



22 July 2013

Clarifying meaning when it matters

Culturally competent professionals understand how to work with interpreters. They ensure that all business critical concepts are stated clearly and simply, so that an interpreter can translate them accurately.

1. Identify a concept or key term that is important to your business but may be hard to translate. To help you do this, think of the five or six core ideas that you would be very sorry if your counterparts didn't grasp exactly as you intended them to.
2. Work with colleagues to make sure you all agree on what you understand by the term. It is quite often the case that, when pressed, it becomes clear not all colleagues share the same view of exactly what a key term means.
3. Then challenge yourself to define the concept or key term in writing, over five or six lines, using very simple, straightforward words.
4. Each line should capture one aspect of the meaning. The overall meaning should become richer and clearer with each line. At the end of the five or six lines, the meaning should be completely clear.
5. An interpreter can then translate this short script and ensure your key, business-critical idea is accurately conveyed across the divide of language and culture.

WORK WELL WITH INTERPRETERS

The perils of translation!

Translation blunders abound in international business. For instance, Pepsi famously translated its 'Come alive with Pepsi' campaign into German as 'Come out of the grave with Pepsi' and in Asia as, 'Bring back your ancestors from the dead with Pepsi.' But a personal favourite of mine is French cosmetic company Guerlain's choice of the word 'Samsara' for a new perfume. It was felt that the word sounded graceful, musical and exotic – just the impression they wanted to convey. The trouble is it's also the Buddhist term for the 'endless cycle of suffering and death'. It's a bit like calling your new face cream 'Leprosy'! Translation and interpretation are fraught with pitfalls for the unwary.

The obvious way to address such risks would be to develop fluency in the language of a country where your organisation has significant interests. Language and culture function as 'right glove and left glove'. Learning a language provides a powerful insight into the culture of that society, as well as sidestepping your reliance on interpreters, in many situations

The challenge of learning an Asian language

However, the problem is that it's simply unrealistic for most business people to devote sufficient time to language learning – and even then it could only ever be one language. For example, the US Foreign Service Institute estimates that a native English speaker requires 2,200 hours to reach a professional level of proficiency in Mandarin. As a comparison, they estimate that only 600 hours would be required to reach the same proficiency level in French.

I generally find that UGM clients can only devote enough hours to learning (any) Asian language to be able to converse in fairly simple social settings, or perhaps bravely venture some light opening remarks in a speech or presentation. They cannot give the time that would be needed to learn how to function independently of an interpreter in a formal meeting, or even to read and write beyond simple emails. Thus, improving the poor state of Asian language learning in Australia, while a vital long-term goal for our education system, cannot meet the needs of the current workforce. What about you? Can you speak an Asian language well? Are you studying one at the moment?

Even if you believe it isn't something you can consider at this point in your career, you don't need to feel that there's nothing you can do that will help. Developing greater cultural competence is within the reach of all. The portfolio of 24 practical skills introduced in 'Business Success in the Asian Century' will serve you well in most situations, and in many countries. One of these skills involves how to adjust your talk so that the chances of accurate interpretation and translation are maximised.

Paraphrasing as a key skill in your toolkit

This skill alone has a powerful impact on our clients' businesses, helping them to secure greater mutual understanding and alignment, even when they have to use a crucial term, which has no real equivalent in language systems across the region. At the heart of the translation challenge is that English is not a culture-free language and, indeed, there are few words that have exact equivalents in other languages.

This means that native speakers of any given language often take it for granted that every word they have at their disposal to express the ideas that matter to them must also exist in every other language. But this is very far from the truth. Many terms in everyday use by Australian business people have no exact equivalents outside of English. These include such common words as 'fair', 'reasonable', 'evidence', 'impartial', 'bias', 'commitment', 'compromise', 'opportunity', 'efficiency' and 'liability'. Issues like these cause the most significant risks because each party tends to believe that others are approaching the exchange just like them.

A powerful technique is to get into the habit of paraphrasing important but potentially complex and culturally loaded terms using very simple, straightforward words. This practice reduces the risk of mistranslation and supports you in staying in control of what is being communicated, even when you need to use an interpreter. See the side box.

Play safe when working with interpreters

You're also well advised to play safe when it comes to the proficiency of interpreters. Assume their skills are lower, until you find out otherwise. So keep your English straightforward. Avoid slang or cultural nuances. This way, you can be more confident that they are translating exactly what you say. Remember that humour is very hard to translate into another language and culture. The well-known cartoon series *Doonesbury* had a Chinese interpreter called Honey, modelled on a real person, one of China's best interpreters, Tang Wensheng. In one cartoon frame we see her tell the Chinese dignitaries, "I think the American is about to make a joke ..." Then in the next frame, she says, "The joke has been made. He is expecting you to laugh at it. Go wild. Now!"

Awareness and good intentions aren't enough to ensure effective performance in relatively complex settings where there can be several cultures represented. You need to be skillful. This means something much more specific than the rather vague advice that you should 'tolerate ambiguity', often mentioned in books about Asia. In many situations, it's more useful for you to focus instead on clarifying meaning. This will support your business outcomes more strongly.