

CHALLENGES OF EASY AND PLAIN LANGUAGE IN LATVIA

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ABSTRACT

In the age of globalisation and digitalisation, the amount of information is constantly increasing. The society's responsibility is also increasing, as there is a large part of society that needs special support in order to make this information accessible. One way to do that is being able to communicate in easy or plain language. The aim of this article is to reveal easy and/or plain language as one of the measures for an inclusive society, and pinpoint the possibilities of expanding it in Latvia, where there has been little discussion about the different use and text creation methods of easy and plain language. Therefore, professor Dr. paed. Sarmīte Tūbele draws attention to the specifics of plain language target groups from a speech therapist's point of view and summarizes the diverse characteristics of learning disabilities. When discussing the possibilities of adjusting learning materials, she emphasises the importance of integrating quality illustrative elements into easy language texts in order to encourage the reader's perception and interest.

Dr. paed. Ieva Sprōģe discusses methods of text creation/adaptation in the context of translatology and lists criteria for processing and creating texts, as well as suitable classic translation methods, emphasising the main goal of easy and plain language – improving the ability of perceiving a text by simplifying it, i. e., making it more understandable. Subsequently, a summary of suggestions for easy and plain language text requirements and using them with target groups is provided.

Methodology: The research was carried out using literature review and a study of easy language organisations, as well as events organised by them and their guidelines.

Results: The article provides a brief summary of easy language history and describes current international discussions about easy language, pointing out both positive development tendencies and problematic aspects; the most common classifications of easy language and its target groups are described, as well as the interpretations and possibilities of classification for the concept "easy to read"; conclusions are made about the possibilities of developing easy language text creation in Latvia.

Easy language is described in the context of translating/adapting and speech therapy by collecting suggestions for easy and plain language text requirements and adapting them for the target groups. This is the first time that an easy and plain language description in a scientific, multidisciplinary context has been provided in Latvia.

Keywords: *easy language, inclusiveness, information understandability and accessibility, plain language, text adaptation/translation.*

Introduction

The globalisation and digitalisation provide our society with more and more information, however, there is a large part of society that can access this information only with the help of special support. Society is aware of this, and in many aspects of life, the term ‘inclusiveness’ is frequently brought to attention. The means of communication and language is one of the most influential measures for creating an inclusive society which places an increasingly higher emphasis on communication via easy and/or plain language.

Although in Latvia there is little discussion of the scientific aspects of using easy and/or plain language, foreign linguists in collaboration with several institutions and representatives of target groups carry out nationally and internationally significant research both individually and in group projects. “Easy Access for Social Inclusion Training” else EASIT (EASIT, 2018, Sept. 1) could be noted as one of the most important latest projects, and one of the most noteworthy conferences – the International Easy Language Day (IELD) Conference which took place in Germersheim, Germany on May 27–28, 2021 (IELD Conference, 2021). A significant number of scientific research and project descriptions in this field have been published abroad (Selkokeskus, 1983), and research is being carried out about texts that are characterized as “easy to read/plain language” or “selkokieli” which, translated from Finnish, means “clear and/or understandable”. Sweden has been familiar with plain language for 40 years under the name of “lättläst”. The list of research carried out in Europe and USA could be continued indefinitely, and this is proof that societal inclusiveness by adapting means of communication is becoming increasingly more important; at this point in time, Latvia has the opportunity to adopt the good practice and learn from others’ mistakes. There are no guidelines for the Latvian language yet, but some groundwork has been laid for communicating with people with special needs; therefore, further action needs to be taken by carrying out scientific research and drawing conclusions.

Methodology

During the creation of this article, the bibliographic research method was applied, conclusions about easy/plain language were gathered by analysing the information provided in several easy language organisation websites, as well as results of conferences on easy language and publications of research.

The selection criteria are the search for the keywords “easy language” “plain language” in various sources of information. The theoretical basis

for the conclusions on text production in easy language is the analysis of theoretical literature in this field as well as functional theory and psycholinguistic theory.

Professor Dr. paed. Sarmīte Tūbele draws attention to the specifics of easy language target groups from a speech therapist's point of view and summarizes the diverse characteristics of learning disabilities. When discussing the possibilities of adjusting learning materials, she emphasises the importance of integrating quality illustrative elements into easy language texts in order to encourage the reader's perception and interest.

Dr. paed. Ieva Sprōģe lists criteria for processing and creating texts and discusses methods of text creation/adaptation in the context of translatology, emphasising the main goal of easy and plain language – improving the ability of perceiving information by simplifying a text, i. e., making it more understandable.

Results

The article provides a summary of suggestions for easy and plain language text requirements and using them with target groups; conclusions are made about the possibilities of developing easy/plain language in Latvia, as the first scientific and analytical reviews in this field, such as this article, have only now begun to appear. The authors explore the understandability and creation of easy/plain language texts in the context of speech therapy and translatology. This is the first time that an easy and plain language description in a scientific, multidisciplinary context has been provided in Latvia.

Discussion

1. On easy/plain language. A review

By summarising the information published by organisations that represent easy/plain language and other sources (Kellermann, 2014), it is clear that the beginnings of easy language are connected with the organisation "People First" which was founded in 1974 and in 1996 developed the *Easy Read* idea, which was later joined by the German-speaking group "Mensch zuerst". Finland and Sweden are also trailblazers in this field. In both these countries, the name of easy language is connected to easy reading: "lättläst" in Swedish and "selkokieli" in Finnish, which means "clear and/or understandable" (Leskelä, 2015). In 1997, the first official network for people with learning disabilities was established in Germany, and the organisation "Mensch zuerst" which published two dictionaries in easy language, was founded in 2001. In 2006, the Easy Language Network was founded

in Germany, and in 2008 it already encompassed 30 associations, as well as individuals with and without learning disabilities; in 2013, this organisation had six member countries: Germany, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, Luxembourg, and Netherlands which created the Easy Language Union “Leichte Sprache” (Leichte Sprache, 2021) that translates texts into easy language, examines the understandability of texts, organises educational courses and lectures, creates easy language policy, and popularises easy language. The first easy language standard in German was developed in 1998 by the International League of Societies for Persons with Mental Handicaps (ILSMH). Due to the difficult name, it was later renamed as Inclusion Europe. Inclusion Europe is an umbrella organisation for several European parent organisations. One of its most notable projects is *Pathways*, started in 2009, which included people with learning disabilities and specialists from Finland, Scotland, France, Ireland, Germany, Portugal, Austria, and Lithuania. The title of the first easy language standards was “European guidelines for easy-to-read information”.

A big catalyst for developing easier communication was the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It has been signed by all 27 EU member countries and 120 other countries from all around the world. The term “easy language” was not widely known at the time. In 2009, the previously mentioned international project *Pathways* published the next guidelines for using easily understandable language, which are commonly called the “European rules”. Soon after that, various organisations were founded in Germany and other countries, and several standards were created. One of the easy language standards that are still popular in Germany are the guidelines *Leichte Sprache – ein Ratgeber*, which were published by Leichte Sprache with the support of Germany’s Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales, 2014). In Austria, the international organisation Capito (Capito, 2014) was founded; it is a franchise system, and it classifies the use of easy language in levels. The vocabulary is adjusted accordingly to the common European language proficiency levels A1 to B1. Capito unites 20 organisations from Germany, Switzerland, and Austria and also has its own guidelines. Easy or plain language is widely used in the USA. In 2010, they passed the “Plain Writing Act of 2010” which also includes guidelines and a dictionary. Similar development can be seen in the United Kingdom, for example, in the guidelines developed by *Plain English Campaign* (Plain English Campaign, 1979).

The number of organisations that represent and support easy/plain language is constantly growing – they expand, become international, cooperate and participate in various projects, where one of the topics is optimising and adapting easy language for target groups. For example,

Inclusion Europe has 78 member organisations from 39 European countries (including Latvia and its organisation “Rūpju bērns” [Child of care]). As the number of organisations grows, guidelines and terminology concerning this simplified language are also expanding and improving. As a result, easy-to-read language in individual organisations or countries is classified in levels; some have separated easy and plain language; some use “easy language” or “easy to read” as an umbrella term; other terms concerning this field are also often used inconsistently.

2. Topical discussions about easy language in the international domain

2.1. Requirements and critique

The goal and tasks of easy language nowadays are generally viewed in the context of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. There is a general definition of “communication” which “includes languages, display of text, Braille, tactile communication, large print, accessible multimedia as well as written, audio, plain-language, human-reader and augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, including accessible information and communication technology; [...]” and “4. Persons with disabilities shall be entitled, on an equal basis with others, to recognition and support of their specific cultural and linguistic identity, including sign languages and deaf culture” (ANO Konvencija, 2011).

There is still an overwhelming number of people who, for different reasons, are bad at reading. In Austria, Germany, and Switzerland approximately 24 million people cannot read properly (Capito, 2004); there is no such data for Latvia, however, these people are in Latvia, too (Zvirbulis, 2018). This means that most of the information provided by companies and government institutions is not understandable for them. Therefore, easily understandable language has a special meaning in the lives of these people. The fact that institutions provide increasingly comprehensive information in plain language in many fields is positive, but there is a growing amount of critique of the inconsistent usage of terms and creation of easy language texts that are sometimes low-quality or even incorrect. This is caused by a technical, formal observation of easy language guidelines which in turn creates split sentences which are hard to understand and sometimes are riddled with grammar mistakes. There are a lot of these complaints, and easy language experts and organisations try to refute them (Bock, 2019; Maaß, 2015; 2020, Lange & Bock, 2016; Oomen-Welke, 2015; Leichtfuss, 2017) with such explanations as:

- People with reading disabilities are not the only target group of easy language; they are more likely to be included in the target group for plain language. Easy language corresponds approximately to the A1

language proficiency level in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF), but plain language – approximately to the B1 level.

- If an easy language text is not easily understandable or is even erroneous, it has not been created correctly (Bock, 2019, Maaß, 2020).
- Easy language is used more and more widely, but adults without mental developmental disabilities do not embrace standardized easy language texts with childish illustrations; they may feel discriminated. It is important to note that easy language is not meant for a wide range of readers (the target group for plain language), but for a specific target group (see before, see 2.3, etc.)

Even though there are differences in both the interpretation of terms and the guidelines developed by different organisations, the information provided in organisations' websites and research that are listed at the end of this article can be summarized in order to create a simplified classification.

2.2. Classification of easy language. Easy and plain language

When concerning easier reading/ easy-to-understand languages and the terms “easy language” and “easy to read” several names are used: Easy Language, Easy Language Plus, Plain Language, Easy to read.

Target groups

Easy language is meant for people with learning disabilities, including disabilities that used to be called intellectual development disorders. The target group for easy language is more specific.

Plain language is meant for people who know how to read but have difficulty understanding more complicated texts due to possibly temporary conditions. This is oriented towards a larger part of society.

Illustrations

Easy language is supplemented by simple illustrations in every paragraph.

Plain language texts are illustrated basically the same as standard texts – illustrations are often scarce or non-existent. Plain language may use diagrams and other infographics which are not used in easy language.

From a visual standpoint, which is especially important for printed texts, easy language takes up the most space due to text formatting and illustrations.

Plain language takes up a little more space than standard texts or source texts, if there are a lot of terms or abstract notions that need to be explained.

Amount and density of information

Easy language virtually does not convey complicated information; a lot of information, for example, numbers, is omitted or expressed in relation,

e. g., “a lot” “a little” and so on. The information usually includes only the most important content and is expressed in very short sentences.

Plain language can convey almost all information, provided that there is enough space for the text.

Process of monitoring

Easy language is monitored by people from the target group.

Plain language may not be monitored at all.

Vocabulary and text formatting

Plain language vocabulary is a lot larger than easy language vocabulary. Sentences may be more difficult. There are no set guidelines for text formatting.

Translation/adaptation of the text

Translations into easy language are almost always done by specialized text writers.

Plain language texts are oftentimes written by representatives of the company/field.

From a text creation method standpoint, plain language creation is more like editing than translating. The result is not an entirely new text, as it is with easy language, but a more or less adapted version.

Visuals/content

When looking at an easy language text, the difference from standard texts is clearly visible. They differ visually; generally, they use a larger font, more line spacing, various graphic elements and colours, images, or videos, they use short and understandable words and explain the complicated ones.

Plain language texts have no significant visual differences from standard language texts.

A short description of plain language

Plain language texts have shorter sentences and a simpler sentence structure. When using plain language, one should avoid foreign words, complicated figures of speech, for example, idioms or metaphors, as well as unusual expressions and hints.

Plain language texts allow a large part of society to access information or literature and ensure conformity to international accessibility and inclusiveness requirements. Plain language is not text creation for parts of society; plain language is adapting complicated texts for the reading abilities of a wide section of society.

The level of plain language can usually be observed in tabloids. When comparing plain language to learning a foreign language, it corresponds approximately to A2–B1 level in the CEFR.

Unlike easy language, plain language does not have set guidelines. The term “plain language” is not systematically used. “Plain language does

not mean simplifying the meaning or significantly shortening the text. Using plain language principles in a document make it easier to understand, but it is not the same as easy language. A text can be completely transformed by using plain language principles, and this will help a larger part of society to understand it better, but it will not help people with reading disabilities” (Veckalne, 2020).

Combining plain and easy language

There are attempts to create an easily understandable language as a third option and a compromise on the term. There are discussions on the subject, of whether it is necessary to combine the two notions and how much, or whether to further develop their classification.

2.3. Once more about target groups

Pupils with intellectual development disorders are the group that requires the most attention, as they have no use for learning materials that are in no way adapted. Intellectual disability is characterised as a condition where individuals show significant deficits in cognitive processes, adaptive functioning (conceptual, social, and practical). There are four stages of severity of intellectual disability – mild, moderate, severe, and profound (Girimaji & Pradeep, 2018), which differ significantly and require a special approach in the learning process. One of the main problems is disorder in all cognitive processes (Marrus & Hall, 2018), and limited capabilities to work, perceive, and understand things. Memorising is mechanical and very slow, and brighter stimuli are required; children with intellectual disabilities cannot concentrate their attention; the capacity of attention is small, and it is hard to capture the attention. There is no interest in the surrounding objects, environment; weak observation skills, as well as spatial and time perception (Shree & Shukla, 2016; Tūbele et al., 2013). This means that the presentation of the learning material requires small sections, larger letters, and engaging tasks. There are a lack of interest and understanding of images; poor emotions, will, and initiative; images are necessary but with as little extra details as possible, clear and understandable. Distinct problems are present with communication, speech development, and language acquisition in general – limited vocabulary and limitations in its use. As there are difficulties with using acquired knowledge in a new situation – repetition is necessary (Bornstein et al., 2018; Pruthi, 2013).

There are several common features that characterize children with intellectual disabilities, which depend on the stage of severity and their individual characteristics.

Cognitive dysfunction is comprehensive, and even both verbal and non-verbal tasks are difficult.

There are very weak generalization abilities, children are unable to model tasks, they can solve them only in specific situations.

There are correlations between intellectual disabilities and disabilities in behavioural, emotional, and volitional areas.

There is a very low cognitive interest and uncritical attitude towards oneself and towards the result of one's work.

Difficulties in predicting the consequences of actions, inability to think and plan, lack of focus that hinders development.

Poor curiosity (Bornstein et al., 2018; Pruthi, 2013; Shree & Shukla, 2016).

As a result, children with intellectual disabilities develop at a much slower rate and need support and assistance, especially in the language field. Children with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities have particular difficulties. They need constant help and support. The main task is to teach the skills and abilities needed in everyday life.

The next group is pupils with learning disabilities, a group that is heterogeneous and varying in its expressions and needs. These children have difficulty learning without help and support, particular difficulties present with learning a language and using it (Law et al., 2017; Tübele, 2019). Learning disabilities are defined as a neurobiological problem where the individual's brain functions and is structured differently. This influences one or more base processes that are involved in the understanding and use of spoken or written language; it also influences math skills (Turkington & Harris, 2006). One of the main problems presenting with learning disabilities is difficulty learning to read, as well as difficulties in later stages, when reading is one of the main skills necessary to learn successfully (Tübele, 2019). There are several areas of difficulty for learning disabilities, and individual pupils have different combinations of difficulties (language skills, attention, listening skills, math skills, memory, movement, difficulty organising oneself, reading, social skills, thinking, writing) (Turkington & Harris, 2006). This means that it is not possible to create a universal teaching aid that would provide support for all pupils in all cases of learning disabilities. Terms "developmental dyslexia" "dyscalculia" "dyspraxia" are also used, however, in the context of international disorder classification we use the concept of mixed disorder of scholastic skills (F81.3). This is a residual category for disorders in which there is some mixture of developmental disorders of speech and language, school skills, and motor functions; nevertheless, none of these is dominant enough to form a main diagnosis. This mixed category should only be used if there is an extensive overlap with all of these circumscribed developmental disorders. The disorders are usually associated with a certain degree of general impairment of cognitive functions; it should therefore be used if there are

malfunctions that meet the criteria of two or more categories of F80, F81 and F82 (Tübele et al., 2013). These pupils need daily help and support; adapting learning materials would be an important step in implementing an inclusive approach.

Consequently, when preparing texts, the goal needs to be clear – for whom and why are these texts being prepared, for how large an audience, in what format will they be available.

2.4. Easy language text creation

In order to make daily communication and the texts used in it more understandable for a larger part of society, “we should formulate simpler sentences and explain professionalisms and foreign words. That would be the most important thing,” was said in an interview on the subject of language accessibility by professor Silvia Hansen–Schirra, organiser of the 1st International Easy Language Day Conference, German translologist, and easy language researcher (Hansen-Schirra, 2021).

Adapting a complicated text or translating it into plain language, i. e., making it easy to read, is truly not simple. This is the dilemma of creating such texts: if a fact needs to be represented in all its complexity by explaining complicated words and concepts, the text will become significantly longer. This means that the (possibly) inexperienced target group readers will receive almost twice the amount of text that was meant for source text readers. However, if the text is shortened, the translator/adaptor needs to coordinate the target text content with the client and decide which information is necessary for the reader and which is not. Both of these options are problematic and need to be carefully considered (Maaß, 2015). The most successful in this field will be professional translators who have studied translology and translation theories, but the number of them in Latvia is still unfortunately very small. After all, in many countries it is translator and interpreter unions and institutes of linguistics/translatology that have initiated the scientific research of easy language and are uniting in organisations and shared projects. For example, in Germany, the biggest organisation of this kind is “*Bundesverband der Dolmetscher und Übersetzer – BDÜ*” [the Federal Association of Interpreters and Translators]. Almost all large easy language promotion organisations that develop easy language guidelines have translation and philology experts and their organisations as their members. Consequently, it is logical that easy language text creation is usually called translating. Adapting a text is an inseparable part of translation; no matter what text type (Reiß, 1993) is concerned, translation will require some form of adaptation, namely adjusting the text to the conventions of the reader’s culture, including text conventions. This has been proven for decades in the context of translation theories – in

psycholinguistic translation theories and from the standpoint of functional translation; one of the most well-known, striking examples is the Skopos theory (Stolze, 2005).

Transforming a text from a source text into easy language is intralingual translation, and, as with any translation, the process requires translation methods that a translator who has studied translation theories will use purposefully and deliberately. In this situation, the most appropriate would be the pragmatic translation methods developed by translologist Michael Schreiber (Schreiber, 1998), but, of course, every translator chooses their own theories that correspond to their linguistic understanding. “Different bodies of guidelines have been developed. They provide guidance but cannot exhaustively explain all questions that arise when writing, as each author has to decide again and again what would be best for the respective target audience and the respective text” (Bock, 2019).

3. Easy/plain language in Latvia

On March 1, 2010, Latvia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, but Latvia’s Easy Language Agency was founded ten years before that, in 2000, and the tenet they have chosen on their website reads, “We care that everyone can understand and integrate into the society around them” (Vieglās valodas aģentūra, 2021).

How is easy language prevalent in Latvia?

“Latvijas Radio 1” offers the possibility to listen to news in easy language every evening (<https://www.lsm.lv/temas/zinasvieglaja-valoda/>). In compliance with Cabinet Regulation No. 445 “Regulations Regarding Institutional Information Displayed Online” (Kārtība, kādā iestādes ievieto informāciju internetā, 2020), many government institutions’ websites publish information in easy language.

There are no easy/plain language guidelines yet that are based in the linguistic structure of Latvian language, just as there is no scientific research, hence the approach to creating these texts has been varied. This has also been observed in other countries. However, there is research taking place in Latvia, and soon the results of an Erasmus+ project that was started in 2020 will be published. This project involves researchers from the University of Latvia and Latvia’s Easy Language Agency, as well as representatives from Lithuanian, Czechoslovakian and Slovenian institutions. Up until now, several fiction works and educational materials have been adapted and courses for teachers are being organised in collaboration with the Latvian Language Agency.

The Easy Language Agency reports that, due to an initiative by the University of Helsinki and Tampere University, a handbook on easy language is expected to be published in 2021.

Conclusions

How to communicate in easy/plain language – needs and skills

Up until now, the notion of “easy language” in several countries has been closely tied to rules and standards: some elements of language are forbidden, others – allowed. The main reason for that is usually the text quality. In her latest research, Bettina Bock (Bock, 2019) names five criteria for creating a “good” text and concludes that “a set of rules is not enough for ensuring the quality of a text. That is why we keep raising this issue and suggesting alternative viewpoints and practical approaches. Our suggestion is to take a step back from viewing “easy language” in a rigid form, restrained by rules. Instead, we can define it according to needs and functions: easy language is used to create understandable communication between societal groups and remove language barriers that would exclude these groups from communication. That is what “easy language” is. Diminishing the importance of rules does not mean that previous/other rules could not be useful. However, they should be viewed more as suggestions, not set norms that need to be precisely observed in every situation.” Hopefully, Latvia will not be “restrained by rules” on the path of scientific research but will learn from the good practice and mistakes of other countries. Latvian researchers could say the same about the field of easy language, as professor Christiane Maaß wrote in the foreword of her 2015 publication *Leichte Sprache ein Regelwerk* [Easy language: a set of rules], “When I encountered the phenomenon of “easy language” a few years ago, I almost could not believe my eyes: a whole new variety of the German language that has not yet been researched in the context of linguistics and that opens up unexpected ways of communication – that was a dream of mine as a linguist and translator. Soon enough, the full research scope was clear: what actually is easy language (a variety without speakers?)? Where is it leading? What is the target audience and how can we find out more about them and their specific needs?

And finally, what should easy language rules look like? What is the scientific research situation in other countries regarding simplified variations of standard language? What support measures should professional translators receive in the context of this scientific research?” (Maaß, 2015). Taking into account Maaß’s conclusions and all the previous deductions, it is clear that answers to these questions can only be found through collaboration that is interdisciplinary– traditionally, these disciplines are education sciences (especially special education), linguistics, sociology, and medical sociology.

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