



INTERVENTION

Anglophones: If you Want us to Understand You, You Will Have to Speak Understandably!

A Humble Proposition Concerning Paper Presentations by Native English Speakers at International Conferences

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It is a simple fact these days that “international conference” means almost certainly that the conference language will be English. It is today’s *lingua franca*, as were Greek, Latin, French or German in respective historical times and contexts. This situation can be explained scientifically, praised or bemoaned normatively (if not nationalistically) or dealt with productively. As others may be much better at explaining the rise of the English language to its dominant position and as I am not interested in measuring the qualities of one language against those of another, in this intervention I do not want to deal with the fact *that* English is used at international conferences, but want to make some simple propositions concerning *how* it is used.

The background for this came from discussions at the International Conference of Critical Geography in January 2005 in Mexico City that took up questions raised already at the previous meeting in July 2002 in Békéscsaba (Hungary). In both cases, the “language question” was on the agenda. The situation may be regarded as somewhat typical for international conferences: on the one hand, English was the language that most (if not all) participants were able to use; on the other hand, this produced uneven communication, with people whose English was not that fluent being excluded from discussions. But then again, the situation was different from your usual international/English language conference: not only were other languages used (French in Békéscsaba, Spanish and French in Mexico City) and translations

offered, but the situation itself was problematized (Bialasiewicz 2003:21–22). Not surprisingly, it was especially (if not only) non-English speakers who engaged in these discussions.

My own positionality regarding the language question is similar to that of many who learned English as a foreign language: I can speak, write and understand it all right but it will never feel as comfortable as my mother tongue. Thus, when communicating in English, I am necessarily always aware of the fact that it *is* a foreign language and try to choose my words accordingly. This consciousness of having to speak carefully seems to be the big difference between native and foreign speakers when using the English language. Put another way: when it is not your mother tongue, you will most likely tend to form simple sentences using a limited vocabulary. This cannot be said of some (if not all) colleagues from the Anglophone world. Apparently, some of them tend to make no distinction between a paper presentation in an all-Anglophone context and at an international conference. This is just fine—as long as they don’t expect non-English-speakers to understand them. But if they want them to be able to follow and discuss their presentation, some humble recommendations may be of some help. All of them derive from personal experiences and do not draw on the vast literature on the subject.

- 1 Speak slowly. This will sound extremely banal, but don’t try to put as many words as possible into a 15-minute presentation just because you can—or at least don’t expect anyone to join you on your high-speed track.
- 2 Don’t read. You will almost certainly use longer and more complicated sentences and speak faster. Maybe you know this thought, which sometimes comes up when you read something out aloud: “What am I talking about?” Now this is exactly what your audience will think, particularly your non-Anglophone audience: “What is s/he talking about?” and “Why should I care, if obviously s/he doesn’t”.
- 3 Pronounce important words especially carefully. It may be especially important, for example, to understand the name of the city, theoretician or person you are talking about. It may also be worth making sure that not so well known words essential to your paper are understood. (I remember having heard of a Dutch guy who didn’t understand the word “Ungeziefer” in the first sentence of Kafka’s (1915) *Die Verwandlung*—and to whom the story didn’t make much sense.) Also, a simple “not”, “in-” or “un-” can be of great importance.
- 4 Don’t use context-specific abbreviations and acronyms. Say “state attorney” instead of DA, “federal drug police” instead of DEA and “juvenile delinquent” instead of JD—and please don’t say “the DEA processes JDs to the DA”.

- 5 Try to avoid metaphors specific to your language and/or national context. For example, don't expect people to understand what you mean by a left fielder—to get an idea of the global diffusion of baseball, just take a look at the list of participating countries at the Olympic tournament.
- 6 Don't create neologisms. Coming up with new, hip and sexy expressions is obviously a means of promoting oneself within academia and a way of getting quoted. Here, apparently, the cultural turn in geography with the new importance it gives to “academic celebrity” (Barnett 1998:385–388) reproduces cultural studies' “conspicuous tendency to try to make a name for oneself by creating neologisms that are for a good part obviously senseless and aim at academic copyright only” (Lindner 2000:79). But not only is the explanatory or descriptive value of these creations often of dubious nature, in a paper presentation they can lead to serious problems, as overcrowding in the realm of sexy neologisms makes even sexier and thus even more bizarre inventions necessary that especially your sincerely interested but now very puzzled foreigner will have a hard time deciphering.

Obviously, most of these recommendations also make sense when talking to an all-Anglophone audience (as they do in class). But in an international context, I think they are absolutely crucial. Following them will surely not eliminate the “language problem” and it will certainly not explain it. But it may at least help to create a situation in which more equal discussions are possible (about, for example, linguistic imperialism and language as a means of social control) and from which parts of the audience will not feel excluded from the very beginning.

By the way, “Ungeziefer” is vermin.

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