

What do people think about the way government talks?
Attitudes to plain language in official communication

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Abstract

When official publications supposed to inform the public do not do their job well the consequences can be serious, impacting for example on someone's income because they did not know they were entitled to benefits. Campaigners argue that official communication should be written in plain language to make it more understandable. This seems to be largely accepted by Government and yet plain language has not become everyday practice. The public conversation about plain language invokes a range of ideas about what plain language signifies, suggesting that there may be more complex reasons for the maintenance of non-plain communication than simply laziness of the writers. For spoken language, language attitude studies have been used to provide empirical evidence of the beliefs people have about different language varieties, drawing on these for explanations as to why languages change or are maintained. Drawing on the language attitudes field, a matched-guise study of plain language was therefore carried out to consider if readers and writers of official communication had particular attitudes towards plain and non-plain language in official communication. Participants were found to judge organisations producing plain texts to be less professional and less credible than those producing plain texts, but more approachable and more down-to-earth, with values at or approaching statistical significance. It is suggested that non-plain official communication continues to be produced because it is the prestige variety. Factors that affect peoples' attitudes to plain language are also discussed, including the content of official information, characteristics of participants, and what people expect from language in this very particular context.

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1. Introduction

The language of government is a target for satire ('officialese') as well as more serious criticism that people cannot get benefits they are entitled to or comply with tax obligations because they do not understand information from official sources. The dominant response to this concern is the call for language in official communication to be 'plain'. Proponents argue that the language of official communication should be clear enough to be understood easily by the reader, because the alternative "oppresses" people (Cutts, 1996:3). It appears that these voices have been heard by officialdom; government departments seek to have their public information accredited as plain and legislative drafters have their own guidance on writing plain law. Yet it does not appear that plain language has become the norm in official communication – neither campaigners nor government believe that plain language has become practice, and it is still easy to find examples of official language to satirise. The National Audit Office (2006:8) reported that a single government failure to communicate (relating to information about a change in pension entitlements) will cost the Government £8 billion in savings by 2050. The consequences of not getting the language of official communication right are therefore enormous for individuals and the state. It is worth asking why an accepted solution, plain language, has not proliferated.

While academics acknowledge the importance of looking at the language of public information, given how much "power and control" information providers have (Lippi-Green, 1991:151), there has been little scholarly interest in plain language. There has been more of a discussion in the specific field of plain language and the law but even here there are concerns about the lack of empirical evidence about the effectiveness of plain language (Barnes, 2006:128). This raises the question of what effectiveness is in official communication – plain language is often advocated because it improves clarity and understanding, but these concepts are not necessarily straightforward, tangled up with what plain language campaigners want the language of government to accomplish socially. While we know little about whether plain language improves comprehension, we know even less about whether the readers and writers of plain language share the campaigners' interpretations of what plain language means.

This study is therefore a start to filling in the evidence gap, using the field of language attitudes research to find out what is going on beneath what campaigners and

government say about plain language, what people actually think about plain language. This paper is not attempting to advocate for or against plain language, but rather to gather evidence that may contribute to our understanding of why official language maintains a norm that is not plain.

1.1 The content of this paper

This paper reports a pilot study about attitudes towards plain and non-plain language in official communication. The background section describes the public conversations about official language and plainness. Particular ideologies are identified as underlying what campaigners and official organisations say about preferences for plain language. In light of this, a crucial gap in current research seems to be empirical evidence about the values everyday people associate with plain language. Section 2.4 discusses how the field of language attitudes research can be used to fill this gap, noting its use in addressing questions of language change and maintenance, leading to the specific research question of applying language attitudes questions to plain language in official communication.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology employed to develop a pilot survey of attitudes towards plain language in official communication. Chapter 4 presents and discusses the results of this survey, joining up elements of the quantitative and qualitative findings and linguistic analysis. Section 5 then draws conclusions relating to the headline findings.

1.2 A note on terminology and scope

The study looks at plain and non-plain language in UK official communications (in English). In order to make this study manageable, official communication has been defined in a very limited way as planned, written material from government or other official organisations (e.g. Parliament, Non-departmental public bodies) to the public. Specifically, it is material that is designed to inform, not to persuade. This was chosen because there is a great deal of official information out there, but it is something that may go relatively unnoticed. There are a variety of other material produced from official sources, each raising slightly different issues from those dealt with here: circulars that are written for primarily an internal audience; press notices designed to 'spin' and issue; international agreements that are deliberately vague to allow different parties to have different interpretations; legislation that has practical application in a court of law; correspondence drawn up from stock form letters for

individuals about their personal circumstances. These are not included within the definition of official communication here or tested in the survey; although evidence about plain language in the legal field has been considered here because it is one of the few areas plain language has been looked at in.

Within that limited definition of official communication this study looks at plain and non-plain language. Plain language refers to an overall concept, not the work of a particular organisation such as the Plain English Campaign. Section 2.2. discusses the features and various definitions of plain language. The non-plain title is clearly unsatisfactory – it ignores variation within the non-plain and also suggests that plain is the norm. However, given the undesirability of using a derogatory term like ‘officialese’ for non-plain language in official communication, and given that it is specifically the contrast between plain and not that is being looked at, these are workable categories for this study.

Questions of attitudes to plain language connect to a vast number of issues that could not be dealt with here. It would be worth for example considering how plain and non-plain language relate to difficult and variously defined concepts such as style and register (Schilling-Estes, 1998:67). Plain and non-plain language have been described as varieties or types within official communication throughout this study in an attempt to be neutral. It has not been possible to discuss all the material relevant to this study here – language attitudes research is a vast area, touching on controversial questions of what a ‘standard’ variety is and how it is defined. It has not even been possible to discuss all the issues relating to plain language. However what this study does do is take an innovative approach to looking at plain language, applying a technique from language attitudes research to get empirical evidence about the effect of plain language, evidence that is currently sorely lacking.

2. Background

Our everyday lives are filled with information from official sources: from messages when we log onto computer systems telling us about a public organisation's legal right to monitor our email to brochures coming through the door about how our council tax is being spent. When the language of official communication goes wrong the kinds of information it involves, about our rights and obligations, mean that the impact can be as grave as the money we get or whether we do something without knowing it could land us in prison. Questions about what makes official communication better are worth looking at. This study is concerned with one of the main proposals to do just that – by making official communication plain.

This chapter sets out the public debate about plain language, exploring some of the complexities behind what people are hoping plain language will achieve. In doing so, language attitudes research is identified as a useful field to investigate the plain language, because it can identify the different social perceptions people relate to a particular language variety.

2.1 *Officialese* v. plain language

There is popular and official criticism of the language of official communication. Derogatory terms for this type of language include “Government-speak” and “Government Gobbledygook” (Massie, 2008) or “*officialese*” (Auld, 2008); ‘*officialese*’ is defined as “*derog.* the formal precise language characteristic of official documents” (Thompson, 1995:945). People have enough awareness of such language that it can be parodied in programmes like *Yes Minister*, such as this example of Sir Humphrey Appleby taking responsibility for an action:

“The identity of the official whose alleged responsibility for this hypothetical oversight has been the subject of recent discussion, is NOT shrouded in quite such impenetrable obscurity as certain previous disclosures may have led you to assume, but not to put too fine a point on it, the individual in question is, it may surprise you to learn, one whom your present interlocutor is in the habit of defining by means of the perpendicular pronoun.” (The Yes (Prime) Minister Files, 1997-2006: Series 3, Episode 3).

Lobbying organisations criticise official language for the detrimental impact it has on people – the Low Incomes Tax Reform Group (2009) campaigns against “badly expressed” information from HMRC, where the consequences include people underpaying tax and thus being subject to penalties. The criticisms also come from

within Government. The Cabinet Office (2003:12) describes people in official institutions using “a particular style, language and format [...] that is opaque to the public”. The Local Government Association, a membership organisation for local government, publishes an annual list of words in official communication which it feels are impenetrable to the public and should not be used, most recently including “webinar triologue for the wellderly” (Local Government Association, 2010).

The response to these concerns is long-standing and officially accepted – official communication should be written in plain language. Sir Ernest Gowers, a senior civil servant, was commissioned by the Treasury in 1948 to write advice for officials on improving their language, titled *Plain Words* (Gowers, 1960:4). Cameron (1995:72) states that plain language in official communications for the public has been “official policy” since this time – and it is still preferred today. The Civil Service looks for plain language competence when it is recruiting – if you are considering a career in the Government Economic Service you should note that individuals who cannot explain economics in plain language to non-economists are considered “impotent” (Civil Service, 2010). The Office of the Parliamentary Counsel's guidance for legislative drafting, often considered the most obscure language that comes from official organisations, states that clarity is a principle of good drafting, and that clarity involves using plain language (Office of the Parliamentary Counsel, 2008:1).

Yet plain language is not always used in official communication, it does not even seem to be the norm. Advocates of plain language note that, although they believe they have won the battle to convince people of the concept, plain language has not embedded into everyday practice (e.g. Kimble, 1992:3; Plain English Campaign, 2010b). A large not-for-profit advisory service similarly told me that there might be greater understanding of the issues but it was not feeding into practice – describing official information as neither user-friendly nor intuitive – and that the overall picture was not getting any better (private communication). The Local Government Association (2010) list of banned words is not a short one (250 words, up from 200 in 2009). Asked by Parliament last year for advice on how to make official language clearer, the Plain English Campaign noted that they had the same recommendations that they had been making for the past thirty years (Public Administration Select Committee, 2009: Ev 12, Q53). The idea that official communication is improved by being in plain language may have been official policy for half a century, but not a lot seems to be changing in terms of making it actual usage.

Plain language advocates are clear where the failure to embed plain language into official language lies – with the writers. Eagleson (1991:370) states: “the hesitation or tardiness to practise plain English [...] bespeaks a real problem with professionals”. Redish (1985:133) and Kimble (1992:22) both suggest a range of reasons relating to why writers of official communication do not change their ways – such as habit, inertia, lack of knowledge or of good models to follow and time and budget pressures. Boleszczuk (2009:10) similarly suggests that lawyers stick with legal language because that is where they feel comfortable. Interestingly, these arguments are similar to those reasons lay people give as to why others keep using non-standard varieties of spoken English though they are stigmatised as incorrect – “a lack of industry, intelligence and even common sense” (Niedzielski and Preston, 2000:102). From language attitudes research we know that, for the contrast between standard and non-standard spoken English, people may have more complex motivations to continue to use language varieties other than those openly valued (Milroy and Gordon, 2003:132). If we want to understand why official communication continues to be written other than in officially accepted plain language, we need to look more closely at what people think about plain language.

2.2 Plain language – what it is, who wants it and why

Plain language is essentially a type of prescription (Cameron, 1995:21) – plain language campaigners and official organisations state that official communication is better if it is plain. In this section we look at people publicly say they think about plain language – what is being prescribed, by whom, and for what reasons.

There is remarkable consensus about what plain language is (Cameron, 1995:65). Similar advice can be found in a variety of different sources; key recommendations include write shorter sentences, use the active and not the passive voice, use vocabulary that your readers understand (e.g. Cutts, 1996:9; Plain English Campaign, <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/files/howto.pdf>, retrieved 25 July 2010; Hopkins, 1998). Guidance often rewrites examples of official communication to demonstrate the contrast to plain language, thus

“I refer to your letter regarding the reminder you have received in respect of your council tax”

becomes in plain language

“I’m replying to your letter about our council tax reminder” (Auld, 2008)

(for example eliminating the passive ‘you have received’ and exchanging the formal phrases ‘regarding’ and ‘in respect of’ for the everyday word ‘about’). Plain language

guidelines are not unfamiliar – they are very similar to advice on ‘good’ writing that does not specifically describe itself as plain (e.g. Williams, 2003; Gaskell, 1998).

Plain language is often associated with particular commercial organisations. In the UK perhaps the most well-known is the Plain English Campaign, founded in 1979 with a shredding of official documents in Parliament Square (Plain English Campaign, 2010a). There is also the Plain Language Commission, established by Martin Cutts in 1994, who had co-founded the Plain English Campaign (Plain Language Commission, 2010). Both have accreditation schemes, whereby organisations may pay to have documents or websites assessed and amended to meet the ‘crystal mark’ or ‘clear English standard’ for plain language. There is a certain amount of squabbling between these two organisations – Cutts for example has written articles about links between the Plain English Campaign’s awards and their commercial activities or about the failures of their accreditation scheme (Cutts, 2007a; Cutts, 2007b). The plain language idea has also been taken up by many official and commercial organisations – through using the accreditation schemes of the Plain English Campaign/Plain Language Commission or through their own internal movements. The European Commission (2010) for example has its own English clear writing guide, containing plain language recommendations.

One movement that is not usually connected with plain language but perhaps should be is ‘easy-read’. Easy-read publications are designed originally for people with mild learning difficulties but are often also recommended for people whose first language is not English, or who have lower literacy skills (Transmedialink, <http://www.transmedialink.co.uk/home-2/our-services/easy-read-2>, retrieved 3 August 2010). Easy-read documents often look very different from other official communications, plain or not, because they have a specific layout – in particular, each idea in text is accompanied by a picture designed to visualise the idea being expressed in words (K International, 2008-10). The actual language of easy-read documents is however plain language – the same recommendations are made as to how it should be written and easy-read guidelines draw on and refer to plain language guidelines (e.g. Mencap, 2008; Information for all, 2004). Like plain language, easy-read seems to have been largely accepted by official organisations, as evidenced by for example the publication of all three major party’s election manifestos for 2010 in easy-read. Unlike plain language it is conceptualised as an alternative format for official communications, not a replacement – producing official easy-read documents is managed under a framework for translation (K International,

2008-10). As a whole, the format is seen as connected with a specific audience, people with learning difficulties, and campaigned for by charities representing that audience. It is interesting that the same plain language could appear in two different movements, perhaps our first indication that plain language can be related to a range of different social values. This area would be worth exploring in further detail, but the language of easy-read is essentially plain and for that reason has been included in this study without further comment.

The aims of plain language are presented as “common sense” (Cameron, 1995:65) – so that the reader can understand the information. The Plain English Campaign’s (2010b) definition is “writing that the intended audience can read, understand and act upon the first time they read it”. Martin Cutts (1996:3) oft cited definition is similar: “the writing and setting out of essential information in a way that gives a co-operative, motivated person a good chance of understanding the intended meaning at first reading, and in the same sense that the writer meant it to be understood.” For many people the concept of plain language is synonymous with the concept of clear writing (e.g. Plain Language Association International, 2010; Office of the Parliamentary Counsel, 2008:1; Redish, 1985:125). Plain language is about making official communications more comprehensible.

These apparently simple definitions however hide a great deal of complexity. Firstly, many people take issue with the idea of ‘clarity’, arguing that in and of itself this term is ambiguous (Wagner and Cacciaguidi-Fahy, 2008:1). Specifically in the legal field, Flückiger (2008:9, 23) argues that there are two different concepts of clarity – readability but also the applicability of the law to concrete situations, legal precision – and they cannot necessarily be achieved together. Finegan and Biber (2001:245) look at the same issue across language as a whole – they separate clarity as a different concept to readability, and argue that achieving these requires different language, an elaborated as opposed to an economical mode of expression. What this suggests is that what plain language would improve about official communication is not simple – it may be possible to achieve one thing with plain language, readability, but at the expense of another, such as legal precision.

The aims of plain language are not only more complex than they first appear, they are in service to broader social objectives. The above definitions of plain language as making information more understandable specifically make it more understandable to the reader. Plain language makes the organisation change its language in order to

communication with the public. (Maher, 1998:35). Opeibi (2008:221) describes the use of plain language as where human interests take precedence. This is therefore a particular construction of the role of official organisations in society. Sir Ernest Gowers (1960:29) original guidance for officials to write plainly contained the maxim “Be short, be simple, be human”. Plain language is about making the Government more like the public, more human, rather than a faceless, distant institution. Gowers emphasised that writing in a friendly style was about officials being servants of the public (Gowers, 1960:197, 16). Current European Commission clear writing advice explicitly recommends leaving out details of Commission procedure (in the aim of conciseness) as this otherwise reinforces the image of the Commission “as a bureaucratic and distant institution” (European Commission, 2010:4). Plain language is not just about making official communication more comprehensible, it also is supposed to carry particular social connotations, to construct officials as friendly, accessible and in service to the public.

The motivations for plain language go beyond even this construction of a state in service to the public, it is about a public right to information. Cameron (1995:28) describes plain language as part of a democratic ideal – that the public have a right to understand the information available from official institutions. There have been similar connections with plain language in other countries - Piehl (2008:154) describes how in Finland the push for plain language in public institutions relates to an interest in achieving “democracy and social equality”. This ideology behind plain language may relate to the current incarnation of the plain language movement having arisen from the consumer movement – revived interest in plain language started in the private sector under pressure from the concept of consumer rights (Redish, 1985:128; Eagleson, 1991:362). The Thatcher Government gave significant moment to recasting citizens as consumers of public services (Clarke *et al*, 2007:128), so the same concept of consumer rights could have carried over into plain language in the public sector. Cameron (1995:222) argues that plain language manipulates by claiming to be unmanipulative – it presents itself as simply about getting a message across in a more understandable way, but in fact it is the instrument of particular social positions (Barnes, 106:109). An idea that plain language improves official communication is therefore an idea that it improves it in specific ways.

Throughout history plain language has represented itself as an idea about expressing language clearly but this has related to particular ideological positions. The

seventeenth century plain style movement was largely motivated by scientific developments and the idea that language should provide clarity to communicate scientific discovery (Davis, 1999:77). Like today, plain language was presented as simply the best way to get the message across (Adolph, 1968:7), like today this actually carried broader ideals about values. The values however were different – values of neutrality and precision, where today they are about accessibility and humanity. This may explain why seventeenth century plain style was actually very different to today’s plain language – it was “more nominal, more impersonal, more technical” (Adolph, 1968:248). These are things which plain language movements today explicitly denounce (Plain English Campaign, <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/files/howto.pdf>, retrieved 25 July 2010). In the 1930s George Orwell raised concerns about unclear official language. There was a link to today’s position in that he saw official language as being distant to real usage and therefore real people, but the concern was that this was deliberately obscuring the message, official language being used to manipulate people (Milroy and Milroy, 1991:44). In the 1930s, the core ideal behind pressure for plain language was honesty. Even today, a democratic ideal of accessibility is only part of the story. Plain language joins up with other movements for language change, such as calls for gender neutral language (Cutts, 1996) or the need for prompt and sincere apologies (Plain English Campaign, <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/files/howto.pdf>, retrieved 25 July 2010). Plain language is not, and never has been, just about understanding information. It has always been in service to broader aims.

Underneath the apparent consensus about what plain language is there are a host of things going on. Plain language is not just about making language more understandable; even this concept is shaded to mean preferencing the reader. As well as what plain language may do to make the message in official communication more comprehensible, it affects the social connotations that go with the information. Currently, the motivation for plain language is about democratic rights to information, and so plain language represents accessibility, friendliness of the state in service to the public, although this has not always been the case. But if plain language is much more complex than first represented, this also suggests that the reasons why it has not penetrated official communication may be more complex than reluctance on behalf of officials to write in plain language. We need to know more about the impact of plain language to get behind these public statements about what it does.

2.3 What do we know about plain language?

Unfortunately, compared to what is said about plain language, what we actually know is minimal – there has been little academic interest (Barnes, 2006:84). In line with the key definition of plain language as striving to make official communication understandable to the public there has been research into whether plain language improves comprehension, but it is not wholly satisfactory. For example, Baker *et al* (1991) found that giving cardiology patients individualised information packets (advised upon by the Plain English Campaign) meant that they were more satisfied with and had greater understanding of their drug regime. It should be noted however that these patients also just received more information than their comparators – so we do not really know if it was the fact that the language was plain, or that the information was given that caused the effect. Friedman and Hoffman-Goetz (2007) found that more readable language improved comprehension of information about cancer – but only in relation to one type of cancer (out of three in the study). The picture of whether plain language improves comprehension is hardly complete.

There is still less evidence about plain language and what it does other than in relation to comprehension. If plain language is not just conveying information, but also concepts of accessibility or democracy, we want to know if the readers associate plain language with those values. Kimble (1992:23-24) suggests there is a body of evidence about what people think about plain language, but these appear to be studies relating to whether people find legal documents and forms complicated. Similarly, Mills and Duckworth (1996) asked whether a form was more or less difficult than average. These are still therefore drawing on ideas of comprehension rather than the broader values associated with plain language. One relatively old and small scale study (43 lawyer and judge participants, with a between participants design) did ask people some more attitudinal questions about plain language versions of legal texts, such as whether they were convincing, vague, dynamic (Benson and Kessler, 1987). These were however inauthentic plain texts, constructed for the purpose of the study, so beyond any other methodological concerns we might have, this study does not help us understand what people think about real official communication when they come across it in their daily lives. From the public discussion about plain language, people advocating plain language do not do so neutrally but on the basis of plain language having particular values and of those values serving the campaigners' broader social aims. We do not know whether the people reading and writing official communication associate plain language with this same values. This appears a critical research gap and may also be relevant to our question about why

plain language, if overtly accepted, has not embedded in official communication practice.

2.4 The value of applying language attitudes research to plain language

The question behind this discussion has been why, if plain language has been officially accepted, it has not proliferated into practice as the language of official communication. The suspicion that there might be something more complex going on than simply intransigence among the writers has been confirmed by the elucidation of a range of values associated with plain language. What we lack however is the empirical evidence to look behind these public statements into what values people actually associate with plain language. There is however a tradition in linguistics which supplies the empirical analysis for such questions – the field of language attitudes research (Coupland and Bishop, 2007:74-5). This section reviews briefly that research paradigm to see how it would be of value in assessing the impact of plain language.

There is a long history and an “impressive array” of research into what lay people think about the languages they and the people around them use (Zahn and Hopper:1985:113). Cargile *et al* (1994:212) comment that this field goes back to Aristotle, who argued that how a person spoke affected the trust people had in the speaker and therefore in the message (the concept of *ethos*, see Aristotle’s *On Rhetoric*, trans. Kennedy, 2007: Bk. 1 ch.2). Many people see Pear’s study of people’s attitudes to BBC voices as the beginning of this research area, showing that non-linguists had consistent stereotypes about the speakers of language varieties (Giles and Billings, 2004:188). Although there is great debate in the psychological field generally about what an attitude actually is, how they affect behaviour and even whether such a thing exists (Taylor, 2007), there is evidence that language attitudes may affect behaviour, such as greater or lesser compliance with instructions given in different language varieties (Garrett *et al*, 2003:69). Such attitudes can have a major impact on peoples’ lives, as shown in the study by Dixon *et al* (2002), which found that people were more likely to believe people guilty of particular crimes if they spoke a particular language variety. Crucially language attitudes are also used to gain insight into why language varieties change or are maintained (Buchstaller, 2006:362; Milroy and Gordon, 2003:132) and for the success or failure of language policies (Cargile *et al*, 1994:224). This is therefore a useful area to find evidence as to why plain language has not established itself.

There are three key types of research within this field (Cavallaro and Chin, 2009:144, Cargile *et al*, 1994:212). The first is looking at the metadiscussion about language varieties, such as government policy and popular commentary. As has been done with plain language above we can see from such work what ideas language is associated with. The second involves directly asking people about their attitudes to languages, but the third, and largest area concerns indirect approaches to finding out peoples' attitudes, predominantly through Matched Guise Tests (Garrett *et al*, 2003:14-18). The problem with asking people directly what they think about languages or varieties is that public and private attitudes are not necessarily the same thing (Milroy and Milroy, 1991:11) – what people tell you they think about language may not be what they actually think (Garrett *et al*, 2003:24). Matched Guise Tests access attitudes indirectly by asking people to describe characteristics of speakers. The participants do not know that they are actually hearing the same speaker but in different guises – languages, varieties. Collecting judgements participants make about speakers in this way is therefore an indirect way of getting their judgements about language varieties – because that is the only difference they can be basing their judgements on. This technique was originally developed by Lambert, looking at attitudes to French and English in Canada (e.g. Lambert, 1960) but has subsequently been used with a range of varieties and languages, more recently with controls so that specific linguistic features are the only element that varies (e.g. Buchstaller, 2006 looking at attitudes specifically to 'be like' as a quotative). Conducting such a study in the field of plain language would therefore enable us to supplement our discussion of what the campaigners and the official organisations publicly say about plain language with evidence about what people generally think about plain language, what characteristics they do and do not associate it with.

A key finding from language attitudes research has been used to suggest reasons why people continue to speak stigmatised non-standard varieties of English (Milroy and Gordon, 2003:132). There is a “generally consistent pattern of results relating to the social evaluation of standard and non-standard speakers” (Giles and Billings, 2004:191). Participants are asked to rate speakers on a variety of characteristics, which have been found to cluster in three (variously named) dimensions of prestige, friendliness and dynamism (Garrett *et al*, 2003:53; Giles and Coupland, 1991:35). The consistent pattern is that standard speakers score higher on the prestige dimension but non-standard speakers score higher on the friendliness dimension (Niedzielski and Preston, 2000:43; Garrett, 2007:117). Whilst one variety is

conceptualised as the variety of status, of education, of superiority, the other has value in being socially attractive, associated with being good-natured and warm (Zahn and Hopper, 1985:118); people maintain the non-standard because it is 'better', in a different way (Milroy and Milroy, 1991:57). In particular, these reasons for maintaining a variety that is socially attractive, if not prestigious, relate to being part of a group that proudly identifies itself with that variety (Giles and Billings, 2004:197). We maintain and prefer language varieties that belong to a group we belong to, and devalue speakers from outgroups (Cargile *et al*, 1994:214). This is not something that just occurs with non-standard varieties – Trudgill (1999:122) questions whether people maintain technical registers for the precision of talking about a specialist topic, or really as a symbol of being part of the ingroup associated with that specialism. We may therefore be able to draw on the attitudes people have towards plain language as part of an explanation as to why it has not taken hold as the language of official communication.

Despite the body of research in this area, it has nevertheless focused in specific areas leaving particular gaps. Language attitudes research has focused on spoken language, only using written stimuli as a means to present participants with spoken language but with fewer confounding factors (Buchstaller, 2006). Given evidence that it is not accent, but rather lexis, which is the most important area of language in forming peoples' judgements (Giles and Billings, 2004:198), this focus is not required. Looking at plain and non-plain official communication through the lens of language attitude research is therefore an exciting concept – able to contribute to the richness of language attitude research by adding the new dimension of attitudes to written language.

2.5 Research aims and question

This study is motivated by the question of why, if the use of plain language is "common sense" (Cameron, 1995:222) in official communication, it has not proliferated and become the norm. The field of language attitudes research has been identified as an appropriate place to investigate this question, because it allows us to look at what values people associate with plain and non-plain language. In the contrast between standard and non-standard varieties of English, peoples' value systems have been suggested as part of the reason why people would maintain a stigmatised variety.

This paper therefore reports a pilot survey of attitudes to plain and non-plain language in official communication, to consider the feasibility and value of investigating this area of language in this way, addressing the research question:

- What attitudes do people have towards language in official communication?

This study will consider whether people are able to differentiate between language in official communication that is designed to be plain and that which is not, anticipating that they will. As plain language campaigners are motivated by an ideal of democratic accessibility, it is anticipated that plain language will score highly on characteristics related to friendliness. In the usual patterns found in language attitudes research, plain language would then score less highly on prestige characteristics.

3. Methodology

This study used a survey, based on the Matched Guise test, to obtain attitudes towards plain and non-plain official communication. It was a small-scale pilot survey to test practicalities and the value of this area of research, as this methodology has not previously been applied to this type of language. This chapter reports how and why participants were selected and the development of the survey instrument.

3.1 Participants

Results were gathered from 39 participants.¹ Participants were selected and the survey administered via a network sampling procedure, using two networks (from South-West England and London/South-East England). These networks were chosen to access people from a range of ages and occupations, i.e. to be more similar to the population as a whole than a sample of students. The sample only included first language English speakers.

These networks were also chosen to exclude class variation, as this seemed likely to affect the results, but in ways that we do not sufficient existing research to predict. Class is often difficult to deal with because it is a blunt categorisation, dividing people into large, externally imposed groups rather than categories that are relevant to the people and the language under study (Meyerhoff, 2006:182). One class could happen to match a grouping that was salient to the particular question under study, or it could cross over many, hiding the relevant context for variation. Class is even more difficult with plain language because of their complex relationships. Historically plain style was the language of the English gentleman, the elite (Rees Mogg, 1984:11) but the current plain language movement views plain language as the language of the majority, part of preventing the oppression of the disadvantaged (Cutts, 1996:2). Plain language can be a mark of the educated middle class and even the aristocracy but at the same time opposes social pretension (Cameron, 1995:66). The lack of prior research on attitudes to plain language makes it difficult to predict how this tangle of associations would affect the results. Class was therefore excluded from this study by using networks that accessed a homogenous sample in terms of class (data was collected on profession and highest level of education confirming a middle class sample).

¹ Results from one further participant were excluded because his responses were incomplete.

We do know from existing research into language attitudes that there is likely to be an ingroup effect, where people who use a language variety view it more positively (Garrett *et al*, 2003:76). Part of the purpose of this study was therefore to consider what an ingroup would be in terms of official communication. The London/South-East network was chosen so that the sample could be balanced for people who work in the public sector (the writers of official communications) and elsewhere and for a range of different experiences of official communication. Effort was similarly made to balance the sample in terms of gender, as this has been demonstrated to have an effect on attitudes (Coupland and Bishop, 2007:80).

3.2 Materials

A questionnaire was developed (Appendix A), working with focus groups of participants comparable to the target participants for the sample. This was done to ensure validity of the survey instrument, that participants would have consistent interpretations of what they were being asked.

The questionnaire outlined the project, what participants needed to do and explained that continuing to fill in the questionnaire would be taken as consent to their data being used anonymously for research purposes. The questionnaire contained four texts, each followed by five ratings scales and an area for free comments, and a final page of demographic questions.

3.2.1 The texts

Four authentic texts were used in the questionnaire. These are all extracts from official communications designed to inform the public:

- Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman – first text in the ‘about us’ section of website, headed ‘Our Role’
<http://www.ombudsman.org.uk/about-us/our-role>, retrieved 7 June 2010
- Scottish Public Services Ombudsman – first text in the ‘about us’ section of website, headed ‘FAQ – What is an Ombudsman’, website is crystal marked
<http://www.spsso.org.uk/about-us/faqs/what-ombudsman>, retrieved 7 June 2010
- Summary of the Mental Capacity Act 2005, produced by the former Department of Constitutional Affairs, the National Health Service, the Public Guardianship Office and the Welsh Assembly, key principles section
<http://www.dca.gov.uk/legal-policy/mental-capacity/mca-summary.pdf>, retrieved 7 June 2010

- Summary of the Mental Capacity Act 2005, produced by the former Department of Constitutional Affairs, the National Health Service, the Public Guardianship Office and the Welsh Assembly, easy-read version, the big ideas section <http://www.dca.gov.uk/menincap/mca-act-easyread.pdf>, retrieved 7 June 2010

The full texts are in boxes 1 and 2.

The texts were edited to remove information that would identify the originating organisations; images and layout features were removed so that participants' attitudes would only be affected by the language. The sequence of the texts was varied to control for ordering effects which can be problematic in within-participant designs.

These texts were designed to constitute two pairs of texts which, as in a matched-guise test, vary only by language. Both pairs of texts therefore contain the same subject matter, and are subsequently referred to by subject as the Ombudsman and the Mental Capacity Act texts. Both pairs of texts are as close as possible to being the same 'speaker'. The Mental Capacity Act texts are literally designed to be the same information produced by the same organisations. The Ombudsman texts have the same content and function, coming from the same position and section of their websites. They are from two different organisations, but these are two very similar organisations (with the same role but in different parts of the UK). It would be difficult to obtain two authentic versions of official communication on the same subject without them coming from different organisations, unless a researcher had internal access to information that had been revised which was not possible for this study. Focus groups confirmed the similarity of the texts as to content and speaker; this is important so that we can be confident that differences in attitudes are produced by the language contrast.

Each pair of text has two versions – non-plain and plain. The plain versions are externally validated as such – one is from a crystal marked website and one is an easy-read version – as well as by the focus groups. A linguistic analysis was also conducted on the texts to see whether they contrasted in terms of key guidance for writing plain language (see 4.1). Authentic texts were used to make participants' experience of them as close to real as possible – these texts are not particularly 'good' or 'bad' examples of plain and non-plain official communication, they are something people might actually have to read. The attitudes reported through the

questionnaire should therefore be similar to the attitudes people would have if encountering these texts in their everyday lives.

3.2.2 The scales

This study uses an indirect mechanism to collect attitudes to language. Participants were informed in general terms about the aims of the research, that it was to look at how well government organisations communicate with the public (they were not deceived), but were not told specifically of what type of language was under investigation. Participants were then asked to rate characteristics of the organisation producing each text. Because the texts only differ by being in plain or non-plain language this tells us what people think of the language without explicitly having to ask. We therefore gain access to their private not public attitudes, reducing social desirability bias where people tell the researcher what they believe they ought to think about a language variety (Garrett *et al*, 2003:57).

For each text, participants providing ratings of the organisation on five scales by giving scores going from one to seven. The five scales went from:

- professional to informal
- credible to not reliable
- approachable to distant
- down-to-earth to pretentious
- on-a-level to patronising

These are subsequently referred to by the description at the (left) positive pole, or in charts by that initial.

Scales alternated between positive poles on the left and right. Data entry was manipulated so that in the results a seven represents the most positive rating on all scales.

An odd-numbered scale was used so that participants could choose a middle value, a potentially neutral value. Much work with rating scales uses even-numbered scales to force participants to choose one side or another. There is however no previous research on attitudes to plain and non-plain language in official communication – we do not know if people actually have any. Forced choice at this stage could give us a false positive – where the attitudes only exist because the question was asked and people forced to choose.

The terms used at each end of the scale were gathered through focus groups spontaneously describing the four texts and then discussing these descriptions to identify what they felt were opposites in this context. The idea therefore was to use terms that were meaningful to the potential readers of these texts, rather than either terms that have been used before with different types of language or the ambiguous terms such as 'clarity' which appear in public discussion about these texts.

The terms from the focus groups were condensed to be manageable for the survey participants on the basis of the research aims. There is a broad consensus of findings from language attitude studies that ratings scales cluster on three dimensions of prestige, friendliness and dynamism (e.g. Zahn and Hopper, 1985). Terms were selected from the focus groups to fill the prestige (professional, credible) and the friendliness (approachable, down-to-earth, on-a-level) dimensions; a description relating to dynamism only appeared once in all the focus groups and so this dimension was excluded as it appeared to be less important to the area of communication under study.

Box 1: The Ombudsman texts**Ombudsman (non-plain)**

The role of the Ombudsman is to provide a service to the public by undertaking independent investigations into complaints that government departments, a range of other public bodies, and the NHS, have not acted properly or fairly or have provided a poor service.

We aim to provide an independent, high quality complaint handling service that rights individual wrongs, drives improvement in public services and informs public policy.

Plain Ombudsman

What is an Ombudsman?

Ombudsmen deal with complaints from ordinary citizens about certain public bodies or organisations providing services on their behalf.

The Ombudsman looks into complaints about most organisations providing public services. We are not a regulator or a watchdog.

Our job is to give an independent and impartial decision on a complaint. What we can and can't do is defined by law.

Box 2: The Mental Capacity Act Texts**Mental Capacity Act (non-plain)**

Five Key Principles

The whole Act is underpinned by a set of five key principles set out in Section 1 of the Act:

- A presumption of capacity – every adult has the right to make his or her own decisions and must be assumed to have capacity to do so unless it is proved otherwise;
- Individuals being supported to make their own decisions – a person must be given all practicable help before anyone treats them as not being able to make their own decisions;
- Unwise decisions – just because an individual makes what might be seen as an unwise decision, they should not be treated as lacking capacity to make that decision;
- Best interests – an act done or decision made under the Act for or on behalf of a person who lacks capacity must be done in their best interests; and
- Least restrictive option – anything done for or on behalf of a person who lacks capacity should be the least restrictive of their basic rights and freedoms.

Plain Mental Capacity Act

Mental Capacity Act – The Big Ideas

This is a list of the 5 most important things people must do and think about when using the Act. These are:

- 1 Start off by thinking that everyone can make their own decisions.
- 2 Give the person all the support they can to help them make decisions.
- 3 No-one should be stopped from making a decision just because someone else thinks it is wrong or bad.
- 4 Anytime someone does something or decides for someone who lacks capacity, it must be in the person's best interests – there is a checklist for this.
- 5 When they do something or decide something for another person, they must try to limit the person's own freedom and rights as little as possible.

4. Results and Discussion

This chapter discusses the results of this study of attitudes towards plain and non-plain official communication, in four sections:

- a brief linguistic analysis of the texts used in the survey to confirm the plain and non-plain distinction and discussed in light of participants' qualitative feedback;
- headline results of the survey – to answer the research question as to whether participants had different attitudes towards plain and non-plain official communications and what these were;
- discussion of the two dimensions of friendliness and status in relation to both qualitative and quantitative information to consider why the pattern of results arose;
- a discussion about why one scale on the questionnaire, on-a-level to patronising, did not function.

4.1 Linguistic analysis of the texts used in the survey

This section presents a brief analysis of linguistic features in the survey texts relating to plain language guidelines, firstly the sentence length contrast in both pairs of texts and then features in individual pairs of texts. There is much more that could be said about the linguistic features of even these short extracts of official communication but the purpose of this study is not a linguistic analysis of plain compared to non-plain official communication. This primary purpose of this section is to confirm that each pair of texts contrasts according to criteria for plain language. The contrasts in linguistic features are also related to participant's qualitative feedback (see Appendix C for qualitative comments from the survey, referred to by participant number).

4.1.1 Wordiness

Each pair of texts contrasted on a key plain language guideline – that of writing short sentences. The oft-stated recommendation for plain language texts is that sentences should be kept short, averaging 15 to 20 words across a whole document (e.g. Cutts, 1996:9). The Ombudsman texts are similar lengths (67 and 64 words) but the plain text is broken into six sentences, giving it an average sentence length of ten words, where the non-plain text has only two sentences (each of 30+ words). The plain text is if anything going beyond plain language recommendations in keeping sentences short. The Mental Capacity Act texts also contrast – the non-plain text is technically only a short title and one sentence (170 words) where the plain text punctuates for several sentences

It may seem superficial to draw conclusions about average sentence length from such short extracts of text but this was a feature that participants spontaneously noticed. One participant described the non-plain Ombudsman text as “long and complex” (2) while focus groups criticised it for having long sentences which made it confusing. Participants described the non-plain Mental Capacity Act text as “wordy” (2, 6) and focus groups said it “goes on a bit too much”. Participants therefore seemed aware of the idea of long sentences and described this negatively; they were aware enough to identify it in even short extracts of text. Interestingly, no one commented however that the plain texts were good because they had shorter sentences.

4.1.2 The Ombudsman Texts

A plain language recommendation is to use “the clearest, crispest, liveliest verb” (Cutts, 1996:9). The first sentence of the non-plain Ombudsman text definitely does not do this – the only verb is the copula verb linking the very long infinitive clause in predicative complement function with the opening Noun Phrase, ‘the role of the Ombudsman’. The verb has no real content in this construction (Huddleston and Pullum, 2005 :73) only a grammatical function – this is definitely not what plain language recommends. In contrast, the plain text starts with semantically meaningful verbs – ‘deals with’, ‘looks into’. The Ombudsman in the plain text is doing something, where the Ombudsman in the non-plain text is described as something; in the Plain English Campaign’s terms, the non-plain text’s alternatives to verbs make it sound like nothing is happening (<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/files/howto.pdf>, retrieved 25 June 2010:7).

Participants did not necessarily have the same interpretation of this linguistic contrast as the Plain English Campaign. One participant described the plain text choice of ‘deal with’ as possibly “misleading” (2) in that it could mean several different ways of handling a complaint. On the same theme, one focus group participant, who worked in the public sector, preferred the non-plain text because she felt she knew precisely what an ‘investigation’ would entail. This is interesting because one of the debates about plain language is whether it sacrifices precision for accessibility (Flückiger, 2008) – these two participants seemed to find the plain texts imprecise. One participant did come closer to the idea that nothing was happening in the non-plain text, stating that the organisation “wants to give as little information as possible, whilst trying to appear positive about its self” (17). This seems then to go beyond the

Plain English Campaign's concern, to connect to an idea of deception, which was something focus groups also suggesting in terms of this text, that it was deliberately confusing. One of the difficulties with the qualitative feedback from the survey however is that we do not know which linguistic feature was salient to a particular comment; a way to expand this research would be to conduct interview on texts to relate comments to specific features.

Another key plain language recommendation is to use words that can be understood by the audience (Cutts, 1996:9). We can see how this is achieved in the plain Ombudsman text, which talks about its 'job', something that most of its readers are likely to have themselves and therefore to understand, where the non-plain text uses the more abstract 'role'. It is however arguable whether something is lost in the word 'job', that it does not include the idea of the organisation as having a broader position in society, taking away some of its status. The plain and non-plain language may express the same information, but they do not seem to be giving the same overall impression of the organisations. The non-plain text is also full of specialist, or community of practice, language. For example, the phrase 'drives improvement in public services' is a familiar phrase in the public sector as one of the four principles of good public scrutiny (Centre for Public Scrutiny, <http://www.cfps.org.uk/about-us/>, retrieved 15 August 2010). This was specifically identified by participants as a "horrible, jargony phrase" (2). It was also noticeably this text that participants described as being part of the state, such as "buried in bureaucracy" (39) and "official in the worse sense" (17). Using specialist vocabulary, the opposite of plain language guidelines, was noted by participants, and seems to be connected negatively to being official.

4.1.3 The Mental Capacity Act texts

The Mental Capacity Act texts, as a summary of legislation, are telling people what their obligations are – and there is an interesting contrast as to how they tell people what to do. Both texts have five points setting out obligations under the Act. In the first text these are expressed through deontic modal verbs, in bullet points that contain first a Noun Phrase, a name for the obligation, and then the obligation itself. The plain text also uses deontic modal verbs to express obligation in later bullet points but starts with imperative constructions, explicitly addressing the reader and telling them what to do. This accords with plain language guidelines, which say not to be afraid of imperatives (Plain English Campaign, <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/files/howto.pdf>, retrieved 25 June 2010). However, there

were a number of negative focus group comments about the plain text which relate to telling people what to do – for example it was described as “rule-like” and as something that was talking down to a child, used to justify a description of the text as patronising. In contrast, the two-part structure of obligations in the non-plain version seems likely to have motivated the positive comment that it is “balanced and well judged” (17) (the bullet points balance two halves), with the participant going on to state that this gave them trust in the organisation. The difference between how plain and non-plain official communication gives instructions appeared relevant to people, but not in terms of clarity, the ostensible aim of plain language, but rather in terms of whether the organisation was found to be trustworthy or patronising.

A favourite plain language recommendation is to prefer the active rather than the passive voice (Cutts, 1996:9). This is clear in the comparison between the Mental Capacity Act texts, where we have passive clauses in the non-plain version – ‘an act done’ – in comparison to active clauses in the plain version – ‘someone does something’. In order to fill subject positions in the active clauses the plain text ends up with many non-specific pronouns – someone, something. Focus groups explicitly linked this feature to this text being “vague” or “sketchy”, raising concerns that the organisation was not committing itself to specifics. One focus group participant said she needed small print to go with this text. The passive constructions in the non-plain text mean that the agent can go unstated, and although it may not have any more information the gap is invisible, not giving the same impression of being incomplete. The same focus group participant in fact acknowledged that there was no more information in the non-plain text but still felt she needed something more to go with the plain text. Opeibi (2008:239) says that the problem with passives is that they create distance, that they are inaccessible. Here accessibility may be won at the expense of a feeling of completeness – the active clauses emphasise information that is not there.

These indefinite pronouns would not necessarily cause such difficulty in a different context. Finegan and Biber (2001:240) discuss the functional needs of written versus spoken language, suggesting that pronouns are prevalent in spoken language because there is more context to fill them in. Written language in contrast is trying to convey information over a time and space boundary without the same opportunities for repair (Lippi-Green, 1997:20). What we may be seeing here is participants struggling in a written context with something they would be comfortable with in a spoken context. However plain language campaigners actually suggest that what

they are trying to achieve with official communication is something closer to spoken language, like talking to someone across a table (e.g. Redish, 1995:125; Kimble, 1992:19). This does perhaps work in the sense of creating an impression of being approachable, but when they conflict with the functional needs of the written context come across as vague.

We can therefore see from this analysis that there is a contrast within each pair of texts, in that the plain text accords with plain language guidelines and the non-plain contrasts. This confirms the validity of using these texts in a survey to gain insight into attitudes to plain and non-plain language – the texts reflect this distinction.

It is also worth noting that linguistic features that contrasted in terms of plain language guidance were salient to participants, showing up spontaneously in focus group or qualitative comments. Focus group participants, including public sector workers, were not familiar with the term plain language so they were not talking about these features because they knew of the recommendations. This suggests that plain language guidelines do pick up on language issues that people are independently aware of.

It is clear however that the language distinctions between plain and non-plain language were not only meaningful to people in terms of comprehension – they commented on factors such as vagueness and trust. They were also not wholly positive about the plain language – some features were disliked and others divided participants. It looks like there may be something more interesting happening with plain language that simply whether it is preferred because it is clearer; the quantitative results will confirm whether this is the case.

4.2 Headline survey results

My research question was whether people had different attitudes towards plain and non-plain official communication. I expected that people would differentiate between these in finding plain varieties more friendly, given that the aims of plain language campaigners include accessibility of information. The familiar pattern for language attitude studies is that varieties that are found to be more friendly are found to have less prestige (Giles and Billings, 2004:191). The results of my survey demonstrated that people did have different attitudes to plain and non-plain official communication, and that they differed in the expected directions.

The following section presents the main results comparing attitudes on the first four rating scales (professional, credible, approachable, down-to-earth). This is followed by a discussion of how characteristics of participants can affect language attitudes. The fifth scale did not function as expected and is discussed separately in 4.4.

4.2.1 Comparing plain and non-plain official communication

We can see from the medians that the organisation producing the Mental Capacity Act plain text was rated lower on the two prestige scales (professional, credible) than the organisation producing its non-plain partner text and higher on the two friendliness (approachable, down-to-earth) scales.² This is the expected pattern.

Table 1: Median scores for the organisation producing each text by scale

	Ombudsman	Plain Ombudsman	Mental Capacity Act	Plain Mental Capacity Act
professional - informal	6	6	6	5
credible - not reliable	6	5	6	5
approachable - distant	5	5	4	6
down-to-earth - pretentious	4	5	4	5

The expected pattern is also present for the organisations producing the Ombudsman texts on the credible and down-to-earth scales, but on the other two scales they have the same medians.

The scores on each rating scale for each contrast in plain and non-plain texts were analysed using Wilcoxon Signed Rank tests to identify differences in attitudes and to determine if they were statistically significant.

² Rating scales produce ordinal data, although they are often treated as producing interval data (Field, 2009:9). As such, it is inappropriate to use the mean as a measure of central tendency for this data (Field, 2009:22) or to analyse it using parametric statistics such as ANOVA (Field, 2009:132). The median is therefore used as the measure of central tendency and non-parametric statistical tests are used throughout this paper.

Significant differences were found for ratings of the organisations producing the Mental Capacity Act texts on all four scales in the expected directions. For the Ombudsman texts, a significant difference was found between the plain and non-plain texts on the professional scale, and differences approaching significance ($\alpha = .05$) on the three other scales, all in the expected directions (see Appendix B for full tables, including positive and negative ranking frequencies which show directionality where medians are the same).

For the Mental Capacity Act texts:

- the organisation producing the non-plain text (Mdn=6) was rated to be significantly more professional than the organisation producing the plain text (Mdn=5), $Z=-4.03$, $p<.001$
- the organisation producing the non-plain text (Mdn=6) was rated to be significantly more credible than the organisation producing the plain text (Mdn=5), $Z=-2.97$, $p=.001$
- the organisation producing the non-plain text (Mdn=4) was rated to be significantly less approachable than the organisation producing the plain text (Mdn=6), $Z=-3.04$, $p=.001$
- the organisation producing the non-plain text (Mdn=4) was rated to be significantly less down-to-earth than the organisation producing the plain text (Mdn=5), $Z=-2.53$, $p=.005$

(all significance values one-tailed).

For the Ombudsman texts:

- the organisation producing the non-plain text (Mdn=6) was rated to be significantly more professional than the organisation producing the plain text (Mdn=6), $Z=-3.214$, $p>.001$
- the organisation producing the non-plain text (Mdn=6) was rated to be more credible than the organisation producing the plain text (Mdn=5), approaching significance at the .05 level, $Z=-1.521$, $p=.068$
- the organisation producing the non-plain text (Mdn=5) was rated to be less approachable than the organisation producing the plain text (Mdn=5), approaching significance at the .05 level, $Z=-1.503$, $p=.068$
- the organisation producing the non-plain text (Mdn=4) was rated to be less down-to-earth than the organisation producing the plain text (Mdn=5), approaching significance at the .05 level, $Z=-1.580$, $p=.059$

(all significance values one-tailed)

It may seem surprising for the Ombudsman texts that there is a statistically significant difference in attitudes on the professional scale where the medians were the same. We can see however from the distribution of scores (Table 2) for this scale why this might be so – the non-plain version received no low scores and nearly three-quarters of all scores were of the two highest. The plain text received much more spread out scores, with only just over half (20/39) being of the two highest. The measure of central tendency does not represent well the difference in attitudes.

Table 2: Frequency of scores for each text by scale

	Ombudsman				Plain Ombudsman				Mental Capacity Act				Plain Mental Capacity Act			
	P	C	A	D	P	C	A	D	P	C	A	D	P	C	A	D
1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	4	1	0	1
2	0	2	3	2	6	2	1	1	1	1	3	3	5	3	0	3
3	1	1	8	7	5	6	4	4	1	2	9	6	6	4	3	2
4	3	4	8	11	2	3	7	11	0	2	7	12	4	9	7	9
5	7	10	10	11	5	12	14	8	7	6	9	11	4	7	9	5
6	16	14	5	5	10	6	9	12	15	18	7	3	11	9	14	12
7	12	8	5	3	10	10	4	3	15	10	2	1	5	6	6	7

These results show that for both texts, although significantly only for the Mental Capacity Act texts, the organisations producing the non-plain versions were scored more highly on the two scales in the prestige dimension (professional, credible) and lower on the two scales in the friendliness dimension (approachable, down-to-earth) than the organisations producing plain versions. This suggests that non-plain language is the prestige variety for official communication.

Noticeably across the results there is a skew towards the more positive ratings; the very lowest rating was only given 12 times for any text on these four scales (out of 624 scores). A 'ceiling effect' like this is common with rating scales which restrict people to a limited range of values, but is problematic because it means we do not really know whether or how people would want to differentiate more between the texts they scored most highly.

It is worth considering why the differences are statistically significant for the Mental Capacity Act texts but mostly not for the Ombudsman texts; there are three possible reasons. Firstly, it may be that the contrast between the Mental Capacity Act texts is different from the Ombudsman texts, that an easy-read text is not the same as a plain text. However, we noted above that guidance for writing easy-read is substantially the same as writing plain language. We also noted in the linguistic analysis that the easy-read text matched plain language guidance. One participant did identify the plain Mental Capacity Act text as easy-read (16), but she had worked specifically with that text before. There is little research about easy-read language (and format) and the relationship between this and plain language is worth exploring in its own right, but it is not a convincing explanation for the difference in findings between these pairs of texts.

A more likely explanation is that the particular linguistic features that were present in the different pairs of texts caused a stronger reaction towards the Mental Capacity Act texts. The Mental Capacity Act texts are telling people what to do, with imperative constructions in the plain text as recommended in plain language guidance (e.g. Plain English Campaign, <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/files/howto.pdf>, retrieved 25 July 2010). We have noted above that participants were aware of this feature – it seems to have motivated their qualitative comments. More recent language attitudes research often seeks to isolate particular linguistic features and look at attitudes specifically to these and how they relate to attitudes to varieties they occur in (e.g. Campbell-Kidner, 2010). The difference in findings between the Mental Capacity Act and Ombudsman texts may suggest that imperative constructions specifically are a feature that makes a difference to peoples' attitudes to official communication. Looking specifically at attitudes to how official communications express obligations or requirements would therefore be a valuable area for future research. This would also be a useful area practically. Much official communication with the public tells people what to do (e.g. what benefits people can claim, what information they have to give HMRC about taxes). The need to find an appropriate way to express such information will arise frequently. This survey suggests that explaining obligations in non-plain language would be more likely to be interpreted as professional and credible than using plain language.

The third potential issue is the content of the texts themselves. Giles and Coupland (1991:48) have criticised matched guise research for assuming that subject matter can be neutral and not affect attitudes towards the language (the possible impact of

subject was an important reason for keeping the content constant in each pair of texts). It is very likely that the subject of the Mental Capacity Act texts was more important to the participants. The subject seems more serious – dealing with people and their right to make their own decisions, where the Ombudsman texts are about a less fundamental right to make complaints about public services. The qualitative feedback supports the idea that people found the subject matter of the Mental Capacity Act texts important, so much so that they wanted to comment on content and not only on the language. One participant included a long commentary on provision for voting in relation to mental capacity (5) and another edited the text itself (including ‘teenager’ where the text says ‘adult’ (36)). The Ombudsman texts did not generate this heated a reaction. This suggests that the relationships between content, language and attitudes would be a valuable area for future research.

This difference between the Mental Capacity Act text findings and the Ombudsman text findings also suggests where it would be worth starting to look at the impact of content on attitudes – with the relative legal nature of the content. The Mental Capacity Act texts are literally summaries of legislation. Whilst the Ombudsman texts do on some level originate from legislation (e.g. the Acts that establish the Ombudsmen) they are not explicit summaries of the law in the same way. Participants seemed aware of this nature of the Mental Capacity Act texts, with one participant describing the non-plain version: “reads like a lawyer putting a piece of legislation into plain, but formal English” (29). It is fascinating that the participant described this non-plain text as ‘plain’ – the only spontaneous reference to this term. It may be that what is non-plain in official communication generally was plain as a version of a legal text; the plain text may have seemed a step too far, beyond plain and into “wrong or bad” according to this participant. Cargile *et al* (1994:223) note that we do not only have absolute attitudes to language but relative ones, that relate our expectations of the language user to the language used – we evaluate negatively someone we know to be of high status, and therefore expect to use high status features, if they use low status features. A similar principle may have been in play with the Mental Capacity Act texts – if participants recognised them as having a legal origin they would expect a certain type of language. The contrast between the non-plain and plain texts would also be a contrast between expected and unexpected, differentiating the attitudes more strongly than for the Ombudsman texts.

These statistical results demonstrate that people differentiate between plain and non-plain language on a range of characteristics – not just on the headline messages of

plain language advocates that plain language is clearer. In fact, as was suggested by our theoretical discussion of this aim, participants found clarity an ambiguous and difficult concept. Participants were deliberately not asked their views on the clarity of the texts, because this appeared to be a confusing term in the focus groups (one member of which described all four texts as clear). Clarity also appeared several times in the qualitative feedback, with no consensus. For example, the non-plain Ombudsman text was described as “clear” (17) and “not as clear” than its plain counterpart (26); the plain version was also described as “very clear” (39) and “less clear” (10). Moreover, some of the participants’ comments suggested that they had difficulty reconciling clarity and other attributes. One participant described the plain Mental Capacity Act text as “less credible, although it is very clear” (17). Another said of the plain Ombudsman text “despite the less formal language, the actual content is less clear” (10). Such comments seem to suggest that they had certain expectations of clarity and these were not borne out. That people spontaneously raised the concept of clarity suggests it is an idea that is relevant to them, that they had some much trouble with it emphasises its subjective nature and the importance of gathering empirical data on the terms in which people actually judge plain language.

4.2.2 The impact of participant characteristics on language attitudes

Previous language attitudes research has found that differences between participants affects their attitudes towards language varieties. There is a substantial body of evidence showing that attitudes particularly relating to prestige differ by gender (Cavallaro and Chin, 2009:152). Coupland and Bishop (2007:83) identified differences in attitudes towards language varieties by different age groups. A key issues is whether people are members of an ingroup associated with that language or variety, for example Coupland and Bishop (2007:81) demonstrated that people from Wales and Scotland gave stronger prestige values to Welsh and Scottish accents than English people did.

Multinomial logistic regression could be used to assess whether factors such as gender, age or belonging to an ingroup were affecting peoples’ scoring of the organisations producing plain or non-plain official communication although this preliminary survey does not have enough participants for this procedure to be robust. The sample was balanced by gender (56% female, N=22), so any effects of this would not skew the overall results. Similarly the sample was balanced by potential ingroup/outgroup categories (49%, N=19, based in the public sector; 56%, N=22, have daily or regular contact with official communication); the issues around an

ingroup category for this study are discussed below. However, the sample was predominantly younger working age people. D'Arcy and Tagliamonte (2010:394) suggest that language attitudes can be age graded, in that the social significance of prestige forms may be more salient to a middle age group, based in the work place and therefore more subject to establishment pressures. On the other hand for this particular study the youngest age group who may still be in formal education being taught to write in certain ways might have had motivation to prefer the variety most like what they are striving to write. The uneven age distribution may therefore have affected the results, but in unpredictable ways. It also would have been useful to sample participants with an even spread of age-groups as this would allow consideration of whether a change was in progress – shown through the apparent time construct if attitudes varied with a linear progression across the age groups (Meyerhoff, 2006: 286; Coupland and Bishop, 2007:85).

Table 3: Age distribution of participants

	Frequency	Percent
Under 25	3	7.7
25-44	26	66.7
45-64	9	23.1
65 or over	1	2.6
Total	39	100 ³

This area of study raises some particular difficulties for assessing the impact of ingroup membership on attitudes – because there are no obvious ingroups for either plain or non-plain communication – there are no native ‘speakers’ of either. The idea of plain language as being focused on the reader, on members of the public, rather than the official organisations (Office of the Scottish Parliamentary Counsel, 2006:6; Maher, 1998:35) may suggest that plain language is aligned with the public, and non-plain with the officials. These do not sound like very useful definitions however – ‘the public’ is a very large group with much variety within it, including private sector tax accountants who spend a lot of time working with official communications even if they do not write it. We can anticipate that familiarity with official communication would affect peoples’ attitudes – people who work more with official communication would

³ Percentages do not exactly sum due to rounding

have more contact with non-plain language as the current norm and would therefore be less likely to see non-plain language as distant. Participants were asked two questions to start investigating this problem of defining an ingroup – whether the worked in the public or private sector how often they came across official communications in their everyday lives. As expected, these groups do not wholly match – most public sector employees work with official communications daily or regularly but so did a third of private sector employees. It is therefore recommended that future studies should not use a simplistic definition of working in the public sector to define an ingroup. Another factor should also be considered. Language attitude studies have shown that it is not just being in an ingroup that affects attitudes, it is the level to which you identify with an ingroup (Giles and Billings, 1994:196 look at how attitudes towards Welsh changed as attitudes towards Welsh identity changed). ‘People who have daily contact with official communication’ is not a group name that implies a coherent, recognised group that people could identify with (Eckert, 2001:123). Further work in this area should include as part of the qualitative data collection an investigation of what groups people consider relevant in this context, which would then allow the data to be examined for whether those groups have an impact.

Table 4: Number of participants by sector of occupation and contact with official communications

	Daily or regularly	Occasionally or rarely	Total
Private/other	7	13	20
Public/not for profit	15	4	19
Total	22	17	39

4.3 The dimensions of prestige and friendliness

My pilot study showed that organisations producing plain versions were rated lower on prestige characteristics (professional, credible) and higher on friendliness characteristics (approachable, down-to-earth). We expected to find that plain language would be judged to be friendlier because campaigners are aiming to trigger values of accessibility. Clearly however more is happening with the readers and writers of plain language than just this association – because they also find plain language less prestigious. This section explores the results on the different dimensions in more detail, confirming through correlations that the scales worked

together on the expected dimensions and using qualitative feedback to consider why this pattern of results arose and how it relates to the public discussion about plain language.

4.3.1 The prestige dimension

This pilot study contained two scales (professional and credible) intended to tap into people's attitudes towards the relative prestige of plain and not plain official communication. These two scales significantly and strongly correlated with one another for each text (Ombudsman $r_s = .578$, $p < .001$, Plain Ombudsman $r_s = .766$, $p < .001$, Mental Capacity Act $r_s = .725$, $p < .001$, Plain Mental Capacity Act $r_s = .498$, $p = .001$: significance values all one tailed), confirming that attitudes on these two scales were related.

The identification of credible as a prestige value is not in line with previous language attitude studies. Honesty, a similar concept to credibility, has previously been identified as part of the friendliness dimension (Zahn and Hopper, 1985:118), and in this study there were some relationships between the credibility and down-to-earth scales (Ombudsman, $r_s = .346$, $p = .016$; Mental Capacity Act $r_s = .518$, $p < .001$). For this study however credibility was considered part of the prestige dimension because it was associated in focus groups with authority and confidence, rather than honesty. It was also associated in focus groups with ideas of being "technical" rather than "sketchy", "precise" rather than needing small print, which make it seem more similar to scales such as 'completeness' which have previously been identified on the prestige dimension (Zahn and Hopper, 1985:118). The qualitative feedback also confirmed that credibility and professionalism were related, with one participant stating that "informality can easily erode perception of reliability/credibility" (29) and another said "I felt no trust as this just seemed incompetent" (17). Where perhaps in spoken language we associate honesty with friendliness and informality, in official communication it seems that we actually look for a degree of formality, of competence and professionalism, to believe what we are reading. Although the same overall pattern of results has been found in this survey for attitudes to official communication as attitudes to spoken language, it looks as if attitudes are not necessarily constructed in the same way.

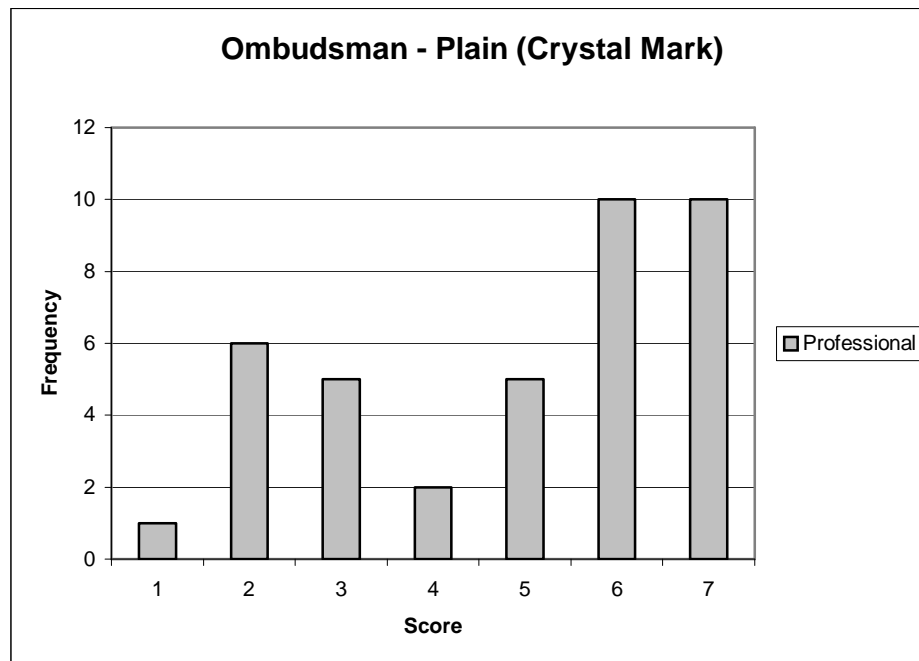
There were suggestions from the qualitative feedback that finding the non-plain texts more professional was related to an expectation of what language should be in this context. Several of the participants suggested that the plain texts looked like a

different type of language, such as “slide show-type words” (29), a “fact sheet”(17), “a Q&A page”(11), or was something aimed at a specific audience such as younger people(17) or carers(11). Interestingly, on both non-plain texts scores were bunched very tightly in the most positive values – as if participants were very clear that these texts accorded with their concept of professionalism. We suggested above that Language Expectancy Theory (Cargile *et al*, 1994:223) may have had a role in the different reactions to the texts on content, but it may also have a role in the judgements more broadly. Official communication is a formal context – what we may expect to see is formal language. Niedzielski and Preston (2000:275-6, 296-7) found that features that are not to be used according to plain language guidelines – long sentences and the passive voice – were associated with formality, although they might be viewed negatively in a “natural” context. The formality of non-plain language may be what we expect in a formal context, and judge therefore to be professional. It is worth recalling at this point that what the focus group participants thought of as the opposite of ‘professional’ in the official language context was ‘informal’. Plain language is designed to be less formal, more accessible, than non-plain official communication, but in doing so it conflicts with our expectations of what official language should be and is judged less professional. We noted in the discussion of linguistic features that there were several areas where trade-offs were being made, where accessibility seemed to come at a cost. It is possible that the underlying motivation for plain language, related to broader democratic ideals (Cameron, 1995:69) may cause a focus on achieving friendliness that is itself hindering its acceptance as an appropriate vehicle for formal, official communications.

There was an unusual distribution of scores for the professional scale on the plain Ombudsman text that is worth looking at in more detail. As well as the general trend of skew towards positive scores there appears to be a second, lesser, peak of scores in the negative values. This is a roughly bimodal distribution, which often arises where there are effectively two different populations in the sample (Dancey and Reidy, 2004:78). In this case the lower peak over-represents in contrast to the sample as a whole people who have infrequent contact with official writing (58% of this peak of occasional or rare contact with official communication compared to 44% in the sample as a whole). This emphasises how useful it would be to conduct an analysis of whether ingroup or outgroup membership affected how people scored the different texts. If this pattern was present statistically it would show that people who have less contact with official communication find plain language in this context less professional. Advocates of plain language tend to suggest that it has not proliferated

because of lack of effort, or hostility, on behalf of the professionals writing official communication (e.g. Eagleson, 1991:371; Redish, 1985:133). This peak of negative ratings of the plain language text more associated with people who have less contact with official communication begs the question as to whether it is actually the outsiders, the public who have stronger opposition to plain language in official communication.

Chart 1: Frequency distribution for professional scale, plain Ombudsman text



4.3.2 The friendliness dimension

The two rating scales approachable and down-to-earth were expected to operate similarly as attitudes within the friendliness dimension; this is confirmed by the significant and strong correlation between ratings on these scales for each text (Ombudsman $r_s = .747$, $p < .001$, Plain Ombudsman $r_s = .608$, $p < .001$, Mental Capacity Act $r_s = .592$, $p < .001$, Plain Mental Capacity Act $r_s = .546$, $p = .001$; all significance values one-tailed).

The plain version in both pairs of texts scored more highly on these ratings scales, significantly so for the Mental Capacity Act texts. This suggests that plain language does achieve its aims of being accessible and also that it would work for those official organisations who are using plain language because they want to present an image of friendliness, of being human (Gowers, 1960:29). Qualitative feedback supported

the statistical finding. The non-plain versions were described as “very official in the worst sense – it feels like barriers are going up as you read it!” (17) and “aloof” (6). Focus groups also stereotyped the non-plain versions, mocking them as the kind of language they’d expect from the television show *The Office*. Participants specifically picked up the idea that non-plain versions were not aimed at members of the public. For example one participant noted that the non-plain versions were stating things “irrelevant to me” (6), or asking “why as a member of the public do I need to know that” (2) of information in the non-plain versions. In contrast plain versions were described in terms of “most people could understand this” (6) or as “accessible to all” (17).

There are however two ways in which plain language might be negatively viewed on this dimension. The first is where it is perceived not to be genuine, as for the participant who described the plain Ombudsman text as “trying too hard to come across as unofficious” (32). This matches Campbell-Kidner’s (2008:647) finding that where variants are judged to be put on they are viewed negatively. Sketchwriter Matthew Parris suggested in evidence to Parliament (Public Administration Select Committee, 2009:Ev 2, Q6) that false simplicity is in fact the vice to be mocked in current official communications. The second is where people are unused to plain language. One participant (a Mental Health Nurse) rated the organisation producing the non-plain Mental Capacity Act text very highly on the friendliness scales and commented that she found it “much friendlier [...] very similar to official formats that I use for mental capacity decision making” (35). She found the plain version less approachable and less down-to-earth in comparison. She was not distanced from the non-plain versions by the language because she was used to them, but found the plain versions less accessible. The debate about plain language in legal settings has particularly raised the question that the idea of reader-focus is not straightforward – because different readers may have different needs (e.g. Barnes, 2006:116; Office of the Parliamentary Counsel, 2008:2). This is confirmed here where a professional reader responds exactly opposite to the aim of plain language for members of the public. Although official communication may be aimed at the public it could be used by a variety of different audiences; plain language does not necessarily even meet its aim of accessibility for all audience.

4.4 The on-a-level to patronising scale

The on-a-level scale did not function as expected or as the other scales. It has therefore been excluded from the main results and is discussed instead here as to why it did not work.

The on-a-level scale did not show the same differentiation between plain and non-plain texts as the other scales. The Wilcoxon signed ranks test did not show a statistically significant difference in the results for either pair of texts (Ombudsman: $Z=-.443$, $p=.341$; Mental Capacity Act: $Z=-.529$, $p=.305$, both one-tailed).

Table 5: Median scores for all texts on the on-a-level scale

	Ombudsman	Plain Ombudsman	Mental Capacity Act	Plain Mental Capacity Act
On a level – patronising	5	5	4	4

It is likely that these results came about because this scale did not work. Unlike the other four scales, which have a positive and negative pole, this scale has a neutral value (on-a-level, as opposed to talking down to someone) and a negative value (patronising). We have noted the general pattern for participants to respond at the positive end of the scale; the lack of a positive pole may have made it difficult for participants to place their responses. That this scale had different poles from the other scales may also have caused participants difficulties. It is further possible that the term 'on-a-level' did not have meaning to survey participants – it came from a focus group discussion about what patronising meant but as a standalone term is perhaps less accessible.

Beyond the problems with this scale itself it is possible that it was asking participants an ambiguous question. The motivation for this scale was based around the negative pole – patronising – which spontaneously arose in focus groups and was selected because it has also been looked at in one of the few pieces of research to come close to looking at attitudes to plain and non-plain official communication. Gould and Dixon (1997) contrasted 'overaccommodative' speech (simplified syntax/vocabulary, repetition) with norm speech in doctor-patient interaction, concluding that the plainer language was perceived to be patronising and demeaning (although people did

understand more (Gould and Dixon, 1997:65)). The question they raised was whether higher levels of understanding were worth the cost to emotional well-being given that people found the language distasteful. However, for official communication patronising did not appear to be a clear term – participants in focus groups debated its meaning, for example some saw it as the opposite of pretentious while others felt that these terms could and often did go together; this scale potentially had different meanings to different participants. The contrast between this and the Gould and Dixon's (1997) finding may suggest that we have clearer ideas about what patronising language is in a doctor-patient interaction are constructed differently to those in official communication.

5. Conclusions

This study was designed to investigate what attitudes people had towards language in official communication, specifically whether and how people could differentiate between plain and non-plain official communication. The first thing this survey showed was that people did have attitudes – there were statistically significant, or approaching significant, patterns of difference, not just random variation. Specifically this study showed that people rated organisations producing plain language official communication to be more approachable and more down-to-earth but less credible and less professional than those organisations producing non-plain official communication. This pattern, where one variety is considered more friendly but less credible than another, is the same pattern as that consistently seen for non-standard varieties of English in contrast to standard varieties (Garrett, 2007:117). This finding of a similar pattern further suggests the validity of this work, although we certainly cannot assume that the same thing is happening with judgements of standard and non-standard spoken English as with judgements of official communication. Language attitudes techniques can effectively be applied to variation in written, formal, official communication to provide evidence of our attitudes to these.

This was of course a preliminary survey and as such there are several ways in which the methodology could be improved. A larger sample size would mean the statistical results were more robust, and that crucial questions about the impact of factors like gender and belonging to an ingroup could be tested. Further qualitative material should be gathered to investigate key issues such as what credibility in official communication really means to people. The questionnaire itself could also be improved; terms on the rating scales should be adjusted to get reliable results relating to the idea of ‘patronising’ language and more texts could be included (subject to keeping the survey manageable) to explore further the impact of content or differences between attitudes to plain language and easy-read specifically. It would also be worth exploring options such as using magnitude estimation judgements rather than rating scales to collect peoples’ attitudes, as these can eliminate the ‘ceiling effect’ seen here where scores bunched towards the high scores, and therefore allow more fine-grained differentiation among positive ratings (Bard *et al*, 1996). Key directions for future research include drawing out attitudes to specific features that differ in plain and non-plain official communications, such as the use of imperative clauses, but could also usefully look at whether and how our attitudes towards plain language differ for contexts beyond the definition of official

communication used here, such as publications that are designed to persuade not only to inform.

The question that motivated this study, its practical application, was why, if plain language seems to have been officially accepted for official communication, it has not embedded into everyday practice. Notwithstanding the methodological improvements that could be made to this study, it does suggest an answer. The finding of a pattern of attitudes towards language in official communication shows that we do not approach it neutrally, rather we have a structure of values about such language that come into play when we read official communications (Coupland and Bishop, 2007:86). What we take away from official communication is not only information about benefits or taxes but social information – depending on the language we interpret the organisation as friendlier or more believable. The statistical finding is confirmed by the qualitative data – we saw in the linguistic analysis section that people were applying values to features of plain language that went beyond whether they affected understanding. The persistence of non-plain official communication may at least partially be explained, as suggested for the maintenance of stigmatised spoken varieties, because of the attitudes people have towards it.

In the context of official communication, this study suggests that non-plain language is the prestige variety; this is a likely explanation for why it continues to be the norm. People do associate plain language with friendliness, in line with the instrumental aims of plain language to improve accessibility to official information but they did not find plain language to be professional. Crucially they did not find it to be credible – it hardly seems likely that officials will write official information, that is therefore supposed to be an authoritative statement, in a way they do not expect to be believed. The finding that plain language is not the prestige variety can only be taken however to relate to this specific area of official communication. We saw that how language attitudes were constructed for official communication may be different to other types of language – for example with different ideas about what is patronising or credible. We also saw that attitudes towards plain language may be affected by peoples' expectations of official language – they would not necessarily find plain language less prestigious in a slide show. Plain language was relevant to people in official communication – we saw that they spontaneously identified issues in plain language guidance, such as long sentences and jargon. The question perhaps is whether the accessibility aim of plain language causes trade-offs for accessibility against other values, but it is those other prestige related values that are most

relevant to what language variety dominates. Further exploration of attitudes towards specific linguistic characteristics of plainness should be able to establish whether it is possible for language in official communication to be accessible without triggering values of imprecision and informality, or whether perhaps the accessibility ideology that dominates plain language fundamentally distances it from the prestige form for formal, official communication.

At the beginning of August the media reported a leaked memo, from the Department of Education to organisations it worked with, detailing changes in language from the previous Labour Government to the new Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition (BBC Radio 4, 2010: 07.42). For example, the jargon term 'stakeholders' is to be replaced by the everyday word 'volunteers' or even 'people'. This preference for non-specialist language may suggest a new impetus for the plain language movement. This pilot survey has hopefully started to provide evidence about the impact that plain and non-plain language have interactionally in official communication, and demonstrated that there is much more that we need to look at to take this debate forward.

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Appendix A Questionnaire

Hello

I am a Masters student at the University of Edinburgh, looking at how Government organisations communicate with people. I'd really appreciate your help with my work.

If you are able to help me, I'd like you to fill in the questionnaire that follows. This should not take you more than 10 minutes. Please answer all the questions.

The questionnaire involves reading four short texts (about making complaints about public services and about the Mental Capacity Act) and then giving your opinions about how the organisation producing these texts is getting its message across. Please highlight numbers from 1 to 7 according to how strongly you think the organisation would match the descriptions at the ends of the scale. There is also space for you to make any further comments you would like to. At the end you will be asked some short questions about yourself.

Your responses and all information you give will only be used anonymously. If you decide to continue you can still contact me later and ask to withdraw from the study.

If you would like any further information about what I'm working on or the questionnaire please contact me on [email address]

Please email the questionnaire back to me at [email address]

Thank you again for your help

[name]

University of Edinburgh

1

The role of the Ombudsman is to provide a service to the public by undertaking independent investigations into complaints that government departments, a range of other public bodies, and the NHS, have not acted properly or fairly or have provided a poor service.

We aim to provide an independent, high quality complaint handling service that rights individual wrongs, drives improvement in public services and informs public policy.

Do you think that the organisation that produced this would be:

professional						informal
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

not reliable						credible
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

approachable						distant
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

pretentious						down-to-earth
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

on a level						patronising
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

If you would like to make any comments, please do so here:

2

What is an Ombudsman?

Ombudsmen deal with complaints from ordinary citizens about certain public bodies or organisations providing services on their behalf.

The Ombudsman looks into complaints about most organisations providing public services. We are not a regulator or a watchdog.

Our job is to give an independent and impartial decision on a complaint. What we can and can't do is defined by law.

Do you think that the organisation that produced this would be:

professional						informal
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

not reliable						credible
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

approachable						distant
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

pretentious						down-to-earth
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

on a level						patronising
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

If you would like to make any comments, please do so here:

3**Mental Capacity Act – The Big Ideas**

This is a list of the 5 most important things people must do and think about when using the Act. These are:

- 6 Start off by thinking that everyone can make their own decisions.
- 7 Give the person all the support they can to help them make decisions.
- 8 No-one should be stopped from making a decision just because someone else thinks it is wrong or bad.
- 9 Anytime someone does something or decides for someone who lacks capacity, it must be in the person's best interests -there is a checklist for this.
- 10 When they do something or decide something for another person, they must try to limit the person's own freedom and rights as little as possible.

Do you think that the organisation that produced this would be:

professional						informal
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not reliable						credible
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
approachable						distant
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
pretentious						down-to-earth
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
on a level						patronising
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

If you would like to make any comments, please do so here:

4**Five Key Principles**

The whole Act is underpinned by a set of five key principles set out in Section 1 of the Act:

- A presumption of capacity – every adult has the right to make his or her own decisions and must be assumed to have capacity to do so unless it is proved otherwise;
- Individuals being supported to make their own decisions – a person must be given all practicable help before anyone treats them as not being able to make their own decisions;
- Unwise decisions – just because an individual makes what might be seen as an unwise decision, they should not be treated as lacking capacity to make that decision;
- Best interests – an act done or decision made under the Act for or on behalf of a person who lacks capacity must be done in their best interests; and
- Least restrictive option – anything done for or on behalf of a person who lacks capacity should be the least restrictive of their basic rights and freedoms.

Do you think that the organisation that produced this would be:

professional						informal
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not reliable						credible
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
approachable						distant
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
pretentious						down-to-earth
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
on a level						patronising
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

If you would like to make any comments, please do so here:

Questions about you:

1: Are you female male?

2: Are you under 25 25-44 45-64 65 or over?

3: How would you describe your accent when you speak English (e.g. Glaswegian, Southern English, don't really have accent)?

4: Where do you work? In the
 private sector public sector not for profit not employed
 other, please describe

5: How do you describe your occupation?

6: What is the highest level of qualification that you hold?
 degree or equivalent higher education qualification
 GCE A Level or equivalent GCSE Grade A*-C or equivalent
 other qualifications, please describe no qualifications

7: How often do you use official publications, e.g. tax information, government websites, NHS leaflets, to get information, in your personal or working life?
 daily regularly occasionally rarely

8: What area of the UK do you live in?
 Scotland Wales Northern Ireland

England:
 North East North West Yorkshire and The Humber
 East Midlands West Midlands East of England
 London South East South West

Thank you very much for your help.

Appendix B

Statistical Tables

Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

		Ranks		
		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
POMB.P - OMB.P	Negative Ranks	20 ^a	15.00	300.00
	Positive Ranks	6 ^b	8.50	51.00
	Ties	13 ^c		
	Total	39		
POMB.C - OMB.C	Negative Ranks	15 ^d	15.57	233.50
	Positive Ranks	11 ^e	10.68	117.50
	Ties	13 ^f		
	Total	39		
POMB.A - OMB.A	Negative Ranks	8 ^g	14.69	117.50
	Positive Ranks	18 ^h	12.97	233.50
	Ties	13 ⁱ		
	Total	39		
POMB.D - OMB.D	Negative Ranks	11 ^j	11.50	126.50
	Positive Ranks	16 ^k	15.72	251.50
	Ties	12 ^l		
	Total	39		
POMB.O - OMB.O	Negative Ranks	9 ^m	8.39	75.50
	Positive Ranks	9 ⁿ	10.61	95.50
	Ties	21 ^o		
	Total	39		
PMCA.P - MCA.P	Negative Ranks	25 ^p	17.00	425.00
	Positive Ranks	5 ^q	8.00	40.00
	Ties	9 ^r		
	Total	39		

PMCA.C - MCA.C	Negative Ranks	21 ^s	14.81	311.00
	Positive Ranks	6 ^t	11.17	67.00
	Ties	12 ^u		
	Total	39		
PMCA.A - MCA.A	Negative Ranks	7 ^v	12.29	86.00
	Positive Ranks	23 ^w	16.48	379.00
	Ties	9 ^x		
	Total	39		
PMCA.D - MCA.D	Negative Ranks	10 ^y	14.00	140.00
	Positive Ranks	23 ^z	18.30	421.00
	Ties	6 ^{aa}		
	Total	39		
PMCA.O - MCA.O	Negative Ranks	16 ^{bb}	14.13	226.00
	Positive Ranks	12 ^{cc}	15.00	180.00
	Ties	11 ^{dd}		
	Total	39		

- a. $POMB.P < OMB.P$
- b. $POMB.P > OMB.P$
- c. $POMB.P = OMB.P$
- d. $POMB.C < OMB.C$
- e. $POMB.C > OMB.C$
- f. $POMB.C = OMB.C$
- g. $POMB.A < OMB.A$
- h. $POMB.A > OMB.A$
- i. $POMB.A = OMB.A$
- j. $POMB.D < OMB.D$
- k. $POMB.D > OMB.D$
- l. $POMB.D = OMB.D$
- m. $POMB.O < OMB.O$
- n. $POMB.O > OMB.O$
- o. $POMB.O = OMB.O$
- p. $PMCA.P < MCA.P$
- q. $PMCA.P > MCA.P$
- r. $PMCA.P = MCA.P$
- s. $PMCA.C < MCA.C$
- t. $PMCA.C > MCA.C$
- u. $PMCA.C = MCA.C$
- v. $PMCA.A < MCA.A$
- w. $PMCA.A > MCA.A$
- x. $PMCA.A = MCA.A$
- y. $PMCA.D < MCA.D$
- z. $PMCA.D > MCA.D$
- aa. $PMCA.D = MCA.D$
- bb. $PMCA.O < MCA.O$
- cc. $PMCA.O > MCA.O$
- dd. $PMCA.O = MCA.O$

Test Statistics^c

	POMB.P - OMB.P	POMB.C - OMB.C	POMB.A - OMB.A	POMB.D - OMB.D	POMB.O - OMB.O	PMCA.P - MCA.P	PMCA.C - MCA.C	PMCA.A - MCA.A	PMCA.D - MCA.D	PMCA.O - MCA.O
Z	-3.214 ^a	-1.521 ^a	-1.503 ^b	-1.580 ^b	-.443 ^b	-4.029 ^a	-2.968 ^a	-3.041 ^b	-2.533 ^b	-.529 ^a
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001	0.128	0.133	0.114	0.658	0	0.003	0.002	0.011	0.597
Exact Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001	0.135	0.136	0.118	0.682	0	0.002	0.002	0.01	0.61
Exact Sig. (1-tailed)	0	0.068	0.068	0.059	0.341	0	0.001	0.001	0.005	0.305
Point Probability	0	0.005	0.001	0.003	0.022	0	0	0	0	0.004

a. Based on positive ranks.

b. Based on negative ranks.

c. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

Non-parametric correlations

Correlations

		OMB.P	OMB.C	OMB.A	OMB.D	OMB.O
Spearman's rho	OMB.P Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.578**	-.013	-.140	-.009
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.	.000	.469	.197	.478
	N	39	39	39	39	39
OMB.C	OMB.C Correlation Coefficient	.578**	1.000	.299*	.346*	.328*
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.	.032	.016	.021
	N	39	39	39	39	39
OMB.A	OMB.A Correlation Coefficient	-.013	.299*	1.000	.747**	.713**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.469	.032	.	.000	.000
	N	39	39	39	39	39
OMB.D	OMB.D Correlation Coefficient	-.140	.346*	.747**	1.000	.721**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.197	.016	.000	.	.000
	N	39	39	39	39	39
OMB.O	OMB.O Correlation Coefficient	-.009	.328*	.713**	.721**	1.000
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.478	.021	.000	.000	.
	N	39	39	39	39	39

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

Correlations

		POMB.P	POMB.C	POMB.A	POMB.D	POMB.O
Spearman's rho	POMB.P Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.766**	.004	.029	.123
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.	.000	.489	.430	.227
	N	39	39	39	39	39
POMB.C	Correlation Coefficient	.766**	1.000	.205	.118	.271*
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.	.105	.237	.047
	N	39	39	39	39	39
POMB.A	Correlation Coefficient	.004	.205	1.000	.608**	.666**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.489	.105	.	.000	.000
	N	39	39	39	39	39
POMB.D	Correlation Coefficient	.029	.118	.608**	1.000	.728**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.430	.237	.000	.	.000
	N	39	39	39	39	39
POMB.O	Correlation Coefficient	.123	.271*	.666**	.728**	1.000
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.227	.047	.000	.000	.
	N	39	39	39	39	39

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

Correlations

		MCA.P	MCA.C	MCA.A	MCA.D	MCA.O
Spearman's rho	MCA.P Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.725**	-.138	.186	.261
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.	.000	.201	.129	.054
	N	39	39	39	39	39
MCA.C	Correlation Coefficient	.725**	1.000	.253	.518**	.482**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.	.060	.000	.001
	N	39	39	39	39	39
MCA.A	Correlation Coefficient	-.138	.253	1.000	.592**	.545**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.201	.060	.	.000	.000
	N	39	39	39	39	39
MCA.D	Correlation Coefficient	.186	.518**	.592**	1.000	.749**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.129	.000	.000	.	.000
	N	39	39	39	39	39
MCA.O	Correlation Coefficient	.261	.482**	.545**	.749**	1.000
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.054	.001	.000	.000	.
	N	39	39	39	39	39

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

Correlations

			PMCA.P	PMCA.C	PMCA.A	PMCA.D	PMCA.O
Spearman's rho	PMCA. P	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.498**	-.216	-.353*	.181
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.	.001	.093	.014	.135
		N	39	39	39	39	39
PMCA. C	PMCA. C	Correlation Coefficient	.498**	1.000	.110	.126	.537**
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.001	.	.253	.222	.000
		N	39	39	39	39	39
PMCA. A	PMCA. A	Correlation Coefficient	-.216	.110	1.000	.546**	.438**
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.093	.253	.	.000	.003
		N	39	39	39	39	39
PMCA. D	PMCA. D	Correlation Coefficient	-.353*	.126	.546**	1.000	.503**
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.014	.222	.000	.	.001
		N	39	39	39	39	39
PMCA. O	PMCA. O	Correlation Coefficient	.181	.537**	.438**	.503**	1.000
		Sig. (1-tailed)	.135	.000	.003	.001	.
		N	39	39	39	39	39

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

Demographic information**Gender**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Male	17	43.6	43.6	43.6
Female	22	56.4	56.4	100.0
Total	39	100.0	100.0	

Age

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid under 25	3	7.7	7.7	7.7
25-44	26	66.7	66.7	74.4
45-64	9	23.1	23.1	97.4
65 or over	1	2.6	2.6	100.0
Total	39	100.0	100.0	

Accent

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Standard ^a	26	66.7	66.7	66.7
Non-standard ^b	13	33.3	33.3	100.0
Total	39	100.0	100.0	

a. anyone who stated that they had no accent, a southern English accent or a standard accent

b. anyone who described themselves as having a specific accent e.g. Glaswegian

Sector

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Private and other	20	51.3	51.3	51.3
Public ^c	19	48.7	48.7	100.0
Total	39	100.0	100.0	

c. includes not-for-profit

Textuse

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid daily	12	30.8	30.8	30.8
regularly	10	25.6	25.6	56.4
occasionally	9	23.1	23.1	79.5
rarely	8	20.5	20.5	100.0
Total	39	100.0	100.0	

Appendix C

Qualitative Feedback from Questionnaire

Ombudsman (non-plain)

2	The first sentence is too long and complex. "Drives improvement" is a horrible, jargony phrase, and why as a member of the public do I need to know that they "inform public policy"? Sounds like they're not concentrating as much as they could on my complaint.
17	This text although clear appears drab and grey and very official in the worst sense - it feels like barriers are going up as you read it! The organisation wants to give as little information as possible, whilst trying to appear positive about its self. It is off putting to the point of a loss of trust from this reader, even in such few paragraphs.
18	Such an ombudsman would have to been seen by the public to be completely impartial and with no room for error and scandal as such would make them un approachable
26	Not as clear as first statement
39	Rather a 'mission statement' impression buried in bureaucracy

Plain Ombudsman

2	What's the difference between a regulator, a watchdog and an ombudsman? Simply stating that they are different is not that helpful. "Deal with complaints" is possibly misleading – to me it implies that they will make good the situation rather than deciding on the rights and wrongs.
5	They are saying what they are NOT ("We are not a regulator or a watchdog") and capping people's expectations ("What we can and can't do is defined by law"). This is perfectly reasonable but comes across as: 'don't really expect us to make a difference'
6	I find bullet points easier to read and take in rather than long paragraphs of text (especially online / on screen). I do think where the text is to be read makes a big difference – ie online, in a newspaper, in the literature for the organisation.
10	Again, despite the less formal language, the actual content is less clear.
17	The first line confused me; the second line appeared to be repeating the point of the first. I felt no trust as this just seemed incompetent.
23	The language used seems more informal than the other texts.
26	Written very clearly
29	This looks like slide show-type words
32	Trying too hard to come across as unofficial.
39	Very clear statement giving good reassurance

Mental Capacity Act (non-plain)

2	Neutral and precise, but too wordy to be memorable. I would find myself boiling this down further in order to remember it, but it's fine for reference.
6	I find this quite hard to read – I had to read 'practicable' twice as it's not a word I'd heard of before. Language seems aloof and wordy. Personally, I don't care about the 'section 1 of the act' part – irrelevant to me.
11	I now understand what text 3 was trying to say
17	This text seems balanced and well judged and I would feel trust in the organisation that wrote this.
29	More difficult to read, but reads like a lawyer putting a piece of legislation into plain, but formal English. This could be a lawyer briefing someone not legal, but professional.

35	Much friendlier version/explanation Very similar to official formats that I use for mental capacity decision making
36	- inserted "teenager" into text itself
39	I felt there to be an unsettling attitude coming out of their guidelines

Plain Mental Capacity Act

2	This looks actually useful.
5	<p>My sister is mentally handicapped (very roughly a mental age of 5) and she gets a voting form for the elections (she is over 18). Her mother takes her to vote, as is her right. However she knows very little about the options, apart from maybe what the main candidates look like, and even this is not correlated to the name on the ballot paper (she can read a little but wouldn't know 'Gordon Brown' from 'Harry Potter' even if she knew she liked Mr Brown when seen on TV).</p> <p>Her mother allows her to vote freely but says 'not this one' or 'this one', and points at any that have BNP or fascist tendencies.</p> <p>I've argued with my mother about this as I think at best it is diluting the voting process as I know her reasons for putting a cross next to one name or the other is based more on if any candidate has a name she is familiar with and can read easily than any manifesto pledges.</p> <p>I also disagree from the other end of the spectrum, why disallow certain parties and not others? Should my mother just not tell her which party to vote for thereby effectively doubling her own vote, she has power of attorney in other areas of her daughter's life, why not here. Or tell her to vote for the candidate, that my mother feels, would be most helpful to her daughter.</p> <p>My mother mostly doesn't believe that the 1 vote makes a difference and would rather allow her daughter to feel part of the event that most other people are doing. In which case is it more fun just to tell her to put a cross in all the boxes and spoil the vote.</p> <p>The other point is that without my mother taking her daughter to vote, she would never go on her own and wouldn't feel left out or disenfranchised.</p>
6	I think most people could understand this quite easily – approachable and fairly friendly
10	Point no 4, despite being worded in more informal language is actually more confusing to read than the equivalent sentence in the previous version.
11	The author had insufficient mental capacity to summarise the act
16	I have worked in the past with "Easy Read" documents prepared by Government for the Mental Health Act. Easy Read documents are necessary to allow people with learning disabilities to access information produced by Government. I have prepared my response on the basis that this extract sounds like it is designed in an "Easy Read" style and format (but with the pictures removed).
17	This text seems like something marketed at younger readers, but still accessible to all. It feels like a fact sheet but the language used also makes it less credible, although it is very clear.
18	To make these statements work an organisation has to be seen to be upholding these and not just using them as advertising material

29	To informal. 'wrong or bad' Informality can easily erode perception of reliability/credibility (to me) Can verge towards patronising.
32	Over-simplified
39	The text is clear to understand. It needs to be re-read to clarify the meaning

Separate comment

11: Out of interest - are 1 and 2 produced by the same organisation? (1 reads like their corporate policy and 2 an answer on a Q&A page). I assume 3 is guidance for carers that doesn't translate well outside that environment.