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Agent Does Guide to EU-Speak

By Naftali Bendavid

An agent has precised the modalities of actual English usage that can be used with reasonability by European Union actors assisting at meetings.

Indeed, the note can be used by anyone including informatics workers and those engaged in planification. We at Real Time Brussels hope the note's suggestions are retained, and that they will not have to go through a comitology.

If those sentences do not appear to be in any recognizable language, there's a reason for that. They are examples of what might be called EU-speak, according to a [33-page document](#) assembled last year by Jeremy Gardner, a senior translator at the European Court of Auditors. The memo appears to reflect years of pent-up frustration at the poor use of English in EU documents.

In some cases, EU officials simply use English words incorrectly or awkwardly. In other instances, they words seem entirely made up, and appear nowhere outside the orbit of the EU.

Mr. Gardner argues that the EU needs to use recognizable English if it is to communicate effectively. "Over the years, the European institutions have developed a vocabulary that differs from that of any recognised form of English," the document says. "It includes words that do not exist or are relatively unknown to native English speakers outside the EU institutions."

Some of this is to be expected in an organization whose members speak numerous languages, and a number of the mistakes come from attempts to translate, say, a French term ("axis," for example) a little too directly into English.

The document is likely to inspire both sympathy and the sense that it resembles the complaints of an overly picky English teacher. Some of the recommended alternative words—like "secondment"—seem hardly an improvement on the original error ("detachment").

Here are some highlights from among the 89 words cited by Mr. Gardner:

ACTOR. "In EU usage, 'actors' are often 'the people and/or organisations involved in doing something'. In standard English, however, an actor is generally someone who performs on stage or screen." One recommended alternative is "player." Of course, that can also mean a stage performer, as the memo notes.

AGENT. In ordinary English, an agent could be a Mossad operative, a travel agent, or someone who represents, say, Beyonce. "Its use to mean 'someone who is employed by the EU in any capacity' is

incorrect and, incidentally, is not even sanctioned by the Staff Regulations or the Conditions of Employment of Other Servants.” That certainly settles it.

ANGLO-SAXON. In the wider world, Anglo-Saxon can mean a 5th Century tribe, an American WASP, or a long-defunct language. But in the EU it means English-speaking. “This term is particularly inapplicable (and, I gather, irritating for those concerned) when used to describe the Irish, Scots and Welsh, who partly base their national identities on not being Anglo-Saxons, and verges on the ridiculous when used to include West Indians.”

COMITOLOGY. This is used in EU documents to mean “committee procedure,” but, as Mr. Gardner points out, “Not only does the word not exist outside the EU institutions, but it is formed from a misspelt stem (committee has two ‘m’s and two ‘t’s) and a suffix that means something quite different (-ology/-logy means ‘the science of’ or ‘the study of’). It is therefore highly unlikely that an outsider would be able to deduce its meaning, even in context.”

FICHE. “Fiche is a useful word, but it is French.”

MODALITY: This is a word “which people (a) swear is correct and (b) say they have to use because the [European] Commission does so.” Unfortunately, it is not English. Mr. Gardner points out that it is used in more than 2,000 cases in [EUR-Lex](#), the website that provides official EU legal texts, “to mean ‘procedure’, but this does not make it mean procedure.” In fact, “modalities” is one of our favorite examples of EU speak—particularly [when they are technical and have been clarified](#).

Mr. Gardner said in an email that he is simply trying to make EU texts more readable. “I fear that some people mistake me for one of those “eats, shoots and leaves” type pedants, but this is not my intention here,” Mr. Gardner said, referring to a popular book on grammar. “I am concerned with trying to help people keep to a model of English that is comprehensible for our potential readership.”

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