

A word in your ear: keep it slow and simple

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When I spoke to a recent Brussels conference of business translators, one of them asked me if the Financial Times had any plans to publish a separate edition in simplified English. Not that I knew of, I told him, although it was an interesting idea.

We have thousands of readers who are not native English speakers but whose knowledge of the language is sufficient to take in these pages every day. But there must be many others who grasp the financial concepts but find the English too complicated.

On the Eurostar back to London, I pondered what a simplified FT might look like. The first issue to tackle, I thought, would be vocabulary. In his book *The English Language*, David Crystal says that a medium-sized English dictionary has about 100,000 words in it. Even native speakers know only a fraction of these.

"How many words does you know?" Ali G, Sacha Baron Cohen's *faux-naïf* television creation, once asked the linguistics luminary Noam Chomsky. Prof Chomsky said that mature humans usually knew tens of thousands of words. "What is some of them?" Ali G demanded. As the unsuspecting Prof Chomsky spluttered in amazement, Ali G told him: "Me know loads of words: parachute, photograph, spaghetti, camera."

Mr Crystal, in his book, recounts an attempt to work out how many words the average native English-speaker does know. This involved taking a sample of entries from different parts of a dictionary and asking the subject to count how many she recognised. Extrapolating her answer to the whole dictionary suggested she understood 38,300 words and regularly used 31,500.

How many words would a non-native speaker need to understand a simplified form of English? Several people have investigated this over the years and have come up with a similar answer: fewer than 1,000. One of the pioneers of simplified language, Charles Kay Ogden, devised what he called Basic English in the 1920s. It used only 850 words – sufficient, he said, to communicate.

The Aerospace and Defence Industries Association of Europe, a champion of simplified English, has devised a system that uses no more than 900 words. The association's involvement demonstrates what often drives simplified English: the need for safety.

When pilots or sailors from different countries talk to each other, they usually do so in English. English is the international language and, in spite of challenges from Spanish or Mandarin, is likely to remain that way throughout our lifetimes.

Air traffic controllers, pilots and sailors began speaking to each other in English and soon developed a language they could all understand. A limited but effective vocabulary was one part of it, but they also needed forms of speech that they could all recognise. Misunderstandings meant people could die.

So in 1980, Mr Crystal writes, a project was set up on Essential English for International Maritime Use. Also known as Seaspeak, this relied on standard, easily understood phrases. So instead of "What did you say?" or "I can't hear you" or "Please repeat that", sailors and coast guard officials were told to opt for "Say again."

The European aerospace association's effort began a year earlier when the Association of European Airlines asked aircraft manufacturers to improve the comprehensibility of maintenance manuals. Many airline technicians were not native English speakers and found the documents difficult.

In 1986 the manufacturers issued their first guide to Simplified Technical English, which was then adopted by the Air Transport Association of America and has since become an international standard.

The standard is specific in its instructions, which aim to ensure that once someone has learnt a word in one form, they will not encounter it in another. So manufacturers are told the word “follow” should always mean “come after” and not “obey”. So you can say “obey the safety instructions” but not “follow the safety instructions”.

You can see why this might be useful in aircraft maintenance books but it would be unnecessarily restrictive in reporting the credit crisis.

But at least one news organisation has developed a simplified English service, and it did it some time back. The Voice of America broadcast its first programme in what it calls “Special English” in 1959.

This has a slightly bigger vocabulary – 1,500 words. It also has style rules: use short sentences that contain only one idea. Use the active voice. Do not use idioms. And above all, speak slowly. Special English broadcasters speak at two-thirds of normal speed.

To a native speaker, the effect is soporific. To a non-native speaker, the increase in comprehension must be thrilling. Simplified English may not be for everyone, but with the rise in the number of people around the world working in English, I suspect we will see more of it.

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