

Introduction

Written language, as a means of communication, should be as clear and concise as possible. Natural language is too unrestricted, sometimes confusing or ambiguous. Linguistic engineering has therefore developed a new language, contained within the limits defined by a machine: the **controlled language**.

This research note explores if and how controlled languages can be effectively used for creating business documentation.

Definition

A controlled language is an artificially defined subset of a natural language (usually of English), in which terminology, syntax, and/or semantics are constrained.

Controlled languages are achieved through:

- increased terminological consistency and standardization, elimination of ambiguous and non-necessary terminology (a typical controlled language vocabulary contains approximately 1.500 core Words),
- simplified sentence structure (a typical controlled language contains a set of construction rules),
- and standardized document format and layout (a typical controlled language contains a set of stylistic rules).

Controlled languages tend to be designed with one or two goals in mind.

- Some are designed to make texts written in the controlled language easier to understand by humans. AECMA Simplified English is such a language. It was designed to make English aircraft maintenance procedures easier to understand, for example by people who are not native speakers of English. Nowadays, it is often a contractual requirement to deliver aerospace manuals in AECMA Simplified English.
- Other controlled languages are designed primarily to make it easier for machines (to process and translate) texts written in the controlled language.

Remark: Controlled languages have also been developed using languages other than English as the source language, such as German, French, Spanish, Swedish, Greek and Chinese.

Controlled languages versus sublanguages

There is some similarity between a controlled language and a sublanguage.

- A **sublanguage** is the language used in a specific domain, such as biology, artificial language, aerospace, ... For example a 'chip' in the domain of computers and electronics means a piece of semiconducting material, a 'chip' at a British pub is a piece of fried potato. Each of these domains has a vocabulary to its needs.
- The critical difference is that a **controlled language's** terms, syntax, and semantics are actively and purposefully proscribed, generally with particular objectives in mind. While the proscriptions of a **sublanguage** are unspecified, and evolve naturally.

Controlled languages versus style guides

- In some ways, a **controlled language** is analogous to a **style guide** used by editors and writers to achieve clear and consistent style and terminology for a particular publication.

Key benefits

Research on the subject indicates that controlled languages can bring several virtues:

- improved comprehensibility, ONE WORD = ONE MEANING,
- consistent style that creates a common reading level, text for cross-cultural acceptance worldwide,
- integration into SGML and XML web publishing systems,
- reduction in the exposure to product liability caused by foggy expressions,
- a global language for e-commerce and customer support
- easier post-processing and re-use of documents,
- uniformity of documents across an organization, coherent communication
- fast and coherent machine translation,
- a measurable index of document quality.

Drawback

Controlled language is a controversial issue for linguists, editors, readers, but also for firms.

Costs, marketing and sales figures are at stake

To create and maintain a controlled language for a specific domain is time-consuming:

- terminology committees have to define and review dictionaries
- linguists have to define and impose syntax rules
- writers have to be trained
- ...

Authoring problem

There has been resistance to using controlled languages because of the difficulties authors face when first using controlled language tools. Both the controlled language and the checking correction tools must be learned, and this can be frustrating or inconvenient for engineers and technical communicators.

- The need for writers to conform to explicit rules of controlled languages highly disrupts their 'automatic' sentence processing functions.
- Controlled languages make it hard for a writer to find out whether a particular sentence conforms, and how to alter it if it does not.
- It is hard to customize a controlled language to the specialized requirements of particular applications.

Lack of emotional and aesthetic qualities

- Even in the technical field, written language should not be totally deprived of emotional and aesthetic qualities.

When to use?

Controlled languages are effective in commercial or industrial applications such as the authoring of user manuals or maintenance manuals, where **large quantities of complex documents** are generated and updated on a regular basis, and where **terminology is domain specific**.

Controlled languages are being used increasingly widely, particularly in the **aerospace industry**, and also in domains where documentation is traditionally highly complex, arcane, or poorly written, such as **government, finance, and law**.

Controlled languages are particularly efficient within the domain of **Security**.

Plain English versus Controlled English

When a controlled language is out of scope, Plain English can be a valuable alternative. Plain English has most of the advantages of Controlled English without the disadvantages. Moreover, it can be implemented quickly and cheaply.

What is Plain English?

Plain English is less bound to rules than controlled English. A plain English document is a document that uses words economically and at a level the intended audience can understand and act upon the first time they read it.

Plain English takes into account design and layout as well as language. Its sentence structure is tight. Its tone is welcoming and direct. Its design is visually appealing.

Plain English should be used in any information that people rely on when making decisions.

Where does plain English come from?

Plain English was launched in the U.K. as a full-time movement in 1979. Initially it was a reaction to badly designed and written public information such as forms and contracts. Later the legal profession and finance industries became the most important targets. This because ordinary people have the right and the need to make informed decisions about money and the law.

Nowadays:

- Many states in the US require insurance contracts to be in plain English.
- The U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) has published a set of legal requirements for plain English documentation.
- In Canada and Australia, many new laws must actually be drafted in plain English.
- In Britain terms in consumer contracts must be in 'plain and intelligible language'. The regulations also say these terms must be accessible, which means using clear design and typography.
- Similar regulations apply to all countries in the European Union.

Where can I learn plain English?

- The U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) is providing an online version of their plain English handbook at <http://www.sec.gov/news/extra/handbook.htm>, a **must-read** for everybody involved in business communication.
- The UK-based Plain English campaign offers some free guides and has a series of printed books for sale (<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/introduction.html>).

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