

Sabine Kirchmeier / Anne Kjærgaard /
Margarethe Kvaraenes / Aino Piehl

Language use in public administration – what do we want?

This section was organised as a panel discussion with the aim of exploring some of the tensions and problem areas that can be found in language policy approaches with regard to plain language and multilingual language policies. Four main topics were introduced and the panellists were asked to contribute experiences, thoughts and ideas.

The topics were:

Plain language and the citizen

How plain can you be? Does plain language endanger or enhance respect for public institutions?

Plain language and economy

Are plain language strategies expensive or does plain language save time and money? And how is (or could) this be measured?

Plain language and multilingualism

How can plain language strategies support multilingual practices and vice versa?

Plain language and politics

How can we ensure a political focus on clear communication for all citizens in Europe? Could stronger cooperation between public institutions in Europe on plain language strategies (multi- or monolingual) and their effects have a positive impact?

The concluding discussion tried to explore whether EFNIL could play a role in enhancing the communications of public institutions in the future.

Participants in the discussion were Aino Piehl (FI), Margarethe Kvaraness (NO), Cecilia Robustelli (IT) and Anne Kjærgaard (DK), and the discussion was led by Sabine Kirchmeier.

In the following report, the contributions from the panellists for each main question are grouped together. Note that not all panellists made individual contributions on all subjects.

1. Plain language and the citizen

How plain can you be? Does plain language endanger or enhance the respect for public institutions?

Anne Kjærgaard pointed out that it is difficult to be plainer than the matter you are writing about allows you to be. Plain language is not about simplifying a complex reality. It is about conveying this reality without making it even more complex than it already is.

Whether plain language endangers or enhances respect for public institutions probably depends on the national culture – plain language possibly has the potential for both. In Denmark we tend to have a rather informal way of addressing each other, which reflects a rather informal tone of communication in general, but this does not seem to endanger respect for public institutions. Of course it is important to strive towards clear and correct language that also conveys information in a polite and appropriate way. Language can be plain and also convey information in an inappropriate way, for example by being impolite. That is obviously not what public institutions should aim at.

The argument that plain language can undermine respect for public institutions is from time to time put forward as an argument against it. The underlying assumption is that it is better to write in a complicated way if that is what it takes to ensure the respectability of a given institution, than to try to ensure that people understand what they are being told. This argument is highly problematic: information from public authorities is often very important and can have potentially vital consequences for people's personal lives. There is no excuse for conveying that type of information in a language that people cannot be expected to understand. A public institution that does not attempt to make itself understood does not deserve respect from the general public.

Margarethe Kvaraenes stressed that the degree of plainness partly depends on culture. There are cultural differences in Europe regarding the role which authorities play vis-à-vis their citizens. For instance in Middle and Southern Europe authorities might tend to take a more formal position, being more authoritative in their communications, and thus creating more distance.

The fact that very few contributions on international clear language conferences originate from Middle and Southern Europe could indicate a lack of interest in plain language issues. At the same time, the interest in plain language issues in the Nordic countries is high. One could say that authorities' efforts towards a more dialogue-based contact with citizens reflect the Nordic countries' egalitarian culture. To pick an example, the Norwegian tax authority operates from the assumption that citizens want to pay their taxes and get it right. The theory seems to be that if you show faith in people, you create commitment. The tax authority's communication with taxpayers reflects this view. Once again, it depends on culture: in the Nordic countries, authorities seem to gain respect by being more

transparent, whereas in other, more southern cultures, authorities might lose respect by being more “populist” in their communication.

Aino Piehl concluded that there are several ways to communicate plainly. The degree of plainness must always depend on the requirements of the current situation. In the recent Finnish campaign Clear Language for Administration, a plain language prize was awarded to a health care institution that communicates with all its patients in easy-to-read language which is meant for special groups, e.g. people with disabilities, the old and infirm, and immigrants. The easy-to-read policy received universal applause, and no one complained about information being given in language that was too simple. It is, of course, essential to assess the needs and skills of the target group accurately, and it is preferable to test if this assessment is correct rather than to rely on the assumptions of the authors and their peer group. Probably respect for public institutions grows out of the quality of services and communications rather than a ceremonial style in language.

2. Plain language and economy

Are plain language strategies expensive or does plain language save time and money? And how is (or could) this be measured?

Anne Kjærgaard pointed out that plain language strategies are an investment. Successful strategies should save time and money. It is important to emphasise that this is not only about the recipient. There are also benefits for the organisation (that is the public institution or private firm), and plain language work should be designed to take these into account.

Exactly how the effects of plain language strategies can be measured depends on the goals of the particular organisation. At the Danish Tax Authority they counted the number of calls from citizens regarding specific letters. They observed that after they had re-written a letter, the number of calls concerning that letter decreased – presumably because the recipients understood the letter better. This is just one example of how hard evidence on the beneficial effects can be provided.

Margerethe Kvarenes was convinced that plain language strategies can save time and money. But one must not underestimate the effort it takes to a) convince someone to make a change and b) to actually write in a shorter, more concise, more targeted way. So there is an investment to be made, but there are also long term benefits. There have been some surveys showing this, and there are methods available. For any measurement it is crucial to know the existing situation, for instance by retrieving figures from the helpdesk on how many questions or calls a specific letter generates. Then, after having introduced and distributed a revision of that same letter, one can repeat the questions and measure the results of the plain language effort.

Aino Piehl mentioned that it has actually been shown that good communication – appropriate contents, clear language, suitable tone of voice – does save a considerable amount of time (for examples see *Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please* by Joseph Kimble 2012). This does not only apply to communication between authorities and citizens. Significant improvements in efficiency can also be achieved by improving communication between authorities. The Institute for the Languages of Finland has found in studies it has conducted that authorities are often dissatisfied with the communications they receive from other public agencies.

Organising, writing better, creating support systems for writers (e.g. text banks) and training and motivating personnel takes time and costs money in the beginning. In the long run it pays to change old practices for more effective ones. The gain can be measured in many ways: counting the number of phone calls or email enquiries about letters, instructions etc. before and after the change; measuring the time taken to read documents before and after; counting the number of recipients of letters who comply with instructions or answer letters, or the speed with which they respond; comparing the feedback the authority receives before and after the change, etc.

3. Plain language and multilingualism

How can plain language strategies support multilingual practices and vice versa?

Margarethe Kvarenes stated that in a very practical sense, plain language is an advantage when you have to present a text in several languages. If the original uses clear language and a logical structure, the interpretation and translation into other languages becomes far easier. In this process, it is also common to discover flaws and ambiguities in the original, which can be amended accordingly.

Aino Piehl confirmed that multilingualism is an excellent plain language tool. If multilingualism is practised by translating texts into other language(s), ensuring regular interaction between writers and translators will produce both better source texts and better translations. Translators must understand the message, and if they are able to give feedback to writers and discuss issues with them, it helps writers to see where their texts need clarifying (or modifying in some other respect, such as tone). If feedback is included in the process, writers will be better motivated to receive comments and make changes in their texts. If a text can be written simultaneously in two or more languages, potential problems become apparent and can be solved during the writing process.

The cost of translation is often considered when public authorities decide which information will be presented in several languages. If the source texts are written clearly, translating is easier and can be done more quickly.

4. Plain language and politics

How can we ensure a political focus on clear communication for all citizens in Europe? Could stronger cooperation between public institutions in Europe on plain language strategies (multi- or monolingual) and their effects have a positive impact? And what role could EFNIL play here?

Margarethe Kvarenes: The Nordic Clear Language Network, where each Nordic Language Council has one representative, is of great use for its members. The network has had some support by the Nordic Council in the past, but it is unclear how much the Council will focus on clear language issues in the future. To spread plain language research, good practice, tools and experience to areas outside the Nordic region, it would be useful to have a plain language group within EFNIL.

Aino Piehl: Plain language is a field of activity that is mostly deemed as good and useful by politicians but is seldom prioritised. In spite of delays, misunderstandings etc, administration keeps rolling along even with difficult texts. It has been difficult to engage politicians to really see plain language as a key element in good governance, though politicians and authorities have agreed since the 1970s that official language must be clear; this has been required by Finnish law since 2003 and before that, this obligation was decreed by a government decision dating from 1982.

5. Does EFNIL have a role to play with regard to plain language?

There was strong agreement amongst the participants in the panel and in the audience that EFNIL should engage more in the language of public administration. Ensuring a political focus on clear communication in competition with lots of other important topics is difficult in every country. EFNIL could address the governments of the member countries by issuing a common statement, perhaps in an open letter, that stresses the importance of plain language for citizens' rights; the inclusion of all residents; and, last but not least, the efficient functioning of administration. A plain (or clear) language network inside EFNIL could help to develop such an initiative.

At the general assembly following the conference, EFNIL decided to establish a special interest group for language use in the public sector.

Bibliographical information

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