

THE ROLE OF TEXT IN THE COMPREHENSIBILITY OF E-SERVICES

Heloisa Fischer¹, Master's student, **Claudia Mont'Alvão²**, D.Sc. **Erica dos Santos Rodrigues³**, D.Sc.

(1) Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, PPGDesign/ LEUI,
Rua Marquês de São Vicente, 225, Rio de Janeiro – RJ, Brazil, 22451-900

¹helofischer@gmail.com

²cmontalvao@puc-rio.br

³ericasr@puc-rio.br

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1. Context

Facilitating access to e-Government services is one of the current challenges in the digital transformation of governments (UNITED NATIONS, 2018, p.30; BRASIL, 2018c). The term e-Government, or e-Gov, refers to the use of information and communication technologies in public administration (COMITÉ, 2018). In this context, citizen interaction occurs mainly on digital platforms, and public service is called e-service.

Many countries face low levels of e-services adoption (RANA & DWIVEDI, 2015). Several studies stress the importance of meeting citizens' needs as they interact with digital governance. Such is the perspective of works on public value. Public value means “the value produced by the government, which is perceived by citizens and created in the adoption of digital services” (LOPES, LUCIANO & MACADAR, 2018a).

Works on public value highlight the design of e-services as one of the main drivers of public value. They underline that designing user-oriented e-services, facilitating access, and offering convenience would help governments create public value (AL-HURJAN ET AL., 2015; LOPES, 2016; LOPES, LUCIANO & MACADAR, 2018a, 2018b; JORDAN, 2019).

E-Gov texts tend to be written in officialese, a style that is difficult to understand for the majority of citizens. In Brazil, such style is known as *burocratês* (HOUAISS, 2001, p. 532).

There is a writing technique called Plain Language that claims to address the reader's needs. Its guidelines include using words familiar to users and noncomplex sentence structures. Plain Language claims to design texts that are easier to read.

Since the 1940s, international stakeholders – especially in the public sector – have contributed to establishing the technique's guidelines. Our article reproduces Harris, Kleinman, and Mowat's (2010) summary of the 25 guidelines outlined by Cutts (2013).

There are records of Plain Language being used in public administration in the United States and the United Kingdom as early as the 1940s, mainly on civil servants' initiative (GOBBLEDYGOOK, 1944; GOWERS, 1988). From the 1970s onwards, the movement expanded globally. The digital transformation in the 2000s has pushed the use of Plain Language, even in countries with highly educated populations (FISCHER, 2018, pp. 21-36).

In Brazil, there is legislation that determines the use of clear and easy to understand the information in public communication (BRASIL, 2011; BRASIL, 2015; BRASIL, 2017; BRASIL, 2018). However, policies on the use of Plain Language in Brazilian e-gov are at an early stage.

2. Method

This article discusses how textual comprehensibility could contribute to facilitate access to Brazilian e-services. It develops the rationale by using concepts of interaction in e-gov, public value, officialese, and Plain Language.

It assembles data on the present stage of digitalization of public services in the Brazilian federal government, discusses the idea of barriers to interaction in e-gov, and emphasizes e-service design issues.

Our study discusses the impact of officialese's linguistic elements on textual comprehensibility. To do so, it analyses an excerpt from an e-service available at the Brazilian federal government website. It also outlines Plain Language guidelines and indicates five countries that employ the technique in e-gov texts. It gathers recent actions to foster the use of Plain Language in the Brazilian public sector.

3. Results

In February 2020, the Brazilian federal government website listed 3,444 services in 185 federal agencies, without indicating their stage of digitalization.

Given that the Brazilian Digital Governance Policy establishes self-service as the primary means of providing e-services (BRAZIL, 2016a), we have searched for data on the status of service digitalization.

A survey conducted by the National School of Public Administration (Enap) analyzed 1,740 services from 85 federal agencies and came to the following rates:

- **None** (15.6%): Service fully provided in person. No digital information;
- **Informative** (8.8%): Information available online. Service fully provided in person;
- **Partial** (44.1%): At least one stage of the service offered through digital platforms;
- **Digital** (24%): All interactions carried out digitally, but some human action required;
- **Self-service** (7.4%): All processing performed by information systems.
(BRAZIL, 2018 b, p.64)

Digitalization limits the possibility of solving doubts through personal contacts. In the self-service stage, this possibility disappears. In the other stages, human connection declines. Thus, e-service texts should convey clear and objective information to reduce barriers to interaction. However, most texts use officialese.

Officialese's main features are complicated writing, derived from legal language, with complex syntactic structure, unfamiliar vocabulary, and heavy informational load (MENDONÇA, 1987). Formality and impersonality are also hallmarks (SILVEIRA, 2008).

In Brazil, the majority of the population cannot read long and complicated texts. The following figures are from the Functional Literacy Indicator Report – INAF Brazil 2018, which measured literacy levels of citizens aged 15 to 64:

- **29%** of functional illiterates (illiterate + rudimentary level): can't read or only finds explicit and literal information in simple texts;
- **34%** at the elementary level: under certain conditions, can select information in medium-size texts and make minor inferences;
- **25%** at the intermediate level: can find literal information and make trivial inferences;
- **12%** at the proficient level: can elaborate more complex texts
(AÇÃO EDUCATIVA, 2018).

The United Nations has listed thirteen kinds of barriers that hinder access to e-services and affect citizen participation, encouraging the international community to expand the list (UNITED NATIONS, 2018, p.34).

If the information that is difficult to understand is an obstacle, then officialese can be considered a barrier to interaction in e-government.

Public value researchers stress the importance of e-service design focusing on features as “user-oriented,” “ease of use,” and “usability” (LOPES, 2016; LOPES, LUCIANO & MACADAR, 2018b). As these works do not deal with textual issues, their analysis does not take into account the implications of using officialese.

Our study analyzed an excerpt¹ from the service of purchasing repellents for pregnant women assisted by the *Bolsa Família* cash transfer program (GOV.BR, 2019).

The excerpt presents long sentences, well above the average number of 15-20 words recommended by international Plain Language guidelines.² It also includes recursive structures, passive constructions, and technical vocabulary.

Currently, at least five countries have guidelines for plain language in e-gov:

- *United States*: [plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/](https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/)
- *United Kingdom*: gov.uk/guidance/content-design/writing-for-gov-uk
- *Canada*: canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/services/government-communications/canada-content-style-guide.html#toc6
- *Australia*: guides.service.gov.au/content-guide/writing-style/
- *New Zealand*: digital.govt.nz/standards-and-guidance/design-and-ux/content-design-and-management/plain-language/

In Brazil, few initiatives involving plain language existed in the public sector until 2018. (BRASIL, 2016b; SÃO PAULO, 2016). From that year on, there were discussions on using Plain Language in e-gov at the National Open Government Meeting (III ENCONTRO, 2018), the International Meeting on Government Innovation (ENCONTRO, 2019) and the Public Management Innovation Week (5th WEEK, 2019). Policies appeared in 2019.

In the city of São Paulo, a decree issued the Municipal Plain Language Programme (SÃO PAULO, 2019b), and a municipal bill was approved (SÃO PAULO, 2019a). In December 2019, a federal law was submitted to the Chamber of Deputies to create the National Plain Language Policy (BRAZIL, 2019).

4. Conclusion

Given that officialese makes information difficult to understand for the majority of the population, it may undermine access and affect citizenship.

The need to facilitate access to e-services in Brazil is likely to create conditions for prioritizing users’ textual needs. Accordingly, information on e-services should be provided in a clear, concise, and straightforward language that is familiar to citizens.

But changing the official writing style requires structural transformation. In this respect, research on facilitating access to e-services has urged governments to undertake structural reforms to serve better their citizens (OECD, 2018, p.22; BRAZIL, 2018a, p.75).

¹ Available at <https://www.gov.br/pt-br/servicos/adquirir-repelente-para-gestante-inscrita-no-programa-bolsa-familia>

² The number of words in a sentence should not be dissociated from linguistic factors that can make the text complex from the processing perspective. A 20-word text can be more complex than a 40-word text, depending on lexical and syntactic choices. Besides, languages have different structural resources, and the discussions on linguistic complexity cannot ignore this. Cutts (2013) suggests an average of 15/20 words based on a corpus study of the English language by Kucera and Francis (ANDERSON, 1971).

The emphasis that Plain Language places on the reader is consistent with the attributes of “user orientation” and “ease of use” supporting research on public value. It may potentially minimize textual comprehensibility problems due to officialese. Therefore it can be considered a facilitating factor to public value.

Hence, it seems appropriate to evaluate the role of language style in the textual comprehensibility of e-services, examining linguistic aspects that facilitate or hinder reading. Our research intends to set up an experiment to assess textual comprehensibility.

The research is associated with the Design Master’s program of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio), as part of the Ergonomics and Usability and Human-Computer Interaction research line. Our investigation intersects with psycholinguistic studies on reading and textual comprehensibility conducted in the Post-Graduate Program in Language Studies at the same institution. It uses qualitative and quantitative methods, with an experimental study.

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