EASY LANGUAGE USE AND LANGUAGE ATTITUDES IN LATVIAN PUBLIC SPACE

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Abstract. Everyone has an equal right to social participation, information, and inclusion regardless of their limitations, and easy language removes communication barriers and facilitates exercising these rights. The importance of information accessibility is referenced in several regulations. However, worldwide experiences demonstrate that legislation on information accessibility does not always correspond to practice. The current study explores whether the realization of the significance of accessible information has reached decision-makers in Latvia and sought to find out if the practice of accessible information has been established in society. The research included a bibliographic overview of legislation on easy language in Latvia and an anonymous online questionnaire (N=829) to compare the changes in overall attitudes toward easy language. It was observed that the legislative amendments had not significantly promoted easy language development. The comparative study demonstrated that in 2024, Latvian society had a better easy language awareness and a deeper understanding of its principles and target groups than in 2021. The respondents indicated that radio news, podcasts, and online information had contributed to their knowledge. Moreover, it appears that various social and individual activities, rather than legislation, have produced more remarkable results in strengthening the position of easy language. Thus, easy language development in Latvia is still primarily based on practice.

Key words: easy language, information accessibility, human rights, legislative changes in Latvia, language attitudes

INTRODUCTION

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights claims that 'all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights' and 'everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers' (UDHR, 1948: Articles 1 and 19). In modern society, everything is constructed and expressed utilizing language: language allows us to set values and norms, develop our business, elaborate on legislation, provide education, and develop science. Additionally, language tends to become more complex and multilayered. Hence, the question is – what could

help exercise human rights to information in cases of temporary and permanent limited language processing abilities?

This is where various language simplification methods can be applied. The testimonies of the need for language simplification date back several hundred years (Ehrenberg-Sundin, 2004). Consequently, a bridge between different language use levels is not a new necessity.

During the last decades, the two main language simplification varieties have developed: plain and easy languages. These varieties display notable differences. Both easy and plain languages are employed in asymmetric communication. However, plain language is used in mediating between professionals and the general public seeking general comprehensibility. In contrast, easy language is applied in communication with persons with language difficulties, thus reaching specific and vulnerable groups of society (Leskelä et al., 2022: 194). Although the concept of easy language is primarily used in the context of this research, the article also highlights the issues that emerge from confusing the two varieties.

The level of plain and easy language use differs from country to country, and it is closely linked to a range of factors such as geopolitical and historical situations or the number of accessible communication-related projects (Lindholm and Vanhatalo, eds., 2021). When analysing the available information, the main driving forces for plain and easy language development seem to be individual initiatives, the work of non-governmental and other organizations, education, research, and legislation.

METHODS

Qualitative and quantitative research methods were used to fulfil the tasks outlined in this article. The bibliographic method was applied, describing the current level of easy language development, the benefits of easy language use, and the differences between easy and plain languages. Furthermore, the content analysis of the respective laws and regulations was carried out on two levels: legislation that Latvia has ratified as a member of international bodies, and local regulations. The two methods yielded the analysis of Latvia's situation both regarding practice and legislative effectiveness.

The quantitative research method was applied to clarify the general attitudes toward easy language in Latvia. An anonymous online questionnaire was created to obtain the data. For this study, it was important to observe the changes in attitude. Thus, the question set was designed considering the study by the *Easy Language Agency* (*Vieglās valodas aģentūra*) within the Erasmus + project *Promoting Easy-to-Read Language for Social Inclusion* (PERLSI). Both questionnaires consisted of two question blocks: respondents' demographic data and easy language awareness. The questions to clarify easy language awareness were: 'Have you heard of or encountered easy language?'; 'Who, in your opinion, would benefit from easy

language use?'; 'Have you encountered a situation where you do not understand important information because it is too complicated?'; 'What kind of information was difficult to understand for you?'; 'What did you do when you had difficulties understanding?'. The respondents were then asked to evaluate the following claims using a Likert scale: 'Authorities should always use easy language to communicate with citizens'; 'In situations where I do not understand the text, I feel silly'; 'I would be grateful if someone prepared information in easy language for me'; 'the awareness that someone prepares information in easy language for me would make me feel discomfort'. The questionnaire in 2024 included an additional question asking to indicate where the respondents obtained their knowledge of easy language if they had it before. Then, the comparative approach was used, and the outcomes of the questionnaire for the year 2024 were juxtaposed with the results of the PERLSI questionnaire.

The study, however, has limitations: it can be observed that in the questionnaire, both plain and easy language concepts have not been distinguished. In 2021, this might be linked to non-existent research in the field at that time and a lack of knowledge of international practices. The questionnaire in 2024 was kept similar for comparison purposes. However, in further research, it should be noted that, although similar in several aspects, plain language and easy language are independent concepts.

The research complies with the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Commission Opinion No. 71-43/84.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In the 1970s, several countries, namely, the United States of America, Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and later also Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Singapore, Hongkong, New Zealand, and Australia, started to consider providing clear and understandable communication in the legal field. In these countries, the burden that bureaucratic language and tangled sentence constructions would impose was noticed, therefore, measures to reduce the cases of misunderstanding and confusion were implemented (Asprey, 2010). This could be considered the beginning of the plain language movement.

Almost simultaneously, the Nordic countries began adapting language for people with perceptual disorders. In the 1960s, Sweden elaborated a strategy of publishing books and newspapers in easy language. In the 1980s, Finland and Norway started different easy language-related activities, many of which are still present (Liepa and Polinska, 2021: 13).

The turning points for easy language development are the UN Declaration of the Rights of Disabled Persons (1975), which stipulates that 'disabled persons have the same civil and political rights as other human beings' (DRDP, 1975: Article 4), and subsequently the UN Convention for the Rights of Persons with

Disabilities (2006), which provides that persons with disabilities equally with others are entitled to access the physical environment, transportation, communication, and information (CPRD, 2006; Liepa and Polinska, 2021: 13, 14). Thus, the right to receive understandable information for people with disabilities in legal acts has been established for decades.

Nevertheless, people with disabilities are not the only part of society who need easy language. Although specific target groups can vary from country to country, easy language beneficiaries can generally be divided into two categories: people with a permanent need for easy language (e.g., people with intellectual disability, people whose language processing skills are reduced due to an illness or injury), and temporary easy language users, e.g., language learners, immigrants, or diaspora. Notably, 'belonging to one of the groups mentioned above does not automatically create the need for Easy Language' (Virtanen, 2006, cited in Leskelä, 2021: 159).

Certainly, the fields where easy language might become useful, are diverse: from maintaining the language skills for inherited language users to ensuring patient rights in situations of asymmetric communication to helping integrate people who have just arrived in a new country. In this regard, the Icelandic experience serves as a good example: in 2020, Icelanders published the first fiction storybook in easy language for people studying Icelandic. Until then, adults learning the Icelandic language 'had to read children's books' (Ólafsdóttir and Pálsdóttir, 2021: 262). Similarly, Finns initially used easy language for people with intellectual disorders; nevertheless, 'it soon became obvious that it could also be applied to other people, for instance, elderly people with memory-related illnesses, young readers with reading difficulties, or immigrants learning Finnish' (Leskelä, 2021: 150).

The spectrum of easy language use in Latvia has not yet been established. Easy language has a significant role in special education; the communication principles taught to and later exploited by special education teachers largely correspond to easy language principles, although it has been rarely marked as such (Liepa, 2021: 37). Nevertheless, teachers gradually start to recognize the advantages of easy language in every classroom and are willing to learn it (Polinska and Liepa, 2023: 673). In addition, other initiatives promote easy language in Latvia, such as Latvian Radio daily news in easy language or a writers' competition. Strong encouragement for easy language development was the Erasmus + project *Promoting Easy-to-Read Language for Social Inclusion* (PERLSI), which founded easy language research and subsequently contributed to implementing an elective study course in universities. Detailed information about the project and its outcomes is published on the project webpage (Online 1). Meanwhile, the project team's deep interest in the field over time will foster the growth of other yet undeveloped easy language directions.

LEGISLATIVE BACKGROUND

No easy language law was issued in any country in comparison to the Plain Language Act in the USA (2010) and New Zealand (2023). Nevertheless, analysing best practices in Europe and globally has shown that incorporating the easy language concept in legislation fosters its use and development. Thus, it is worth inspecting the laws and regulations that apply to information accessibility and easy language use in Latvia.

As a European Union (EU) member state, Latvia must comply with several acts at the EU level. The earliest is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948), which Latvia adopted in 1990 when regaining its independence. Article 19 of the UDHR claims that 'everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers' (UDHR, 1948: Article 19).

As mentioned above, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006, adopted in Latvia in 2010) significantly endorsed easy language use in many European countries. Article 9 of the Convention stipulates:

To enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to [...] information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems [...] These measures, which shall include the identification and elimination of obstacles and barriers to accessibility, shall apply to, inter alia: [...] b. Information, communications, and other services, including electronic services and emergency services. (CRPD, 2006: Article 9)

Moreover, in Article 2, *Definitions*, plain language is explicitly mentioned as a means of communication. Noteworthy, in the Latvian translation of the Convention, 'plain language' is translated as 'easy language', this again shows that there has been a lack of a clear division between the two concepts in Latvia. At the time, the easy language idea had already been established by the Easy Language Agency (*Vieglās valodas aģentūra*); moreover, the Easy Language Agency has never distinguished the terms in their practice. Clear differentiation between easy and plain languages started with the first research papers in the field in 2021 – Sproģe and Tūbele indicated that some have separated easy and plain language (Sproģe and Tūbele, 2021: 490), whereas the terms have been clearly distinguished in the first easy language guidelines *Vieglā valoda. Rokasgrāmata* (*Easy Language. The Handbook*) (Liepa and Polinska, eds., 2021: 10-13).

In 2019, the European Accessibility Act was published to harmonize the requirements for products and services launched in the European market so that several target groups would benefit from reduced barriers and wider accessibility. The law stipulates that contact information, safety information,

and instructions should be presented in a language 'easily understood by consumers and end-users' (European Accessibility Act, 2019). This directive was incorporated into the Law on Accessibility of Goods and Services, which was passed in 2023, but will enter into force in 2025. The purpose of the law is to promote the accessibility of goods and services to persons with disabilities and 'all persons with long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments' (Law on Accessibility of Goods and Services, 2023), and similar to the European Accessibility Act, it stipulates that the contact information, safety information, instructions for use, and other information indicated on the product is clear, understandable, and easy to perceive.

The only national regulation that mentions easy language or easily understandable information is the addition of the Freedom of Information Law (1998), Procedures for Publishing Information on the Internet by Institutions (2020). In Part III, Article 20.10, it is claimed that 'The section "Easy to Read" shall include a brief description of the institution and other information necessary for the clients of the institutions in an easy-to-read language'. However, there is neither further information on easy-to-read language, nor what information is necessary for the clients.

Accordingly, the regulations regarding easy language are implemented formally as the decisions on the section's 'Easy to Read' quality are left to the institutions, which lack understanding of easy language principles and necessity. The 'Easy to Read' section on the web pages usually consists of a contact list and concise information about the institution, which cannot be considered topical information (Liepa, 2021: 40). The proportion of international regulations and local legislation (four and one, respectively) related to information accessibility demonstrates that Latvian decision-makers have not developed the understanding of the advantages of easy language, plain language, or clear communication yet. Moreover, due to the complicated geopolitical situation and other governmental priorities, information accessibility has seldom, or rather never been in the spotlight.

EASY LANGUAGE AWARENESS AND ATTITUDES. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Despite the lack of appropriate regulations regarding language understandability, the field is still developing. In this context, it was important to observe awareness and changes in attitudes toward easy language. To reach this aim, an anonymous online questionnaire was created, and the results were compared to those of the questionnaire conducted within the PERLSI project in 2021. Convenience sampling was used for both questionnaires.

In 2024, 831 respondents participated in the study. Two of them did not consent to answer the questions, and one indicated that they were not able to answer the questions properly from the given options. The three participants were

excluded from the study. Of 828 participants, 69% (N = 568) were women, and 31% (N = 260) were men. In the PERLSI study in 2021, there were 509 respondents: 53% (N = 270) women, and 47% (N = 239) men.

The changes in easy language awareness were significant: in 2021, 11% of the respondents claimed they knew what easy language is and used it; 27% asserted they knew what easy language is, but did not use it, whereas 53% said they did not know what easy language is, and 8% found the question difficult to answer. In 2024, 22% of the respondents answered they knew what easy language is and used it; 43% knew what easy language is, but did not use it; only 28% revealed they did not know what easy language is, and 7% found the question difficult to answer. The easy language awareness comparison is presented in Figure 1 below.
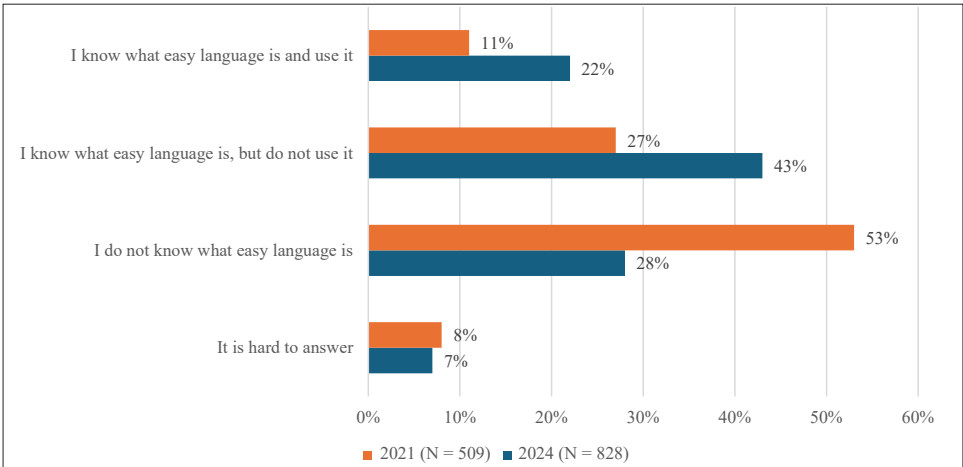

Figure 1. **Easy language awareness in 2021 and 2024**

The answers to the question about easy language target groups also demonstrate an increase in easy language awareness. The respondents were presented with the claim that easy language helps understand complex information and asked who, in their opinion, might benefit from information in easy language. Several answers were possible for this question. In 2021 (N = 509), 54% recognized that everyone would benefit, 47% said 'seniors', 39% claimed that both arrivals and people with intellectual disabilities, 37% marked people with dyslexia, 33% – minorities, 26% – people with autism spectrum disorder, 21% – people with hearing impairments, 9% – diaspora. In 2024 (N = 828), 62% claimed that everyone would benefit from easy language, 59% indicated that the beneficiaries would be people with intellectual disabilities, 54% – seniors, 46% – arrivals and people with autism spectrum disorder, 44% – minorities, 42% – people with dyslexia, 32% – people with hearing impairments, and 23% – diaspora.

A higher rate can be observed in every target group, which suggests a deeper understanding of easy language usability. The comparison of the awareness of easy language target groups is presented in Figure 2 below.
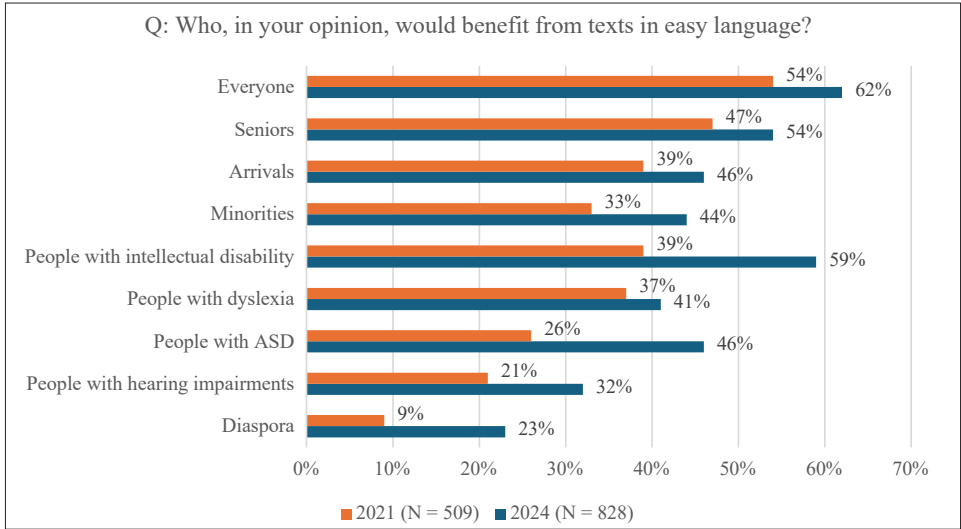

Figure 2. **Awareness of easy language target groups in 2021 and 2024**

Another set of questions was targeted to determine the necessity for language simplification and clear communication. The respondents were asked to share whether they have encountered situations where they could not understand important information because it was too complicated. In 2021, 70% of the respondents said they had sometimes experienced such situations, 15% said it happened often, 11% claimed there had not been such situations, and 4% found it difficult to answer. In 2024, the rates were 74%, 14%, 7%, and 5% respectively. In 2024, all the respondents were asked the following questions: 'What kind of information was difficult to understand to you?' and 'What did you do when you had difficulties understanding?'. Out of 57 (5%) respondents answering that they had not been in a situation where they did not understand information, 17 repeatedly confirmed the statement in the following two questions, whereas 40 respondents explained which information they could not understand and what they did to solve that.

The most often indicated incomprehensible information sources in 2021 and 2024 were very similar: a letter from an authority – 57% and 53%, a document prepared by a specialist – 48% and 46%, an authority's website – 45% and 45%, information concerning services – 28% and 27%, safety rules – 19% and 18%, respectively. From other replies, legislation dominates in both years 2021 and 2024.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the section on determining the need for clearer communication refers largely to plain language not easy language, although in some fields and situations, easy language could also be applied.

Finally, the respondents were asked to evaluate easy-language-related claims by using the Likert scale. In 2021, 84% of the respondents agreed (49% of the respondents completely agreed and 35% rather agreed) that authorities should communicate with the public using easy and understandable language compared to 88% of the respondents (76% completely agreed and 12% rather agreed) in 2024. Evaluating personal preferences and feelings in 2021, 62% of the respondents (32% completely agreed and 30% rather agreed) claimed that they would be grateful if they received information in easy language. In 2024, the rate was 81% of the respondents (61% completely agreed and 20% rather agreed). On the other hand, the respondents were asked to indicate whether they would feel discomfort/shame if they received information in easy language. In 2021, 14% completely agreed with the statement, 19% rather agreed, 33% rather disagreed, and 26% completely disagreed. 8% of the respondents found it difficult to answer. In 2024, only 3% completely agreed with the statement, 6% rather agreed, 22% rather disagreed, and 55% completely disagreed. 15% of the respondents found it difficult to answer. These results show that the stigma around easy language has decreased.

The comparative analysis shows that during the last three years, overall easy language awareness has increased: the number of study respondents who understand the concept of easy language is higher, and on the other hand, there is a significantly lower percentage of persons who have never heard of easy language. The data also demonstrates a deeper understanding of easy language target groups or people who would benefit from receiving information in easy language. Moreover, the respondents can more often identify themselves as easy or plain language users.

CONCLUSIONS

In certain circumstances, anyone can be a potential reader of plain language (Leskelä et al., 2021: 6). Although accessible and clear communication could reduce the burden of misunderstandings, Latvian decision-makers have not placed language use in the spotlight, nor have they developed the understanding of its advantages. Accordingly, the legislation changes and measures regarding information accessibility are not sufficient. Moreover, the existing measures are implemented reluctantly. This phenomenon can be explained by lacking knowledge of easy and plain language principles: the authorities still tend to use bureaucratic language and complex structures, which is impacted by the sturdy notion that the primary addressee of the communication is not the client but the court

(Moors, 2023). Thus, it can be concluded that the current legislation alone is ineffective in strengthening the position of easy language in Latvia.

Although the attitude of authorities is rather superficial, and their approach is formal, easy language in Latvia has developed. The results of the comparative study between 2021 and 2024 demonstrate a higher awareness of the concept, a deeper understanding of the target groups and possible benefits, and a reduced stigma around easy language.

Notably, the study respondents indicated that most often they did not understand the information given by authorities. This means that not only the position of easy language but also that of plain language should be strengthened, and the concepts should be clearly distinguished. Easy and plain languages can form successful grounds in healthcare, education, everyday life, culture, and literature accessibility. To achieve this, it is of paramount importance to exploit the advantages of convenient, fast, and efficient information exchange in a digital environment and to establish a close relationship between research and practice. In this context, a controlling and advisory body for accessible communication would be helpful.

This research has confirmed that successful easy language development is achieved through interaction of all mechanisms: legislation, organization work, education, research, and individual initiatives.

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