

SUMMARY

- ◆ Investigates the use of phrasal verbs and the choice of more “common” English vocabulary, usually Germanic in derivation
- ◆ Finds that non-native speakers may not acquire idiomatic meanings of phrasal verbs and that French speakers preferred Latinate vocabulary

Plain English?

A Study of Plain English Vocabulary and International Audiences

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In 1989, a China Airlines flight, flying in zero visibility, crashed into the side of a mountain shortly after take-off. On the voice recorder, the last words of the Chinese pilot to the co-pilot were, “What does *pull up* mean?” When I first heard this story, I wondered why a pilot, presumably trained in the international English used for aviation, would not understand a command from the tower. On investigation, I learned that the official term used in “control tower” talk is *climb*. However, the warning system built in to U.S.-made planes issues the message “Pull up!” when altitude drops or an object looms ahead.

As a former teacher of English as a Second Language, I knew that expressions such as *pull up*—phrasal verbs or two-word verbs—are often very difficult for non-native speakers of English because they are idiomatic; that is, their meanings cannot be derived by knowledge of the individual words. *Pull up* once corresponded to the physical action of a pilot in pulling the control lever that adjusted the degree of ascent or descent of the plane. Now, however, most controls in a modern jetliner consist of dials and buttons—there’s no “pulling” involved. So it is understandable that someone not familiar with the term *pull up* would not be able to derive an accurate meaning for it.

However, as a current teacher of technical writing, I introduce my students to the principles of Plain English, advocating the use of “everyday” English terms, including phrasal verbs such as *pull up*. I began to wonder if Plain English is, in fact, Obscure English—for those not brought up in an English-speaking environment. That is what led to the study that follows.

THE PROBLEM

Recent publications on technical and business writing contain a number of articles about international and multicultural issues. This is an area of increasing interest in the field as more business is conducted internationally and as the workforce in businesses worldwide becomes more multicultural. Growing concern with this topic is the impetus behind at least two publications: The May 1999 special issue of *Technical communication* titled “Global issues, local concerns” edited by Nancy Hoft and *Global contexts: Case studies in international technical communication*, a book of case studies in international communication edited by Deborah Bosley, published in 2000 as part of the ATTW series by Allyn and Bacon.

Even in Memphis, TN, where I live and teach, which has long been isolated from the volume of international business conducted on the coasts of the U.S., local businesses such as FedEx and International Paper have hired the graduates of our program in professional/technical writing to prepare documents that will be read by non-native speakers of English and translated into other languages. In 1999, I attended a conference on technical writing in Europe at which most of the speakers were concerned with product documentation. It was clear from the discussion there that writers and editors were applying those principles of writing typically taught in technical

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writing programs today and advocated by the Plain English movement in the U.S., the U.K., and Australia.

Most of these “principles of clear writing” were developed through research conducted with native speakers of American English. The influential work of Joseph Williams interpreted research results from the fields of psychology and reading for writers and teachers of workplace English. However, I have been able to find little evidence of the effects of these principles on readers whose native language is something other than English and whose English may be less than completely fluent.

For example, none of the companies represented at the international conference I attended (including IBM and Nokia) had done any usability testing with non-native speakers of English reading in English or using the translated versions of their manuals. Most of the companies expressed a preference for using native speakers of English to produce the original version of the documentation (even when the product was produced in Germany or the Netherlands, for example), and then having native speakers of the target languages do the translation. This preference seemed to be based on the accuracy of the language produced by the original writer, not necessarily by the quality or effectiveness of the writing.

To begin to answer these questions about the universal clarity of Plain English, we need to study two areas:

1. Whether the principles advocated by proponents of Plain English make documents more readable for people whose native language is not English
2. Whether the kinds of “simplification” that writers do for English speaking audiences are the appropriate ones for international audiences

I was particularly interested in exploring relative readability for speakers of French and German (as well as other Germanic languages) because of linguistic differences in these languages that I believe may affect the readability of different styles in English.

French is a Romance language based on Latin. Since Plain English guidelines usually include the reduction of the number of Latin-based words in favor of Anglo-Saxon equivalents, Plain English may actually pose greater lexical comprehension problems for speakers of Romance languages. This concern was suggested by Spyridakis and others (1997) as one of the reasons that translating documents written in a Simplified English form into Spanish was more difficult and time consuming than it was for the translators working with Germanic languages (Simplified English was created to improve the international comprehensibility of documentation in the aerospace industry and focuses on vocabulary and usage specific to that area, but the effect on vocabulary usage is similar to that of Plain English).

German speakers, on the other hand, have identified that the most problematic aspects of English for them are

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the different usages of the present progressive versus simple present and the present perfect versus simple past verb forms (Hall 1998). The emphasis in current writing instruction to eliminate passive verb forms seems to have little effect on comprehensibility for speakers of German and Germanic languages.

WRITING FOR INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCES

We know that much of today’s business and technical writing is done for international audiences, either to be translated or to be read in English by native speakers of other languages. I have documented this in several places (Thrush 1993, 1997) as have other authors such as Weiss (1992) and Boiarsky (1995). In addition, the sight of the booths of translation services lining the exhibit area at the STC Annual Conference makes it plain that many companies view international communication as a major area of concern and as a significant expenditure. We cannot talk about audience these days without including the significant problems involved in writing for non-native speakers of English. Attempts to address these problems, as well as the relatively low literacy rate of English speakers in some lines of work, have included the development of systems called Plain English, Simplified English, and Controlled Language.

Plain English, Simplified English, and Controlled Language systems

Plain English, *Simplified English*, and *Controlled Language* are three terms used to describe attempts to produce English that is easily readable, accessible, and usable.

While usage of these terms is not necessarily standardized, Controlled Language systems tend to be designed and used to make both machine and human translation faster and more accurate, and to improve the clarity of communication among professionals in the same line of work.

Simplified English is the term used by the European Association of Aerospace Industries (AECMA) for its own controlled version of the language specific to aircraft maintenance. The AECMA (1998) says this about its Simplified English system:

AECMA Simplified English (SE) consists of a limited vocabulary and a set of rules intended to increase the

readability of technical texts. It is called a “controlled language” because these rules impose on writers:

- ◆ *simple syntax*
- ◆ *a limited number of words*
- ◆ *a limited number of clearly defined meanings for these words—in general, each word has only one meaning*
- ◆ *a limited number of parts of speech for the words—in general, each word has only one part of speech*

Plain English, on the other hand, is intended to be used for a variety of documents, settings, and purposes, and, as such, allows the writer much more latitude in language use. Plain English “movements” (established in the United Kingdom and Australia as well as the U.S.) have primarily targeted government documents, especially those intended for consumers, taxpayers, and other non-specialist readers.

Plain English, Simplified English, and Controlled English systems are all based on research on how readers (native speakers of English as discussed above) process text, so they tend to focus on the same principles of writing, particularly on the reduction of the vast vocabulary of English to those terms most readily understood and on the use of easily processed syntactic forms.

Controlled language and translation

If a controlled form of English is, in fact, clearer and more accessible to the reader, then it stands to reason that documents written in this way would be more easily and quickly translated. Daniel Brockmann (1997) says, “It goes without saying that controlled language makes it easier not only to understand a text, but also to translate it into another language, thereby reducing translation cost” (p. 10).

However, research on this issue has yielded mixed results. While Holmback, Shubert, and Spyridakis (1996) found in one study that the AECMA Simplified English was significantly more comprehensible for the non-native speakers in their study, the native languages are not identified. A later study by the same three researchers (Spyridakis, Holmback, and Shubert 1997) indicated that the Simplified English used by Boeing Corporation resulted in translations that matched the originals in style and had fewer omissions than the non-Simplified texts, and that for Spanish translators especially, the Simplified English versions were translated more accurately. However, there was no difference between the translations of the Simplified English and non-Simplified English versions on the measures of major mistranslations or omissions. Also, the advantages of the Simplified English versions did not hold up for the Chinese translators (p. 9). The researchers recommend further study on the effects of varying levels of English proficiency, the impact of time limits, and the

effects on ability to perform a task. If the Simplified English versions were not necessarily translated any more accurately than the non-Simplified versions, the implication is that the “simplifications” did not aid the non-native speakers of English in comprehending the texts accurately.

Syntax and comprehension

While many of us have written about cultural factors affecting the comprehension of text and about the problems facing translators in general (Maylath 1997; Hoft 1995), few studies have actually examined the specific elements of English that interfere with comprehension by non-native speakers. A study by Strother and Ulijn (1987) suggested that eliminating passive verbs and nominalizations did not affect comprehension of a text about computer science, regardless of the language or academic background of the reader, but this study was flawed in several ways. The test used to measure comprehension consisted of only 10 true-false items, and the readers’ scores on the test were so high and so close together that significant differences could not be established.

The English as a Second Language/English for Specific Purposes (ESP) literature provides more information on syntactic issues. Selinker and Trimble (1974), for example, found that speakers of other languages often had more difficulty with the non-technical vocabulary than with the technical, especially for syntactic items over which the writer has discretion, such as the use of definite and indefinite articles, or the choice of verb tenses. Cohen and others (1988), in a study of native speakers of Hebrew, found that lengthy noun phrases and clauses, not too surprisingly, interfered significantly with their subjects’ ability to comprehend a text on genetics.

However, most of the studies in the ESL literature use non-technical texts with students living in an English-speaking environment, factors that themselves may affect both the particular variety of English they know and their experience with syntactic features used by native speakers. Also, most of the studies have used academic texts, even

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when they were on technical topics, rather than instructional or purely informational texts typically encountered in the workplace. We need much more information on how readers from different cultures and language backgrounds interact with texts, and how specific features of English technical writing facilitate or interfere with comprehension.

THE PLAIN ENGLISH MOVEMENT

While Controlled Language and Simplified English schemes are used largely to facilitate translation and are applied in very restricted environments, the Plain English movement is influencing the writing of many types of documents that are intended to be read in English. The Plain English movement has had its ups and downs in the U.S. but has been widely applied and accepted in Australia and, to a lesser extent, the U.K. On 1 June 1998, U.S. President Bill Clinton issued a memorandum calling for the use of Plain Language in government writing. (The term *Plain Language* was used to include government documents now being written in other languages, especially Spanish. However, the guidelines on the Plain Language Web site are primarily applicable to English, and all the examples given are in English.) The president’s memo says, in part, “We are determined to make the Government more responsive, accessible, and understandable in its communications with the public. Plain language saves the Government and the private sector time, effort, and money.” The memo specifically recommends that writers use

- ◆ Common, everyday words, except for necessary technical terms
- ◆ *You* and other pronouns
- ◆ Active voice
- ◆ Short sentences (Clinton 1998)

As a result, the National Partnership for Reinventing Government (NPR), under the leadership of Vice President Albert Gore, established the Plain Language Action Network (<http://www.plainlanguage.gov/>), which has produced a document titled “Writing user friendly documents.” These guidelines include examples of documents before and after Plain English principles are applied.

Joining in the movement toward clearer, simpler writing, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) has also issued guidelines (www.sec.gov) and an extensive handbook on how to produce Plain English. The SEC has, in fact, adopted a Plain English rule, which went into effect on 1 October 1998, requiring companies submitting prospectuses and other materials to the SEC to write them “in a clear, understandable manner.” The SEC *Plain English handbook* (1998) has chapters on using active rather than passive voice, writing shorter sentences, using personal pronouns, and other features frequently advocated by technical writing teachers.

Instead of:	Use:
accomplish	do
ascertain	find out
disseminate	send out
endeavor	try
expedite	hasten, speed up
facilitate	make easier, help
formulate	work out, devise, form
in lieu of	i instead of
locality	place
optimum	best, greatest, most
strategize	plan
utilize	use

Figure 1. The word substitution list advocated by the National Literacy Secretariat of Canada recommends replacing Latinate vocabulary with Germanic terms.

Latinate versus Germanic vocabulary

One principle of most Plain English, Simplified English, and Controlled Language guidelines, and a precept of many technical writing textbooks, is the use of simple everyday words, instead of ornate, technical or complex vocabulary. The *SEC Plain English handbook*, for example, advises writers to “use short, common words to get your points across.” Specifically, it recommends using *end* instead of *terminate*, *explain* rather than *elucidate*, and *use* rather than *utilize*.

However, the history of English is such that the majority of “everyday” words, including those recommended by the SEC, came into the language from German through Old English and Middle English. In fact, the 100 most-used words in English are all Germanic in origin. To verify this fact, I checked the list of over 330 terms and substitutions suggested by the Plain English Campaign (1998), an organization with branches in both the U.K. and the U.S., in the *American Heritage dictionary*. As I anticipated, 86% of the terms considered too technical or “fancy” are listed in the *American Heritage dictionary* as having Latin or French origins. Of the terms recommended for substitution, 66% are of Middle English or Old English (and therefore Germanic) origins. In this shorter list from the National Literacy Secretariat of Canada (<http://www.web.net/~plain/Plain-Train/>), it is easy to see that the “bad” words are composed primarily of Latin roots and prefixes, while the “good” words are the shorter, Germanic terms (see Figure 1).

For an international audience, the implications of such lists are interesting. Readers whose native languages also derive from Latin (French, Spanish and Italian, primarily) may be more likely to comprehend the very terms that the Plain English advocates would like to eliminate from workplace writing. On the other hand, speakers of Germanic

Instead of:	Use:
accelerate	speed up
acquaint yourself with	find out about
aligne d	lined up
ascertain	find out
assemble	put together
calculate	work out
circumvent	get round
complete	fill in
comply with	keep to
comprises	is made up of
constitutes	makes up
contemplate	think about
cumulative	added up
deduct	take off
defer	put off
delete	cross out
designate	point out
determine	work out
disburse	pay out
discharge	carry out
disconnect	cut off
establish	set up
exclude	leave out
expire	run out
fabricate	make up
implement	carry out
insert	put in
participate	join in
reimburse	pay back
represents	stands for
review and scrutinise	look at

Figure 2. The SEC Plain English handbook recommends these substitutions for phrasal verbs.

languages may find the shorter substitutions more familiar (although the Germanic words, having come into English much earlier, have gone through many changes and are less likely to resemble their cognates in other languages than are the Latinate terms.).

Phrasal verbs

Phrasal verbs are sometimes called two-word verbs. They consist of a verb and a preposition (or two). The meaning is often idiomatic; that is, the meaning of the phrasal verb cannot be derived by looking up the verb and the preposition separately in a dictionary. Phrasal verbs cause problems for most learners of English; they are acquired later than the one-word, usually Latinate, synonyms.

In the *SEC Plain English handbook*, the two- (and three-) word verbs shown in Figure 2 are recommended.

Phrasal verbs show up in several of the examples of Plain English rewrites provided in the NPR and SEC guidelines.

From the NPR:

*If the lands you wish to lease are within a KGRA, you must follow the procedures for submitting a bid **set out** in subpart 3205 of this part.*

From the *SEC Plain English handbook*:

*You will not have to **pay for** or **turn in** your shares of Beco stock to receive your shares of Unis common stock from the **spin-off** (a nominalization of a phrasal verb).*

*If you want to buy shares in Fund X by mail, **fill out** and sign the Account Application form . . .*

*We'll have to **turn down** your claim if we don't get the report by that date.*

*We might have to **give out** this information in a few special cases.*

From the Plain English Campaign, the British Plain English initiative:

*Thank you for your letter asking permission to **put up** posters in the entrance area of the library.*

Thus, the expectation of the Plain English advocates is clearly that these phrasal verbs are readily understood by readers of English. My experience with learners of English as a Second Language and anecdotal evidence such as the crash of the China Air jet, however, suggest otherwise.

THE STUDY

My doubts about the effectiveness of Plain English guidelines (particularly those relating to vocabulary) on non-native audiences led to the study that follows. This study attempted to prove or disprove two hypotheses:

1. Phrasal verbs may make texts less accessible to non-native speakers of English.
2. Latin-based English vocabulary items will actually aid the comprehension of some readers and hinder that of others, relative to their native language backgrounds.

SUBJECTS

Participants in the study were students of technical subjects, primarily engineering and computer science, ranging in age from 17 to 24. They were intermediate students of English as a Foreign

TABLE 1: SCORES ON GENERAL READING TEST

	Mean	SD	t	p
French-speakers (df = 44)	88%	7	0.46	NS
German-speakers (df = 44)	87.5%	7.7		

Language. The French-speakers were students at the Université Catholique in Lille, France. The German speakers were from an intensive English program in Germany and from Potsdam University, outside Berlin. To ensure that the test subjects were at the same general proficiency level in English, I administered a reading test composed of passages and test items taken from old forms of the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) test. The results are shown in Table 1.

There was no significant difference between the French-speaking subjects and the German-speaking subjects on the general reading proficiency test.

METHODS

Study 1

The first study examined the comprehensibility of phrasal verbs for both French and German speakers. I used a list of 27 items taken from the various Plain English guidelines mentioned previously. Subjects were asked to match the Latinate term with the phrasal verb that the guidelines suggest as a substitute. In a pilot test, a group of native speakers of English averaged 26.5 correct answers, showing the test consisted of valid, matchable items. I also tested a small group of students of different language groups (Spanish, Thai, Mandarin Chinese, French, and Russian) who are enrolled in an International MBA program. These students had all scored better than 600 on the TOEFL test (the standard score for admission to graduate programs) and were enrolled in an advanced business English course.

The 13 students tested averaged 17 correct on the 27-item test. The scores ranged widely, with the speakers of European languages averaging scores in the low 20s while those whose native languages were Asian averaged under 10 correct answers. These results indicated that the phrasal verbs, were, indeed, a problem for even advanced learners of English as a Second Language.

The scores of the French and German subjects are shown in Table 2.

There was no significant difference in the scores on the test of phrasal verbs. Both groups were able to identify the meanings of only about one-third of the phrasal verbs tested.

TABLE 2: SCORES ON TEST OF 27 PHRASAL VERBS

	Mean	SD	t	p
French-speakers (df = 44)	8.53	3.47	0.3	NS
German-speakers (df = 44)	9.42	4.77		

Study 2

The second part of this study, on whether everyday English words of Germanic origin impede comprehensibility for speakers of Latin languages, was much more difficult to design. I wanted to know if the students recognized, and therefore preferred, one type of lexical item over the other, and if the choice of vocabulary affected overall comprehension. I used two test types to measure these factors.

First, I used passages taken from study books for the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication, a test frequently used by employers and business schools), but removed some words from each passage. I then supplied the subjects with a list of vocabulary words to choose from. The list included both the original terms taken from the passages and a synonym for each. If the word I removed was Latinate, I provided the Germanic equivalent and vice versa. By choosing the terms to complete the blanks in the passages, the subjects demonstrated preferences for either the Latinate or the Germanic term. The results of this test are shown in Table 3.

All the subjects, both French-speaking and German-speaking, chose more Latinate words than Germanic words, resulting in percentages for the Latinate words of more than half. However, the French-speakers chose significantly more Latinate words ($p < 0.05$).

The second part of the test looked at overall comprehension. Passages from the TOEIC test were rewritten in two versions. One version contained a number of Latinate

TABLE 3: PERCENTAGE OF BLANKS COMPLETED WITH LATINATE RATHER THAN GERMANIC WORDS

	Mean	SD	t	p
French-speakers (df = 44)	68.83	5.61	1.67	<.05
German-speakers (df = 44)	56.36	2.55		

TABLE 4: PERCENTAGES CORRECT ON FORMS OF MULTIPLE-CHOICE TEST

	Latinate Form		Germanic Form		t	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
French	89%	.32	84%	.24	.62	NS
German	77%	.27	86%	.21	.13	NS

terms; the other contained Germanic synonyms. The two versions of the text, L (for Latinate) and G (for Germanic) were randomly distributed to both the French and German speakers. Table 4 shows that no significant differences were found in the comprehension of either version of the text by either group of subjects.

Because of time constraints, this portion of the text was quite short, with only 10 items. Therefore, I don't think the results are conclusive. This area requires further testing.

DISCUSSION

The clearest indication emerging from this study was the difficulty that phrasal verbs are likely to pose for non-native speakers of English. Even very advanced learners of English have not mastered these idiomatic expressions. Furthermore, many of these verb phrases have different meanings in British versus American English.

The other significant finding in this study was that both the French speakers and the German speakers showed a preference for Latinate vocabulary items in completing passages. This preference may result from the fact that the passages were of an academic or professional nature, and the models of this type that the students had read in English used the more formal, Latinate vocabulary. However, the fact that the French speakers chose significantly more of the Latinate terms than the German speakers did show an influence of the native language on vocabulary preference. Further work needs to be done on the interactions of native language and word derivation for comprehension of various types of material.

Implications for writers and teachers

As I repeat to my students often, the keys to successful professional writing are audience and purpose. Certainly the native language of the reader is a factor to be considered in making effective choices from the writer's repertoire. With the dramatic increase in the number of non-native speakers of English in our workplaces and in the amount of international business conducted by most companies and organizations, our audiences are more likely

than not to include people who may have difficulty with the more idiomatic elements of English, particularly phrasal verbs, and speakers of Latinate languages—Spanish in particular. Therefore, writers may want to be judicious in their use of phrasal verbs.

In preparing writers for the diversity of their audiences, I have found the following to be helpful.

1. We discuss how English is related to other languages, and how the evolution of the English language has created a strange amalgam of Germanic syntax with Latin, Greek, French, and Germanic vocabulary. We look at examples of Spanish, French, and German, and identify vocabulary that has cognates in English and is therefore recognizable. We also look at examples of languages unrelated to English, such as Japanese, to see how much harder it is to derive any meaning from the vocabulary. We talk about our own language learning experiences and what caused us the most difficulty in understanding a foreign language.

2. I require that students perform a usability test with some document they have written using subjects whose native language is not English. It is quite easy to recruit participants for such a study by contacting the teachers of advanced level intensive ESL classes or of the courses provided by the English department for international graduate students. My students are often surprised to find that their carefully crafted texts (and graphics) have cultural, syntactic, or semantic problems for even quite fluent learners of English. They also acquire a greater appreciation of what people around the world go through to learn English to participate in the global community.

CONCLUSION

The intent of this study was not to negate the effectiveness of Plain English guidelines, but to highlight some specific areas that might need further investigation. Most previous studies of the usefulness of these guidelines in preparing technical materials for non-native speakers and for translation have evaluated the general application of all the Plain English guidelines, not specific features. As this study indicates, there may be features of Plain English that are less applicable when the intended audience consists of non-native speakers of English or speakers of other dialects of English, and other features that should be localized for segments of the audience. Unfortunately, this possibility complicates the business of writing for today's international and multi-cultural audiences. However, in cases where comprehension of the written material is critical, careful consideration of these issues may well be worthwhile. In any case, accurate knowledge of the effect of choices made by writers on their readers is important to our profession and to the continued improvement of communication among the peoples of the world. **TC**

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