

Using simple language to manage the recognition process

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German officialese is difficult enough for many native speakers to understand. How much harder must it be for migrants who are confronted with this kind of language within the process of seeking professional or occupational recognition? This article describes both how the "Recognition in Germany" information portal uses simple language for the purposes of providing guidance and identifying occupational competencies, as well as the challenges associated with this approach.

What is simple language?

Many people will be familiar with the concept of "plain language", not least because of the reference made to the term by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. For government websites, plain language is even a mandatory prerequisite (cf. *Barrierefreie Informationstechnik-Verordnung – BITV 2.0* [Federal

Ordinance on Barrier-Free Information Technology]) and follows fixed guidelines. In contrast to plain language, simple language is still a relatively new construct and is used in a wide variety of ways without any clearly defined guidelines. A definition thus far has only existed to the extent of delineating it from plain language: "Simple language is more complex [than plain language]. More difficult terms are also used." (KELLERMANN 2014, p. 7). In the absence of any distinction between plain and simple language, mixed forms of the two have been created, and this further complicates the precise use of simple language. A summary of the main differences is provided in the Table.

Information provision for the recognition procedure

Because knowledge of German is not a prerequisite of recognition procedures, information relating to the Recognition Act and to the recognition of foreign qualifications needs to be presented in a way that is accessible and comprehensible for non-native speakers. Irrespective of

Table
Plain or simple language? The most important differences

Plain language	Simple language
Target group: Persons who can hardly read, such as illiterates and those with an intellectual disability	Target group: Persons with low reading skills such as functional illiterates, persons with a low level of education or reading and spelling difficulties, persons without a school leaving certificate or persons whose native language is not German
Guidelines are in place, legally established by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Accessible Information Technology Ordinance (BITV 2.0).	No guidelines yet in place and not established in law
Very simple words, no foreign words	For the target group of migrants: Explicitly use foreign words
Very short sentences (subject + predicate + object), only one message per sentence	Short sentences with no more than about 15 words and a maximum of one comma
Corresponds to Reading Level A1	Corresponds to Reading Level A2/B1
Aimed at about 5 per cent of people in Germany	95 per cent of the population are able to read texts in simple language

Sources: Klar & Deutlich – Agentur für Einfache Sprache, www.klarunddeutlich.de (retrieved: 02.09.2016); KELLERMANN 2014

this, the idea that as many people as possible should be able to autonomously obtain information forms part of the avowed policy aim to achieve inclusion.

The Federal Government information portal for the recognition of foreign professional and vocational qualifications www.anerkennung-in-deutschland.de has been dealing with this topic since its launch in 2012. The aim of making the portal available in nine languages is to make contact with persons who as of yet speak no or very little German. In addition to this, endeavours are also being made to provide information on the recognition procedure in a form of German which is readily understandable. Since the summer of 2016, the portal has consciously aligned itself to simple language and has also developed its own guide for use by the editorial team. Nevertheless, striking the right balance between easily comprehensible language and formulations which are legally watertight is always a tight-rope walk for the editors.

Using respectful language when providing guidance

Simple language is also an important aspect of personal guidance on recognition. The benefit of a face-to-face meeting is that advisers can back up the simple language they use with gestures and also utilise signs and facial expressions to elucidate what they are saying to persons interested in seeking recognition.

Within the guidance context, respect plays a major role alongside comprehensibility. Rather than resorting to “child’s speech”, advisers should pursue a dialogue between equals in accordance with the unwritten rules of simple language:

- Do not use idioms
- Avoid convoluted subordinate clauses
- Steer clear of the subjunctive and passive
- Speak comprehensibly and slowly
- Be prepared to repeat complicated facts and circumstances (cf. basis & woge e.V. 2014)

Support is now available in the form of guides for advisers (cf. e. g. basis & woge e.V.), which provide an introduction to simple language and translate fixed terms such as “certificate of recognition” or complex processes.

¹ Skills analyses are carried out in circumstances where persons are unable to provide appropriate documentary evidence of their foreign professional or vocational qualification because, for example, they have been forced to flee. In the skills analysis, occupational competencies are evaluated by experts via such means as a work sample, a specialist oral examination or a company-based work test.

² Cf. www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2010/28320471_kw02_gesetze_verstaendlich/200582 (retrieved: 07.09.2017)

Identification of professional and occupational competencies despite a low level of knowledge of German

Use of spoken simple language is also offered when professional or occupational competencies are assessed within the scope of a skills analysis.¹ The skills analysis was brought into being by the Recognition Act. It represents an opportunity to check professional knowledge using a process in which language plays a subordinate role, as is the case with the pure examination of documents by the competent body. Although the procedure should be conducted in German, the intention is that it will not fail because of language difficulties. Task assignments should be formulated in an appropriate way, and tools such as dictionaries, sketches and figures and the use of translators are all permitted. In addition to this, further support is provided by the empathy of the experts and by the assistance they provide, for example, in giving verbal or physical explanations of specialist terms.

Especially within a government authority context, simple language remains rarely used and still has many hurdles to overcome. Nevertheless, there are grounds for hope. Several initiatives aimed at simplifying official German are now in place across the country, and the Federal Government has already taken action. Since 2009, there have been editorial staff teams at the Bundesministerium der Justiz [Ministry of Justice] and in the Bundestag [German Lower House of Parliament] tasked with formulating laws in a more comprehensible way.² Work is under way on guidelines to regulate the use of easily understandable written German for non-native speakers in government authorities. Respectful verbal or written communication with persons interested in seeking recognition should be the objective of every government authority and of all those involved in providing guidance. Simple language is a step in the right direction in this regard. ◀

Literature

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