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SIMPLE WRITTEN LANGUAGE*

by

Luis Ramiro Beltran
Audiovisual Specialist USOM/BOLIVIA

The language of the Extension Worker is an audiovisual language. But, in many situations, you will be compelled to use another language that is not of sight or hearing: the written language. Hence the following limitations: only those who can read can receive the message. Therefore this will cause you to differentiate between those who read and those who do not, and also to differentiate the first class in accordance with their level of instruction. The less instruction your audience has the more simple your written words will be. A low grade of instruction and a complicated written language automatically weakens the message. The efficiency of the transmitting instrument is lowered. You may assume, without fear of contradiction, that the average level of rural area groups is low. Hence you yourself can justify the absolute need of turning to your public in the simplest written language.

Otherwise be sure your message will be weak and your public will not receive it, or will get it in a deficient manner, and you will thus not attain your objective. Naturally, in an urban community or in a specialized group the situation will be different. The greater the education of your public the less need to simplify your language. However, no matter who your public is, the simpler your language the more effective the message. Writing to the Indian, write the simplest. Writing to city newspaper readers, technicians, specialists, intellectuals, professors or university students, there will be less need to simplify your language, but from first to last your communication will be better received if simply written.

How to Simplify the Language.

The recipe, in truth, is simplicity: the concept must be the simplest possible and the manner of expressing it must also be simple. Both concept and form, must be, furthermore, brief. Simplicity, brevity. How can you give these characteristics to the language?

To write simply do the following:

1. Write your message twice. The first time, without trying to simply it, as you ordinarily would write. That is because nobody can

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write with ease directly in simplified language. Each one writes in accordance with his own cultural level. Then, analyze the text and this time try to put yourself in the place and level of instruction of those who will read it. Imagine you are the farmer. Then, you will eliminate many words, substitute others, simplify the first version. Then, write the second version. Compare the vocabulary of each and you will see quickly which of the two will present less difficulties of reading and comprehension.

2. Keep in mind the vocabulary your public uses in ordinary conversations of daily life. Try to find those words which the people use most frequently, that is to say, words which are familiar to them and which they understand and use normally. In writing, try to use these words instead of those you would use ordinarily to express the same ideas. If possible, try to make in your district a list of words in Spanish which the farmers use most frequently.

3. Do not include material unknown to your public. You cannot explain or recommend the use of tractors to an audience which hypothetically has no understanding of agricultural machinery; people who work only with elementary manual tools. They have never seen a tractor. They cannot even imagine what it is like. Regardless of your words, they lack the basic knowledge to understand what you are referring to or even to form a mental picture of a concept which is to them completely abstract, vague and unknown.

4. Do not use signs except where indispensable. Paragraphs in parenthesis, quotations or dashes tend to confuse the elementary grade reader. The same with exclamation points and question marks.

5. Do not use literary figures of speech or similar abstract terms. Use concepts in the simplest, clear and concrete terms. On referring to the llama do not give his scientific or zoological name nor call it the "sober companion of the Indian." Call bread, bread. You are neither a poet nor a professor. You are a practical teacher; an extensionist, an educator at the service of the community.

6. Limit scientific terms and technical words to a minimum, unless (1) absolutely indispensable to introduce a new word or because there is no equivalent. (2) Instead of saying insecticides, say products to kill insects. If you have to use a new word, by all means give the explanation in simple language. Give the farmer's word rather than the scientific one. For example, don't say, "hexachloride of benzene." Say simply "Lexone." In the same way, try to cut out initial letters and abbreviations.

7. Do not use academic and artificial phraseology. Speak and write in a way to be understood. Instead of saying "consequently," say "therefore." Instead of saying "satisfactorily," say "very well." Instead of "dubious circumstances," say "bad situation." Nothing is gained by using high sounding terms or unusual words, except to confuse the reader.

8. Use underlining, bold type and capital letters to emphasize important words as well as to clarify the complicated ones.

9. Put your text to the proof. Let others read it, preferably those on the same level as your audience. Analyze what these people get easily and what they get only with difficulty.

10. Remember you are not writing for yourself. It is not sufficient if your friends and colleagues understand. It must be written to satisfy the audience you wish to reach, not to satisfy your ego and evoke praise from others on the same cultural level as yourself.

To Write Briefly, do the following:

1. Revise your initial draft. Count the number of sentences. Count the number of average words to a sentence. Abbreviations and numbers are counted as words. The fewer words, the briefer will be your sentence. Shorter sentences mean a shorter text. The ideal for extension work is 15 words to a sentence, as an average.

2. Eliminate all unnecessary words, keeping only those that are strictly of use. Get rid of adjectives.

3. Try not to write long paragraphs, divided artificially by commas and semi colons. The quicker the final period, the better.

4. Break up long paragraphs into component parts. One idea to a paragraph. Don't write: "Another way consists of throwing hot water on the ground to be used in transplanting, such amounts of water to be in proportion to the ground being treated and in which at times the insecticide 'Aldrin' can be used to prevent destruction by insects." Rather, write: "You can also throw hot water on the ground used in transplanting. The amount of water must be in proportion to the ground being treated. Sometimes, you may mix the product called 'Aldrin' to fight plagues of insects." See the difference?

Comparative Example.

1st. Version.

The plagues which infest the production of potatoes destroying one third of the yearly crop along the country's plateau are diverse. Among said plagues we can mention principally two of them: the white worm and the ticona worm which introduces itself into the interior of the potato (worming its way into the fruit from the surface to the core) corrupting it and having it enter rapidly into a pernicious process of putrefaction which represents -- as it is logical to assume -- serious loses in the economic yield of the crop.

Undoubtedly it becomes indispensable to exterminate with radical procedures these minute and voracious enemies of prosperity in proportion

as the nutritive potato mentioned constitutes one of the fundamental elements in the diet of the Bolivian consumer; eliminating said worms the farmer will find himself apt to obtain a satisfactory production and, consequently, will be able to dispose of a greater quantity of food, and, on expending his product, a greater sum of money for the benefit of his personal economy.

Through the mediation of a series of perspicacious experimental works, the scientists of the Division of Investigation of the SAI have been able to positively verify that one of the most efficacious insecticides to neutralize the white worm is the Hexachloride of Benzene, gamma isome 10% whose obtention is assured in any branch of the SAI, an insecticide also known by the term Lexone and other similar names.

Analyze this first version. '1 the underlined words are

technical terms

scientific formulas

academic turns of phraseology

artificial and obscure expressions

concepts having no previous references

unnecessary words

superfluous adjectives

Note the excessively long sentences, overloading of ideas in one sentence, symbols, numbers, abstractions, idiomatic turns, dashes and punctuation marks. True, you can read this, with your education, but will rural people understand it?

2nd Version.

The white and ticona worms are the worst enemies of the potato. They eat and destroy it.

They spoil a third of the yearly crops grown in the plateau area. Thus the farmer earns less.

The potato is one of the chief foods in Bolivia. We all eat many potatoes. Thus we must protect the crops.

You must get rid of these worms that do so much damage. They must all be killed. Thus you will have more potatoes. Or, more food. When you sell them, you will have more money.

The best way to kill the white worm is the insecticides. They are special products to kill insects and worms.

The S.A.I.* has found that one of the best insecticides for the white worm is the one called Lexone. Lexone is a powder. The Extension Agent will help you get it. Ask him to help you.

*(Joint Bolivia-U.S. Agricultural Service)

The difference between the first and the second version of the same subject is clear. The farmer will surely understand the simplified version not the first one. The second version has received the benefit of the rules of simplification mentioned above.

Applications of the Simplified Language.

Now you know the importance and above all the utility of the simplified language in Extension work. Just the same it is likely that you will wonder whether this teaching is really beneficial and practical.

True, you will not have too many occasions of putting this knowledge into practice, at least with respect to written language. Specialists prepare publications and bulletins which, revised by the Department of Technical Information, will be given to you for distribution. But simplification of the language is something that can be used in many different ways. For example:

When you have to prepare a talk, accompanied by charts.

When you prepare some information for the newspapers.

When you have to prepare a radio program.

When you prepare a circular letter in your district.

In preparing placards for an exhibition or a fair,
write for a publication or bulletin.

In criticizing and giving suggestions on material to
increase the effectiveness and clarity of the same.

In preparing reports.