Precision in language

Mike Morris 30th July 2019

I watched the BBC News over the weekend and heard that our new Leader of the House, Jacob Rees-Mogg has introduced some rules on written English within his department; however, for transparency I should point out that the BBC heard it first on ITV News (I am not sure where they got it from).

"*I am very pleased to learn* that *due* to *ongoing, hopefully unacceptable speculation* about *investment* in consultation to *ascertain* if a *lot* of resources are *no longer fit for purpose*, I am now able to *meet with* you in September. *I understand your concerns* and *disappointment* with the delay."

Don't worry, the above is just my attempt at putting together a sentence that uses as many "prohibited" words as possible and in deference to Jacob Rees-Mogg *esquire,* I wont use them again (maybe). However, I do note that from the sentence above we can still use the words *Consultation* and *Delay* – that must be a relief to many politicians.

Joking aside, this did get me thinking about two things, the first one is the ubiquitous spelling and grammar checker. These are fantastic things to aid the writer and ensure that their output is spelled correctly and is grammatically accurate. But how many are set to American English, causing the program(me) to check for mis-spelt words rather than mis-spelled ones? The second thing that I was thinking about, after a discussion with an esteemed colleague was the use of some words that we all hear every day.

Interoperability is a great example, its dictionary definition describes interoperability as the degree to which products, programmes, etc can be used together or the quality of being able to be used together. Therefore, **interoperable systems** or those systems that **interoperate** must surely be at the top end of interoperability. To me then, such systems must be so transparent that the user doesn't know that the subordinate system(s) exists yet can read and write any and all information to that system or systems. In the NHS World, this would obviously be correctly rewritten as **interoperate subject to the constraints of information governance**.

Yet we see everywhere claims that systems will interoperate with other system(s), but the reality is too often very limited data transfer and sometimes monodirectional transfer only. These must be declared as partially interoperable, whereas fully interoperable systems must mean the bidirectional exchange of 100% of the information held in each system. I am, however prepared to add the word *relevant* and the phrase *subject to information governance* to the above.

The problem is of course that words become hackneyed and overused and their true meanings get lost in marketing hyperbole. This is a fact of life but it does make life difficult for the innovators who really can offer full interoperability (subject to the constraints of information governance) as they run out of concise words that describe what is possible.

To demonstrate that I am trying to pay more than lip-service to this concept and before I go back to writing more marketing collateral, I will now ask colleagues to check my work, as Mr Rees-Mogg's final requirement is, after all, CHECK YOUR WORK. We can hope!

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