

Introduction

The purpose of the present *Handbook of Easy Languages in Europe* is to shed light on Easy Language both as a language form with specific features and as a phenomenon used to fulfil certain functions in society. Until recently, the field of Easy Language has consisted of national initiatives but has lacked literature providing a more general overview of the concept. Until very recent years, the field has had no established research tradition. This volume is the first attempt to provide an overview of Easy Language in Europe. The various contributors provide detailed descriptions of Easy Language in their own European countries. The book starts with an introduction to Easy Language, briefly discussing some of its general conditions, then highlighting some important aspects specifically related to research and terminology.

1 The Easy Language concept

The expression *Easy Language* is more of an umbrella term for different language varieties than the name for one uniform concept. It refers to modified forms of standard languages, which aim to facilitate reading and language comprehension, resulting in, for example, *Easy Slovenian*, *Easy Spanish*, *Easy French*, or *Easy Latvian*. Easy Languages have been adapted in terms of content, vocabulary and structure to make them more readable and comprehensible. They are aimed at people who find it difficult to understand standard language. Although the term *Easy Language* usually refers to various kinds of texts, spoken interactions can also be based on its principles. The term *easy to read and understand*¹ is used by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with

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1 This handbook favours the term Easy Language, see more in the section on terminology.

Disabilities (CRPD) in conjunction with inclusion and accessibility, and has equivalents in many European countries and languages (e.g., *Leichte Sprache* Germ., *selkokieli* Finn., *lättläst* Swe., *Leitura Fácil* Pt.). Guidelines for international Easy Language (or *easy-to-read*) practices are provided by Inclusion Europe (IE 2009) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA 1997, 2010). Easy Language is a form of accommodated speech or text: people being able (and willing) to adapt their speech to the reception capacity of the recipient. At the time of writing, that is, 2021, a commonly agreed, official definition of Easy Language has yet to be established.

2 Easy Language in European society

Modern societies are completely based on linguistic constructions. Everything is built by language: legislation, values, norms, business, religion, education, science, politics, etc. Unlike in the early twilight of European history, the current view is that all people, despite their limitations, have an equal right to information, inclusion, and social participation. According to the latest PIAAC results, between 4.9% and 27.7% of adults across the countries involved in the study have only the lowest levels of literacy proficiency (OECD Skills Outlook 2013: 23). Based on these results, we can reason that a great number of people need Easy Language in their everyday lives, for example, when interacting with authorities.

Easy Language removes obstacles in the same way as a wheelchair ramp built next to stairs. In many countries, Easy Language has been a very practical, down-to-earth project: when certain people have not been able to understand certain information, others have modified and simplified it. This kind of humane activity in the interaction between people arises from the basis of general ethical standards and values. The goal of Easy Language is to enable participation and to prevent exclusion (Maaß & Rink 2019).

Easy Language is closely tied to *accessible communication* (UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, CRPD, 2006; The EU Accessibility Directive 2016/2102; Perego 2020). The ratification of the CRPD has been of great importance for the development of Easy Language in many countries.

When communication is accessible, it is easy to find and perceive, and it is related to the previous knowledge of the recipients, which may have various special communication needs linked to, for example, sensory impairment, low education, illness or migration (Maafß 2019). Easy Language is one tool among others, such as braille, sign language or audiodescription: it lowers the barriers to and makes communication accessible.

The first signs of actual explicit usage of Easy Language vary. In Sweden, for example, the first documented signs of *lättläst* date back to the 1960s. Many Easy Language activities were launched exceptionally early. Finland and Norway followed slightly later, and the Nordic countries soon co-operated in the development of *easy-to-read* newspapers. The Nordic countries shared relatively flexible perceptions of the principles and purpose of Easy Language, and the concept itself was practised by organizations and activists.

The CRPD (2006) has had a great influence on Easy Language-related measures in many countries. The concept of *Leichte Sprache*, which began in Germany in the early 2010s, was more systematic and structured than Easy Language in the Nordic countries. The concept of *Leitura Fácil* was presented to Portuguese stakeholders in 2009, and in 2010, the easy-to-read version of the CRPD had an impact on the political and decision-making level, acting as a trigger to the need for accessible information. The Easy Italian version of the CRPD traces back to 2011. One of the most important milestones for Easy Language was the first Easy Read standard, addressing the creation, adaptation and validation of Easy Read documents, launched in Spain in April 2018 (UNE 2018).

The Act on the Provision of Digital Services (2019) has forced all the Member States of the EU to examine the accessibility of online services run by public providers. Although the text of the Act does not explicitly mention accessibility of language, let alone Easy Language, linguistic accessibility is included in the spirit of the law: digital accessibility is important, but it does not really help if difficult language remains a barrier.

Although various forms of international co-operation related to Easy Language have been in place for decades (e.g., the Easy-to-Read network, founded in Barcelona 2006 and the Inclusion Europe Pathways projects), European-wide co-operation has only really intensified in recent years. This co-operation has

been accelerated by the growth of Easy Language research in particular. Open research events in recent years (e.g., EASIT² events, conferences organized by Hildesheim and Mainz researchers, Klaara conferences) have rapidly brought together not only researchers from different countries but also other actors. A recent example of international co-operation is the International Easy Language Day, which was celebrated for the first time on May 28th 2020. This handbook is also one result of vigorous European co-operation.

3 Who needs Easy Language?

The practices in European countries may differ in terms of whom Easy Language is aimed towards, i.e., who is considered the target audience of Easy Language. As a rule, people with clear cognitive impairments (e.g., developmental disabilities, memory disorders) are believed to benefit from Easy Language. In many countries, people with various learning disabilities, neurocognitive disorders (e.g., ADHD, autism spectrum disorders) or functional illiteracy are also included. Opinions as to whether second language speakers benefit from Easy Language vary slightly. In some countries, immigrants are considered a major target group of Easy Language, while in other countries, immigrants are expected, by default, to learn the common standard language with no 'Easy Language step'. Children with normal language learning abilities are excluded from Easy Language target groups as a rule, but Easy Language material may be recommended on some occasions, such as in custody proceeding documents, medical records and treatment instructions. In some countries such as Austria, situational variation (fatigue, illness, accidents) is considered to create a need for Easy Language among adults with normal language skills.

In some cases, Easy Language has also supplanted the standard language as a language format for the general public. When the Satakunta Hospital District in Finland introduced Easy Language patient instructions, no one wanted to use the standard language patient instructions anymore. One answer to the

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2 Easy Access for Social Inclusion Training (EASIT) is an EU-funded research project, led by Anna Matamala.

question of who the Easy Language target groups are is: everyone. Each individual should have the right to choose whether they want information in Easy Language or in standard language. It is important to ensure that Easy Language is a publicly available, neutral and non-stigmatized option for all public communication in society. In the spirit of the CRPD, the target groups of Easy Language have, and should have, an important role in developing Easy Language.

4 Easy Language research needs international collaboration

Easy Language is an example of a real-life phenomenon that has not yet been tamed by research methods. As in many places, it has been born on the grass-roots level, the idea of making complex language simpler has resulted in countless variations. Applied to both written texts and oral speech, for people with various backgrounds and often by practitioners other than linguists, outcomes labelled Easy Language or something similar may consist of a great variety of linguistic elements. In most countries, systematic research on Easy Language is only in its early stages, trying to determine what is already being done, and how it could possibly be done better.

Even though many countries provide guidelines for easy writing and Plain Language, until the mid-2010s, only a few studies provided support for these guidelines (Wengelin 2015). The few studies in the field compare reading comprehension of texts in standard language and texts in Easy Language, particularly on websites (Karreman et al. 2007; Fajardo et al. 2014; Schmutz et al. 2019). Wengelin (2015) notes that many of the research results that form the basis for writing guidelines are outdated. Thus, there is an apparent lack of research on Easy Language and Plain Language that takes a linguistic point of departure. A similar situation can be seen in related fields: in their overview of accessible information for individuals with intellectual disabilities, Chinn & Homeyard (2016) noted that the articles they reviewed demonstrated a limited awareness of each other. Even studies that dealt with related issues contained no references to each other, which made it difficult for the researchers to comprehend how later work was based on earlier work.

Very recent years have witnessed an increasing body of research, particularly in the German-speaking area of Central Europe (cf. Bredel & Maaß 2016; Bock; Fix & Lange 2017; Maaß & Rink 2019; Bock 2019; Parpan-Blaser et al. 2018; Parpan-Blaser et al. 2019). The most prominent cases in the field of Easy Language research in the late 2010s include the research and educational programmes at the *Forschungsstelle Leichte Sprache* (led by Christiane Maaß, University of Hildesheim, Germany), the *Simply complex – Easy Language* project (led by Silvia Hansen-Schirra, Arne Nagels and Walter Bisang, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany), the *Leichte Sprache im Arbeitsleben – LeiSA* project (led by Bettina Bock, University of Leipzig, Germany), and *Einfach leicht verständlich* (led by Anne Parpan-Blaser and Gabriela Antener, University of Applied Sciences and Arts North-western Switzerland). Of special importance is the EU-funded *EASIT* project (Easy Access for Social Inclusion Training), which involves five countries (Germany, Italy, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden) and is led by Anna Matamala (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Catalonia). The first international Klaara conference on research on Easy Language was held in Helsinki in the autumn of 2019, and the second conference was scheduled for August 2020, in Olten, Switzerland, but has been postponed to 2021 due to the coronavirus pandemic. Encouraging news constantly comes from different countries regarding new courses, PhD grants, special issues in journals, research projects, and events related to Easy Language at universities and universities of applied sciences.

International collaboration is needed, especially in research. As pointed out by, for example, Nietzio et al. (2014: 347–348), Easy Language guidelines include both language-independent rules, such as ‘avoid all abbreviations’ and ‘always start a new sentence on a new line’, and language-specific rules, which must be specifically modified for each language. For example, in Finnish or Hungarian, morphological features need to be stressed to a greater extent than in many other European languages, because they are agglutinative languages, using inflectional suffixes to indicate grammatical functions. However, even though specific languages may differ as research objects, we need common methods and theoretical views: as the research tradition is only just taking shape, discussion is desperately needed in this area, and researchers must engage in close collaboration to move research in this field forward. In order

to establish a new research tradition, we also need tools such as publication channels, conference series, joint EU research projects and PhD training. We hope that recent activities such as the Easy-Plain-Accessible book series (edited by Christiane Maaß and Silvia Hansen-Schirra, Frank & Timme) and the Klaara conference series (changing hosting organizations) will continue and help the field emerge.

Research related to Easy Language is needed not only in linguistics but in many other disciplines. Easy Language is clearly a multidisciplinary research subject, and is interesting for researchers of, for example, health sciences, sociology, language technology, economics, and service design. Easy Language relates to many acute research themes such as language and well-being, health information and health literacy. How are Easy Language texts used by authorities? What kinds of aspects are related to the actual use of Easy Language texts in everyday literacy? Could so-called *reading representatives*, who help people read easy-to-read materials provide opportunities for everyone to be able enjoy literature and live as independent a life as possible? How much do problems caused by difficult language cost society each year? What kinds of attitudes are associated with Easy Language? Does Easy Language stigmatize target groups? Could machine translation help simplify texts?

5 Terminological issues

The grassroots activities and practical usage have naturally led to a great variety of terminology in both local languages and translations into English and other languages, as discussed by, for example, Christiane Maaß (2020: 50–56) and Elisa Perego (2020: 3–32). Given that Easy Language is also a multidisciplinary subject, it is inevitable that terminological variation occurs in research in national and international contexts. Even the phenomenon itself has had several terminological candidates: *Easy Language*, *easy-to-read language*, *easy-to-understand language*, *easy read*, *easy-read*, *clear language*, *simplified language* or *simple language*. Although each potential term may have great reasoning behind it, the most important issue is that actors in different countries and various fields can find each other and are aware of what has been

done. The faster the terminology is harmonized or at least explicated, the faster the research-based knowledge can spread across disciplinary and linguistic boundaries and improve Easy Language practices. Positive signs are in the air, as Easy Language-related terminology is to be included in The Dictionary of Accessible Communication (Hansen-Schirra et al. forthcoming).

Because the notion of *Easy Language* is related to and often mistaken for another frequently used concept – *Plain Language* – we must provide a brief overview of how these phenomena differ. The notion of *Plain Language* refers to communication that is designed to ensure the audience understands the message as quickly and as easily as possible (Cutts 1995). The modern Plain Language movement started in the 1970s and presented guidelines for making public documents easier to understand (Mazur 2000: 205). The Plain Language movement is closely attached to public writing, particularly to facilitating the understanding of legal writing. Today, Plain Language is a global activity, involving organizations, officials, conferences and practitioners in tens of countries (PLAIN 2021). Whereas *Plain Language* is related to institutional documents, and aims to simplify legal language for non-professionals, the notion of *Easy Language* refers to making various texts or speech accessible to people who have difficulties reading and understanding standard language. As a language form, *Easy Language* is usually more simplified than *Plain Language*. To date, very few research-based comparisons have been made of the Plain Language and Easy Language forms (see Gutermuth 2020), but in general, the easy version includes additional writing guidelines, such as the rule that a new sentence should always start on a new line (Nietzio et al. 2014: 347).

	Standard language	Plain Language	Easy Language
Purpose	Provides a unified means for communication and an institutionalized norm which can be used in e.g., official documents or mass media; a prestige variety of language	Aims for wording, structure, and design so clear that the intended audience can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information	Aims for maximal comprehension of texts and equality of interaction
Target audience	Everyone, sometimes 'from experts to experts'	Everyone	People with various linguistic limitations (e.g., neuro-biological reasons, immigrant background, low literacy)
Level of complexity	Naturally complex, sometimes very complex	Seeks simple words, structures, and constructions, avoids jargon	Deliberately and often heavily simplified at all levels: content, grammar, lexicon
Usage area	Public communication, jargons, written text and oral speech	Legal or administrative texts, official documents	All purposes: informative texts, fiction and non-fiction literature, news texts, also oral communication
Legal status	Primary position as an official language, often prescribed by law	In many countries, laws mandate that public agencies use Plain Language to increase access to services	No legal status in most countries, Germany an exception

	Standard language	Plain Language	Easy Language
Linguistic status	It is questionable whether standard language can be spoken/written as a native tongue	Not spoken/written as a native tongue	Not spoken/written as a native tongue
Producers	Whole population	Mainly authorities, companies, organizations	The more skilled party in any asymmetric communication situation

Table 1: Comparison of approximate characteristics of codified standard language (Crystal 2011), Plain Language (PLAIN 2021) and Easy Language. Plain Language targets as large an audience as possible through clarity and avoiding overly technical language. Easy Language shares these aspects but takes its point of departure from the individual and aims to meet the various special needs of individual users. As Easy Language practices and the definitions of the concepts may vary from one country to another, this comparison should be taken as indicative only.

Terminology is often tied to methodological or theoretical approaches, or even philosophical or ideological background factors, and terms may vary from one field of research to another. This is a common issue in many fields, and has to be taken seriously, especially with multidisciplinary topics such as Easy Language. In addition to the key term *Easy Language* itself, a few other important terms also need to be agreed upon. In some cases, the definition is more or less commonly agreed on, but the term itself is unstable: What should we call the process of making standard language Easy Language – *modifying*, (*intralanguage*) *translating*, or *adapting*? Do we set *recommendations*, *instructions*, *guidelines*, *rules* or *standards* for Easy Language? Who is Easy Language for – *target groups*, *target audiences*, *user groups*, *end users*, *recipients*, or *beneficiaries*? Naming the specific groups of people is even more challenging: is Easy Language for *people with cognitive disabilities*, *special linguistic needs*, *cognitive impairments*, or *language disorders*? Is it targeted towards *people with immigrant backgrounds* or *second language learners*? Sometimes it is the translation between two or more languages that highlights the terminological issue: some languages may have traditional terminology that does not translate well into other languages. Some terminological questions grow far beyond the scope of Easy Language

yet play an essential role in how we handle and present it (e.g., *autism spectrum disorders vs autism spectrum condition*).

In this phase, we are creating the base for large-scale research on Easy Language. This is also the time for identifying terminological questions and directing the terminological discussion, even though experience has shown that reaching a consensus might be challenging. Actors in the field have extensive experience of certain terms, and researchers usually want to decide for themselves what terms to use. Accepting diversity is, on the other hand, a reasonable strategy, because it is not always possible to know in advance what term would be the best to use³.

6 The vision and organization of this volume

This handbook describes the principles and practices of Easy Language in Europe in 2020 and before. Each chapter follows essentially the same structure. The chapters take their point of departure from the history of Easy Language in the particular country. The historical background is followed by an overview of the current situation of Easy Language, dealing with topics such as terminological definitions, legal status, and stakeholders. Target groups, guidelines, and practical outcomes are discussed under their own headings. Education and research are presented together, and each chapter contains a final section in which the authors reflect on the future perspectives related to Easy Language in their country. The Appendices of each chapter present sample texts illustrating the Easy Language guidelines of the different countries. Some topics, such as terminology or target groups, are discussed on a general level here in the introduction and country-wise in the chapters.

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3 In Finland, researchers from various fields develop terminology in collaboration with the Helsinki Term Bank for the Arts and Sciences (HTB 2021). HTB is a multidisciplinary project that aims to gather a permanent terminological database for various fields of research, using an open collaborative website. The project is affiliated with the Finnish Language Resource Consortium FIN-CLARIN, and through this affiliation, has a connection with the European infrastructure ESFRI. Although HTB is mainly intended for the Finnish research community, it welcomes researchers from all countries and language areas, providing a platform for permanent terminology work. Finnish linguists have already started working with Easy Language terminology in HTB, and the field is open to terms and terminological ponderings from other languages.

The chapters of the book vary in length and, to some extent, in content emphasis. The authors of the book chapters have highlighted different themes. For example, although the connections between Easy Language and Plain Language emerge strongly in some countries, the limited presentation of Plain Language in some other chapters does not necessarily mean that the phenomenon itself does not have a strong position in that country. Although the structure of the chapters is roughly the same, the different voices of the authors can be heard in the texts, characterizing and enriching the regional originalities and histories of each country. The chapters of this book present some opposing views and practices, hopefully leading to new research settings. The reader may also notice some imbalance in how research on Easy Language is presented and discussed – this is not necessarily a matter of imbalanced articles, but of the different stages of research in the different countries. As editors, we have strived to offer the most consistent reading experience possible, while respecting and valuing the expertise and views of the authors.

This handbook also enables comparison among different countries. As the editors of this book, we hope that this comparison will encourage rather than discourage. Although Easy Languages have taken many great steps in countries all over Europe, no country can declare that the process is complete. In some countries, Easy Language really is in its initial stages. However, all countries presented in this volume have experiences to share with others. This *Handbook of Easy Languages in Europe* is the first attempt to study the position of easy and accessible language in Europe, and despite the best efforts to reach actors and researchers in all the European countries, unfortunately, this first volume does not present them all. Hopefully, when it is time for the second volume, *Handbook of Easy Languages in Europe 2030*, this will be possible.

7 Future perspectives: Easy Language all over the world

Texts change the world. This handbook paints a picture of today's Europe from a particular perspective. Seeing leads to thoughts and actions. This handbook is intended to be a text that will cause changes not only in Europe but everywhere. Easy Language can bring the luxury of understanding to everyone but is

essential for those for whom standard language is not an option. The majority of the work being done on Easy Languages in Europe will be applicable to and beneficial for a great number of countries with even larger populations and special linguistic needs. Hopefully, awareness of the actions of different countries will lead to multifaceted co-operation. It is quite certain that we in Europe can learn a great deal from what has been done for accessible communication in the world's multilingual communities.

In this book, we try to give a neutral description of what has happened so far, but our perspective may change in the future. Most importantly, things are moving. We can't always go fast; we can't always go directly forward. Societies and situations are different, and a variety of forces and coincidences affect the course of Easy Language. We need patience and perseverance, but also creativity and courage. 'I don't have goals, I have a direction', said Professor Anna Matamala, head of the EASIT project, in autumn 2019. This is a good motto for us all. Our concrete Easy Language goals may change as situations, funding and opportunities change. But our direction remains clear: little by little, we are building a world in which language is easy and communication is accessible.

Bionotes

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