

EDITORIAL

# Introduction: Easy Language research

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(Received 9 August 2022; accepted 9 August 2022)

## 1. Introduction

This special issue of the *Nordic Journal of Linguistics* is dedicated to the emerging field of Easy Language research. It is our great honour to serve the readers of this journal with fresh fruits that we received in response to the call for papers published in NJL in February 2022.

The term EASY LANGUAGE (Germ. *Leichte Sprache*, Swe. *lätt språk*, Finn. *selkokieli*; earlier EASY-TO-READ LANGUAGE or ETR) refers to a modified variety of a natural language that has been adjusted to be easier to read and understand in terms of content, vocabulary, and structure. Easy Language has been primarily targeted at people with difficulties in understanding standard forms of language, for example due to learning disabilities and neurocognitive disorders. There is also a connection between Easy Language and PLAIN LANGUAGE (see International Plain Language Federation, <https://www.iplfederation.org/>), both aiming at simplifying language.

Although attempts to create understandable language probably have a long history, the start of the Easy Language era in the European context can be dated back to the late 1960s, when the first easy-to-read Swedish materials were published. Significant milestones were reached in the 1990s, when the first recommendations for easy writing were published by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, <https://www.ifla.org/>) and Inclusion Europe. Since then, the target groups of Easy Language have been expanding, now covering people with various backgrounds and life situations. Ongoing changes in societies and legislation of accessibility are creating an increasing need for Easy Language and research on the topic. Easy Language is a multidisciplinary research topic of interest in various disciplines such as linguistics, health sciences, and cognitive science.

Even though Easy Language has a decades-long history in Europe and especially in the Nordic countries, it is only in recent years that we have seen an increasing interest in conducting research on the topic (Lindholm & Vanhatalo 2021). The development and use of Easy Language has been built on experience gained from practical work with target groups (Wengelin 2015). Over the past ten

years there has been a dramatic increase in research on the area, especially in Germany (e.g. Bredel & Maaß 2016, Bock 2019, Maaß & Rink 2019, Hansen-Schirra & Maaß 2020).

Thus a considerable literature has recently emerged around the theme of Easy Language, albeit focusing on the German-language area. Even though Easy Language as a practical phenomenon still holds a strong position in the Nordic countries, particularly in Finland and Sweden, linguistic research on the topic is still scarce.

The objective of this special issue is to encourage discussion of Easy Language research in the Nordic countries. Our aim is to introduce this topic to the readers of this journal and to motivate new researchers to initiate research in this field. This issue targets both the international community of researchers of Easy Language and scholars with a particular interest in the Nordic languages. Because our objective is to establish a dialogue with an international audience, we wanted to publish this special issue in English.

## 2. Perspectives on Easy Language: the contributions to this special issue

As stated in the Introduction, research on Easy Language is an emerging field. This is also evident in the contributions to this special issue, approaching the topic from various perspectives. This issue involves articles with both a theoretical and an empirical focus, addressing the conceptualization of and definitions related to Easy Language, the relationship between language forms such as Easy Language, Plain Language, and standard language, and effects of language adaptation on text reception. The articles deal with four different languages: Swedish, Finnish, German, and Dutch. Two of the articles discuss theoretical issues, whereas the other two are studies of empirical data.

The first article in this special issue is Solveig Arle & Carina Frondén's literature review of research on Easy Swedish. Applying a meta-narrative method, the authors examine terms and definitions used in Swedish literature, descriptions of the target group, and discourses and values used to justify Easy Language. Their results demonstrate an exclusive focus on written language as well as a general agreement on the heterogeneity of the target group. Controversy arises from different perspectives on reading as well as the breadth of the concept.

Leéalaura Leskelä, Arto Mustajoki & Aino Piehl provide an overview of Easy Language and Plain Language as tailored language varieties and investigate them in relation to standard language. Their study deals with the similarities and differences between these language varieties, introducing adaptation to reach vulnerable groups as the main purpose of Easy Language, whereas Plain Language aims at general comprehensibility.

The topic of Mathilde Hennig's article is the system of language variation. Dealing with the issue of whether ETR German can be categorized as a 'variety' or a 'register', the study demonstrates challenges related to capturing the variational status of ETR German within the system of language variation because of its artificial character. Despite these difficulties, the explanatory frameworks of concepts such as 'variety' and 'register' are demonstrated to be useful for describing the particular variational status of ETR German.

The final article of this issue is Enid Reichrath & Xavier Moonen's study assessing the effects of *Language for all*. *Language for all* is a method with characteristics of both Plain Language and Easy Language that was developed in the Netherlands to provide information in a maximally accessible manner. A comparison of texts written in *Language for all* and texts written in standard language demonstrates the potential of *Language for all* in making texts more understandable. The authors, however, point out the need for further research.

### 3. Prospects

Unfortunately, we were not able to include all the offered articles (altogether ten manuscripts) in this volume. Thus the focus has been clearly on linguistics, and interesting pieces concerning, for example, language technology and literature in Easy Language will be published elsewhere. The wide interest is a positive sign for the future of research into Easy Languages. For example, there is work in progress on languages such as Icelandic and Norwegian, and comparative research on understanding of Easy Language text is another emerging trend. We hope to see more full-blown research based on empirical data in the near future. Questions concerning the essence and identification of Easy Language, as well as the division of labour between Easy Language and other varieties such as Plain Language, turned out to be unifying factors in most articles of this volume, thus reflecting the state of the art in research on Easy Languages.

The possible topics for Easy Language research are endless, and there is an urgent need for research that would enhance the development of Easy Languages for different users, genres, and communicative situations. Questions of understanding and recipient design are at the heart of Easy Language. Innovative research that involves a user perspective and engages Easy Language users as co-researchers would be consistent with the inclusive nature of Easy Language. The field is interdisciplinary, but linguistics is still central because Easy Language is about language after all. The studies of national languages involve multiple research orientations that will benefit Easy Language research, such as research on standardization of language, language planning and Plain Language, discourse analysis, L2 studies, interactional linguistics, conversation analysis, research on the complexity of language, typological studies, sociolinguistics, etc. The traditional core of linguistics, language structure and lexicon, are also central elements of Easy Language. Different schools in morpho-syntactic and lexicology research, such as cognitive and systemic-functional linguistics, with their orientations towards semantics and discourse, have much to contribute to Easy Language research.

All linguistic knowledge of the languages in question is useful when considering their Easy Language varieties. Theories and methods used for other linguistic research are valid for Easy Language research as well, although there is room for innovative approaches especially in interdisciplinary research on understanding. Linguists should feel their responsibility in this area of massive societal impact. In the field of Easy Language, there is no research-based education without research. There is still much to be done to guarantee that Easy Languages will fulfil their task to enhance understanding for those who face difficulties with the standard language.

**Acknowledgements.** We would like to thank everybody involved in the making of this special issue: the Editors of the *Nordic Journal of Linguistics*, the reviewers of the articles, our authors including those whose articles are not published in the final version, and the funders of the research published in this issue.

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