Plain Language and CLARIN

Laura Herzberg
Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache
Mannheim, Germany
herzberg@ids-mannheim.de

Andreas Witt
Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache
Mannheim, Germany
witt@ids-mannheim.de

Elisa Squadrito
University of Macerata
CNR-ILC "A. Zampolli"
Pisa, Italy
elisa.squadrito@ilc.cnr.it

Abstract

Plain Language received its first international standard in 2023 with ISO 24495-1. This contribution compares how Germany and Italy have taken it up, the former with an established tradition of accessible administrative writing and a German-specific standard, the latter with dispersed initiatives and scarce resources. It then asks where Plain Language meets CLARIN, as a subject of research and as a question about CLARIN's own documentation, illustrated by a short rewrite of a documentation passage.

1 Introduction

Plain Language[1] refers to writing that is clear, concise and accessible, ensuring that the intended audience can easily understand content without unnecessary complexity (ISO, 2023). Over the past decades, its use has been promoted by professional associations and advocacy organizations worldwide, including the International Plain Language Federation (IPLF), which has developed resources, guidelines and certification programs to advance clear communication across public and private sectors.

Related approaches such as Easy Language also exist, focusing on more strongly simplified and standardized forms of communication for specific target groups (Maaß, 2020; Vanhatalo, 2021). However, these are not the focus of this contribution.

A recent development in the field of Plain Language is the publication of ISO 24495-1:2023 *Plain language – Part 1: Governing principles and guidelines*, the first international standard to provide systematic guidance for producing such documents (ISO, 2023). It was developed by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) in collaboration with the International Plain Language Federation and draws on published research and on the practice of the associations that took part (IPLF). Its preparation was led by ISO/TC 37, the technical committee responsible for language and terminology. Through the involvement of national standards bodies and liaison organizations, the standard is connected to existing work on terminology and language resources.

This contribution outlines the concept of Plain Language and introduces the ISO 24495-1 standard, including its implementation across different languages, with a focus on Germany and Italy[2]. It then examines its role within the CLARIN infrastructure, considering possible tools such as a Plain Language checker and translator and rewriting a passage of CLARIN documentation as an illustration. Finally, the article discusses the implications of these developments for research and practice.

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[1] Initial capitals are used throughout to mark terminological usage. *Plain Language* denotes the approach codified in ISO 24495-1 and promoted by the IPLF. Lower case is reserved for the non-terminological use of the adjective, as in *plain wording*.

[2] English is the working language of CLARIN and of its central documentation which makes that documentation the natural starting point. German and Italian are examined here as the first two cases; further languages can follow.

2 Plain Language

Plain Language is an approach to communication in which wording, structure and design are shaped so that intended readers can easily find the information they need, understand it and use it effectively (ISO, 2023). It follows a reader-centred perspective, taking into account factors such as audience needs, levels of literacy, subject expertise and the context in which the information will be used.

It covers wording, but also organization, structure and information design. It applies to written and digital texts, from administrative and technical documents to public communication and can be adapted across different languages and contexts.

2.1 Standard on Plain Language: ISO 24495-1

ISO 24495-1 defines Plain Language as communication in which wording, structure and design make it easy for intended readers to find what they need, understand it and use it (ISO, 2023). It emphasizes a reader-centric approach that accounts for reader needs, literacy levels, expertise and context. This focus on usability distinguishes Plain Language from simplistic readability formulas or easier variants of language intended for specific audiences; of particular note, Plain Language is not the same as Easy Language, which caters to people with significant reading comprehension difficulties. The standard applies to a broad range of written and digital texts and provides principles and guidelines applicable across document types and most written languages, with examples presented in English. It also covers information design and the evaluation of documents with intended readers.

Following the publication of Part 1, subsequent parts of the ISO 24495 series have been developed or are in progress. The next published part is ISO 24495-2:2025 *Plain language – Part 2: Legal communication*, which provides guidance specific to legal texts and how to apply the foundational principles of Part 1 in legal contexts to help readers understand rights, obligations and complex legal structures (ISO, 2025). Another example is ISO 24495-3:2026 *Plain language – Part 3: Science writing*, published in May 2026, which addresses the challenges of communicating scientific information to diverse audiences (ISO, 2026).

2.2 ISO 24495-1: Implementation in various languages

Beyond its original English version, the ISO Plain Language standard is now available in many languages and has been adopted or made available by numerous national standards bodies around the world. National bodies in Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and others have formally adopted ISO 24495-1 as a national standard in their languages, often with localized titles and editorial adaptations. In some countries national standards bodies sell the international version or bilingual versions without formal adoption. For example, the German national body publishes DIN ISO 24495-1:2024 *Einfache Sprache – Teil 1: Grundsätze und Leitlinien* (DIN, 2024a), while Italy's body publishes UNI ISO 24495-1:2024 *Linguaggio chiaro – Parte 1: Principi e linee guida* (UNI, 2024).

2.3 Germany

Historically, *Einfache Sprache* is a relatively recent term in Germany, while the concept of "Citizen-oriented Language" (*Bürgernahe Sprache*) has been present in administrative and academic discourse since the early 1980s, emphasizing accessible communication without unnecessary simplification, cf. Maaß (2020). Early initiatives, such as the 1984 guidelines on *Bürgernahe Verwaltungssprache*, were widely disseminated and later updated, yet Plain Language remains less institutionalized, with no dominant approach or stable translation market, cf. Maaß (2020). DIN ISO 24495-1 is the national implementation of the international standard, providing guidance for producing clear, reader-oriented texts across domains such as administration, business and education (DIN, 2024a). It applies to written, printed and digital communication and is guided by four core principles: relevance, findability, comprehensibility and applicability, supported by practical recommendations such as audience analysis, clear structure, concise language and consistent presentation. Since the ISO text is by design language-neutral, it is complemented by DIN 8581-1 *Einfache Sprache – Anwendung für das Deutsche – Teil 1: Sprachspezifische Festlegungen*, which specifies the guidance for German (DIN, 2024b).

In practice, initiatives such as simplified news formats and resources like the *Korpus einfaches Deutsch* ("Corpus of simple German"), a corpus of accessible German texts annotated for research and teaching and searchable through the KorAP platform, illustrate how these principles are implemented and empirically studied (Jach & Dietz, 2024).

2.4 Italy

While ISO adopts the name *Linguaggio Chiaro*, Crestani (2024) identifies the Italian equivalents of *Einfache Sprache* as *lingua semplice* "simple language" or *linguaggio semplificato* "simplified language". This terminological instability, as discussed by Vanhatalo (2021), reflects a more recent tradition compared to German-speaking countries, as interest in Plain Language in Italy emerged only in the 1990s.[3] The publication of the *Codice di stile* (1993)[4] marked a key moment in simplifying administrative and bureaucratic communication, initiating three decades of research and numerous reference manuals.[5]

Yet, initiatives often remain fragmented and locally confined, while rulebooks on their part lack an explicit linguistic foundation leaving room for interpretative discretion (Sciumbata, 2026). Access to resources is also limited, as reliable corpora remain scarce and dispersed across projects (Sciumbata, 2026). The adoption of ISO 24495-1 by the Italian Standards Body (UNI) in 2024 is a first move toward harmonization (UNI, 2024). The standard provides a shared framework that can consolidate dispersed initiatives and align Italian practices with international guidelines. Its scope extends beyond public administration to private-sector domains such as insurance and legal communication, where increasing attention is being paid to clarity. For instance, the Italian Authority for Insurance Market (IVASS) and legal practitioners have begun promoting Plain Language in documentation and contracts drafting (Trono, 2024). The integration of ISO principles into academic research nevertheless remains inconsistent (Sciumbata, 2026) and its impact on administrative and legal writing conventions is so far limited.

3 Plain Language in CLARIN

CLARIN provides a distributed, interoperable environment for language data and tools across Europe, which can support Plain Language both as a subject of study and as a standard for CLARIN's own documentation.

3.1 A dedicated structure

One option would be a dedicated structure for Plain Language, either in the form of a K-centre, a working group, or a committee. This body would coordinate the development and provision of materials in Plain Language wherever feasible, including training resources, tool descriptions and documentation accessible to non-specialist readers. The proposed structure could also provide a point of coordination with adjacent domains such as Easy Language, where the two overlap. Tutorials showing how to use Plain Language resources and tools would fit alongside this, with an initial focus on German, offering anyone interested in the topic an accessible overview and a practical starting point[6].

3.2 Support within the CLARIN infrastructure

The CLARIN infrastructure provides the technical basis for integrating Plain Language into reusable, scalable workflows by enabling tools and resources to be shared, combined and accessed across centres and user groups. Plain Language applications can therefore be embedded in existing research and processing environments rather than built separately.

[3] Further variants include *semplificazione linguistica* ("linguistic simplification") and *linguaggio chiaro e semplice* ("clear and simple language").
[4] Dipartimento della Funzione pubblica, *Codice di stile delle comunicazioni scritte ad uso delle pubbliche amministrazioni*, Roma, Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 1993.
[5] For scientific manuals and guides see Fioritto (1997), Fortis (2003), Bombi (2015) and Conferenza dei Presidenti delle Assemblee legislative delle Regioni e delle Province autonome (2025).
[6] A collection of German-language video tutorials on *Einfache Sprache* in general and also on its differences from *Leichte Sprache* is available at https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLIvbABMA5kgbRXvWnlv87Ty6mfhYrGkxE.

3.3 Plain Language checker

One possible line of development is a Plain Language checker that could be implemented within the CLARIN infrastructure, for example by using large language models and established natural language processing techniques. Such a tool would make it possible to automatically assess texts with respect to clarity and structure, going beyond traditional readability metrics. Integrated into CLARIN pipelines, it would let users evaluate texts inside their existing workflows. The checker would be one way of putting the principles of ISO 24495-1 to work. In this sense, the checker can be understood as a practical example of how CLARIN's infrastructure could support the operationalization of ISO 24495-1 principles.

3.4 Plain Language translator

A Plain Language translator is a second possibility. Such a tool would aim to transform complex or specialized texts into Plain Language versions while preserving meaning and communicative intent. Given CLARIN's access to multilingual corpora and processing tools, it would be well suited to host and distribute such a service, particularly in contexts where accessibility across languages is required. It would extend the infrastructure from analysis to text transformation and it would serve users outside academia as much as within it.

3.5 Rewriting a passage of CLARIN documentation

The principles of the standard can be applied to CLARIN's own documentation. The passage below is quoted from the tutorial on the Federated Content Search, where it explains how a query reaches the participating centres and how the results come back.

> Source
>
> "The Aggregator communicates with components called endpoints, which are provided as a service by all centres who participate in the federated content search. Each endpoint provides access to one or more searchable resources. The user can select a specific resource or resources, based on the resource name or on the language, or search through all of them. The content of these resources is searched with the query supplied to the endpoint. The endpoint returns results to this query and the aggregator collects the responses from all the endpoints and displays them to the user."[7]
>
> Rewritten for a first-time visitor[8]
>
> You type a search word into the Aggregator, the search page that CLARIN runs for this purpose. It passes your search to the archives that take part, and each archive looks through the texts it holds. You can search all of them or choose particular ones, by name or by language. The Aggregator gathers what comes back and shows you the results together.

The rewrite is not about avoiding technical terms. *Aggregator*, *endpoint* and *resource* fit a developer building an endpoint, since that is exactly the vocabulary the task calls for. For a reader who only wants to know what the search will do for them, those same words are less helpful, since that reader has a different question in mind. *Aggregator* is a case in point: it is the name of the tool, so the rewrite keeps it and adds a few words saying what it is, rather than replacing it with something vaguer.

The other differences follow from the same shift. The source names the components first and the user only in its third sentence, while the rewrite starts with what the user does and keeps the steps in the order they happen. The source says that the resources are searched while the rewrite gives each step someone who acts. It also says what to type and what comes back. The result is a second version for a different readership, not a replacement for the first.

4 Discussion and conclusion

ISO 24495-1 and a research infrastructure such as CLARIN meet at several points and together they can advance Plain Language both as a research field and as a practical approach to communication. While Maaß (2020) notes that the potential of Plain Language remains only partially realized in Germany, Sciumbata (2026) similarly highlights the limited implementation of the ISO standard in Italy. As

[7] https://www.clarin.eu/content/content-search-tutorial

[8] This version is one way of applying the guidelines of the Plain Language standard to this passage, not the only possible one.

illustrative cases of broader limitations in the application of Plain Language, Germany and Italy point to gaps that CLARIN could help address by providing infrastructure and accessible resources. This way, CLARIN can foster standardized solutions that promote wider adoption of Plain Language practices.

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