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TABLE OF CONTENT

LEADING THROUGH LANGUAGE: WHAT DO YOU SPEAK (AND HEAR)?[1]

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A man who is ignorant of other languages
is ignorant of his own.
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Abstract

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger famously coined the phrase, "Language is the house of being." The language we speak and the words we use can reveal our cultural mindset and world-view. But meanings are easily lost in translation; the same terms used in one culture can have vastly different meanings in another, with profound and all too often disastrous consequences for international business. Under hyper-globalization, all entrepreneurs and managers must be global citizens. More important than knowing how to bow, kiss or shake hands or whether to bring wine to dinner in Singapore, they must be competent at working with, persuading, and empowering people from totally different value systems. Leaders and managers can greatly enhance their cross-cultural competence by learning even fragments of another language—an essential key to the capacity to stand in the shoes of the target culture.

Keywords: international business, cross-cultural management, globalization, language, filters

Do you know the joke about the Italian who came to New York? "Ona day, I'ma go to NewYork, to a bigga hotel. I go down to hava soma breakfast. I tella the waitress I want two piss o toast. She branga me only one piss. I tella her I want two piss. She say, 'Go to the toilet.' I say, 'You no understand; I want two piss on my plate.' She say, 'You better not piss on your plate, you sonam- abitch.' I don't even know the lady, and she calla me sonamabitch!

"Later, I'ma go to Drake restaurant, very good restaurant.The waitress branga me a spoon an a knife, but no fock. I tella her I wanna fock. She say, 'Everybody wanna fock.' I tella her, 'No, no, you no understand; I wanna fock ona table.' She say, 'You better not fock on the table, you sonamabitch.' I don't even know the lady, and she calla me sonamabitch!

"Finally, I'ma go back to my room ina hotel, and there's no sheet on my bed. I calla the manager. I say, 'I wanna sheet.' He say, 'Go to the toilet.' I say, 'No, no, no, you no understand. I wanna sheet on my bed.' He say, 'You better not sheet on your bed, you sonamabitch.' I don't even know the man, and he calla me sonamabitch!

"I say, this is enough. I wanna go back to Italy. So I'ma go down to reception, and the man at reception, he say to me, 'Piss to you.' I say, 'Piss ona you too, you sonamabitch. I'ma go back to Italy."[i]

Lost in Translation

[1] This article is based on Zweifel, T.D. (2013). *Culture Clash 2: Managing the Global High-Performance Team*. New York: SelectBooks. 2nd revised edition.

This joke shows what can go wrong in cross-cultural interactions. We have a filter through which we hear what is being said, and things can easily get lost in translation. The Italian *knows* what the New Yorkers are talking about. Of course they are talking about sex and other bodily functions. The Italian's brain is wired to accept only one reality, one perspective. And that is what this article is about: How does our language shape what we can see or hear—and how we perceive our reality and the world?

I confess that I fell prey to a similar misunderstanding once (and who knows how many other times, when my interlocutors were merely too polite to point it out to me). In a previous incarnation, back in 1986, I was named the global manager of an international education campaign involving twenty-seven countries. On a conference call with the organization's president, I laid out the whole structure, including management by time zones and national campaign managers. The president was impressed and complimented me for the design and preparation. Then I described how excited people around the world were about the campaign—that's when I committed the gaffe. I was twenty-four at the time, I ran the campaign from the Munich office, and my command of English was good but not perfect. Especially slang expressions were beyond me. What I meant to say was, "Everybody is really turned on by the campaign." What came out of my mouth was, "Everybody is really horny."

There was a pause on the other end that lasted several seconds but seemed excruciatingly long. Nobody said anything. Then finally the President said, "Thomas, that sounds wonderful"—upon which everyone on the call hung up all too quickly. I knew that I had done something wrong—but what? A senior staffer in the global office called me a few minutes later to say that the president was thrilled with my strategic thinking. Then she said: "Do me a favor: don't ever say on a conference call again that everybody is horny, okay?"

Let's Talk About Sex

Since we are on the topic, let's talk about sex some more, which, needless to say, is not talked about with the same openness in every culture. "Most Egyptians are secretive about sex," Aliaa Magda Elmahdy told CNN, "because they are brought up thinking sex is something bad and dirty, and there is no mention of it in schools." Elmahdy had set off a wave of outrage in 2011 when, in a perhaps ill-considered attempt to promote sexual equality and free expression in Egypt after the Arab Spring, she posted nude photos of herself online.

She may have a kindred spirit in the United States: Gary Chapman, a seventy-three-year-old Southern Baptist pastor and author of *Five Love Languages* which has sold over seven million copies. "That is the idea that good Christians don't talk about sex," Chapman told a crowd of 1,000 at a conference in a church outside Nashville, Tennessee. "At least not out loud, and certainly not in the church." He may have a point. In a video called "No Second Chances" that is used in abstinence-only courses in the United States, a student asks a school nurse, "What if I want to have sex before I get married?" To which the nurse replies, "Well, I guess you'll just have to be prepared to die."

Swedish culture discusses sex quite differently. In her 2006 book, *When Sex Goes to School*, Kristin Luker told of visiting sex-education classes in Sweden and hearing an instructor's response to the question, "What is an orgasm, and why do people talk about it so much?" The teacher's response: "Orgasm is the moment of highest pleasure during sex, and that's why people talk about it so much."[ii]

What Is "Privacy"?

Or take the related topic of privacy. Max Schrems, a twenty-four-year-old law student in Salzburg, Austria, wanted to know how much Facebook knew about him, and requested his own Facebook file. What he got turned out to be a virtual Bildungsroman of 1,222 pages,

containing wall posts he had deleted, old messages that revealed a friend's troubled state of mind, even information he had never entered himself about his physical whereabouts.

Mr. Schrems felt a vague unease about what Facebook might do with all that information. "It's like a camera hanging over your bed while you're having sex. It just doesn't feel good," he said. "We in Europe are oftentimes frightened of what might happen some day."

He is far from alone. In Japan and Switzerland, Google was widely criticized for being intrusive when its self-driven cars cruised the streets with a camera snapping pictures for Google Street View. According to the *New York Times*, it's worse: when Google's cars drive by your house, they apparently scoop up your most private emails too. "It was one of the biggest violations of data protection laws that we had ever seen," Johannes Caspar, a German data protection official, told the *Times* after he forced Google to show him what its Street View cars had been collecting from his fellow citizens. "We were very angry."

This might be a clash of European vs. American values. "In the United States, privacy is a consumer business," Jacob Kohnstamm, chairman of the Dutch Data Protection Authority, told the *Times*. "In Europe, it is a fundamental rights issue."[iii]

In other cultures, people might transgress the boundaries of privacy without a second thought. In India, a shopkeeper might casually ask a childless woman if she has gynecological trouble, school grades are posted on public walls, and many people still live in extended families, literally wandering in and out of each other's bedrooms. Only recently, a government project to issue biometric identity cards to every Indian citizen set off a flurry of concern, prompting the government to draft a law that enshrines the right to privacy—for the first time in India's history.[iv]

Language Shapes Reality

It all comes down to language: the vastly different meanings for words like "sex" or "privacy" in different cultural contexts often gets lost in translation. To take another example, the word "promise" or "commitment" can have vastly different meanings in different cultural contexts depending on whether they are uttered (or heard) in a Lutheran culture like the Netherlands or Scandinavia where people tend to be careful what they promise because they would feel guilty for not delivering on the promise; or in a Catholic culture like Italy or Brazil where you get absolution for breaking your word; or in a culture like the United States where making promises tends to be more like a tool for playing a large-scale game and reaching beyond what is merely predictable.

These different meanings can even live side by side in the same person. One result of globalization is that more and more children grow up in bilingual families and multilingual surroundings. Our younger daughter Hannah, a dual American and Swiss citizen, is an example of that. At the age of two, she said bilingual things like "Daddy, isch das dini watch?" or "Come on baby, mir ässed äs Gummibärli."

As we have seen, A Turkish girl might go to school in Berlin and speak Turkish at home and German in school. Even if she does not go on to study in London and fall in love with a Frenchman, recent research has shown a significant difference between the brains of monolingual babies who hear only one language at home, and bilingual babies who hear two. Researchers at the University of Washington found that at six months, the monolingual infants could still distinguish between phonetic sounds, whether in the language they were used to hearing or in another language not spoken in their homes. But as they grew to ten or twelve months, the monolingual babies were no longer detecting sounds in the second language, only in the language they usually heard. In contrast, the bilingual infants at ten to twelve months were able to discriminate sounds in both languages.

"What the study demonstrates is that the variability in bilingual babies' experience keeps them open," said Dr. Patricia Kuhl, co-director of the Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences at the University of Washington and a co-author of the study. "They do not show the perceptual narrowing as soon as monolingual babies do. It's another piece of evidence that what you experience shapes the brain."[v] If we take that statement to its logical conclusion, different languages might even shape different brain structures.

At the very least, it seems clear that our language and the way we look at the world are correlated and in a sort of dance with one another. But which way does the causal vector point? Does language shape reality (as in, "the Yellow Danger" or "Americans are bullies") or is it the other way around (as in, China really is a danger and Americans really are bullies, we are only calling a spade a spade)? Be that as it may, new research at MIT has shown that language is essential to being human. Language, says the anthropologist Mark Pagel, was instrumental in enabling social learning—our ability to acquire new behaviors that helped our evolution by watching and imitating others, which in turn accelerated our species on a trajectory of what anthropologists call "cumulative cultural evolution," a bustling of ideas successively building and improving on others.[vi] Language was the crucial feature without which we might have never evolved from being Neanderthals.

Pagel's assertion is supported by experiments today. When language was taken away from people, they were no smarter than rats or infants. In one study, MIT students were asked to count dots on a screen. When they were allowed to count normally, they did great. When they had to do a non-linguistic task like banging out a rhythm while counting, they still did great. But when they had to simultaneously repeat a verbal text such as a news report while being shown the dots, they did poorly. They needed their language skills to count.[vii]

All this goes to show that the languages we speak not only express or reflect our thoughts, but also shape the very thoughts we wish to (or are able to) express. Our language shapes our reality. Or perhaps we should use the plural term: our languages shape our realities. If, as the German philosopher Martin Heidegger put it, language is the house of being—or Charlemagne more than a thousand years before him, who proclaimed that "To have a second language is to have a second soul"—then different languages shape different souls, different ways of being. Studies have confirmed that different languages shape the way you and I understand, think about, and experience "reality."

Patterns in language reveal hidden values, attitudes, and mindsets; in other words, culture. If I say, "Federer hit the ball," in English it is clear that he hit the ball in the past, not in the present, while in Indonesian, you need not—indeed, cannot—change the verb to mark the past tense. On the other hand, in English it is not clear—except perhaps from the context—whether Roger Federer or his wife Mirka hit the ball (after all, she used to be a tennis pro too), while the Russian or Hebrew languages would make a clear distinction between a male and female ending of the verb. In Turkish, you have a different verb form depending on how you acquired the information about Federer hitting the ball. For example, you would use one verb form if you saw him hitting the ball with your own eyes, and another if you heard or read about the event second-hand.

In another investigation, Spanish and Japanese speakers could not remember the agents of accidental events as readily as English speakers could. Why? In Japanese and Spanish, the agent of causality is dropped: "The vase broke," rather than "John broke the vase."[viii] In Spanish or Japanese, people later did not remember as well as English speakers who committed an accidental error such as popping a balloon, breaking an egg or spilling a drink.

This has profound consequences for how people assign responsibility for events, whether they blame each other, or if and how they punish each other. In a related study, English speakers watched the video of Janet Jackson's infamous "wardrobe malfunction" (a

wonderful non-agentive coinage introduced into the English language by Justin Timberlake), accompanied by one of two written reports. The reports were identical, except in the last sentence where one report used the agentive phrase "ripped the costume" while the other said "the costume ripped." Even though everyone watched the same video and witnessed the ripping with their own eyes, language mattered. Not only did people who had read "ripped the costume" blame Justin Timberlake more, they also levied a whopping 53 percent more in fines.[ix]

Culture and Leadership

The concept of agency brings us to leadership, for which not one universal definition exists either. Leadership has diverse connotations in different cultures. For example, in our male-dominated culture that has prevailed for several thousand years, many people associate leadership with forceful, domineering behavior or with command-and-control.

In German-speaking cultures, the word "leadership" would be translated as "Führerschaft"—not exactly a word people are at ease with. And Germans are not alone with their skepticism: as Rabbi Aaron Raskin and I write in our book *The Rabbi and the CEO*, Jewish scholars do "not approve of lordship, because … no mortal can lord over another." Already the first-century Talmudic scholar Rabbi Yohanan cautioned, "Woe to leadership, for it buries those who possess it."[x] Both in Sweden and Japan, leadership is a lower priority than building consensus, and most people feel better if they can get by without sticking their necks out. Similarly, "there is a degree of skepticism in the UK towards anyone who tries to lead, and a belief in the inspired amateur which discourages people from having leadership roles," according to the director-general of the Institute of Directors in Britain. This reluctance to lead is reinforced by the British view that it is unseemly, and a bit cheap really, to blow your own horn. In the former Eastern Bloc countries, there is a marked reluctance to lead and take initiative, since under socialism, the state used to take charge of people's lives for so many years.

In Latin cultures, leaders are generally expected to be more autocratic and less participatory than in, say, U.S. or Scandinavian cultures. In the U.S. culture, the term leadership is used for just about anything that can be marketed and makes it sound better, from "leadership leases" to "leadership donors" to the "Democratic Leadership Council." Americans are often caught in the myth of "the faultless leader." Many of them like to believe in Camelot, the white knight who saves us from the mundane. Leaders must have a flawless character. If they are not super-human, they are discredited and soon discarded—unless they die first, in which case they live on in the imagination as forever young, dynamic, and pure. Those who survive are given a hard time; witness Bill Clinton or George W. Bush. (The jury is still out on Barack Obama.)

Language and International Business

By the way, if you question the relevance language has for your business imperatives, think again. Language can profoundly influence the positioning of a product or service. Several years ago the consulting firm Insigniam worked with a Fortune 100 pharmaceutical company on a leading over-the-counter drug. The challenge was to build one common global positioning for the brand, at a time when the drug was branded differently in each culture. One issue the project team faced was the branding of a respiratory treatment. In the United States the drug was positioned as a decongestant. But the language of illness was not the same around the world—far from it. For example, nasal congestion was then a non-existing ailment in German-speaking cultures (Germany, Switzerland, Austria or GSA for short); the German language did not even have a term for it. The team came together and revealed the different cultural mindsets that expressed themselves in different languages about illness and

about drugs. By finding a strategic perspective that transcended ailments and focused instead on the physiology of respiratory health, the company now had a platform that permitted a strategic positioning in each target culture. After the drug's market share grew significantly around the world, the project team acknowledged that the process of using language to reveal culture had been a key driver in the drug's success.

Globalization might have led to a merging of languages. The lexicographer Peter Sokolowski, editor at large for the Merriam-Webster archive, is in charge of finding new words in the media and seeing if they have become part of everyday language. One German word has been part of the (written) English language since 1895: *Schadenfreude*, "enjoyment obtained from the troubles of others" or literally the combination of "damage" and "joy." Lots of other German words have become indispensable to the English language. *Kindergarten, Angst, Poltergeist, Wanderlust, Pumpernickel, Fräulein, Bildungsroman, Lederhosen, verboten,* and *kaput* no longer need translation.[xi] The same with French expressions: *à la carte, au contraire, au pair, avant garde, coup d'état, fait accompli, force majeure, joie de vivre, Mardi gras, raison d'être,* and *vis-à-vis*.

So perhaps a new breed of human being is emerging, one who uses a *potpourri* (another French word) of languages and is at home anywhere in the world? A question worthy of further research.

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[i] I owe this joke to Lawrence Flynn.
[ii] *New York Times,* November 16, 2011.
[iii] *New York Times,* May 22, 2012.
[iv] *New York Times,* February 5, 2012.
[v] *New York Times,* October 11, 2011.
[vi] Mark Pagel. *Wired for Culture: Origins of the Human Social Mind.* New York 2012: W.W. Norton.
[vii] Lera Boroditsky, "Lost in Translation," *Wall Street Journal,* July 23, 2010.
[viii] Ibid.

[ix] Ibid.
[x] Talmud, Pesahim 87b; see Hyman Goldin. *Ethics of the Fathers.* New York 1962: Hebrew Publishing Company. 10.
[xi] *Der Spiegel*, 52/2011.