

Learning from linguistics: choosing our words wisely



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Broader Horizons is an occasional series of articles focussing on related fields of relevance to bereavement or to those who care for bereaved people. In this article Sarah Carr looks at how concepts from plain language have the potential to help communicate with bereaved people.

Abstract: It is important not to use language in a way that excludes some people. 'Readability' (or 'understandability', in the case of spoken language) is a useful concept from the field of plain language. It is applicable to choosing both vocabulary and sentence structure. This paper looks at techniques to help those working in bereavement support to select understandable words and phrases when communicating with clients. Drawn from linguistics (the scientific study of language), these include the natural phenomenon of accommodation and several techniques that can be used as development activities: identifying short words; identifying jargon; using a thesaurus; using a corpus; using Google; and checking with clients. The paper includes an illustration of these techniques.

Keywords: readability, understandability, vocabulary, jargon.

Introduction

'Language can be used to oppress others by excluding them. This is done by, for example, educated people to exclude the uneducated and by professional people to exclude the non-professionals. Both the words used (vocabulary) and the way they are used in sentences (grammar) can be used to prevent others understanding you, and therefore making them feel left out and inferior. As counselling moves towards greater professionalism, it is important that we do not fall into the trap of excluding people with the language we use.'
(Sanders, 2011, p82)

Some people do use language purposely to exclude others – hence the term 'doublespeak', coined by George Orwell to mean 'language that is deliberately unclear or ambiguous' (Waite, 2007). But many more, including those working in essentially altruistic occupations (such as bereavement support), use language that is unintentionally unclear or ambiguous. Sometimes, this can be due to the essentially 'slippery' nature of words; as Parkes (2007, p23) observes: 'Some of the words and

terms in common usage following bereavement are ambiguous or likely to be misunderstood.' Another common cause of misunderstanding – or even not understanding – is our use of language that is not part of our clients' vocabulary (in the case of words) or grammar (in the case of sentences). This is a very human error: as forms of language become familiar to us, we simply forget that they may not be so to others: it is very difficult to view our own language use objectively.

Of course, successful communication – so important in bereavement support – is not just about the words used; tone of voice and body language are also important sources of information on the client's feelings and thoughts. But the language used is vital – and especially when support is provided not face-to-face, but by telephone (when body language is invisible) or by email (when, in addition, tone of voice is inaudible). These are both increasingly popular modes of bereavement support in today's busy, digitised world. For example, the number of calls to the Cruse National Helpline increased from 5,881 in 2012/13 to 9,978 in 2013/14 (Cruse, 2013, 2014).

In this paper, I explain the concept of ‘understandability’ (often known as ‘readability’ when applied to written language, as it most often is), a key concept in plain-language writing and editing (which has been my main paid work since 1997). Ironically, ‘plain language’ is a rather misunderstood term. Often thought to be about simplification, plain language is in fact matched to the needs and abilities of the readership or audience. So if you are writing or speaking to a group that is highly educated or shares a technical vocabulary (for example, members of a profession), it is fine – and often desirable – to do so at their own level. However, the average reading age of the UK population is estimated as 12 to 14 years (Cutts, 2008).

Having explained ‘understandability’, I introduce simple tools and techniques for assessing how understandable specific words and phrases are likely to be to your clients, so helping ensure that the vocabulary you use in bereavement support is as person-centred as possible. There is no space here to look at ensuring that sentence structure is clear – what Sanders (2011) refers to as ‘grammar’ – but this may be covered in a future article.

Elements of understandability

If language is understandable, it means that the target readers/listeners can understand it quickly and easily the first time they

read/hear it. To assess whether a written text is understandable (in deciding whether to grant accreditation with the Clear English Standard), Plain Language Commission uses the criteria shown in Table 1. The five elements of understandability listed – purpose, content, structure, style and grammar, and layout and design – are typical of those used by plain-language practitioners the world over.

Communication in bereavement support differs from typical plain-language work (ie. documents aimed at the general public) in several key respects:

- It is much more often spoken than written (ie. in face-to-face and telephone support) – though organisations will also produce written information on their services (eg. leaflets and websites).
- Where it is written, it is usually in electronic rather than print format (ie. in email support), and takes the form of a short message rather than a long document.
- It is aimed at one specific individual (the client) rather than an often-heterogeneous group of people.
- It is not one-way but part of a dialogue between practitioner and client.
- Those producing it (whether paid or voluntary) tend to have been trained and have agreed to follow some kind of code of conduct.

Table 1: Accreditation criteria for Clear English Standard

Purpose

- Is the purpose obvious or stated early and clearly?

Content

- Is the information accurate, relevant and complete, anticipating readers’ questions and answering them?
- Are essential technical terms explained or defined?
- Is a contact point stated for readers who want to know more?

Structure

- Is the information well organised and easy to navigate through, with good headings and sub-headings?
- Is there good use of illustrations, diagrams and summary panels?

Style and grammar

- Is the style right for the audience, with a good average sentence length (say 15–20 words), plenty of active-voice verbs, and reasonably short paragraphs?
- Is the document free of pomposity, verbosity and officialese (no aforesaid, notwithstanding, hereby, adumbrates, commencements and inter alias)?
- Is the text grammatically sound and well punctuated?
- Is capitalisation consistent in text and headings?
- In any contents page, are headings consistent with those in the text?

Layout and design

- Does the document look good?
- Is the type easily readable and is there enough space between lines of type?
- Is there a clear hierarchy of headings and spaces?
- Have emphasis devices, such as bold type, been used well?

Source: Plain Language Commission (2011)

- The purpose of the communication has already been agreed (eg. through the counselling contract provided by a qualified professional, or through the leaflet and service description that a volunteer may instead offer).
- The content of the communication cannot be judged by a third party, as it is confidential and is determined using professional competence and standards.

Taken together, these features of bereavement support mean that, of the five elements of understandability listed above, it is indeed style and grammar that are of greatest relevance here. This reflects the importance of ensuring that your vocabulary and grammar are inclusive, not exclusive. It is important to use words and phrases that are familiar to the target readers or listeners, and that match their language level.

Identifying familiar words

So how can you tell which words will be familiar to your client? The fact that bereavement support involves two- rather than one-way communication is a great help here: what your client says or writes to you shows what types of words they are comfortable with. Hence, reflecting their words is initially safest. When you need to use your own words (eg. in paraphrasing), various simple techniques – one natural and the others requiring more conscious effort – can help to identify suitable ones.

The natural phenomenon is 'accommodation', a term from linguistics that describes what happens when two people from different social or educational backgrounds communicate: their language use tends to converge. Crystal (1987, p51) reports: 'Modifications have been observed in several areas of language, including grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, speech rate, use of pause, and utterance length.' He notes, however, that much depends on people's attitudes towards each other (and so the desirability to each of speaking like the other). While I am not aware of any research on accommodation in counselling, I would think that empathy and unconditional positive regard – two of the core conditions generally seen as important in all forms of counselling and support – would promote accommodation in the practitioner.

Other techniques cannot be used in the midst of a client session, but are useful as separate professional-development activities; I outline several such techniques in the following sections.

Identifying short words

Of course, some clients may prefer to use complex words (in which case you can reciprocate), but generally, shorter words are more familiar (and so easier to read) than longer ones. Of the most frequent 200 words in British English, 174 have one syllable, 24 have two syllables and only two have three syllables (Gramley & Pätzold, 1992).

Spoken language (unless it is prepared, for example a speech) tends to be naturally less formal than written language,

and emails tend to be more conversational in style than other forms of writing. Counselling is therefore off to a good start when compared to many inherently drier forms of written communication, in which it is easier to slip into the trap of using the 'aforesaid, notwithstanding, hereby, adumbrates, commencements and inter alias' referred to by Plain Language Commission (2011).

As with all guidelines, though, there are exceptions:

- Some longer words may be familiar to most people (for example, *anxiety*, *depression* and *misery*). Longer words like these are generally fine to use. But if there is a shorter word, you may as well use this, as it is likely to be even easier to understand.
- Some words may be short but unfamiliar. This includes many foreign words and phrases, particularly Latin ones. Some (for example, *vice versa*, *per cent* and *etc*) have become so common that most people understand them. But others (such as *per se*, *inter alia*, *ipso facto* and *sine qua non*) are less well understood. Foreign plurals can also be tricky, so it is clearer to use English plurals where possible – for example, *indexes*, *formulas* and *focuses* rather than *indices*, *formulae* and *foci*.

Identifying jargon

'Jargon' can be defined as technical terminology that is unfamiliar to laypeople. Most professional and special-interest groups have such terms, which may take the form of abbreviations. They are a useful form of shorthand between those in the know (for example, *continuing bonds* and *UPR* (unconditional positive regard) in this field) but can alienate and/or confuse others (Carr, 2002). The Acronym Finder website, for instance, lists over 20 phrases for which *UPR* is the short form. Parkes (2007) notes that care is needed in using various bereavement-related terms, including *grief*, *mourning*, *meaning-making*, *dependent* and *empathy*, as well as words used to refer to the disorders of grief.

If it is possible to omit jargon and abbreviations without losing meaning or being more long-winded, by all means do so. But, from an ethical viewpoint, using technical terms can empower clients – just as a doctor would use the medical term for a condition when diagnosing it in a patient, so that the latter could look it up, talk to friends and family about it etc. 'The risk of misunderstanding is no reason to stop using these terms; problems can be avoided if we take care and clarify our usage when necessary' (Parkes, 2007, p23).

The important thing is to briefly explain any jargon that you use, in plain English. Exactly the same guidance applies to abbreviations: use the full form the first time you mention it, again adding a brief explanation if need be.

Using a thesaurus

Sanders (2011, p110) suggests spending time 'developing a "feelings vocabulary"' by writing down all the feelings words you know, asking others for contributions, and grouping the words

under types of feelings (eg. those relating to anger, sadness, fear etc). This exercise can be extended by using a thesaurus to explore words of different lengths and origins, with similar meanings.

Using a corpus

To check the frequency of different words and phrases in language, linguists often use a corpus (database of written and/or spoken material). For example, the web-based British National Corpus (BNC) is a 100-million-word searchable collection of samples of written and spoken language from a wide range of sources, designed to represent a wide cross-section of British English from the later part of the twentieth century. You can search it free of charge at <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>. The Simple Search results give up to 50 real sentences containing the word or phrase you searched for, and show the total number of occurrences in the corpus, which is useful in knowing how familiar it is likely to be to clients.

One drawback of the BNC Simple Search is that some words can have more than one meaning and/or be used as more than one part of speech. For example, *cross*, as well as being an adjective describing a feeling (eg. *she was cross*), can also be a noun or a verb (eg. *she drew a cross* and *she had to cross the road*). So, if you search the BNC for *cross*, you get 7392 results, yet only 3999 for *angry*. You might therefore conclude that *cross* was a more familiar term than *angry*, but a more specialised search using a code to indicate that you wanted to find only adjectival uses of *cross* gives just 134 occurrences, suggesting *angry* is in fact much more common.

It is important to use words and phrases that are familiar to the target readers or listeners, and that match their language level

The other drawback of the BNC is that only 10% of the corpus is spoken language. (This may also explain the relative rarity of *cross*, being a less formal alternative to *angry* and therefore less common in writing than in speech.) In any case, I would expect that the more complex (and so time-consuming) search required to differentiate between word classes is unlikely to appeal to busy people.

Using Google

A more straightforward alternative is to use Google, with Meyer, *et al* (2003, p241) observing: 'Increasingly, corpus linguists have begun using the World Wide Web as a corpus for conducting linguistic analyses.' Indeed, the internet represents a particularly up-to-date record of everyday language: 'We were particularly struck in our analyses by the "unfiltered" nature of the Web: much of the data we encountered in our analyses was unedited

and thus reflective of how people actually use language' (Meyer *et al* 2003, p253).

As well as being a familiar tool to most internet users, Google has the advantage that rather than having to add linguistic codes to help differentiate the sense of the word that you wish to search for, you can simply add other everyday words. So, for example, you could search for *feeling cross* to help Google filter out the non-adjectival occurrences of *cross*. While a Google search for *cross* returns 1520 million results, a search for *feeling cross* gives 209 million. The much-higher proportion of *cross* (in the sense of a feeling) on Google (13.8%) than on the BNC (1.8%) is explained, I believe, by the fact that *cross* is a relatively informal word and Google is likely to contain more everyday language than the BNC.

While Cutts (2011) suggests that a BNC frequency of 1200 or more means the word or phrase is 'fairly common', it is not feasible to set a value for Google results in this way, as the number of web pages is increasing all the time (ie. the size of the corpus is limited in the BNC but not in Google). Although this makes it tricky to check out the likely familiarity of a single word or phrase using Google, it is still very useful in comparing the relative frequencies of similar words. In the next section, I illustrate this technique.

Illustrating the technique

Using the section on processing the pain of grief from a popular book on grief counselling (Worden, 2010, pp43–46), as a trusted source of bereavement-related terms, I took nine nouns used there to describe common feelings following bereavement: *anger*, *anxiety*, *depression*, *dysphoria*, *grief*, *guilt*, *loneliness*, *pain* and *sadness*. For each, I used a thesaurus (Waite, 2007) to look up words with similar meanings. There were between five and 15 alternatives for each word – except 'dysphoria', for which none was given, suggesting (not surprisingly) that it is an unusual word (technical jargon from psychiatry: fine in Worden's book but less useful in communicating with clients). I then checked the frequency of each original word and synonym using Google, preceding each with 'feeling'.

Table 2 shows the results of this exercise, with each cell representing one group of emotions, ordered by Google prevalence (with number of occurrences in brackets). Short words (defined as those with one or two syllables) are in bold. These do tend to appear higher up the frequency lists – and so are generally the most appropriate to use in communicating with clients.

Meyer *et al* (2003, p253) note: 'Although frequency information generated by search engines must be interpreted with caution, such information is "suggestive" and can give a sense of which linguistic usages are common and which are not.' Like the BNC, the internet can also be used to see the contexts within which specific words and phrases are commonly used: 'In addition, the examples that can be found on the Web are valuable for establishing common patterns of usage' (Meyer *et al*, 2003, p253).

Table 2: Words for loss-related emotions, and their frequency in Google results

Anger	Anxiety	Depression
anger (96.1) outrage (52.4) rage (42) annoyance (32.1) fury (23.2) irritation (17.3) wrath (13.9) irritability (7.5) indignation (4.5) exasperation (0.5) vexation (0.4)	fear (195) concern (188) worry (150) anxiety (120) nerves (29) apprehension (12.4) agitation (11.7) angst (11.4) apprehensiveness (9.3) nervousness (7.4) tenseness (1) unease (0.7) uneasiness (0.6) disquiet (0.4) fearfulness (0.3)	depression (121) sadness (46.2) despair (37.3) misery (27.8) sorrow (24.1) melancholy (11.3) gloom (8.5) hopelessness (6.3) unhappiness (3) desolation (0.6) despondency (0.4) melancholia (0.4)
Dysphoria	Grief	Guilt
dysphoria (0.4)	pain (198) grief (68.4) distress (57.9) sadness (46.2) misery (27.8) sorrow (24.1) mourning (16.9) agony (14.6) mournfulness (13.4) anguish (10.7) bereavement (6.1) woe (2.3) heartache (1.1) desolation (0.6)	shame (95.6) regret (72.4) remorse (8.3) guilt (5.8) contrition (4.3) self-reproach (0.3)
Loneliness	Pain	Sadness
isolation (71.7) rejection (47.7) loneliness (24.7) abandonment (14.9) friendlessness (0.5)	pain (198) grief (68.4) distress (57.9) sadness (46.2) despair (37.3) torture (30.9) misery (27.8) agony (14.6) sorrow (24.1) heartbreak (6.6) torment (3.5) unhappiness (3) heartache (1.1) wretchedness (0.4)	depression (121) grief (68.4) sadness (46.2) misery (27.8) sorrow (24.1) melancholy (11.3) mournfulness (9.6) gloom (8.5) unhappiness (3) woe (2.3) heartache (1.1) gloominess (1) despondency (0.4) dejection (0.4) wretchedness (0.4)

Checking with clients

Whichever words you choose to use with clients, it is always a good idea to take the time and trouble to discuss and clarify their meaning in the particular context. Parkes (2007, p25) advises:

'Words are the symbols we use to communicate meaning. They are useful only if the meaning they convey is shared between individuals. Much of the time minor differences, shades of meaning, are of little importance ... Problems only arise when sloppy or ambiguous language leads to misunderstandings or failure to communicate important issues.'

Misunderstandings may be particularly likely when communicating with non-native English speakers: 'Our ethnic and cultural background will affect both how we think and the meaning we construe in the words of others' (Wilson, 2014, p167). Other languages may use terms that are not easily translated into English, being embedded in complex cultural understandings and meanings, just as English too may use words that are culturally specific: 'Contrast the Spanish translation of grief as *afliccion*, '*affliction*,' with its implication of misfortune and injury from some outside source to be suffered passively, with the English term *grieving*, conveying a more internal and potentially active connotation' (Neimeyer & Keese, 1998, p231). Contrastive linguistics is a specialist branch of linguistics that studies the similarities and differences between present-day languages.

'Be short, be simple,
be human'

Conclusion

Sir Ernest Gowers, author of the famous book *Plain Words* (first published in 1948), summed up plain-language guidance well in his 'three fundamental precepts': 'Be short, be simple, be human' (Gowers, 1986, p22). While being human is a vital part of both plain language and bereavement support, attention to brevity and simplicity – and so to clarity – may also enhance our effectiveness as bereavement support workers. ■

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