EASY – PLAIN – ACCESSIBLE

Easy Language in German Public Administration

What? Who? How?

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English Figures

Frank & Timme

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Abstract

Accessible communication has found its way into German public administration. Since 2020, federal authorities have been obliged to provide information in Easy Language. The aim is to dismantle communication barriers between public authorities and citizens, i.e. between professionals and non-experts. But **what** is accessible communication and Easy Language? **Who** are the Easy Language actors within the authorities? Moreover, **how** do they produce Easy Language texts?

Elena Husel gives a first insight into the matter focusing on federal authorities in Germany. In a pointed and excellently illustrated manner, she presents the societal functions of Easy Language for the target groups. The focus is on the path from retrievability and perceptibility to comprehensibility as the core function of Easy Language. The author explains the legal framework and the implementation of Easy Language within the authorities. Her special focus is on the administrative actors who work with Easy Language, as well as on their creation process.

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Figure 1

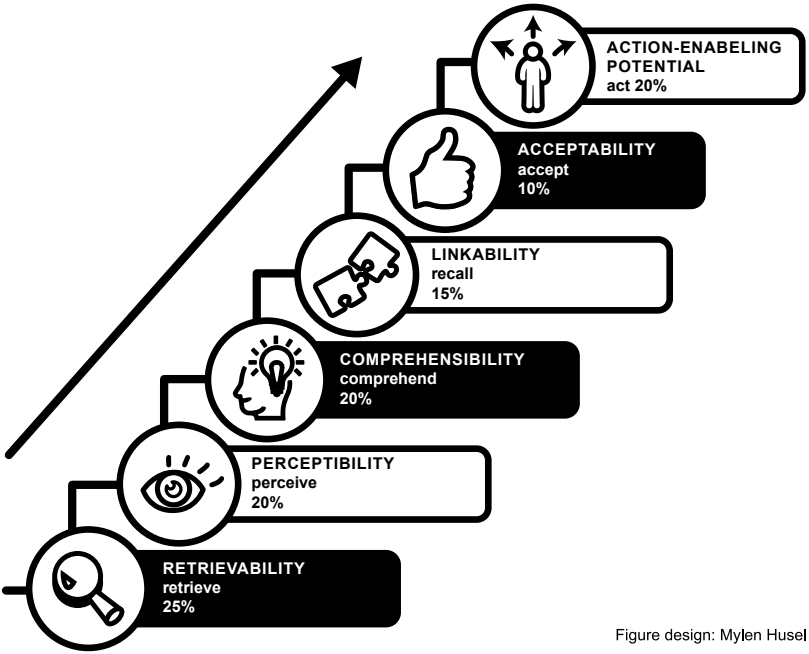

Figure 1: Accessible communication model "*Hildesheimer Treppe*". Text features in the first line and formatted in uppercase letters. Respective actions of recipients underneath. Own representation based on Rink/Maaß 2022: 11 and Maaß 2020a: 27. For the German figure see Husel 2022: 16.

The starting point for considering communication barriers is the Hildesheim school's accessible communication model, conceptualized by Maaß/Rink (2019: 24), which is here referred to as "*Hildesheimer Treppe*" (literally translated: staircase of Hildesheim). The model describes which process stages are necessary in order to make information accessible (Maaß 2020: 26 ff.). The process of accessibility can be modeled as an ascending staircase, which since the extension by Rink (2020: 79 ff.) comprises six steps. The representation

as a staircase clarifies that the individual process stages build on each other (figure 1).

The six stages of the accessible communication model "*Hildesheimer Treppe*" have a text and user perspective. Looking at the texts (formatted in uppercase letters in the figure), the following questions are asked: what features must texts have in order to be accessible? Are they retrievable in a specific situation for the intended target groups (stage 1)? Are they perceptible (stage 2), comprehensible (stage 3), linkable (stage 4), acceptable (stage 5) and action-enabeling (stage 6)?

Besides, this process can be viewed from a user perspective and the following questions can be asked: can recipients find texts in a specific situation (stage 1), perceive (stage 2) and understand them (stage 3), link them to prior knowledge and are they able to recall them (stage 4), accept them (stage 5) and finally act or make decisions based on the content (stage 6)?

Each of these stages has to be „managed by working memory, which has only a limited capacity - in all people, but even more so in some of the Easy Language target groups" (Maaß 2020: 27). Ideally, when going through the individual process stages, the recipients use up 20% of their cognitive capacity for retrieving texts (stage 1), 20% for perceiving (stage 2), 20% for understanding (stage 3), 20% for recalling (stage 4), 10% for accepting (stage 5) and 10% for acting (stage 6). If the processing capacity is overused at one stage, the recipients are no longer able to use the text for their actions (Rink 2020: 65). Recipients then find themselves confronted with communication barriers.

Figure 2

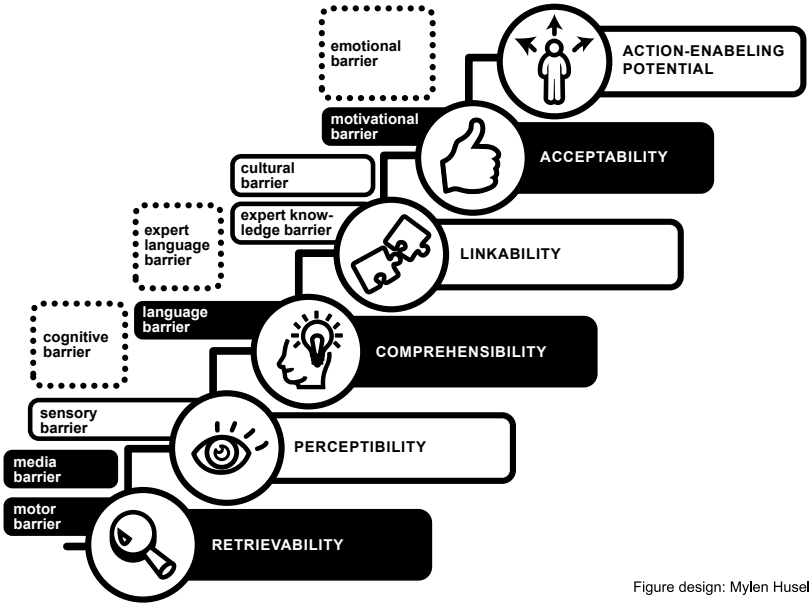

Figure 2: Textual communication barriers on the accessible communication model "*Hildesheimer Treppe*". Own representation based on Rink/Maaß 2022: 12 and Maaß 2020: 27. For the German figure see Husel 2022: 19.

Ten textual barrier types can be distinguished. Rink (2020: 136 ff.) differentiates between eight barrier types and Lang (2021: 113 ff.) expands the typology by two barrier types at the stage of acceptability (stage 5). The barrier types can be localized on the accessible communication model "*Hildesheimer Treppe*". They are presented in the order in which they can hinder or block the target groups' processing of information (figure 2). The location of the communication barriers is a prototypical and simplified representation and shows the accessibility process from text perspective only (also see Maaß/Rink 2022, in print).

Retrievability (stage 1): A motor barrier and a media barrier mean that content is available, but recipients cannot find it and therefore cannot use it.

A **motor barrier** occurs "when motor impairments affect access to content" (Rink 2020: 138, own translation). This applies, for example, to the accessibility of exhibition tables, the thickness of the paper or the handling of the computer mouse (ibid.). A **media barrier** includes the linguistic, medial and conceptual processing of text content, which, depending on the target groups profile, can impact negatively on perceptibility and comprehensibility (Rink 2019: 32).

Perceptibility (stage 2): A sensory barrier means that retrievable content cannot be perceived because the mediality of the Easy Language texts does not match the available sensory channels. A **sensory barrier** impairs "the acquisition of information where a functional sensory channel is a prerequisite for the perception of information" (Rink 2020: 137, own translation). This barrier occurs, for example, when content is conveyed through an acoustic channel to recipients with hearing impairment (ibid.).

Comprehensibility (stage 3): A cognitive barrier and a language barrier contribute to recipients not understanding perceptible content either temporarily or permanently. One speaks of a **cognitive barrier** when the content structure is cognitively overwhelming (Schubert 2016: 18). Cognitive barriers can be caused by lack of previous knowledge on a specific topic or high levels of abstraction that makes content not accessible for people with cognitive impairmet (Rink 2020: 137). Communicating in a specific individual language creates a **language barrier** for those people who have a different first language (Rink 2019: 31). In addition to language learners, people with prelingual deafness or aphasia can be affected by a language barrier (Rink 2020: 139).

Linkability (stage 4): An expert knowledge barrier, an expert language barrier and a cultural barrier occur when recipients understand the text content, but they cannot link it to previous knowledge and therefore cannot transfer it into the long-term memory. In the case of an **expert language barrier**, recipients understand the language, "but not the specialized language of the message" (Schubert 2016: 18, own translation). Unlike the expert language barrier, the **expert knowledge barrier** does not arise from linguistic formulations, but from the lack of subject-specific, content-related knowledge (ibid.). Both barrier types often occur in combination. A **cultural barrier** matters when "there is not enough cultural knowledge for deciphering the text. This includes

knowledge of discourses and text types as well as their linguistic, medial and conceptual design" (Rink 2020: 139, own translation).

Acceptability (stage 5): A motivational barrier and an emotional barrier mean that the target groups can reject a text despite content and grammatical coherence. A **motivational barrier** is based on a lack of habitual reading motivation and/or low general reading skills on the part of the recipients (Lang 2021: 117, 120). Since administrative texts are usually read with little intrinsic motivation, they should make particular efforts to be acceptable in order to reach their target groups (ibid.: 123). An **emotion barrier** is more closely linked to the reception situation (ibid.: 75): "Strong temporary emotions, such as an agitated state of mind, affect the concentration, short-term memory and thus text comprehension" (ibid.: 131 f., own translation).

Action-enabeling potential (stage 6): The stage of action-orientation has not yet been given its own barrier types. Nevertheless, this stage is of great importance for the implementation of the societal functions of Easy Language. If recipients can successfully evaluate accessible information, the foundation for social participation is laid.

Figure 3

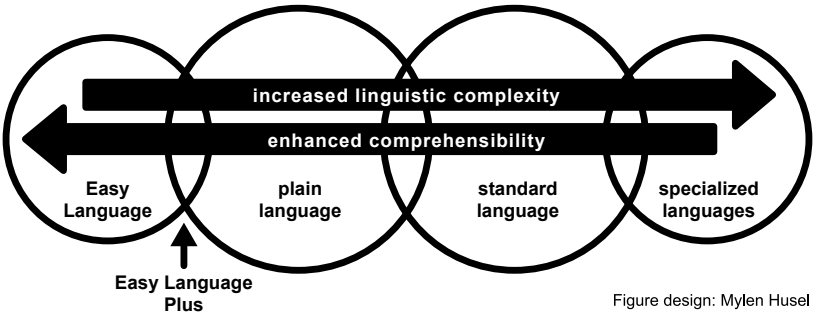

Figure 3: Easy Language, Easy Language Plus and plain language in the language variety continuum. Own representation based on Hansen-Schirra/Maaß 2020: 18. For the German figure see Husel 2022: 27.

A look at the language variety continuum clarifies the difference between Easy Language and plain language as "varieties with reduced complexity" (Bredel/Maaß 2016: 58, own translation, figure 3). Specialized communication is only understandable for a limited circle. Viewed from specialized languages and standard language, comprehensibility of texts is enhanced moving towards Plain Language and is maximally pronounced in Easy Language. Plain Language addresses a possibly large audience with clear and understandable formulations; Easy Language also does this and additionally takes the individual needs of the recipients into account (Lindholm/Vanhatalo 2021: 20). Thereby Easy Language is distanced further from standard language texts. Conversely, starting from Easy Language, the complexity of the linguistic means used increases steadily going towards the direction of plain Language and standard language and is maximally pronounced in specialized languages. However, the contentwise complexity of a topic is unaffected by the linguistic complexity.

Figure 4

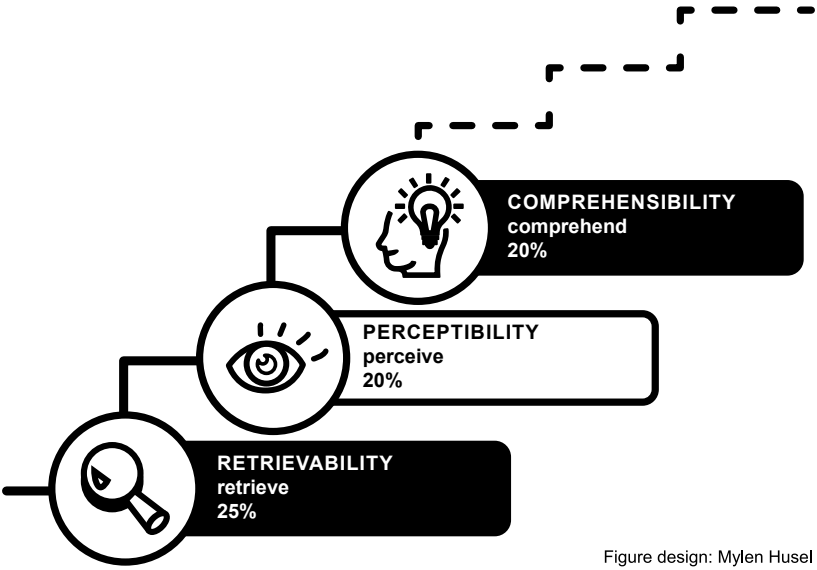

Figure 4: The first three stages of the accessible communication model "*Hildesheimer Treppe*". Own representation based on Rink/Maaß 2022: 11. For the German figure see Husel 2022: 30.

Perceptibility and comprehensibility are referred to as the "core functions of Easy Language" (Bredel/ Maaß 2016: 512, own translation). However, "maximally enhanced comprehensibility" (Maaß 2020: 88) is the distinctive feature of Easy Language texts. Prior to the stage of comprehensibility are the stages of retrievability and perceptibility (figure 4). Therefore, comprehensibility of Easy Language cannot be considered isolated. Linguistic, medial and conceptual strategies (Rink 2019: 60 f.) as well as multimedial and multicodal strategies can be used to dismantle communication barriers on the three stages concerned.

Figure 5

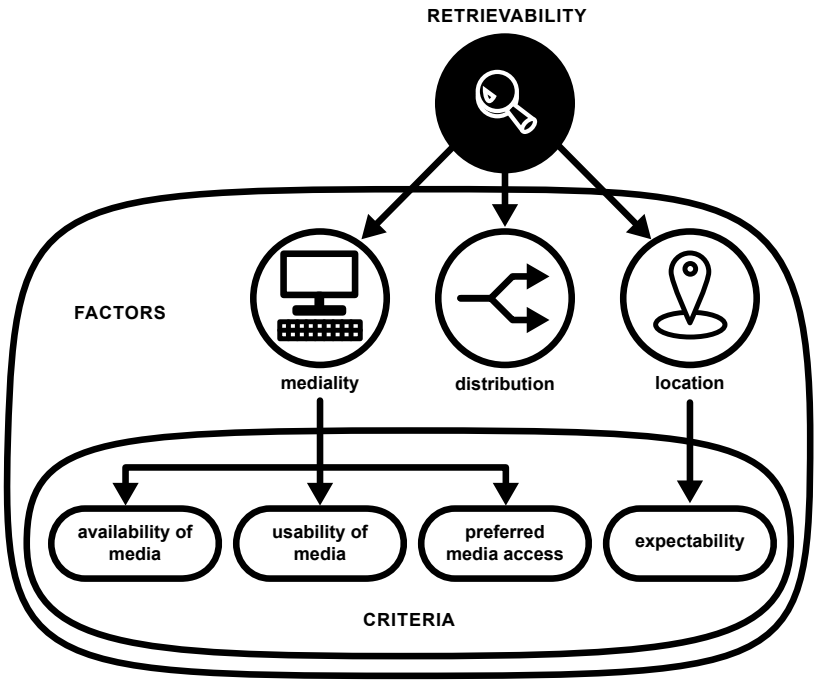

Figure design: Mylen Husel

Figure 5: Factors and criteria of retrievability. Own representation based on Maaß 2020: 30 and Rink 2020: 140f. For the German figure see Husel 2022: 32.

Retriebability of Easy Language texts increases if recipients can access texts on an available and usable device via the preferred media access at an expected and low-threshold location (figure 5).

The first factor of retrievability is **mediality**. Mediality concerns the question of which media are used to convey information, such as radio, newspapers or the Internet (Maaß 2020: 34). At the device level, media must meet three criteria in order to be retrievable: they must 1. be available, 2. be usable and 3. correspond to the preferred media access of the recipients (Rink 2020: 140f.):

With regard to the **availability of media**, these questions arise: which end devices are used to output Easy Language texts and do the intended target groups have access to these devices at all? (ibid.: 141). When it comes to the **usability of media**, the question is whether all potential recipients can actually handle the available devices and media safely (ibid.: 141). Here, motor impairments must be considered (ibid.: 138). With regard to the **preferred media access**, the media usage behavior of the target groups must be considered. If several media are available and usable for information acquisition, recipients often prefer certain media.

The second factor of retrievability is **distribution**. It should be as low-threshold and close to everyday life as possible, for example in libraries, kiosks or supermarkets (Maaß 2020: 34). It must be viewed critically that most Easy Language texts in Germany are only made available online (ibid.: 33). Although this reduces production and distribution costs, it is often neither appropriate nor sufficient for the needs of the recipients, especially for older people or people with cognitive impairments (ibid.: 33).

The third factor of retrievability is the **location** of media in mass of communication offers (Maaß 2020: 34). Here the "supposed transparency through an information oversupply [...] is opposed to the natural limitations of attention and information processing potential" (Szyszka 2020: 17). Recipients only search information in Easy Language in places where they also expect a communication offer (Maaß 2020: 33). Therefore, the criterion of **expectability** is relevant for the location of Easy Language. It is currently difficult to find texts because they are scattered and little known. For example, there is no central access page to all online Easy Language texts (ibid.).

Figure 6

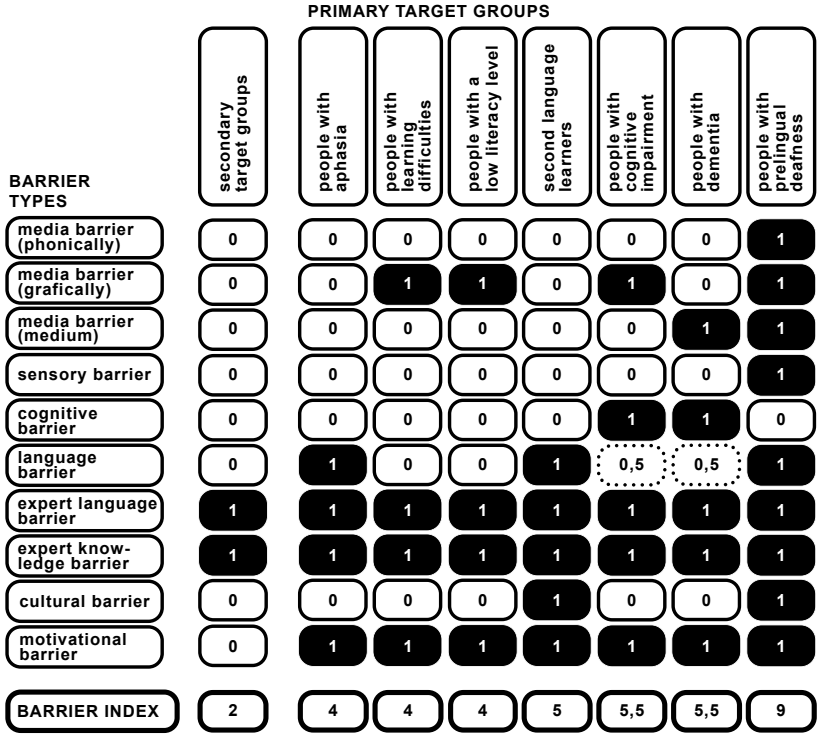

Figure 6: Modified Rink's Barrier Index. Own representation based on Rink 2020: 143, Lang 2021: 135 and Bredel/Maaß 2016: 161. For the German figure see Husel 2022: 43.

The primary and secondary target groups of Easy Language can encounter communication barriers when dealing with texts. These communication barriers can "complicate or even deny target groups with and without impairment access to the text object" (Rink 2019: 29, own translation). **Rink's Barrier Index** (Rink 2019: 57ff. and 2020: 142ff.) shows, how high the quantitative effect of communication barriers is for the individual target groups. Target groups of

Easy Language and types of communication barriers are compared in a table (figure 6).

Ten types of communication barriers are listed in the left column of the table: a media barrier in three manifestations, a sensory barrier, a cognitive barrier, a language barrier, an expert language barrier, an expert knowledge barrier, a cultural barrier and a motivational barrier. The motor barrier is not shown, because multiple disabilities are not assumed (Rink 2020: 144). Only the motivational barrier according to Lang (2021: 133ff.) is presented, since the emotional barrier is situational.

The Easy Language target groups are shown in the header of the table: As in Rink (2020: 145), the first group consists of secondary target groups without communication impairment who are non-experts. Administrative communication usually uses too much specialized language and requires too much specialized knowledge even for these target groups (ibid.). Subsequently, the primary target groups of Easy Language are listed according to increasing value in the barrier index. They are regarded as non-experts as well: people with aphasia, people with learning difficulties, people with a low literacy level, second or foreign language learners, people with cognitive impairment, people with dementia and people with prelingual deafness. As in Rink (2019: 144), the profile of deafblindness is not shown. People with visual impairment are not considered a primary target group of Easy Language as in Bredel/Maaß (2016: 131ff.) and are therefore not included in the table.

The index in the footer of the table is calculated as follows: The left column of the table groups the different barrier types; they either apply (1 point), do not apply (0 points) or partially apply (0.5 points) to the respective target groups (Rink 2020: 144). The sum of the points produces the barrier index in the bottom row of the table. "The barrier index thus increases with the number of barrier types applicable to the respective target groups" (ibid.: 166, own translation). The higher the value in the barrier index is, „the more extensive are the strategies in terms of text interventions and design" (ibid., own translation). The table adopts the updated index values by Lang (2021: 135).

Figure 7

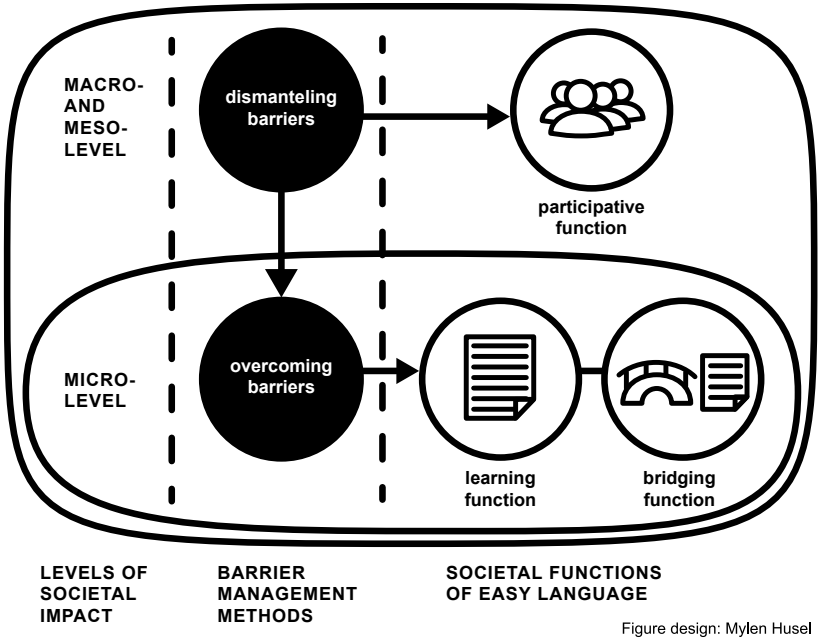

Figure 7: Societal functions of Easy Language. Own representation. For the German figure see Husel 2022: 51.

The consideration of societal functions of Easy Language (figure 7) begins with **dismantling communication barriers**. Dismantling barriers is the original textual method of accessible communication. The **participation function** of Easy Language derives from there: The basis for participation is created by making information accessible in Easy Language and evaluable by the recipients. Dismanteling barriers takes place at a societal meso level, as it enables individuals and groups to participate. As a result, it affects higher-level systems at a societal macro level.

Recipients can more easily overcome communication barriers that still exist but have been weakned. **Overcoming barriers** is based on the method of dismantling barriers, but lies in the hands of the recipients. The **learning and bridging function** of Easy Language results from overcoming barriers: Since Easy Language is adapted to the needs of the primary target groups, they experience success in reception and their self-efficacy expectations increase. This sets a learning process in motion that can go so far that Easy Language and the source text can be used parallelly. The learning and bridging functions occur at a societal micro level, where the focus is on individual development.

Figure 8

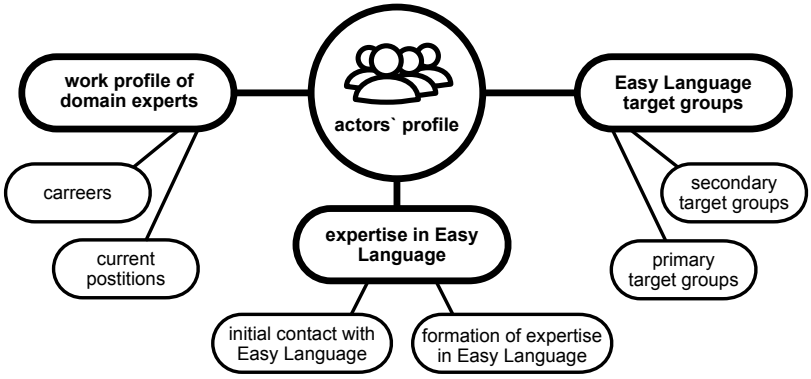

Figure design: Mylen Husel

Figure 8: Category system on the profile of actors responsible for the genesis of Easy Language texts in German Public Administration. Own representation. For the German figure see Husel 2022: 83.

Figure 9

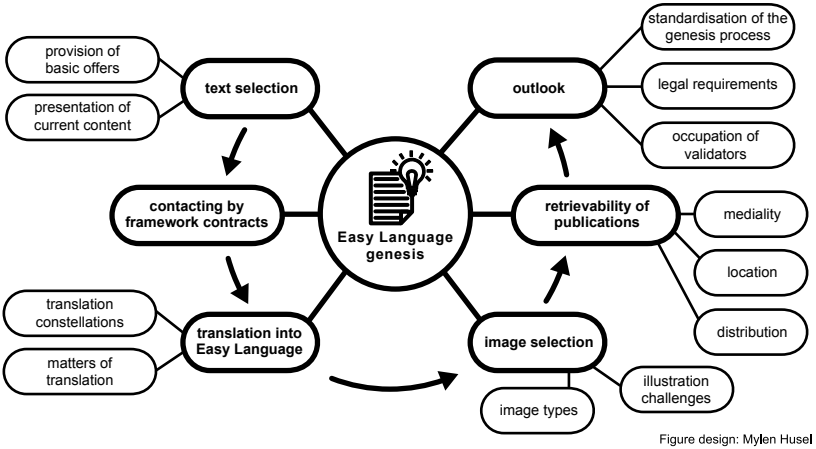

Figure 9: Category system on the genesis of Easy Language texts in German Public Administration. Own representation. For the German figure see Husel 2022: 95.

Figure 10

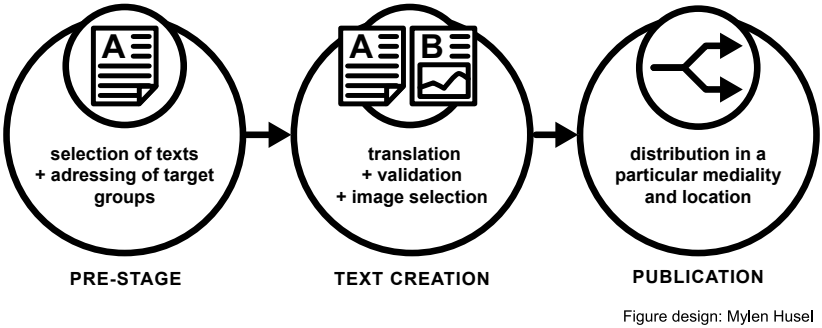

Figure design: Mylen Husel

Figure 10: Easy Language genesis process. Own representation. For the German figure see Husel 2022: 117.

A three-step process for the genesis of Easy Language texts in German federal authorities is derived from the interview data (figure 10): the process begins with a pre-stage phase, which includes the selection of source texts and addressing of target groups. This phase is followed by the text creation phase that includes translation, text validation and image selection. It is also accompanied by technical acceptance and correction loops within the authorities. The process ends with the phase of publication, that is, the distribution in a particular mediality and location.

Figure 11

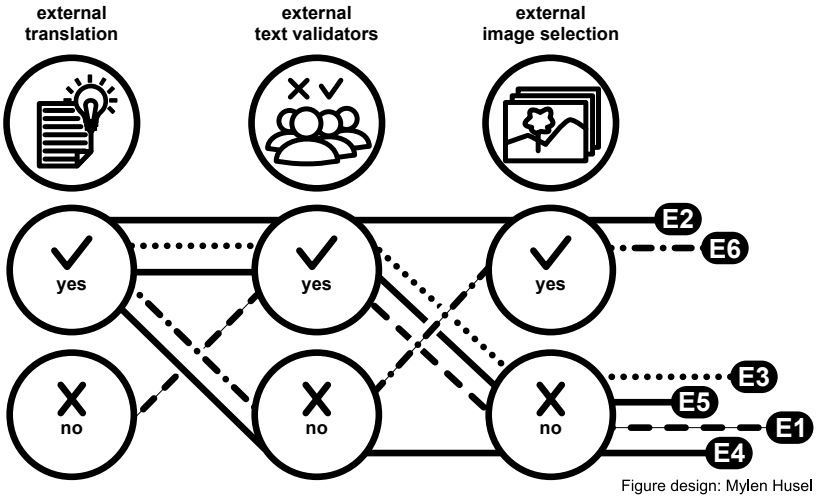

Figure 11: Case-constellations in the phase of Easy Language translation. Own representation. For the German figure see Husel 2022: 120.

Translation into Easy Language encompasses three components: 1. translation (external or internal), 2. involvement of external text validators (given or not) and 3. image selection (external or internal). The figure shows for all interviewees (abbreviations E1 to E6) whether the translation and image selection was carried out externally or internally and whether validators were involved or not (figure 11).

Expert E1 translated texts into Easy Language herself, involved a group of external validators and then selected the images within the authority. Expert E2 outsourced all three components, translation, validation and image selection to external service providers. Experts E3 and E5 also outsourced the translation and validation but selected some or all of the images internally. Expert E4 had the text translation outsorced without involving validators and then

internally selected the images. Expert E6 also outsourced the translation and did not involve validators, but also had the images selected externally outside of the authority.

Figure 12

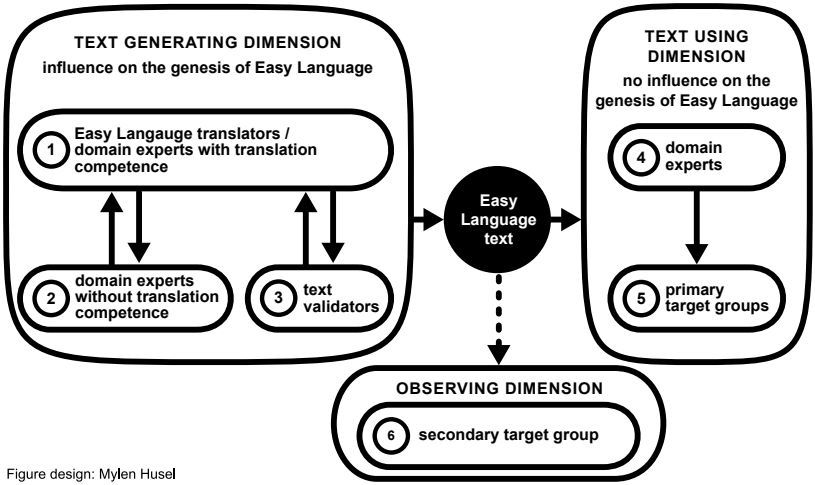

Figure 12: Modified model of Easy Language actors. Own representation based on Maaß 2020: 169. For the German figure see Husel 2022: 129.

The model of Easy Language actors by Maaß (2020: 169) is modified in the following (figure 12): the text-using dimension includes actors who influence the genesis of Easy Language. This dimension contains three profiles:

(1) Easy Language translators / domain experts with translation competence
(2) domain experts without translation competence
(3) text validators

(1) Easy Language translators or domain experts with translation competence communicate with (2) domain experts without translation competence and (3) text validators. When (2) domain experts within authorities involve (3) validators in the genesis of Easy Language, they do not communicate directly with them, but choose the detour via (1) Easy Language translators.

The completed Easy Language translations directly address members of the text-using and observing dimension. The text-using dimension consists of actors without influence on the genesis of Easy Language. Within the text-using and observational dimension, these three profiles are represented:

(4) domain experts
(5) members of the primary target groups
(6) members of the secondary target group

(4) Domain experts use Easy Language texts to communicate with (5) members of the Easy Language primary target groups. Unlike (3) text validators, (5) members of primary target groups do not influence the genesis of Easy Language but encounter the completed texts. The latter are also available to (6) members of the secondary target groups. They belong to the observing dimension, as they are not dependent on Easy Language to overcome communication barriers. Howover, they can also benefit from Easy Language texts.

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