

Exco lekgotla plots 2010

John Linnegar

On Saturday, 16 January your Exco members plus several key portfolio holders met for an all-day lekgotla to kickstart the year and plot the way forward for PEG for the coming six months. Top of the agenda were: the need to find successors to retiring Exco members; the CPD scheme, accreditation (including the test) and the new membership categories; PEG participation in conferences and book fairs and possible membership on the SA Book Development Council, to promote our members more widely; and the appointment of a part-time paid administrator to provide administrative support to Exco and committee members.

Serving Exco members Paul Schamberger (Vice-Chair), Mary Hazelton (National Secretary) and Lulu van Molendorff (Membership Secretary/Treasurer) have all announced their intention not to seek re-election at the AGM in June. For one of these key positions we have already found a new incumbent: Linda Pretorius has generously agreed to understudy Lulu until our long-serving Treasurer bows out in April. We thank Linda for taking on this key portfolio and assure her of our support in this new role.

We are, however, still looking for volunteers to fill the other two portfolios from June's AGM. Please contact our National Secretary, Mary Hazelton, should you wish to volunteer or should you want to nominate another member for a position on Exco. The current national chair will be serving a second one-year term from June, but PEG should be looking to groom his successor to the chair who will occupy the position of vice-chair until June 2011. If you feel you have what it takes to help lead PEG through this period of growth and professional renaissance, please step forward ...

CPD rollout

Your Exco has been actively honing the newly conceptualised CPD scheme, and this was taken a major step forward with the launch of the accreditation test pilot in the wake of 16 January. We have five seasoned members currently subjecting themselves to the test in order to benchmark it; should the test pass the test (as it were), we'll be rolling it out to members well before the AGM. You certainly will be worth your editorial salt should you excel at this test: Norman Blight, the driving force behind it, has made sure of that! Sincere thanks to the 'unknown editors' who are currently working through it.

As you will have read in *PEGboard* and elsewhere, we're edging steadily towards meaningful membership categories (and the criteria for them) that will reflect the different abilities and levels of experience of our members. Many of you have responded positively to the announcement of the new categories, particularly to the criteria set for each, which now appear to be fairly stable and workable. Our thanks go to the portfolio holders responsible for bringing us to this point. What remains for Vicky Botha and Mary Hazelton to finalise, following further discussion at the 16 January meeting, is the CPD points avenue for attaining Member status. This, too, will be in place before June.

A leg up to newcomers

The mentoring scheme continues to go from strength to strength under Irene Stotko's able curatorship, though we continue to be short of willing mentors (come on, seasoned PEGgers, you *can* do it!). In view of this shortage, and of the long waiting list of potential mentees, Exco took the decision to offer mentorships to PEG members with the least practical experience ahead of other applicants, in order to be true to the spirit of the scheme: namely, to give newcomers with little experience a leg up towards professionalism. Applicants with some experience are asked to be patient – your turn will come, albeit not immediately. As from 2010 the fee-free period comes to an end, and a standard R1 200 plus a R30 administrative fee have now become applicable to all candidates accepted for a mentorship. ...>

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This will be a significant means
of raising PEG's profile in very
important quarters ...

< ... **Strutting our stuff**

Meanwhile, PEG continues to forge ahead on the professional development and conference fronts. Thanks to the efforts of Exco, participation in the trade-only London Book Fair is now assured and several of our members will be representing us all to the international publishing community at Earl's Court on 19, 20 and 21 April. Then, with the World Cup Soccer tournament having elbowed the Cape Town Book Fair (CTBF) out of its 'head-quarters' at the Cape Town Convention Centre in June, the fair will now take place from 30 July to 2 August; your Exco has agreed not only to participate in the book fair once again but also to support a proposal to be put to the CTBF management to organise a one-day workshop on editing for plain language. The CTBF team have since agreed to proceed with the workshop, which means that an opportunity for professional development will be presenting itself to publishing and editorial personnel under the auspices of PEG, PASA, the Frankfurt Book Fair and the CTBF. The workshop will take place on the trade-only first day, and will be a great opportunity for a maximum of 120 PEG members and other professionals-in-the-making to hone their plain language skills. This will be a significant means of raising PEG's profile in very important quarters – a serious investment in our future. Further details will be released by the CTBF during the year.

Opening a window

Talking of which, Exco also approved a proposal to form an umbrella body representative of language practitioners such as ourselves together with the likes of SATI in order to gain a voice on the influential South African Book Development Council. The council should be receiving input from and representing language practitioners (as key role-players in the publishing value chain), but hitherto it has had no representation by or information on copy-editors, proofreaders and translators, so it has the potential to become an invaluable window on our profession and enable PEG to have a voice and feature in important forums about aspects of language usage and publishing.

All of the above developments, and more, have added greatly to the PEG committees' administrative workload. So a proposal to appoint a part-time, paid administrative assistant was adopted. The incumbent will free committee members of their admin loads and give them more time to perform their core functions well. She will, for example, act as invigilator of the accreditation test (mainly to preserve candidates' anonymity), be responsible for disseminating the members' directory, and help the conference convenor with the enormous amount of admin attached to such events. The appointee will officially commence duty on 1 February 2010. More about this development in the next issue of *PEGboard*.

The meeting also reached agreement on how the Plain Language Conference proceedings would be recorded for dissemination among members: the February issue of *PEGboard* would cover them in detail, but it was proposed to publish a PEG Guide on the subject in the near future, in the same format as the *PEG Guide to Style Guides* published in November 2009. 🐾

Chair's chatter

RED-LETTER DAY. A lucky day; a day to be recalled with delight (Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable). Red-letter day? Red-letter month more likely, with good news for PEG on all fronts! Five cheers for 2010!

First, a number of PEG stalwarts have accepted an invitation to pilot the newly devised accreditation test, and that's already in their hands. They will benchmark the test so that when our members take it, the results will have been pegged against an equitable professional standard (if you pass it, you'll know you're really worth your salt). Thank you to these volunteers, whom I cannot thank personally because the pilot is shrouded in confidentiality to ensure fair results. The finalised test will be available before June.

Secondly, the South African Translators' Institute (SATI) have agreed to co-exhibit with us at the London Book Fair (19–21 April), which will not only be good for SATI but will also bolster local practitioners' presence at the fair considerably. Our participation on the SA Market Focus exhibit is now signed and sealed, as are our opportunities to blow our trumpets (not our vuvuzelas) to interested publishers in the so-called Networking Arena. Copies of the 2010 PEG Members' Directory will, of course, be handed out liberally to publishers from all over the globe: make sure your entry or advertisement has been placed.

Thirdly, the venue, date and a number of speakers – including keynote speakers Mandla Langa and Sindiwe Magona – for the PEG-initiated conference on Editing Works of Fiction and Narrative Non-Fiction have been confirmed. Please diarise 13–14 May and try your best to get to Franschhoek if you are at all interested in good editors of fiction-type texts. There's a crying shortage of good editors in these genres, so if you have what it takes, this conference could launch your career into a new trajectory ... The programme and announcements will be released during February.

Fourthly, the directors of the Cape Town Book Fair (CTBF) have accepted a PEG proposal to run a one-day workshop on Plain Language (PEGgers who could not attend the November 2009 conference take note). To be held on the newly instituted Trade Day (30 July), its focus will be more practical, with a stronger training element, but much of the original content will be covered. This is a significant breakthrough for PEG: it signifies endorsement by the Publishers' Association of South Africa (PASA), the directors of the Frankfurt Book Fair (a major partner of the CTBF), the CTBF itself, and possibly also the MAPPP Seta, of PEG's strategy to upskill practitioners and raise the profile of our profession. PASA and CTBF have undertaken to support and promote our efforts among their constituents, both nationally and internationally. Another date for you all to diarise.

Fifthly, to keep us all abreast of developments in our association, the P-zine has been launched by our Marketing team. We hope you find it useful as a harbinger of relevant information.

... the results will have been pegged against an equitable professional standard (if you pass it, you'll know you're really worth your salt.)

All of these ventures have added, and will be adding, to your committees' and branches' responsibilities during 2010 – a red-letter year, indeed – and on your behalf I thank our dedicated corps of volunteers for so willingly and selflessly serving our profession. ☺

Yours in editing
John

Ed's inkspot



While preparing this first issue of the wholly electronic *PEGboard*, your editor had a number of thoughts running through her head, most of them technical. And most of them still unresolved, as you will see. Take page layout, for example. I started out from a premise based on a print layout, in which the regular PEG items would be included in the first two and last two pages. The eagerly-awaited Plain Language Conference reports would then fill a pullout, centre section of eight pages.

When I think electronically, however, this reasoning becomes nonsense. An e-newsletter's pages are not so much 'turned' as scrolled through – that is, if it is being read on-screen as opposed to printed out and taken to bed for a leisurely browse through. And page numbers? For printing, they go without saying. On screen, other conventions apply, such as providing hyperlinks to longer items. *PEGboard* as we have known it for many years has suddenly become a work in progress. A virtual medal is being designed for our new layout specialist, Lesley Price! Happy reading, dear patient reader. ☺

– Hester

Piloting the test

Norman Blight

The PEG accreditation test for 2010 is currently being piloted by some generous members with long experience and respected reputations, editors selected by the committee for Continuing Professional Development (CPD). The test includes a number of editing tasks, and the responses to these test pilots will set the benchmarks for marking the test in future. The pilots' work will be examined and recorded anonymously, and form the basis of the marking memorandum.

The CPD committee will make the test procedure available to members seeking PEG accreditation by publishing, on the website, a detailed curriculum of the knowledge and skills which may be included in the test. In preparing for the test, prospective candidates will be expected to become familiar with the curriculum details by doing the necessary study and practice; some will need to begin with (short) courses in appropriate editing skills, and possibly undertake a mentorship. Beyond that, candidates should have not only sufficient editing knowledge and skills, but also the experience to be confident of delivering competent work to clients: the accreditation test should serve to confirm the candidate's professional readiness. The test is not an introduction to editing.

A potential client, in searching the Directory for editorial services, is therefore not looking for an enthusiast with editorial ambitions. The client should be assured that an accredited member is competent to deliver professional services, at a high level. The work required in the test is therefore intended to be detailed and challenging. 🍀

Emphasis on marketing

Kristina Davidson

At PEG Cape Town's October 2009 meeting, Kristina Davidson presented a two-hour workshop on 'How to market yourself'. The topic was in response to a member survey in which over 80% of the respondents chose marketing their businesses as their preferred topic for a PEG meeting. The workshop covered the following aspects:

- Freelancing versus small businesses
- What is marketing?
- Marketing objectives
- Market research
- SWOT analysis
- Marketing strategy
- The marketing Ps
- Your brand
- Your marketing activities (word of mouth, PR, direct marketing, internet marketing, telephone marketing and networking)

The workshop was intended to be practical and useful. Participants were encouraged to reflect on ways of marketing themselves through exercises in the workbook handed out at the workshop.

The next meeting will take place at the end of February 2010. A Cape Town PEG member, Michel Cozien, will be giving a talk entitled 'Indexe[r]s add value'.

PEG Cape Town will hold one more meeting in April 2010, before the AGM in June at which a new committee will be elected. The current office bearers (Kristina Davidson, Sharon Montgomery and Sukaina Walji) will not be available for re-election but are confident that other PEG members will offer to serve on the new committee. 🍀

Don't miss the 2010 PEG Directory!

12 February 2010

Final submission of Directory entries for inclusion in the 2010 print/CD version

Style guide: http://www.editors.org.za/media/documents/peg_directory_style_guide_2010.pdf

19 February 2010

Final submission of Directory advertisements

Advert specs: <http://www.editors.org.za/media/documents/peg%20advert%20specs%202010.pdf>

15 April 2010; 15 June 2010; 15 August 2010

Submission of late entries for addition to the Web Directory for 2010

No changes or new entries after 15 August 2010

Orders, entries and advertising: Fiona at wallacefionajean@gmail.com

Confirmation of payments: Lulu at liewelulu@xsinet.co.za or fax: 086 625 1049

Bank Account: ABSA Bank; a/c name: Professional Editors' Group; a/c no. 90 452 866 42; branch code: 632005 (Hyde Park branch)

PEG newbies

Between September 2009 and January 2010 PEG has enjoyed a fresh inflow of new blood. All newbies are warmly welcomed. The list gives an overview of their spread of locations and skills.

Gauteng

- Anabel de Lima, Lonehill
– editing, proofreading
- Andrew Lanham, Glen Austin
– editing, proofreading, writing, design
- Barbara Martin, Parktown North
– proofreading
- Belinda Stege, Kempton Park
– proofreading, writing, training
- Chantal Cuddumbey, Morningside
– editing, proofreading, writing
- Debbie Sinclair, Victory Park
– editing, proofreading, writing
- Delia Kotzé, Windsor West
– editing, proofreading
- Dumisani Mphalala, Rosettenville
– editing, writing, English-Xhosa translation
- Elaine Dell, Benoni
– HR consulting
- Elizabeth Stewart, Lynnwood Glen
– editing, proofreading, writing
- Ellyn Barry, Northwold
– proofreading
- Fernanda Snyman, Murrayfield
– editing, proofreading, writing, translation
- Gillian Collett, Murrayfield
– editing
- Hayley du Plessis, Northcliff Ext.
– editing, proofreading, writing, designing
- Ilze Holtzhausen de Beer, Villieria, Pretoria
– editing, proofreading, indexing, writing, training
- Jacqui Greenop, Little Falls
- Joey Kok, Bezuidenhout Valley
– editing, proofreading, writing, training, indexing, translation
- Kirstin Kilian, Lynnwood
– editing, proofreading, writing, translation
- Leilanie Basson, Melville, Johannesburg
– editing, proofreading, writing, training
- Lia Marus, Parkview
– editing, proofreading, writing
- Mariëtte Botha, North Riding
– editing, proofreading, writing, translation, content research, consultation
- Penny Crowther, Sunninghill Gardens
– editing, proofreading, writing
- Suzanne and Alison Jefferies, Waverley, Jhb
– editing, proofreading, writing, training
- Veronica Mathebula, Horison Park
– editing, proofreading, writing

Western Cape

- Andrea Hickman, Vredehoek
– editing, proofreading
- Brian Wakeling, Hout Bay
– editing, proofreading
- Diane de Kock, Newlands
– editing, proofreading, design
- Elaine Davie, Greyton
– editing, proofreading, writing
- Gina Daniel, Darling
– illustrator
- Ilana Sachar, Bloubergsands
– editing, proofreading, writing, design, project management
- Linda Nienaber, George
– editing, proofreading, writing
- Jane Nash, Plumstead
– editing, proofreading, writing, training
- Maryth Meise, Stellenbosch
– editing, proofreading, translation
- Michelle Ryan, Fish Hoek
– editing, proofreading, writing
- Paul Carter, Waterfront
– editing, proofreading, writing, training
- Robin Gaylard, Observatory
– editing, proofreading, writing
- Sandie Vahl, Simon's Town
– editing, proofreading, writing, design

Limpopo

- Peta Jones, Freshwoods Farm, Louis Trichardt
– editing, proofreading, indexing, writing, training, project management

KwaZulu-Natal

- Jo du Plessis, Zimbali
– editing, proofreading, writing
- Katherine Evans, Hillcrest
– editing, proofreading, typing

Eastern Cape

- Andrew Grewar, Somerset East
– editing, proofreading, indexing, writing, design, training
- Derrick Morton-Achmad, Walmer Estate

Mentoring via Skype

Barbara Elion

'Ever the ardent editor!' a Facebook 'friend' posted on someone else's wall. She was referring to my querying the spelling of an author's name. Said author, I discovered after a fruitless Google search, was a fiction of her witty imagination. Having an editor's disposition means that one watches text with the beady eye of a hawk. Even a slippery witticism on a Facebook wall stirs the sensors of a would-be editor. This brings me to the point of this article, which is mentoring newbie editors via a Skype teleclass. 'Ah, a non sequitur!' you are muttering. True, but I have your attention.

In April 2009, I sent a message to the PEG e-group enquiring from new PEG members whether there was any interest in being part of a pilot teleclass which would focus on general issues that regularly crop up for editors. After negotiation around dates and times (with some interested parties falling away because of timing), we settled on a Thursday morning 75-minute slot – the condition being that everyone had to have ADSL access or a 3G card, as well as a Skype identity.

The first four pilot sessions were offered on a complimentary basis to introduce members to my mentoring style. The teleclass initially comprised four members from around the country, with more requesting permission to join following recommendations from within the group. We held online classes every second week from May to October 2009. Some of the 2009 group members went on to join other mentoring and training programmes run by experienced PEG editors.

A class size of seven is the *maximum* ideal at any one time (even though Skype conference calling suggests a maximum figure of 24). In a larger Skype teleclass it is difficult for the host mentor to recognise who is speaking, particularly if there is feedback on the line, and because dealing with competing questions from different members becomes unwieldy. Other technicalities include members' closing all programs other than Skype so as to minimise interference; all having a functioning microphone on the headset or Skype phone, and the host having the fastest DSL connection.

Topics discussed included:

- Academic editing
- Client communication
- Cost estimates
- Establishing terms and conditions
- Practical exercises
- Professionalism in editing
- Resources and style guides
- Time management

Participants were encouraged to ask questions and raise issues during their mentorship, some of which we discussed through private correspondence. Below is a scenario posed by one of the participants for discussion within the group:

The client is self-publishing a text that contains a map and/or an illustration or graphic from a published book. The client does not seem to know much about copyright permissions and is not very concerned about whether using the image requires permission or not. The copy-editor spots that the image is in all likelihood copyright-protected and that placing it may constitute a violation. She lets the client know about this, but the client feels acknowledging the source is enough. This may or may not be sufficient. What is the editor's responsibility in such a situation?

It was a joy to host these sessions for it created a sense of camaraderie within the group and a safe sounding board for those who had been working in isolation. We all learned a great deal from each other, and not only about the use of words.

Skype teleclasses in 2010 are available on request. For further details, contact Barbara Elion at be@onelifemedia.co.za 🐦

A handle on plain language issues and practice

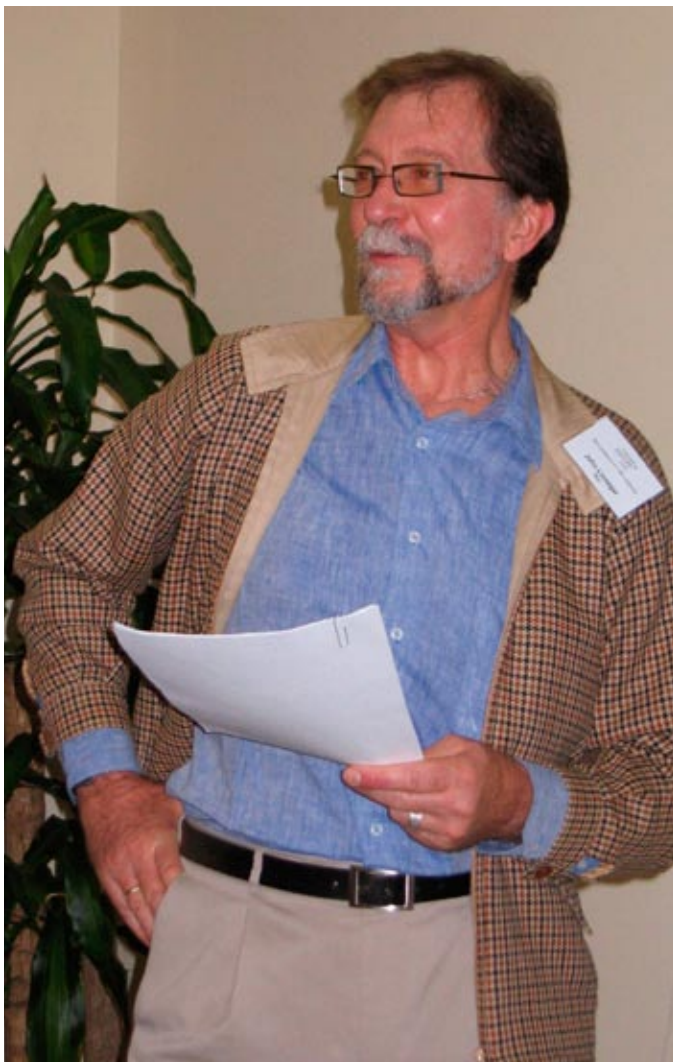
Special PEGboard report on the one-day conference held on 14 November 2009 at Hofmeyr House, East Campus, University of the Witwatersrand.

Reports by Jill Bishop
Photographs by Linda Pretorius

GALLERY

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John Linnegar introducing one of the speakers.



There were weighty discussions during the afternoon workshop ...



... but also some light-hearted moments ...

Professor Annelize Nienaber, a lecturer in the Faculty of Law at the University of Pretoria and the first speaker at PEG's miniconference on plain language, comes with a wealth of knowledge and a plethora of accolades within the field of law. Prof. Nienaber holds a Master's degree in constitutional and human rights law and a Doctorate in human rights law and medical law and ethics, and is an advocate of the High Court of South Africa.

She is the legal advisor to the Clinical Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Pretoria and Chairperson of the Faculty of Law's Research Ethics Committee. She is an editor of the *African Human Rights Law Journal* and assistant editor of the *Journal of Contemporary Roman-Dutch Law*. She works part-time for the Centre for Human Rights (an NGO) and chairs UP's Disciplinary Committee.

Together with Professor Frans Viljoen, she organised the first South African academic conference on plain legal language in July 1999. She is the co-author and co-editor of several articles and textbooks.

Plain language and the law, and plain legal English, in South Africa

Annelize Nienaber, Faculty of Law, University of Pretoria

Legal language has from the earliest times been a source of satire and ridicule. Many literary works portray lawyers as trapped in their own pompous verbosity, reflecting a popular notion of lawyers and their language as absurd. Legal language is criticised for its use of obscure expressions, Latin and technical terms, wordiness, long, complex sentences and seemingly meaningless repetitions and archaisms.

In the last four decades the attack on 'lawyers' language' has increased. As a result, governments are under political pressure to impose legislative measures forcing drafters to draft laws that are more accessible to lay persons. The term *plain language* is used to describe such accessible, clear language.

A definition of plain legal language:

Plain language is clear, straightforward expression, using only as many words as are necessary. It is language that avoids obscurity, inflated vocabulary and convoluted sentence construction. It is not baby talk, nor is it a simplified version of the English language. Writers of plain language let their readers concentrate on the message instead of being distracted by complicated language. They make sure that their audience understands the message easily.

— Robert Eagleson

This definition highlights two very important features of plain language: first, the idea that plain language is not a watered-down, bland and infantile version of a specific language; and second, what is important in plain language is the message and not the fancy language wrapped around it. The search is for language that will convey a message to an audience in the most effective manner.

The importance of audience

Plain language is therefore language which enables the reader to grasp the message readily, without difficulty and confusion. As a guiding principle, language (and legal drafting as a manifestation of language) does not only exist on paper: it is also intended to communicate a message successfully to an *audience*. The audience that the legal text is intended for is very important. The ideal is to draft a text that the intended audience will find easiest to understand. For this reason we have to ask who the audience is and what that audience's required level of comprehension of a text is.

For example, the audience of legislation includes Members of Parliament, people who are affected by the legislation, officials applying the legislation, and judges and lawyers. Thus what constitutes 'plainness' may differ from audience to audience, but difficult subjects need not be represented in complex or obscure language.

Plain language in South Africa

Only about 3½ million people in SA have matric or an equivalent level of education. Although English is the language of business and the official medium of instruction and communication for many, very few South Africans are mother-tongue speakers of English.

In South Africa the law – and specifically legislation – was often used in the past to deny people their basic human rights, and many people still regard the law with suspicion and fear. Difficult legal language compounds this problem.

The maintenance of the rule of law, which is the foundation of any parliamentary democracy, has two

prerequisites: first, people must understand that it is in their interests, as well as in those of the community as a whole, that they should live their lives in accordance with the rules; and second, they must know what those rules are. But it is impossible to know the rules of our democracy if they are written in abstruse legal language!

Dullah Omar, then Minister of Justice, said in a speech in 1995:

One of the cornerstones of our programme for the transformation of justice is the principle of people’s access to justice. It is in pursuit of this goal (empowerment) that the nature and style of public information becomes so critical. If we write laws in complicated and difficult language, how can we possibly expect the citizens of the country to understand or obey those laws?

The enactment of South Africa’s first democratic Constitution, bringing about transformation of the legal system of South Africa, also heralded calls for ordinary citizens to have greater access to the law – the ‘democratisation’ of the legal process. There were calls for plain legal language, which is believed to ensure greater access to the law.

First steps: the Constitution, 1996

Those drafting the new Act attempted to remedy the problems in the old Act, and did so by using plain language principles in the overall structure, the structure within each chapter, sentence structure and language, certainty of voice (must, may, to be), and design and layout.

For example: the Interim Constitution, section 12, read:

‘Every person shall have the right to respect for and protection of his or her dignity.’

The final (1996) Constitution, section 12, reads:

‘Everyone has inherent dignity and has the right to have their dignity respected and protected.’

Plain language has now become a legislative imperative

Plain legal language is required by the National Credit Act 34 of 2005, section 64, which states that the consumer has the ‘right to information in plain and understandable language’. The Long-Term and Short-Term Insurance Acts of 1998 require that information for policyholders must ‘be [in] plain language, avoid uncertainty or confusion and not be misleading’; it must also be in clear and readable print size, spacing and format.

An extract from the Consumer Protection Act 68 of 2008:

22. (1) The producer of a notice, document or visual representation that is required, in terms of this Act or any other law, to be produced, provided or displayed to a consumer must produce, provide or display that notice, document or visual representation –

- (a) ...; or
 - (b) in plain language, if no form has been prescribed for that notice, document or visual representation.
- (2) For the purposes of this Act, a notice, document or visual representation is in plain language if it is reasonable to conclude that an ordinary consumer of the class of persons for whom the notice, document or visual representation is intended, with average literacy skills and minimal experience as a consumer of the relevant goods or services, could be expected to understand the content, significance and import of the notice, document or visual representation without undue effort, having regard to ...

Plain legal language drafting a ‘must have’ in business

It has become an issue for advertising – companies want to be able to claim that they provide plain language contracts to the consumer. Banks, insurance companies and the like require plain language drafting to create more accessible documents. With the upsurge in consumer advocacy, consumers regard it as their right to be informed in plain language what the contract they enter into entails.

Caveat: lack of elegance?

Plain legal language is often criticised as being a compromise of the beauty and elegance of legal English. ‘Translations’ may, in certain circumstances, indeed compromise the original text – it would certainly compromise Shakespeare if *Hamlet* were to be translated into plain language:

Original:

*I’ll call thee Hamlet.
King, father, royal Dane: Oh answer me,
Let me not burst in ignorance; but tell
Why thy canoniz’d bones hearsed in death,
Have burst their cerements, why the sepulchre
Wherein we saw thee quietly inurn’d
Hath op’d his ponderous and marble jaws,
To cast thee up again?*

(*Hamlet: Prince of Denmark Act I, Sc IV*)

Plain language translation:

*What are you doing out of your coffin, Dad?
We buried you the other day and you’re supposed
to be dead.
Don’t keep me waiting!
I’m bursting to know! 🍷*

Candice Burt, a plain language lawyer, is a director at communications and training consultancy Simplified. The Simplified course, which she developed together with partner Frances Gordon, has been used to train more than 2000 delegates in South Africa, Kenya, the UK and Portugal. Candice is also the South African representative for Clarity, an international association promoting plain legal language.

Through her work in simplifying legal and financial information, Candice has consulted with many blue-chip companies both locally and abroad. She wrote the plain language chapter of the Government Communicators' Handbook, and in October 2009 presented a paper on the legal framework for plain language in South Africa at the seventh biennial Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN) conference in Sydney.

Legislation on plain language – boost or minefield for the cause?

South African companies and regulators walk a tightrope between a standard that is too low and a standard that is unfeasible.

Candice Burt (www.simplified.co.za)

Plain language can be defined according to section 22 of the Consumer Protection Act 68 of 2008:

‘... a notice, document or visual representation is in plain language if it is reasonable to conclude that an ordinary consumer of the class of persons for whom the notice, document or visual representation is intended, with average literacy skills and minimal experience as a consumer of the relevant goods or services, could be expected to understand the content, significance and import of the document without undue effort, having regard to:

- the context, comprehensiveness and consistency of the notice, document or visual representation
- the organisation, form and style of the notice, document or visual representation
- the vocabulary, usage and sentence structure of the notice, document or visual representation
- the use of any illustrations, examples, headings, or other aids to reading and understanding.’

For example, look at the following plain language ‘translations’ of legal texts:

Disclaimer:

The Carrier shall not be liable for damage to or destruction or loss of the Goods or any other property arising out of or incidental to or in connection with or occurring during the provision of the Services or for the mis-delivery or non-delivery of the Goods and whether or not caused or contributed to by the default (including negligence) of the Carrier or any agent, servant or officer of the Carrier or any other person entitled to the benefit of these conditions. (Fastway Courier website)

In plain language ...

While providing these Services to you, we* are not responsible for:

- any loss or damage to the Goods
- any loss or damage to other property
- delivery of the Goods to the wrong address
- failure to deliver the Goods.

We are not responsible even if we have caused the loss or damage through our own action.

* ‘We’ would be defined to include all employees, etc.

Clause from a will:

I, the undersigned, do hereby revoke, cancel and annul all and any wills, testamentary dispositions and codicils heretofore made by me.

In plain language ...

I cancel all my previous wills. or When I sign this will, I cancel all my previous wills.

The Consumer Protection Act has much to recommend it. Most importantly, it makes South Africa the first country to have national laws on the use of plain language. It also provides a holistic definition of the term and forces companies to comply – quickly.

However, the Act contains potential minefields. Up until now, too little research has been done on the use of plain language and there has been too little consultation between drafters, clients and audiences. Not only do regulators not know what plain language is but companies don’t have the budgets, time or expertise to enforce the use of plain language, and enforcement mechanisms are cumbersome. 🍄



Lia Marus, Hester van der Walt and Candice Burt discuss business.



Elizabeth Davison and Eleanor Cornelius grappling with a few issues during tea.

PAPER 3

Eleanor Cornelius holds an MA in General Linguistics and a Diploma in Higher Education, both from the University of Stellenbosch. She is currently engaged in doctoral studies in the field of language and the law, specifically the comprehension of legal language by Afrikaans-speaking lay people.

Shortly after the inception of the Pan South African Language Board in 1995, Eleanor was appointed deputy director of language planning, tasked with establishing dictionary units for each of the eleven official languages. By the time she left PANSALB in 2001, all eleven units had been established as section 21 companies and fully functional entities.

Eleanor lectures in the Department of Linguistics and Literary Theory at the University of Johannesburg, teaching courses in linguistics, psycholinguistics, editing, legal translation, plain language principles and simultaneous, consecutive and liaison interpreting.

Plain language gone wrong: failing the vulnerable members of society?

Eleanor Cornelius

Introduction and background

‘The law and its language affect the daily lives of virtually everyone in our society’ (Tiersma, 1999). Poor communication, either verbal or written, may lead to the miscarriage of justice, with grave consequences for those affected. Ordinary citizens expect not to understand statutes and documents such as regulations, wills and contracts. It thus seems that an ordinary civilian needs the help of a legal practitioner to understand the content of these documents. As Mellinkoff (1982) points out: ‘Ordinary people don’t understand the language of the law; and don’t like it – the language, the law, and being left out’.

This paper focuses on a booklet published by the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development in 2003 to explain some aspects of PEPUDA – the Promotion

of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, 4 of 2000. A person who picks up such a booklet – bright, colourful and bearing the title *Equality for All* – expects it to be in language he or she will readily understand.

The booklet may be regarded as an instance of intralingual translation, or an ‘alternative textualisation of a given authentic discourse’.

Did the changes made to the original required by simplification make the booklet more comprehensible to lay persons, compared to the Act itself? My discussion focuses on textual features and not on individual reader factors which may also influence comprehensibility, such as motivation, interest, purpose, social and cultural background and circumstances, or differences in decoding

and parsing skills, background knowledge and the interests of readers and the ability to make complex inferences.

Text simplification

Intralingual translation modifies a complex text, such as an Act or some other legal document, in order to fit the linguistic competence of a particular target audience. In this way, complicated content is unlocked and meaning mediated. The main focus of my analysis is the audience, since I wish to show that there is a mismatch between audience, language and other textual features in this booklet.

Audience and 'translation' model

In the process of legislative drafting, it is not possible to write for all the divergent audiences and readerships simultaneously. But this should not pose a problem when writing a simplified version for ordinary citizens. The aim of the *Equality for All* booklet is explicitly stated: to explain the Act and the functions of the Equality Courts. Surely the solution is to write for those people with the least power in society, those most likely to need help accessing legal assistance?

In modern functionalist and communicative theories of translation, the translator and the plain language drafter make choices which are recipient-oriented, and also pay attention to the function of the alternative simplified version. Such an instrumental approach to translation results in more natural-sounding and authentic texts.

The *Equality for All* booklet failed to fulfil its communicative purpose: the compilers of the booklet did not attempt to place the reader in a central position, or to recreate a novel and authentic target text with a new communicative function, or to bring the original content or linguistic form within the experience of the lay reader. As a result the reader is confronted with the same or even greater difficulty and incomprehensibility than in the Act itself – and the vulnerable members of society are thus failed a second time.

Example 1, taken from the booklet, has clearly been copied from another document (thanks to almost verbatim cutting and pasting from the Act). The reader will thus know that the booklet has not been honestly written for a particular readership (in this case a lay audience), which may result in lack of interest and reader alienation.

Example 1:

Dissemination and publication of information that unfairly discriminates

Section 12 of the Equality Act provides that no person may disseminate or broadcast any information, or publish any advertisement or notice that could reasonably be understood to demonstrate a clear intention to unfairly discriminate against any person. This does not, however, apply to valid engagement in artistic creativity, academic, or scientific inquiry, fair or accurate reporting in the public interest, or publication of any information, advertise-

ment or notice, in accordance with section 16 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, as amended, that deals with freedom of speech.

This discourse excludes the ordinary person who is already acutely aware of and possibly uncomfortable with the nature and conventions of legal language. Such discourses demonstrate a total disregard for the reader of the booklet, who quite possibly has limited reading experience.

Readability of the Act and the booklet

Both the Act and the *Equality for All* booklet were subjected to the Microsoft Word 2007 readability test, which provided a rough baseline for comparisons of the basic text features (total words, sentences, paragraphs etc.) of the Act vis-à-vis the booklet. In the light of strong criticism against the use of readability formulas, this was judiciously done, simply to provide a basic point of departure for the analysis. Table 1 gives an overview of the readability scores for the Act and the booklet.

Table 1:
Readability score results for PEPUDA and the booklet

| | PEPUDA | <i>Equality for All</i> |
|------------------------------|--------|-------------------------|
| Counts | | |
| Words | 9009 | 3229 |
| Characters | 47 717 | 17 183 |
| Paragraphs | 571 | 344 |
| Sentences | 147 | 85 |
| Averages | | |
| Sentences per paragraph | 1.0 | 1.8 |
| Words per sentence | 22.3 | 10.8 |
| Characters per word | 5.0 | 5.1 |
| Readability | | |
| Passive sentences | 14% | 9% |
| Flesch Reading Ease* | 35.9 | 45.9 |
| Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level** | 13.8 | 9.5 |

* For Flesch Reading Ease, the desired score is between 60 and 79 (on a 100-point scale): the higher the score, the easier the text.

** Number of years of schooling required to understand the text (US system).

Discourse features and organisation

The title page contains very little information: only the title of the booklet, *Equality for All*, and the title, number and date of the Act appear.

Headings are useful to organise and present text clearly: they indicate the organisation and scope of a text, i.e. they provide an outline of the document; they serve as useful signposts, assisting readers to locate specific information; and they provide cues about the nature of the content. In addition, headings may serve as instruments to engage the reader in the text and to ensure

involvement. Headings in the form of questions fulfil both these functions.

However, in most instances, the headings in the booklet resemble the headings in the Act, e.g. ‘Purpose of the Act’, ‘Institution of proceedings in the Equality Court’, ‘Appeals and reviews’. The reader is never directly addressed, either in the headings or in the body of the text itself. It is a pity, since the use of pronouns personalises the information.

One of the principles of good document design is to give an overview of the main ideas of the text, and to provide a context. The booklet starts with an introduction to the Equality Act (Example 2), but it does not describe what information is included, neither does it provide signposts for the document, nor any indication of how to use the booklet. The introduction is what the reader reads first; it should thus give the reader an indication of what he/she can expect from the text. This introduction does not invite the reader to carry on reading!

Example 2:

Introducing the Equality Act

As South Africans, our rights are entrenched and protected by the South African Constitution and its Bill of Rights. In turn, laws give effect to the various rights. The right to equality, as one of these rights, is protected by law in the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, 4 of 2000 and the Employment Equity Act, No. 55 of 1998. The two Acts work in synergy.

It should be noted, however, that the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, also referred to as the Equality Act, does not apply to any person to whom the Employment Equity Act applies, or to the same extent. The Employment Equity Act applies to all employers and employees, as defined by the Act, except the members of the National Defence Force, the National Intelligence Agency and the South African Secret Service. The Equality Act provides for those excluded from the Employment Equity (EE) Act, thereby including the unemployed and members of the aforementioned governmental agencies. The Equality Act can also be used by all the people of South Africa, including employers and employees, for disputes not provided for in the EE Act, such as hate speech.

The length of the booklet, based on word count, is approximately one-third of the length of the original Act (as indicated in Table 1). It is important to note that texts that have been simplified, elaborated or modified to reduce cognitive processing difficulties may sometimes result in a longer alternative text, because rephrasing the meaning more simply and giving explanations where necessary require additional words. In addition, the writer of a simplified text must provide missing cohesive links or restore implicit relationships between utterances.

Again, the simplification may result in a longer text, containing more explicit explanation and illustration in an attempt to aid comprehension.

It thus does not automatically follow that, because fewer words are used to convey information contained in the principal Act, the booklet facilitates ease of understanding and comprehension. What we want is a ‘wider spread of information’; this is a first step in moving away from the conventions of legal language, which is by default extremely dense, compound and complex. The drafters of the booklet focused almost exclusively on shortening the original and changing the way in which the content is presented, without any linguistic ‘treatment’ or intralingual ‘translation’. Compare the introductory paragraph in the Act (Example 3) to the corresponding material in the booklet (Example 4).

Example 3:

To give effect to section 9 read with item 23(1) of Schedule 6 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, so as to prevent and prohibit unfair discrimination and harassment; to promote equality and eliminate unfair discrimination; to prevent and prohibit hate speech; and to provide for matters connected therewith.

Example 4:

Purpose of the Act

The Equality Act aims to:

- prevent and prohibit unfair discrimination and harassment;
- promote equality;
- eliminate unfair discrimination; and
- prevent and prohibit hate speech.

The drafters shortened the information by leaving out the reference to the Constitution; the remaining information is included, unchanged, in the booklet but presented in the form of a bulleted list, which is somewhat more user-friendly.

There are many more examples of how, apart from shortening the original and in some cases presenting the information in another format and sequence, no attempt is made to explain, elaborate, clarify, motivate or facilitate comprehension by any other means. The definition of ‘harassment’ that is given – Example 5 – is the same definition that is provided in the Act; the only difference is that the different aspects that make up ‘harassment’ are listed separately. The meaning of the concept ‘harassment’ is not explained: a vulnerable, powerless member of society, and in all probability a second- or third-language speaker of English, will not be able to use the definition to determine whether he is the victim of harassment in the definition in Example 5.

Example 5:

Harassment is defined as:

- unwanted conduct which is persistent or serious, and

- demeans, humiliates or creates a hostile or intimidating environment, or is calculated to induce submission by actual or threatened adverse consequences, and
- which is related to sex, gender or sexual orientation, or a person's membership or presumed membership of a group identified by one or more of the prohibited grounds or a characteristic associated with such a group.

The same holds true for the inclusion of the definition of 'discrimination' in both the booklet and the Act. A definition in an Act is meant to be precise, clear and unambiguous, and every attempt is made to refer to every conceivable contingency. However, in an information booklet which has no legal force or effect, such issues should take a back seat to the primary goal of functional and communicative adequacy. The inclusion of examples – for instance, providing different scenarios which illustrate actions that constitute harassment or discrimination – may be of more value to the reader than the mere repetition of a definition which is formulated for a specialist audience of legislation.

An example – Example 6 – of what is not considered to be unfair discrimination is given, but the example is not user-friendly. Although the example is supposed to explicate, it does quite the opposite. The use of multiple negatives (in bold) – both explicit and implicit – binomial expressions (in square brackets and italics), a whiz deletion (the asterisk indicates the omission of 'which have been'), and a passive construction, militate against ease of understanding and render the example worthless.

Example 6:

If the **discrimination** is based on an **unlisted** ground, it is considered **unfair** if one or more of the conditions are established, **unless** the respondent proves that the **discrimination** is fair. For instance, it is **not** considered **unfair** discrimination to take measures * designed to [*protect or advance*] [*persons or categories of persons*] **disadvantaged** by **unfair discrimination**. This, however, does **not** apply in cases of **hate speech** and harassment.

Passive

The simplification strategy used in drafting the booklet, i.e. shortening by leaving out paragraphs, and cutting and pasting from the Act, causes a disjointed style which lacks coherence and cohesion. This kind of writing does not create a flow of information and therefore does not move the reader along, nor does it maintain reader interest.

Sources of linguistic complexity

There is no shortage of guidelines, hints and tips for producing texts in accessible and plain language, and 'how to' tips abound on the Internet and elsewhere. However, plain language manuals, even though they are easy to use, are essentially written for non-linguists. This may result in the dumbing down of the source text, simply because the plain language drafter – who is not a linguist – follows these guidelines to a T.

Constructions that impede comprehension
Particular lexical and grammatical constructions that are sources of difficulty in legal language include:

- nominalisations
- technical vocabulary
- complex and 'as to' prepositional phrases
- misplaced phrases
- whiz and complement deletion
- negatives (in particular double and multiple negatives)
- passive constructions (in subordinate clauses)
- doublets, triplets and word lists
- subordinate clauses in a single sentence (embeddings).

In addition, there are also a number of syntactic and discursal features which cause the reader problems with comprehension and cognitive processing:

- lengthy sentences
- lengthy initial case descriptions
- qualificational insertions
- syntactic discontinuity
- archaic language.

Constructions that enhance comprehension
One particular construction, namely modal verbs (*can, may, must* etc.), has been shown to *enhance* intelligibility, especially when used with personal pronouns. Using personal pronouns to address the reader directly 'humanises legal documents'. As pointed out earlier, this construction is conspicuously absent in the booklet. The reader is never directly addressed, which results in reader alienation.

Linguistic complexity in the booklet

The introduction (Example 7) is written in legalese – as is the rest of the booklet – with high information density which alienates the reader from the outset. In addition, almost all the characteristics of legal language, such as archaic deictics, passive constructions, technical specialist terms, binomial expressions, whiz and complement deletions, negatives, qualifications and low frequency words, are present in this introduction. This may cause the reader to lose interest immediately and to stop reading at once.

Example 7:

Introducing the Equality Act

As South Africans, our rights are entrenched and protected [*binomial expression*] by the South African Constitution and its Bill of Rights. In turn, laws give effect to [*complex phrase*] the various rights. The right to equality, as one of these rights, is protected by law in the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, No. 4 of 2000 and the Employment Equity Act, No. 55 of 1998. The two acts work in synergy [*low-frequency word*].

It should be noted [*truncated passive*], however, that the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, also referred to as the

Equality Act, does not [negative word] apply to any person to whom the Employment Equity Act applies, or to the same extent [complex phrase]. The Employment Equity Act applies to all employers and employees, as defined by the Act, except [implicit negative meaning; qualification] the members of the National Defence Force, the National Intelligence Agency and the South African Secret Service. The Equality Act provides for those excluded [implicit negative meaning] from the Employment Equity (EE) Act, thereby [archaic deictic expression] including the unemployed [negative prefix] and members of the mentioned [archaic deictic expression] governmental agencies. The Equality Act can also be used by all the people of South Africa, including employers and employees, for disputes [technical term; whiz deletion] not [negative word] provided for in the EE Act, such as hate speech [undefined specialist term; negative concept].

Conclusion and recommendations

The booklet falls short in providing access to information: where the principal Act is accessible to members of the legal profession or those people with legal training only, the booklet also caters to this small readership, leaving the vast majority of citizens out in the cold. This failure to inform ordinary South Africans of their constitutional rights compounds the problem of systemic inequalities in social structures, practices and attitudes, which is the very problem the Act seeks to eradicate. The ‘consolidation of democracy’, as envisaged in the Act, is not served at all.

The challenge is to make information available to the ordinary citizen, who does not have English as a first language, who lacks sophisticated knowledge of the law and who is not initiated in the language of the government, bureaucracy or the law. This challenge requires knowledge of theoretical linguistics in general, and knowledge of those linguistic structures and grammatical features which impede or enhance understanding in particular, as well as the skilled ability to apply these in a functional approach to intralingual translation.

It is apparent that the drafters of the booklet did not avoid the very lexical features and grammatical structures that impede comprehension and present readers with processing difficulty. It is therefore suggested that:

- the practice of using civil servants to compile such texts is not successful and should be abandoned.
- alternative textualisations of complex original texts should be done by skilled writers who have the required knowledge and sophisticated ability to produce user-friendly texts that are easy to understand.
- knowledge of plain language principles and the comprehension difficulty posed by particular features and structures should be included in the training of language practitioners in South Africa.

‘Plain language is not just about vocabulary. It involves all the techniques for clear communication – planning the document, designing it, organising it, writing clear sentences, using plain words, and testing the document whenever possible on typical readers’ (Kimble, 1996-1997).

The communicative purpose of the booklet is served, and the text succeeds only, if lay persons fully understand its content and are able to use it to solve problems in their daily lives. The use of inaccessible language, which is characteristic of power discourses, leads to the exclusion and marginalisation of people on different levels. If this happens, the ‘consolidation of democracy’, as envisaged in the PEPUDA, is not served at all, and valuable resources such as effort, money and time are wasted. ♪

Resources

<http://www.clarity-international.net/index.htm>
<http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/networkindex.html>
<http://www.languageandlaw.org/PLAINENGLISH.HTM>
<http://ssrn.com/abstract=1352075>
<http://www.plainlanguage.gov/library/kimble2.htm>
<http://www.plainlanguage.gov/library/kimble.htm>
<http://www.plainlanguage.gov/handbook/>
Revisiting Plain Language, by: Mazur, Beth, Technical Communication, 00493155, May 2000, Vol. 47, Issue 2

Robert Gentle completed his postgraduate studies in Aeronautical Engineering and Computer Science in France, where he worked in the corporate sector before returning to South Africa to become an award-winning financial journalist with *Business Day*. Today Robert runs a one-man consultancy, Plain Business Writing, which he founded in 1995. He has consulted for and provided writing training to dozens of corporates, and his training material has been bought by hundreds of organisations in South Africa and overseas, such as the Canadian Federal Government, Ernst & Young in London and NASA.

Beyond plain English

Robert Gentle

I still remember my first edit. I was an account director at a big corporate PR agency. One sunny morning, I received the proof of an annual report. ‘Ag, won’t you please just have a look at it,’ one of my colleagues asked. ‘You know, just check for typos and stuff. It’s not even an hour’s work.’ Nearly seven hours later, I was still working on the document, and when I finished it the next day, the pages were full of red ink.

The (by now almost unrecognisable) annual report was returned to the client by courier. There was a long and deathly silence. After two weeks my colleague said, ‘That’s it, we’ve been fired.’

The very next day, a big envelope arrived by special courier from the client who’d sent the annual report. There was a handwritten note inside. ‘Dear Robert,’ it said. ‘This is a marketing brochure that we’re about to put out. Could you please proof the copy as soon as you can and send it back to me?’

This was my first lesson as an editor – stand by your work. You’ll be respected for it.

A few years later, I was running my own little consultancy, Plain Business Writing (not Plain Business Editing!), when I learnt my second lesson – always get payment upfront.

The third lesson came when I was asked to edit a letter to the employees of a prominent financial services company in Sandton. The letter was about the value of each employee’s pension fund. After reading it, I phoned the client and said, ‘The English is fine, but you can’t send it out because nobody will understand it.’ Deathly silence.

To cut a long story short, I reworked the letter and sent it back the following day. The client was delighted. For those of you who are interested, the long story is in my book, *Read This! Business Writing that Works*, on page 116.

The lesson is: a good document is not just about grammatically correct English. If that were the case, then we’d have no problem understanding legal contracts. A good document is not even just about plain English. Rather, a good document is first and foremost about clarity. In other words, what are you trying to say? Clarity of thought leads to clarity of expression. As a Broadway theatre producer once said: ‘if you can’t write your idea on the back of my calling card, you don’t have a clear idea.’

This brings me to the final lesson I’ve learnt over the years, one which flows naturally from clarity of thought – clarity of presentation. How do the ideas flow? Is there a logical order? How are the ideas presented on the page in terms of white space, colour and font? Is complex information made easy to digest through the use of graphics, charts or pictures?

Presentation is critical. How often do we see informative, well-written documents undermined by poor design? One look and we put them aside, unread – all that editing and plain language for nothing. Communication is multi-dimensional. It goes beyond mere words and sentences.

Where do you find good writing? For me, without question, in the media. Take a top-notch, full-colour business magazine like *Fortune*: the language is clear, the design is easy on the eye and complex information is cleverly presented. You can take it all in at a glance. I think media like this holds a big lesson for us in making a consumer contract or policy document come alive.

What we as editors and writers do is only a part of what creates a clear, easy-to-understand document. Plain language isn’t the catch-all solution that the Consumer Protection Act perhaps holds it out to be; in fact, plain language is only the beginning. Our challenge is to go the extra mile and put a lot more than just plain language into our contracts and policy documents.

The one thing that hasn’t changed over the years is convincing a client that a document needs more work than he imagines it does. ‘Ag, won’t you just take a quick

look at this and check the English' is still very often the standard brief. Invariably, I have to remind them that I can do a light proofing for grammar, a heavy edit for length or a complete content restructuring for ease of understanding.

My advice? Always try to convince the client to go for all three – what I call The Full Monty. They might hate you for it at first, and it might take them a couple of weeks to recover from the experience, but they'll usually call on you again. 🐦



Rob Gentle during his entertaining talk.

PAPER 5

Frances Gordon's career began with travelling rural South Africa to research and write educational materials for adult learning. This sparked an interest in clear, simple communication which she began to apply in the corporate world. Frances has worked in the field of simplified communication since 1995.

Frances has worked on documents and websites for blue-chip international companies such as Capital International, Barclays Life, NatWest, Lloyds-TSB, Budget Insurance and Royal Mail. South African clients include Discovery, Liberty Group, First National Bank, Bond Exchange of South Africa and Alexander Forbes. She has written for various UK and South African publications, and has experience in printed, system-generated, Web, Intranet and SMS communication.

In 2005, Frances Gordon and Candice Burt founded Simplified, a training and consultancy firm that specialises in plain language. In 2009, Frances was invited to be part of the International Plain Language Working Group, whose purpose is to professionalise plain language and try to develop global standards for plain language.

Will international guidelines help or hinder plain language in South Africa?

International guidelines are by no means decided, and our regulators and clients must be strategic on the standards they set.

Frances Gordon (www.simplified.co.za)

Frances gave delegates an overview of international developments in plain language, then turned to South Africa, where international standards are not directly applicable to our multilingual, diverse society.

An international working group exploring the future of plain language

The International Plain Language Working Group was founded in 2008. In October 2009, the first draft of an options paper was distributed to attendees at the PLAIN conference in Sydney. The Working Group's task is to professionalise plain language. Among its aims are to explore a definition of plain language that applies globally, standards for plain language, certification and accreditation of practitioners, as well as research and advocacy issues.

The working group consists of practitioners from diverse countries (including South Africa) as well as representatives of three plain language organisations:

- Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN): PLAIN is a volunteer non-profit organisation of plain-language advocates, professionals, and organisations committed to plain language.
- The Plain Language Center: The Center is a non-profit organisation based in the US that promotes and supports plain language in government and business communications.
- Clarity: Clarity is an international group that advocates the use of plain legal language.

Developments at PLAIN

2008 saw the formal incorporation of PLAIN, with a new Board of Directors and Professor William Lutz as Chairman. Members include plain language advocates and practitioners from the US, Canada, France, Australia, South Africa, Namibia and Malaysia (Cheryl Stephens: <http://plainlanguage.com/blog/2009/01/looking-back-on-2008.html>).

The Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN) conference was held in Sydney, Australia, in October 2009. It was the world's largest international plain language conference yet, with about 300 delegates from the US, UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Mexico, Portugal, Sweden and South Africa. Speakers included some of the world's most influential plain-language advocates and practitioners. South Africans Frances Gordon and Candice Burt presented papers and seminars at the Plain Language Conference. Candice Burt, a co-founder of Simplified and the South African representative of Clarity, gave a plenary presentation called 'Laws set the framework for plain language in South Africa'.

Frances Gordon presented a workshop entitled 'Making plain language work' as part of a Corporate and Finance seminar aimed at Australian industry professionals. She took part in a panel discussion about plain language and other fields, where she discussed the lessons that plain language practitioners can learn from marketers.

Frances also reported back as member of the 12-strong International Working Group for Plain Language.

Other initiatives

A group, Plain Language Movement, was formed on Facebook, and another, Plain Language Advocates, was created on LinkedIn. In New Zealand, the Plain Language Power network was formed, and Plain Language arrived in Portugal where, for the first time, a governmental body (social security agency) adopted plain language (<http://plainlanguage.com/blog/2009/01/looking-back-on-2008.html>).

Setting PL standards in South Africa

One of the obstacles we face in setting plain-language standards in South Africa is that our linguistic and literacy contexts are diverse and under-researched. Currently, we rely on international best practice and informal research to inform our work in plain language. Some of the questions and issues as yet unanswered are:

- Who are the authorities?
- Various legal definitions
- Various guideline documents
- Various expert opinions
- Varied research outcomes
- Research biased towards English and towards developed countries
- Where will our regulators and our clients go for help with the South African standard?

International best practice principles give useful guidelines on what is probably easier for most readers to understand. It's certainly a good place to start. There are some principles (such as using a subject-verb-object structure most of the time) that can be accepted as more or less reliable. However, there are many others that are linguistically and culturally dependent. We have a very special situation of many important business and legal documents being in English only, while many South Africans are second language speakers of English. This, together with low literacy levels, changes the way people read, and what they find easy or difficult to understand.

There is certainly a need for more research to be done by researchers who have a solid grounding in the appropriate methodologies for plain language research. 🐦

Links:

- <http://www.centerforplainlanguage.org/>
- <http://www.clarity-international.net/>
- <http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/>
- www.plainlanguage.co.za



Frances Gordon with William Lutz, Chair of the working group, at the 2009 PLAIN conference in Australia.

A most interesting and informative workshop on plain English principles was held in the afternoon of the miniconference, facilitated by **David Langhan**. David is director of the Maskew Miller Longman Foundation and Educational Trust, which works to support disadvantaged schools in implementing the National Curriculum Statements. He has an MA in Applied Linguistics, his dissertation having been on the role of textbooks in hindering learning in black primary schools.

David taught at a Department of Education and Training school in KwaZulu-Natal for a few years in the mid-80s and then moved into the non-governmental organisation sector in teacher training, and curriculum and materials development in disadvantaged schools. After a brief spell as a publisher, he spent five years at the Teacher In-service Project in the Faculty of Education at the University of the Western Cape, as materials developer for school development projects.

David subsequently became publishing manager and then publishing director for Pearson Education South Africa, where he developed a new series of undergraduate textbooks aimed at bridging the gap between school and university. He then became responsible for accessibility and quality assurance for Pearson Education's new FET College Series of textbooks in 2006.

Workshop on plain English principles

Facilitated by David Langhan

The purpose of the afternoon workshop at the plain language miniconference was to make editors (and writers) more aware of the problems of second-language readers of English and how plain English principles can be used to make text easier to read. Not all authors and editors are used to writing for schools and colleges, and often know little about the learners and their needs. The conference attendees were divided into groups and worked with materials supplied by David Langhan, learning how to apply the principles of plain language in the context of further education and training. Their preconceived notions and set thought patterns were challenged against the background of the morning session's papers.

David explained the top-down/bottom-up model of how a reader processes text to create meaning. The model assumes that every reader brings a set of competencies to the reading task, and that every text is created on the basis of assumptions by the author/subject specialist/editor ('the writer') about the target readership and their likely competencies.

Bottom-up and top-down

Readers use two strategies to interpret a text: bottom-up and top-down.

A bottom-up strategy responds to elements of the text such as vocabulary, terminology, sentence structures and idiomatic expressions. In other words, this strategy involves the reader in responding to cues and clues in the text.

Top-down processing is more of a cognitive task. It involves the reader in fitting information in the text into his or her existing knowledge, cultural concepts and associated values, and the genre and language style of the text; and in predicting what the text will be about, and what will 'come next' in the text. In other words, the reader is constantly anticipating what the text will be about, and fitting each new piece of information into the comprehension that he or she is building up and progressively constructing. A skilled reader can do this even without understanding all the vocabulary – by making informed guesses about meaning.

Mismatches cause problems

Problems arise when there is a mismatch between the assumptions of the writer (and editor) and the competencies of the reader. Writers and editors need to be aware of potential mismatches and be able to assess their target readers' likely ability to construct the meaning of the text.

Writers and editors also need to be able to employ appropriate writing techniques that compensate for likely mismatches and make it easier for the reader to access meaning. For example, if a group of target readers are likely to have inadequate vocabulary, they are not likely to have the confidence to skip unknown words and use context and prediction skills to work out meanings. It is therefore essential for the writer and editor to know as much as possible about the readers' (English) language skills, educational level and life experience in order to determine how to write text that is not only accessible to the reader, but which enables him or her to develop new understanding through correctly interpreting the text.

Tips on writing accessible text

David offered some guidelines on writing (and editing) in line with specific reader competencies:

- Avoid abstract concepts in headings: instead of ‘andragogy’, use simple terms like ‘the principles of teaching adults’.
- Use easy, general English vocabulary. Always choose the simplest word you can; if you need to use a more difficult word, explain it by using simpler words.
- Use only necessary, subject-specific terms. New terminology is difficult to process, and should be kept to the absolute minimum.
- Explain new terms simply and fully. Use the reader’s life experience and compare or contrast the term with a more common meaning and give practical examples.

For example:

The word ‘housekeeping’ comes from housework. Housework is made up of all the things you do to take care of your house, like washing, cleaning and ironing. So how does housekeeping come into fitting and turning? Housekeeping in fitting and turning terms is keeping the workshop neat and tidy, and functioning properly (Langhan 2007:17).

- Make sure the links in the text are explicit. Use clear linking words frequently to show connections between ideas. Interestingly, readers find linking words that indicate a change or contrast (*however, on the other hand, alternatively*) harder to understand than words that indicate a straightforward progression (*because, in the same way*).
- Make sequences explicit. Use words like *first, second, next, then, after that*.
- Think carefully about the use of artwork in the text, and integrate illustrations clearly with the relevant words.
- Use scaffolding to support the reader. In the beginning, refer frequently to what the reader already knows; keep content brief and simple; explain new words carefully; use repetition and reminders. This reduces the reader’s anxiety and builds confidence. As the text progresses, gradually remove these props as the reader becomes capable of handling greater complexity. 🍷

Reference:

Langhan, D. 2007. *FET College Series: Write clearly*. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman.

GALLERY cont.



Ken McGillivray, Ellyn Barry and John Linnegar.



Sandra Mills, Melvin Vergie and Reinhard Sonntag.



Joan Fairhurst and David Langhan talking during the tea break.



Jester Maphisa, Mary-Jo Warner and Norman Blight.