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AT THE HEART OF COMMUNICATION
across disciplines and around the world

A Brief History of Plain Language

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1. Common, vulgar roots

In a book I still find marvellous, *Our Marvelous Native Tongue, The life and times of the English language*, Robert Claiborne wrote about the great, successive waves of migrant peoples, beginning 8,000 years ago, over the face of Asia, North Africa, and Europe. They moved by generations, labouring and loving, warring and fighting, singing and slaughtering, farming and hunting, starving and feasting and farting around the campfire.

As they went, they created the rich and exasperating languages we speak here in this room. In making that introductory statement, I have easily drawn on a dozen root words that go back those 8,000 years to a common Indo-European source. Our common language, says Claiborne, still includes "fire" and "fart."

And fight. Starve. Slaughter. Feast. Sing. Love. Child. Kind. Kindred.

2. The early literacy of the ruling classes

The literacy of Western Europe, as in most ancient societies, evolved along class lines. In medieval India, only the Brahmin could read the sacred Veda.⁽¹⁾

In medieval Europe, Latin was the language of literacy. It was owned and operated by the Church through the good offices of the clerical scribes who wrote edicts and proclamations for their mainly illiterate masters -- the ruling warlords of the day.

The warlords of Normandy and Brittany who conquered the island to their west in 1066, were the great-grandchildren of Norse raiders from Scandinavia who had been pillaging and settling the coastal regions of France for a couple of centuries. Their "vulgate" had by now assimilated the campfire Latin of the Roman invasions. Old French richly and easily mingled with Old Norse and the Germanic vocabulary of the tribes of northwest Europe, who had settled in southern Britain earlier.

The new Norman kings, queens, and barons of the "Angle's Land" were often illiterate, but they were far more cosmopolitan than their predecessors.

Their grandchildren travelled back and forth to Europe a great deal. They held lands in France. They made pilgrimage to Rome. They *loved to* vandalize the Middle East.

Eleanor of Aquitaine, mother of Richard the Lion-hearted and a brood of viciously contending princes, rode to the Crusades, dressed in practical, manly clothes and brought the music, poetry, rhythm, and seasonings of Southern France and the East back to England – and into the language.

These ruling families continued to speak French and have their scribes write edicts and proclamations in Latin, including the Magna Carta, signed by Eleanor's son John in 1215. But not long after the enchanting Eleanor, popular languages began to invade art.

3. The entry of popular languages into literature

Dante in Italian, Chaucer in English, and Cervantes in Spanish were all writers who walked through a door that people like Eleanor had opened. They began to write poetry and stories in the common, vulgar, tongue, rather than the language of the Church or the Law.

I had never connected my own struggle for plain language to these great early writers until a light went on for me one sunny morning in November 2000, when PLAIN's Chair, Christine Mowat, sat down at her computer with what must have been a darned good cup of coffee, and wrote to the PLAIN ListServ about the language people used on Chaucer's famous pilgrimage to Canterbury.

Christine reminded us that Geoffrey Chaucer was a member of the rising London middle class of the 1300s. In the spoken dialect of the England he knew, Chaucer has his host call on the Clerke of Oxenforde to tell his tale, not in the "heigh style" that clerics used to write for kings, but rather to...

"Speketh so pleyn at this time, I yow preye,
that we may understonde what ye seye."

Chaucer's plain, poetic storytelling is already, recognizably, our tongue. The struggle for access to information, and to literature, was on.

Young William Shakespeare, two centuries later in Stratford-on-Avon, was the son of a skilled glover -- a businessman and civic politician who was himself completely illiterate. He sent his son to the local school, where young Will, probably much like young Chaucer, laboured through an *entirely Latin curriculum* -- not one word of the English that runs riot in Shakespeare's sonnets and plays was taught to him during his eight years of formal education. (2)

No wonder these guys couldn't spell! That's why we all depend on style Czars like William Sabin. [*Bill, are you here yet? Would you stand up and say hello?*]

With no rules to follow, Shakespeare and Chaucer still shared a horror of the contrast between the formal, classical language of their education and the lively, contemporary language they were helping to create.

"An honest tale speeds best being plainly told," the Bard wrote in *Richard III*.

And in *Hamlet*, he steps right off the page and out of Hamlet's character to lecture the visiting players on the proper, natural delivery of their lines, as if Shakespeare the actor/director could not stand to see his language treated in the old, stiff style.

Christine also reminded us that Bill Sabin's honourable profession was born during Shakespeare's lifetime, with the first English dictionary, compiled in 1604 by Robert Cawdry. Cawdry explicitly designed it to broaden literacy by explaining all those difficult Old French and Latinate terms...

"in *pleine* English wordes, gathered for the helpe of Ladies, Gentlewomen, or any other unskillfull persons." (3)

A little later in the 1600s, Sir Edward Coke was making the case for translating the law from French into English:

"I cannot conjecture," said Coke, "that the general communication of these laws into the English Tongue can work any inconvenience, but introduce great profit, seeing that *ignorantia juris non excusat*, ignorance of the law excuseth not."

It interests me that Coke had to make his argument for plain English from French in Latin, and then translate it to English. But by 1731 a law had been passed by Parliament requiring that lawyers must write:

"... in the *English* tongue and language only, and not in *Latin* or *French* or any other tongue or language whatsoever." (4)

Of course, by that time, the English tongue had incorporated, by way of campfire liaisons and the general marketplace, so much French, Latin, German and whatnot that the notion of language purity could not be raised without a great deal of giggling. English has never had an Academy, where learned men and women consign certain vocabulary to the flames.

English has always been a bit of a tart. Like Queen Eleanor. And with the Internet, it gets tartier by the minute.

4. Access to information: the birth of a notion

What was beginning to entrench itself was a notion of a shared, democratic understanding. The literature of the 1700s played a central role in what would come to be the plain language movement. Jonathan Swift lacerated the lawyers in *Gulliver's Travels*:

"... This society hath a peculiar cant and jargon of their own, that no other mortal can understand, and wherein all their laws are written, which they take special care to multiply; whereby they have wholly confounded the very essence of truth and falsehood, of right and wrong."

The American revolutionary Tom Paine burned the notion of clarity into everything he wrote, including this powerful call to letters:

"As it is my design to make those that can scarcely read understand, I shall therefore avoid every literary ornament and put it in language as plain as the alphabet. "

By the nineteenth century, Charles Dickens was on the lawyers' case in *Hard Times*:

"In the taking of legal oaths, for instance, deponents seem to enjoy themselves mightily when they come to several good words in succession, for the expression of one idea; as, that they utterly detest, abominate, and abjure, and so forth ... We talk about the tyranny of words, but we like to tyrannise over them too; we are fond of having a large superfluous establishment of words to wait upon us on great occasions; we think it looks important and sounds well."

5. The Rise of Mass Literacy

Dickens and Paine were still talking about plain language as a issue that affected and interested the literate, privileged, property-owning classes -- a tiny triangle at the top of the social pyramid.

Something very different was coming. David Vincent, in *The Rise of Mass Literacy In Europe*, tells an amazing story about a quiet revolution in technology and education, both practical and spiritual, and in the end more powerful than Paine's great rhetoric or Swift's acid quill.

The literacy revolution had been brewing since the invention of the printing press and the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s. People had begun to teach one another to read the Bible, for themselves, in the common tongue.

Up to the mid-nineteenth century, the statistical measure of mass literacy in Europe was, according to Vincent, the simple ability of newlywed men and women to sign their names in the parish register, or of army recruits to sign their lives away, rather than making a mark, like an 'X'.

The austere, passionately devout, reformation Protestants of Sweden were way ahead of this standard. They had achieved, starting in the 1600s, the highest measurable literacy rate in the world. The authorities actually tested children on their knowledge of the catechism -- a very high standard of literacy for the times. Sweden also became the first country to declare universal literacy as a goal. *[Let's welcome the Swedes in our midst. Bengt and Maria, are you here yet? Please say hello!]*

Let us now leave the virtuous Scandinavians and get back to the general state of things in industrial England during the last half of the nineteenth century: Dickens's world.

In Europe, says David Vincent, working-class children (and those children worked shockingly hard) gained the right to a few years of state- or church-funded basic education, if the economy of their families could spare them.

And unlike Chaucer and Shakespeare, those children were taught to read and write the language they actually spoke. The age of mass literacy had begun.

"Ahr've goh' me lettahs!" protests Eliza Doolittle the flower girl indignantly, when Henry Higgins, the great "Professor of Phonetics" in Bernard Shaw's 1910 play *Pygmalion* suggests that Eliza might not be fit for his instruction.

She had to "have her letters" in order to transfer her understanding of what vowels sounded like as an inner city dialect speaker, so that she could then make herself sound like Henry, an Oxbridge dialect speaker. The fact that Eliza came pre-loaded with basic literacy was essential to the development of Eliza as a person, and of the play as a whole.

"It's "eow," and "g'ong" that keep her in her place,
Not her wretched clothes and dirty face,"
-- sings Henry in the popular musical version of this story. But both Higgins and Shaw were quite wrong. What distinguished Eliza from other street girls was not her accent, but three years or so of public education.

Vincent argues that the rise of mass literacy was about public education combined with the huge migration of people from Europe to North America, Australia, New Zealand and many other parts of the world. To that, add a technological change so simple that it will make you laugh.

The postage stamp.

6. Redefining Literacy

In 1875, the Universal Postal Union was created under the Treaty of Berne. This treaty brought about a flat-rate, 'penny postage' system. Ordinary people -- families, lovers, businesses -- from Russia to Ireland, from Scandinavia to Egypt, and across the ocean to the new dominion of Canada and the American republic -- could now correspond with one another, regularly and cheaply, through the mails.

They did so with astonishing volume. We know this because the Treaty of Berne had also mandated a system for keeping records of letter- and postcard-writing. The Postal Union's records meant that literacy could now be defined as the ability to send a message and understand the answer. Against this higher standard, the rates of literacy skyrocketed. In 1876, about 2,500 Europeans wrote letters. By 1913, about 25,000 Europeans used the mails each year. (5)

Were these letter-writers "literate" in the way we define literacy today?

I possess a few early letters from a young ancestor who left the family farm in Southern Ontario to cut down the white pine farther north at the turn of the last century. They are written in a childish hand, grossly misspelled, and at what I would today judge as a Grade 3/4 level.

In one, he says that he got drunk on whiskey one night and got into a fight that was *not his fault* (his emphasis). He then assures his family that he reads his Bible faithfully each night in the bunkhouse. He ends by greeting his mother and father, sisters and brothers, cousins, aunts and uncles, spelling their names lovingly.

Was my ancestor a fully literate man? Well, he could do much more than sign his name in the enlistment rolls or the parish register. He was far more literate than the generations that preceded him. He worked, saved his money, moved farther west, bought a farm, kept his accounts, stayed in touch.

He was a *functionally* literate man, measured by the standards of his day.

But the "literacy bar" keeps rising. Our expectations of *mass* literacy soared in the 20th century. Yes, I know, we are fond of saying that literacy is "on the decline." But listen to Nicholas Lemann, recently writing in *The New Yorker*:

"In 1900, only six per cent of American eighteen-year-olds had a high-school diploma; by 1960, seventy per cent did ... And the increases in the American high-school population came at a time when ... our schools were taking in students from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds and national experiences." (6)

The World Health Organization identifies mass literacy as a major indicator of the health of a society. I believe that the plain language movement is a friend and champion of mass literacy, imperfect as it is.

7. The politics of mass literacy

By the end of the Second World War, a plain language champion we will all recognize emerged. His essay was an inspiration to me when I was a young, aspiring journalist. Many parts of it have not aged well for me on re-reading -- there is a certain fussiness and particularity about his language likes and dislikes that no longer appeals.

But, my gosh, he still has lines that galvanize me like a rallying cry! He begins this way:

"Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it."

And he ends, magnificently, this way:

"I have not here been considering the literary use of language, but merely language as an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought ... If you simplify your English, you are freed from the

worst follies of orthodoxy ... when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself ... Political language -- and with variations this is true of all political parties ... is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind. One cannot change this all in a moment, but one can at least change one's own habits ... "

-- Ladies and gentlemen, George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language." (7)

8. The Modern plain language movement

The United Kingdom -- Maher and Cutts

Now we come to the plain language pioneers who emerged in our own lifetimes. I am not going to take this brief history past 1990, because many of the modern pioneers are in this room and can tell their own stories better than I could. But I do want to tell you a little about the last 35 years or so of the plain language movement.

Chrissie Maher is a romantic figure for me. Her early community journalism and Plain English Campaign in England inspired many young literacy workers and plain language advocates in Canada during the 1970s and early 1980s. *[I would like at this time to welcome her son, George Maher, and his presentation partner John Wild to this gathering.]*

Chrissie grew up in the north of England and left school as a young teen to help support a large family, when the coal industry was failing. She went to night school to get more literacy with the advice and support of her employer.

Let us all be grateful that Chrissie's night school existed. This woman turned out to be, quite simply, a communications genius.

In Tony Gibson's wonderful book, *The Power in Our Hands: Neighbourhood based world shaking*, we get a sense of what she accomplished. While she raised her own young family, she fought like a tiger through the *Bugle*, a community newspaper she organized with neighbours and family. She fought the garbage and blocked drains and dangerous playgrounds that plague public housing projects. She fought for a better redevelopment plan for the neighbourhood, and against the insular distrust of ethnic minorities.

She challenged the authorities to a dialogue on the stupid way they were trying to communicate with ordinary people. Her community opened "The

Benefits Shop” where people could get advice on government forms, what they meant, and how to fill them in. Chrissie also became a loud, obstreperous voice in the National Consumer Council.

During the 1970s, Chrissie teamed up with a very brilliant, very young journalist with a lot of hair, by the name of Martin Cutts. Martin is another great hero of mine in the history of the plain language movement. *[Martin, are you here yet? Please stand up and say hello!]*

Chrissie, Martin and friends pulled off all kinds of media stunts -- they gleefully shredded documents in Parliament Square. They established things like the "Golden Bull Award" to thoroughly embarrass the powerful people who were enacting legislation and policy in unforgivable language.

They dressed up in silly costumes. They mailed packages of real tripe to verbose bureaucrats and officials. But always, they were popular educators. They showed us how easy and logical it would be, with some training and sensitivity, to translate things like landlord's letters, insurance, and product instructions into contemporary English. They created "before and afters" that were screamingly funny and completely persuasive. All this they did with so much élan and skill that they became the darlings of the BBC. Their message and their training materials went around the world.

The United Kingdom – Clarity

In 1983, a solicitor named John Walton was head of a local authority's legal department. He read a letter from a surveyor published in the Law Society's England and Wales *Gazette*, in which the surveyor complained about how hard his job was when the leases were so difficult for people to understand.

Walton replied in print, suggesting that anyone interested in forming a movement to promote plain English in the law write to him and send 5 quid. More than 200 lawyers did, from as far away as Australia. (8)

Walton called the first meeting in the following year. He started a newsletter and chaired the new association until 1987. Since then, Walton's newsletter has become a serious legal journal with the sponsorship of distinguished Lord Justices.

Clarity, the organization Walton founded, has become a worldwide group of practising lawyers, judges, parliamentary and public service legal staff, teachers and professors, librarians, legal translators, linguists and plain language consultants, with a membership of more than 1,000, representing close to 30 countries worldwide.

And what a beacon they are to us all! Just this past summer, Clarity put on its first conference in co-operation with the Statute Law Society in Cambridge, England. *[Congratulations, Clarity! Would all the Members of Clarity in our midst please stand up!]*

The United States

In 1978, President Jimmy Carter issued Executive Order No. 12044, requiring federal regulations to be written in plain English. This was revoked in 1981 by President Ronald Reagan.

But meanwhile, in the early spirit of Clarity In the United States, there was the Plain English Committee of the State Bar of Michigan. *[Pioneer Joseph Kimble of the Thomas Cooley Law School, please stand up!]*

And the United States Document Design Centre, created by the National Institute of Education, had begun a project in 1979 leading to "a 20-year period rich with contributions to the growing field of document design" bringing together "anthropology, cognitive psychology, composition, graphic design, forms design, legal drafting, linguistics, organizational psychology, rhetoric, and sociology." (9)

[Do we have anyone from the Document Design Center of those days? Please say hello!]

A community educator I met in 1984 named Michael Fox had begun an organization called PLAN – Plain Language Action Now – out of Washington, D.C. And the American Labor Education Center had begun a campaign to educate local organizers and stewards as early as 1982.

In 1989, a lawyer, linguist and maverick in the best American tradition blew the whistle on the gobbledygook of corporate America with his best-selling *Doublespeak: From Revenue Enhancement to Terminal Living*. *[Dr Lutz is not here yet, but we shall hear him tonight.]*

Health education in Canada and the U.S.

Crucial as it is to know our legal rights, the popular struggle for information is also about a society where people know how to be healthy, how to nurture and educate children, to avoid disease, and, when the time comes, to die with dignity.

In Canada, we had the early work of Mary Breen and Janis Wood Catano. Since then, the Canadian Public Health Association has conducted

awareness campaigns in partnership with health professionals from many fields under the leadership of Debra Gordon El-Bihbety and her staff.

We'll learn more about progress in health information in Canada and the United States from Helen Osborne, Joanne Locke and many others, during this conference.

In honour of our health pioneers, would Helen and Joanne, Reva Daniel, the representatives of the Canadian Public Health Association, and all other public health plain language professionals, please stand up and say hello.]

Australia and New Zealand

As early as 1983 in Australia, the newsletter of the Australian Literacy Council was featuring articles by Venetia Nelson and the Communication Research Institute of Australia was publishing style guides on government forms. (10)

There was the Centre for Plain Legal Language at the University of Sydney Law Faculty and the brilliant work all through the '80s of Michèle Asprey and the extraordinary Judith Bennett.

We're so glad that Professor Peter Butt, another of these pioneers, is also here. And so is Jacquie Harrison of New Zealand. *[Peter, Michèle, Jacquie and anyone I've missed please stand up!]*

South Africa

South Africa has the distinction, I believe, of being the first nation to enshrine the right of access to information in its constitution. *[I would like to welcome Deirdre Viviers from South Africa, and also ask that Phil Knight, who helped to draft that constitution, stand and say hello.]*

Canada and the founding of PLAIN

Plain language professionals from Canada have been a part of this movement for a long time: doing research, sponsoring conferences and travelling the world.

Phil Knight also helped to lead the Plain Language Society out of Vancouver in the 1980s, along with Wendy Putman, Richard Darville, Dianne Bodnar, Shirley Dommissie, Peter Buitenhuis, Stephen Carlman, and Sheila Jones.

In George Orwell's scary year of 1984, a community literacy worker named Ruth Baldwin had for some time been monitoring Clarity and the Plain Language Society and adapting Chrissie and Martin's training materials in

order to consult with Canadian government agencies in Ottawa about *their* bumf. Tannis Atkinson and I came to train with Ruth in that year.

The Canadian Legal Information Centre, or CLIC, under the leadership of Gail Dykstra and Gwen Davies, had assembled a library of plain language resources that is still a part of our national library.

At the Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy, Betty-Ann Loyd and colleagues developed brilliant training models for plain language workshops that many of us still draw from.

The early founders of PLAIN

I have left some extraordinary people to end this history with. They are the people who founded the International Plain Language Network, the forerunner of this association. Their work has included previous conferences, high-quality newsletters, and a far-sighted and early grasp of the Internet, which began to connect us all by the mid-1990s.

[Here I ask you all to stand and applaud the founding work for our association done by: Kate Harrison of Winnipeg, Judith Bennett of Melbourne, Australia, and especially Cheryl Stephens and Janet Dean of Vancouver.]

Ending thoughts

When I was a little girl, I went to Sunday School, and I learned the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, a lesson I took to mean that great cultures crash and burn without a common language, a common understanding.

How terrifying that image of a crashing tower has become for us now.

This conference is dedicated to clear communication, across disciplines and around the world.

A conference is a campfire. Around our campfire, let's argue, but let's laugh too, about this perplexing profession of ours.

Nobody goes away from a campfire agreeing completely, because we all still have so much to learn.

May we keep talking and learning. Good luck everyone. Thank you for being here.

This is going to be a wonderful conference.

Endnotes

- (1) For a good overview of the history of written literacy and its social meanings see Steven Lagerfeld, "The Reading Revolution," *Wilson Quarterly* (Washington, D.C.: The Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, Spring, 1986), page 104.
- (2) These insights into the early life of Shakespeare are courtesy of Brian Bedford's performance, *The Lunatic, the Lover, and the Poet*, compiled by Bedford and performed at Stratford, Ontario in August, 2002. The quotation and reference are from *King Richard III*, Act 4, Scene IV and Hamlet's speech to the players.
- (3) Cawdrey and Chaucer quoted by Christine Mowat from Tom McArthur, "The Pedigree of plain English," in *English Today*, 1991.
- (4) *Records in English*, 1731. Coke is quoted from *Commentary upon Littleton*, in Butler, 19th edition, 1832 by David Melinkoff, *Language of the Law* (Little, Brown and Company, 1963.) This delightful information is all from the Plain English Campaign, *Language on Trial: The plain English guide to legal writing* (London: Robson Books Ltd., 1996).
- (5) See the graph on page 4 in David Vincent, *The Rise of Mass Literacy: Reading and writing in modern Europe* (Cambridge and Oxford, England and Malden, MA: Polity Press and Blackwell Publishers, 2000). My thanks to CLAD Associate Erika Steffer for giving me this enlightening book.
- (6) Nicholas Lemann, "Dumbing Down: Did progressivism ruin our public schools?" *The New Yorker*, September 25, 2000.
- (7) George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," *Selected Essays* (Toronto: Penguin Books Ltd., 1957), pages 143 and 157.
- (8) Many thanks to Mark Adler, an early member of Clarity, for this brief history of the association.
- (9) Dr. Ginny Redish and Dr. Susan Kleimann, "The US Document Design Center: A Retrospective" in *Clarity*, No. 43, May, 1999.
- (10) Communication Research Institute of Australia, *Forms Data Sheets*. (Canberra: Communication Research Institute of Australia Inc., 1990).

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A Brief History of Plain Language

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Sally McBeth, B.A. (Hons.), joined the Toronto East End Literacy Project in 1984 after working in community journalism and human resources. Since 1995, she has managed Clear Language and Design (CLAD), a revenue-generating division of East End Literacy. CLAD draws its clients from labour, government, business, and community groups. She is a senior member of the Society for Technical Communication, and is also active in the Editors' Association of Canada and PLAIN. She co-chaired the PLAIN 2002 international conference with Michelle Black.