Piece of Cake: News in Easy Language

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Abstract
The increasing linguistic diversity for reasons of interculturality, education, age, mental skills, etc., at the international level creates the need for information available in many languages and at a different linguistic level. Usually, linguistic accessibility-translation- is more often presented as a "right" only to the extent that it is necessary to protect other rights (ex. access to legal services). Barriers to information intake arise when, for example, a person can take in the information but does not have sufficient command of the language in which the information is written. This paper aims to highlight the use of easy language as a key tool for effective information communication in the news, making information related to current events accessible and adapted to the needs of people who, for various reasons, have a limited understanding of the official/dominant language.

1. INTRODUCTION

Linguistic constructions are the base of our societies legislatively, morally, educationally, economically, politically, and scientifically. Language is everywhere. In order to claim societal equity, every person must have equal rights to information access, social participation and inclusion. Accessible communication means not only to find and perceive information but to connect it with the recipient's previous knowledge. Information from public authorities is usually provided at a language level that a large amount of the population does not have the appropriate skills to access. On a societal level, this reveals a massive problem, as many adults are unable to understand common information from authorities, companies and media without help from others. This affects not only the recipients but also the senders of the information and indirectly affects social cohesion.

Communicative routines reflect the degree of democracy and inclusivity within a society. If people can not participate in the public discourse, generally or at least in topics that immediately affect their lives, how can they be included in society? Is news accessible to everyone so that they can live an informed life?

There has been a growing awareness of the need to make media more accessible, meaning to meet anyone's information needs more efficiently and effectively. This turn in the communication culture has not occurred uniformly, globally or evenly over time. The importance of media accessibility is revealed: "in different ways in different geographical, temporal, and social settings and depending on various factors, such as the target user group profile, the sender-receiver relation, and the function of the simplified information" (Peruzzo & Goranka 2022:8).

This article will discuss news accessibility through the lens of language rights as a right to information, inclusion and social participation, all using easy language as a tool.

2. INFORMATION ACCESS

Access to information is a basic human need. At the same time, all people and populations have a fundamental right to produce, access, acquire, transmit and benefit from information. This right exists in every aspect of everyday life, regardless of geographical location, political beliefs, cultural, economic and social context or even the criticality of the surrounding events, such as a natural disaster. It is a common phenomenon to address linguistic accessibility- referring exclusively to translation - as a "right" to the extent of a necessity to protect other rights. One of the most common occurrences is the access to legal services. However, accessible information is critical to reducing vulnerability and building resilience in the community.

Katarina Tomaševski's 4-A scheme – framing indicators under the four headings of availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability – has been adopted and adapted in many parts of the world and for a great variety of settings (Karlsson & Grimheden 2011:1), including media and news content.

Although Tomaševski focused on education, the same framework can be applied here because the 4-A approach provides a structured and comprehensive way of considering the extent to which media approach their obligations to provide news to culturally and linguistically diverse groups.

● Availability— is information recognized as an essential product and service? Is it affordable?

● Accessibility—is news available and accessible, meaning free and delivered on multiple platforms, in multiple modes, in all relevant languages?

● Acceptability— is the provision of news acceptable, ensuring accuracy and appropriateness of information?

● Adaptability—can the provision of news be adapted to different scenarios, for example, fluid language requirements, literacies, technological demands, new modes of delivery, diverse hazards and movement of people?

Fröhlich ((Fröhlich & Candussi 2021) distinguishes four different levels on which information barriers arise: perception, recognition, previous experience, and previous knowledge. Regarding information perception it must be taken into account that one can take in information in a language that they do not have sufficient command of or that factors, such as strong emotions, can affect their ability to make meaning of the information. Previous experience and knowledge are of great importance, too. Both of them are connected to vocabulary and general linguistic characteristics and have a strong connection to cognitive foundations and previous occurrences (Fröhlich & Candussi 2021). One way to overcome information barriers is the use of Easy Language.

3. EASY LANGUAGE: TERMINOLOGICAL AND CONCEPTUAL ASPECTS

There is a variety of terms that are used to refer to concepts related to Easy Language: Easy-to-Read, Easy Reading, Easy Read, Easy-to-Understand Language, Plain Language, Simple Language, Simplified Language, Citizen Language, Clear Writing (Matamala 2022).

The expression "Easy Languages" refers to "modified forms of standard languages, which aim to facilitate reading and language comprehension" Lindholm & Vanhatalo 2021:11). In Easy Languages, the adaptations that have been made are in terms of content, vocabulary and structure, in order to make them more readable and comprehensible by people who have difficulties in understanding standard language.

One must not confuse easy language with the notion of plain language. The latter refers to what the International Plain Language Federation described (2019) as "A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information".

Lindholm and Vanhatalo (2021:18) describe the difference between Plain Language and Easy Language, making the following differentiation:

"Whereas Plain Language is related to institutional documents and aims to simplify legal language for non-professionals, the notion of Easy Language refers to making various texts or speech accessible to people who have difficulties reading and understanding standard

language. As a language form, Easy Language is usually more simplified than Plain Language."

Leskelä (2021:158) divides Easy Language's users into three main groups:

1. People who have an innate and probably lifelong need for Easy Language due to their neuro-biologically different language processing capacities (people with intellectual disabilities, autistic people, people with severe reading, concentration and perception difficulties)

2. People with reduced language skills due to an injury, illness or trauma acquired during their lifetime (for example people with aphasia or memory related illnesses)

3. People who are likely to only need Easy Language temporarily and have another language or means of communication (e.g. people learning a language as a second language, sign language native speakers etc.).

These three users' groups are not divided into primary or secondary groups; they are all equally important. It is, however, recognized that they form heterogeneous groups and differ in respect to their linguistic needs and abilities. People can have two different simultaneous causes (for example an autistic immigrant person or a person with intellectual disability who has a memory disorder). It has also been emphasized that belonging to one of the groups mentioned above does not automatically create the need for Easy Language. It is also worth noting that some people may need Easy Language almost constantly in their daily lives, whereas others may only benefit from it occasionally.

An attempt to resolve this problem is to divide Easy Language into three levels of difficulty, so that everyone can take advantage of the level that is most suitable for them, regardless of which group they belong to. In this paper, we chose the categorization proposed by Leskelä (2021):

- Easiest Easy Language: Users with the most severe language and reading difficulties, who need maximal simplified language, and probably do not read by themselves.

- Basic Easy Language: Average Easy Language readers, who are mainly able to read by themselves, but have considerable problems with standard Language.

- Advanced Easy Language: Users with minor reading challenges.

Since there are discrepancies between the skill abilities of individuals within groups (and groups), whose needs should Easy Language serve and who should be compromised? Also, when we seek to define the appropriate language form to be used for a specific group (eg autistic people or immigrants) it is very easy to get carried away by stereotypes and prejudices.

We must not forget that there is no such thing as a typical immigrant or autistic reader, but rather a huge range of different people with different and varied skills and challenges. Cincová & Latimier (2021:120) mention that "foreign speakers who are only taught the written (and colloquial) standard, are regularly lost in everyday language." Linguistic attainment is thus an important factor in sociocultural integration, as it helps the new language user to become an independent member of the new society (Hammer 2017:92).

What is worth considering is the potential of Easy Language to balance the power relations between different language users (Leskelä 2021:161). Although this applies to all the previous groups, it is extremely important when talking about native and non-native speakers. Native speakers lose their linguistic dominant position when not-native speakers are addressed in Easy Language instead of Standard Language. Not only because the message is in simplified linguistic form but also due to the challenges native speakers themselves come across when shifting from Standard to Easy Language.

At the same time, the results of the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) show that in nearly all countries, a sizable proportion of adults have poor reading skills (19,8%). Adults lacking these basic skills can only read short and familiar texts, are unable to integrate, interpret or synthesize information and have trouble acquiring and evaluating information, communicating with others and performing practical tasks. In most countries, immigrants have significantly lower skill proficiency than native-born adults (EAEA n.d.).

It is important to keep in mind that PIAAC was conducted by interviewing adults aged 16-65. According to the World Social Report 2023, the number of people aged 65 years or older worldwide is projected to more than double, rising from 761 million in 2021 to 1.6 billion in 2050. The number of people aged 80 years or older is growing even faster. Population aging is an irreversible global trend. It is the inevitable result of the demographic transition – the trend towards longer lives and smaller families – that is taking place even in countries with relatively youthful populations. In 2021, 1 in 10 people worldwide were aged 65 or above. In 2050, this age group is projected to account for 1 in 6 people globally.

Taking into account the high number of immigrants in the countries today and the results of the OECD Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies Survey (PIAAC) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) surveys and focusing on the illiteracy figures of the entire population there is a growing number of people needing gasification for the content (text etc.) they consume. Focusing on the illiteracy figures

of the entire population and the demographics, it is obvious that Easy Language is no longer a matter exclusively for disabled population, but a mainstream issue.

Easy language has guidelines and rules that apply to all Indo-European languages, as the difficulties in text comprehension are not limited in words and phrasing but can also be detected in "non-word elements such as numbers, abbreviations, and special characters" "(Nietzio et al. 2014:347). At the same time, these language-independent rules describe ways for improving textual legibility, becoming language-specific rules which vary depending on specific linguistic elements. Text usability depends on the degree of text complexity, readability and ambiguity (Parego 2021:19). According to Maaß (2020), the features that text needs to have in order to be accessible are to be retrievable, perceptible, comprehensible, linkable, acceptable and action-enabling. "It is therefore not only a question of whether the language is easy or difficult to understand but whether it meets information needs, i.e., whether it is based on the target group's previous knowledge and experience." (Fröhlich & Candussi 2021:38). It must be taken in account that one of the frequent problems that occur in practice when reducing informational complexity at one level may increase complexity at another level. For example, the news consumers' presumed lack of extralinguistic knowledge may lead to adding information that will increase by extension syntactic complexity. The same effect may have the use of inclusive, politically correct language (Peruzzo & Goranka 2022).

A large number of people have problems accessing communication products or services due to text's perception difficulties or media's format inaccessibility. Using easy language in texts does not "completely dismantle, but lowers communication barriers" (Maaß 2020:12). Bernabé-Caro and Orero describe Easy Language regarding Media Accessibility "as a service to improve reading and foster comprehension" (2019: 56) and recommend the list of existing accessibility services to include it, because it has the characteristic to make a "message accessible to all people, in their intellectual and learning diversity".

4. NEWS IN EASY LANGUAGE: CASES ACROSS EUROPE

Efforts have been made in order to improve language accessibility in news both at the national and the international level through the use of Easy Language, despite facing numerous challenges. Addressing examples from Europe, it is clear that news (newspapers) in Easy Language has existed for a few decades.

Sweden

Sweden is a country with a long history in using Easy Language, as it started almost six decades ago in the form of several different initiatives and actions. In 1976 an Easy Language newspaper was initiated. In 1984 the Swedish government assigned to the National Committee

for Talking Newspapers (audio newspapers for people with visual impairments) a task that led to the start of 8 Sidor newspapers (focused on people with intellectual disabilities). In 1986, the Swedish Parliament decided to fund a national newspaper in Easy Language, the 8 Sidor. This eight-page long newspaper was, and still is, weekly with an online version (updated every weekday) since 1997. It is worth mentioning that since 2010, 8 Sidor has run a special website called Alla väljare (All voters), which provides in-depth information about elections, political issues and the organization of Swedish democracy. Especially, at election time it hosts a chat function so that readers can ask political parties questions. This Easy Language newspaper is regarded as one of the most accessible newspapers in the world, with about 5000 subscribers in the print edition and about 40000 visitors on their website weekly. News in Easy Language is broadcast both by Swedish Television and Swedish National Radio. It is reported at a slower pace with commonly known words. (Bohman 2021).

Netherlands

As stated in Vandeghinste et al. (2021), Flanders in 1985 was published the first publication of the "Wablieft" ("Excuse me, what did you say?") newspaper. Initially, Wablieft was a single black and white paper that appeared every three weeks. Due to the demand in 1989 it started to be printed in tabloid format, in a newspaper style and gradually, by 1995, it became a weekly publication. Vandeghinste et al. recognized that "Wablieft clearly addressed a need, as it already had 2300 subscribers in 1990, and 5000 by 1995" (Vandeghinste et al. 2021:58) and in 2011, with its digital expansion in an online weekly version there were around 7000 subscribers. For the beginner readers of Dutch, there is an even easier newspaper form, the "Wablieft Start".

Finland

The newspapers Selkosanomat in Easy Finnish and Lätta Bladet in Easy Swedish appeared in 1990.They are current affairs newspapers in easy language, published eight times a year. Four magazines in the fall and four in the spring. Each has 20 pages and covers the following topics: domestic and foreign events, entertainment, culture, sports and everyday things. Both are politically and religiously unaffiliated magazines. Selkosanomi and Lätta Bladet have online magazines with new news every week that can be read and listened to for free and there is a picture edition too. Finnish Broadcasting Company Selkosanomat and Lätta Bladet launched its radio news in Easy Finnish in 1992 and expanded in television in 2015. This was a huge step, as it allowed people with language barriers to follow television news like everyone else. YLE news in Easy Swedish began in 2019 (Leskelä 2021).

Lithuania

Lithuanian "Viltis Journal" has been published quarterly by the Society for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities (Viltis) since 1997. It covers disability issues as aspects of social life, such as traveling, news on policy, summer camps. There are other informative projects in easy language, made either by private sector or nongovernmental organizations but are focusing on disability issues only (Šumskienė & Baltrūnaitė 2021).

Latvia

In Latvia, due to the absence of legislation, there haven't been developed any media in Easy Language. However, in 2016 radio news in Easy Language was launched by the cooperation of the Latvian State Radio with Easy Language Agency (Anča & Meļņika 2021).

Slovenia

In Slovenia, the national broadcaster RTV has been publishing shorter articles and news in easier language on their website (Dostopno) since 2020. At the beginning of 2021, they launched a web portal called Enostavno (Simple), featuring daily global news, news from Slovenia, sports news, trivia, and practical texts (Knapp & Haramija 2021:480). In Norway we find Klar Tale, a newspaper in easy language, that has both digital (daily) and printed (weekly) editions. The latter is also available as an e-newspaper and an audio alternative. (Bovim Bugge et. al. 2021).

It is noticeable that in print (newspapers and magazines) the use of Easy Language in many European countries, especially in the North Europe, has been going on for decades. However, the use of Plain Language in news is not widespread to any great extent. Also, there are no systematic attempts to integrate this practice from major non-state Media.

5. EASY LANGUAGE IN MULTIMODAL NEWS

Easy language is a solution mostly used in written texts in order to strengthen comprehensibility. But when it comes to language concerns, we must not forget the variable of paralanguage (Parego 2021). Easification (Bhatia 1983) formats guide users with independent features aiming to increase comprehensibility and usability (Parego 2021). These formats may include page layout and the use of pictures or/and images. However, in a multimedia digital news world, it remains to be seen how easy language will be transferred to the audiovisual world (Matamala 2022) in a multimodal context. Regarding easy language and audio, we will refer to the work of Bernabé-Caro and Orero (2021) on easy-read and audio description, who "consider that due to the dual nature of AD–being a text to be read aloud and an oral text–both writing and listening can be made easier to understand". (Matamala 2022:137). Specifically on

subtitles, Alba Rodríguez (2013 in Matamala 2022) suggested creating "adapted subtitles" or "easy subtitles". Maaß and Hernández Garrido (2020:149) propose a format for how to insert easy language in audiovisual texts, based on the belief that audiovisual translation includes "all forms of translation and interpreting between different modalities involving tertiary media of any type". They also highlight the challenges of using easy language, a language form different from the standard, as "it has limited acceptability" and "its use is affected by the media restrictions". However, as the potential of online multimodality and interactivity expands and knowledge about accessibility improves, Easy Language materials are further developing to cover the various needs of people with language barriers and market's need to follow platforms etc. This means developing Easy Language audio-visual materials, animations, videos and any other new media form.

6. AI AND EASY LANGUAGE

The possible use of Artificial Intelligence in the linguistic simplification process is one of the greatest challenges of the near future. It can achieve significant reduction in the production cost and time and it will enable the processing of much larger volumes of text. However, in order to achieve a high-quality language simplification outcome there must be adequate time and resources to train the software. One of the main problems in the development of AI for automated language simplification is the lack of sufficiently large training text stocks. Translations, and in the case of the use of easy language we have intralingual translation, tend to be treated as a transparent and immediate communication tool, despite the complexity of the actual process. As is the case with many systems of mediation, easy language "makes an experience self-evident and the mediators invisible from the view of the end user, concealing the intricate and complicated problems related to agents, processes, and effects of mediation" (Kang 2012:440). Therefore, new techniques must be investigated that enable unsupervised text simplification but it is too premature for practical applications.

7. CONCLUSION

Language enables communication between members of the society; it is also a carrier of sociocultural values and norms (Hammer 2017:91-92). People need to process more information today than ever. The rapid development of the quantity of information may impact the way language needs to become easier. At the same time, "communicative routines reflect the degree of democracy and inclusivity within a community." (Cincová & Latimier 2021:121). Because user's groups are very diverse in respect to, for example, their language skills, there

is no only ideal shape of information. The very best solution is the one that gives the recipient an individual choice of how they want to consume the news in a particular situation.

It is not easy to estimate the exact percentage of the population that needs Easy Language, not only because it has not been recorded in its entirety to date. However, data are available for certain individual groups, but also because of the nature of its subcategories. An obvious example is individuals who use easy language for as long as it takes them to acquire a higher language level. In order to identify the effectiveness of using easy language in the news, an additional study is proposed. After identifying the distinct subgroups (individuals with developmental disorders, immigrants, etc.), researchers should interview the audiences/users of easy language regarding their preferences in getting information and news consumption. Another challenge is to ensure that Easy Language news will reach its audience. It is important to address the way adapted news is being promoted in order to be found.

Surely, news in Easy Language is addressed to a part of the public. The problem is that we don't know the size of this part in real numbers, because practically a large share of people who benefit from this accessibility tool are invisible due to its skills in standard language. There are cases where easy Language is chosen instead of the standard language as a language format for the general public, too. There should be the option of switching between different levels of linguistic difficulty and individually choosing the appropriate form. Each individual should have the right to choose the language format in which they want information, which is publicly available and neutral, without being stigmatized for their option.

Political and institutional actors (states, international organizations) are crucial in providing correct and easy information without causing discrimination. Within the European Union, for example, general instructions can be given to the Member States for the creation of multimodal news content in the national languages (state/public television and radio, newspaper, social networks and the world wide web). Also, the EU institutions can enrich their information material with multilingual editions in easy language: press releases, information for the public, but can also provide guidelines to all Media that wish to follow their example and expand their audience. It is also proposed monitoring for possible improvement of the quality of the audience served, research about the use or not of news in easy language by the general public, as well as the possible impact on the prevention of the phenomena of misinformation, fake news and disinformation.

In an effort to implement easy language to journalistic work, it is crucial to search what the audience is able to find and which media and environments prefer. Media should get to

know what it is able to perceive, process, understand and retain and how it will act on such given accessible information. Media which want to adapt their content to new audiences, need to find "the balance between comprehensibility and perceptibility on the one side, and acceptability and stigmatization potential on the other" (Maaß 2020:12). News providers could use easy language in order to enhance comprehension and improve the user experience for everyone, so that stories can be "linguistically and visually transformed into a new news culture" (Barker 2020:186). The public provision of comprehensible daily news is still greatly limited. As the market for a news service dedicated to the limited target group of users, poorly capitalized attempts to find solutions have the disadvantage of not being able to professional media or have regular media style on a daily basis. Outdated news is an unsatisfactory solution, even if it is in Easy Language. Everybody has the right to accurate and current news content.

Particular attention should be paid to both emergency updates, such as in cases of natural disasters, and all political, economic or social events that are promoted as urgent matters for the general population. Certainly, not all information content broadcast on a television station or hosted on journalistic websites can be translated into easy language. However, the news and information provided to people using Easy Language must create a complete picture of current events.

Easy language should not be separated as a special language from general communication and information activities. It's not about dumbing down text. And it's not even just about the words. It's about understanding your audience (a piece of them) and giving them writing that is clear, concise and well-organized. That way, they can find what they need quickly and easily, understand it, and act on that understanding.

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