

GOBBLEDYGOOK – OR WHY YOU CAN'T UNDERSTAND YOUR INSURANCE POLICY

ENGLISH TODAY, the popular magazine forum for discussion about the English language and the influences upon it, enters its second year of publication with a special issue on the campaigns to promote plain English and 'exterminate official gobbledygook', legalese and bureaucratese.

The Plain English Campaign was launched in Britain in 1979 with a ritual shredding of 'appalling' government and municipal council forms in Parliament Square, London. The success of this campaign has been such that:

By 1985, 15 700 forms had disappeared, 21 300 had been thoroughly revised, and 9 million had been saved on the forms bill.

Chrissie Maher and Martin Cutts, the founders of the campaign, describe in *ENGLISH TODAY* the cases of:

the incomprehensible letter sent by the London Borough of Ealing to residents which panicked them into thinking they were about to be imprisoned

the astonishing sales of home insurance policies written in plain English and marketed as such

Local Councils, says the Campaign, continue to use the language of the 'pompo-verbosity' school for no real reason. Private companies, however, are often just as resistant to change - with sometimes devastating results:

People are not just injured when medical labels are written in gobbledygook - they die. Drivers are not just hurt when their medicines don't tell them they could fall asleep at the wheel - they are killed.

Jean Aitchison, currently a Senior Lecturer in Linguistics at the London School of Economics and author of several books on the subject, looks at 'The Gobbledygook Syndrome' in *ENGLISH TODAY*.

Ms Aitchison argues that a considerable amount of jargon is not 'bad' language, but 'inappropriate' language. Selfish, insensitive people use language which does not take into account the needs or situation of the listener. Another problem, says Ms Aitchison, is caused by oversensitivity:

In London, Hackney Council has decided to call dustmen 'refuse operatives', and the disabled people's officer wants to replace the term 'blind' with 'visually challenged'...

Are these euphemisms really wrong in some way? Ms Aitchison warns against such judgements:

...it is important not to assume that one's own linguistic preferences are in some intrinsic sense right'.

We should, instead, concentrate on using language appropriately, since new words cannot be prevented from entering the language.

ENGLISH TODAY's international perspective continues in this latest issue with an account of the successes of the plain English campaign in the United States. James T Dayananda, Professor of English at Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania and author of three books and numerous articles on the English language, talks of the aims and objectives of the movement in the States.

According to Mr Dayananda, the plain English movement is not about legislating prose style, but about making functional documents like leases, contracts and insurances policies 'understandable to the consumer'.

In the USA it is the Government which has both helped and hindered the progress towards the use of plain English, reveals Mr Dyananda.

President Carter effectively started the plain English movement in 1978 when he signed an Executive Order requiring that regula-

tions be written in plain English. Federal agencies were told to simplify paperwork and eliminate gobbledygook.

Since that time thirty-four states have passed laws or regulations setting standards for plain English in insurance policies and Plain English bills are in progress in nine further state legislatures.

However, a major setback to the movement came in 1981 when President Reagan revoked Carter's earlier order, at a time when there are

...a staggering 30 million Americans lacking the reading skills to handle the minimal demands of daily living and the consumer's need ... for information expressed in plain English is more critical than ever.

Mr Dayananda goes on to describe the Flesch Reading Ease Test to rate the readability of written material and his own guidelines to help everyone write clear and concise English.

Also in *ENGLISH TODAY*, issue 5 :

Robert Burchfield, editor of the Supplement of the Oxford English Dictionary, talking to BBC Radio's presenter Barry Tomalin:

'Chomskyans have caused a whole generation of young, brilliant people, especially in American universities, to blunt their minds learning a system that wouldn't work.'

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Nicholas Bagnall, Literary Editor of the Sunday Telegraph, coming to the defence of the much maligned cliché. Is the cliché in fact a venerable cultural device?

Are we, he asks, simply bowing to the current fashion for originality ('The Cult of Originality') by rejecting the cliché?

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Tex-Mex: the astonishing mixture of Spanish and English which thrives on the borders of Texas and Mexico.

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What is literature? When popular reading tastes rarely coincide with the established notion of 'literature', might one not conclude that there is something wrong either with our literature or the teaching of it? Douglas Pickett, Examinations Officer with the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry Examinations Board.

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