



Easy-to-read and Easy Language

Blog by Sabira Stahlberg

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1. What is Easy-to-read and Easy Language?

*How should Easy Language and Easy-to-read be defined? Is Easy Language a **constructed** or a **natural** language? Are Easy-to-read books poorer in language and contents than books in standard language?*

The discussion about what Easy Language and Easy-to-read actually are has been going on for decades. People unacquainted with Easy Language and Easy-to-read would like to classify it as an artificial language, because it is simpler and the utilised vocabulary is more limited than in standard language.

But Easy Language is according to linguistic criteria **a natural language**. It follows the grammar and vocabulary of the standard language and develops together with standard language.

There is nothing artificial in Easy Language. It has not been **created** specially or is **limited** to specific literary works like for example the languages of the various peoples in J.R.R. Tolkien's famous work *The Lord of the Rings*.

Easy Language is also not separate from standard language, but a **simplified** and **clarified form** of language: Easy English is a simpler form of standard English. Easy Language does not differ from standard language except that word choices are easier, sentences and lines are shorter and clearer and there is much white space on the page.

Easy Language was developed out of a need to **create communication and texts** in a more uncomplicated language than standard language, so that also those with challenges in understanding ordinary language in speech and/or texts can acquire information.

Easy-to-read

Easy-to-read texts are written in Easy Language. In Easy-to-read books, the layout and fonts are chosen so that they will facilitate **mechanical** reading. The story is commonly **compressed** and contains fewer descriptions than in books in standard language. Otherwise Easy-to-read books function like books in standard language.

Easy Language and Easy-to-read are constantly developing.

They naturally follow the development of standard language, but new research and experiences gathered from various target groups affect also the criteria for Easy Language and Easy-to-read.

A growing group of authors and writers of Easy-to-read texts **develop** and **update** Easy Language with every text they write. When we began producing Easy-to-read books more than two decades ago, Easy language was different. This does not mean that we now use modern slang or anything similar, but that we **know now much more** how Easy Language is perceived in written form by various target groups. This knowledge helps us to form and develop Easy Language so that it can be understood by different kinds of readers.

Easy Language is the result of **joint efforts** for several decades by many persons to create speech and texts, which can be understood by as many people in society as possible.

2. Easy-to-read – a genre?

Is Easy-to-read a genre in its own right or are there genres within Easy-to-read? Scholars are still probably arguing... if scholars really would argue about Easy-to-read! In countries with more Easy-to-read publishing activities, there are several Easy genres – crime, poetry, novels and others, while in countries with less publishing, Easy-to-read is often perceived as a single genre. Is there enough variety in Easy-to-read literature to identify different genres?

So far neither scholars nor media have really discovered Easy-to-read **literature** and the discussion about whether genres exist has not begun in earnest. Newspapers or magazines very seldom **review** Easy-to-read books and scientific publications discussing genres in Easy literature are close to zero. Researchers prefer to analyse more simple materials which can easily be limited, such as language in news and magazines or Easy language published by authorities.

Literature?

Even if Easy-to-read literature does not receive much attention, a great deal has happened during the past years. Publishing is growing and the variation of Easy literature, too.

Easy-to-read is nowadays more **acceptable** than at the beginning of the 2000s, when my first Easy-to-read book was published. As a “serious” author and researcher, I was then more or less expected to apologise and to be ashamed of writing something so trivial and insignificant as an Easy-to-read book.

Yes, today Easy-to-read is considered to be literature. After waiting for years on the porch, Easy-to-read is now allowed into the kitchen. But apparently still more time is needed before Easy-to-read is permitted to sit down on the sofa for guests in the living-room.

Literature for children and teenagers

Easy-to-read is used extensively in schools today and **most readers are children and teenagers**. Therefore Easy books are commonly categorised as suitable for a certain age group and preferably as literature for children and teenagers. Reading and writing challenges however do not necessarily disappear with age.

For **adults** with reading difficulties and also for others, for example **elderly** and **migrants**, it is a positive experience to be able to read Easy adult literature. It offers rewarding and enriching content and lowers the bar for reading.

Separate genre

Easy-to-read is commonly considered a **separate genre**, regardless of age group or topic. Books for various ages and different genres are collected in libraries under the heading “Easy-to-read”, but is Easy-to-read literature in reality just one genre?

An Easy-to-read book differs in many ways from a “difficult to read” book in standard language. Can and should it, based on its easy language and special layout, be classified as a genre?

There are many interpretation possibilities and it depends if one considers Easy-to-read to be literature, for example fiction, in other words an **art form** based on originality.

Originality

The answer to the above question could be yes: Easy-to-read is a separate form of literature and a genre of its own. Easy literature employs a specific form of **language** and special **literary techniques**, which should be enough to classify it as a genre.

Each book I and other authors of Easy-to-read produce are original volumes. **We work creatively.**

Also adapted books are based to a certain degree of originality, because those who process novels and other books into Easy-to-read, cannot just “translate” the books into Easy Language, but they must rewrite the text to fit the Easy-to-read form.

Contents

At the same time, the reply to the question of a separate genre is no, if we take contents as a starting point.

Easy-to-read literature cannot generally be added to any classical main genre. In contrast, **within Easy literature** there are all kinds of fictional genres, from prose to poetry and drama, and also **non-fiction** and **popular science**.

Naturally, a compromise could be to classify Easy-to-read as its own genre with various sub-genres. I would call for **deeper research** and a **broad discussion** about Easy-to-read literature with librarians, scholars, teachers, readers and all others interested stakeholders.

Invite Easy-to-read for a coffee/tea!

Create your own opinion by reading Easy-to-read books.

There are **hundreds of pages** and **many dozens** of entertaining and thought-provocative books to get acquainted with.

If Easy-to-read cannot sit on the sofa in your living-room, offer coffee or tea in the kitchen or go out into the garden with a piece of strawberry cake – and discover new literary dimensions.

I guarantee it will be both fun and thrilling.

3. Easy literature and accessibility

Accessibility is a popular word today and it is used in many kinds of contexts. Easy-to-read offers a possibility to acquire written information and knowledge in an easier language. Easy Language websites and brochures contribute to make institutions and organisations and their messages more easily available to all who need or prefer to read easier texts. But what does accessibility mean for Easy literature? Team Bokpil is working since 2015 with developing innovative and pedagogical Easy-to-read books and making them accessible for all.

Easy-to-read books are aimed at offering access to **reading experiences** for all. They transmit **knowledge** while **motivating** to read. The books should also support the development of **reading skills** and other important skills needed in society. Easy-to-read literature should also **encourage** further reading. The **demands** and expectations for Easy books are often much higher than for books in standard language.

Nowadays **many different kinds of readers** use Easy-to-read books. Some need easier texts because ordinary books are too demanding, or because of reading challenges, low vision or other difficulties. Others need Easy books for a certain period, just to get started with reading. A growing group of readers prefer Easy books because they offer **compact, logical** and **clear** stories. Also seasoned readers use Easy books and texts to quickly get a general idea of a subject or a current question.

Accessible for everyone?

Easy-to-read increases the accessibility of a text in many ways. Yet, far more political and economic actions must be taken to really make Easy-to-read literature available to everyone. The **need for Easy texts** is growing parallel with an increasing use of technology and decreasing reading and writing skills in society.

To offer as many people as possible a chance to **participate in society**, much more information in Easy Language is needed, and also many more Easy-to-read books on various topics. **Multicultural** literature and Easy books in **multiple languages** are needed to include and support the integration of multilingual persons.

Easy-to-read websites are often free of charge, but books usually come at a price and are far from cheap. Does this mean that Easy literature in fact is not accessible for all? Does the **financial situation** decide who can read Easy books?

Libraries can bridge the economic gap and offer Easy literature to readers. Many publishers have created **free materials** for their books. Several publish chapters or even whole books free of charge on the internet. But new forms of support must be developed if we want the books to be completely free of charge. (Bokpil has decided to sell paper books for a low price, and the e-books are free.)

The number of readers is growing every day in all age, interest and language groups. Far more **research** about Easy literature is needed. Researchers could for instance shed light on how Easy books support language and reading skills, pedagogy and also society in general.

4. Easy-to-read criteria – for all?

*In different languages there are different **criteria** for defining what kind of text is Easy-to-read. In Finnish, German and Tatar, for example, longer words than in English or Swedish are allowed because of the structure of the languages. But even if we follow only the English recommendations for Easy-to-read, can they be used for all target groups? Easy-to-read books are today being read by a broad and varied audience, from people with various intellectual disabilities to unfamiliar readers of various ages, and those who are learning a new language. Should we provide **different criteria and various Easy Languages** for the diverse reader groups?*

A person **learning English** has other reading needs than a person whose **mother tongue** is English. The norms and rules for Easy-to-read are however **general** and should in principle be valid for all target groups who are supposed to need Easy literature and texts.

In Sweden, every Easy-to-read book publisher has their own definitions for **language levels**. In Finland only Bokpil uses language levels to indicate the **degree of easiness/difficulty** of language in a book. But the language level definitions of Bokpil are also quite general. Comparisons between books on the same language level show sometimes even fairly large variations both in the word choice and sentence structure.

An argument for creating different criteria for the diverse reader groups is that they have different needs. But can we really define **exactly** what their needs are? In Team Bokpil's experience, the needs are first and foremost **individual**. Within a group of ten people who are expected to have similar needs of Easy-to-read literature, there are at least ten different kinds of individual needs.

Different readers read differently

For a reader with **high language awareness**, an Easy-to-read book may seem too stiff and simple, because no "fine language" is utilised. But for a reader with challenges this is not so. They do not appreciate the finery. A reader who is learning a new language or experiences difficulties in reading does not react upon the "loss" of fancy words. On the contrary – a complex vocabulary would only **disturb** the reading process.

For persons with reading challenges it is more important to **focus** on the text and grasp its meaning. They want first and foremost **succeed** in reading and **understanding** the contents. An Easy-to-read book must be sufficiently simple and contain few pictures, so that the reader manages to read it to the end. Easy-to-read literature makes it possible for a reader with **challenges** to reach the goal – to read a whole book.

If we look at individual readers, we can observe that each has their diverse interests, reading skills and motives for reading. There is today a large selection of Easy-to-read literature, and the number of Easy books is increasing every year. We can probably trust that the readers who need or want to read Easy literature **find books suitable for them** and on an Easy Language level they understand. We do not need different criteria for various groups, but much more Easy literature written by various authors about a lot of topics.

5. Must we follow all Easy-to-read rules?

*The development of Easy-to-read is today often seen as the development of **definitions and rules**. Both actors in the Easy-to-read field and scholars throughout Europe are focusing increasingly on categories and classifications. So far all is well – researchers should work with analyses, and data which can be classified is needed for analysing. But is it healthy for Easy-to-read literature and Easy Language that they are restricted in this way?*

Some reasons for the trend to define and categorise could be found in the fight against **prejudices** in society: if Easy-to-read can be defined clearly and comprehensibly and there are distinct rules, then society must seriously consider Easy-to-read literature. A further assertion is that beginners need rules for writing Easy-to-read texts. But we should really discuss **how many** and **how detailed rules** are required. What is enough and what too much? How many definitions and rules are useful?

Easy Language should not be limited

The danger with too many strict rules is that the Easy Language becomes rigid and unnatural. The goal is actually the opposite: Easy Language should be **alive** and **natural**. The contents in a book are told in Easy Language, but the language should invite to read; in other words, it should be **linguistically interesting**.

Authors and publishers can use various **language levels** to describe how easy or difficult the language is, but language levels should have flexible borders. Also in standard language there are various ways for expression, and different topics require **various uses of language**. Climate change cannot be told in the same way as stories about dogs, historical mysteries or artificial intelligence.

What kind of rules are needed in that case? Do we actually need rules – or preferably **principles** and **frameworks**?

Rules or frameworks?

In the fight for acknowledgment of Easy-to-read in society we should not forget that Easy Language is a **living language**, a **variation** of standard language. Easy Language follows standard language **vocabulary** and **grammar**. It develops and changes together with standard language – and with each new Easy-to-read book.

Must all existing rules be followed before a text is classified as Easy-to-read? Our answer is no.

Each Easy Language author, like all writers, develop an **individual language**. To write in exciting, enticing and melodious language requires **exercise** and **creativity** both in standard and Easy languages. Too strict rules for Easy-to-read causes the language to become monotonous and boring.

Easy Language must not be suffocated by too many and complicated rules. My experiences with Easy-to-read writing in several languages and Team Bokpil's work with **translations** into languages without previous Easy Language show that **frameworks** are needed, not rules. For Easy Language to be alive and attractive to readers, **flexibility**, **openness** and **freedom** are needed.