

# Successful cross-cultural communication requires us to test our assumptions

by Geoff Hart

Everyone's heard about the ignorant tourist who is visiting a foreign country and having difficulty communicating with the natives. The tourist tries to communicate in English, our modern lingua franca, and when the native fails to understand, the tourist repeats exactly the same sentence, but louder and slower. After all, everyone must speak English, so the problem must be volume and pacing. At best, both people shrug, smile placatingly, and move on, having failed to communicate; at worst, tempers rise, and both leave with greatly reduced respect for the other person's culture.

It would be nice if we all spoke dozens of languages and could avoid such problems, but in reality, most of us lack that skill. Instead, we face the tourist's problem whenever we try to communicate in our own language with colleagues or clients from other cultures. The most common communication problems arise when we assume the other person thinks the same way we do and shares our understanding of what we're trying to say. We writers make this mistake less often, because we've learned to identify and eliminate such assumptions in our writing; this lets us add the missing context or explain our hidden assumptions to ensure we communicate successfully. But we're not immune to the problem either, particularly in oral communication, when we have less time to revise our words.

People who live where interactions among multiple languages and cultures are part of everyday life have an enormous advantage over North Americans, for whom multilingual and multicultural communication is an exceptional situation. For example, many Europeans and Asians can communicate effectively, if not elegantly, in a second or third language, but most North Americans are stubbornly unilingual. Unfortunately, familiarity with a multilingual context doesn't ensure successful communication either; despite my multicultural awareness, I repeatedly forget the difference between US letter-size paper and European A4, and even though I live in Canada, a British Commonwealth nation, I work with so many American authors that I tend to assume US English is international English. It seems to be fundamental to human nature that we assume our audience shares our assumptions, and that's only rarely true.

With practice, we can learn to consciously use the same thought process we use to clarify our writing whenever we must use our own language to communicate with someone from a different culture. In this article, I'll explore some ways to increase the likelihood of success.

## Understand the culture

Most of us recognise the difficulty of dealing with other cultures, and are willing to at least make an effort to adapt our communication style. Those of us who speak English as our first language, and particularly North Americans, recognise English's role as an international language, and tend to assume that other cultures will make an effort to accommodate our linguistic imperialism. It's certainly true that people of a host country will try to extend a host's courtesy to visitors who don't speak their language, but we shouldn't rely on this in our professional communication. Making even a simple effort to learn a host country's customs lets us show respect for their culture, and that respect is returned. In contrast, failing to make that effort can lead to resentment, and that can compromise even communication that would otherwise be clear. Once offence is given, it's too late; "you never get a second chance to make a first impression", and that first impression can interfere with all subsequent communication.

As communicators, we should strive to understand other cultures well enough that we can at least avoid the obvious traps. Something we writers often forget, focused as we are on words, is that communication begins long before we have a chance to exchange many words. For example, business meetings often begin with an exchange of business cards. North Americans tend to glance briefly at a card before shoving it into a pocket. In China, this would be insulting behaviour, so before travelling in China, I trained myself to accept an offered card with both hands, read it carefully, pronounce the name and smile, and ask whether I had pronounced the name correctly. In return, I offered my own card with both hands simultaneously, held so my colleague could read it without having to turn it around. The effort was always appreciated.

In most Asian cultures, establishing a friendly relationship must precede efforts to focus on business, and if you don't understand this, you'll receive a cool reception. When I communicate with Asian colleagues, I consciously try to break my North American habit of writing concisely and getting quickly to the point. After I've completed the initial formalities, I'll often comment on the weather or any interesting work I've been doing, and during our annual Chinese lantern festival (Shanghai ships thousands of handmade silk lanterns to Montreal each year), I'll mention this to my Chinese colleagues and send them a link to photos. Many reply with pictures and anecdotes of their own.

Even within multicultural Europe, cultural differences can disrupt communication. Germany, for example, is a stereotypical low-context culture that values direct, concise, straight-to-the-point communication, whereas Spain is a high-context culture that values relationships and the context surrounding communication ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/High\\_context\\_culture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/High_context_culture)). Although such stereotypes can mislead us, deep cultural roots may underlie a stereotype and explain why people communicate in a certain way and how we can accommodate that approach. In urban Quebec, for instance, conversations switch back and forth between French and English as speakers choose the language that offers the most flexibility to express a given concept or to help less-skilful speakers who are having difficulty. Conversations that begin in the group's majority language soon become a Babel of multilingual idiom. This is a common pattern: those who try to understand and accommodate people from another culture are accorded equal respect.

### Speak slowly

The tourist who speaks slowly but loudly seems foolish, but there's logic to this approach. When we must speak to a foreign audience in our own language, we must remember that they lack our experience with the language and cannot easily compensate for faults in our speech. Speaking slower (without emulating a dying tape recorder) gives them time to recognise individual words and determine their meaning; speaking louder (without shouting) makes the words more distinct because it focuses our attention on pronouncing words distinctly. It's not the volume or pace that is important, but rather the effort to concentrate on the words rather than using all the bad habits we've acquired from over-familiarity with our language.

This approach is particularly useful when working with interpreters. When I spoke about technical communication during a visit to China, I consciously spoke louder and more slowly than usual (I have a quiet voice and speak fast when I'm excited), and paused and relaxed between sentences. This gave audience members who spoke some English more chance to understand what I was saying, and gave the interpreter time to reiterate what I had said in Chinese without feeling rushed. In addition, I paused slightly longer than usual after displaying a new line of text in PowerPoint so everyone had a chance to read and absorb that line before I began speaking about it; because most people understand written language better than its spoken form, this increased the likelihood my audience would correctly discern my spoken words. I also printed my presentation for the interpreters, along with explanations of difficult or technical points, and gave them copies well before my talk so they had time to understand my presentation and ask me about anything unclear.

The difference between speaking your own language to a compatriot (in the original sense of that word, namely someone from your country) and speaking to someone from another culture is analogous to the difference between movies and a live performance. Film-makers focus closely

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on the faces of actors so that even subtle and nuanced gestures and facial expressions are clearly visible. Particularly now that we can watch a movie on DVD, they know we can replay a scene if we missed something. But at a live performance, we're farther from the actors and can't replay scenes, and we must concentrate to exclude distractions such as the scenery; even for those in the front row, there are no 'extreme close-ups'. That forces performers to speak louder and exaggerate their gestures to ensure that nobody will miss what they're trying to communicate. As a result, stage performers sometimes appear to be 'over-acting' on television because they haven't yet learned to overcome these habits. When we speak to someone in a language they don't understand well, we must reverse that process to some extent.

### Suppress your reflexes

Each of us develops certain communication reflexes that become subconscious. People who know us well can learn to understand them, but others may not be so fortunate. For example, I type '<g>' frequently in my e-mail messages; the 'g' stands for 'grin', and is the equivalent of the smiley face icon. In North America, this identifies a comment that should not be taken seriously, and it's a useful way to emulate the way we smile during a conversation to ensure that listeners will understand what we're saying as an attempt to amuse and engage our conversational partners. Recently, I typed <g> in an e-mail message to a Filipino colleague whose impeccable English led me to assume she would understand. Her reply made it clear that she hadn't understood, and because I was paying attention, I noticed this and was able to explain what I'd done. Paying attention to her nonverbal cues told me I'd behaved reflexively without confirming that she would understand, and correcting the problem led to an interesting conversation that taught me much about the Philippines.

Because these kinds of reflexes are subconscious, we tend not to notice them, but we can at least learn to pay attention to how people respond to what we say and do. It can be helpful to ask a friend to point out what we're doing wrong; once we're aware of a problem, we can learn to suppress it. More often, we must identify potential problems ourselves because we won't have someone to monitor our actions. Before travelling to India, I learned that food should not be touched with one's left hand—problematic, given that I'd spent much of my life eating this way. For the month before my trip, I actually sat on my left hand at the start of each meal until I'd learned to touch food only with my right hand.

Both examples show how learning what might offend my colleagues and looking for their reactions would let me look for bad habits I needed to suppress. Only when you're aware of a problem can you try to solve it.

### Suppress language reflexes

Similar problems arise in our writing and speech, often from unconscious assumptions that shape how we frame our thoughts. Idiomatic phrases are a particular problem, as they differ dramatically between cultures. In Quebec, for example, the French use obscenities based on Catholic reli-

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gious practice, whereas the English use obscenities based on body parts and bodily functions. Most cross-cultural communication won't involve obscenities, but I've chosen this example to dramatise how the sources of idiom differ. Another example is that many American idioms used in business writing are based on sports, such as 'getting to first base with a client' (baseball) or 'making an end run around an obstacle' (American football). This is less common in non-English cultures, but also varies among English cultures; for example, the British might speak of a 'sticky wicket' (cricket) to refer to a difficult or embarrassing situation.

Verbs also pose problems, and not just because languages differ in their preferred verb tenses and in verb conjugations. For example, the subjunctive is a dying part of English and passive voice is discouraged, whereas both are alive and well in French. Phrasal verbs pose particularly serious problems, because they are idiomatic and thus, metaphorical. For example, the phrase 'served notice' requires an understanding that 'serving' means 'delivery' and 'notice' means you want the person to notice something; 'informed' or 'alerted' says this more clearly because both verbs are largely free of metaphor. But even the non-metaphorical 'have to' is not immediately obvious because 'have' indicates possession; 'need to' or 'must' are easier to understand.

Complex sentences containing parenthetical clauses are another problem, particularly in speech. Our audiences are not stupid, and will eventually be able to untangle the meaning of such sentences, but doing so requires more effort. The problem relates to limitations on human short-term memory: while reading or hearing our own language, we process the components of a sentence easily and extract their meaning rapidly. But understanding a foreign language is slower, and we often lose the last part of a sentence while our attention is focused on understanding the first part. In speech, we can slow our pace to avoid this problem; in both speech and writing, we can break longer sentences into shorter ones, or simplify the sentence so the parenthetical information and clauses are easier to identify and understand.

Synonyms are yet another problem, particularly for English, which has the world's richest vocabulary. As James Nicoll famously observed, "We don't just borrow words; on occasion, English has pursued other languages down alleyways to beat them unconscious and rifle their pockets for new vocabulary." As writers, we take great pleasure flourishing our vocabulary, and English offers many words to abuse in this way. Unfortunately, it takes considerable time and effort to acquire such fluency, and in cross-cultural situations, most of our audience won't share our skill. For such audiences, simpler is better. Metaphorically, a '\$10 word' is longer, more complicated, or more obscure, and thus 'more expensive to purchase' than shorter, simpler, more familiar '\$1 words'. But in a very practical sense, the \$10 words are also more expensive in terms of the mental effort audiences must exert to understand them and in terms of the cost of failed communication. Using simpler and more familiar words seems to suppress our creativity, but we still have ample opportunity for linguistic virtuosity when we use simpler words.

Synonyms can also lead to confusion over the intended meaning. Technical writers learn a useful trick related to synonyms: wherever possible, we use each word to convey only a single meaning, to avoid words with multiple (potentially confusing) meanings, and to avoid using two words to communicate the same meaning. This eliminates three potential sources of confusion over the meaning of a word. The European Association of Aerospace Industries' Simplified Technical English (<http://www.simplifiedenglish-aecma.org/>) takes this approach to extremes, because its practitioners face a uniquely difficult challenge: creating English that will be understood correctly, after some training, by culturally diverse audiences around the world. (Translation and localisation would be a better solution, but when you're translating thousands of pages of complex documentation into dozens of languages simultaneously, this may be logistically and economically impossible.)

### Conclusion

Successful cross-cultural communication depends on the same skills we use to write clearly: we must spend the time required to understand our audience, identify our assumptions, and determine whether the audience shares those assumptions. When they don't, we can make our assumptions explicit or choose a different approach so the audience shares our understanding. Some of the assumptions we make are cultural, others are linguistic, and others combine aspects of both. But all these assumptions arise from the same root: even when we're communicating with someone from our own culture who knows us well and shares our language, they exist in the separate world of their own mind. It's the gap between those worlds that creates different assumptions and different interpretations of the world.

Editors understand this problem because we spend much of our careers solving problems that result from authorial assumptions readers don't share. This statement reflects more than just pride in my profession. I'm the author of more than 300 published articles, and each one has been a new lesson about my ignorance of my own assumptions. Learning to edit our own writing minimises such ignorance because we learn to test our assumptions, but the lesson is stronger when someone else does the teaching; each of us is somewhat blind to our own assumptions. Successful cross-cultural communication requires us to learn enough of other cultures that we understand how their assumptions differ from ours, then apply the same critical skills we learn from editing our written communication and having it edited by others to reveal our own assumptions.

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