful, numerate shopper may spot that the quantity is different, but those in a rush (often the reason for shopping online) could easily buy something cheaper but less good value, so spending more overall. We've written to Tesco complaining about this wording. So far, silence.

In the meantime, Morrisons has been forced to withdraw a toy designed to help toddlers learn to read because some of the words were misspelled. The alphabet building blocks included a picture of an umbrella captioned 'UmberIIa' and a boat beside the word 'Yatch'. And instead of the usual X-ray or xylophone, the letter x block shows the interestingly punctuated 'X'mas tree'.

When dissatisfied customer Suzanne Toulson complained, the store initially refused to take the product off the shelves, saying they had ordered replacements but would allow the existing stock to run out. But Ms Toulson didn't give up: 'I was offered a refund three times, but I was more interested in getting these toys off the shelves because the spelling was wrong. There are only 26 words on the blocks, surely they can get them all right?'

Morrisons has since withdrawn the £3.22 toys, made in China, from all its UK stores. A spokesperson apologized for the mistakes; any customers who bought one are entitled to a refnud.

[Source: *Daily Mail*, 5 May 2009: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1177129/Bottom-class-Morrisons-stocks-spelling-blocks-say-U-UmberIIa.html]

Unclear sign lands council in a fine mess

Also facing the need to give refunds is Manchester City Council. It may have to repay £300,000 to motorists fined for driving in a bus lane – because a warning sign had a word missing. Derek Brocklehurst was fined £30 for driving in the lane, but dodged the penalty after successfully claiming the fine was unenforceable. Now he may have opened the way for more than 10,000 drivers to reclaim penalties paid to the council.

After receiving his ticket, the sharp-eyed minicab driver pointed out to officials that a sign allowing buses, cyclists and black cabs to use the lane lacked the word 'only'. He said:

> The regulations state that along with the blue circular sign indicating [with pictures] a bus, a cycle and a taxi, there should

also be an accompanying sign bearing the word 'only'. At Victoria, there was just a circular sign, so I wrote to the council to tell them. It's a technicality, but the sign was illegal. I have helped a number of other drivers do the same thing, and have printed off a standard letter available to anyone else who got a notice of fine before the sign was changed, to challenge it.

[Source: *Daily Mail*, 20 April 2009: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1172081/Council-faces-300-000-payout-motorists-fined-driver-points-bus-lane-warning-sign-word-missing.html]

Plain Language Commission news

You probably know about our editing, accreditation and training services, but did you know that we also provide readability reports?

What readability is
Readability refers to how easy text is to read and understand. The readability of a document depends on a range of factors, including content, structure, style, and layout and design.

Why reading ease matters
The average reading age in the UK is about 13 (according to data from the National Literacy Trust website), so if you're writing for the public, it's important to tailor public information to this level if you want most people to understand it. Of course, it's important too to treat the audience with respect: more on this below.

We can assess the readability of any text – printed or electronic. Maybe you'd like to check that your own organization's document is pitched at the right level. Or maybe it's your job to monitor other individuals' or organizations' writing and you'd like an objective assessment from language experts.

What we can provide
We will use specialist software to calculate the reading level of your text, and identify any problem areas. We'll explain clearly what we've done and why, and what the results mean.

We recognize that computerized tests have shortcomings. For example, they ignore aspects of readability such as use of appropriate headings, logical argument, lack of ambiguity, good grammar and good punctuation. As Martin Cutts notes in 'Writing by numbers' (see the Articles page of our website): 'Assessing a document's clarity on test results alone is therefore likely to be misleading.'

Discussion groups and one-to-one interviews are better than readability testing alone for assessing clarity, but are usually feasible only where cost and speed don't matter. As Martin observes: 'This means that in deciding whether a document is at an appropriate level for its audience, editorial judgment based on experience will be the best aid.' And that's exactly what we offer you to accompany the software results: a qualitative expert assessment of your document, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses.

How technical terms affect the report
If your document contains technical terms, these are bound to affect the computerized scores: it's an inevitable shortcoming of software. But our qualitative assessment is more sophisticated.

We believe it's often a good thing to include technical terms in documents for

the public, so long as you explain them well. And if you're writing for members of a profession or other group, technical terms are valuable shorthand, allowing you to express specialist concepts concisely.

How much does it cost?
It's hard to give set prices for readability reports in the way we do for our editing and accreditation services, as the cost depends not only on the size of your document but also on:

- its format (for example, Word documents are easier to test than PDFs)
- the type of document it is
- your needs: what you plan to use the report for, and so the type of information you'll find most useful. For example, we can focus on particular areas of the text, or aspects of language. We can even provide a comment from our research director if, for example, you'd like this for a press release or other publicity.

Do contact us if you'd like a quotation – you'll be pleasantly surprised by our charges for this rare and specialist service.

Somerset takes proper gander at LGA word list

There's more this month on the Local Government Association's publication of a list of 200 words that 'public bodies should not use if they want to communicate effectively with local people' (see our last 2 issues). In Somerset County Council's internal newsletter, *Proper Gander*, chief executive Alan Jones – a self-declared (tongue-in-cheek) 'fervent advocate of a holistic, paradigmatic shift towards more meaningful engagement' – puts forwards his objections to the list:

- The LGA is not right, in my view, that 'ambassador' is the same as 'leader', or that 'coterminous' means the same thing as 'all singing from the same hymn sheet'.
- When you turn to the language used by public sector organisations, many of the terms we use are valuable and have special meaning based on both an academic and practical understanding of our industry.
- Many more [terms], listed by the LGA, are understood across all sectors of the economy, across all continents. 'Capacity' in an organisational sense is not the same as 'ability'. 'Customers' are not just 'people' but part of a relationship with a provider of a service or product.
- Language itself is a living and evolving thing…As Stephen Fry, a reformed pedant, has pointed out, even Shakespeare invented lots of new words and was also fond of verbing his nouns.

Fry laments in his blog, *The New Adventures of Mr Stephen Fry* (http://www.stephenfry.com/blog/): 'Sadly, desperately sadly, the only people who seem to bother with language in public today bother with it in quite the wrong way.'

Linguistic link: Simply Understand

This website takes a different approach to clarifying government writing. Corinne Pritchard, who worked in the public sector when she left university 'way back' in 2005 (ever felt old?), writes:

> As time went on I noticed more and more a kind of institutional tendency to overcomplicate things. A letter requesting info would become a four-page treaty. Press releases had at least six paragraphs that just repeated the one before, in a slightly

different way. And that's just the really simple stuff! This tendency to overcomplicate was even more obvious, though, in the consultations government departments put out.

So every month, Pritchard collects 3 or 4 government consultation documents and asks people to vote for the one they want translated. She then boils them down to the key points, in plain language, so that people can tell the government what they really think: a 'labour of love', according to TheyWorkForYou.com.

Read more at http://www.simplyunderstand.com.

Readers ~~write~~ document that it can be OK to repurpose nouns

In last month's *Pikestaff*, we included various examples of *Daily Telegraph* readers criticizing verbs being used as verbs. Peter Neill emailed to point out that verbed nouns aren't necessarily a bad thing:

> This phenomenon is hardly new (though I concede that some of the newer examples are particularly ugly). But we paint things, we glue, we concrete. We film and tape, we grass over, we brick up. Is it just that an unfamiliar usage sounds odd until it has bedded into the language? And I agree that it's perhaps not best practice to invent a word when a perfectly serviceable one already exists.

> As I type this on a keyboard that has no connection with metal type I'm reminded that in a constantly evolving language there may be rights and wrongs, but very few absolutes.

And Nina Woodson emailed to say: 'Here in the U.S., "repurpose" is a not uncommon verb', highlighting that accepted English usage varies between cultures too.

It seems to us that the main problem arises when nouns are used as verbs despite there being perfectly good (usually shorter) verbs already – like 'to departure' instead of 'to depart'. Also, it's interesting that abstract nouns seem to make poorer verbs than concrete ones (like Peter's DIY examples).

Nick Wright of Editor Software offers the tip that Microsoft Word's spellchecker picks up most of the unusual verbs, though StyleWriter catches more, as well as nominalizations (covered in our tip last month).

Another factor that may make some verbed nouns jar is being intransitive (unable to take a direct object) but used transitively (with a direct object). In fact, we realized that one of the examples that the *Telegraph* quoted as a verbed noun – 'Arrive me' – isn't actually this (that would be 'Arrival me') but an intransitive verb used transitively. This is another feature of modern English usage, for example 'to impact something' instead of the conventional British English 'to impact on something'. Do you have any more examples? If so, please send them to us at pikestaff@clearest.co.uk.

Tip of the month: do your best to PC the wood from the trees

The issue
Two years ago (in *Pikestaff 4*), our tip of the month looked at using inclusive language. As we explained then, we're all in favour of avoiding inequality in writing – not least as there's research to show that language powerfully

influences people's attitudes, behaviour and perceptions (try Googling 'Sapir–Whorf hypothesis'): further evidence that language really does matter.

But it's easy to get carried away with political correctness and end up making unnecessary changes to language. Of course, it's tricky to get the balance right – perhaps impossible, since 'right' is inevitably subjective. So this month we present a couple of examples that we've recently been faced with, and tell you what we advised and why. Do you think we got the balance right?

Example 1

A council asked for our thoughts on the metaphorical use of 'purdah'. It had recently written that its publicity activity had entered a 'purdah' period because of the need to be politically impartial, with local government elections coming up. A member of staff complained that it was an insensitive use of this religious word, especially since purdah in its literal sense applies to women only. We advised:

> You have used 'purdah' in a figurative way for 'secrecy'. It is often used like this in the run-up to the Budget speech, eg 'The Chancellor has gone into purdah', 'pre-Budget purdah'. The figurative use is therefore extending the original meaning to men as well as women. Our Oxford dictionary gives a typical figurative use concerning female dress fashion: 'In the thirties and seventies, legs went into purdah.' It does not offer any warnings about such figurative use as being potentially offensive. The British National Corpus also contains several such examples, including some that apply specifically to men, eg 'Nonetheless, after about eighteen months in technological purdah, he emerged, having resolved most of the equipment problems.'

> The dictionaries (eg, *Encarta*) give purdah as always lower case. *Encarta* says purdah means 'the Hindu or Islamic custom of keeping women fully covered with clothing and apart from the rest of society' or 'a screen or curtain used in Hindu communities to keep women out of view' or 'a veil worn by Hindu or Muslim women as part of purdah'. So purdah is a matter of custom among some Hindus and Muslims and the word is not a strictly religious term. Encarta does not give any figurative senses in which the word is used, nor does it offer any warnings about such use.

> The complainant is perhaps being over-sensitive on behalf of others. In her book *Talking About People: a guide to fair and accurate language*, Maggio suggests that no alternative is needed for 'purdah', as adopting Islamic dress is in fact 'often a political statement by which the wearer rejects the sexual exploitation of women'. So its use in figurative senses is not derogatory because to many people purdah is a positive thing.

Example 2

A customer sent us a job application form for editing and accreditation with the Clear English Standard. In the section on monitoring equal opportunities, the form used initial capital letters for 'Black', 'White' and 'Mixed' (as skin colours), wherever the words appeared in the sentence. They explained that although colours would – unlike nationalities – not normally be capitalized, they were following the style in the census and were concerned that to capitalize nationalities but not colours may suggest that the organization saw colour as less important.

We replied:

> We can't accept the use of initial caps on the terms 'mixed', 'white' and 'black' in documents to which we give accreditation except (obviously) where these terms start a sentence. Some dictionaries give initial caps to these words as a variation but the norm is lower case. We have followed this in the documents we have edited and accredited for several London boroughs. Terms like 'Asian', 'Polish', 'Kurdish', 'Hispanic', 'Jewish' and 'Caribbean' take initial caps because they derive from a continent, country, religion, language or region and this has long been conventional. We know that conventions can change but in the UK it is still not conventional to cap 'white' etc. For example, in *The Times* on 1 May, the page 1 story and the page 2 leader both used 'whites' and 'blacks' in lower case. Capping is not to do with importance, relative or otherwise.

> The *Cambridge Guide to English Usage*, which draws on 2 big corpuses and many dictionaries and style guides (and thus is strongly evidence based), says: 'Data from both CCAE and BNC [corpuses] show that **black** resists capitalization, even when paired with other ethnic descriptors, as in *blacks and Mexicans*. Newspaper coverage of events in South Africa also uses lower case.'

> Terms like 'male', 'female', 'transgender', 'heterosexual', 'homosexual', 'bisexual', 'gay' and 'lesbian' are also lower case, as is 'deaf', though there are lobbies to get initial caps accepted for some or all of these.

The ants are my friends, they're blowin' in the wind

Following our article last month on mondegreens (when someone mishears a phrase that sounds very like another), Steven King wrote to tell us about a website dedicated to mishearings of the lyrics to Bob Dylan songs: www.punkhart.com/dylan/lyrics/mondegreens.html. But notching up over 100 mondegreens seems not to have harmed the 68-year-old mumbler, whose new album, *Together Through Life*, recently shot to number one in the charts. The fact that only very aged people buy albums will have helped.

In my (public) house are many kitchens

Dining out, our cookery editor spotted the following in a pub menu's small print:

> These dishes are suitable for vegetarians, whilst we take care to preserve the integrity of our vegetarian products, we must advise that these products are handled in a multi-kitchen environment.

This sentence ain't suitable for much. It takes little care to preserve the integrity of sound syntax (it's a run-on sentence) and has been written in a multi-rhubarb style. We must advise that the first comma needs to be a full stop (or possibly semi-colon or dash). And the whole thing could be said so much more simply:

> These dishes are suitable for vegetarians. We take care to make sure they don't come into contact with meat and fish, but we do prepare everything in the same kitchen.

Contribute

Have you recently come across any rampant rhubarb or troublesome tripe? If so, we'd love to hear from you. Email us with your views, examples, and ideas for future stories at pikestaff@clearest.co.uk.

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

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