



The “Borderless English” Approach

A guide to speaking English so that the French can understand you!

by Nathalie Kleinschmit, for the Franco-British Chamber of Commerce and Industry's Executive Forum Newsletter, April 2001

“Can you give me a ballpark figure? Last year's figures were way off base. I'll touch base with you later today. “

Luc, a French manager, responded to his American boss' statement by signing up for more English lessons! Despite his ten years of studying English grammar, he, like most people in the world, has never played baseball. He finds himself struggling to keep up with American and British colleagues when they speak naturally, using vivid expressions and local references. And if he wants to succeed professionally today, he knows that international business situations require English as a shared language.

English is undeniably the main language of business worldwide. It is used for 75% of the world's mail, 80% of computer data and two-thirds of scientific documents. Mother-tongue English speakers number 300 million, a further 500 million use it daily.

Yet, while Germans and Spaniards find it easy to negotiate with each other in English, many non-native speakers say that their real challenge is speaking with native speakers who appear to have a great advantage over them. That said, many native English-speakers confess that they walk away from some international meetings feeling frustrated by the lack of clarity and questioning their own effectiveness. They may master the language but they suffer as much as their colleagues from the misunderstandings that occur in international business.

Getting a message across the cultural barriers requires a shared effort and willingness. As managers worldwide polish up their language skills, native speakers can also learn to speak in way that is more effective in international settings – Borderless English.

Borderless English is a way of speaking English so that it leaves as little room for misunderstanding as possible. The approach begins by understanding what complicates English for non-native speakers and then knowing how to adapt one's way of speaking. Three main categories of language can be focused on: Idioms, “false friends” and phrasal verbs.

Idioms and local colour

Idioms are colorful expressions that we use quite naturally when we speak, for example.

“a white lie”, “I'm catching the red-eye”, “out of the blue”, “cutting through red tape”, “he's too green for the job”, “we're in the black”, “I'm tickled pink”, “a golden handshake”, “the grey area”...

For non-native speakers, the words, taken at face value, make little sense. And in a business meeting, these expressions taken from the local context - sports, the military, food, history, local events, religion, nature - only serve to confuse. Even Canadian English speakers might find that the expression “sticky wickets” throws them for a loop. They might say instead that they're “up a creek without a paddle”! Is it fair to expect a Korean colleague to decode “it's a Mickey Mouse operation”? Simpler synonyms can always be found. “He annoys me” is easier to understand than “he drives me up the wall”.

False friends and mixed meanings

René, a top French manager almost lost his job when he presented his SBU's business plan to company's Board of Management. The English bosses were shocked to hear about the many "delays" he had included in his plan. When they asked him about them, he replied that "delays were normal". It took them awhile to realise that René was using the English word "delay" to mean "délai" which doesn't mean "lateness" but only means "cycle time" or "deadline"...

A "false friend" is a word that means one thing in one language and a slightly or completely different meaning when used in another. When non-native speakers communicate in English, they may use words without being aware of the different meanings. Mieke, a Dutch woman was asked if she was free on March 3rd to participate in a meeting. She answered that she was free and then became very angry when the meeting leader confirmed the date of March 3rd. She had meant "frei", "on holidays" rather than "free" as in "available"!

Dictionaries don't always help. For example, the French word for "ridiculous" is "ridicule". However, when a French people say the prices are "ridiculous" they usually mean that the prices are very low. In English, "ridiculous" usually describes very high prices. Thousands of "false friends" exist between English and other languages. Most people working in bilingual settings can give examples of how "false friends" have wreaked havoc. It's impossible to avoid mixed meanings however managers can foster better understanding by taking the time to clarify ambiguous terms that come up in meetings.

Phrasal verbs

"I don't get it. Didn't they get the message? The e-mail didn't get through? We need to get going on the project. If only they got their act together, we'd all get along!"

A non-native would not understand the different forms of "to get it" but could get the meaning of the same conversation in Borderless English:

"I don't understand. I thought they received the message. We weren't able to receive their e-mail? We need to advance our work on the project. They need to organise themselves so that we can work properly together."

Phrasal verbs are made up of a verb followed by a preposition. You can "look up to the sky" but also "look up to someone". You can "get across a river" and also "get a message across". You can "look through a window" but also "look through a report". What are the differences between "read over", "read through", and "read up"? Depending on what a person's "up to", substituting "Are up to it?" and "It's up to you!" with "Are you prepared to do it?" and "It's your decision." might lead to better understanding.

Borderless English – a personal choice

Some native speakers question the need of "simplifying" their language. They bring up the dangers of losing part of the wealth that natural English can offer. It is true that a certain amount of style is sacrificed when we use the Borderless English approach instead of our standard English - the expression "that wraps up our meeting" sounds more dynamic than "the meeting is finished". Yet, in a time-strapped world of globalisation, the approach is easier to implement than to learn every international colleague's language.

For native English speakers, the adoption of Borderless English shows their foreign counterparts that they appreciate their efforts in learning to speak English. It demonstrates their willingness to bridge some of the cultural gaps. Speaking Borderless English is not easy, not natural and can appear dull. And obviously, no approach can wipe out all ambiguity and discomfort...but it does help improve communication.

Besides the desire to communicate, Borderless English requires active observation skills to differentiate the different levels of English. Observation skills can be put into practice on this article - going back and underlining all of the non-global expressions... And then, rewriting the text in Borderless English!

The ball's in your court...