

Global Communication Begins at Home

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At the 1964 New York World's Fair, the story goes, a machine translated Russian to English and vice versa. But there were some problems with it. One visitor supposedly put in English: "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." The Russian translation read: "The vodka is good, but the meat has rotted."

Whether this story was a product of immature technology or Cold War joking at the expense of the "Godless Soviet Union," there is a lesson for today's global economy and Internet-connected Information Society. Language didn't matter so much when we had no global communication infrastructure. Now that we can communicate globally, language matters more than ever.

And it isn't just the gulf between different languages that is at issue. A BBC commentator wrote recently, during President Bush's trip to Europe, that Europeans found his "simple, almost babyish" language "refreshing." Multi-lingual European leaders, said the writer, pride themselves on their obfuscation and complex language, and reporters often argue about what politicians "actually meant" as opposed to what was "merely implied." With Bush there was no doubt.

Plain speaking, as it was once called, has long been admired. Plain speaking can denote simple ideas, and perhaps that is why some hold it in contempt. But sophisticated language can mask indecisiveness, can be used to avoid taking a position that some might find objectionable, or can hide a shortage of ideas or plans. Carefully parsed language -- full of sound and fury, signifying nothing and communicating little -- is much less valuable than simple ideas simply stated.

Complexity is not valuable in itself, but complex ideas communicated precisely -- as illustrated by British Prime Minister Tony Blair -- can be refreshing as well.

Our communication technology is getting better, and the translators more precise. I put "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak" into Babel Fish, translated it into Russian, and then translated the Russian back to English. The Result? "Spirit is willingly ready but flesh it is weak." Much better than in 1964, but still "much leaving to understand left out."

But while our communication technology is getting better, our communication is not. And suspicions flourish where communication is obscure, absent or clumsy, whether that suspicion is directed at Islam or cowboys, capitalists or socialists. Who really understands North Korea? Talks with its neighbors are on, then off, punctuated by threats and demands. Communication must first exist -- and in this case, even threats and demands are a beginning. The second fundamental is clearly defined words.

In the 19th century United States, the definition of words and their derivations were central to any school subject or study. But by the mid 20th century, that had changed.

George Orwell discussed the deterioration of language in his 1946 essay *Politics and the English Language*: "Prose consists less and less of *words* chosen for the sake of their meaning," he said, "and more and more of *phrases* tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated henhouse."

With our international reach and international hostilities, we can no longer use henhouses to communicate. Each word and its origin must be understood as a concept. As the student begins to unravel the complexities of a poorly understood word, magic happens. The word on the page becomes a clear concept in the mind, which can be used to think, to create, to evaluate, to communicate -- even across the formidable barriers of distance and language.

Several years ago, I sat next to a Russian friend at a conference in Rome. Panel members spoke in English, Spanish, German and Russian, and yet my friend did not use the translation service. I asked her if she was no longer interested in the proceedings, and she replied that she understood those languages. Americans must begin to learn our own as well as other languages, because there is a lot to understand.

Languages are the sets of symbols we use to communicate our basic ideas, goals and purposes. And in a clear transmission, duplication and understanding of those ideas, goals and purposes is the ultimate resolution of suspicion, hostility and war.

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