

Communicating across borders

with English as a working language

Observations, reflections and tools

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GlobalDenmark Publishing A/S

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Claus Adam Jarløv, August 2012

Foreword

Communicating across borders: Why English?

In addition to my mother tongue, English is my language too. Having graduated in English in 1982 and planning to start my own communication consultancy firm, I was told by experts that in a world of globalisation, English would not be the only foreign language to be used by Danes when working outside their borders. Spanish, German and French would be as important and get the same attention as would English. The experts were wrong. While German, French and Spanish are undeniably representative of enormous cultural and demographic domains, these languages have become truly 'foreign' in Denmark. Sadly, one might say, languages other than English have been reduced to minor subjects at schools, or they have disappeared entirely. Efforts are made to remedy this language deficit: campaigns are launched, language societies evolve and slogans are made: 'We lose business opportunities in Germany if we don't master German'; 'French is the gate to understanding French culture', and 'Spanish represents an entire continent'. And yet, in spite of these powerful statements, English prevails as the Danes' first foreign language.

Over the past almost 30 years I have engaged in giving courses and doing consultancy work for business people, politicians and researchers who are to communicate their views, ideas and projects outside Denmark. As the Danish language is confined to a relatively small cultural and geographical entity, these professionals must use a language that is likely to be understood outside Denmark. That language is English. In addition, Danish researchers who also engage in teaching are required to do this in English because of the highly international composition of universities in Denmark.

The courses we conduct are not really language courses; rather, we couple the clients' subject with the language learning process: the English language becomes instrumental to communicating their subject effectively across borders. This is what we aim at, and this is something that is quite stressful to many Danes; yet, it is a mission possible.

As Danes, we have the luxury of being bombarded with English: the media, the music industry etc. are brimming with the English language. Films are not dubbed so most Danes actually hear 'real' English on a daily basis. English is widely used in the academic world, and not least young people readily adopt English words when speaking, much to the concern of older generations who see their dear old language

‘contaminated’ and ‘impoverished’. Danes are generally known to be in relatively good command of English, and yet there still seem to be challenges associated with using the language. English is the Danes’ second language (L2). I claim this to be generally the case in most European countries, and increasingly so.

Being in good command of L2 is valuable; when coupled with other disciplines, it becomes much more so. By coupling English with cultural understanding, presentation skills or negotiation techniques, English becomes instrumental to achieving goals beyond merely mastering the language. Rather than impoverishing local languages (L1), English as L2 will enrich local cultures and languages, if put into a broader conceptual context: global competence.

I wrote this book in English to communicate my message to my fellow Danes and to those outside the Danish village who also engage in communicating across borders, using English as a shared language. The mission of the book is to illustrate how competences, such as negotiating and giving presentations, must be brought together through a shared language. In this way we can all contribute valuably, not in spite of our differences, but because of them.

PART 1

Chapter 1

The objective of the book

This book intends to facilitate the communication of culture, skills and knowledge through using a common, shared working language. It aims at stimulating curiosity, creativity and communication across borders: mental borders, personal borders, professional borders and national borders.

The background

Globalisation and global crises require us to understand ourselves locally and to communicate our views and interests globally. Globalisation has become inevitable, whether we like it or not. To operate in it and benefit from it, a new set of skills is required. I call this '**global competence**'.

In a world of specialisation, the need for cross-cutting competences has risen: specialists working globally cannot only concentrate on their subject area. They are to an ever higher degree required to work in an *inclusive* context, involving business communities, ordinary people and other fields of specialisation. Specialisation is no longer exclusive and local, but inclusive and global.

An ever more complex world requires a wide range of specialist skills and competences for it to work. A field of specialisation is a *locality* in the sense that it is delimited, has certain borders, and relates to something specific. If the specialists focus only on

that, they will have to leave it to others to communicate their achievements globally: someone else will present the project, someone else will negotiate partnership contracts, and someone else may well take advantage of the specialists' inability to deal with issues outside the immediate scope of their project.

Formerly it was acceptable for specialists to adopt a 'tunnel vision' in their work; specialists being completely absorbed in their field without being interested in or capable of interacting with the world outside their 'village'. Such a limited focus will no longer do; many excellent specialists give horrible presentations, are unable to teach others about how to make use of their results, and possibly fail to negotiate a fair contract for themselves or their department. Global competence will enable professionals break out of their tunnel of specialisation.

Global competence is relevant to all, regardless of class, nationality and cultural orientation. If we allow globalisation to be an elitist project, we are at risk of creating an underclass of people who will never become part of the globalisation process, and therefore never contribute to it nor benefit from it. This book endeavours to bring on observations, ideas

and tools to whoever is interested in communicating across their borders.

Bringing competences together

Global competence brings key disciplines together:

language, negotiating, presentations

Global competence cuts right across a multitude of disciplines. Even if the world today is characterised by an ever higher degree of specialisation, there is an increasing need for people to master or at least engage in disciplines previously believed to belong to specialists' domains.

Each discipline may well be valuable in isolation; but when integrated with the other disciplines, they form a global competence model that will generate much more value than each discipline alone.

This book claims that a 'holistic' approach is necessary for generating value for individuals locally and people globally.

The structure of the book

This book deals with cross-disciplinary competences. It is divided into two parts, the first of which comprises chapters 1-4 where ideas, concepts and phenomena are presented and discussed. The second part of the book is practical and tools oriented, focusing primarily on three essential disciplines: giving presentations, attending meetings and engaging in negotiating across borders.

Chapter 1 presents basic concepts and models that cut across the themes addressed in the book.

Chapter 2 deals with how we understand each other, and how things we want to express may be understood differently by people we communicate with across our own borders. The chapter offers a simple formula as a tool for dealing with the complexities inherent in the communication process.

Chapter 3 'Global competence and the English language' addresses the issue of a shared working language making the other disciplines possible. The language is the glue that keeps the other competences together.

Chapter 4 addresses psychological aspects of communicating in a cross-cultural environment.

Attitudes, reactions and behaviours are subject to a variety of rules and conventions where language plays an instrumental and catalytic role. The chapter discusses how communicating in a foreign language can remove barriers and enable people to communicate across personal and mental borders.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 deal with specific issues and tools relevant to communicating across borders: speaking to groups, attending meetings and making agreements with others – presentations and negotiations.

The final chapter offers tips and advice on how to improve skills in English without attending language courses. In addition the chapter gives a number of hands-on tips within the broad concept of communication and cultural understanding.

As a supplement to this book, an audio version and an e-book are planned to be made available at www.communicatingacrossborders.com. Here we will also offer language resources, negotiation tools and academic references.

Key concepts

This book makes use of concepts and metaphors to illustrate how certain phenomena permeate all the disciplines addressed. The concepts described below are by no means unique; they exist in many guises and are part of what is broadly known as human interaction.

Requirements, needs and wishes

‘Requirements’ relates to that which the individual has no immediate influence on: the law, for example; an instruction or a mandate from ‘above’ that is to be negotiated. Requirements are constants in a given situation.

‘Needs’ implies what tool is to be used or what action or decision is to be taken to achieve a certain goal. The ‘needs’ domain is about what is necessary; for example, if a Danish civil servant is required to negotiate new threshold limits in the EU for phthalates in toys, he or she needs to know about phthalates and EU law; in addition, the Danish civil servant needs to be in command of the language used in the negotiations. ‘Needs’ is the core of this book. ‘Wishes’ is what we want to get out of what we do on a personal, individual scale: fulfilment of hopes and wishes – satisfaction and success.

An example

A government agency has commissioned a consultancy company to launch a campaign to improve health and safety at the workplaces. The requirements were: the project was to be carried out within the current legislation; it was to be run over a six-month period in the construction sector; and injuries and deaths were to be reduced by at least five per cent. The needs comprised: a poster campaign aiming at the workers' families (to make them aware of the importance of workplace safety). The wishes might be happier people and a more stable and efficient workforce.

Acknowledgement of the existence of the phenomenon

This concept is key to education, development and problem solving. It implies the ability and willingness to see the problem before something is done to solve it. For example, for a company to adopt a language policy successfully, all parties must be able to see the need for it. The inability to see the need for a language policy may not necessarily generate immediate crises, but in the long term it may fall prey to ‘tacit sabotage’: employees say ‘yes, we will work for it’ and then nothing happens.

Acknowledging the existence of a phenomenon is a requirement for long-term motivation.

Interest in the other side

For communication to work properly, it seems obvious that at least two parties must have an interest in communicating. The absence of interest in the other side is detrimental to communication.

Interest in the other side is expressed in curiosity, questions and identification: ‘What if I were in their shoes?’ Interest in the other side paves the way for communication, negotiation and, ultimately, for benefitting from cultural diversity.

An example

A Danish prime minister is interviewed on an Arab TV channel over a major crisis where parts of the Muslim world have been deeply offended by some blasphemous cartoons that portrayed the prophet Mohammed. This had serious implications for Danish exports to the Muslim world. The interview was therefore extremely important. The Danish PM spoke English, and the interviewer spoke Arabic. The interviewer was very serious and unsmiling. The Danish PM smiled throughout the interview. Whereas what the PM said was friendly and serious, his facial expression did not match that of the interviewer. The conversation was somehow asymmetrical, not necessarily because of what was said, but due to the guest (the Danish PM) not reflecting the behaviour of his host, the interviewer. At the end of the interview, the host said, and this time in English, 'Prime Minister, thank you very much', and the PM smiling responded 'You are welcome'.

The Danish prime minister did not mirror the facial expression of his host. In this way, he generated distance and asymmetry between himself and the interviewer, a kind of non-verbal power struggle evolved. In some cultures, one does not smile when something serious is discussed, and one adapts to the role as a guest. The Danish guest did not do this. Whatever the reason was for this is subject to conjecture. What the asymmetry does suggest, though, is that he wasn't really interested in adapting to the atmosphere and style of the interview. The reasons notwithstanding, the Danish prime minister gave the other side the impression that he was not really interested in how they saw the issue. Perhaps expecting arrogance on the Danish part, the Arab world may have seen this confirmed in the interview.

The Danish PM's final remark 'You are welcome' is a phrase used to acknowledge that you have done somebody a favour, when you are the 'host'. *'Thank you so much for helping me'* – *'You're welcome'*. What the PM should have said was 'It has been a pleasure' or perhaps, or 'It has been a privilege' to generate appropriate symmetry. Considering how sensitive the situation was, it was thought-provoking to see this asymmetry contributing to a conflict: The Danish PM made his case in good Danish-sounding English, but risked damaging his own interests by the apparent absence of **interest in the other side**. Interest in the

other side is the product of curiosity, respect and humility; absence of interest in the other side often translates into ignorance or arrogance.

The village



The concept of **the village** can be understood literally: the small community where everybody knows each other, share facilities and infrastructure and may see people coming from outside the village with a degree of scepticism. The village represents something safe and predictable, a comfort zone.

The concept can also be viewed metaphorically as a domain where those within it share certain beliefs, values, language, etc. An example is a department in an organisation in which those working there have a sense of group belonging. The village may represent a group of specialists whose special knowledge defines their particular territory. This gives the members a sense of uniqueness, making it easy to communicate with one another in spite of local language

differences. Specialisation becomes a comfort zone due to a shared group identity.

The relevance bridge



When communicating with others, a relevance bridge is created if the person speaking generates interest because what is being said is valuable to the person spoken to. For example, when we listen to a lecture and think ‘Aha! This is something I can use!’ then there is link or bridge between what is said and what is heard. Conversely, if what is said does not mean anything valuable to us, we may easily forget what we are told. The absence of a relevance bridge may well mean the absence of understanding.

Global competence

Global competence links competences and disciplines as well as personal, professional and national characteristics into a complex that enables the individual to exercise and communicate skills in the world and at the same time retain the traits that define him or her personally, nationally and professionally.

Global competence implies communication across borders: communicating across national borders, i.e. understanding and communicating with people outside one's own 'local village', i.e. one's own country. The concept also implies communicating across professional borders, e.g. when a doctor communicates with a patient; across departmental borders, where departments in an organisation discover that they have different cultures, ways of speaking, etc.; across personal borders when one realises how challenging it is to speak to a group outside one's comfort zone.

Linkage of competences



Global competence is not an end, it is a means. Global competence is the vehicle that carries skills, knowledge, ideas, projects, etc. into the world – that is not only to our own world, but to the entire globe.

An example

*An IT specialist – John - was to give a talk to investors about a new project that badly needed a capital injection if it were to succeed. Even if John was a real ‘geek’, he knew that his audience were not IT specialists (**insight**) and had therefore checked their backgrounds. He decided to use everyday language,*

*and, when necessary, explained technical terms (**language**) to them, making sure that the technical principles were properly understood (**profession**). Naturally a bit shy, he knew how important it was to be a little more formal in his style than he would usually be (**personality**).*

John enjoyed his talk even if he only talked about a fraction of what he would have liked to discuss with his colleagues. He came across effectively not in spite of, but because of his ability to couple competences.

Three languages in global competence

This book operates with three language domains, each with its own function and importance.

A language used as a mother tongue is the first language that is spoken **in** the village **by** the villager **with** the other villagers. The mother tongue is learned from birth, and mother-tongue speakers generally have little consciousness about the language as it is more part of their identity than the result of intellectual activity. Grammar and syntax are broadly used intuitively with adjustments from parents and, later in life, school.

In contrast to the mother tongue's 'coming to the user' in the earliest formative years, the second and third languages are **acquired** languages, learned later in life, for a specific purpose. The second language or the working language is used to communicate with people outside the home village. The second language is used to communicate with others who either have that language as their mother tongue or use it as a second language. Grammar and syntax are often seen as difficult because the rules are different from those used in the mother tongue context. The focal point of this book is exactly the role of English as a second language, as a working language used globally. The second language is **acquired** and **global**. The book

argues that the second language is not a foreign language, but a language that exists as complementary to the mother tongue.

The third language level is used inside a village that is not one's own. The third language is a foreign language, generally used with people who use it as their mother tongue. As is the case with the second language, grammar and syntax are often seen as difficult because the rules are different from those used in the mother tongue context. The third language is acquired, local and foreign.

An example

A German businessman – Hermann - is stationed for two years in South Korea. At a language school he learned Korean, enabling him to do simple shopping, open a business meeting with some polite phrases and conduct a simple conversation with his business partners. Korean becomes his third language, a means of generating a good, respectful and friendly atmosphere. When talking to his wife in their apartment, he speaks German, his mother tongue. At the business meetings, Hermann communicates in English with his Korean partners; before the meeting, however, he will have exchanged a few polite remarks in Korean with them, opening the door for communicating in English.

English: a question of form and substance

English can be studied scientifically: as such it is a subject offered at most universities all over the world. English is in this regard *substance*: We study English because we want to understand the language and what it represents. The *means* is our scholarly efforts, the *end* is English.

The English language is indeed an extremely relevant subject for in-depth research in its own right; however, in this context, English is used as an instrument, a tool: in global competence English is a *means* – it is *form* – and as such only important if it communicates issues: *substance*.

Some people are language specialists, have profound linguistic knowledge and deal with the language as *substance*; others use the language as a *means* of communication rather than a subject for academic study.

Using English as a global working language is not the expression of a national identity – we have the multitude of national – local – languages for that. That is why English is becoming increasingly accepted as a ‘lingua franca’, also in language communities hitherto known as ‘Anglo-phobic’. Making a conscious distinction between what is a

mother tongue and what is a working language protects our local languages and hence our identity. Acknowledging the existence of our mother tongue and our second language may pave for the enrichment of both.

Coupling disciplines with our working language

This book couples disciplines: the language used between villages, negotiations and presentations. Few professionals today can afford to say they will never need to attend international meetings, or negotiate or present something in public – in their mother tongue or in a language that allows communication across linguistic borders.

Chapter 2

On communication

This chapter deals with the goal of this book: expressing and understanding ideas, intentions and information among two or more parties. Communication is a requirement for making this possible.

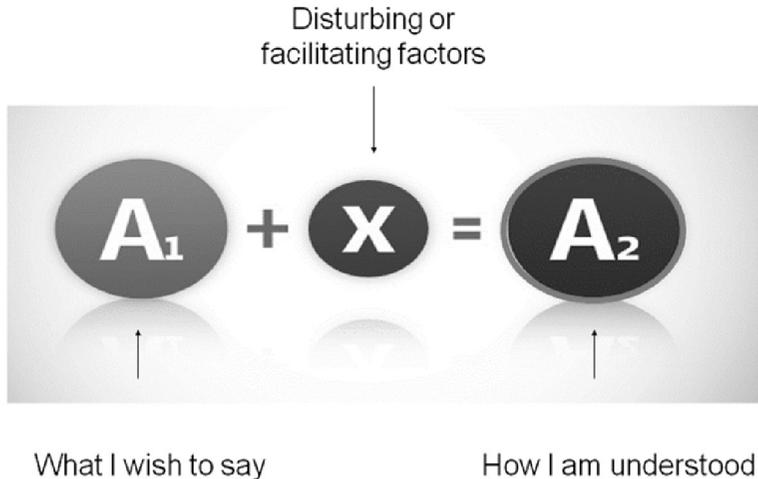
The word 'communication' is related to 'community' and 'common', suggesting togetherness and sameness. Communication is a social activity, requiring a shared platform, a shared code and a shared interest in the other side. The notion of sharing implies symmetry between those communicating: sounds made and sounds understood, a key that fits into the lock and hence opens a mental door of understanding between parties.

Communication can be a balanced process between equal partners, or one of the communication parties can be in a more dominant position than the other. Communication can therefore be symmetrical or asymmetrical.

Sender and recipient

Communication is about making contact. A message is transmitted from one point to another, and in order for that message to be received, the recipient must be ready to receive it.

A prerequisite for the message to be successfully communicated is that there is a common understanding of the rules underlying the communication. These can be **syntax** (how sentences are constructed), **semantics** (what the words mean) or **culture**, such as level of formality and behaviour. In this context, culture covers national culture, ethnic culture and business culture. What characterises them all is that they are tied together by rules which in the ideal world are understood by all parties involved.



Whereas communication processes hold a vast array of elements, they can be illustrated by a simple formula: $A_1 + X = A_2$, where A_1 is the message the sender wishes to send, and A_2 is the message as it was understood by the recipient. The 'x' is a variable of elements that somehow affect the way the message is understood. There are countless factors that constitute disturbing or facilitating elements - positive or negative 'x's - ranging from the tone used, grimaces, the physical environment, etc.

The communication formula is a tool for making it easier to identify elements that influence the way we understand and misunderstand each other.

For example, not asking for clarification may change the way the message is understood because we rely on guesswork. When we guess what was meant, we have an 'x' that may undermine our communication.

Rather than being offended or surprised at discovering that we have not been understood as intended, we can use the formula as a way of analysing the reason for the misunderstanding. The formula helps us identify, discuss and ultimately act: if issues, such as misunderstandings, become specific, something can be done about them.

The more we understand each other's code, the less clarification seems to be needed. A shared code reduces disturbing 'x's that lead to misunderstanding and enhances the understanding of what is communicated, even that which is not said. This means that a shared code of understanding holds elements of implicitness. Interest in the other side makes a shared code and symmetrical communication possible; global competence presupposes acknowledgement of the possible existence of a message that is never expressed, but possibly intended. This is done by constantly ensuring mutual understanding of the message communicated.

Absence of the negative 'x' means that there is a clear link between A_1 and A_2 , between message sent and message received. In its pure form, this is seen in such situations where unclear communication may be fatal. When the pilot requests landing permission, he would be dry and clinical in his style: 'Flight 381 requests landing permission', and the ground personnel will respond with almost the same words to ensure that message has been properly understood. Imagine if the pilot says 'Hi there, I believe it would be a jolly good idea if you gave us permission to use your runway pretty soon'. Time will be lost in trying to understand what the pilot really meant. Therefore, the pilot has learnt to use 'aviation language', which happens to be English. Technical English of this kind is relatively simple and above all explicit and thus unambiguous: the disturbing 'x' is minimised, and, ideally, $A_1=A_2$.

A shared code is the basis for group identity: when the rules are mutually understood, a sense of community or group belonging evolves. Members understand each other and become elements of a social organism. As social creatures, most humans will strive for that sense of group belonging. Communication is the key to this.