
Speak English!

By Lothar Katz

This is the time of the world's most important sports event. Well, at least according to my German friends and countless others around the globe. Obviously I am talking about football or, if you prefer, soccer. More precisely, the 2010 World Cup tournament held in South Africa. Those who cannot be there to cheer up their team often look for other ways to share in the excitement. One option: all over Germany, people gather by the thousands to collectively watch the matches on large public projection screens, made available by local governments and commercial sponsors. The Germans use an English-language term to refer to these events: *Public Viewing*.

Uhhh, here in the States, a public viewing usually involves a group of people dressed in dark colors, a half opened casket, and a dead body.

Which meaning is the correct one? Is there something wrong with the way the Germans use the term? Cheap jokes aside, there really isn't. One of the great characteristics of the English language is its enormous flexibility. Using the same term for different things is quite common. Do you *table an issue* when you put it *on* the agenda (British English) or take it *off* (American English)? Does *mugging* mean robbing someone (American/British) or studying hard (Indian)? Is a *holiday* a special celebration (American) or simply time off (elsewhere)? Decide for yourself! Even more frequent is the use of different terms for one and the same thing. Whether you say *restroom*, *washroom*, *lavatory*, or *toilet* may tell me something about where you are from, but these terms pretty much refer to the same place. *Zero*, *null*, *nil*, *naught*, or *nought*? *Thrice* or *three times*? *Twenty seven hundred* or *two thousand seven hundred*? *Silverware* or *cutlery*? *Pull in an order* or *prepone* it? Go ahead, use whatever you're comfortable with! Oh, and let's not forget the wide range of spelling differences, from *color/colour* to *organize/organise*.

Variety

Microsoft's Office software supports thirteen different versions of the English language, from *English-Australia* to *English-Zimbabwe*. Wikipedia list more than 130 regional dialects, reminding us of yet another factor, the differences in pronunciation, slang, et cetera that add further variety. From the Texan *y'all* to the Irish/Scottish *amn't*, a myriad of regional/local expressions spice up the language. Not enough yet? Let's add sports language, abbreviations, colloquialisms, proverbs, and other forms of culture-specific code. Does *going the whole nine yards* (American football), *hitting a homer* (baseball), or catching someone *offside* (football/soccer) leave you *hit for six* (cricket)? Let's go see a *vet* (Veteran or veterinarian? Can't tell without context info...), *hit the sack* (American: go to bed), meet a *bra* (South African: male friend), have a *bash* (British: party), and call someone a *drongo* (Australian: idiot). Isn't this language wonderful?

All this flexibility comes at a price. Misunderstandings between speakers of different flavors of English are common, as is evident from the legion of stories about British-American communication challenges. Worse, learning to communicate in English and deal with all this variety can be hell for non-native speakers. Native English speakers regularly underestimate how the way they talk causes confusion or misleads others.

Speaking Well

So what can you do to reduce the risk of being misunderstood? If you communicate with colleagues across different dialects, accents, native languages, as well as varying levels of familiarity with the language, you'll want to follow these simple rules:

- Speak slowly. Doing so gives your counterparts more time to translate and/or reflect on what is being said. That is well worth the risk of appearing a bit boring.
- Speak clearly. Try to sound like a TV commentator or reporter. Members of these professions know that saying 'going to' instead of 'gonna' or 'it is' instead of 'tis', for example, makes them much easier to understand.
- Use simple terms. Tame your urge to employ elaborate language and sophisticated expressions. After all, how smart are you going to look if your counterparts don't understand what you're saying?
- Avoid colloquialisms, slang terms, proverbs, and similar expressions. Be your own censor: if there's even a remote chance that your counterpart may be unfamiliar with what you were about to say, say it another way.

Following these rules takes practice. With discipline, though, you'll quickly be able to embrace them. So go ahead, speak English. It's the world's premier business language. But *plleeeeeeeze*, try to speak it in ways others can understand!

Lothar Katz is an International Business Advisor and the author of "Negotiating International Business – The Negotiator's Reference Guide to 50 Countries Around the World". He has a wealth of experience in achieving productive cooperation across cultures and driving business success on a global scale.

A seasoned former executive of Texas Instruments, a Fortune 500 company, Lothar regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. He teaches International Project and Risk Management at the University of Texas at Dallas' School of Management and is a Business Leadership Center Instructor at the Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business.
