12-1-2007

Bridging Cultural Barriers in Bicultural Projects: More than Translation and Interpretation of Language

Taira Koybaeva
Utah State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/gbl

Taira Koybaeva
Utah State University

BRIDGING CULTURAL BARRIERS IN BICULTURAL PROJECTS: MORE THAN TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION OF LANGUAGE

"What kind of bird are you if you can't sing?" chirped the bird.
"What kind of bird are you if you can't swim?" quacked the duck.
Prokofiev in *Peter and the Wolf*

Managers directly responsible for intercultural enterprises, while usually well versed in the technical aspects of their responsibilities, often lack the required intercultural expertise, including foreign language skills. This situation is not surprising, since such managers usually earn these positions as successful technical specialists who have been rewarded with ever-increasing responsibilities over their careers until, ultimately, those responsibilities cross international boundaries. Once assigned, they seldom, if ever, have the time necessary for the specific cross-cultural training needed. This is true of managers from other countries as well as the U.S. The trend is readily apparent in joint U.S.-Russian aerospace and defense projects, which can be large and expensive in terms of the number of people, time, equipment, materials, and supplies involved.

Translators and interpreters are trained to help bridge intercultural barriers, usually by facilitating communication through the translation and interpretation of different languages. These people are experts. They spend many years mastering the vocabulary and grammar of different languages, including their native tongues. They advance through their own professional ranks, usually based upon language expertise. Their careers progress, not necessarily according to the difficulty of the language involved, although that could happen, but rather, as the projects on which they work become increasingly important. As all influences on meaning become increasingly important in this progression--language,

culture, personality, context, etc.--the additional influences beyond language alone often stretch beyond the expertise of the language expert.

These comments are not intended to be critical of the highly qualified managers, administrators, or translators/interpreters responsible for intercultural enterprises. As stated, the lack of multicultural awareness among managers and the relatively narrow focus on language by many language experts is not unexpected. It is, however, a practical condition that must be addressed in almost all intercultural endeavors.

All of those involved in these projects face not only technical challenges, which are significant in and of themselves, but also serious complicating factors of language, culture, individual differences, and other situational complexities. For references showing examples on the influence of language and culture on international management, see Victor, 1992; Scollon and Scollon, 1994; Cohen, 1997; Parhizgar, 2002; and Thomas, 2002. These additional challenges must be met in order to overcome the technical ones of more direct interest. Language is only the first and most obvious intercultural concern. Even if all parties "speak the same language," differences in the use of specific words, phrases, and grammar sometimes pose problems because the parties define words and phrases somewhat differently and use different grammatical conventions, based upon either incomplete understanding or differences in specific dialects of the language learned.

Culture--that broad concept encompassing a myriad of human institutions composing a particular society, along with various behavioral conventions, artifacts, and other important geographical, ethnic, economic, and political influences--strongly influences the behavior, attitudes, and relationships of the members of a particular society. References regarding what constitutes the concept of culture include Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1954; Hall, 1969, 1976; Hoftstede, 1991; Cohen, 1997; Parhizgar, 2002; and Thomas, 2002. Virtually everything a person thinks, says, and does is influenced to some degree by his/her cultural heritage. Hall writes:

> Deep cultural undercurrents structure life in subtle but highly consistent ways that are not consciously formulated. Like the invisible jet streams in the skies that determine the course of a storm, these currents shape our lives (9)

Cultures differ among different societies, often quite significantly, and the greater the cultural differences the greater the challenge. When people of different cultural heritages work together, these cultural influences can create misunderstandings and interfere with the work itself. Also, the challenge of intercultural endeavors can be compounded by individual differences between the personalities of human beings, as they reflect variations in their native cultures.

Culture may be understood not only in the context of ethnicity, national traditions and values, politics, and economics, but also with respect to a person's professional community, even according to one's organizational associations. Scientists and engineers usually seem to compose a unique subculture in almost any society, for example, and yet, scientists and engineers in one society usually embody cultural traits quite different from scientists and engineers in another society, even though their professional interests may be similar.

Unfortunately, too many managers and others are not aware or adequately sensitive to all of the influences in international undertakings, except perhaps as a vague sense of uneasiness; and even when specifically aware and sensitive to the need, seldom do they possess all of the necessary skills to deal with these challenges.

LANGUAGE AND MEANING

The usual first concern of intercultural endeavors has to do with differences in language. It is easy to conclude that what is needed is simply the translation of one language to the other. Sometimes, participants might even naively believe that all that is needed is a quick study of a little grammar, a few phrases, and a dictionary. The world witnessed, via television, President John F. Kennedy emphatically exclaim to thousands of Germans crowded into the street of Berlin to hear his moving address, "I am a jelly donut!" His unknowing insertion of the article *ein* into the sentence "Ich ben [ein] Berliner!" changed its meaning from "I am a Berliner!" to the ridiculous exclamation he actually broadcast to Berlin and the world. "Ein Berliner" is a particular kind of German pastry. A more accurate expression of what he intended to say would be, "Ich ben aus Berlin," which might be translated, "I am from Berlin," a phrase perfectly communicating his intended message, although it seems illogical to English speakers. Fortunately, the Germans understood his intent, forgave his poor knowledge of German, and embraced the grandeur of the moment.

Nonetheless, it could well have been embarrassing for the President and his foreign relations team if the error was reported to them. A similar error, perhaps one not so immediately obvious, however, could threaten an intercultural project, set off an international scandal, or worse.

Inherent Problems of Language

Several problems inherent to language are familiar to almost any translator or interpreter. The first reflects one of the wonderful traits of language, almost any language. Modern languages allow a single idea to be expressed in a multitude of ways, using many different words, phrases, and grammatical constructions. In fact, no two people are likely to express the same idea the same way. Much of our personalities is expressed in our unique use of languages. Also, such differences can convey infinite nuances and levels of meaning, and some people simply are more skilled in expressing their ideas than others. A "pretty flower with red petals" to one person is a "floral symbol of eternal affection" to another.

A second problem inherent is the nature of language is the evolution of definitions within different cultures. As cultures evolve, even those using the same language, definitions change to accommodate new meanings. It is easy to understand, then, that words in different languages denoting similar meanings are likely to embody slightly different meanings. The word meaning "equal" in one language, for example, can have a different meaning, with various different connotations, from the comparable word in another language. In the one case, the word *equal* might mean *the same amount*. In the second case, the word might be similar, but additionally imply *fairness*.

Such differences can prove insidious because it may take months to discover subtle, but significant differences in the meanings of words. In one such example, Russian and U.S. aerospace teams organize the "space segments" and "ground segments" of their programs slightly differently. Each phrase means approximately the same thing in both languages, but not quite. Some things that would be considered as part of the space segments and ground segments in Russian projects are somewhat different in U.S. space segments and ground segments. In one project, even though the translations were accurate, before the discovery of this difference, they caused confusion (translate that word *confusion* to mean "misunderstanding and administrative delays") between the two sides.

A third inherent problem occurs due to incompatible grammar. Messages are often sent through the selection of a particular grammar, rather than the words themselves. Sometimes there is no equivalent manner of expression in a different language. For example, modality of obligation is expressed differently in Russian and English. In Russian, an expression that "you must do such and such" has a much softer meaning, more like a suggestion than the same English phrase, which implies a demand or command.

All of these problems are encountered even at elementary levels of foreign language study and are commonly understood among professional translators and interpreters. Nonetheless, even these rather obvious problems continue to torment intercultural enterprises. As challenging as these difficulties are, however, other challenges make the understanding and reflection of meaning in intercultural communication vastly more difficult.

Machine Translation

Modern computer software is capable of translating languages quickly and inexpensively. This often is called *machine translation*. Given the present state of the technology, this strategy can sometimes be risky. Sofer states, however:

> As long as language continues to communicate more than the immediate literal meaning of words, as long as there are shades of meaning [that] keep changing all the time, as long as people have to make value judgments about the meaning and intent of a text, one will continue to need human [interpreters] to get the job done. (156)

The full impact of this idea may not be apparent at first. It often takes some time to discover hidden complexities in language, even in seemingly straightforward technical translation. The time it takes to discover such things is costly for a program, time usually unscheduled and robbed from other tasks, and often results in significant delays.

Technological Cultures

It might seem that there should be little problem with the translation of technical terminology. Technical terms, however, often are not consistent between cultures. Different *technological cultures* sometimes adopt similar technology, then modify it to suit their own needs, circumstances, and ideas. Sometimes scientists and engineers in different cultures simply invent their own, separate, technologies and do not share. Ess states, with respect to non-technical influences on technology:

> Although many engineers may...[take] the position that the technologies they build are [politically, culturally, and economically] neutral...social [scientists often]...say that technology is socially constructed. In recent years, numerous instances of how technical artifacts embody political, cultural, or economic positions have been identified. (48)

Consider the cases of the Russian and U.S. aerospace technologies. For decades, these two countries engaged in an expensive and globally significant rivalry for aerospace supremacy. Working separately, they developed different technologies, both successful in that their equipment worked but quite different in significant ways. Each responded to its own cultural, technical, political, and economic conditions. What is more, both worked in relative secrecy until very recently.

Neither Russia nor the United States had a well-developed aerospace industry immediately after World War II. Both, however, inherited much of Germany's expertise in rocketry and launched their own, separate, industries. The successful flight of Sputnik, in Soviet Union's early space program served as a rallying cry in the United States for greater efforts in its own space program. The race was on!

The electronic age was underway in the U.S. and provided massive electronic computing capability in the space exploration effort. The Soviet Union, in contrast, was relatively backward compared to the U.S. economically and with respect to advanced technology. The Soviets made a prodigious effort to overcome their economic and technical disadvantages, which required the development of a space industry from its very foundation. The Soviet space industry had little computing expertise. In order to compensate for this relative weakness, Soviet aerospace scientists and engineers developed excellent skills in mathematics. The government dedicated many scientists, engineers, and workers to the task of

solving what seemed innumerable technical challenges. They focused on huge rockets capable of launching almost any payload into outer space.

In the early 1990s, when scientists and engineers from the two countries began joint projects, the Russian specialists were greatly surprised that an attitude control system, a crucial part of a satellite, was designed by only two people on a typical U.S. design team. A similar system in Russia would have taken more than 30 such specialists.

From this brief background, one can understand that the simple phrase, "design of attitude control," implies a much different process for the American aerospace scientist than it does for the Russian. This difference in meaning is due, not necessarily to the ultimate intent of the instrument (although that, too, turns out to be somewhat different) but rather, to the technological approach of the process in the different cultures. What is evident in this one small example can permeate virtually the whole of a project.

Another difficulty arose in an early aerospace project between Russian and U.S. teams, when a simple difference in wiring conventions went undetected until after deployment of the satellite, which failed to perform its scientific mission. The entire multimillion-dollar project was considered a technical failure, contributing little more than space junk to either program.

Differences in technological culture also may manifest themselves in totally different terms, even in concept, in reference to the same thing. A *bus* to a U.S. aerospace scientist denotes the part of the satellite with thrusters that propels the payload through space when changing orbits or maneuvering while in orbit. This same part to a Russian engineer constitutes a "platform" on which the payload rides through space. These are but U.S. buses and Russian platforms contain slightly different technical components, making them conceptually different entities. Failure to understand that difference delayed a crucial step in the design stage of one project and threatened funding of the project.

Differences in technological culture also can occur even in the manner of analysis. Russian scientists and engineers, for example, often break a project apart into multiple, separate areas and analyze each one in detail. U.S. aerospace scientists and engineers more often analyze an entire project in layers, simultaneously considering all the parts together from the outset, but in increasing detail as the project progresses.

Nothing reflects cultural differences in technology more clearly than technical documentation. It is here that managers finally realize where differences in technology and culture are likely to affect the success of a project. For example, the typical Russian technical documentation process totally segregates different aspects of a project, such as design, cost, production, maintenance, management, etc., whereas U.S. technical documentation generally integrates all aspects of a project, so that each document articulates with other related documents. Consequently, both parties can become confused and frustrated by the manner of preparing technical documents and meanings attached to such documentation.

Politics, Economics, Administration, and Pride

Political differences between nations, especially as manifested in differences in governmental administration, compound language differences, even in simple, straightforward references. If one speaks to a U.S. bureaucrat about "approval" of a project plan, the U.S. bureaucrat might envision a time-consuming process of compromise through a series of meetings involving different agencies and offices. This is largely a horizontal process with members of one agency or office negotiating with members of another agency or office at approximately the same ranks in the bureaucratic hierarchy. This bureaucratic process typically appears more horizontal than vertical. "Approval" to a Russian bureaucrat usually means a difficult process, vertical, fraught with administrative danger, in which approval progresses through different layers of territorial hierarchy, often ultimately requiring specific approval at the highest levels of government, which can take an equally long time, sometimes much longer than the U.S. process.

In one such case, U.S. officials were surprised when "government approval" required formal approval by all major Russian ministries and a signature by then President Yeltsin when "government approval" in the U.S. required only the signature of the program manager after consultation with a few other officials. Without an understanding of which requirements apply on both sides of an intercultural endeavor, negotiation, planning, and execution of the project can be very difficult or even impossible.

Economics, too, effects the understanding of culture, even technical culture. For example, Russian technical instruments perform well, but

lack most of the "bells and whistles" of which U.S. engineers are so fond. A well-known joke among aerospace professionals compares the "million dollar" pen U.S. astronauts use in space, the kind that doesn't require gravitational flow of ink to operate with the Russian instrument, wooden graphite pencils. Both perform equally well.

National pride also has a powerful influence on intercultural communication. A sense of cultural affiliation, and the emotional feelings it generates, often creates suspicion and jealousy, both of which can distort and even corrupt the communication process. Mutual blame occurs when a joint defense project fails, each side accusing the other of poor planning, on the one hand, and failure to follow through, on the other hand. The difficulties become a matter of national pride, neither side willing to acknowledge responsibility for fear of somehow tainting the luster of their national image. Further work together on the mission is possible only after struggling through these issues of pride and the resultant distortions with which each side viewed the problem.

Political, economic, and administrative changes also affect intercultural programs. For example, Russia has been going through a period of deep economic depression and fundamental political reform for more than a decade. Such changes can cause changes in terminology, creating new terms, modifying old ones, and eliminating others. For example, the word for "academician" in Russian traditionally has been reserved for a few hundred of the most respected researchers and professors who were officially awarded the prestigious rank by the national government. Many of them were designers of new weapons or aerospace systems. Recent political and economic changes in the nation, however, have resulted in an explosion of universities and research institutes who employ many "academicians," named by these organizations themselves. This situation now makes it difficult to differentiate among all of the "academicians" in the country for the purposes of approving and funding technical projects. It also makes it difficult for U.S. officials, scientists, and engineers to understand the qualifications of those with whom they are working in Russia.

Sometimes new terms appear, but nobody really knows exactly what they mean. Some terms are neologisms, others are borrowed from different languages. One such example is the adoption of the term "office" by the new Russian political bureaucracy. In Russian, however, the term denotes prestige and compensation. This seemingly innocent term once

caused a five-hour distraction in negotiations related to a joint U.S.-Russian defense program. U.S. negotiators wanted to use the word to denote a joint management body that would control implementation of the program. The Russian negotiators refused to use this term, fearing that it would prompt other Russian bureaucrats to demand additional involvement and funding, thereby delaying, and perhaps blocking, approval of the overall program. The word "council" better conveyed the meaning in Russian. U.S. negotiators insisted that the word "council" would completely confuse the approval process in the United States, because it does not convey the real meaning of the body in question. Currently, the negotiators from both sides are pursuing the program without an explicit managing body, due to this impasse in terminology.

Individual Personalities

In addition to vagaries in language and culture, individual personalities affect the communication process, both intracultural as well as intercultural communication. It is simply a matter of additional variables. Considering the almost infinite possible language and cultural combinations, personality differences can compound the problem of translating/interpreting meaning. Fortunately, the problem is simplified by identifying the specific personalities involved in a particular communication process and narrowing consideration to those specific ones.

The U.S. manager of one project was very gregarious, open, and tended to overstate much of his communication. His Russian counterpart was quite austere, quiet, extremely closed, and understated everything, especially anything implying commitment and expectation. It should be mentioned here that neither personality was unique to his own culture, since Russians are both gregarious and introverted, as are Americans. The interpreter in this case spent a great deal of time not only interpreting language, but clarifying for each party, in consultation with the other, the implications of what was being said. What might have been a half-hour conversation required three hours. After the two managers became better acquainted with each other's personality, the interpretation process conformed to a more normal flow. Indeed, the two became quite good friends, and eventually, interpretation became easier than in many other, similar circumstances. By paying attention to the different personalities involved, the interpreter anticipated and resolved a variety of potential administrative and technical problems.

Further complicating factors are the personalities, perspectives, and skills of different translators and interpreters. Since so much information is filtered through the translator or interpreter—a human being subject to his/her own personality, biases, and limitations of ability—the content and tone of communication can change, depending upon who is doing the work. What is more, since interpreters typically work in shifts of 30-45 minutes, and shift changes can markedly affect a single communication process.

Situational Context

Similarly, the situational context affects meaning in intercultural communication. While situational context affects all communication, like personality, it compounds the problem of intercultural communication as any interpretation must capture not only the specific meaning of statements, but contextual meaning as well, which can change both focus and emphasis. A seemingly single question like, "Would you join me for breakfast tomorrow?", takes on very different meanings in different situations. In the context of business negotiations, the question is likely to mean something like, "Let's start on this work early tomorrow." In the context of a purely social gesture, perhaps in the midst of business negotiations, the statement is more likely to mean something like, "Let's get to know each other better." The two situations imply different kinds of breakfast. Both can be important to the success of intercultural projects. Failure to understand the meaning of the invitation, however, can confuse, embarrass, and frustrate the parties involved. The interpreter in such a situation should be alert for any sign of misunderstanding of what the invitation implies to the receiving party and be sure to communicate the intended meaning of the invitation in its situational context.

Summary of Complexities Attendant to Intercultural Communication

There are various complexities in intercultural communication, including more traditional concerns of language, and, to some extent, culture. One also finds less commonly recognized concerns, such as political, economic, and administrative influences, the influence of national pride, individual personalities, and situational context. By understanding all of these influences, language professionals and managers of multinational

projects can facilitate intercultural communication and thereby increase both the efficiency and effectiveness of intercultural enterprises.

In summary, the complexities of intercultural communication are:

- Inherent flexibility of language.
- Inconsistent definitions among different languages.
- Incompatible grammar affecting meaning.
- Cultural influences on meaning, including influences of technical culture.
- Political, economic, and organizational influences.
- Individual personalities of the parties involved, including translators and interpreters.
- Situational context.

IMPLICATIONS

All of the considerations outlined in this paper have various implications for language professionals and managers of intercultural enterprises. Translators and interpreters, for example, should: 1) achieve fluency in both languages, 2) gain a broad and in-depth understanding of both cultures, including current events, 3) have a specific understanding of the industry, the enterprise at hand, and the individuals involved, 4) be willing to question and clarify where necessary, 5) be as objective as possible. The personality and biases of the interpreter should remain a non-issue as far as possible, 6) be humble (The task is not easy).

This list of demands placed upon translators and interpreters may be daunting for some. The situation gives rise to the possibility of two kinds of intercultural specialists--one emphasizing language, the other emphasizing contextual considerations. Both must make efforts in all of the areas listed above, but each would focus his/her efforts on one specialty at a time. While the roles for a single individual may alternate from project to project, the specific demands of each role make it difficult to perform both simultaneously. Translation and interpretation requires full attention to language considerations alone. Intercultural considerations, too, require full attention. It is as if requiring a technical manager were also to serve as a full-time translator/interpreter for a major project. The roles, though related, are different and each requires the full attention of a qualified   professional.   Neglect   of   either   role--the   transla-

tion/interpretation specialist or the intercultural advisor--jeopardizes the communication process. Satisfaction of both roles enhances that process and increases the likelihood of intercultural success.

Implications for managers include the recognition of the importance of all of these considerations and provisions to address them all. A manager's job is difficult even without additional intercultural complexities. Yet, such intercultural matters strongly influence many enterprises, especially their communication processes. Failure to recognize and address any of these considerations jeopardizes the communication process, recognized one as perhaps the most critical of all organizational and management processes.

The specific implication for managers is the possible employment of two kinds of intercultural experts--translators/interpreters and intercultural advisors. By fulfilling both roles, managers help insure the integrity of intercultural communication and the success of their enterprises.

BIBIOGRAPHY

Adler, N. 1991. *International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior.* Boston: PWS-Kent.

Cohen, R. 1997. *Negotiating Across Cultures: International Communication in an Interdependent World.* Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press.

Eco, U. 2000. *Experiences in Translation.* trans. McEwen. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Ess, C. with Faye Sudweeks (eds.). 2001. *Culture, Technology, Communication: Towards an Intercultural Global Village.* Albany: State U of New York P.

Kroeber, A.L. and Kluckhohn, C. 1954. *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions.* New York: Random House.

Hall, E.T. 1969. *The Hidden Dimension.* New York: Doubleday.

——. 1976. *Beyond Culture.* New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday.

Hofstede, G.H. 1991. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind.* Berkshire, England: McGraw-Hill.

Kim, Y.Y. and Gudykunst, W.B. (eds.). 1996. *Theories in Intercultural Communication.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Paarhizgar, K.D. 2002. *Multicultural Behavior and Global Business Environments.* New York: International Business Press.

Scollon, R. and Scollon, S.W. 1994. *Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach.* Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Sofer, M. 1999. *The Translator's Handbook.* Rockville, Maryland: Schreiber Publishing, Inc.

Thomas, D.C. 2002. *Essentials of International Management: A Cross-Cultural Perspective.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Victor, D.A. 1992. *International Business Communication.* New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.