

Plain language in Spain

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For thirty years Spain has been striving to improve its communicative style to create a democratic community proud of its linguistic and cultural diversity. Progress has been good but there is still much to do.

This article reviews the communicative style Spain inherited from the dictatorship, Spain's conception of plain language, the goals it set for the four most widely used languages, and the results achieved.

Spain has seen enormous changes since the dictatorship ended in the 1970s. In these thirty years Spain has moved from a dictatorship to a democracy and from a centralised government to one closely resembling a federation, with autonomous parliaments and administrations. Spain joined NATO, the European Council, the European Union, and adopted the euro.

Languages

While Spanish remains the country's *lingua franca*, Spain recognises four co-official languages:

1. Aranese in a small valley in the Pyrenees
2. Basque in the Basque Country and Navarre
3. Catalan in Catalonia, the Balearic Islands and Valencia (where it is known as "Valencian")
4. Galician in Galicia.

The academic community further recognises languages such as Asturian and the Aragonese Faba and languages imported by immigrants even though they don't have official status.

Nearly 42% of Spaniards are bilingual or live in bilingual communities with autonomous governments, parliaments and administrations. It is not easy to summarise plain language in Spain because the situation has yet to be studied as a whole. In writing this article I have relied on information given to me by experts¹.

Our inherited style

From the dictatorship

The administration's communicative discourse during the dictatorship was unwieldy, obscure and

written exclusively in Spanish. This discourse featured:

- Syntax that tended towards long, complicated sentences with much subordination
- Vocabulary that included words rarely used in everyday spoken and written language
- Documents that were organised into lengthy sections and paragraphs with rigid and obsolete structures
- Idioms that were flattering for civil servants and humiliating for citizens.

Civil servants had to be flattered to get them to carry out their normal duties with addresses such as: "according to your faithful knowledge and understanding (*según su leal saber y entender*)"; "... grace which is hoped to be obtained through your just action, most illustrious One (*gracia que espera obtener del recto proceder de Vuestra Ilustrísima*)"; "my very Lord (*muy Señor mío*)".

Citizens on the other hand had to plead (*ruega*) with and supplicate (*suplica*) to officials to give them the rights they were due.

While we all recognised this style was artificial, old-fashioned, and often incomprehensible, we had to use it when dealing with the administration.

From earlier times

Certain characteristics of our inherited style predate the dictatorship and have legal and socio-cultural roots.

From 1881 to 1985 the law required court judgments to introduce every fact and ground for a decision with the gerunds *resultando* (being) and *considerando* (considering). Doing so resulted in a very long subordinate clause with no full stops; a judgment could be delivered in a single sentence several pages long. This style influenced all administrative and legal writing even though it is rarely used in spoken Spanish. Solemn written forms of address reflected a view of society which was both hierarchical and class-oriented. For example, *Vuestra Ilustrísima* (Your Most Illustrious One); *Vuestra Señoría* (Your Lordship/Ladyship); *Excelentísimo Señor* (Most Excellent Lord); *Muy Ilustre Señor Don* (Very Illustrious Sir Lord). Nowadays, as we all have the same legal status, the law recommends using *usted* (you) and *señor/a* (Mr/Ms). The old-fashioned forms, however, are occasionally still found.

Democratic aims

With political change, Spanish institutions began to adapt their language to the needs of a modern democratic society just as our neighbours had done. This marked the birth of the effort to develop a communication style that could better reflect citizens'

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rights and obligations. The starting point for each of the four main languages was very different.

Spanish

Language change involved dealing with the unwieldiness of a writing tradition consolidated over centuries. Linguistic alternatives that were closer to the common language needed to be developed, on many levels (syntax, terminology and discourse). It was also necessary to change people's attitudes and values. Many people honestly believed that complex, incomprehensible text transmitted relevant information better than simple, clear text, possibly because it sounded more formal and therefore more appropriate. Besides, they were simply more used to reading and writing this unwieldy style, and so changing this habit was even more of a challenge.

Basque, Catalan and Galician

These languages faced a double challenge. Firstly, they needed to create a register. Having been outlawed for most of the 20th century, these languages effectively lacked a register because they had rarely been used for contemporary public communication. Secondly, they needed to struggle against the influence of Spanish's obscure style and against the process of linguistic substitution.

The result has been that these languages have focused on designing a new style suited to the needs of their recently regained autonomous administrations. The basic principles guiding their efforts are:

1. to respect the inherent characteristics of each language as spoken and written;
2. to recover their historical traditions (whether medieval, renaissance or literary); and
3. to adopt international standards, including the use of plain language.

The creation of plain Catalan, Basque and Galician has gone hand in hand with linguistic "normalisation". According to Spanish sociolinguistics, normalisation revives the use of a language and is thus the opposite of linguistic "substitution". This probably explains why in many ways plain language has developed much more quickly in these three languages than in Spanish.

Using language simplification as a tool for linguistic normalisation has not always achieved its goal. For example, judges, solicitors and barristers translate Catalan model documents into Spanish instead of using them as written. Basque institutions are considering publishing their manuals in Spanish as well as Basque because their efforts at simplified Basque have failed to change the habits of Spanish speakers.

Language typology

Spanish, Catalan and Galician are Indo-European Romance languages. The approach to designing a plain style for these languages is not so different from that needed for French or even English. Basque, however, comes from a different linguistic family and has different lexical and syntactical structures from Roman or Indo-European languages. So developing a plain style for it requires a different approach.

Despite historical and typological differences, many principles for plain writing apply to all four languages. For example, writers are asked to avoid using nominalisations, passive verbs, verbal paraphrases, abstract words, long sentences, and excessive subordination. These recommendations are reflected in the spoken form of each of the four languages.

The concept of plain language

There have not been many campaigns focused exclusively on simplification in Spain. The reason is that plain language—though important—is seen to be only an element of a more ambitious and relevant purpose: to create a register that satisfies citizens' communicative needs in a democratic community. Other features of this purpose are:

1. Creating a modern linguistic tool that:
 - allows people to express any idea in any of the four languages;
 - avoids the colonising influences of one language over another. For example, English over all the four languages, Spanish and French over Catalan and Basque, and Spanish and Portuguese over Galician; and
 - is in keeping with the tradition and idiosyncrasies of each language.

I believe that this public register should meet the dynamic demands of language (neology) while filtering out interference from other languages such as barbarisms, syntactic calques (direct, word-by-word translations) and code switching. How can *software*, *impeachment* or *tsunami* be said in each of these four languages? In answer to this, the following agencies maintain plurilingual terminological data bases and on-line computer tools:

- Euskaterm for Basque <www1.euskadi.net/euskalterm/indice_c.htm>
- Termcat for Catalan <www.termcat.net>
- Termigal for Galician <www.cirp.es/>
- *Real Academia de la Lengua Española* for Spanish <www.rae.es>.

2. Creating a respectful language, which does not discriminate on the basis of sex, race, sexual orientation, ideology or religion.

Examples of changes to avoid sexual discrimination include:

- job descriptions: *personal sanitario* (health personnel) instead of *medicos* (doctors, m) and *infermeras* (nurses, f);
 - forms of address: *señora* (equivalent to the English Ms) instead of *señorita* (Miss) which was used to refer to a girl and an unmarried woman; and
 - married women: continue to use their maiden name after marriage. Thus *María Solís* who marries *Pedro Pérez* would not be called *María Pérez* or *María Solís de Pérez*.
3. Encouraging communicative practices which respect language plurality by defending citizens' right to speak their own languages and to understand other languages. Each community has enacted regulations on language use. These are designed to promote a linguistic register which is both useful and modern.

In this context, plain language is seen as an important tool for citizens to exercise their rights and obligations. Plain language:

- improves citizens' ability to read and write;
- increases their understanding of democracy, and therefore can reduce corruption and marginalisation; and
- changes the values and communicative habits of the population, which are remnants of the dictatorship.

There are also valid economic reasons for using plain language such as reducing reading and production time, reducing costs and errors, and increasing efficiency. Although important, these economic reasons are neither essential nor urgent.

Campaigns and results

The communities run campaigns to change peoples' attitudes and values on language use and their institutions were the first to adopt simplified forms that used modern language. Recently some private banks and service providers have followed this example with varying degrees of success.

Public sector

Governments and local administrations (town and county councils) were the first to change the style of their discourse with citizens. Various public agencies such as ministries, schools for public administration, ad hoc language services, and language schools offered recommendations for simpler discourse and published simplified forms. Since the

1980s specialised journals on administrative language have been published. Today the following journals provide an important reference on the subject and include the legal framework, simplified models of documents (structure, phraseology, format), grammar and vocabulary (discussions about rules, terminology, neology, place-names), translation (linguistic interference), writing techniques and bibliography:

- in Catalan: *Llengua i Administració*, 1982
- in Galician: *Revista de Administración Galega*, 1985; *Boletín de Administración e Lingua*
- in Basque: *Administrazioa Euskaraz*, 1993.

During the 1990s, manuals were published in all four languages that greatly influenced administrative language. In 1991 and 1994 the Ministry of Public Administrations published in Spanish the *Manual de estilo del lenguaje administrativo* and *Manual de Documentos Administrativos* <www.igsap.map.es/sgpro/documentos/sgprg.htm#instru>. Similar manuals were published in 1991 in Catalan and Galician and in 1994 for Basque. Like the Spanish manuals these have since been updated and republished.

Bureaucrats have learned how to write better from training courses based on the manuals' recommendations and from international plain language specialists. Ensuring familiarity with the linguistic register appropriate for the public administration has become an essential part of civil service training programmes. The following websites publish the manuals and other information about each language:

- Basque: <www.ivap.com> by the Basque Institute of Public Administration
- Catalan: <www.eapc.es> by the School of Public Administration of Catalonia
- Galician: <www.egap.xunta.es> by the Galician School of Public Administration
- Spanish: <www.inap.map.es> by the *Instituto Nacional de la Administración Pública*.

Legal writing

Here language renewal has probably been much slower, although notable efforts have also been made. Several institutions, including the Autonomous Parliaments and the Ministries of Justice, have established language services and set up networks of consultants to correct, edit and translate legal documents. Manuals on how to simplify rules, laws and technical documents have gradually improved the clarity of legal documents. The plurilingual journal, *Llengua I Dret*, has been gathering research on legal language usage since 1983 <www.eapc.es/rld.html>.

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The Spanish Government has passed rules to simplify the style of judgments, and the official associations of lawyers have published some model forms for legal proceedings. Despite these efforts most Court documents are still written in obscure language. This may be why the Ministry of Justice of the central Government recently set up the Committee for Modernising Legal Language.

Other institutions

Public institutions such as universities, town councils, labour unions and chambers of commerce have actively contributed to creating and publishing plain language. Many of these organisations employ language experts to draw up, correct and translate their documents according to their style rules. Noteworthy examples are the universities of Barcelona and Santiago de Compostela which have published style manuals and standard-form documents. Although these manuals and documents are aimed specifically at academics they are useful to other groups and some are available online. Each year the University of Barcelona gives an award to the organisation which has communicated best with its community. Some town councils' "quality-of-service" campaigns include improving their oral and written communication.

Private sector

The demand for a plain language has increased as people's attitudes and values have changed. The public increasingly expects industry to communicate more clearly and efficiently having seen that public institutions are doing so. Companies are responding to this demand because they want to retain and expand their customer base, not because they want to promote democratic renewal. Banks such as La Caixa, Banc de Sabadell and Gipuzkoa Donostia Kutxa have style manuals and model forms to encourage simplification and clarity. Utility companies have redesigned some of their documents including invoices, contracts, rules and regulations to make them easier to read and understand.

Style manuals

These are one of the most important tools for improving language. Both the private and public sectors use style manuals to set down guidelines for clear writing. Manuals are published in print and on the web. They have sections on grammar, punctuation, capitalisation, and preferred vocabulary, and often include models of commonly-used documents such as the most usual internal (reports, memos) and external (correspondence) documents;

technical documents (reports, research protocols); administrative documents (official letters and requests); and courtesy documents (invitations, notices, replies to complaints). All of these standard form documents tend to some extent to abide by and promote international principles of plain language.

Conclusion

Spanish communication is gradually becoming more comprehensible. People are coming to understand that they need not use complicated or obscure language to make what they have to say sound important. Similarly, when people do not understand something, they no longer assume they are ignorant; instead they call on the author to write more clearly.

For example, the internet is further pushing organisations to simplify the way they communicate with their customers. Interactivity depends on easy-to-understand, simple forms. Consequently mutual comprehension is increasing.

Much remains to do. Old-fashioned, incomprehensible discourse persists in the courts, in legal contracts, and in many organisations' rules and regulations. New challenges continue to arise because communication is dynamic, but plain language is taking hold because Spaniards want to understand their rights to euthanasia and justice, and read about scientific developments in medicine and the environment.

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