Standards, training, certification:
An update from the International Plain Language Federation

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International

eJOURNAL

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Onwards and upwards

**Margrethe Kvarenes
PLAIN President**

I have borrowed the mantra of Christopher Balmford, project leader of the group of experts developing the ISO standard for plain language: "Onwards and upwards!" After having participated in our recent global conference, Access for All – Plain Language is a Civil Right, I see this mantra as the perfect description of the spirit of the field of plain language. We are growing. In size, in scope, in knowledge, and in engagement. At our May conference over 400 participants from close to 40 countries, shared their practices, dilemmas, success stories, and concerns.

PLAIN in the years to come

Taking all the input into account, I see that PLAIN is right on target with the new strategic plan that we will present to our members for a vote during our upcoming Annual General Meeting.

The plan is based on your input through a member survey and one-to-one interviews. It outlines goals within 6 areas:

Regional coordination and development: Through our new committee we will build geography- and language-based regional networks for plain language. Part of this goal will be to cultivate "member ambassadors" in a range of countries. If you're interested in becoming a member ambassador, look out for our invitation!

Membership: Growing international membership remains at the heart of PLAIN's reason for being. Developing more member benefits will be our tool to achieve our ambitious goals.

Conferences: We plan to offer both in-person and virtual conferences, but also provide more informal networking opportunities for our members.

Finance and governance: We are continuing to professionalize our operations so that we can become more strategy-focused and targeted in our work.

Communications: We will make improvements to our website and member portal, provide possibilities for members to connect, and develop a communication plan to provide our members with regular, helpful information.

Professional development: Within the context of the International Plain Language Federation, we will work towards implementing the ISO standard and facilitate professional development for members through several avenues.

I look forward to formalizing the plan and putting it into action with my fellow PLAIN board members.

Thank you, Neil!

I also want to thank Dr. Neil James, the former president of PLAIN who actually brought PLAIN's first strategic plan to life. What a strategic move, the plan has served us well! During the past years Neil has graciously shaped this e-journal as the Founding Editor. Together with PLAIN board members he tailored the content to cover plain language in several languages and through stories from across the world. The journal now is a main member asset and a solid pillar in reaching one of PLAIN's major goals – to make plain language more and more international. Thank you, Neil. And welcome to our new editor, Hannah Sapunor-Davis. You will do well!

Margrethe Kvarenes

PLAIN President

Introduction

Hannah Sapunor-Davis
Managing Editor
PLAIN e-journal

At our recent online conference, Access for All: Plain Language is a Civil Right, board members of the International Plain Language Federation shared the ongoing work of this umbrella organization for plain language. Some highlights of these discussions include:

- how the work on the ISO standard is progressing, and how the working group has asked the International Standardization Organization to use "you" in the standard, which has never been done in an ISO standard before

- how the Federation is exploring ways to help countries implement the standard once it's adopted

- how feedback from PLAIN's members about training and resources has led the Federation to explore the possibilities of guidelines and programs for training and a library of resources for plain language professionals.

The Federation's current priorities are standards, training, and certification. We wanted to highlight all of the impressive progress that has been made so far in this issue of the e-journal. Furthermore, this issue will be made available to everyone, not just our members, in the hopes to promote the international advancement of plain language for everyone.

To get us started, Chair? **Vera Gergely** sets us up with an overview of the Federation, including the why, how, and what of it all. For those of us (myself included) with little knowledge of how international standards are developed, **Christopher Balmford's** article about the mechanics behind this process is enlightening.

Then, we have some updates from various Federation committees. **Gael Spivak** discusses how this standard can be implemented at the national level, and how it might look different around the world.

In effort to professionalize plain language, the Certification Committee has been hard at work researching the most effective and sustainable way towards certification, as outlined by **Neil James**.

And how could someone potentially reach certification? Training is one approach, and **David Lipscomb** reviews a few methods and resources that the Training Committee has examined so far, along with their next steps.

But before all that, there was the definition, a cornerstone to international plain language. **Annetta Cheek** gives an overview of the detailed work that went into sculpting this short and seemingly simple text, which has been a critical tool for a lot of us.

And just in case you need more convincing that a standard for plain language is something to get behind, **Cheryl Stephens**, co-founder of PLAIN, shares some fascinating neuroscience behind reading and processing information.

And finally, we have 3 perspectives from our members who are on the frontlines of the plain language movements in Europe. **Lorenzo Carpanè** (Italy), **Natalia Nechaeva** and **Emma Kairova** (Russia), and **Uwe Roth** (Germany) share the challenges of advocating for plain language in their respective countries while also discussing the progress made towards reaching a common understanding and expectation of clear communication.

We hope to highlight more work and perspectives like theirs from our members around the world. Do you have something to share about the state of plain language in your country or language? Be sure to keep your eye out for calls for contributions for future issues or send an email to Plain.

International
PLAIN LANGUAGE
f e d e r a t i o n

Last but not least, I would like to take a moment to say thank you to our intrepid Editor-in-Chief Neil James, who got this e-journal off the ground along with Joanna Richardson in 2019. Thanks to his knowledge, network and intuition for useful content, the journal is now one of PLAIN's major membership assets, documenting and spreading information about plain language across the globe. I will be taking over his duties now, and I only hope that I can fill his shoes. I know that with the generosity and enthusiasm from our members, it will be a pleasure.

Hannah Sapunor-Davis is a freelance editor and English teacher, who is originally from the United States and is based in Germany. She is currently the chair of the Communications Committee on the PLAIN Board of Directors.

Thank you to sponsors of the Access for All: Plain Language is a Civil Right conference

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G R O U P

Vera Gergely

Chair, International Plain Language Federation

The International Plain Language Federation was founded in 2007 by the Plain Language Association International (PLAIN), the Center for Plain Language, and Clarity International. Originally, it was called the International Plain Language Working Group, but it adopted the name of a Federation in 2011.

Why was the Federation founded?

The Federation's underlying mission is to professionalize plain language around the world. There are 2 key aspects to this goal.

Let's look at "professionalization" first. Plain language started out as a movement advocating for citizens' rights and reduced bureaucracy. It emphasized benefits for the public and people's right to understand.

These arguments still hold true, but recent decades have seen a shift toward understanding plain language not as a movement (or not just as a movement) but more as a profession.

The International Plain Language Federation: An overview

Why is this distinction important?

- **Movements** are usually run by volunteers, who tend to work for free and are not measured against any standard.
- **Professions,** on the other hand, have professionals who have to undergo some form of training and may need to be certified. Their work is measured against standards, and they definitely do not work for free.

The 3 organizations set up the Federation because they realized it would be better to work together on these issues – all the while involving the wider plain language community.

Second, I want to emphasize the phrase "around the world". The international field of plain language was historically dominated by English-language practitioners. The conferences are usually held in English, our journals are in English, and I myself am writing these words in English even though it's not my native language. Yet most people on Earth use a language other than English.

We need to make sure that other languages and cultures are equally represented and considered when developing plain language as a profession.

How does the Federation work?

Under its constitution, the Federation's only members are the 3 founding organizations (the Center, Clarity, and PLAIN). Individuals cannot be members of the Federation.

The Federation is governed by a board, which is made up of the following representatives:

- the presidents/chairs of the 3 member organizations
- a second representative from each of the 3 organizations
- the chair, appointed by the 3 presidents/chairs (previous chairs of the Federation were Dr. Neil James and Dr. Annetta Cheek, both of whom are still involved today)
- 6 country and language representatives appointed by the previous 6 board members and the chair, to make the board truly international. (These are currently from Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, Philippines, South Africa, and the United States.)

The Federation is not a legally incorporated organization, and it is fully run by volunteers on its board and committees.

The Federation is essentially a mechanism for its member organizations to work on issues that are best accomplished together. It does not oversee the 3 member organizations. The 3 presidents decide annually what the Federation should be working on the next year.

A key principle is that the Federation may not compete with its member organizations and may not knowingly harm the organizations' or their members' interests. For instance, the Federation will not offer training to the public because then it would be competing with plain language practitioners – although it might in the future offer guidelines for training.

Equally importantly, the Federation is always actively looking for feedback from the plain language community. This can take various forms:

- more than 60 volunteers from the 3 member organizations contributing their expertise
- regular reports on our work at plain language conferences
- articles in the Clarity Journal or the PLAIN e-journal, such as in this issue.

We're always eager to listen, so please tell us what you think about the Federation's work.

What is the Federation working on?

The underlying agenda for the Federation was set out in the Clarity Journal 64 published in 2010, also known as the "options paper". If you haven't read this, I strongly encourage you to do so. The options paper explores the most prominent questions relating to 7 priorities:

1. Defining plain language
2. Setting international standards
3. Training practitioners
4. Grounding plain language in research
5. Advocating for plain language
6. Certifying practitioners
7. Strengthening our institutional structure.

Our first step was defining plain language. We needed common agreement on what plain language is before doing anything else. At the time, there were dozens of slightly (or wildly) differing definitions, so we needed to reach a consensus.

Since 2014, we have had a commonly accepted definition of plain language, available on the Federation's website along with translations into many other languages.

The next step was setting international standards. While a definition was crucial, we needed a more detailed understanding of what makes a document plain. That's why the Federation initiated a plain language standard through the International Standards Organization (ISO), which is due to be published at the end of 2021.

The definition of plain language serves as the cornerstone of the standard. The standard was built on the expertise of 50+ international plain language experts who formed the ISO Working Group, as well as feedback from the wider community.

With the standard soon to be published, the member organizations decided that the Federation should next focus on 3 areas in our agenda:

1. localization and implementation of the standard
2. training
3. certification.

To progress this, we put out a call for volunteers among the members of the Center, Clarity, and PLAIN. We already had one committee working on the standard, and now we have formed 3 more committees to investigate and work on the new areas. You can read more about their work in the following articles in this journal.

The Federation has accomplished a lot since 2007, but we still have a long way to go to achieve "professionalization of plain language around the world." However, the number of volunteers and the enthusiasm they bring makes me confident that we're on the right track. I'd like to thank everyone serving on the committees, on the board, and on the ISO Working Group. We couldn't do it without you.

Vera Gergely embarked on the ambitious task of introducing plain language in Hungary in 2014. Since then, they have worked as a freelancer, offering plain language editing and training to companies. Vera also wrote a comprehensive guide on how to write clearly in Hungarian. Vera has chaired the International Plain Language Federation since 2020. Vera also serves on the Drafting Committee of the ISO Working Group 11 for international plain language standards, is a Board member of PLAIN International, and a country representative for Clarity International. They love bouldering and reading fantasy and science-fiction. Vera holds a master's degree in economics.

1. Excerpt from the Federation's recently adopted Guidance for Volunteers

2. See Christopher Balmford's paper Plain Language: beyond a 'movement' for more arguments on this issue.

A language-neutral plain language standard — A tool for us all

Christopher Balmford
Board Member, International Plain Language Federation

Project Leader, ISO Plain Language Project and Convenor, ISO Working Group 11

All being well, the International Organization for Standardization (known as ISO) will release a plain language standard in 2021. ISO has over 22,500 standards that are written and maintained by volunteer international experts. The experts are appointed by ISO's 165 members, and each ISO member is a national standards body – for example, Japanese Industrial Standards Committee and Standards Australia.

The ISO standard is based on the International Plain Language Federation's widely accepted definition of plain language. In this way, the standard will help broaden people's understanding of plain language, and help people everywhere produce documents that work for their intended audience.

Plain language experts

ISO's plain language project was initiated by the International Plain Language Federation, which PLAIN, Clarity, and the Center for Plain Language formed in 2007.

In 2019, the Federation proposed to Standards Australia that it develop an international plain language standard. Standards Australia decided this would best be developed internationally. So, in June 2019, Standards Australia proposed to ISO that it develop the standard. ISO approved that proposal.

The Federation has a blog telling the story of the journey to the plain language standard and explaining how you can be involved. The blog includes 7 videos of the standards-related sessions from the October 2020 Access for All conference. Videos about our progress from the May 2021 Access for All conference should be available soon.

Plain language experts – including more than 10 PLAIN members – are on the ISO working group developing the plain language standard. Those experts were appointed by their country's national standards body.

ISO has also appointed PLAIN, Clarity, the Center, and the International Institute of Information Design as a Liaison Organization to the working group. This is something of a big deal. Each Liaison Organization can appoint a representative who can:

- attend and speak at meetings to express the Liaison Organization's views

- see, and comment on, drafts of the standard.

To help a Liaison Organization form its views on drafts of the standard, it can seek input from its members. PLAIN, Clarity, and the Center did this during 2020. (The IIID had not then been appoin **of a multi-part standard**

The plain language standard to be released in 2021 will be Part 1 of a likely multi-part standard. Part 1 will cover high-level matters, so it can be language neutral. So far, people speaking more than 17 languages – from every continent (except Antarctica) – have reviewed the standard to make sure it will work in their language.

Later parts of the standard will likely focus on particular languages and on particular types of documents and communication.

A standard for "guidance"

Part 1 of the plain language standard will be a standard for "guidance", which places it in the middle of ISO's 3 levels of standards. Those levels are:

- At the "bottom" are technical reports, which provide information only.

- In the "middle" are standards for guidance, which use the word "should" to guide users towards what the standard aims to help them achieve.

- At the "top" are mandatory standards, which is probably what most of us think of when we think about a standard. These standards use the word "shall" to direct users on what they must do if they are to comply. (To be sure, that "shall" causes pain to many a plain language practitioner.) In the ISO world, these mandatory "shall" standards are known as being "normative" (see Wikipedia).

An example of a mandatory standard is the one about paper sizes (A2, A3, A4, and so on). Its mandatory nature helps, for example, manufacturers of:

- printers and photocopiers to make machines that will handle the relevant sized paper

- paper to make paper that will fit all the complying machines.

Although the plain language standard may evolve to become a mandatory standard, for now it will be a standard for guidance. Any ISO project to make the plain language standard mandatory would go through the same expert-driven process that the current standard for guidance is going through.

The localization committee

To help ease the way for the pending standard, the Federation has a standard localization committee. The committee, chaired by Gael Spivak of Canada, is seeking to work with plain language practitioners in as many countries as possible to help them engage with their national standards body and localize the standard to their languages and culture.

You can find out who else from your country or language is already involved in this work, and inquire about joining the team, by contacting Gael Spivak directly. You can also apply to be directly involved in developing the standard through your country's national standards body.

A tool for us all

The aim of a plain language standard is to provide a tool for plain language practitioners everywhere:

- with the credibility of ISO, its 165 national standards body members, and its 22,500 plus standards.

- with the credibility of being developed with input and support from many plain language experts who are members of PLAIN, Clarity, and the Center.

A useful model of the tool the standard might become is the United States Plain Writing Act, which requires Federal government agencies to write in plain language. The Act was signed into law by President Barack Obama in 2010.

Last year, at the Access for All conference, participants celebrated the 10-year anniversary of the Act. People working in US government agencies reported that the Act has empowered them, helped legitimize plain language in the eyes of the skeptics, and generally made their work easier.

Here's hoping plain language practitioners everywhere will be saying similar things about ISO's plain language standard when they celebrate its 10-year anniversary in 2031.

Christopher Balmford is a sea-kayaker, a former lawyer, an entrepreneur, and a plain language advocate and practitioner. He is the convenor and project leader of ISO's TC 37 Working Group 11, which is developing a standard for plain language. Christopher is a past-president of the international plain language organization Clarity. In 1999, he founded the consultancy Words and Beyond, which provides plain language training, cultural change, and document rewriting services. In 2000, he founded the online legal document provider Cleardocs, which Thomson Reuters acquired in 2011.

Localizing the ISO standard

Gael Spivak

Plain language writer and editor

The Federation's Localization and Implementation Committee is focused on helping countries around the world adopt the ISO standard for plain language.

Once an ISO standard is published, countries can choose to use that standard in various ways. They can:

- endorse it but not adopt it as one of their national standards

- adopt it using one of several options.

Endorsing a standard

If a country endorses the plain language standard, they can claim that they endorse an ISO standard. However, some countries do not give the same status to an ISO standard as they do to a national standard.

For example, if Canada does not adopt the standard but only endorses it, Canada can refer to it as an ISO standard (and can say it's a good standard). But they will not say it's a

Canadian standard for use in Canada, nor will they publish it as a Canadian standard.

To make it a Canadian standard, it has to go through the Canadian system for that. That system includes having consumer representation on the national standard's working group and consulting the public about the national standard.

Adopting a standard

ISO lays out the mechanism to adopt standards in the publication ISO/IEC Guide 21. Here is a brief summary of ISO's process.

When a country adopts a standard, it becomes a standard of that country, and it can do one of the following (using the ISO term for each):

- identical: adopt it as it is

- modified: adopt it with editorial and substantive changes, or localize it to their own country

- not equivalent: adopt a portion of it.

There are requirements for each option. These are some examples of how it can work:

- If a country adopts the standard as identical, it is allowed to make insignificant changes and does not need to identify them.

- If a country modifies the standard, it must identify and explain the changes.

- If a country adopts only a portion of the standard or changes it substantially, it will be considered a different standard, not connected to the ISO one.

Localizing includes translation as well as any changes to suit a country's culture, languages, or other needs. For example, countries may expand the standard by including best practices to reflect what works within their own language, such as sentence length.

Varying processes by country

In addition, adopting an ISO standard requires that each country go through its own process, as set out by its national standard-setting body.

We have discovered that the process for adopting a standard varies between countries, sometimes by quite a lot. If you want to help your country adopt the ISO standard, you should be aware of some of the differences to help you plan. For example:

- Some countries have multiple standard-setting bodies.

- Some countries have government standard-setting bodies and some have private standard-setting bodies (or a mix of both).

- Some countries do not allow more than one national group to work on the same topic. So if there is already a technical committee for plain language in your country, the work to adopt the ISO standard may have to be done through that existing committee.

- Some countries allow expert working groups to be created at the national level, as a type of sub-group of their official committee to ISO. If your country allows this, it's much easier to join that kind of working group.

Implementing the standard

The Federation's Localization and Implementation Committee has started its work by identifying people who:

- are interested in helping with this particular aspect of implementing the standard

- are already on the ISO working group that has been drafting the standard

- could work together across countries (same languages or similar regions).

For example, there are Spanish language professionals from several countries who are working together.

We will be coordinating and keeping track of who is working on what aspects in each country. We've also written a communications plan to help practitioners with messaging and strategies, as they try to convince various groups to localize or adopt the standard.

One of the challenges with working on implementation is that people are not allowed to read the draft standard without being involved in its development. And after it is published, people will be able to access it only by buying it.

Contributing to our work

If you would like to be part of this process, you can help with the implementation and localization work by joining your country's national standards body. This will help us to promote and increase adoption of the plain language standard around the world.

To find that body, go to this list of ISO countries.

After that, you can join your country's mirror committee to the ISO committee (Technical Committee 37, Language and terminology), or convince your country to create a mirror committee, if it does not exist already.

You can also find out who else from your country or language is involved in this work, and inquire about joining the team. Simply contact me, Gael Spivak.

Gael Spivak works in communications for the Government of Canada, where she specializes in plain language writing and editing. Topics she's worked on include food safety and food labelling, biotechnology, zoonoses, and road salts. Gael is a past president of the Editors' Association of Canada and is currently a moderator in the Editors' Association of Earth community of practice on Facebook. She likes to collect things, including squirrels, tiny books, and articles on the singular they.

Access for All Conference Gold Sponsor

Neil James

Chair, Certification Committee

International Plain Language Federation

Certification generally involves independent verification that an item has met a pre-determined standard. Certification of plain language practitioners has been part of the Federation's agenda since it started. In the 2010 options paper, Sandra Fisher-Martin's chapter on certification noted:

Deciding on whether to certify plain language practitioners and how to go about doing it is a long-term project. Sound foundations must be laid before we make any progress: a definition and standards for plain language, a clearer understanding of what plain language practitioners do and the skills and knowledge required to do it.

A decade later, the Federation now has a commonly accepted definition in place and the International Standards Organization is about to publish the first plain language standard. It is timely to start working on certification in earnest. This article outlines our initial steps.

First steps toward certification

An expanded brief

Unlike in 2010, when the discussion of certification focused solely on practitioners, the Federation in 2020 decided to consider certification in 4 areas:

1. Organizations
2. Individuals
3. Training
4. Documents

To progress this, it decided to set up a Certification Committee, and 22 practitioners put themselves forward. We have representatives from a dozen different countries: Australia, Canada, France, Italy, Malaysia, Mexico, The Netherlands, Poland, Russia, South Africa, the UK, and the US.

The Federation asked us to look at the options for certifying all 4 areas and to explore what related professions do. As with the development of the ISO standard, it wanted to consult the wider community every step of the way.

A research paper

The Certification Committee held its first meeting in February 2021. We decided the best way to capture our research and to consult would be to develop a research or options paper. We divided into 4 subcommittees and drafted a paper looking at 4 topics in each area:

1. Focus for certification
2. Issues to resolve
3. Models to consider
4. Next steps

In the first topic, we looked at what could be certified in each area. In areas such as documents and individuals, this was simple enough. But in the case of organizations, should we certify plain language specialists or (potentially) any organization wanting recognition for its plain language activity? And do we certify training for plain language practitioners, and/or training on plain language for non-communication specialists?

Most of the issues we identified are common across all 4 areas. Certification has obvious advantages. For the public, it will help to improve the quality and consistency of communications. For organizations, this will also improve efficiency, reputation, and compliance with external requirements such as plain language laws. For plain language as a discipline, it will raise standards and advance our profession.

But there are challenges we need to resolve. These include the potential costs of certification, the risk of dispute and liability if a certified outcome is not to standard, and the conflicts of interest that can emerge between "doing" and "certifying".

Next, we have been looking at the available models for certification. In some cases, this has meant exploring the standards or guidelines we might certify against. In other cases, we have focused on the institutional structure for doing the certifying by looking at comparable fields and the systems they are using.

We submitted a summary paper on our initial research to the Federation board in April, which will next be considered by the boards of the Federation's member organizations.

The certification process

As the diagram shows, a certification system can operate at up to 3 levels:

To start with, you need to establish a standard against which something will be certified. Then you need an individual or organization that can certify that an item meets that standard. In some cases, you also need an accredition body that can attest that the individuals or organizations doing the certification have the expertise to do so.

The Certification Committee started with the assumption that the soon-to-be-published ISO standard for plain language would set the foundation for certification. However, this is a "guidance" standard rather than a "requirements" standard, and a more restrictive requirements standard must be used for any formal certification system.

In any case, even an ISO requirements standard alone would not be sufficient to certify all areas we are looking at. Certifying organizations, for example, calls for quality management systems as much as plain language standards. Training standards would be needed for that area as well as standards on plain language content. And certification of individuals will require standards of practice and assessment systems.

A (very) early framework

With these challenges in mind, we have sketched out a very early framework for a plain language certification, noting that we are yet to define all the standards we would use and who would take on the role at each level – or even whether we would use all levels in all areas (see table below).

We have made some significant progress in just a handful of months, but the process is still at an early stage. The Federation board has asked us to continue the research in all areas while it circulates our initial paper to the boards of its member organizations. Over the next 6 months, we will report again with more detailed models and options to discuss with the wider community.

System for certification

	Standards bodies	Relevant standards	Accreditation bodies	Certification bodies	Outcomes
1. Organizations	ISO IPLF?	ISO Quality mgt	Who?	Who?	Certified organizations
2. Individuals	ISO IPLF?	ISO New frameworks	Who?	Who?	Certified individuals
3. Training	ISO IPLF?	ISO New Guidelines	Who?	Who?	Certified training
4. Documents	ISO IPLF?	ISO	Who?	Plain language organizations	Certified document
Underlying guidance	ISO	Guidance standadrd			

Dr. Neil James is Executive Director of the Plain English Foundation in Australia. He was the founding Chair of the International Plain Language Federation and a past President of PLAIN. In 2019 he won PLAIN's Christine Mowat Award. He has published 2 books and over 100 articles and essays on language and literarure.

Plain language training

David Lipscomb
Chair, Training Committee
International Plain Language Federation

A training committee

At the end of 2020, the International Plain Language Federation set up a committee to explore what role it might play in strengthening plain language training and education. After an open recruitment process, the Training Committee brought together 22 plain language professionals with a wide range of experience, expertise, and languages.

Why do we need such a committee? From the very beginning of the Federation, its 3 member organizations identified training for plain language practitioners as a priority.

Since then, demand for plain language training and education has only continued to grow. It's been spurred by new legislation and growing recognition that plain language gives people access to information they need in their daily lives. The soon-to-be published ISO Plain Language Standard will spark even more demand.

Accompanying this demand has been a corresponding growth in the number, variety, quality, and credibility of plain language training and education programs. As a result, we – plain language professionals – have learned a lot about how plain language is best learned, in various languages, cultural settings, industries, and types of organizations. It's time we gathered and shared this expertise, and the Federation is best placed to do this.

Our work so far

We began broadly. After reviewing the 2010 options paper in Clarity 64, we brainstormed ways the Federation might further professionalize plain language training after the ISO Standard is published. By late January 2021, we zeroed in on 3 training-related projects:

- high-level **guidelines** for plain language training and education

- a **resource bank** for plain language professionals, featuring research and practical materials for training and coaching

- online **train-the-trainer** modules to aid plain language trainers.

We divided into 3 subcommittees, with each exploring one project. By late April, we presented the results to the Federation board, which essentially told the committee to "keep going!"

Over the next 6 months, the Training Committee will focus on the high-level training guidelines and a resource bank, since these 2 projects would provide content for any train-the-trainer modules. Following is some further detail about these 2 projects.

Training guidelines

Similar to the way the ISO standard offers guidelines for plain language documents, any training guidelines might recommend ways to approach plain language training.

To be clear, such guidelines would not prescribe a one-size-fits-all approach to training and education. Just as plain language professionals know that readers differ, expert plain language educators know that learners and organizations differ wildly. And experienced plain language trainers develop individual styles and methods.

So any guidelines would be a set of high-level recommendations – perhaps even recommended questions to ask as you approach training – and not a fixed list of requirements.

The following table outlines who might use the guidelines and how it would benefit them.

User of guidelines	Benefits of using the guidelines
Plain language trainers and educators	Increase the reach, effectiveness, and credibility of their work, while offering new ways to highlight individualized approaches.
Writers, editors, and content experts (potential trainees)	Offer assurance that the training they are getting represents best practices and expert consensus.
Organizations considering training programs	Increase confidence that the adoption of plain language is doable and that the person they're considering hiring is well versed in the field.

One next step will be to conduct further research into existing models, such as the training guidelines built into ISO 9001 and 14000, as well as the Universal Design for Learning Guidelines. Our subcommittee will also explore the best ways to gather best practices – from surveys and interviews to review of published materials.

A resource bank

A 2020 survey of PLAIN members asked "Which of the following resources would you find the most valuable?" Some 73% of the participants chose "online library of standards/best practice".

A resource bank would meet this need, making available everything from sound research to practical materials for training and coaching. The big challenges will be in creating a broad set of criteria and in finding a platform that would satisfy them.

So far, the subcommittee has been exploring web-based options, including subscription-style approaches that would be self-funding and close to self-running.

While Federation member organizations, other institutions, and many plain language practitioners already offer useful resources on their websites, the content is often hard to find, fragmented, and duplicated.

A Federation resource bank would offer a logical place to centralize existing resources – especially those with general application. Of course, some resources from the Federation's member organizations may remain available only to that organization's members.

Who might use such a resource bank? For starters:

- plain language trainers looking for new evidence to support their work

- experts in health, law, engineering, and finance looking for ways to communicate technical content in plain language

- managers who want to support their teams or spark staff development

- participants in plain language training courses

- anyone else interested in clear communication.

Think of how much you would have wanted proven materials when you were new to plain language.

What's more, a resource bank could foster an active community of practice, with plain language practitioners around the world contributing knowledge, sharing ideas, and supporting each other. It could also provide support material for the ISO standard.

Next steps for this subcommittee include:

- conducting a short survey among all 3 member organizations to ensure members support the idea (potentially including a modest subscription fee dedicated to funding the resource bank to make it sustainable)

- researching existing models

- exploring ways to minimize administrative time for moderation and review, such as a self-regulating rating system (1-5 stars or a thumbs-up/down feature)

- exploring funding, including sponsorships and direct financial contribution

- identifying a volunteer content strategist or developer to confirm that a resource bank with the features we might need is feasible.

How you can help

We are looking for anyone in the plain language community with experience as a web content developer who might be interested in working on the resource bank project. Simply contact me, David Lipscomb to let us know.

We would also love to hear feedback, ideas, and suggestions. Look out for more updates in about 6 months, when we next report to the Federation board.

David Lipscomb is Vice Chair of the Center for Plain Language and a member of the drafting committee for the ISO Plain Language Standard. As a day job, he directs the Writing Center at Georgetown University, where he is Associate Teaching Professor of English. Earlier in his career, David ran a small consulting firm that conducted training and coaching for Kellogg, Viacom, the American Red Cross, and dozens of other organizations.

Annetta Cheek
Chair, Standards Committee
International Plain Language
Federation

The international definition of plain language

plain language. This article briefly outlines how we arrived at this definition, what we've done since then, and where we go from here.

Beginnings

The path to an internationally accepted definition was neither easy nor straightforward. The work was started by the (then) International Plain Language Working Group that Neil James proposed at the 2007 PLAIN conference in Amsterdam. We held our first meeting at the Clarity conference in Mexico City the following year.

The group was formed with representatives from the Plain Language Association International, The Center for Plain Language, and Clarity to professionalize plain langauge in ways best achieved by working together.

In 2009, the working group released a series of options papers at the Sydney PLAIN conference, one of which set out the existing definitions of plain language and proposed that we establish a

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 the 2014 Clarity conference in Antwerp, the international plain language community formally endorsed a standard definition of

standard international approach. Up to that point, varying definitions were used and they were of variable quality.

This called for extensive consultation with the plain language community over subsequent conferences. In 2010, the working group published a more developed version of the options papers in the Clarity Journal, Issue 64. We identified an international definition as our top priority task.

The International Plain Language Working Group renamed itself the International Plain Language Federation at the Stockholm conference in 2011, where there was also extensive debate on the right wording for the definition.

We continued to refine the definition in conferences at Washington (2012) and Vancouver (2013) and through an email discussion list. As we narrowed the drafts (and there were 17 of them) the group also narrowed until we were left with Annetta Cheek,

Joe Kimble, Chrisopher Balmford, Martin Cutts and Neil James. The Federation Board endorsed the definition in 2014 and the 3 member organizations adopted it in the following year.

These translations are not meant to be literal, but rather to capture the essence of the definition. If you can provide a translation in another language, please email Federation Chair Vera Gergely.

Issues

A couple of issues have come up repeatedly throughout the history of the definition. The one that generated the most discussion is whether to use the term "reader" or "audience." The 2010 options paper used "audience", but the definition endorsed in 2014 used "reader."

More recently, some people have advocated for "user," to signify that plain language is not just for documents that are read. Some commenters suggest that "reader" is becoming too limiting and out of date, and that we will need to broaden it.

During the final push to adopt the definition, the drafting group also debated the adverb "easily" ad nauseum. For a short time, "readily" was in the running, but that quickly lost out. However, not all drafters believed that either word should be there. "Easily" won because a majority agreed that it would close a potential loophole. The qualifier requires that the reader can comprehend a document without excess effort.

International standard

The 2010 options papers included international standards as the implied second priority after the definition. The Federation started its standards project in 2019. We decided to work with ISO, the international standardization body, to develop that standard.

Through the efforts of Christopher Balmford, Standards Australia (the Australian national standards body) proposed the project and ISO agreed. By 2021, the ISO working group produced a draft standard, which is now in its final stages of development.

The plain language standard is largely based on the international definition. It's a procedural document that outlines processes that organizations need to follow to ensure their communications conform to the definition.

ISO is an immensely influential international body. Once the standard is adopted, it and the definition on which it is based should become accepted very widely in the public and private sectors of many countries.

The future

I'm occasionally asked whether there's any intent to revise the definition. Actually, when it was first adopted, there was an intent to review the definition in 5 years to see if it should be revised.

While developing the ISO standard, there was considerable discussion about possible revisions. Most people on the ISO working group – which included many with communication interests other than plain language – felt that the current definition was a good one. But there

were some suggestions that the Federation may want to think about in the future.

One suggestion has been to change the structure to clear up any confusion about whether "easily" applies only to "find", or also to "understand" and "use". The original intent was that it applied to all 3 verbs, but the current version does not make that clear enough. We might also want to revisit the wording alternatives of "reader", "audience", or "user".

Finally, it's likely that as the ISO standard spreads to different countries that are not all English-speaking, we may learn lessons about applying the definition in other languages that will suggest changes in the original English version.

Annetta Cheek is an anthropologist by training. She worked for the United States Federal government from 1980 until early 2007 and spent four years as the chief plain language expert on Vice President Gore's National Partnership for Reinventing Government.

Annetta is one of the founders of the federal plain language group, PLAIN, and of the Center for Plain Language in the United States. She served as chair of both groups. While at the Center, Annetta was instrumental in getting the US Congress to pass the Plain Writing Act of 2010. She is currently on the board of Clarity and is a past chair of the International Plain Language Federation.

Translations

With agreed wording in English, our next task was to translate it. So far, we have collected translations of the definition in 24 languages:

Afrikaans	German	Potuguese
Catalan	Greek	Romanian
Chinese	Hungarian	Russian
Chinese (Cantonese)	Indonesian	Serbian
Dutch	Irish Gaelic	Spanish
English	Italian	Swedish
Finnish	Japanese	Turkish
French	Norwegian	

Cheryl Stephens

Plain Language Wizardry

Did you see the note circulating on social media a decade ago—the one about fluency?Many joked about this, but it is true – and the research it reported has been verified in the years that followed.

If it's easy to read, it's easy to do, pretty, good, and true

The Psychologist, February 2010

A reader's feeling of fluency flows from information being quick and easy to read. Readers evaluate material on a balance of the effort required and the information they gain. The less effort needed, the more likely they are to consider the information reliable, to act on it, and to form a positive judgment about the writer.

The neuroscience behind writing for fluency

Drawing from neuroscience

But how exactly can a writer make the text easy to read? Fortunately, research in neuroscience has been mapping the reading processes we need to understand.

Scientists follow activity in the brain by measuring chemical and electrical activity as the brain receives, encodes, and moves information. The field of neuroscience extends to neurobiology, neurolinguistics, and neurocognitive psychology. These can all help us develop best practices for reading efficiency.

A research agenda for plain language could start with a literature review in each area. I have created some brain-focused writing guidelines from my own review. Following are the key steps in the reading process that I drew from the literature.

Competing for attention

We've heard a lot about information overload. The first challenge it presents is how to draw your desired reader's attention to your material. Then you need to use techniques that gain their focused attention. Without that, your beautiful language will never be read.

The form of the communication also needs to meet reader expectations for the genre. Readers prepare themselves for processing different kinds of information according to what they expect of it.

Writers or editors can then help to orient readers by previewing the topic and outlining a structure the reader can use to frame and hold detail. We

naturally categorize to make sense of things by creating a schema, shape, or plan. A schema helps to keep the reader's focused attention and prime them for action.

These preview tools are known as "advanced organizers". In the pre-attention phase, the reader's interest is also engaged by elements such as:

- color
- size
- position
- predictability
- number of elements
- emotional impact
- contrast

After getting the reader's attention, the writer then has to produce engaging content that tells the reader how this information relates to their life. This will motivate the reader to focus, which is essential before reading begins.

Measuring reading ease

Understanding the processes involved in reading can also help us to quantify reading ease by measuring the:

1. speed of processing text, and the delays caused by certain features of language and design

2. effort and energy required to process, understand, and encode the information

3. ease or difficulty in recalling the information to complete a task or use it

Measures of readability
Speed   Efficiency   Recall
For the reader
Fluency   Information Gain
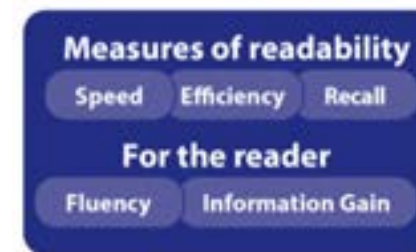
We can then make reading easier and information more available for recall by using techniques such as choosing the right words and using the default structure of sentences.

Comprehending the words

A focus on these language and thinking functions of the brain help to make textual decisions that facilitate reading. This does not replace user testing, but it can save a lot of time. It also gives us the evidence we need to persuade some language traditionalists to accept change.

To comprehend text, the reader must:

- sound out the phonemes in a word, connect the sound with vision of the word by sight

- search for the word in long-term memory

- link the word with possible meanings by recalling prior encounters with it

- hold words and possible meanings in working memory

- use knowledge of sentence structures and punctuation to deconstruct the sentence

- identify a word's function by its location in the sentence

- process all the above to understand the sentence's meaning

- go back to an earlier stage if there is dissonance at any point or if there is no congruence.

As with other brain activity, the brain searches for similar patterns in its storage system. This is the Type 1 thinking system that Daniel Kahneman reported. As thinkers, we strive for consistency, and the lack of it prompts psychological stressors, such as anxiety and frustration.

When comprehension succeeds, information is connected to the existing network of related or similar information in our long-term memory storage. Only the differences are saved between the word's current use and prior encounters. New information must be assimilated or altered so it will connect. Or new connections or frameworks have to be created.

Deciphering the meaning of the words is inextricably linked with discovering the syntax of the sentence to confirm the word meaning. Together, these disclose the semantics – the meaning.

Making inferences

Next comes inference, which includes anticipating what comes next, connecting the dots, and following the narrative. When the writer merely implies, the reader must infer the connections and details. Not all readers can make the necessary links.

Inference works like auto-correct or predictive text – it can be wrong and require the reader to backtrack to revise their developing understanding. Inferences are drawn from the context, document structure, page layout, and design elements.

Inferring the writer's meaning is a crucial cognitive skill for readers and a marker of the reader's literacy skills. This is shown in the following chart for assessing adult reading competencies from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Reading Text

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Read relatively short texts to locate a single piece of information.

Follow simple written directions. | Read more complex texts to locate a single piece of information or read simpler texts to locate multiple pieces of information.

Make low-level inferences. | Choose and integrate information from various sources or from several parts of a single text.

Make low-level inferences from multiple sources. Identify relevant and irrelevant information. | Integrate and synthesize information from multiple sources or from complex and lengthy texts.

Make complex inferences and use general background knowledge. Evaluate quality of text. | Interpret dense and complex texts.

Make high-level inferences and use specialized knowledge. |

Inferences are demanded of the reader when they must hold information in working memory while seeking information that is physically separated. On another level, the process of inferring parallels the brain's natural practice of anticipating and predicting what comes next. This and problem-solving takes place within the capacity of the working memory, which is short.

Developing best practices

By combining this scientific evidence, we can draw out guidelines for presenting information in ways that address the anticipated reader's literacy skills, as the table below summarises.

Note that even geniuses (4% of the population) still prefer clear, simple, structured information – because all brains like it that way.

Thirty years ago, Edward Fry offered us writeability guidelines he developed from studying and consulting on readability. We now have similar results from studying what happens inside our heads as we read and think.

If you follow the guidelines that I have developed for readable writing, you'll save yourself time and make life easier for your readers.

Three communication styles for different reading competencies	
1. Low literacy	• Visual graphics with word labels • Very short, simple sentences
2. Average literacy	• Common words • Default sentence structures • Clear and simple layout
3. Skilled readers	• Clear language • Industry-specific terms • Familiar organization • Good layout and structure

Cheryl Stephens has been a leader in the plain language movement since she co-founded Plain Language Association International in 1993. PLAIN has honoured Cheryl with its Founders Award, life membership, and by naming its biennial innovation award after her. In 2019, Cheryl founded the association PLAIN Canada CLAIR. Cheryl Stephens researches, writes, and teaches plain language. Her works include Plain Language Legal Writing, Plain Language In Plain English, and 2 other books about plain language through Plain Language Wizardry. She received her BA from the University of the Pacific and a law degree from the University of British Columbia. She studied communications at Simon Fraser University and manages a LinkedIn group called Plain Language: Research. Reading about neuroscience is her latest hobby.

Janice (Ginny) Redish

PLAIN LANGUAGE COMMISSION

Lorenzo Carpanè
Palestra della scrittura

The Italian insurance market is facing a new challenge: to simplify the language of contracts. Palestra della scrittura, our company that focuses on research and training, is a partner with some of the most important Italian insurance companies. In order to do this, we have to deal with the following issues:

1. consider Italian insurance contracts today – how companies write them currently and what indications come from Italian authorities

2. define "plain Italian" as level B1

3. reflect on plain Italian and legal issues

4. encourage plain Italian within insurance companies: our mission.

Crystal-clear insurance contracts: Mission possible

1. Consider Italian insurance contracts today

In February 2018 the Italian Authority for Insurances (IVASS), in cooperation with the Italian Association of Insurance Companies (ANIA), published a guideline for all companies entitled "Contratti semplici e chiari". It's a short, nine-page PDF with few indications about how to make contracts clearer, especially in their general structure. There is only a short section about wording, phrases, and style.

Since then, IVASS checks each year on how companies have improved their contracts. Results are quite different: some of them have tried (or are trying) to make their language clearer, while other companies still use rare and specializeded words, long sentences, and passive voice.

At the same time, we must consider what ANIA itself states: Italian insurance markets for damages has one of the lowest rates in Europe in relation to gross domestic product (GDP).

The question therefore is: are these two facts connected? And what about the fact that where contracts are clearer (such as in United States or United Kingdom), the insurance rate is higher?

So, can we assume that the clearer the contracts, the higher the insurance rates in relation to GDP are?

2. Define "plain Italian" as level B1

First of all: why B1? Let's consider the reading level of 15-year-old Italian students. According to OCSE-PISA results, only 5% of students can understand complex texts, which is classified as ranging from level B2 up to C2.

Secondly, as stated by the Italian national statistics institute (ISTAT), in the population between ages 25 and 64, only 61.7% has attended at least 12 years of school, compared to 78.1% of the European Union. If insurance companies want their contracts understood, they therefore need to write at the B1 level. Contracts are the first step, but this should include all documents and communications as well. This is also the goal that IVASS wants to achieve: what they ask of insurance companies is to use a plain Italian – a B1 level Italian.

Thirdly, according to Istituto Treccani, the so-called "lessico fondamentale" (basic vocabulary) of the Italian language consists of an average of 2,000 words, out of the 427,000 words of the whole language. And the average Italian uses those 2,000 words to make more than 93% of their daily communication. This is therefore the situation we must be aware of.

3. Reflect on plain Italian and legal issues

Of course, "plain Italian" is also a matter of wording.

Let's give a simple example. In every contract you can find the phrase "conclusione del contratto".

A B1-level speaker would understand "when the contract ends" or "when the contract stops". But in legal Italian, that sentence means "when the processing phase ends", or in other words, "when the contract comes into effect". Exactly the opposite. So, why can't we use a clearer phrase? Other words or sentences like this are common in contracts, with the result of leaving people in doubt about the real meaning of what they read.

But the Italian language has a wider problem, which comes from its linguistic history. The very first origin of Italian was recorded in 13th-14th century, when some great poets in Tuscany began using their own dialect instead of Latin. In 16th century, the characteristics of this "Tuscan" were established as a literary and court language, while common people went on using the different dialects spread throughout Italy. Since then, what we call "Italian" today was used exclusively by clerics, poets, and intellectuals. Although the process of a real linguistic unification started with the reunification of Italy in 1866, it wasn't until the mid-20th century that the common language took hold.

So we can say that modern Italian is a "written-born" language, not a "speaking-born" one. The result is that Italian is in general a more conservative language and the difference between the written and oral language is wider than in other countries. And as you can imagine, the gap is even greater between legal written Italian and spoken Italian.

4. Encourage plain Italian within insurance companies: Our mission

Insurance contracts are probably the most common example of legal language. Besides, the need of insurance protection is more and more relevant, with special regard to the so-called "LTC", or long-term care policies. The population is getting older and older and public welfare is not enough. People need policies, but clear policies. So we at Palestra della scrittura have to deal with different issues:

a) Challenge resistance from lawyers. They barely tolerate general the use of plain language, as they consider such a choice as a danger to their authority. The more complex they write, the higher – in their estimation – is their reputation.

b) Develop language skills as fundamental training for all people involved in the insurance system.

c) Help companies find acceptable solutions for the challenges that the complexity of the Italian legal language presents.

d) Push for a wider movement for the development of plain Italian, using all strategies we can afford, including support from Plain Language Association International.

All of these connect to our final goal: to help people become conscious citizens who know their rights and duties. It means increasing trust in institutions in general, publicadd comma and private. If we do not pursue this goal, the risk we run is to enforce the divide we now see between citizens and institutions: now, as confirmed by ISTAT, at a very high level. What will this mean for our society? And what for the new generations?

_____

Lorenzo Carpanè is partner of Palestra della scrittura, a company that provides training, coaching and research about language and communication skills. He is professor of Italian technical language at University of Bolzano (Italy) and a scholar of language and literature, having published many articles and books. He is also a writer and novelist.

Contratti assicurativi chiari e semplici: Missione possibile

Lorenzo Carpanè
Palestra della scrittura

Il mercato assicurativo italiano sta affrontando una nuova sfida, per semplificare il linguaggi dei contratti.

"Palestra della scrittura", un'azienda che si occupa di ricerca e formazione, è partner di alcune importanti compagnie assicurative. Per questo obiettivo della semplificazione, dobbiamo affrontare le seguenti questioni:

1. Considerare i contratti assicurativi italiani: come le compagnie li scrivono in questo momento e quali indicazioni provengono dalle autorità italiane;

2. Definire un "plain Italian", come livello B1;

3. Riflettere sul "plain Italian" e sulle sfide legali;

4. Incoraggiare il "plain Italian" nelle compagni assicurative: la nostra missione.

1. Analizzare i contratti assicurativi italiani odierni

Nel febbraio 2018 l'Autorità italiana per le assicurazioni (IVASS), in cooperazione con l'Associazione delle Compagnie Assicurative (ANIA), ha pubblicato delle linee guida per tutte le compagnie, intitolata Contratti semplici e chiari. È un breve pdf di nove pagine con poche indicazioni su come realizzare contratti più chiari, specialmente per ciò che riguarda la struttura generale. Solo poche parole su lessico, sintassi e stile.

Da allora IVASS verifica come le compagnie migliorano i loro contratti. I risultati sono molto diversi: alcune di esse hanno tentato (o stanno tentando) di rendere più chiaro il linguaggio, mentre altre compagnie usano ancora parole rare e specialistiche, frasi lunghe e forme passive.

Allo stesso tempo, dobbiamo considerare ciò che la stessa ANIA certifica: il mercato italiano delle assicurazioni danni ha una delle più basse percentuali in Europa in relazione al prodotto interno lordo (PIL).

La domanda dunque è: questi due fatti sono connessi? E cosa dire del fatto che dove i contratti sono più chiari (come negli Stati Uniti o nel Regno Unito), la percentuale di assicurazione è più alta? Pertanto, possiamo dedurre che più chiari sono i contratti, più alta è la percentuale di assicurazione in rapporto al PIL?

2. Definire il "plain Italian" come livello B1

Prima di tutto: perché B1? Consideriamo il livello di capacità di lettura degli studenti italiani di 15 anni, secondo le rilevazioni to OCSE-PISA. Essi provano che solo il 5% degli studenti più comprendere testi complessi, tra i livelli B2 e C2.

In secondo luogo, come testimoniato dall'Istituto Italiano di Statistica (ISTAT), nella popolazione con età compresa tra i 25 e 64 anni, solo il 61,7% ha frequentato almeno dodici anni di scuola, in rapporto al 78,1% dell'Unione Europea.

Se le assicurazioni vogliono che i loro contratti siano compresi, esse hanno bisogno di scrivere il più possibile con un linguaggio B1: i contratti sono il primo passo, ma così deve avvenire anche per tutti i documenti e tutte le comunicazioni. Questo è l'obiettivo che anche IVASS vuole raggiungere: ciò che essa chiede è che le compagnie usino un "plain Italian", un italiano B1.

In terzo luogo, secondo l'Istituto Treccani, il cosiddetto "lessico fondamentale" della lingua italiana consiste di circa 2000 parole, sulle 427.000 che compongono la lingua italiana. E con quelle 2000 parole un cittadino comune fa più del 93% di tutte le sue frasi. Questo è dunque il quadro che noi dobbiamo considerare.

3. Riflettere sul "plain Italian" e sulle sfide legali

Come abbiamo osservato nel precedente paragrafo, il "plain Italian" è naturalmente anche una questione di lessico. In ogni contratto si trova per esempio la seguente espressione: "conclusione del contratto". Una persona di livello linguistico B1 capirebbe "quando il contratto finisce", ma nell'italiano "legale" quell'espressione significa "quando finisce il processo di realizzazione del contratto", cioè "quando il contratto ha effetto". Esattamente l'opposto. Dunque perché non usare un'altra tra le varie espressioni che la lingua italiana permette?

Nei contratti si possono trovare altre espressioni come questa, con il risultato di lasciare le persone in dubbio sul reale significato di ciò che leggono.

Ma l'italiano ha un problema ancora più grande, che gli deriva dalla sua storia. L'origine della lingua italiana può essere fatta risalire al 13° e 14° secolo, quando in Toscana alcuni grandi scrittori iniziarono a usare il loro volgare al posto del latino. Nel 16° secolo poi le caratteristiche di questo toscano vennero fissate come linguaggio letterario e di corte, mentre la gente comune continuava a usare i differenti dialetti diffusi in tutta la penisola. Da allora quello che noi chiamiamo "italiano" fu usato da chierici, poeti, intellettuali. Fino alla unificazione italiana nel 1866, in primo luogo; ma il processo di una reale unificazione linguistica ebbe bisogno di altre decine di anni, fino alla metà del 20° secolo.

Così oggi possiamo dire che l'italiano è una lingua nata scritta, non nata come linguaggio orale, con un ulteriore risultato: che l'italiano è in generale una lingua più conservativa e le differenze tra scritto e parlato sono più ampie che in altri paesi. E ancora più ampia se consideriamo l'italiano "legale" e il parlato.

4. Incoraggiare il "plain Italian" nella compagnie assicurative

I contratti assicurativi sono probabilmente l'esempio più diffuso di linguaggio legale. Inoltre, il bisogno di protezione assicurativa è sempre più importante, con una speciale attenzione per le cosiddette "LTC" (Long term care), le assicurazioni che si occupano della salute nel nostro futuro. Noi stiamo diventando sempre più anziani e il sistema pubblico non può fare abbastanza. Noi abbiamo bisogno di polizze assicurative, di polizze assicurative chiare. Così noi, come Palestra della scrittura, abbiamo deciso di considerare una serie di questioni:

a) affrontare e superare le resistenze che vengono dai legali: essi fanno fatica ad accettare in generale l'uso di un linguaggio semplice, perché pensano che questa scelta sia un pericolo per il loro ruolo. Più complicato scrivono, più alta, pensano, è la loro reputazione.

b) sviluppare le competenze di tutte le persone coinvolte nel sistema assicurativo

c) aiutare le compagnie a trovare soluzioni accettabili per le sfide che la complessità del linguaggio legale pone loro

d) sostenere un ampio movimento di opinione che chiede una più rapida diffusione del "plain Italian", usando tutte le strategie che possono sostenere questo sforzo. In ciò con l'aiuto di "Plain Language Association International".

Con un obiettivo finale: far diventare le persone dei cittadini consapevoli, sempre più avvertiti dei loro diritti e doveri. Ciò significa aumentare la fiducia per le istituzioni in generale, sia pubbliche che private. Se non perseguiamo questo obiettivo, corriamo il rischio di rafforzare il divario che ora osserviamo tra cittadino e istituzioni: al presente, come confermato dall'ISTAT, a un livello molto alto. Cosa significherà ciò per la nostra società? E per le nuove generazioni?

Lorenzo Carpanè è docente per Palestra della scrittura, azienda che si occupa di formazione, coaching e ricerca sulla comunicazione e sulle competenze nella comunicazione. È docente di Italiano per la tecnologia all'Università di Bolzano; studioso di letteratura e linguaggio, ha pubblicato molti articoli e volumi. È scrittore e narratore.
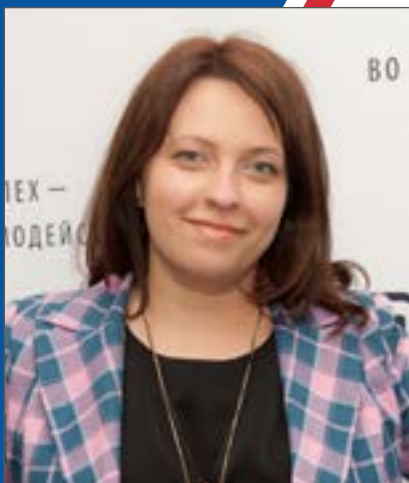
Plain language in Russia

Natalia Nechaeva and Emma Kairova

Plain Russian wanted

Studies show that the level of reading literacy in the Russian Federation is extremely low. People do not understand standard texts and they often need help and explanations. Or they simply prefer not to read at all. At the same time, despite the general tendency to simplify writing, the level of complexity of legal, finance, and technical texts is getting higher. Such textual complexity leads to poor finance, health, and law literacy among the Russian population and results in a huge amount of social and economic problems.

A study among 1,819 people from 39 Russian regions showed that:

- 95% of respondents had not read contracts and other documents before signing.
- Only 40% of Russians read a loan agreement before signing it, and people with low financial literacy take out the most expensive loans.
- More than 70% of Russians are not going to get vaccinated against COVID-19, and about 30% are against vaccination in general. Experts admit the reason is failed communications on the subject.

Thus, plain Russian is needed everywhere since comprehensibility of texts plays a crucial role in healthcare, banking, legal, and other everyday life matters. Business, especially one providing professional services or selling complex products, should also be more efficient in communications to ensure the target audience is really able to understand what it is offered.

Policy documents

Many government agencies in the Russian Federation (educational, social, healthcare, etc.) use various sets of guidelines and instructions on creating an accessible environment, which state explicitly that translation of texts into plain language (terms to denote plain language in Russia are dostupny, ponyatny, prostoy yazyk) is a necessary tool for removing barriers in providing information to the general public. In April 2020, the national standard GOSTR 52872-2019 came into force. It contains requirements on making information provided to the general public in electronic and digital form accessible. The standard recommends ensuring that content is comprehensible, based on the "level of basic general education" (9 grades of secondary school). In cases where understanding the text requires a higher level of education, according to the GOSTR, additional explanatory content or a text version accessible to the general public must be provided.

Clearly an understanding of the need in plain language does exist in the country. However, there are no generally accepted standards for plain writing, nor common view on principles and rules of plain Russian.

Practice: State-level initiatives

In terms of practical realization of the plain Russian ideology, the situation is more optimistic. Efforts are made at both the state and private levels.

As part of the effort to improve financial literacy of Russians, the Bank of Russia launched the resource fincult.info. This website covers most common everyday situations, demanding knowledge in finance and economics. The structure and wording could be improved, but the existence of such initiative is promising by itself. Another interesting initiative in the finance sector is publishing the guidelines by the Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation named "How to write reports in plain language". The document can hardly be considered a universal manual on plain Russian, but it has much in common with other guidelines in terms of the idea and tendency to use simple wording.

The COVID-19 outbreak stimulated developments in making healthcare information more comprehensible. Since it became extremely important that people correctly understand the authorities' recommendations and restrictions, the Ministry of Health – the primary source of reliable information – made much effort to become more accessible and comprehensible for the general public. The texts on the website are written in fairly simple language and the illustrations used are helpful.

However, the most notable changes in everyday communications occur due to efforts of few enthusiasts and effective communications advocates.

Practice: Private initiatives

The most renowned of them is Maxim Ilyakhov — a Russian author, designer, and editor. The creator and promoter of so-called Information Style or Infostyle (Informatsionny Stil), Maxim published several books and delivered training on effective and clear writing. They include key principles of Infostyle, which have much in common with principles of plain language, such as a focus on the reader's needs and interest, clear structure, examples and visualization, non-use of abstract, and complex wording. The target audience of the books and author's other activities are commercial writers and everyone who writes text for work and business.

Maxim also produced some notable and widely used projects as an editor. For example, the case of the state services portal. Development of the site is an attempt of the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor) to improve the readability of official information. A project team was created for Gosuslugi multipurpose editorial policy, which includes guides on how to name services, how to write news, how to answer letters and social media requests, for example. The result is something that could be regarded as plain Russian.

Another popular project set up by Ilyakhov is a digital journal about money by Tinkoff Bank. The project covers hundreds of topics and is aimed at raising financial literacy and culture at the bank's clients and others interested in the topic.

An important initiative was taken by Ivan Begtin, CLARITY member and director of a non-profit organization Information Culture. He has created an open-access resource plainrussian.ru, which is a tool for measuring text readability and complexity. The result is given both as a numeric value and the needed level of education and age (e.g. readability index 14.03; level of education: from 1st to 3rd years at university; approximate age: 17 to 19).

Practice: Project by the Association of Translation Teachers

In 2018, the Association of Translation Teachers created an international research and practice project named "Translation into Easy and Plain Languages in Russia". The project was aimed at consolidating and methodizing expertise, processes, and procedures of writing in and translating into Easy and plain Russian.

The project team includes both association members and external participants, including experts like Dr. Prof. Andreas Baumert (member at ISO Plain Language Standard working group and lead of the DIN Standard for Plain Language working group).

The team is developing and refining conceptual framework for plain Russian, publishing scholarly articles and presenting at thematic conventions. On October 13, 2020, International Plain Language Day, the ATT project group organized the first International Round Table entitled "Translation into Plain Language: Foreign Experience and Prospects in Russia". The discussion at the round table gave a new impetus to the further development of the project.

The project has already shown that both government and non-government organizations understand that plain language is essential. At the moment, the project group is building an expert group to localize ISO 24495 Standard (Plain Language: Governing principles and guidelines) in Russia, developing educational programs, and preparing a textbook on the simple Russian language to be published. We hope that these initiatives and other efforts of the association to popularize plain language will bear fruit in the near future, so that government and commercial organizations in Russia will start communicating plainly.

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Простой язык в России
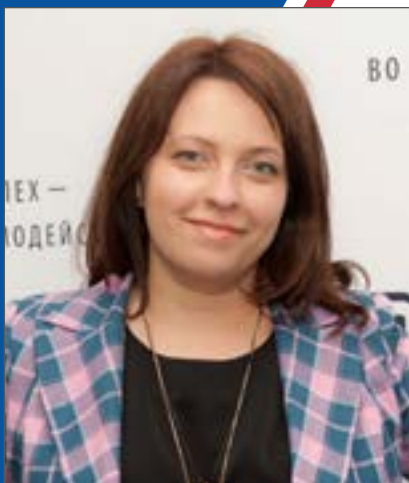
Наталья Нечаева и Эмма Каирова

Простой русский язык: объективная необходимость

Исследования показывают, что уровень читательской грамотности в Российской Федерации крайне низок. Многим людям нужны дополнительные пояснения или помощь, чтобы понять написанные на стандартном языке тексты. Либо они просто предпочитают их не читать. В то же время, несмотря на общую тенденцию к упрощению письменной речи, уровень сложности юридических, финансовых, технических и т. д. текстов в России становится все выше. Это приводит к финансовой, медицинской, правовой безграмотности населения и порождает огромное количество социальных и экономических проблем.

Так, опрос 1819 человек из 39 регионов России показал, что 95% респондентов не читают договоры и другие документы перед подписанием. Только 40% россиян читают кредитные договоры перед его подписанием, а самые дорогие кредиты берут люди с низкой финансовой грамотностью. Более 70% россиян не собираются делать прививку от COVID-19, а около 30% — выступают против вакцинации в принципе. Эксперты признают, что причина в разлаженной коммуникации: антивакцинаторы публикуют гораздо больше доступных и понятных материалов, чем ответственные за здоровье граждан ведомства.

Мы убеждены, что простой русский язык (Plain Russian) необходим в стране на всех уровнях, так как понятность текстов играет решающую роль в здравоохранении, банковском деле, юриспруденции и других вопросах повседневной жизни. Бизнес, особенно предоставляющий профессиональные услуги или продающий сложные продукты, также должен задуматься об эффективности своих коммуникаций, если хочет быть услышанным своей аудиторией.

Простой язык в нормативных документах

Во многих государственных учреждениях Российской Федерации (образовательных, социальных, медицинских и т. д.) существуют руководства и регламенты по созданию доступной среды, в которых в том числе прямо говорится, что перевод текстов на простой язык (термины, используемые для обозначения простого языка в России: «доступный», «понятный», «простой») — необходимый инструмент для устранения барьеров в предоставлении информации всем группам населения.

В апреле 2020 года вступил в силу национальный стандарт ГОСТР 52872-2019. Он содержит требования по обеспечению доступности информации, предоставляемой в электронной и цифровой форме. Стандарт рекомендует обеспечить понятность содержания, исходя из «уровня основного общего образования» (девять классов средней школы). В случаях, когда понимание текста требует более высокого уровня образования, согласно ГОСТР, должно быть предоставлено дополнительное пояснение или текстовая версия, доступная для широкой общественности.

Таким образом, понимание, что простой язык в России необходим, существует. Однако на данный момент в стране нет ни общепринятых стандартов написания текстов на простом языке, ни единого подхода к трактовке принципов и правил простого русского языка.

Практика: инициативы на уровне государства

В плане практической реализации концепции «Простого русского языка» ситуация более оптимистична. Усилия предпринимаются как на государственном уровне, так и в рамках частных инициатив и проектов.

Так, с целью повышения финансовой грамотности россиян Банк России запустил информационно-просветительский ресурс fincult.info. Содержание сайта охватывает наиболее распространенные повседневные ситуации, требующие знаний в области финансов и экономики. Структура текстов и воплощение с лингвистической точки зрения оставляют желать лучшего, но само существование такой инициативы говорит о стремлении финансового сектора быть более доступным. О том же говорит и еще один проект: Счетная палата РФ опубликовала в 2020 году методические рекомендации «Как писать отчеты понятным языком». Документ вряд ли можно считать универсальным пособием по простому русскому языку, но основная идея — писать финансовые тексты простым и понятным языком, избегая сложных формулировок — четко отражена и в нем.

Пандемия COVID-19 создала благоприятные условия для повышения доступности медицинской информации. Поскольку стало чрезвычайно важно, чтобы люди правильно понимали рекомендации и требования, связанные с режимом ограничений, Министерство здравоохранения, являющееся основным источником достоверной информации по ситуации, приложило немало усилий, чтобы стать более понятным для широкой общественности. Тексты на сайте министерства написаны достаточно простым языком, а используемые иллюстрации полезны.

Практика: частные инициативы

Однако наиболее заметные изменения в повседневных коммуникациях происходят благодаря усилиям отдельных энтузиастов и пропагандистов эффективной коммуникации.

Самый известный из них — Максим Ильяхов — российский писатель, дизайнер и редактор. Создатель и популяризатор так называемого информационного стиля, или инфостиля, Максим опубликовал несколько книг и проводит тренинги по эффективному и понятному написанию текстов. Тренинги включают ключевые принципы инфостиля, которые имеют много общего с принципами простого языка — например, ориентация на потребности и интересы читателя, четкая структура, примеры и визуализация, отказ от использования абстрактных и сложных формулировок и т. д. Целевой аудиторией книг и другой деятельности автора являются коммерческие писатели и все, кто пишет тексты для работы и бизнеса.

Максим также создал несколько заметных и широко используемых проектов в качестве редактора. Например, речь идет о портале государственных услуг. Разработка сайта — это попытка Федеральной службы по надзору в сфере связи, информационных технологий и массовых коммуникаций (Роскомнадзор) решить проблему недоступности письменных текстов для понимания, с которой сталкиваются люди при чтении официальной информации. Проектная группа создала для «Госуслуг» многоцелевую редакционную политику, включающую руководства по называнию услуг, написанию новостей, ответам на письма и запросы в социальных сетях и т. д. Сайт «Госуслуг» в результате по праву можно считать написанным простым русским языком.

Другой популярный проект, созданный Ильяховым, — цифровой журнал о деньгах от «Тинькофф Банка». Проект охватывает сотни тем и направлен на повышение финансовой грамотности и культуры клиентов банка и других заинтересованных лиц.

Важной инициативой можно считать проект Ивана Бегтина, члена CLARITY и директора некоммерческой организации «Информационная культура». Он создал ресурс с открытым доступом — plainrussian.ru, который представляет собой инструмент для измерения читабельности и сложности текста. Результат выдается как в виде числового значения, так и в виде необходимого уровня образования и (или) возраста потенциального читателя текста (например, индекс читабельности — 14.03, уровень образования — с 1-го по 3-й курс университета, прибл. возраст — от 17 до 19 лет).

Практика: проект Ассоциации преподавателей перевода

В 2018 году Ассоциация преподавателей перевода инициировала международный научно-практический проект «Перевод на ясный и простой языки в России». Проект направлен на обобщение опыта, стандартизацию процессов и принципов написания и перевода текстов на ясный и простой русский языки.

В команду проекта входят как члены Ассоциации, так и внешние участники, включая таких экспертов, как д-р проф. Андреас Баумерт (член рабочей группы по разработке стандарта простого языка в Международном институте стандартизации ISO и руководитель рабочей группы по разработке стандарта простого языка в Немецком институте стандартизации DIN).

Команда разрабатывает и совершенствует понятийный аппарат и концептуальные основы простого языка, публикует научные статьи и выступает на тематических конференциях. 13 октября 2020 года, в Международный день простого языка, проектная группа АПП организовала первый международный круглый стол «Перевод на простой язык: зарубежный опыт и перспективы в России». Дискуссия на круглом столе дала новый импульс для дальнейшего развития проекта.

Работа над проектом показала, что многие государственные и негосударственные организации понимают, что простой язык необходим. В настоящий момент участники проектной группы формируют экспертную группу для локализации ISO 24495 (Plain Language: Governing principles and guidelines) в России, разрабатывают образовательные программы и готовят к публикации учебно-методическое пособие по простому русскому языку. Мы надеемся, что эти инициативы и другие усилия Ассоциации по популяризации простого языка уже в ближайшем будущем принесут свои плоды: государственные и коммерческие организации в России начнут выражаться проще.

Наталья Нечаева — доцент Российского государственного педагогического университета им. А. И. Герцена, президент Ассоциации преподавателей перевода (АПП), член Союза переводчиков России, член рабочей группы по разработке стандарта DIN по простому языку (Leichte Sprache), член Международной ассоциации PLAIN, руководитель проекта «Перевод на простой и ясный языки в России» в Ассоциации преподавателей перевода, автор статей и докладов по данной тематике.

Эмма Каирова — основатель и генеральный директор переводческой компании и наставнического проекта PROtranslation, член правления Ассоциации преподавателей перевода (АПП), член Союза переводчиков России, профессиональный переводчик и лингвист-педагог, член рабочей группы по разработке стандарта DIN по простому языку (Leichte Sprache), член Международной ассоциации PLAIN, координатор проекта «Перевод на простой и ясный языки в России» в Ассоциации преподавателей перевода, автор статей и докладов по данной тематике.

Plain language has few chances without standards

Uwe Roth
Journalist

It is high time for a standard of plain language in Germany. The population would have been better informed about the Covid-19 pandemic. Trust in political leaders could be higher. Public protest would probably be less. This is my observation as a journalist reporting on the pandemic.

The University of Stuttgart-Hohenheim confirms my assessment. Scientists analyzed more than 1,300 press releases from the German federal government. They found that most texts are too difficult to understand. The press spokespeople do not explain technical terms. An ISO/DIN is urgently needed. It must not be a recommendation but should be binding. Otherwise, little will change. Specialist language is a signal for authority in Germany.

Germans love their long sentences

Plain language is not popular in Germany. On the contrary, complex sentences are part of a long German tradition. Politicians, administrations, and academia like to maintain this tradition. Plain language still has a hard time fighting against it. Mark Twain (1835-1910) laughs about the German language: "Whenever the literary German dives into a sentence, that is the last you are going to see of him till he emerges on the other side of his Atlantic with his verb in his mouth." I can confirm that. I quote this sentence from Twain in my seminars. Participants are predominantly academics. The quote is always good for a laugh.

The academics have come to my course to make their technical language understandable. At the end of the course, participants are usually convinced that it is time for plain language. Yet weeks later, I ask whether the good intentions are still there. Most of the time, I find little change in their communication. If Mark Twain were alive, he could continue to complain about the German language without inhibition.

Specialist language imparts competence and replaces arguments. This was shown in a dangerous way in the Covid-19 pandemic. Some virologists have become extremely popular with their daily statements in the media. The population knows their names. But people do not understand much about what they say about the virus. Virologists stayed in their laboratories or lecture halls before the pandemic. They were rarely in a press conference or talk show in front of a microphone. Scientists expect the public and politicians to accept their conclusions without objection and make rules based on their expertise. They see no reason to be universally understood. Politicians who studied medicine are substitute mediators of knowledge. But do politicians do this with the public in mind?

In medicine, the density of technical terms is extremely high. Virologists would have to undergo intense training to make their knowledge generally understandable. In my courses, I explain this process of transformation in this way: a scientist has firmly anchored the technical language in his mind. He must translate his technical language into everyday language in order to explain something to a layman. This translation must happen in an instant on the way from the brain to the mouth. Few people master this interpretation of their own thoughts in real time.

Is legal certainty more important than comprehensibility?

I live in Baden-Württemberg, a southern region in Germany. I have examined public texts by my state government about the Covid-19 rules. I contacted the ministry. I have confronted a responsible person with my accusation that the public cannot understand the texts. The person was a bit guilt conscious. She apologized, arguing that there was little time to write the text. In addition, she explained that such a text must be 100% legally secure. I asked the provocative question: does a sentence containing 60 words have to do with legal certainty? Can it not be that this text is simply poorly written?

The scientists of the University of Stuttgart-Hohenheim criticize the technical terms in the press releases of the federal government, which have remained unexplained. They also found that many sentences are too long, and the sentence construction is complicated. You can call it bad German. I often hear that legal certainty excludes plain language. This is supposedly the knock-out argument in Germany. But what is technical language made of?

From my point of view, what I see in these texts is 70% everyday German language and 30% technical language. If an author puts the 70% in order (short sentences and clear sentence construction), they get a lot closer to plain language. In a next step, the author must rewrite the technical terms. With these initial steps, much has been achieved for general comprehensibility.

Experts must impart knowledge in everyday language

If the ISO/DIN Plain Language were already in place, two rules would be of central importance:

1. Set the audience for which the text is intended.
2. The text is limited to the vocabulary of the target group.

The legislation with the Corona Code of Conduct, which deeply affects people's everyday lives, is not formulated for the population. The rules are written by lawyers for lawyers. Technical terms from virology and pandemic research are adopted without question. Scientific literature is mostly in English and German translations are rarely specified for specific terms.

Politics, administration, and science expect the media to translate this technical language. But local and regional media in particular are completely overwhelmed by this. Everyone assumes that ordinary citizens understand what "lockdown" actually means. Social distancing, home-office, home-schooling, or FFP mask have become equally common in the German language. But why?

I bring difficult texts towards the goal of plain language. The emphasis is on "towards". I usually only reach plain language because the source texts have failed to serve their purpose. They are not limited to the vocabulary of the target group. I cannot repeat it often enough: a text is addressed to the general public. That is the assignment. But the author did not have the citizens in mind when writing, but lawyers or political opponents. If an author is not willing to have their text consistently rewritten for the target group, plain language has no chance.

My conclusion: the author must embrace plain language. This is the first step for making a text ready for the general public. There should be as little technical language as possible. This will allow the editing process into plain language easier. Covid-19 communication has shown how far politics, administration, and science are from this realization. I can only hope that a national standard will bring more acceptance.

Uwe Roth is a journalist who has been writing texts in simple language for administrations, public institutions and companies for 6 years. He is a lecturer at technical schools and organizes workshops. Roth is a member of the Association of the German Institute for Standardization (DIN). He is deputy project manager in the working group for a DIN Einfache Sprache.

Einfache Sprache hat ohne Standards wenig Chancen

Uwe Roth

Journalist

Es ist höchste Zeit für eine Norm Plain Language in Deutschland. Die Bevölkerung wäre über die Covid 19-Pandemie besser informiert. Die Akzeptanz der staatlichen Anordnungen könnte höher sein. Der öffentliche Protest wäre wahrscheinlich geringer. Das ist meine Beobachtung als Journalist, der über die Pandemie berichtet. Die Universität Stuttgart-Hohenheim bestätigt meine Annahme. Wissenschaftler analysierten über 1300 Pressemitteilungen der deutschen Bundesregierung. Sie stellten fest, die meisten Texte sind schwer verständlich. Die Pressesprecher erklären Fachbegriffe nicht. Eine ISO/DIN ist dringend notwendig. Sie muss nicht nur schnell kommen. Sie darf keine Empfehlung sein, sondern sollte einen verbindlichen Charakter haben. Ansonsten wird sich wenig ändern. Fachsprache steht in Deutschland für Autorität.

Die Deutschen lieben ihre langen Sätze

In Deutschland ist Plain Language nicht populär. Im Gegenteil: Komplizierte Sätze gehören zu einer langen deutschen Tradition. Die Politik, Verwaltung und Wissenschaft halten am Fortbestand dieser Tradition gerne fest. Noch hat es Plain Language schwer, dagegen anzukommen. Mark Twain (1835-1910) lästerte über die deutsche Sprache: "Wenn der literarisch gebildete Deutsche sich in einem Satz stürzt, sieht man nichts mehr von ihm, bis er auf der anderen Seite des atlantischen Ozeans mit dem Verb zwischen den Zähnen wieder auftaucht." Das kann ich bestätigen. Ich zitiere diesen Satz von Twain in meinen Seminaren. Teilnehmer sind überwiegend Akademiker. Das Zitat ist immer gut für einen Lacher.

Die Akademiker sind in meinen Kurs gekommen, um ihre Fachsprache verständlich zu machen. Die Teilnehmer sind am Ende des Kurses meistens überzeugt, dass es Zeit für Plain Language ist. Ich frage Wochen später nach, ob die guten Vorsätze noch da sind. Meistens stelle ich enttäuscht kaum Änderungen in der Kommunikation fest. Wäre Mark Twain am Leben, er könnte ohne Hemmung weiter über die deutsche Sprache lästern.

Fachsprache vermittelt Kompetenz und ersetzt Argumente. Das zeigt sich auf eine gefährliche Weise in der Corona-Pandemie. Einige Virologen sind mit ihren täglichen Statements über die Medien sehr populär geworden. Die Bevölkerung kennt ihre Namen. Sie versteht aber wenig, was sie zu Corona sagen. Virologen waren vor der Corona-Pandemie in ihren Laboren oder Hörsälen. Die Mediziner waren selten in einer Pressekonferenz oder Talkshow vor einem Mikrofon. Wissenschaftler sind gewohnt, dass Öffentlichkeit und Politik ihren Schlussfolgerungen ohne Widerrede akzeptieren. Wissenschaftler erwarten von der Politik, dass diese aus ihrer Expertise Regeln erstellt. Wissenschaftler erkennen keinen Grund, allgemein verständlich zu werden. Politiker, die Medizin studierten, sind ersatzweise Vermittler von Wissen. Aber sind Politiker dabei objektiv?

In der Medizin ist die Dichte an exotischen Fachbegriffen extrem hoch. Virologen müssten ein hartes Training absolvieren, um ihr Wissen allgemein verstehbar zu machen. Ich erkläre in meinen Kursen diesen Prozess der Transformation so: Ein Wissenschaftler hat die Fachsprache fest verankert im Kopf. Er muss seine Fachsprache in Alltagssprache übersetzen, will er einem Laien etwas erklären. Diese Übersetzung muss in kürzester Zeit zwischen Gehirn und Mund passieren. Diese Verdolmetschung eigener Gedanken in Echtzeit beherrschen nur wenige.

Ist Rechtssicherheit wichtiger als Verständlichkeit?

Ich lebe in Baden-Württemberg. Es ist eine südliche Region in Deutschland. Ich habe öffentliche Texte "meiner" Regierung zum Thema Corona-Regeln untersucht. Ich habe Kontakt mit dem Ministerium aufgenommen. Ich habe eine verantwortliche Person mit meinem Vorwurf konfrontiert, dass die Bevölkerung die Texte nicht verstehen könne. Die Person zeigte sich etwas schuldbewusst. Sie entschuldigte sich mit dem Argument, zum Schreiben des Textes sei wenig Zeit gewesen. Außerdem müsse ein solcher Text zu 100 Prozent rechtssicher sein. Ich habe diese provozierende Frage gestellt: Was hat ein Satz, der 60 Wörter umfasst, mit Rechtssicherheit zu tun? Kann es nicht sein, dass dieser Text einfach schlecht geschrieben ist?

Die Wissenschaftler der Universität Stuttgart-Hohenheim kritisieren die Fachbegriffe in den Pressemitteilungen der Bundesregierung, die unerklärt geblieben sind. Sie stellten ebenso fest, dass viele Sätze zu lang sind und der Satzbau kompliziert. Man kann schlechtes Deutsch dazu sagen. Ich bekomme sehr oft zu hören, Rechtssicherheit schließe Plain Language aus. Das ist in Deutschland ein Totschlagargument. Aber woraus besteht Fachsprache?

Aus meiner Sicht zu 70 Prozent aus schlechtem Deutsch und zu 30 Prozent aus Fachbegriffen. Bringt ein Autor die 70 Prozent in Ordnung (kurze Sätze und klarer Satzbau), kommt er Plain Language ein großes Stück näher. In einem nächsten Schritt muss der Autor die Fachbegriffe umschreiben. In der Summe ist viel für die allgemeine Verständlichkeit erreicht.

Experten müssen Wissen vermitteln und Alltagssprache lernen

Gäbe es die ISO/DIN Plain Language bereits, wären zwei Regeln von zentraler Bedeutung:

1. Festlegen der Zielgruppe, für die der Text bestimmt ist.

2. Der Text beschränkt sich auf den Wortschatz der Zielgruppe.

Die Rechtsvorschriften mit den Corona-Verhaltensregeln, die tief in den Alltag der Menschen eingreifen, sind nicht für die Bevölkerung formuliert. Die Regeln sind von Juristen für Juristen verfasst. Fachbegriffe aus der Virologie und Pandemie-Forschung werden 1:1 übernommen. Wissenschaftliche Literatur ist im Wesentlichen in englischer Sprache. Für spezielle Begriffe wird nie eine deutsche Übersetzung festgelegt.

Politik, Verwaltung und Wissenschaft erwarten von den Medien, dass diese Fachsprache übersetzen. Doch vor allem lokale und regionale Medien sind damit komplett überfordert. Alle gehen davon aus, dass einfache Bürger verstehen, was Lockdown tatsächlich heißt. Social Distancing, Home-Office, Homeschooling oder FFP-Maske (Filtering Face Piece Mask) sind in der deutschen Sprache ebenso gängig geworden. Aber warum?

Ich bringe schwierige Texte in Richtung Plain Language. Die Betonung liegt auf "in Richtung". Ich erreiche Plain Language meistens nur annähernd, weil die Ausgangstexte ihren Zweck verfehlt haben. Sie beschränken sich nicht auf den Wortschatz der Zielgruppe. Ich kann es nicht oft genug wiederholen: Ein Text richtet sich an die allgemeine Öffentlichkeit. Das ist der Arbeitsauftrag. Doch der Autor hatte beim Texten nicht die Bürger im Sinn, sondern Juristen oder den politischen Gegner. Wenn ein Kunde nicht bereit ist, seinen Text für die Zielgruppe konsequent umschreiben zu lassen, hat Plain Language keine Chance.

Fazit: Schon die Person muss Plain Language akzeptieren, die den ersten Input zu einem Text für die allgemeine Öffentlichkeit liefert. Sie sollte bemüht sein, möglichst wenig Fachsprache einzubringen. Dann gelingt in der weiteren Bearbeitung des Texts Plain Language. Die Corona-Kommunikation zeigt, wie weit Politik, Verwaltung und Wissenschaft von dieser Erkenntnis entfernt ist. Ich kann nur hoffen, dass eine ISO/DIN mehr Akzeptanz

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