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Merge, Mix, Match and Mould

Shaping communications across cultural barriers

English has become the standard language in the high tech sector. But this has not diminished the need for communication in other languages. Why this is the case is one aspect of ideas I would like to present here today, when I look at the significance of language barriers and their role in intercultural competence.

My company in Munich is specialised in corporate communications. We translate and edit texts for companies that have to communicate in several languages – with the media, their employees and their customers. The majority of our clients are in the aerospace sector and in applied research. We translate high-tech topics into and out of English, German, French and Spanish.

Only when I accepted the invitation to talk here, did I realise how long it has taken me to travel anywhere towards the East of Europe. I don't know anything about the culture, history or languages of my fellow Europeans to the East. Many of them live in Munich. Maybe I just take it for granted that we share the same city, as strangers, separated by our language and culture.

The buzzword today is globalization. Companies are merging, whole regions are becoming specialised, in specific technologies and disciplines, and even they are merging into new technologies. This keeps engineers on the move. They have to go where their skills and expertise are needed most. And that could be almost anywhere. High tech is moving people into countries and cultures that are foreign to them. They need an additional set of skills, so that they can communicate properly with their new colleagues. They need inter-cultural competence. And languages?

How many languages? Which ones?

Should we expect engineers to be super polyglots as well?

The vocabulary of engineers, the language of high tech, is matter-of-fact, and the most important ingredients are used everywhere: micro-second, kilojoule, nanometre, and so on. So of course engineers everywhere can communicate with each other.

It is enough if the engineer can speak one language. One language that almost every one else at work can speak. English, which has become the standard. It has defeated all competing languages, irrespective of the power of the country concerned. English is the metric standard of communication in high tech. Communicating in any other language, is like doing your calculations in inches and not in centimetres. All high tech communication ends up being transferred through the English language, because that is the only language everyone else must be able to understand. Standards must exist when facts, ideas, plans, designs are being exchanged. The high tech products, and the work that goes into them, seldom come from one country alone.

One could argue that if engineers truly master the English language, they won't even need their mother tongue at work any more. No need for translation. They can write and communicate in English.

Is this the beginning of a worldwide / monolingual / high-tech culture?

Engineering expertise is only part of the story. The products engineers design have to be <u>built</u>, somewhere. Products engineered somewhere else, will be built in Hungary. Hungarian engineers could design products made in China, or elsewhere. We can hardly expect <u>all</u> of the people involved, all the way down, through the entire high tech chain, to be good in English.

Let's take the skilled Hungarian worker as an example. Is he going to be motivated to do a good job if he is asked to build something he knows nothing about, because it's only explained, or communicated, in English? Every day he goes to work in the production plant he has to be convinced: about the product, about its importance, the importance of his part in it, his company's part in it. Even, maybe, his country's part in it? We're in the middle of a <u>global</u> high tech revolution, not the "just-do-your-job" industrial revolution.

So do we need Hungarian, or German, or French?

Communication is more than trading information.

We communicate to <u>convince</u>. And any time we want to do that, the information we convey or receive gets <u>mixed</u> with emotion. Content and emotion <u>merge</u>. Emotions help to <u>shape</u> opinions, attitudes, decisions.

And that emotion is inseparable, from our <u>mother</u> tongue, Muttersprache, langue maternelle, our <u>first</u> language, <u>native</u> language. I think this is a phenomenon we all accept, so I won't expand on it here.

What does an Airbus engineer need to get emotional about anyway? He has winglets, fly-by-wire, lower fuel consumption, Internet in the skies. These are really <u>convincing</u> high-tech achievements. He can put his emotions aside. He's got <u>features</u> to keep him motivated!

And we have everything else we need for <u>international</u> cooperation and communication: technical standards, norms, certification procedures. An international high-tech language. English spoken here, as everywhere.

What is technically possible, drives forward our desire for international cooperation. <u>intercultural</u> competence makes it work. An <u>essential</u> feature of this competence is understanding, and accepting, the <u>function</u> of the language diversity we encounter.

Our own language is a source of common identity. It reflects shared values. A shared culture. It is clear that no substitute language will do sometimes.

Is this a benefit or a barrier to cooperation in high-tech? Does this make global cooperation less <u>efficient</u>?

On the face of it, a barrier exists. You can not understand the content of what people around you are saying to each other in their own language. Part of the barrier disappears when you

accept the phenomenon behind the mother tongue, when you respect the need of other people to use their native language.

It is our attitude to the barrier, which decides whether it is seen as one at all, when we work in a multi-lingual environment. If we do not understand what our partners are saying to each other, how does that affect our relationship to them as partners. If they are our partners, we have to trust them and their motives at that moment, in the existing situation. We have to respect their abilities as partners. Because we can only contribute to, or influence, the situation existing between them when they use a language we understand.

I propose that language diversity in international cooperation can be a tremendous benefit, if it is understood as a means to encourage trust and respect between partners. Without these qualities, the cooperation could fail.

This diversity can be a benefit, too, when we look at why people of one mother tongue chose to communicate with it, instead of forcing themselves to use English, the language their partners understand. I am not simply referring this time to emotional factors. The other direct link to our own language is the culture we identify with and through it. Not only what we think and do, but how we think and do.

Most importantly, our understanding of authority, how it is exercised. Our attitude to authority. In the management and organisation of our working world we have , for example, the team-oriented Germans, the strong hierarchy of French management, the non-individualistic consensus practised in Japanese management. The vocabulary each language uses, the way people expresses themselves through it, reflects this understanding of authority, and a common attitude towards authority.

English would not make a differing understanding of authority disappear. The paradox is that language barriers protect each of us from having to adopt an attitude towards, or understanding of, authority which is not part of our own culture. There is no reason why these different interpretations, and the resulting management practices, can not coexist, as long as trust and respect are intact.

So when partners use their own respective languages, working between themselves in a project, this need not be seen as a wish to exclude you, to hide something from you, but to be more efficient, to be more effective in doing what they have to do as your partners in the shared situation.

The only alternative is to insist that all communication takes place only in English. Or through English.

I feel it is relevant at this point, to refer to the work of my own company for EADS, as an example. The employee magazine of this high-tech giant, "forum" by name, appears on newsstands at all EADS sites. Depending on where that site is, the employees working there can read the "forum" magazine in English, French, German or Spanish. And in some places, a polyglot could read the magazine in all four languages, because the site has employees from all countries. That is a real achievement in communication, doing your best to reach every employee in their own language.

But in my own opinion, that fact alone is not what makes EADS, interculturally speaking, exceptionally competent. That has more to do with how the "forum" magazine is written and published.

The magazine is a forum which aims to communicate what is happening throughout the Group, especially those things which affect employees and influence how they <u>feel</u> about working for EADS. The topic could be a high-tech achievement all employees can be proud of. It can also be an issue that raises concern, an issue that poses different questions for all of the countries and people in EADS. But someone has to write about it. Should the author be German, French, Spanish, English or American? The people involved, the people directly responsible for the issue at EADS, have to decide between themselves.

The article gets written and published after it is <u>directly</u> translated into all the other languages. Spanish into German, French and English. German into English, French and Spanish, and so on.

Directly translated. There are editors for each language of the magazine, but the actual content, information and the viewpoints expressed, come from the contributor of the article. The magazine is their forum. How do all of those people directly involved or responsible for the issue at EADS, view the article written by their German or French or Spanish colleague? How do all of the people affected by the issue, at EADS sites in Germany, France, Spain, react to the result? That is only clear once the issue has reached the newsstand, as an article in "forum" magazine.

I remember the early days of EADS and the first editions of "forum" magazine. Nothing was published without the express agreement of everyone directly involved, all of them worried, in different ways, about how things were being presented in the magazine, how things might be interpreted, especially at higher management levels in EADS. And the answer? No matter what language it was written in, everything first had to be translated into English, before the process went any further. The article had to be approved, at least, by everyone <u>directly</u> involved, the <u>direct</u> partners in a newly formed, merged, company.

If we are forced to take ourselves out of our own language, to use another language <u>outside</u> of our own culture in order to communicate with each other as partners, we leave a protective mould: our understanding of authority, of values we trust and respect above all else, embedded as these are in our native language of values we trust and respect above all else. If the result is merged, in an attempt to mix it into something new…

a global/ monolingual/ high-tech culture?…

there is the risk of a mismatch . A lose matrix is created, with questionable authority that is a lot less efficient.

For the first editions of "forum" magazine, my company received many versions of the same article in English, each with conflicting corrections, normally made in the reviewer's native language. The process of finding agreement between everyone directly involved with the issue, was extremely complicated. The German, French, Spanish people at various levels of management, in the newly merged company EADS, were all confronted by something "foreign" to the way they communicated and did things in the past. Not only concerning the editorial process itself, but also concerning basic communication principles: With what

<u>authority</u> should "forum" magazine address its readership? How much controversy should be allowed, how much information, how much openness?

"forum" magazine is the <u>internal</u> voice of companies that have merged, strategically, to achieve the best of what high-tech expertise can offer, across all borders in Europe and elsewhere. The magazine has to inform, and to convince employees about the progress being made. There is simply no better way to convince than through the mother tongue, when writing or reading about work between the partners.

So out went English as the neutral go-between, because there is a need to convey more than information. Translate directly from one language to another, and you create a genuine, authentic link between cultures. The interest shown by employees in "forum" magazine, is one measure of the competence, interculturally speaking, existing within EADS.

The partners in communications at EADS would have remained mismatched, and certainly less efficient, if the initial editorial process had been continued. There is a further sign of growing trust and respect between communication partners within EADS, and not surprisingly, it too has led to more efficiency in communicating with employees: "forum" magazine has meanwhile replaced a number of other internal magazines that "survived" the first years of the merger.

I think this example underlines the role of language diversity, how it can be used positively, across cultural barriers, and in international cooperation. Understanding this function is an essential part of intercultural competence. Allowing this diversity, accepting its role, makes working together more efficient.

We do not have to be a polyglots to be culturally competent. It always presents a tremendous challenge to live and work with people in a <u>culture</u> you can not always <u>understand</u>, even if you have a second language in common with which you can <u>speak to each other.</u>