

Speaking in Ruddles

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Dr Neil James

During the Prime Minister's recent stay in China, much was made of his mastery of Mandarin. Yet Rudd speaks another language he might do well to improve: English. For during his early months in office, his speeches and interviews have hardly been a model of clarity.

In particular, Rudd tends to speak in officialese, an unnecessarily complex style that buries his main message. He will never do things soon, for example, but is 'committed to implementation during the course of the year ahead.' A good solution is not enough for a Prime Minister who is 'in the process of implementing world's best-practice instruments.' Nothing ever started recently, but 'in recent times prior to the commencement'.

This is the language of policy speak, a professional jargon that he no doubt mastered during his days as a diplomat. It can bewilder anyone outside the public service.

The Prime Minister seems to recognise this, but he compensates by tossing in well-worn clichés that only add muddle to the mix. At recent press conferences and doorstops, he spoke of giving the world economy a shot in the arm to remove major sticking points, and of putting our shoulder to the wheel while tightening our belt to keep a lid on the inflation bottle. While time is ticking away, we apparently need to get into gear and embrace the future because progress is not in the bag by any stretch of the imagination.

He even has the dubious distinction of adding two new clichés to the Australian lexicon: 'working families' and 'in due season'.

But does it matter that Rudd uses such an odd hybrid of policy speak and cliché? Perhaps speaking like a policy nerd simply reflects his competence to do the job.

It matters because policy competence is not enough. A Prime Minister also needs to communicate clearly with the people he represents. How can we understand his new direction in foreign policy, for example, when he speaks of making 'some form of conceptual synthesis' out of a 'natural complementarity', as he did in his speech to the Brookings Institute?

The Prime Minister's language is also important because it sets an example. When the bureaucracy hears officialese in its master's voice, it will more readily lapse into the kind of government-speak that hampers every public service. And it is only a short step from technically dense policy-speak to deliberately-deceptive prose.

Kevin Rudd would do well to heed to words of Aristotle, who advised the ideal orator to think like a wise man, but speak in the language of the common people. Until he masters this tongue, our Prime Minister will continue to speak in Ruddles.

Dr Neil James is Executive Director of the Plain English Foundation and author of Writing at Work.