

PLAIN ENGLISH AND SOCIOLOGICAL CHANGE

The author of this paper is an English Solicitor who practiced within the English legal system for nearly forty years. During this period a campaign known in England as the Campaign for Plain English gained considerable momentum and was instrumental in bringing about fundamental changes to the terminology and words used within the legal system. The author is an enthusiastic supporter of Plain English. These changes enabled the legal system to be accessed and understood by a wider community and considerably enhanced the possibility of justice for all. Different terminology evolved ranging from the simple such as the replacement of the word “plaintiff” by the word “claimant” to the complex work required to dovetail interdependent documentation such as legislation.

Plain English as a concept and a tool is now firmly embedded in officialdom, consumer affairs and many if not most areas of English life. An organisation known as “The Campaign for Plain English” is now the unofficial face of Plain English within the UK and its Chrystal Mark is the perceived seal of approval for documents which have been “plain englished”. The paper provides examples of the way English was used before the advent of Plain English. It talks about the way amusement and almost affection has grown in England for these changes and the perceived “quaint” terminology they have replaced. The notion of Plain English is well embedded in the modern English psyche but often, apart from amusement, it also provides an aggrieved member of the public with a stick to beat officialdom or other larger organisations where pomposity or inefficiency is hidden behind unintelligible words and phrases. To be accused of using “gobbledygook”, as old fashioned English is commonly described, is about as serious a sin as any that an employee or an organisation can be accused of.

The sociological changes stemming from or accompanying the development of Plain English are enormous. The author believes lawyers and linguists share the same tools in trade – words. One word misused in a contract can shift risk in

monumental proportions. One phrase used only slightly less appropriately than mainstream terminology can lead to a miscarriage of justice in a court. The paper provides examples of the sorts of “rules” – unofficial customs – that have evolved for writing Plain English.