



### **Title**

The “Unknown Unknowns” of Plain English

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### **Bio**

Dr. Roger Nunn has been a language teacher for over 28 years in six different countries, including more than 20 years in Asia. He has a Trinity College TEFL diploma, an MA and Ph.D. in TEFL from the University of Reading, UK. Dr. Nunn's Ph.D. study was on teaching methodology and curriculum development across cultural boundaries. He has a broad range of publications on a wide range of topics and is particularly interested in international perspectives on EFL teaching.

### **Abstract**

Dr. Roger Nunn considers the pragmatic implications of some of the double speak that politicians enter into. He considers Donald Rumsfeld's "Plain English Campaign" 'Foot in the Mouth' Award, for his now notorious statement on "known, knowns" and "unknown, unknowns". The "plain" English of modern news media has a worrying capacity for keeping us in the dark; which is reminiscent of Orwell's 1984. For Orwell, the natural partner of Newspeak was Doublethink. The Orwellian example of Doublethink best suited to this paper is perhaps, "Ignorance is strength", although some might prefer "War is peace". Professor Nunn also considers the complexity of academic jargon in relation to 'plain English'.

### Introduction:

The Plain English Campaign has won some notable victories against muddled bureaucratic jargon in the public domain. Designed to embarrass well-known public figures into expressing themselves more clearly, the “foot in the mouth award” is awarded annually for “a truly baffling comment”. US Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, was the 2003 winner.

‘Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns — the ones we don't know we don't know.’<sup>i</sup>

To make this “truly baffling comment”, Rumsfeld uses permutations of only two common words, “known” and “unknown”.

1. Known knowns	Things we know we know
2. Known unknowns	We know there are some things we do not know.
3. Unknown unknowns	Sometimes, it is impossible to know what we do not know. We do not even know, or cannot know, that there is something to know.

Categories one and two are plainly stated and easily exemplified. I know that I know America invaded Iraq. I know that I may never really know why they invaded Iraq. It is

Rumsfeld's third category that earned him the award. An "unknown, unknown" applies to cases when it just could not occur to us that there is something we do not know. If someone is waiting round the corner with a gun, to say that we do not know is not enough. We do not even know that we need to know.

Rumsfeld's impromptu remarks, made during a free-flowing media briefing, unwittingly place him in the linguistic field of pragmatics, the very field that is taking on increasing importance in EFL in relation to the internationalization of English. They are at the same time reminiscent of the Orwellian '1984' notion of Newspeak (1949: 241-251), "...the Newspeak vocabulary was tiny, and new ways of reducing it were constantly being devised" (p. 249). Is Orwell's chilling prediction for the decline of English finally coming to pass twenty years later than he foretold? "There was no need for such a word as *bad*, since the required meaning was equally well – indeed, better – expressed by *ungood*". As one disciple of Big Brother puts it (p. 49), "After all, what justification is there for a word which is simply the opposite of some other word... If you have a word like "good", what need is there for a word like "bad"? "Ungood" will do just as well – better, because it's an exact opposite, which the other is not." We are then left with reductionist pairs such as *good/ungood*, *light/unlight* and – doesn't it start to look familiar? – *known/unknown*. From Orwell's Newspeak, there was only one step to coining the notion of Doublespeak for language that willfully disguises the reality it pretends to represent, not ethnic, but linguistic cleansing, as exemplified in the now notorious "collateral damage".

In a recent paper in this journal, (Nunn: 2003 <http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/march03.sub3.htm>) I attempted to discuss intercultural inferencing in terms of pragmatic theory using a specific example from an intercultural simulation involving foreign and Japanese students of intercultural communication in a Japanese University. Three views of inferencing were discussed in relation to the data sample. Grice's view of inferencing guided by a principle of cooperation, and its subordinate maxims, Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory and Clyne's revised maxims for intercultural analysis. To use the academic jargon, that can in no way be called "plain English", within a theory of relevance, "contextual effects" are created by reference to known information, reducing the need for processing by interlocutors who share the same prior contextual clues in a "mutual cognitive environment". The conclusion of the paper is that, in *intercultural* negotiation a higher level of awareness of assumptions about common knowledge is of central importance to competence and performance. On reading Rumsfeld's comments soon after publishing this paper, it immediately struck me that his much-maligned paradigm was in some respects much 'plainer' than my own attempts, and those of more famous linguists, to explain the states of mutual knowledge in communication. An Internet journal is an ideal medium for this kind of retrospective re-analysis as the previous analysis is available at the click of a mouse.

A key aspect of pragmatics is that it is important to make assumptions about what our interlocutors know. Among the five points referred to by Grice (1989: 31) as essential aspects of the inferential process, the last two in particular refer to our state of knowledge:

“To work out that a particular conversational implicature is present, the hearer will reply on the following data:

- (1) the conventional meaning of the words used, together with the identity of any references that may be involved;
- (2) the Cooperative Principle and its maxims,
- (3) the context, linguistic and otherwise, of the utterance;
- (4) other items of background knowledge;
- (5) the fact (or supposed fact) that all relevant items falling under the previous headings are available to both participants and both participants know or assume this to be the case.”

(Grice 1989: 31)

Sperber and Wilson (1989: 43) refine Grice’s view, arguing that notions of mutual knowledge or even notions of common assumptions are untenable. They point out that, “it is left to the communicator to make correct assumptions about the codes and contextual information that the audience will have accessible and be likely to use in the comprehension process.” We must therefore make assumptions about which assumptions will be, and especially will *not* be, “mutually manifest”. Such assumptions are at least partly assumptions about the state of knowledge of our interlocutors. They are vital for successful communication. In this respect, Rumsfeld’s three categories add an interesting dimension in much plainer English.

Figure 1 Rumsfeld's categories: the states of knowledge during communication

1. Known knowns	Things I assume you know – <i>so I do not need to mention them.</i>
2. Known unknowns	<p>Things I know you do not know – <i>so perhaps I will tell you, if I want you to know.</i></p> <p>Things you know I do not know – <i>but do you want me to know?</i></p>
3. Unknown unknowns	<p>Things I do not know that you do not know or that you need to know – <i>so I do not think of telling you.</i></p> <p>Things I am not aware of myself – <i>although it might be useful for you to know.</i></p> <p>Things you do not tell me, because you are not aware of them yourself – <i>although I might need to know.</i></p>

For those of us who spend a lot of time communicating outside our own cultures, Rumsfeld's third category, if not the plainest, is certainly the most relevant. In a foreign culture, and arguably in any communication, the biggest problems are those things that we do not know that we do not know. When we do not know that there is something we need to know, it does not even occur to us to ask. For members of the host culture, they cannot know that we do not know so they do not think of telling us. In our own culture some things are so obvious that we cannot imagine other people don't know them and we might not even be aware that we know them ourselves. Interculturally, this makes a slightly different category. I know what you need to know, even if my 'knowledge' is instinctive or subconscious, but it never occurs to me that you do not.

### **Background From the Previous Study**

Some brief extracts are presented below to provide sufficient background to appreciate the relevance of Rumsfeld's study for those who prefer not to read or re-read the previous detailed argumentation and analysis. "One American student (AM) and three Japanese students (JP1, JP2 and JP3) played the role of insurance agents, each representing a driver in a traffic accident. Their aim was to negotiate the lowest possible percentage of blame for the driver they represented. (Numbers in the transcript represent percentages proposed by negotiators.) Common background information included a detailed description of the accident by the teacher and a short statement by each driver.

In the information provided before the negotiation, the Escort driver, represented by the American student, had admitted to having "a couple of drinks".

### **Transcript Part 1**

JP1: |Why | |Ah ...I think ..{.er ...Escort..}... {you... Escort

AM: Yes.}

JP1: ::Escort is forty to fifty|

AM: |Tell me why |

JP1: |Tell me why |

AM: |Tell me what laws I broke first |

JP1: |I don't know {I don't know that, I don't know} about er the

situation in other country :: but er in Japan ::especially in

Japan :: er ...er You were drunk, {drunk.}|What is drunk is

...er...driving

AM: Ah

JP1: ...is most severe situation|

AM: |Okay| Where does it say ::I was drunk then |It doesn't say

{er my er client does not say} :: he was drunk|

JP1: |Ah...even a little bit {er couldn't er }you couldn't admit

That in Japanese law ::I think|

**Transcript Part 2** (6 minutes later in the same conversation)

AM |You should be more cautious:: when you`re {when  
you`re} coming into this lane :: because I`m driving ... |In  
Japan these lines here ...:: well according to what {the  
VW} the representative for the VW was ...|

JP1 (Interrupting) |::Even if you are driving  
main road you are drunk...| you are drunk...| Okay | Er  
{you have} you did have a drink :: even a little bit :: so I  
think er your responsibility is er 40 to 50, {er 40 to 50 and  
er} ...|

Am |{How do you} how do you know :: I was drunk though ::  
or my client was drunk | I mean :: how do you know |

JP1 |You said ...before|

AM |I didn't say :: he was drunk| I said :: he had a drink|

JP1 |In Japan a little bit drink means drunk:: |Okay| {... in  
Japanese law}| (laughter from other JP students)”

I pointed out that there was an entanglement between the normally accepted range of possible meanings of a lexical item in one context and the background assumptions in relation to drinking and driving within a different speech community.

JP1 identifies the problem early in the conversation. AM does not. This is clear from the way JP1 explains “drunk” contrastively.

JP1 |I don't know {I don't know that... I don't know}  
about er the situation in other country :: but er {in  
Japan} especially in Japan, er ...er You were drunk  
{drunk} |What is drunk ...er...driving...

AM: Ah

JP1: ...is most severe situation|

As Sperber and Wilson (1989: 16) suggest “a mismatch between the context envisaged by the speaker and the one actually used by the hearer may result in a misunderstanding”. We have already noted that the American student did not consider the Japanese student’s

assumption of the “drunkenness” of the Escort driver as true or possibly true in any relevant sense. (I didn’t say he was drunk, I said he had a drink.) The repeated act of ostension by the Japanese student in the second extract obliges the American student to re-consider his assumption. The strong ostensive behaviour of the Japanese student has successfully made the American student recognize the relevance of the contribution “you were drunk” in spite of the fact that this contradicts the background assumption his own argument was grounded in and his assumption that language was the major problem of understanding. Skilled intercultural negotiation involves bringing out into the open, ostensibly making manifest or available for inference what is not shared. The discovery of radically opposing assumptions may represent the cultural equivalent of an electric shock. In this context, the American student, a hitherto able and articulate negotiator with considerable intercultural experience, admitted (in later analysis) that he was “paralysed”, leading him to accept a very high percentage of blame for his driver with little further negotiation.”

The very notion that won Rumsfeld his award, the “Unknown, Unknowns” provide a simple way of understanding what was happening during this intercultural incident. The American student did not know there was something different that he needed to know about the meaning of “drunk” for a driver in Japan. This student happened to be an experienced and skilful intercultural negotiator in many situations. The conclusion is perhaps that even a skilled intercultural communicator cannot be aware of what he does not know he needs to know. This will always be an important aspect of intercultural communication to try to take into account, if only to reduce the stress of the inevitable

pragmatic failures that those who cross borders cannot fail to encounter. The “unknown unknowns” are part of intercultural life. In this case, it was the Japanese student who realized what was happening and explained it to the visiting student. However, this student had “lost” the simulated negotiation by this stage in terms of the “Insurance Negotiation” task set. We may hope optimistically that it was well worth losing a classroom simulation in order to gain intercultural knowledge that may help in future intercultural negotiations. With regard to English as a language taught for purposes of international communication, this example highlights the difficulties that we face as teachers who are now called upon to teach pragmatic skills as well as the many other interlocking skills relating to linguistic and communicative competence and performance.

Academics writing about intercultural pragmatics are perhaps fortunate to avoid the kind of scrutiny that the plain English judges reserve for high-profile media figures. However, we may receive some comfort from PEC spokesman, John Lister (PEC webpage), who seems himself to find plain English just too boring to stick to when he states with reference to Rumsfeld’s award: “We think we know what he means, but we don’t know if we really know”. There are times when Plain English just does not do the job. Multiple negatives – with a strategic modal verb thrown in for good measure – fit my knowledge of the Iraq war perfectly. I do not know if Rumsfeld did not know there were no WMDs in Iraq but I do know that I might never know what he did not know.

Rumsfeld’s winning enigma uses combinations of only two very common words that would fit into anyone’s list of plain English lexis. But perhaps we may comfort ourselves

by pointing out that “plain” English flatters to deceive. The “plain” English of modern news media has a worrying capacity for keeping us in the dark; which brings us back to Orwell, for whom the natural partner of Newspeak was Doublethink. The Orwellian example of Doublethink best suited to this paper is perhaps, “Ignorance is strength”, although some might prefer “War is peace”. Many views of so-called international English propose the broad view of “World Englishes” in a diverse, complex, unpredictable but fascinating multi-dimensional world. However, we might also note the increasing risk of proposing a reductionist – “less is easier” – unilateral linguistic model, a 2024 Newspeak of our post-cold war era, in the name of concepts such as mutual intelligibility, that are best understood in the domain of Pragmatics.

While the rather complex academic jargon of Pragmatics is ultimately aimed at enhancing understanding, the political masters of monosyllabic mediaspeak often have a vested interest in adding to the considerable number of “unknown-unknowns” that already hinder international understanding. We may never know what they know, because they will hide behind ‘plain’ English, the Newspeak of “International” English, to make sure that we do not.

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<sup>i</sup> The source of his comment is not very 'plain'. For the plain English campaign website, Rumsfeld's comments were at a "press briefing". John Ezard [Guardian website 02.12.2003] suggests the source is not so well-known (therefore not a "known-known?"), stating the comments were made at a "defence department meeting".