Canada Research Chair
in Translation, Technologies,
and Society

UNIVERSITÉ LAVAL

Terminology, translation, and plain language

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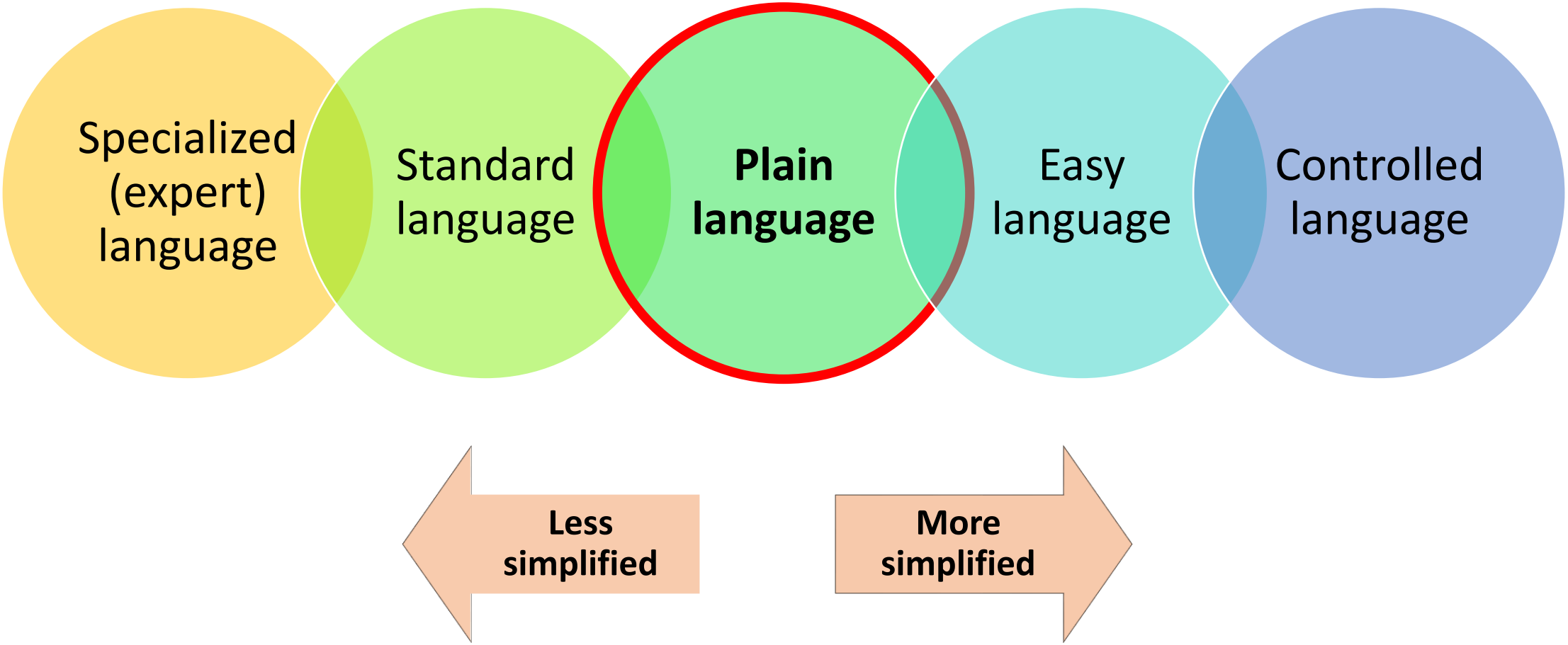
Continuum of specialization/simplification



Plain language

- *Not* a new idea (Chaucer!)… but one that is gaining traction!
  - Concept is language neutral
  - *Institutet för språk och folkminnen* (Institute for language and folklore) promotes plain Swedish (*Klarspråk*)
- EU's `Fight the FOG' and Clear Writing campaigns (1998-)
- UN's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006)
- US Plain Writing Act (2010)
- Recent ISO standards (from TC 37)
  - ISO 24495-1:2023 Plain language – Part 1: *Governing principles and guidelines*
  - ISO 24495-2:2025 Plain language – Part 2: *Legal communication*

Image: www.iso.org

What is *plain language*? (clear communication, clear writing)

"A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so **clear** that the intended audience can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information."

(IPLF 2014)

International PLAIN LANGUAGE federation

https://iplfederation.org

Plain language and (*intra*lingual) translation

- Converting a text from expert or standard language to plain language is often described as *plain language translation* and its practitioners as *plain language translators*

Characteristic	***Skopos* theory (translation)**	**Plain language writing**
Purpose-driven	Emphasizes that the translation process is guided by the purpose (*skopos*) of the translated text	Considers what the readers need or want to find out by reading the document
Target audience-oriented	Allows for flexibility so that translators can adapt the translation to best serve its purpose and the needs of the target audience	Takes into account the profile of the reader(s) (e.g. their level of education, their subject matter knowledge)
Brief-dependent	Expects that translators make decisions based on the translation brief (i.e., instructions from the client that outline purpose, intended use, target audience, and other relevant factors)	Accounts for the context in which the document will be used

Some misperceptions…

- Plain language isn't precise enough and changes the meaning of a document
- Plain language can only be applied to general knowledge and everyday text types
- Plain language is "baby language" that talks down to people and makes writers sound unintelligent

and some truths

- Even specialized concepts can be explained plainly
- Some experts work in their less dominant language or in an interdisciplinary field
- Experts don't want to waste time puzzling out the message
  - Mistakes are made when things aren't clear!

Motivations for using plain language

- Social justice
  - Equal opportunity regardless of circumstances
  - E.g. less educated, new context, less-than-ideal situations (e.g. time pressure, stress, fatigue, illness, distractions)
- Managing risk
  - Improved safety
  - Saves time and money
  - Builds trust
- Extending reach
  - Second-language speakers
  - Increased translatability (including via MT)
- Increasingly, plain language is being legislated

Image: pixabay.com

Where and when is plain language useful?

- When experts want or need to communicate with non-experts
  - Government communication
  - Legal communication
  - Health communication
  - Science (research) communication
  - Banking, insurance, telecoms …

BUT research shows that experts also appreciate many elements of plain language in expert-to-expert communication

When PL is *not* used:

- Fewer citations in science publications
- More misinterpretations of legal texts

Key principles of plain language

- Relevance
  - Content should meet the needs of the intended audience
    - Translators will recognize concepts such as *skopos*, understanding target audience, translation brief
- Findability
  - Document users should be able to find information
    - Document design
- Understandability
  - Expressing the content in such a way that it can be easily read AND **understood** by document users
- Usability
  - Document users should be able to act on or make decisions based on the information
  - Can only truly be validated through user testing

Principles are language *neutral*

Techniques for applying principles may be language *dependent*

Plain language techniques

- No universal solutions!
  - There is no exhaustive list, and not all techniques are relevant for every text
  - **REMEMBER**: plain language is about addressing the needs of the intended audience!!!
- Common recommendations (for English)
  - Short(er) sentences
  - Active voice
  - Visual aids
  - Avoid noun stacking
  - Explain specialized terms (and abbreviations)
  - Univocity and consistency

Image: pixabay.com

What happens when scientists try to implement plain language?

- Small case study
  - Comparing scientific abstracts and plain language summaries produced by scientists
- Canadian Science Publishing
  - 22 journals across science/engineering
  - Scientific abstracts are required
  - Plain language summaries are encouraged
    - Both are prepared by researchers at the time of submission
    - Guidelines provided are minimal

Image: Cdnsciencepub.com

Method

- Only 3 journals include PL summaries
- 50 abstracts + corresponding PL summaries
- Manually identify first 3 terms per abstract (=150 terms)
  - Ignore titles
  - First 3 (if terms are explained, likely on first use)
- Analyze PL summaries to see how terms are handled
- Categorize the transfer strategies
  - 8 categories (presented from most to least common)

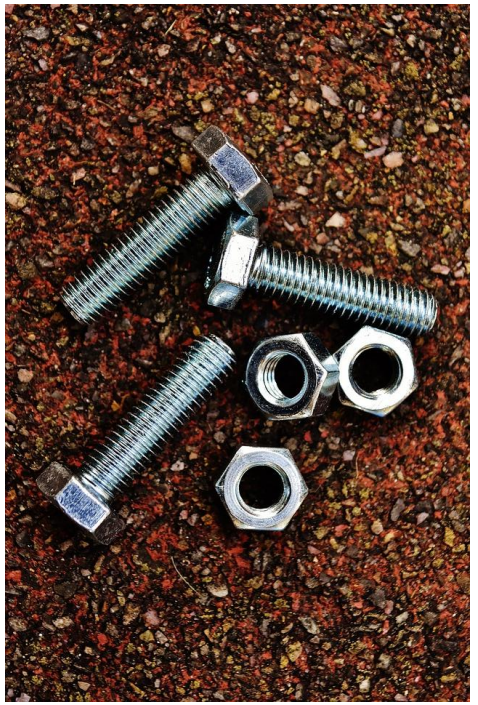


Image: Pixabay.com

Limitations

- Descriptive (case study)
  - No experimental component (e.g. effects on users)
- Small sample size:
  - 50 abs+ PLS, 150 terms, 3 journals, 1 publisher, 1 language
- 1 researcher (subjective)
  - Manual identification of terms (vs term extractor?)
    - User testing?
  - Development of categories
    - Subcategories? Missing categories (e.g. cause/result, part/whole, metonymy)
  - Assigning terms to categories

Image: Pixabay.com

Overview of textual features

	Sci Abs	PLS
Tokens	20,667	32,810
Types	4359	5029
TTR	21.1%	15.3%
Av text length	206.6	328.1
Av sent length	26.6	25.7
Passives	13%	22%
FKGL (Word)	16.7	14.9

- PLS are longer
- PLS have less lexical diversity
- PLS have slightly shorter sentences
- PLS have slightly better readability score
- PLS use more passives!

1) Retention

- Term retained in the text with no additional supporting information
- Challenge: degree of transparency
  - Some may pose challenges for readers, others may not
- Examples
  - Low transparency
    - polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs)
    - relativistic cosmology
    - sentinels of sustainability
  - High transparency
    - milk production
    - honey bee
    - life satisfaction

40 / 150

26.6%

2) Broader concept

- Substitution of a term by a broader concept
  - Broader concept is also a term
  - Broader concept is rephrased in general language
  - Hybrid (part term, part rephrased)
- Examples (broader term)
  - **natural resource managers** → *resource managers*
  - **stony small polyp coral** → *hard coral*
  - **whiteflies** → *insects*
  - **carcinogens** → *toxic chemicals*
  - **sea-surface temperature** → *ocean temperature*
  - **subsistence-oriented smallholder** → *subsistence-oriented farmer*

31 / 150

20.6%

3) Retention + supporting information

- Term retained and supplemented with supporting information
  - Explanation, example, quasi-synonym from general language
  - Term in: quotation marks (x4), parentheses (x4), initial caps (x1)

- Examples
  - **plasticity** → *animals can alter their physiology to cope with new conditions in the short term (plasticity)*
  - **deep pelagic** → *deep pelagic (1000 to 4000 m depth)*
  - **natural health products (NHPs)** → *natural health products (e.g. probiotics)*
  - **scoping review** → *wide search, or scoping review, …*

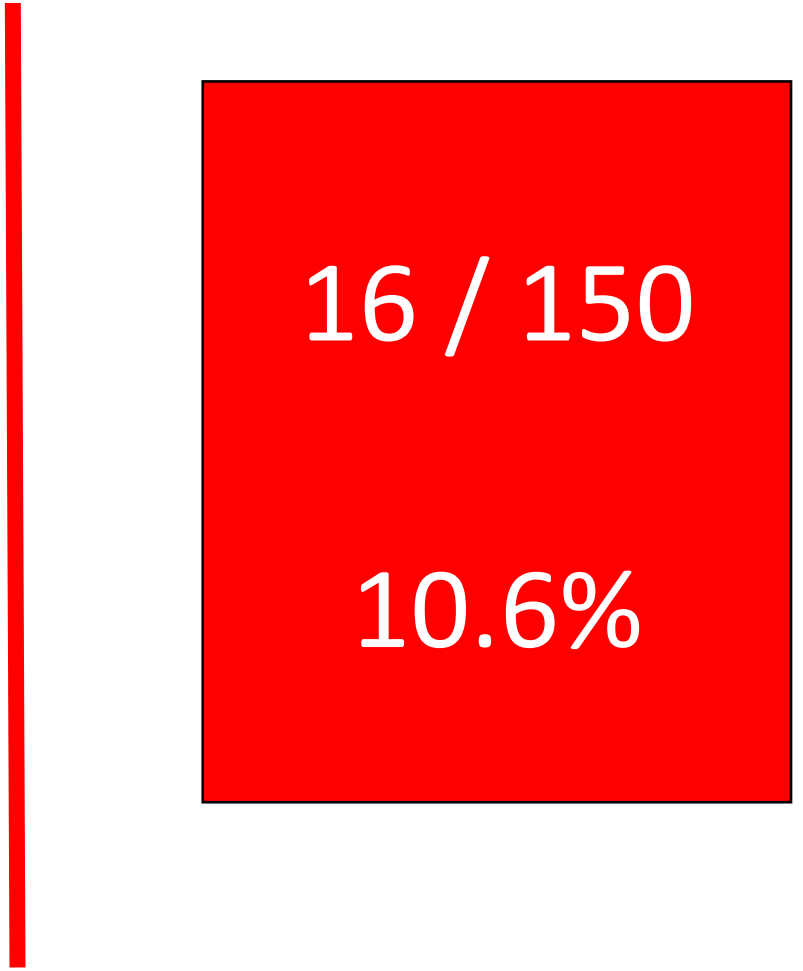
23 / 150

15.3%

4) Concept paraphrased without retaining term

- Term not retained but concept is rendered with an explanatory paraphrase

- Examples
  - **hydrogen absorption** → *act like a sponge for gases*
  - **thermal tolerance limits** → *waters that are warmer than optimal for their growth and reproduction*
  - **millennial-scale survivability** → *remain intact over thousands, or even millions, of years*
  - **trophic position** → *feed high on the food chain*



5) Scientific term to general language word

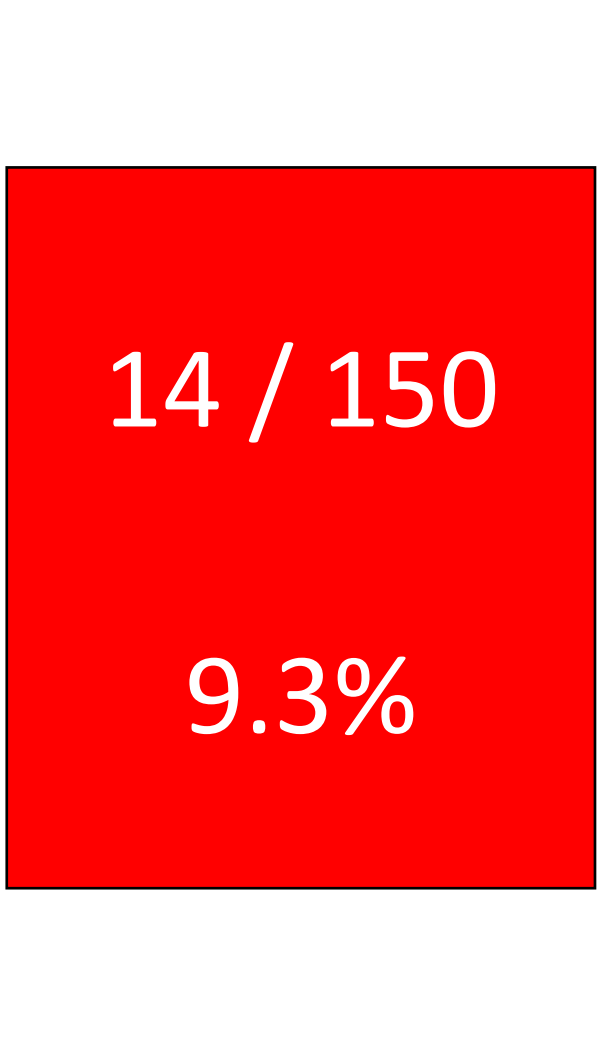
- Substitution of a scientific term with a related general language word
  - Sometimes a more direct relationship, sometimes the word is broader
- Examples
  - ***Gavia immer* (Brünnich 1764)** → *common loon*
  - **zooxanthellae** → *algal symbionts*
  - **n-3 fatty acid** → *omega-3 fatty acid*
  - **chromatic** → *colour*
  - **anthropogenic** → *human*

15 / 150

7.3%

6) Omission

- Specialized concept was not included in PLS
- Examples
  - mollusc nudibranch genus
  - statistical consistency analysis
  - journal impact factor



7) Narrower concept

- Term is replaced by a **narrower** concept
  - Extensional definition
  - Example
  - Abstract to concrete
- Examples
  - **Sahelian West Africa** → *Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger*
  - **morphological evidence** → *colour patterns*
  - **circumpolar North** → *circumpolar Arctic*
  - **ancient starch** → *archaeological starch*

6 / 150

4%

8) (Superficial) reformulation

- Term is reformulated but it doesn't really change much
  - Possibly flows better in discourse?
  - Could be useful for disambiguating noun stacks?
- Examples
  - **soil amendment** → *amendment to soil*
  - **nickel leaching** → *leaching of nickel*
  - **citizen-science-derived data** → *results from the citizen science project*
  - **stock photographs** → *stock photos*
  - **phosphorous interest groups** → *phosphorous stakeholders*

5 / 150

3.3%

Plain language and terminology

- Subject experts are not trained in plain language
- Could term banks help subject experts with plain language writing?

- What can terminologists do (in term banks)?
  - Clearly indicate broader and narrower terms
  - Provide definitions in plain language
  - Provide visual aids
  - Suggest possible plain language alternatives + usage guidance?

Image: pixabay.com

Can’t ChatGPT do text simplification …?

“Plain language is an important part of making things accessible for disabled people. We are very worried that people are using AI to translate text into plain language without realizing that it cannot do that work correctly. We tested multiple AI models, and all of them made big mistakes that changed the meaning of the text. For this and other reasons, we call on other organizations not to use AI for plain language translation.”

- changes in meaning
- focus on words rather than ideas
- biases and stereotypes
- problems even more pronounced in languages other than English

- Add to this other known problems with AI…
  - Copyright, extractivism, envrionmental concerns

- REMEMBER: plain language is about meeting audience needs. AI tools do not (and cannot!) know anything about readers

ASAN
AUTISTIC SELF ADVOCACY NETWORK

https://autisticadvocacy.org/

Emerging research using AI for text simplification

- human expertise and oversight remains “vital to ensure that these tools produce texts that are accurate, clear, and contextually appropriate, maintaining the quality and reliability required, particularly in high-stakes fields like legal communication”.
  - Not enough for AI to produce simplified texts
  - Replacing professionals (e.g. lawyers or legal translators) means replicating elements that shape how meaning is created and understood:
    - Domain knowledge
    - Understanding of legal context (often nuanced)
    - Judgement (understanding of legal implications)
  - AI can support, but it cannot do these things on its own

Zimina-Poirot, M., C. Gledhill & M. Bouyé (2025) ‘Towards clear, simple, and inclusive legal language: Exploring generative artificial intelligence (GAI) models as content rephrasing assistants in multilingual settings’, *International Journal of Language & Law* 14: 143–173.

Still a need for human expertise

- We must continue to train plain language practitioners
- Overlapping skill set between *intra-* and *inter*lingual translation
  - Translation students are good candidates for learning plain language skills
- Terminology – how to *define*, *support*, *choose potential alternatives* – is a key part of plain language
  - Plain language training is relevant for terminology courses also (often part of translator training programs)

Image: pixabay.com

Plain language for translators

- **Available in March 2026!**

Chapter 1. Basic concepts and terms in plain language
Chapter 2. Brief history and key motivations for plain language
Chapter 3. Principles and techniques for plain language
Chapter 4. Inclusive language
Chapter 5. Plain language writing and document design
Chapter 6. Evaluating plain language
Chapter 7. Plain language in different communicative settings
Chapter 8. Easy language
Chapter 9. Controlled language

https://www.routledge.com/Plain-Language-for-Translators/Bowker/p/book/9781032597867

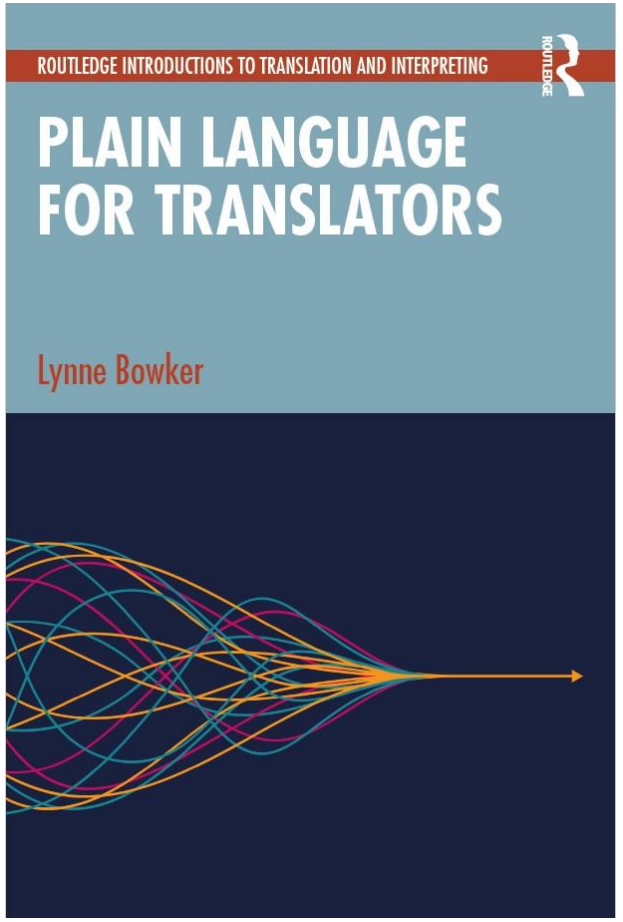


Image: Routledge.com

Thank you!

Comments or questions?

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