

## Plain Language in Finland

**The principles, need and justification of plain language<sup>1</sup> have been subject to discussion in Finland in recent years. Participants in the discussion have included language researchers, users of plain language and their representative organizations as well as authorities, writers, etc. The same discussion is presumably taking place in all countries where plain language publications are produced and the overall idea of plain language is generally known. This article provides an overview of the situation in Finland – and thus hopes to contribute to the international discussion on the theme.**

Common language is a language form shared by various age and occupational groups within a linguistic community. Its outward form is in accordance with the standards of the written language, it uses a vocabulary that is known to be commonly understood and has a simple sentence structure. In comparison, plain language should appear even simpler.

In Finland plain language is defined in these terms: Plain language is a form of the Finnish language which has been adapted in its content, vocabulary and structure so that it is easier to read and understand. Its purpose is to help people who have difficulties in reading and/or understanding the common language.

So how many people need plain language? The question is difficult to research because some of the potential users of plain language can be hard to reach. Problems are also caused by a so-called ‘acquiescence bias’. It means that the test subject tends to give the kind of answers that he or she considers correct from the asker’s perspective (Matikka & Vesala 1997). It is a familiar problem among researchers who have worked with people with intellectual disabilities or severe speech impairments. The problem may however also surface when interviewing, for example, immigrants or aging people.

It has also been noted that a person’s own perception of their reading skills may be incorrect. This became evident in an adult literacy survey conducted in Finland (Linnakylä et al. 2000). Adults with the weakest reading skills did not very often assess their own literacy as poor, even though they had considerable problems with reading. The researchers concluded that adults with poor reading skills were unrealistic about what kind of literacy is required in today’s professional life and society.

In other words, assessing the need of plain language is a very challenging task. A good basis for the assessment can however be found in international literacy surveys (e.g. PISA, Välijärvi et al. 2002). There are also certain other figures available – for example, the number of school children receiving special education is known precisely in many countries.

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<sup>1</sup> In many countries plain language is referred with the term *easy-to-read*. In Finland we have decided to use the term *plain language* because it is more applicable to different linguistic environments, such as spoken language and interaction.

Since there are no direct research results on the need of plain language in Finland, the Plain Language Centre has presented an average estimate at the beginning of the 2000s. According to the estimate, the need for plain language varies in the different age groups and the target group includes around 200 000–350 000 people in Finland (4–7 % of the population). The estimated share of children and young people is 4–8 %, for working age people it is 4–6 % and for over 65-year-olds 10–20%. (Virtanen 2002).

## **Users of plain language**

The reasons behind the need for plain language are highly varied. Among the most important are fetal and childhood development disorders (genetics), illness and ageing, and different factors connected with the social environment, such as belonging in a linguistic minority. In many cases the need is based on a combination of these factors, which makes it even more pronounced.

The people that benefit from plain language are often difficult to categorize in groups because the groups tend to overlap in many respects. It is also obvious that only a part of a given group can be expected to benefit from plain language. With children and young people the most distinct user group is students receiving special education both in comprehensive school and in vocational training.

The cause of a child's or a young person's learning difficulties is not always known. More than one background factors may be involved. Research results at present seem to indicate that linguistic problems are caused by neurological malfunctions in the brain's language processing mechanisms, which each may derive from different genetic background factors. Since it appears that the human linguistic system is quite capable of overcoming its difficulties on its own and there are various routes for language development, permanent problems only arise when there are a number of different background factors affecting the development (Aro et al. 2007).

Educational authorities in Finland have listed the reasons on the basis of which a student qualifies for special education. Young people are accepted in vocational special education if they have, for example, problems with perception, attention and concentration, linguistic difficulties, development delays or learning difficulties connected with autism or the Asperger Syndrome. With these students the need for plain language is probably the most obvious, and with most of the members of the groups the problems with understanding are likely to continue into adulthood.

The problems with understanding language that appear mostly in adulthood can be caused by, for example, strokes or memory loss due to ageing. Another distinct group of users of plain language is made up of immigrants who are still learning the language. Besides these groups, plain language can also be useful to linguistic and ethnic minorities, people receiving psychiatric rehabilitative treatment, marginalized persons and, sometimes, also ordinary school children and the general public. (Virtanen 2009).

These groups are summarized in the following list. Plain language is needed by people

1. who have problems with perception, attention and concentration (e.g. ADHD, FASD)
2. who have linguistic problems (reading difficulties, dysphasia)
3. whose development is delayed (people with intellectual disabilities or other complex learning difficulties)

4. who have learning difficulties connected with different forms of autism
5. who suffer from impairments connected with cerebral circulation (e.g. aphasia)
6. who suffer from memory decline (especially dementia) or have other problems relating to old age
7. who are learning Finnish as a second or foreign language (most commonly immigrants)

## **Guidelines for writing in plain language**

In Finland it has been commonly agreed that plain language should follow the general grammatical guidelines for common language. When exceptions have been made, the feedback, especially from teachers, has been markedly negative. It is also stressed that writing plain language is not just a question of technique and following guidelines, the writer's own creative contribution is of primary importance just as it is in all forms of writing (especially with fictional content).

Principles for writing in plain language were compiled in the 1990s in the international "Guidelines for Easy-to-Read Material" published by the International Federation of Library Associations IFLA (which operates under the UN). The guidelines are currently being updated.

Specific guidelines have been developed in Finland which are based partly on the international guidelines and partly on domestic linguistic research. A significant turn took place in 2009 when the guidelines were reformed with an approach proceeding from different levels of language. In the Finnish classification the levels of language are defined as:

1. Level of text
2. Level of vocabulary
3. Level of concreteness
4. Difficult structures of language
5. Level of sentences

It is very important that the writer considers all the language levels during the writing process – it is not enough to simply change, for example, the vocabulary and the length of sentences. In the following list the guidelines for writing in plain language are presented by language level.

### Text level

- \* Consider whether the topic has been correctly selected.
- \* Define the reader group at which the publication is aimed.
- \* Include a member or members of the target group in the planning process if possible.
- \* Consider what prior information the readers have on the topic.
- \* Decide whether you are going to adapt the text or rewrite it completely.
- \* Decide whether you are going to change the genre, perspective or style.
- \* If the text is aimed at adults, use adult language.
- \* Consider the order of presentation.
- \* Consider what kind of structure would be the best.
- \* Consider what kind of structure would be logical and easy to understand.
- \* Outline the topic.
- \* Consider what you want the reader or listener to learn or remember about the subject. Or is the purpose of the text to provide experiences and entertainment?
- \* Make sure there are no informational gaps in your text.
- \* Consider what the reader's motivation would be to read the text.
- \* Avoid references to other parts of the text.

### Vocabulary level

- \* Use mostly common, familiar words.
- \* Avoid professional or specialized language forms.
- \* Explain the conceptual, difficult words and expressions in the text.
- \* Avoid very long words.
- \* Remember that words can have many meanings.
- \* Consider it carefully when you use metaphors and sayings.
- \* Don't use too many word variations.
- \* Be careful with large numbers, avoid abbreviations.

### Concreteness

- \* Be concrete: avoid abstract expressions, use examples.
- \* Locate the topic in time and place.

### Difficult structures

- \* avoid difficult grammatical cases.
- \* avoid difficult verb structures.
- \* avoid the passive voice.
- \* avoid unnecessary negative constructions

### Sentence level

- \* Favor short sentences.
- \* Contain only one important issue in one sentence. Don't pack too much information into one sentence.
- \* Avoid difficult sentence structures and elaborate adjunct clusters. Contain the most important issue in the main clause and the specifications in the subordinate clause.
- \* Present the familiar subject matter at the beginning of the sentence and the new subject matter at the end of the sentence.
- \* Use normal word order when there is no special reason to use inverted word order.
- \* Make sure that the sentences connect to each other logically.

The following guidelines are for checking the text:

- \* Reread the text after some time has passed and improve it where necessary.
- \* Check that the structure is logical.
- \* Consider whether all the details really are necessary.
- \* Also consider the question in reverse: does your text include enough new information or have you just been repeating self-evidences?
- \* Reading the text aloud is often helpful in polishing up the text. It helps you to realize if the text still contains stiff expressions of formal, written language.
- \* Try to get a member of the target group to give you feedback on the text.
- \* Have another writer of plain language read through your text.

These guidelines have been presented in more detail in the guidebook on plain language written by Hannu Virtanen (Virtanen 2009). In it each clause is followed by various examples that concretize the given guideline. Some of the examples are strongly bound to the Finnish language, others are also applicable to other languages.

### **Readability formulas are not of much use**

Every now and then it is claimed that the easiness or difficulty of language can be assessed by different readability formulas. Such formulas have been prepared by various linguistics around the world. The aim has been that they could be used to categorize texts with different difficulty ratings (e.g. Swedish LIX, which can be viewed at [www.lix.se](http://www.lix.se)). Readability formulas have however regularly met with strong critique. They have been said to be sketchy or even unanalytical: in fact they often tend to just list a group of factors that can be expected to affect the reading process. One readability formula can take into account and reflect only a small part of the many qualities of a text.

Apart from readability formulas, also plain language has been subjected to critique in Finland. It has been questioned whether same guidelines can be issued for different text types. The differences in the reader groups have also caused doubt – can a same text be suited for a diverse range of readers. The discussion has led to the notion that in the future the guidelines for writing plain language need to be developed in two directions: more specific guidelines should be prepared for the different reader groups on the one hand, and for the different text types, on the other. The reader groups may differ in, for example, how the memory supports the reading process (Numminen 2002, 2006).

This said, it should however be stressed that there are more factors in common among the reader groups than differences. This was evidenced when, for example, Finland switched its currency from marks to euros. Different operators produced in collaboration an extensive body of plain language material that described the new monetary system. The material was well received among the different plain language user groups and it did not turn out necessary to produce specific, linguistically different materials for the different groups.

#### Plain language applications and the Plain Language Centre

Plain language books have been published in Finland since the beginning of the 1980s. They can be fictional or non-fictional works either written directly in plain language or adapted from a previously published common language book. A total of 300 books have been published so far. They include, for example, adaptations of the novels of the popular author Arto Paasilinna and the Finnish national epic, Kalevala. Half of the books have been non-fictional, half have been fictional. Almost all genres of literature have been represented, including a few poetry collections. The State supports the publication of plain language books.

There are three plain language newspapers published in Finland. The Leija-Magazine aimed at intellectually disabled readers started to come out in 1983, the current affairs newspaper, Selkouutiset (Plain Language News) in 1990. Selkouutiset is also published in Swedish under the title LL-Bladet. The country's first plain language website was opened in 2001. There are now around ten different Finnish plain language websites, and their role is rapidly becoming more significant.

The Finnish Broadcasting Company has produced daily news reports for the country's two main radio channels since 2007. There is no plain language television programming in Finland as yet.

The Plain Language Centre, which coordinates cooperation and education in the field, was founded in 2000. The Centre also offers advice concerning the layout of plain language publications (for further details in English, see Itkonen 2006). An article in English on the subject can be found at [www.selkokeskus.fi](http://www.selkokeskus.fi). The Plain Language Centre also collaborates with the Papunet web service ([www.papunet.net](http://www.papunet.net)) in offering detailed instructions for preparing plain language websites (for further details in English, see Älli 2006).

The Plain Language Centre collaborates with the Finnish-Swedish plain language center, LL-Center, in publishing the Swedish-language twin of Plain Language News, LL-Bladet. A large number of plain language brochures and web materials are published in both Finnish and Swedish (the country's two official languages), and also some plain language literature is published in Finland in Swedish.

## **Use of plain language in interaction**

The principles of plain language have been prepared from the perspective of making written language easier to understand since written material has specifically been seen to produce the most difficulties among many special needs groups. The fact has however already long been acknowledged in Finland that also participation in conversation can be very difficult for many of the target groups of plain language. But can the principles of plain language be applied to spoken language and situations of interaction? Can similar requirements be set for a speaker as for a writer, considering that in conversations speakers must make linguistic decisions within a split second's time? Constantly observing one's own speech can also weaken interaction, because speakers who focus solely on their output aren't able to engage in lively and reciprocal interaction with the persons they are speaking with.

Conversation also involves many other factors that affect how well the language is understood. The success of conversation varies depending on the situation and speaker. When a person is tired or emotionally stirred it can be quite a challenge for them to use understandable language. On the other hand, the use of plain language in situations of interaction has the advantage, compared to writing in plain language, that the partners are able to receive continuous feedback from each other, also when it comes to understandability. The feedback is by no means always direct, because it is rather rare for people to admit in conversation that they haven't understood each other. It is more common for the speakers to express their problems with understanding indirectly. Pauses, looks, gestures, repetitions or grunts, for instance, can be signs of problems of understanding what the other person is saying. When plain language is applied in conversation, these indirect, often unconscious ways of giving feedback on how the discussion is proceeding need to be taken into consideration. It could be said in summary that simple guidelines for easy-to-understand language are not enough for plain language interaction. The speaker must be aware of how conversations are typically constructed and how people encounter each other in situations of interaction.

In order to come up with guidelines for the use of plain language in interaction, we have to investigate what kind of problems the target groups of plain language meet in conversational situations. This requires analysis of authentic data from real situations of conversation. Linguistic conversation analysis has presented itself as a highly effective method for such research (for further details on conversation analysis, see e.g. Hutchby – Wooffit 1998). It enables us to examine both details in the use of language (e.g. the speaker's choice of words) and the broader construction of interaction (e.g. different ways to express problems with understanding). In Finland plain language interaction has been studied with the methods of conversational analysis both in group and dyadic conversations.

Operating model for plain language interaction groups

In 2007–2009 the Plain Language Centre carried a project entitled “Plain Language and Interaction”, which developed an operating model for plain language interaction groups (PLIG) and examined the challenges faced by different plain language user groups in interaction. The model was developed in groups of intellectually disabled adults, people with different forms of autism and young people with dysphasia. At the same time, a training model for group tutors was produced for offering participants training in using plain language, observing interaction and group dynamics, and supporting and guiding conversation. In Finland there are also plain language groups for aging people suffering from memory loss.

The operating model for PLIG is simple: the group meets regularly to read plain language material and discuss it. The main objectives are not however reading or learning but to practice conversational skills in a safe environment. People with more severe linguistic problems often appear as withdrawn and passive partners in conversation. They may have serious difficulties in expressing their opinions, taking the initiative or realizing that they have behaved improperly towards someone. PLIGs offer an opportunity to practice basic conversational skills with familiar people and the support of trained tutors. The task of the tutor is to support conversational initiatives and make sure that all the members get to participate and no one member gets to dominate the conversation. Little by little, as the participants’ skills and courage grow, the tutor’s role as the moderator of interaction decreases.

## **Guidelines for plain language conversation**

Plain language conversation is based on the idea that the more competent partner in the conversation – the one who has no special linguistic problems – adapts her/his speech to accommodate the person in need of plain language. While linguistic guidelines are also important, most important of all is the partners’ will to communicate with each other. This reflects one of the most significant differences between verbal and written plain language: Interaction and conversation are always an act of cooperation, to which both or all the participants actively contribute. Hence, in plain language conversation the will of the person in need of plain language to communicate and take part in the conversation has a decisive effect on whether the cooperation takes place or not. For this reason, unlike in written plain language, in conversation the more competent partner cannot alone bear the responsibility for solving problems with understanding. Understanding is always a result of cooperation, and no matter what the more competent partner does to facilitate the understanding, she/he is unable to achieve it without help from the partner in need of plain language.

Plain language Centre offers the following guidelines for plain language conversation. Other guidelines have also been developed for the different target groups specifically, which are not included in the list.

Guidelines on speech in general:

- Speak about one thing at a time.
- Use language that matches the age of the person you are speaking with.
- When you make references to time, place or causal relationships make sure that your partner understands them.
- Ask for opinions and make clarification questions.

Guidelines on the use of words and language structure:

- Mainly use everyday, familiar words.
- If you use words you know are difficult for your partner, explain them.

- Consider it carefully when you use metaphors or colloquial expressions. Explain them if necessary.
- Stress the core words of your message.
- Repeat the word that seems to cause difficulties.
- If repeating doesn't help, use paraphrases.
- Avoid difficult structures typical of formal, written language; in Finnish, for example, shortened sentences and participle structures.
- Be careful not to use the passive voice excessively.

#### Guidelines on rhythm of speech and prosody:

- Use clear and longish pauses between the different subject entities, but not in their middle.
- Speak at a peaceful pace, but not unnaturally slowly or monotonously.
- You can stress your message by emphasizing a certain tone, loudness of voice or intonation.

#### Guidelines on methods to support speech:

- Use facial expressions and gestures to stress aspects your speech.
- Point out to and illustrate what you mean, when possible.
- Use other AAC methods, such as drawing, signing or ready illustrations.

#### Guidelines for supporting initiative and active participation:

- consider whether all the partners in the conversation have opportunities to lead the conversation along in a desired direction or whether the conversation is angled around the topics presented by only one of the partners.
- Encourage your partner to express herself/himself if she/he is withdrawn. Show that you are interested in your partner's opinions. Ask about things that your partner finds interesting.
- Support your partner's initiatives even when you have problems understanding her/his speech.
- Seek eye contact.
- See that the atmosphere is peaceful, with as little background noise as possible.
- Try to resolve problems with understanding together with your partner. Express it sensitively but clearly if you haven't understood something.

(For more details in Finnish, see Kartio 2009, Leskelä 2006)

Situations of interaction can vary to a large degree and each situation calls for different type of behavior. For example, institutional conversations, such as classes or interviews, often proceed along a predetermined course. In an interview, the interviewer is expected to ask questions and the interviewee is expected to answer. In a daily coffee room conversation, instead, people seldom follow a preconceived pattern. Therefore guidelines of plain language conversation need to also pay attention to the effect of the type of situation of interaction, in the same way as written plain language needs to pay attention to the type of text at hand. So far very little research has been produced on the use of plain language in varied situations.

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