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*Dagmar Weberová*

## SELECTED LANGUAGE BARRIERS TO INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN THE CONTEXT OF MANAGEMENT STUDIES

### **The importance of English in an international business environment**

Nowadays, we are in no doubt, English has become the lingua franca of the new millennium. Phillipson (1992: 42) uses the following definition of the term lingua franca: it is

a language that is used for communication between different groups of people, each speaking a different language. The lingua franca could be an internationally used language of communication (e.g. English), it could be the native language of one of the groups, or it could be a language which is not spoken natively by any of the groups but has a simplified sentence structure and vocabulary is often a mixture of two or more languages.

In our global world there is a strong tendency to promote English as the only language which can serve modern purposes. This tendency is supported by the fact that a quarter of the world's population, i.e. 1.2 to 1.5 billion people, can speak English at some level of proficiency and it is also true that English has already become the lingua franca of international business. But what English has in common with other languages is the fact that it can also be a barrier.

### **Language as a barrier to intercultural communication**

Language is only one of many barriers to intercultural communication. Words as symbols often turn out to be barriers when their denotative or connotative meaning is not shared. There are many examples when even speakers of the same language do not share exactly the same meaning for every word. This can be particularly observed in the use of British and American English, in which some lexical variations are significant. For example, the sentence "His business is going a bomb" is understood by an American that it is a complete failure while for a British the same sentence has an opposite meaning, i.e. it is very successful. This example indicates that one has to be very careful with words, expressions and idiomatic phrases. Although the number of similar expressions is not very high, it is recommended to be cautious. On the other hand, we can also find a number of idiomatic phrases with only slight variations which have the same meaning in both British and American English (see Table 1).

**Table 1.**

British English	American English
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• beat <u>about</u> the bush</li> <li>• sweep something under the <u>carpet</u></li> <li>• blow one’s own <u>trumpet</u></li> <li>• like a red <u>rag to</u> a bull</li> <li>• a/the skeleton in the <u>cupboard</u></li> <li>• cash on the <u>nail</u></li> <li>• bargaining <u>counter</u></li> <li>• on/have second <u>thoughts</u></li> <li>• off the back of a <u>lorry</u></li> <li>• if the <u>cap</u> fits, wear it</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• beat <u>around</u> the bush</li> <li>• sweep something under the <u>rug</u></li> <li>• blow one’s own <u>horn</u></li> <li>• like waving a red <u>flag in front of</u> a bull</li> <li>• a/the skeleton in the <u>closet</u></li> <li>• cash on the <u>barrelhead</u></li> <li>• bargaining <u>chip</u></li> <li>• on/have second <u>thought</u></li> <li>• off the back of a <u>truck</u></li> <li>• if the <u>shoe</u> fits, wear it</li> </ul>

Some differences in spelling conventions between British and American English are presented below.

**Table 2.**

British English	American English
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• high-flyer</li> <li>• on a shoe string</li> <li>• pay lip service</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• highflier</li> <li>• on a shoestring</li> <li>• pay lip-service</li> </ul>

The strong influence of US movies and television has led to “a considerable passive understanding of much American English vocabulary” (Crystal 2003: 306). Moreover, many of these expressions have been used actively by younger people.

### Translation

Translation problems between languages represent a problem. It has been proven that cultural factors as beliefs, values and attitudes play a significant role in how advertisements are perceived by the local audience. This fact holds true even in the case that some nations speak the same language. Speaking one language does not necessarily mean that nations share the same values or have the same tastes. This brings us to the conclusion that it is a very challenging task to communicate a message to people of different nationalities speaking one language. So to communicate a message to people of diverse nationalities speaking other languages is a far more complicated task. When people speak different languages, translation is important but always imperfect. Although many languages are translatable, there will always be “an incommensurable residue of untranslatable culture associated with the linguistic structures of any given language” (Kramsch 1998: 12). “Sechrest, Fay, and Zaidi have identified five translation problems that can become barriers to intercultural communication” (Jandt 2010: 135). These are vocabulary equivalence, idiomatic equivalence, grammatical-syntactical equivalence, experiential equivalence, and conceptual equivalence.

As many advertisements are used internationally these days, it is quite useful that companies think about possible pitfalls right from the beginning. It seems to be insufficient to produce an advert in one language, and then find an agency to

translate the text into another language. The fact that the length of advertising texts will vary from language to language has to be taken into consideration while working on the physical layout of an advertisement. For example, almost every text written in English will be approximately one third longer in Slovak.

It is obvious that international advertisements have had a significant impact on the style, structure and language of national advertisements. There are some negative phenomena, such as word-by-word translations, frequent use of certain words and exaggerated use of attributes that can be observed in advertisements widely used all over the world.

Many times companies do not pay enough attention to market research. Richards, Hull and Proctor (Richards et al. 1998: 77) mention some areas in which problems have arisen. A wrong choice for the name of a product can have fatal consequences for sales. For example when General Motors introduced its Chevy Nova into Latin America, it did not realize that “*No va*” in Spanish means “it doesn’t go.” The Colgate company introduced a toothpaste in France called Cue, the name of a French pornographic magazine.

Badly translated slogans can also cause difficulties. The slogan “Come alive with Pepsi!,” so successful in the United States was an embarrassing flop in Germany and China because it was pleading with Germans to “come out of the grave” and telling Chinese that “Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the grave.” When Parker marketed a pen in Mexico, its ads were supposed to say “It won’t leak in your pocket and embarrass you.” However, the company translated “embarrass” as *embarazar*, which means “to become pregnant.” So the ads said “It won’t leak in your pocket and make you pregnant.” An American T-shirt maker in Miami printed shirts for the Spanish market which promoted the Pope’s visit. Instead of “I saw the Pope” (*el Papa*), the shirts read “I saw the potato” (*la papa*). When Braniff Airlines translated a slogan for its comfortable seats, “fly in leather” it came out in Spanish as “fly naked.” The American slogan for Salem cigarettes, “Salem-Feeling Free,” was translated into Japanese as “When smoking Salem, you will feel so refreshed that your mind seems to be free and empty.”

There are many ways how to improve translation and avoid amusing translation errors. One of them is to use back translation. It involves translating from the first language into the targeted language, then translating back into the first language. Then the result is compared to the original.

### Vocabulary equivalence

Many English words have multiple meanings and a lot of groups of words can be easily confused. In Jandt’s book (2010: 136) a sentence written by a U.S. businessperson was supposed to be translated into Japanese. The sentence “We wonder if you would prepare an agenda for our meeting” was translated as “We doubt that you would prepare an agenda for our meeting.” In the original text, the word “wonder” was meant as a polite way of telling the Japanese partners to prepare the agenda. In a restaurant we can order the following meal “Beef broth with \*ancient Bohemian meat balls” (Clark, Pointon 2003: v). Instead of using the word “ancient” the word “traditional” would be more appropriate. “A well known rally driver is reported as saying: For many years, Ford and I have had a gentleman’s

agreement – in writing of course.” (Clark, Pointon 2003: 9). A gentleman’s agreement means an unwritten, yet binding agreement. An alternative to this expression is “verbal agreement.” The word “actual” is commonly used in the business context. In many languages, including Slovak, it means current or topical but in English it refers to “real,” e.g. actual performance = real performance, so actual performance does not mean current performance. “Both the \*mother and daughter company did not perform very well last year.” In many languages the term “mother company” is correct, yet English has the term “parent company.” “Let me introduce Mr Schmidt, our \*economical director.” (Clark, Pointon 2003: 70). The word “economical” refers to saving money, resources and time, while “economic” is connected with the word economy and the subject of economics. A certain similarity can be seen in the use of “electric” and “electrical.” The adjective “electric” refers to the production and use of electricity while the adjective “electrical” refers to things connected less directly with electricity. The expression “\*electric engineers” indicates engineers powered by electricity while graduates in electrical engineering are “electrical engineers” (Clark, Pointon 2003: 72).

### Idiomatic equivalence

According to Crystal (2003: 163), the meaning of the idiomatic phrase cannot be deduced by examining the meanings of the constituent lexemes. This implies that idiomatic expressions have a figurative meaning which is known only through conventional use. In fact many words in English have idiomatic origins, but with time passing on they have been assimilated and their figurative sense has been lost. For example, the word “headache” in the sentence “Trying to make the company place more orders is a big headache” can be replaced by the word “problem.” But most idioms have no easy equivalent, and the only way how to help non-native speakers understand these phrases lies in explanation. Taking a closer look at British and American English, Crystal (2003: 306) shows the following idiomatic expressions:

**Table 3**

Idioms used in British English	Explanation
• hard cheese	• bad luck
• drop a brick	• blunder
• in queer street	• in debt
• The best of British!	• Good luck!

**Table 4**

Idioms used in American English	Explanation
• right off the bat	• with no delay
• feel like two cents	• feel ashamed
• out of left field	• unexpectedly
• take the Fifth	• refuse to answer
• a bum steer	• bad advice

Semantically, the majority of English idioms are monosemantic (i.e. they carry only one meaning) but some of them are polysemantic (i.e. they have more meanings). For instance, in the English expression “bring home the bacon,” a non-native speaker knowing only the meaning of individual words (bring, home, and bacon) is unable to derive the expression’s real meanings, which are either “to succeed” or “to earn money to live on.” The next phrase “be running on empty” means either to continue to work although one has no energy left or a person/company has no new ideas anymore and is not as effective as earlier.

From the semantic point of view, idioms are basically classified into pure idioms, figurative idioms, and semi-idioms.

Pure idioms (also called opaque idioms or demotivated idioms) are expressions which meanings cannot be deduced by examining individual words of the phrases, such as red tape, paint one’s fence, hit the roof, (be) on the ball or dead wood.

Figurative idioms (also semi-opaque or partially motivated idioms) are expressions which meanings can be deduced by examining individual words of the phrases, such as talk behind one’s back, bottom of the career ladder, hammer out the details or get the message.

Semi-idioms (restricted collocations) are expressions in which at least one word is used in a figurative meaning while the other word/words has/have a direct meaning, such as wrap up the meeting, golden hello, golden handshake, blind alley job, rain cats and dogs or keep sb in the picture.

Another feature of idiomatic expressions is figuration. As we can notice above, idiomatic phrases usually consist of words that are used in an indirect, non-literal sense or atypical mode. There are four basic figurative elements that can often be observed in idiomatic expressions – metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole and simile.

Metaphor is an implied comparison, in which a word used originally for one thing is applied to another (e.g. on thin ice = in a potential minefield, a headache = a problem, or homework = preparation).

We speak about another figure of speech, metonymy, when the name of one thing is used instead of another one which is associated with it, e.g. a small beer meaning an unimportant person or thing, a fat cat meaning a rich and influential person, a big fish/noise meaning an important and powerful person, Uncle Sam meaning the government or the country of The United States of America, or Fort Knox (His house is like a Fort Knox) meaning a very well protected building.

Hyperbole means exaggerating for effect, in order to make something sound bigger, stronger, better or smaller, worse, etc. For instance, to kill sb with kindness means that one is too kind to somebody, or to kill time means wasting time.

Simile is a figure in which one thing is compared to another, which is quite dissimilar, it often contains words such as “like” or “as”: as safe as houses = very safe, as sharp as a needle = bright, fit as a fiddle = healthy, like a fish out of water = uncomfortable, a memory like a sieve = a bad memory.

It is generally accepted that idiomatic phrases are culturally salient. Idioms require some basic knowledge, information, and experience of using them within a culture where they are used. Furthermore, some meanings can be precisely expressed only in metaphorical language. Of course, it is necessary to explain the exact function(s) of an idiomatic phrase, but more importantly, it seems to be crucial

to draw non-speakers' attention to the role of these expressions in exchanges between speakers.

### Grammatical-syntactical equivalence

Languages do not have the same grammar. English places emphasis on the word order which is often described as fixed. And although the placement of the core elements in a clause is regulated, variations are allowed. But all in all word order is used in English as a grammar signal. A typical word order is the SVO order (subject – verb – object). Its importance can be seen in Table 5, where the meaning of the sentences varies based on the changes made in the word order.

**Table 5.** Source of sentences 2 and 3: Crystal (2003: 214)

1	Please, place a book on the table.	↔	Remember to book a place.
2	Only I saw Mary.	↔	I saw only Mary.
3	The man with a dog saw me.	↔	The man saw me with a dog.

In Table 6 basic word orders of some languages are presented (Jandt 2010: 129).

**Table 6**

Word order	Sentence	Sample Languages
SVO	"Cats eat mice."	English, Chinese, Swahili
SOV	"Cats mice eat."	Japanese, Korean
VSO	"Eat cats mice."	Classical Arabic, Welsh, Samoan
VOS	"Eat mice cats."	Tzotzil (a Mayan language)
OSV	"Mice cats eat."	Kabardian (a language of the northern Caucasus)
OVS	"Mice eat cats."	Hixkaryana (a language of Brazil)

### Experiential equivalence

If an object or experience is not present in one culture, it might be complicated to translate words relating to that object or experience into that language when words do not exist for them.

### Conceptual equivalence

The problem of conceptual equivalence refers to abstract ideas that may have different meanings in different cultures. The meaning of words like freedom, democracy, human rights or corruption is not universally shared. In Slovakia people often associate freedom with speaking honestly their mind or with travelling without restrictions. The meaning of this freedom is not equivalent to what one can experience as freedom in the United States. The word corruption "connotes negative, bad, improper behavior" (Jandt 2010: 137) in the Unites States and in Slovakia; in the United States corruption is a crime and wrong on moral grounds, while in Slovakia corruption is often not perceived as morally wrong.

## Linguistic imperialism

In our opinion no language should dominate the world. We think that linguistic rights have to be upheld because each language is unique and because “each language provides a uniquely communal, and uniquely individual, means by which human beings apprehend the world and one another” (Kramersch 1998: 77). However, it seems that the spread of English is undeniable. Phillipson defines English linguistic imperialism as follows: “the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages” (Phillipson 1992: 47). The dominance of English has resulted in the fact that firstly, more and more resources are allocated to English than to other languages. Secondly, the global use of English benefits those people who are proficient in English. According to Phillipson, “the legitimation of English linguistic imperialism makes use of two main mechanisms” (Phillipson 1992: 47) – anglocentricity and professionalism, which considerably contribute to the structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages. The significant economic importance of English is also reflected in this quote: “Britain’s real black gold is not North Sea oil but the English language” (Phillipson 1992: 49).

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## Wybrane bariery językowe w komunikacji międzynarodowej w kontekście studiów z zarządzania

### Streszczenie

Obecnie silnie promuje się język angielski jako jedyny, który jest w stanie sprostać wyzwaniom współczesności. Jednak język jest również przeszkodą w komunikacji międzykulturowej. Słowa jako symbole stają się barierą gdy ich denotacja lub konotacja nie są wspólne dla uczestników rozmowy. Przykłady źle przetłumaczonych haseł reklamowych pokazują, że wiele firm nie zwraca uwagi na aspekty kulturowe. Szczególnie w języku angielskim, w którym wiele słów ma wiele znaczeń, a sam język jest bogaty w wyrażenia idiomatyczne. Jest

oczywiste, że idiomy powinny być używane jedynie w ramach kultury do której przynależą, a ich użycie wymaga wiedzy i doświadczenia. Kolejnym aspektem jest gramatyka, która różni się w języku angielskim w porównaniu z innymi językami przez swoją zamkniętą strukturę zdania. Podobnie jest z wyrażaniem pojęć abstrakcyjnych, jak wolność, demokracja, korupcja. Różnią się one znaczeniem w zależności od kultury w której są używane. Mimo to język angielski dominuje obecnie w światowej komunikacji.