

# **Easy Language and Easy Read Practices in the Nordic Languages: Exploring Informational Complexity Between Universal Models and Discourse-Specific Variations**

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This special issue seeks to explore so-called “Easy-to-Read and Easy-to-Understand” language, “Plain Language” or “Easy Language” (henceforth EL) in the Nordic languages and, more broadly, in the Germanic-speaking world, by treating them as norm-governed discursive devices situated at the intersection of language policies, communicative practices dedicated to reinforcing accessibility and inclusion, and the socio-historical configurations determining what can be said, understood, and used as relevant information.

Often described as *adapted* varieties of the standard language (if indeed such a thing exists) and based on a set of principles aimed at ensuring communicational accessibility, EL practices and varieties cannot be reduced to mere linguistic simplification processes. The principles behind EL are now formalized by the ISO 24495-1 standard on Plain language. They revolve around four interdependent dimensions:

1. the relevance of information (selection and prioritization of content based on the needs of the target audience),
2. its findability (textual and visual organization enabling quick access to the sought-after information),
3. its intelligibility (lexical, syntactic, and discursive choices that promote understanding),
4. and its usability (the recipients’ ability to effectively utilize the information in specific social contexts) (ISO, 2023; Plain Language Association International, 2021).

These criteria can be interpreted not only as functional features, but also as principles of discourse regulation. They contribute to the stabilization of a transnational standard of public communication, in which readability becomes a guarantee for informational citizenship.

## **Easy Language and the reconfiguration of “standard language”**

From this perspective, EL practices and varieties can be analyzed as controlled discursive varieties, resulting from a reconfiguration of the standard language. This reconfiguration is achieved through procedures of selection, reduction, reformulation, and textual structuring. Such processes do not fall solely within the linguistic domain but involve forms of communicative scenography (in the sense that they define the respective positions of the enunciating institution and the recipient constructed as a subject of reception); they also rely on specific assumptions and rules of anticipation concerning the interpretive competence of audiences.

Recent research shows that these discursive forms tend to become as secondary norms of standardization, producing what might be called a “standardization of the standard” (Bredel &

Maaß, 2016; Maaß, 2020). This evolution raises major theoretical issues and calls into question the stability of the very notion of linguistic norm. In the wake of this process, linguistic norms turn into norms of usage, readability, and accessibility which are heavily dependent on public policies and national institutional frameworks.

The current expansion of EL strategies and varieties to diverse kinds of audience (older adults, non-native speakers, individuals with visual or cognitive disabilities, readers unfamiliar with institutional genres) implies permanent adaptation to the evolution of the recipient's profiles. In turn, this transforms the way in which discursive otherness is constructed within EL practices. The audience is no longer merely assumed to be deficient or struggling. It is plural and variable. Its definition is context-dependent, which calls into question the initial categorizations underlying EL (Lindholm & Vanhatalo, 2021; Uotila, 2019; Haverinen, 2025). The concept of language complexity can no longer be understood in a uniform manner, but must be considered in relation to reader profiles and contexts of use.

### **Easy Language in the Scandinavian and Germanic context**

In the Nordic countries, this evolution is supported by highly institutionalized language policies. By prescribing a language that is “clear, simple, and understandable,” Norwegian and Swedish legislation (Språkloven, §9; Språklågen §11) contribute to the establishment of a normative regime of discursive transparency, where clarity becomes an administrative and democratic imperative. These normative frameworks reflect an institutionalization of plain language and raise the question of a possible international convergence of practices, while leaving open the issue of linguistic, discursive, and cultural variations.

In this context, this issue invites us to examine Germanic EL standards and varieties as products of discursive mechanisms focused on granting accessibility, and integrating linguistics, discourse analysis, cognition, and sociology. The aim the thematic issue is to examine how EL contribute to the institutional production of readability, and to what extent they participate in the constitution of specific regimes of informational truth and social intelligibility.

### **Some questions to be addressed in the issue**

A first series of questions regards the existence of a universal model of “accessible language,” or, conversely, the variability of readability standards across Germanic and Nordic languages: are there structural convergences, or distinct discursive configurations linked to linguistic traditions and administrative cultures? Particular attention may be paid to how clarity standards fit into national discursive traditions, how they circulate across linguistic spaces, and the tensions they generate between standardization and adaptation to contexts of use.

Contributions may also explore the linguistic and discursive variations observable across Germanic EL varieties. To do so, contributions can analyze the lexical, syntactic, and textual choices that underpin the production of accessible texts across different genres (administrative, media, literary, digital). From a cognitive perspective, it is also important to examine information processing mechanisms, regarding the management of complexity, the disambiguation strategies, and the hierarchization of knowledge, considering the interfaces between language, cognition, and culture (Vanhatalo & Lindholm, 2022; Nisbeth Jensen,

2018). This may lead to an examination of the forms of reader anticipation constructed in EL texts. These mechanisms shape frameworks of comprehension, in which readability is simultaneously a textual property, an institutional norm, and an assumption about the interpretive capacities of audiences.

Furthermore, contributions may address the diversification of the target audience and the corresponding evolution of EL usages. Contributors may want to highlight the role of EL in the dynamics of social inclusion, language policies, and educational practices, particularly in contexts of migration and multilingualism (Hurtado & Lindholm, 2020).

Finally, special attention may be given to the multimodal dimensions of accessible communication, analyzing the interplay between text, image, and formatting, as well as the links with augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) and digital environments.

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