

Practicum

Advances are made by answering questions
Discoveries are made by questioning answers

Bridging the Language Barrier When Testing Foreigners and Non-Locals

by

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Amongst the blessed aspects of living in the holy land of milk and honeyⁱ is the enormous number of immigrants and outsiders that live amongst us. In any given working day we interview and examine Europeans, Americans, Latinos, Asians, Arabs and actually every ethnic origin group that exists on the face of earth. As exciting as it is, examiners are constantly being challenged with communication

obstacles due to language and cultural barriers in addition to the usual hurdles experienced in every interpersonal communication. Communication fails because of the language barrier: will it be a foreigner who does not speak your language, a foreigner who does speak your language but translates the spoken words in her/his mind to her/his mother tongue thereby losing some of what was said, locals who use a

ⁱExodus 3:8

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different jargon that leads to a different connotation or meaning, locals who are not educated enough to understand what they were told but due to shyness and embarrassment refuse to admit it, and last but not least, use of regional expressions may be misinterpreted or in some instances even considered offensive. In the process of communicating, one delivers a spoken message which in many times contains unspoken words, gestures, as well as common knowledge. When communicating with a local these subcontextual messages will probably be understood, which is not the case with a foreigner or an outsider who is deaf to the subcontext. A good example is found in Robert Heinlein's sci-fi book "Stranger in a Strange Land"ⁱⁱ which tells the story of a human who was born and raised in the planet Mars. During his first visit to the planet Earth he is asked one morning: "... feel like some breakfast?" which makes him wonder how can one can "feel like" breakfast.

Another aspect is when interviewing or testing someone NOT in her/his mother tongue, their deceptive physiological reactions are decreased compared to testing them in their mother tongue.

This is due to the fact that, unlike second language acquisition which is usually acquired by a methodical cognitive learning process, acquiring our mother tongue ("first-language acquisition") is an unconscious natural assimilation process absorbed by the child and part of his development. Along with the acquisition of his language skills comes the absorption of moral codes wherein "right and wrong" / "good or bad" goes hand-in-hand with "sanction and reward" which in return internalizes a conditioned reflex. As a result, when lying in our mother tongue (and lying is considered something wrong / bad) reflexively we anticipate a sanction ("fear of consequences or punishment") which is the major contributor to the psychophysiological response detected by the polygraph.

Testing with an interpreter

When conveying an idea, the transferor's (speaker's) expressive ability plays a major role yet, even when a person has an outstanding expressive ability, many times we "are still looking for the right words" to express an idea. The receiver, from his end, adds his interpretation to the spoken message, and by doing so he may increase

ⁱⁱ R.A., Heinlein, "Stranger in a Strange Land", Ace Books, NY, 1991, p. 25

the blurriness of the message to the point of deforming the idea. So each step of the communication process imposes a risk of losing the original meaning, and with an interpreter we increase and double the risk. In addition, other possible potential factors that may distort the message are:

- An unprofessional interpreter who does a sloppy and incompetent job by transferring the questions with a different meaning.
- Translators that add their interpretation to the spoken word. Sometimes they even try to “improve” what the transferor said and by doing so they change the meaning.
- Soften the questions because of cultural considerations or because they simply do not feel comfortable asking a direct and harsh question.
- And last but not least, the “examinee’s friendly interpreter,” who is the examiner’s nightmare. It is an interpreter who asks totally different questions: instead of a relevant question s/he asks an irrelevant question.

The solutions to overcome these obstacles are:

- The interpreter should be someone you can trust and know as being reliable

(preferably someone from your own agency and definitely not a friend of the examinee).

- Describe to the interpreter in detail the test procedures prior to the arrival of the examinee.
- Emphasize the necessity of translating your words as precisely as possible.
- Subject the interpreter to a simulated test in order to familiarize her/him with the “ambiance” of a polygraph test.
- Have a bank of potential relevant and comparison questions pertinent to the test in hand in order to allow the interpreter to comfortably phrase them in the best manner and have enough time to write them down before the arrival of the examinee.
- During the pre-test interview sit the interpreter next to you facing the examinee.
- During the test do not read aloud the questions in your language and then have the interpreter repeat them in his/hers. If the examinee has any knowledge of your language s/he will respond during the translation, and information will be lost. Instead point at the question

you intend to ask (either on the printed questionnaire and/or on the computer screen) to the interpreter **before** you are ready to ask it, and when you are ready, signal the interpreter to ask the question.

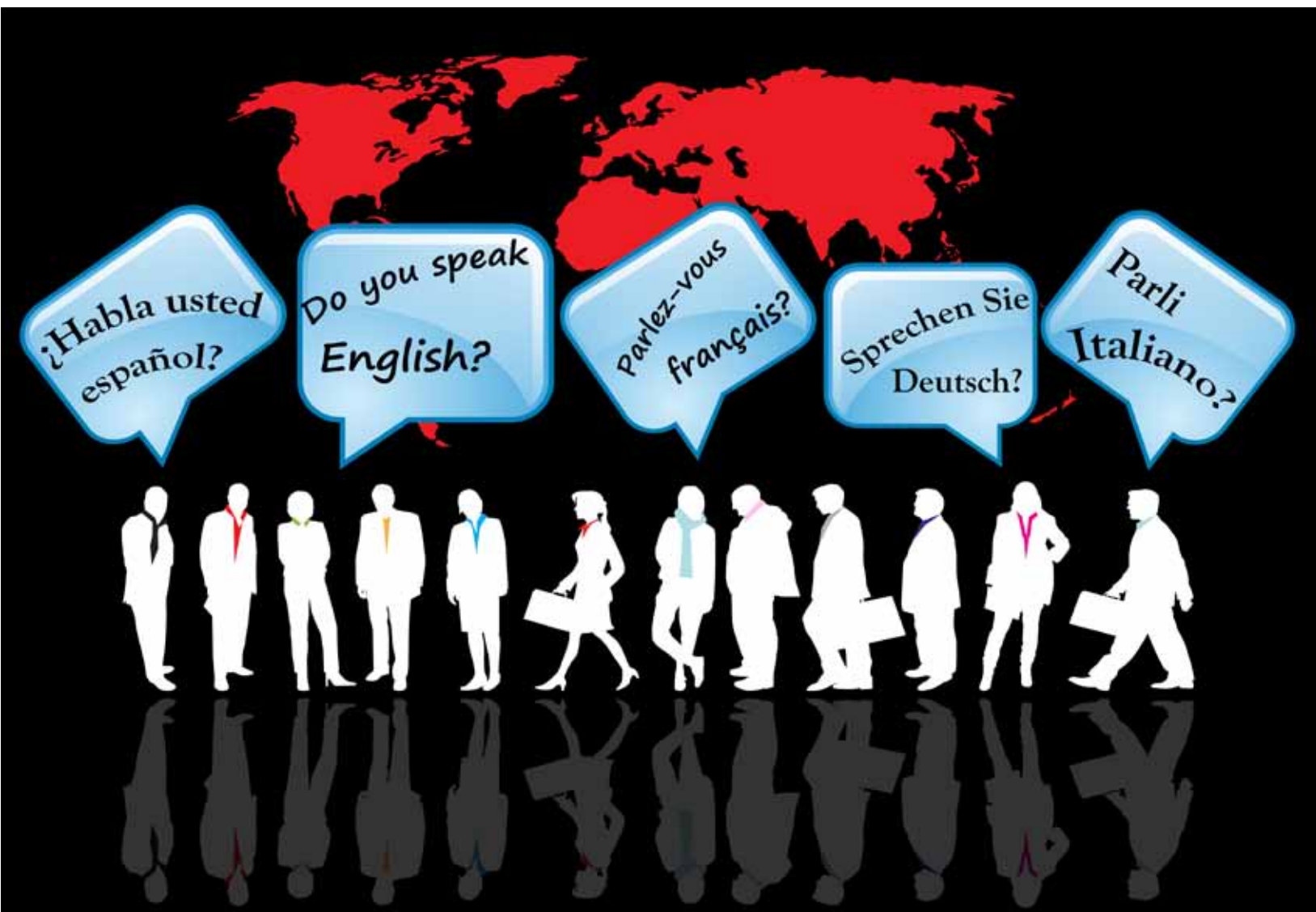
Testing without an interpreter

In addition to the inherited complications that any inter-personal communication bears, communicating with a foreigner or an outsider who does speak the language involves more difficulties, such as:

- Different meaning to the same word: *“Britain and America are two nations*

divided by a common language” (attributed to George Bernard Shaw). Excuse my examples but take the word “ass.” In British English it refers to a donkey while in American English it refers to buttocks. “Pissed” in British English refers to a drunken person while in American English to an angry one, all this without mentioning the proper meaning.

- When transferring a spoken message the receiver processes the words and interprets them not necessarily *per se* but rather through the filter of her/his perception, which may change her/his understanding of the message. In one



instance, when the examinee was asked an irrelevant question “Is today Monday?” he answered: “What do you mean? You know that today is Monday, so stop beating around the bush and get to the point.”

Some of the solutions to overcome these issues are:

- In order to establish rapport as well as evaluate the level of the spoken skills, start by asking the examinee to tell you about her/his hometown. If it's a new immigrant, ask her/him about the difficulties s/he experienced moving from a different country to yours. These two issues tend to open examinees, and by sympathizing with the hardship it helps to build rapport and allow you to familiarize yourself with the examinee's language skills.

- Verify the examinee's understanding by asking her/him to repeat and explain in her/his words every question that you asked.

- Avoid the instinctive slow speaking mode that we usually adopt when speaking with foreigners. This good-intentioned practice causes the examinee to feel you are treating him as though he were mentally slow.

- If your examinee is a foreigner that does speak your language but yet s/he does not have full control of it, have a translator Internet site (such as Google Translate) ready to use on your computer, so if the examinee does not understand a word you can immediately look it up and show it to her/him.

Suggested Best Practice

Two monologues do not make a dialogue
- Jeff Daly

If you cannot establish a coherent communication with the examinee – DO NOT EXAMINE !!!

Epilogue

Keep in mind and avoid Osmo Wiio'sⁱⁱⁱ “Murphy's Law” style communication trap:

- If communication can fail, it will.
- If a message can be understood in different ways, it will be understood in just that way which does the most harm.
- There is always somebody who knows better than you what you meant by your message.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wiio, O. A., “Wiion lait - ja vähän muidenkin” (Wiio's laws - and some others., Welin-Goos, Finland ,1978.