

English - The International Language of Miscommunication

By Ania Wilk-Lawton

English has become the business world's lingua franca. Chances are that if you work for an international company, within a multinational team, you will be using English in communication with your colleagues.

So we all speak English, but do you always REALLY understand what your counterparts are saying?

Your friendly new British neighbour you've met in the corridor said that you should come over for a coffee some time – so why did they look surprised when you turned up at their doorstep the next afternoon. And what about that Polish colleague of yours who needed you to do something for him and simply barked a request at you? And what on earth is wrong with that American passing you their cup with an inch of this morning's cold coffee lurking at the bottom and asking for a warm-up?

The answer to all these questions hides **behind** the words.

Your friendly British neighbour was just being polite – “let's do something some time” is a just an expression, bearing as much weight and actual intention behind it as the notorious “hi, how are you”. If they really did want to invite you for a coffee, they would have made a date.

Your Polish colleague was actually making a polite request, in what he thought was a perfectly polite manner. If you take a closer look at what a polite request is in English – a simple sentence tends to contain at least two “pleases”, one or two “could you's” and “would you's” and sometimes even opens with a phrase “would you like to” when clearly this is not the case. In many other languages, such a multitude of polite expressions crammed into a sentence tends to be considered excessive and in translation from Polish – a simple “would you” already implies softened message and a polite request.



And no, when your American colleague wanted a warm-up of their coffee, they did not mean for you to reheat the sad leftovers at the bottom of their cup, but in fact a re-fill – just a local expression.

Language is a phenomenon that is very deeply set in our culture, our roots and our background – we tend to always come back to the way of expressing our thoughts that is most natural to us. Certain notions present in one language may not even have equivalents in other languages. Lingua franca is therefore a mixed blessing – it brings us the ease of communication, but takes away the joy of making the best out of the language.

Many companies try to deal with the problem by imposing a simplified version of English in internal communications in an attempt to level the ground and give both native and non-native English speakers equal chance to express themselves and to be understood. Sadly this is a strategy that often brings more frustration to the workplace than it actually helps. Non-native English speakers feel patronized and native English speakers feel inadequate expressing abstract ideas in an infantilized language. In unofficial communications people still revert to idiomatic and colloquial expressions, which often leaves the non-native English speakers out of the social circle. Their own linguistic skills and communication styles, misunderstood by their

colleagues exclude them even further, eventually creating a fragmented workplace where the native English speakers are one fraction and the non-native English speakers (whatever their origin) form another one.

There are ways of managing this situation and more and more companies are turning away from the “simplified corporate language” model and making an effort to manage this linguistic diversity of their staff. Some of the solutions that can be recommended in this situation are:

- **Developing contextualized language courses for non-native English staff** – taking into account the local language culture and corporate language as well as the cultural make-up of the team they work within.
- **Encouraging interaction between the native and non-native English speaking staff** by involving them in cross-cultural team building activities and helping them understand and embrace their differences
- **Supporting continuous language tuition on all levels, including local languages** – making an effort to understand the local culture and the local language shows respect for the people and helps staff integrate in the community

As our workplaces become more and more global, the working cultures and attitudes must change accordingly. It is unlikely that the tendency to use English as a global language is going to change any time soon and we should develop strategies and tools to manage it effectively. After all, it may be the diversity within that will be the measure of its strength and global reach.

About the Author: Ania Wilk-Lawton holds a degree in International Relations with a specialty in EU law and a Master's degree in Linguistics. She is fluent in French, German, Polish, and English. Ania has lived and worked in the USA, France, Germany and Poland.