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*Reflections on clear writing in the European Commission*

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- **Rytis Martikonis, Director-General for Translation, European Commission**

The Director-General opened the conference by noting that we have a duty to our citizens and administrations. This is our commitment that we put into practice every day, improving writing with the purpose of clear communication and of administrative lightening. It's also important that today we're here to celebrate the practitioners, visionaries.

We are a community of practice, as seen by participants from across the European Commission here today; we are not alone.

The questions raised 10 years ago are equally important today. There is no saturation point. Our colleagues working in the Parliament and Council on citizens' outreach also show that it's a daily task. For the future, we also need to take it digital – need to ensure that digital tools serve the purpose of enhancing and augmenting quality.

- **Karl-Johan Lönnroth, former Director-General for Translation, European Commission**

He paid tribute to the pioneers of clear writing in the Commission. When he started in DG Translation (2000), he was surprised that editing the Commission's final documents wasn't compulsory; work focused more on output and translation itself than working on the input.

He noted that many texts suffered from excess volume, floral language masking superficial understanding and lots of jargon. Clearly there was a problem. Does our writing help democracy or does it give weapons to our adversaries?

The editing unit was set up in 2006 to offer a professional service and generate growing demand. The clear writing campaign was launched in 2009, starting with workshops, training, information and guidance, online helpline and website.

Progress has clearly been made – can we call clear writing a success? He thinks that it's a lifelong process, a continuous challenge.

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*Panel 1: taking the frustration out of administration*

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- **Katrin Hallik, Selge Sõnum, Estonia**

The 6th clear writing awards have just been presented in Estonia, with many nominations both from public and private sector – no-one is excluded.

How to sell clear writing: with enthusiasm, and as a tool for efficiency. They held a brainstorming workshop with a think tank on ideas (with info designers, linguists, usability designers) – concluded that all digital campaigns need clear language, as it's about communication and caring for people. It is a constant challenge.

Next idea: find friends. Also important to have top management on board to give guidance and set the tone. They had carried out a survey, which identified some obstacles, primarily organisational culture – lots of fear of making mistakes and taking responsibility, mass use of copy-paste. Solutions given through their survey include a feedback system, rotation of officials, training programmes, and sample forms. Most important is to keep enthusiasm and be patient.

Idea of think tank was to get clear writing into e-government. e-government works well in practical terms, but there's still a lot of legalese.

- **Barbara Altomonte, Protocol Unit, Presidency of Council of Ministers, Italy**

Italy has a legal obligation to be clear towards its citizens, which is written into the Constitution. Italy has very detailed legislation on clear writing as the country had to work hard to build its democracy after the war. Legislation heavily influenced by communication people and writers (Italo Calvino) – we don't have legalese so much as bureaucratese. Calvino spoke about the 'ante-lingua' (language against the people, against democracy). In Italy, we love bureaucratese!

We worked on a plain language dictionary of 7,000 words. We worked to encourage bureaucrats use plain language. Started in the 90s to produce more guidelines and manuals for public servants. We have a fundamental law from 2000 – communication in the public administrations, with 2 directives in 2002 (on the simplification of the administrative language) building on it:

- In addition to having legal value, administrative acts must have communicative value
- Must be both legally effective and communicatively effective.

The impact of these laws is varied, to different extents locally. Tuscany, Piemonte and Lombardy have started approaches to make practical acts clearer to citizens, e.g. on public health. Other regions are only just starting and are finding it harder, e.g. Abruzzo, regions in southern Italy.

Communication in public admin must be clear simple, concise and contain thorough and accurate information. Noted and appreciated the REI Italian language network led by DG Translation.

- **Johan Van Hoorde, Nederlandse Taalunie, the Netherlands**

The Union for Dutch language is a collaborative structure for both the Netherlands and Flanders. It is an instrument for common policy for Dutch language and literature. Johan also represents [EFNIL](#), a collaborative structure for language across Europe.

Use of plain language in public administration is also laid down in law. Their planned web service for clear writing has not yet got off the ground. They have an ongoing clear writing campaign in the Netherlands, and do lots of localisation between the Netherlands and Flanders too. They also have awards, guidelines, checklists, templates and meta information on starting a local initiative. Have a brigade of 100 writing experts to help staff in ministries, etc. Their goal is to re-write the 1,000 most frequently used texts – with texts on debt being the priority as the need for texts with a low reading age is high. The ELIPS project maps the role of plain language in European public bodies, with data from 23 countries. In the process of data processing and will publish a report in 2020 as a basis for future policy action.

- **Dirk Caluwe, Heerlijk Helder, Belgium**

Clear writing is not only about language but communication and behaviour. It is important to look at how behaviour changes when we give or receive a message – look at behavioural science. This helped develop their campaign strategy – they respect organisations' autonomy to avoid creating resistance. They ask the organisations to choose their own objectives, and to do a lot of the work themselves. Heerlijk Helder has a coaching role by advising.

Changing people's behaviour takes time, patience is essential. The more specific the project, the more lasting the effect it has. Use the 7E model: enlighten, enthuse, encourage, exemplify, enable, engage, experience.

Use behavioural insights to make texts more effective, with **checklist of behavioural techniques** for letters and mails. Guidance on language are only 1/5 of the instructions, mostly about how to get attention, reduce resistance and produce an effect. Collaboration with behavioural insights team.

- **Thomas François, Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium**

Presented the free digital site ([AMesure](#)) which gives texts get a readability score and linguistic assessment. The software highlights complexity, use of passive, abbreviations, and suggests simpler synonyms based on a list. Still has bugs, open to collaboration. There was a live demonstration.

The team at UCL are developing the program to help drafters of administrative texts to write more simply. Despite all the initiatives, still a problem understanding legal and administrative texts. Problems are that you need a detailed level of precision; perception of prestige. However, the simplified text was more readily understood by both expert and non-expert audiences. Suggested writing different versions of texts to suit different readerships, as what is clear for one reader is not for another.

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*Panel 2: measuring impact and success*

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- **Margrethe Kvarenes, President of PLAIN (Plain Language Association International)**

Just 10 years ago plain language was a little-known concept in Norway. It started with the public making a demand for clear writing to ministers. Over the years, work has been formalised with an initiative for legislation and pre-job training for law students. The icing on the cake is two pieces of pending legislation: the Norwegian language act and the public administration act.

5 core beliefs: clear writing promotes democracy and justice, promotes trust, saves time and money, promotes clear communication.

To measure effects, they look at:

- Effect on civil servants themselves – knowledge and attitude
- Effect on public – user testing
- Quantitative indicators measuring resources spent on clear language.

1<sup>st</sup> case - Immigration Appeals Board. Clear language without reducing legal precision. Still 6 pages long, but essential information first, and has summary on back page with clear headings and steps.

2<sup>nd</sup> case – local council info on moving into care. Used to take 3-6 months. For the council, leads to loss in rental income and low customer satisfaction. They reviewed the procedure and simplified it drastically. Application time reduced to 5 weeks, the council is saving money, and families are more satisfied. She raised the question of how much is the language itself and how much is due to a simplified and collaborative approach?

3<sup>rd</sup> case. Lasting change – it is change management, need to change working and writing culture. Presented the example of Kåre used by Norway's largest life insurance company as a metaphor for the customer who might be confused by their jargon. Has become shorthand for text quality and an excuse not to directly criticise colleagues but instead think of Kåre.

- **Maciej Ogrodniczuk, Jasnopis, Poland**

Presented an IT tool for assessing the linguistic difficulty of text. Similar to Amesure in many respects. Less than half population have secondary education, so surprisingly low reading age. Not to mention the need to communicate effectively with the immigrant population too.

The IT tool can take care of graphical form, composition, language and length. How to check if text isn't too difficult? Have developed checks, but quite costly.

- **Benedikt Lutz, Donau-Universität Krems, Austria**

Described his model for text comprehensibility. Took a cross-disciplinary approach, including cognitive science and psychology, information and graphic design, layout and usability engineering. Also involved writers and readers.

Important to raise language awareness without using linguistic jargon that puts people off.

All analyses must begin with the clear communicative goal for the text.

- **Jurgita Jaroslaviene, Institute of the Lithuanian Language, Lithuania**

There is a long tradition of linguistic advice in Lithuania. Lithuanians care about the quality of their language, particularly after the experience of their language being suppressed. The areas most are concerned about are spelling, loan words, and sloppy language in the media.

They measure impact by looking at literacy skills. The reality is that the clear writing skills of journalists is substandard; there is a need for professional editors. Lithuanian users want to participate in language and cultural events; there is a healthy public appetite for clear language.

Writing culture has changed with the digital wave – rushed prose, use of emojis, loan words from English. It has changed readers' attention span and writers' speed of production.

- **Sandra Fisher-Martins, Claro, Portugal**

10 years ago Sandra had a vision to change unclear language in Portugal. This had no institutional backing, was purely mission-oriented.

Inspired by our work here in Brussels, she started by producing plain language summaries. She gave a TED talk on plain language as a civil right. Impact: after summaries, Claro helped Telecom save €2 million; the highways body received 54% drop in complaints. 2015 general election – 2 parties committed to adopting plain language. Working with ministry of justice to rewrite documents – impact that access to legal aid went up 70%. Began working with the tax office after chasing them for 12 years!

Government spending cuts in 2016 meant no more money for plain language initiatives. Needed to think about building capabilities, not re-writing texts for people. Found that attitude, caring for people, was key. The attitude of a few key people was crucial. Changing attitudes paves the way to a much deeper change.

Unclear language is exclusionary by nature, it confers power on one group over another. Plain language became more embedded in organisations where top people gave explicit support.

Came up with formula for impact:

**function of training + support + incentives x attitude**

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*Panel 3: Communicating legislation and making it more accessible to a broad public*

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- **Ülle Madise, Chancellor of Justice, Estonia**

Writing clearly is a principle of good public administration. There is a public demand for clear communication. If we want the public to do something like pay a fine or to know they can apply for a grant, we need to explain clearly how to go about it. In other words, we need to help Europeans to translate and understand EU legislation by explaining in simple terms what their rights and obligations are.

There is a perception that texts need to be sophisticated and written in secret code that is only accessible to the few. This attitude only creates artificial barriers between the public authority and the people they serve. It is quicker to draft a long and unstructured report than to make it short, structured and clear.

A future initiative will be to raise awareness on the sensitives surrounding language, particularly in how to refer to people with disabilities, people suffering from mental health issues or the elderly.

- **Daina Vaivare, Head of Legal Acts Editorial Department, State Chancellery, Latvia**

Latvia has a similar database to Estonia. Each legal act has an explanatory note that explains the law in simple and clear terms. They also have guidelines including a chapter giving a step-by-step guide on drafting legislation. A 'self-testing' section aimed at staff who draft legislation is available on their drafting portal. A mobile app is also available to staff for drafting outside the office. Training courses are also available.

Guidelines on drafting letters, including templates are also available to staff.

- **Louise Wassdahl, Clear Language Adviser in the Riksdag (Parliament), Sweden**

Sweden's legal drafting process has two mandatory language revisions: the first is at the early stages of legal drafting and the second is towards the end stages of the drafting process. Consultations on language take place by email and by phone. Their parliamentary committee has the last word on the draft legal act.

Plain language courses are available and plain language is written into their strategic and operational plans. Sweden's 2009 Language Act puts into law that language used by public administrations must be 'correct, simple and comprehensible'.

- **Giles Goodall, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, European Commission**

Euromyths/fake news have their background in unclear language, e.g. bendy bananas, Commission bans letters to Santa because of data protection rules!

DG JUST communicates on a whole range of legislation that sets rights and obligations that directly affects the public. For example, they communicate on rules for cross-border divorces and victims' rights. To communicate effectively, they need to understand their target audience, be it consumers

or businesses and target their messages to them. They need to 'speak to them' by employing language that they will understand.

Change needs to come from the top. Therefore, endorsement from your managers is key. To illustrate this, the DGT-JUST 'JUST write clearly' campaign was used as a good example of what could be done to raise awareness and promote clear writing within the Commission. The biggest DG JUST social media campaign 'YOU'RE RIGHT TO'... #YourEURight was illustrated as a good example of clear communication.

- **Keynote address: Celebrating clear writing as part of our working culture – Ilze Juhansone, Acting Secretary-General, European Commission**

The Acting Secretary-General highlighted the new Commission President's six political priorities for 2019-2024:

1. A European Green Deal
2. An economy that works for people
3. A Europe fit for the digital age
4. Protecting our European way of life
5. A stronger Europe in the world
6. A new push for European democracy.

These priorities are issues that Europeans care about. A central part of this Commission's work will be to clearly communicate our actions in these priority areas. To be an efficient administration, we all need to be concerned by clear writing.

Financial jargon and acronyms have been banned from the European Semester reports including the executive summaries. The result is that reporting by the European press has significantly picked up.

The Acting Secretary-General wants all Commission staff to be trained in clear writing and sees a need to cooperate with other EU institutions on the clear writing cause.

Thanks to the 'exceptional work of DGTs editors', the 10-year milestone has been reached, 'now it is time to go deeper and to take clear writing to another level over the next 10 years'.