

Unclear Economic Thinking

Waqas Younas



Citation: Younas, W (2020)

Unclear Economic Thinking.

Policy Perspective and Essays by Learner's Republic.

<https://learnersrepublic.com/>

February 2020

Unclear Economic Thinking

Waqas Younas ¹

Abstract

Pakistan's economy experiences turbulence often. Are our economic policymakers thinking clearly? Since clarity of thought is reflected in writing, this study analyzes for its clarity the policy literature that economic planners at the Ministry of Finance publish for the general public. The analysis was done in two parts. First, the suitability of the texts for the general public was analyzed. Second, the structure and style of the texts were examined, both manually and with algorithms. The results suggest Pakistan's economic writing is neither inclusive nor clear and easy to understand, suggesting that unclear thinking precedes our economic policy.

Key words: Economic writing, Economic policy analysis, Economic writing analysis, Economic thinking

¹ Waqas Younas is a technology entrepreneur with interests in entrepreneurship, writing, and public policy. He can be reached at wyounas@lumsalumni.pk. He also tweets at <http://www.twitter.com/wyounas>.

Introduction

Pakistan's economy finds itself in trouble frequently.

Some basic questions perplex the ordinary citizens of our country. Why is it that after seven decades of existence, we are still struggling economically? Why do the poor see not joy and success, but misery and failure?

Part of the problem may be unclear economic thinking on the part of our policymakers. Had thinking on the economy been clear, we would be in better shape.

One may counter by suggesting that thinking on the economy has mostly been clear, rather it is the execution that has been poor. I beg to differ. First, because our economic thinking and writing are not at all clear, as I will show. Second, because poor execution itself is a result of unclear thinking.

Thinking precedes not only actions but also the written word. If writing is clear and convincing, one can deduce that so is the thinking behind it. Likewise, if writing is vague, then so is the thinking behind it.

Thus, one way to assess the quality of our government's economic thinking is to analyze the economic literature it publishes for the public. I examined the Pakistan Economic Survey (Pakistan Economic Survey 2018-19) (hereafter called PES) and the "Roadmap for Stability and Growth" (A Roadmap for Stability and Growth, 2019), both published by the Ministry of Finance. They are important economic policy documents available for the public at large.

I prove my claim that our economic thinking is unclear in two ways. First, I assert that by publishing these documents in English, our economic experts disregard the background of the general public, most of which does not speak the language. In doing so, they leave the majority of our population in ignorance. Second, by analyzing the language structure in these documents, I conclude that the texts are difficult to understand. Because of this, even those who can understand English find it hard to understand the content. This shows that these policy documents are not designed for the average Pakistani citizen.

The results of this two-part analysis confirm that our economic thinking is unclear.

Suitability of Texts for General Consumption

Let's talk about the first part of my analysis.

Clear thinking leads to clear writing that helps readers gain information. This only happens if writers keep the background of their audience in mind. But the Ministry of Finance completely ignores its audience's capacity to understand its economic texts. Their writing is in English and full of jargon. The native languages of Pakistan, however, do not include English, and it is understood by few. Even many schooled in English are not schooled in economics.

Publishing these documents in this way indicates that our government is not inclusive. Only a lucky few here can understand complex economic writing in English. What about the rest? Should not such documents be published in Urdu as well as in regional languages?

Publishing these documents in national and regional languages in simple text (with useful visualizations) will help more people understand our economic policies. Even those who do not understand English and economics will feel included. Critically, this gain in understanding by the majority can also improve the national discourse around our grave economic issues.

Structure and Style of the Texts

The second part of this analysis considers the structure and style of both the PES and the “Roadmap.” The results show that the writers' style is unnecessarily complex and sometimes impenetrable.

This part of the analysis was influenced by the work of Harvard linguist Steven Pinker (Pinker 2013) and the Stanford Literary Lab (Moretti et al. 2015). This work suggests a few guidelines on how to write clearly in English.

Using those guidelines, I looked at the readability of the two texts, a list of vague words in them, the difficulty of their prose, and their grammar, formatting and citations. I also did a quick comparative analysis with a similar document published by a neighbouring country.

I determined the readability of two texts both manually and by using computer algorithms.

To manually validate the readability of the text, I showed the PES' first chapter to a few people. They all had undergraduate degrees in a discipline other than economics, and they all thought the text was hard to decipher. None could make much sense of it.

As for the algorithmic analysis, I wrote the software (Homer) that determined the readability of the texts using well-known algorithms (Dale et al. 1948 and Kincaid et al. 1975). This software takes text as input and outputs a result that gives us a general idea of whether or not the writing is easy to understand. The results showed that the text in these two documents is, in fact, difficult to understand, due to complex and unwieldy prose.

I also tracked in these two texts vague words such as "growth," "reform," "strategy," "framework," "management," "process," "portfolio" and "and". Most of these words should be avoided because the reader may infer a meaning the writer did not intend. But many of them, including "growth," "framework" and "strategy," were frequently used by the Ministry. The word "growth" is the favourite word of our economists; it appears more than 100 times in the first chapter of PES. I also found that the word "and", careless use of which can allow a writer to link unrelated ideas, is also used to excess.

In addition, I looked at the length and difficulty of the prose. Carelessly written, long paragraphs can be difficult to comprehend. They can complicate a document by developing more than one theme at a time. The same is true for lengthy sentences. By the time the reader is finished with such a sentence, he or she forgets what the beginning is about. Policy documents, meant for the public, should not contain too many paragraphs of more than six or seven sentences, or a lot of sentences that span more than 30 or 40 words.

But my analysis showed that these two documents freely make use of long paragraphs and sentences. Some paragraphs are as long as twelve troublesome sentences. I also found many long sentences - e.g. a sentence comprising about 80 words. These

should be avoided because not only do they strain the memory of the reader, but also may develop unrelated ideas.

Moreover, I saw many grammatical errors in both documents. On the first four pages of the first chapter of the PES alone, one finds more than a couple dozen grammatical, spelling and punctuation errors. These are official policy documents, meant to be read by everyone. Thus they should be carefully proofread before they are published.

Further, improper typography and text formatting make these official texts unappealing and dry for the reader. I did not come across many useful or interesting visualizations, which could have made the text more engaging.

Also, the policies outlined in these documents affect millions of people. One assumes that background research must have taken place, and policymakers must have consulted various studies before writing. Surprisingly, there were no citations in these texts. This gives the impression that perhaps nothing was read or consulted before the documents were written.

A cursory look at the Indian Economic Survey (Indian Economic Survey 2018-2019) surprised me, particularly after reading the PES. The Indian Economic Survey is translated into languages other than English, promoting inclusiveness. It also cites relevant studies. Moreover, it talks about modern ideas such as behavioural economics, use of data and technology. Finally, it is a better-formatted document.

Conclusion

The goal of this two-part analysis is not to criticize personnel working at the Ministry of Finance. I have no doubt their intentions are good. I also do not doubt

their well-meaning service to the Ministry of Finance. But they will be of even greater service to our nation if they can bring clarity to our economic thinking. The hopes, well-being and fortunes of millions depend on it.

Unclear economic writing indicates unclear economic thinking. Clear economic thinking, by the government, is important broadly for two reasons. First, not only can it bring prosperity to the average person, it can also uplift the poor from misery and agony. Second, engaging and easy-to-understand policy documents can help improve our national discourse on grand economic issues. This can then only strengthen, not weaken, Pakistan's democracy.

Thus, our leaders must prioritize clear economic thinking. They should remember that posterity will remember them kindly not for unclear policies that decreased citizens' welfare, but for clear thinking that increased their well-being.

References

Pakistan Economic Survey 2018-19. Ministry of Finance, Government of Pakistan.

http://www.finance.gov.pk/survey_1819.html. Accessed December 4, 2019.

A Roadmap for Stability and Growth. (April 2019). Ministry of Finance, Government of Pakistan.

http://www.finance.gov.pk/A_Roadmap_for_Stability_and_Growth_April_8.pdf.

Accessed December 4, 2019.

Pinker S. (September 2015). *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*. Penguin Books.

Moretti F. & Pestre D. (March 2015). *Bankspeak: The Language of World Bank Reports 1946-2012*. Pamphlet 9. Stanford Literary Lab.

Homer, A text-analyzer in Python. <https://github.com/wyounas/homer>. Accessed December 4, 2019.

<https://litlab.stanford.edu/LiteraryLabPamphlet9.pdf>. Accessed December 4, 2019.

Dale E., Chall J. (1948). "A Formula for Predicting Readability." *Educational Research Bulletin*.

Kincaid, J.P., Fishburne, R.P., Rogers, R.L., & Chissom, B.S. (1975). Derivation of new readability formulas (automated readability index, fog count, and flesch reading ease formula) for Navy enlisted personnel. Research Branch Report 8-75. Chief of Naval Technical Training: Naval Air Station Memphis

Indian Economic Survey 2018-2019. Ministry of Finance, Government of India.

<https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/economicsurvey/>. Accessed December 4, 2019.