

pkestaff

PLAIN
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COMMISSION

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November 2013

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Plain language finally defined – but is this really the last word?

After several years of cogitation, the International Plain Language Working Group has come up with a single-sentence definition or description of a plain-language communication, the idea being to unify the many attempts at a definition put forward during the last 30 years. The sentence aims to cover wording, structure, purpose, usability and design (eg, layout).

The near-final draft was announced at the Plain Language InterNational Association (PLAIN) conference held in Vancouver in October. The proposed text is:

'A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.'

At Plain Language Commission, we think the definition is good but 'that information' forms a clunky climax to the three-part list. It could perhaps finish:

'... and use what they learn.'

Authors in different parts of the world are expected to retain or omit the serial or Oxford commas (after 'structure' and 'find') depending on their local style preferences.

The Working Group is made up of members from PLAIN, the Center for Plain Language, and Clarity, plus several others from around the world. To read more about how the definition was developed, [click here to download the Clarity newsletter number 64](#).

Newsman bites back at fierce private parking practices

Now that an army of rampant private-parking companies are dishing out more than two million non-statutory fines a year throughout Britain – often at £100 a time, and sometimes based on unclear signs and cunningly worded terms and conditions

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that motorists don't see or understand – it's inevitable that some of the people they sting will be rich, famous and blessed with good press contacts.

One such is Peter Sissons, the 71-year-old former newscaster and *Question Time* presenter. After being ticketed in Sevenoaks, Sissons wasted no time in beefing about it to the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph* (26 Oct).



Peter Sissons

Sissons was ticketed at a private car park near his local Homebase store. Having parked in a three-hour bay, he returned after 35 minutes to find the £90 ticket, imposed for allegedly moving his car during that time. This 'offence' apparently breached one of the rules being enforced by the operator, Smart Parking.

Sissons confronted Smart Parking's attendant, who told him he 'monitored the position of the tyre valves' on all parked cars so he could see whether the vehicles had been moved. However, the budding Poirot could not show any photographic evidence of his detective skills. Sissons said, 'This was nothing more than a lie. I had not moved my car. The fine isn't what worried me. It's the deception.'

[Read the full story – click here](#)

Warnings called for as sugar debate gets spicy

Our story in Pikestaff 64 about the huge quantity of refined sugar that healthy-food braggart Nestlé pumps into its cans of San Pellegrino lemonade – 32g, since you ask – was wrong in one respect. We said this was about twice as many teaspoonfuls as go into Coke. In fact, it's a similar amount to what's in a can of ordinary Coke and Pepsi. What fuddled us was not, as you may think, sugar addiction, but Nestlé wrongly informing us that one teaspoon of sugar represented 1.8g (it's usually considered to be 4g). No matter, our main facts were correct.



Mary Berry's recipe for Angel Food Cake in the Great British Bake Off includes 670g of caster sugar

We said the link between added refined sugar and the obesity epidemic was now so clear that it was time to state the sugar quantity much more prominently on all products, instead of putting it in a reference position along with other fine detail. We argued that consumers should be able to see the sugar content immediately.

Since then, the media has been awash with stories about how the national waistline is being expanded by the sugar that manufacturers add to food and drink. The *Sunday Times* (25 Sept) labelled the UK 'the fat man of Europe', with 23% of the adult population obese, compared with half that figure in France. It said eight out of ten

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doctors in a Credit Suisse global survey regarded sugar consumption as linked to the development of obesity and type II diabetes.

The recommended maximum daily consumption of added and intrinsic sugar is 90g for a woman and 120g for a man. At that rate, a single can of Nestlé's San Pellegrino Aranciata contains 40% of a woman's daily allowance. A large Starbucks Coffee Frappuccino contains 61.6g, or 68% of a woman's daily allowance.

[Read the full story – click here](#)

Clear communicators will become a single profession, conference told

Under the slogan 'Plain language advances', a three-day conference of about 200 plain-language professionals from around the world has taken place near Stanley Park in Vancouver, Canada. The event, staged by Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN, for short), promoted the idea that communicators of many kinds should use well-established, evidence-based techniques to clarify the information that people need in their daily lives.

Neil James, vice-president of PLAIN and executive director of the Plain English Foundation in Australia, said technological change would gradually compel writers, editors, typesetters, designers and proofreaders to converge into a single profession, perhaps under the banner of 'clear communications'. And he said the ocean of information on the internet, much of it poorly written, would create a strong demand for qualified professionals who could make it more understandable and usable. ([Click here for a PDF of Neil James' slides](#) (3.7MB), which gives the gist of his speech. Other presentations are available through <http://www.plain2013.org/>)



Neil James

A new university-backed qualification could soon help achieve that goal. Karine Nicolay, from PLAIN's International Plain Language Working Group, said a postgraduate course in clear communications would be trialled in April. It will then be launched in Belgium in November 2014 to coincide with the next conference of Clarity, the group of (mainly) lawyers who advocate the use of plain language in the law.

Students will take the course online. The basic modules will be in English but project work will be in the student's preferred language. Several universities have provided the academic muscle needed to set up the course, and the European Union has provided some much-needed seed money. For more details, see: <http://icclear.net>.

[Read the full story – click here](#)

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Local council snouts in parking trough

In fresh calls to tame the growing scourge of parking penalties on local-authority owned land – yes, councils have their snouts in the trough as well as private firms – a House of Commons Select Committee has issued a damning report on local authorities' shady practices over parking:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/transport-committee/news/parking-substantive/>

As a result, Plain Language Commission, which has highlighted the opaque wording on parking signs from time to time – or ad nauseam, depending on your point of view – (see 'Articles' on our website), will be writing to the prime minister to ask why local authority bosses who continue to flout the law in the ways shown in the report have not been prosecuted.

Councils in England and Wales issue about eight million parking penalty notices a year, so it's become a big moneymaker for many of them. The report says every local authority should publish an annual parking report to show precisely where their parking revenues come from and how any income is being used. Launching the report from its recent inquiry into local authority parking enforcement in England, Louise Ellman, chair of Transport Committee said:

'Parking enforcement is necessary for managing demand on the roads[;] however, the use of parking charges and fines specifically to raise revenue by local authorities is neither acceptable NOR LEGAL [our caps].' (The illegality has been well established for many years, as was reiterated in a recent judicial review of Barnet Council's revenue-raising practices.)

[Read the full story – click here](#)

Tom Vernon: 1939–2013

Martin Cutts writes: In 1980, the broadcaster Tom Vernon – who has died in France at the age of 74 – wrote a short book for the National Consumer Council (NCC) called *Gobbledegook – a review of official forms and leaflets and how to improve them*.

This was partly inspired by the birth of the Plain English Campaign in 1979 and, as one of its co-founders, I had the pleasure of working closely with Tom and providing him with some of the raw material for the book, in which he complained of the 'monstrous documents' inflicted on the population.

The book spearheaded the NCC's evangelism for plain language, which culminated in its efforts to get a plain-language law passed in Parliament and the publication of an influential booklet *Plain Language for Lawyers* (1984) by its legal officer Richard Thomas. [Read the full story – click here](#)

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A fowl-up by any other name

The Japanese fridge-making company Fukushima Industries, of Osaka, is considering a new name for its mascot because the current one does not translate well into English. Though this is not the worst thing to happen to things called Fukushima in recent years – the tsunami and subsequent radiation release take that honour – the mascot, designed to look like a red-footed winged chicken (and why not?), glories in the name Fukuppy.



Govian grammar tests may stretch teachers too

The English tests designed for pupils up to the age of 14 introduced by Michael Gove, the education secretary, demand more knowledge than many teachers possess, declares Bas Aarts, professor of English linguistics at University College London. 'Many teachers feel uncomfortable with grammar and don't know how to use it formally,' he told *The Times* (4 Oct).

Professor Aarts and his team are designing an online tool, Englicious, which will give schools access to a large database of the English language, based on millions of examples of expressions from text messages to BBC recordings.

Perhaps the professor will find a copy of a new grammar book in his Christmas stocking. Just published, Harry Ritchie's *English for the Natives*, which aims to demystify grammar for people who have English as their mother tongue, has been selling well.

[Read the full story – click here](#)

Sainsbury's bans customer for colourful language

The supermarket Sainsbury's has banned a housebound 73-year-old with osteoporosis from using its home delivery service after she called one of its drivers a 'coloured gentleman' during a phone call. Marian Burke had telephoned her local store to complain about items missing from her £80 order, for what she said was the tenth consecutive week. Asked to identify the driver, she apparently said, 'I don't know his name, but he was a lovely coloured gentleman.'

Burke, who is looked after by a Kenyan carer, said, 'Then all hell broke loose. The

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man on the other end of the phone called me a racist and said they'd never take another order from me.'

The term 'coloured' to refer to people who are not 'white' (whatever 'white' means) is regarded by some as offensive today. But in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, when Ms Burke was in her prime, it might well have been thought polite and respectful – certainly compared with the more hateful epithets in common use at the time.

As this story broke, the BBC's Today programme was busy playing Lou Reed's best-known song *Walk on the Wildside* (1972) in homage to the dead performer. Reed's refrain must have caused the folk at Sainsbury's to cover their sensitive little ears:

*'And the colored girls go
Doo do doo, doo do doo, doo do doo.'*

[Read the full story – click here](#)

In/out EU referendum question: we help

The UK's Electoral Commission has published its report on the proposed wording that voters will face in the nationwide referendum that may take place in 2016 about whether the UK should remain in the European Union.

The Electoral Commission consulted Plain Language Commission for our professional opinion about the various proposed wordings, and our work is quoted in the report.

The Electoral Commission's report gives an insight into how much people know about European membership and how confident they are about voting on such a big issue. It also shows what factors the Electoral Commission weighed in the balance when putting its recommendations to Parliament. It proposes two wordings and leaves the choice to Parliament.

[Read the full story – click here](#)

Award for Martin Cutts at plain-language conference

The banquet that closed the 2013 Plain Language InterNational Association (PLAIN) conference in Vancouver was a special occasion for Plain Language Commission's Martin Cutts, who was presented with the Christine Mowat Plain Language Achievement Award.

Giving the address, Ruth Baldwin (PLAIN's treasurer) described Cutts as an international ambassador for plain language for many years, who had befriended

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and influenced plain-language advocates around the world:

'We are particularly happy to be presenting this award here, in Canada, at PLAIN's 20th anniversary because [his] early work... helped to lay the foundation for Canada's plain-language movement in the late 1980s. His nomination came from Canada and was supported by members from around the world.'



Christine Mowat (left) presents the award to Martin Cutts

'We continue to be inspired by his professionalism, his capacity to expand thinking about plain language, his willingness to mentor others, and his long-term commitment to making public information accessible.'

The award is endowed by Christine Mowat, a distinguished figure in the clear-communications field and author of *A Plain Language Handbook for Legal Writers*. She is the founder – and was for 30 years the president – of Wordsmith Associates, a writing and training company operating from Edmonton, Calgary and Vancouver. Before starting her company in 1980, Mowat taught English for 13 years in Kenya, England and Canada.

Readers write...

Nick Coe alerts us to a comma whose odd position explains that chicken is made from chicken. This valuable, er, nugget, of information emanates from the packaging on a Waitrose sandwich, as follows:

DID YOU KNOW?

The chicken in your sandwich is made from chicken, from carefully selected British farms.

Nick remarks: 'It's a pity that Waitrose do not select their commas with equal care.' True enough, and it's still a strange bit of English even when the comma is omitted. No doubt there's some wonderful regulatory reason why Waitrose couldn't have just said: 'The chicken in your sandwich comes from carefully selected British farms.'

Ray Ward's quizzicalities

What is the name of the figure of speech in which a part is used for the whole, as in 'face' for a person or 'wheels' for a car?

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Rolling the credits

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Answer to quiz:

synecdoche (pronounced: sign-eck-doh-key, with the stress on eck)