

Easy does it: Language made simple

Contributed by J. David Goodman
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What language, invented in 1930, is still used by missionaries, airplane repairmen and the Voice of America? The answer is simple...

What do the words "genocide," "suicide," "embryo" and "visa" have in common?

This year, all four were added by the Voice of America to the language it calls Special English, which is also known as specialized English.

And what, exactly, is specialized English?

Well, let's put it this way: If you wrote the phrase "specialized English" using only the 1,500 words the language allows, you would have to call it "simple

English."

Which is, in fact, what most people call it.

Simple English is a catchall term for the various versions of English that use a reduced vocabulary and bare-bones grammar to communicate cross-culturally,

especially online.

"There are a number of simple Englishes," said Elly van Gelderen, a professor of the history of English at Arizona State University. Besides the VOA version,

there is Aerospace and Defense Simplified Technical English, used by the European aerospace industry since 1986 to streamline communications, especially in

maintenance guides for commercial airplanes.

So planes won't crash because of bad grammar.

Another, called EasyEnglish, helps some Christian missionaries take their message abroad.

So souls won't be lost to verbosity.

But the most influential version is the first: Basic English, developed in the 1930s. With some modifications, this version is still in use at the VOA,

mostly for broadcasts to the Third World.

For Shelly Gollust, chief of Special English at the VOA, removing words from the English language is a special art.

“It’s almost like Hemingway,” she said. “You can write something easy and direct, and it’s more powerful that way.”

The VOA has been broadcasting the news in Special English since 1959. Read at two-thirds average speed-at ... two- ... thirds ... average ... speed- these

news broadcasts and feature stories are cobbled together from the list of 1,500 allowable words.

That list, which is available in printed form only outside of the US, is updated just once a decade. In the recent revision, 10 words, including “tears” and

“capitalism.” were purged and 40 new terms, including “Web site” and “behavior,” were added. The new list also includes some words commonly used in reporting

today’s news, including “corruption,” “genocide” and “abortion.” Gollust called this group “very charged words.”

“For ‘corruption,’ we used to just call it ‘wrongdoing,’ ” Gollust explained. “ ‘Genocide’ was ‘mass killings.’ ‘Abortion’ we used to just call ‘an operation

to end a pregnancy.’ ”

Such limits can create challenges when preparing a newscast. “It’s very hard to write around certain things,” Gollust added.

Sam Margolis, creator of SimpleEnglishNews.com, has also found it difficult to write according to the limited vocabulary imposed by his chosen language.

“Sometimes writing in simple English is not so simple,” he said in an e-mail from Budapest, Hungary, where he runs his Web site.

Attempts to restrain the English language have often united language and writing teachers. “Omit needless words!” exclaimed William Strunk Jr. in “The

Elements of Style” in 1935. “If it is possible to cut a word out, cut it out,” advised George Orwell in “Politics and the English Language” in 1946.

One of the first attempts to simplify the language came in 1930 with the publication of Charles Kay Ogden’s “Basic English: A General Introduction With Rules

and Grammar.” Ogden created a list of 850 words, more than two-thirds of them nouns, which could be learned, he claimed, with a month of dedicated study.

(The list could be extended to 1,000 by adding some specialized vocabulary related to different disciplines, such as engineering or the sciences.)

Like proponents of such artificial languages as Esperanto and Volapuk, which were created in Europe in the late 19th century, Ogden saw his mission in grand

international terms. He wanted to create a universal language.

But there were problems. For one, the limited vocabulary of Basic English may have actually made it harder for a non-native speaker to understand, because

the allowable words were more idiomatic and less straightforward.

“Take the word ‘get,’ ” said Professor van Gelderen, a hint of Dutch in her accent. “It can have many meanings. For a native speaker, it looks easy. But for

a non-native, it’s not so easy at all.”

“Poppycock!” said Margolis, employing a word that would not be found on the vocabulary list of any version of simple English. “We do not limit ourselves to

1,500 words. Simple English News introduces new words, phrases and sentence structures to our readers everyday,” he wrote in an e-mail.

Margolis, who has worked as both an English-language instructor and a freelance reporter, believes his work provides a service for those who want to learn

his native language. “There is no way we could be deemed counterproductive,” he said.

Orwell might have agreed. In his 1946 essay, he singled out a passage that criticized Basic English and declared that it served as an example of bad writing.

“Above all,” read the offending passage by Sir Lancelot Hogben, “we cannot play ducks and drakes with a native battery of idioms which prescribes egregious

collocations of vocables as the Basic put up with for tolerate, or put at a loss for bewilder.”

Translated into simple English, this sentence might read, “Over all, we shouldn’t waste our time translating normal words into ugly phrases, as Basic English

does. For example, Basic uses ‘put up with’ to mean ‘tolerate,’ and ‘put at a loss’ to mean ‘bewilder.’ ”

Simple English seems to have found a natural, if limited, home online, where communication across cultures is common.

In October, for instance, the number of

Wikipedia pages written in simple English passed 20,000, narrowly edging out the little-spoken language of Luxembourgish.

But by the Wikipedia-page measure, simple English still lags far behind two other international languages: Esperanto, which has 90,000 pages, and Volapuk, a

language that counts only a handful of speakers but that has more than 110,000 pages.

For the language's supporters, however, there is hope. There are many more pages in simple English than there are in Klingon.

What made the VOA's new Special English word book in 2007?

abuse

advertise

attention

available

behavior

career

class

collapse

contact

corruption

detain

disaster

discrimination

donate

double

embryo

extraordinary

fan

favorite

generation

genocide

ignore

Internet

justice

militia

neighbor

partner

persuade

predict

promise

rape

register

respect

restaurant

rural

suicide

vacation

vaccine

video

visa

volunteer

Web site

whether

witness

And what was cut:

bell

blanket

capitalism

grandmother

grandfather

grandson

granddaughter

mercy

pan

tears

vicious

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