

**VI CONGRESO DE LINGÜÍSTICA GENERAL
SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA (3-7 DE MAYO, 2004)**

Title: multicultural translated communication, within the very multiethnic environment of
Australia

Chrys Chrystello for more than three and half decades worked in political journalism in radio, TV and print media, being a Foreign Correspondent for Radio networks, being widely published in newspapers and magazines, having researched and written documentaries for Australian TV. His interest in languages dates back in the early 70's when confronted with more than 30 dialects in East Timor.

In Australia, he found traces of an Aboriginal Tribe speaking a Portuguese Creole inherited five centuries earlier when Portuguese Discoverers landed there in 1521-1525. A founding member of AUSIT (Australian Institute for Translators and Interpreters) and a member of NAATI (National Accreditation Authority of Australia) since 1984, Chrys has been teaching Linguistics to prospective interpreters and translators in universities. With more than twenty years' experience in translation and interpreting services as a Freelancer Translator specialised in medicine, literature, linguistics, legal, engineering, politics, international relations, Chrys has in the past decades published his works and presented his sociolinguistic themes to conferences in places such as Australia, Portugal, Spain, Brazil, USA and Canada,

In 1999 his major political essay, translated from the English, "East Timor: the secret file 1973-75" sold out its first Portuguese edition after only three days.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this presentation is to update previous strategy papers on multicultural communication, within a very multiethnic environment (such as Australia) in a globalising market. Drawing on previous Australian experiences, we will try to show how one has to mend cultural barriers/prejudices, and develop skills to address specific needs of clients.

The overriding concern was the common lack of consultation, co-ordination, and dissemination of previous attempts, and a strong need to educate service providers and

the communities, as a whole, for the very specific needs of NESB¹ communities in this ever-changing era of global intercultural communication.

From 1950 onwards² when the police arrested a “*wog*” as they were called those days, it had to rely on a friendly “*wog*” who just lived across the road selling fruit. The more “wogs” that got arrested the less time the fruit seller had to work, so the police force decided to pay him a small fee for his “*translating*” services.

Eventually this Sicilian Luigi discovered that was more money to be made in interpreting than selling fruit and was joined by Nick the Greek, Abdul the Lebanese, José the Spanish or Portuguese, Milan the Yugoslav and many more. They became important figures in the neighbourhood always accompanying policemen and soon became socially relevant.

During the 70’s many important changes took place in Australia and we witnessed the creation of the Telephone Interpreter Service (TIS), Anti-Discrimination Board, EEO (Equal Employment Opportunity), Ethic Affairs Commissions, etc., Bilingual officers started being recruited in the early 80’s to serve as interpreters/translators having to pass a test and showing their involvement with their language communities and a sympathetic attitude toward ethnic minorities.

The Commonwealth Government set up NAATI (National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters) in 1977 to establish and monitor professional standards for translators and Interpreters in Australia, and supporting the development of the

¹ NESB- non English speaking background

profession, later leading to the establishment of AUSIT.

AUSIT (The Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators Inc.) the national association of the profession, whose members are practising interpreters, translators, as well as individuals and organizations was founded in 1987, it is primarily involved in promoting high standards of T&I, raising the profile and recognition of translators and interpreters in the community, setting and maintaining high ethical standards, and encouraging continuing professional development.

In Australia, NAATI accreditation is the only accepted official professional qualification for 90 languages and their practising interpreters and translators. Apart sitting for testing, another method by which individuals may obtain such accreditation is by successfully completing a NAATI approved course, in accordance with its guidelines, for content, duration, assessment procedures, staffing, and resources.

For most of these years there was little distinction between the profession of interpreting and translation and ethnic and welfare issues, with a link between government and professionals.

Helping the "*poor migrants*" became the motto. Ethnicity became an overnight beautiful word and everyone in the business had his/hers own interpretation of the official government policies and cared his/hers own community interests.

² NASIR, Mike (January 2001), *The future of the interpreting and translation professions*, Sydney language Centre

Most of those with affiliation to authorities had employment and some prospered, not because they were good or bad, but because they were continuously being used by official instrumentalities such as the courts, the police, legal aid, health workers, social workers, schools, etc. They saw themselves (and myself included for a while) as an extension of government agencies instead of a true blue professional.

The demand increased substantially in the 80's and government departments supplying interpreters were placed in an almost impossible position of catering for an ever-increasing demand, simultaneously dealing with accreditation issues. There were no international policy examples we could follow, so we had to develop our own, learning with our own mistakes. People were simply translating into their own languages whatever the government decided to transmit without any proper study of the best methodology to do so.

Such was the state of affairs when we were offered one of these tasks of "*helping the poor migrants understand government funding for child care facilities.*"

Proper funding/research/follow-up programmes are essential for the success of any initiative in this area but mainstream providers³ are often unaware of the problem and adopt tokenistic attitudes, or merely try to avoid it.

In Australia, the major hurdles faced by overseas-born people have traditionally been lack of communication and lack of active participation in the community at large. They have to

³ *Communicators, translators and interpreters*

be heard first if we want to give them any message. Only then, once the target audience is set, one can define what is to be emphasized to reach a basic message that can be safely transferred into various cultures and languages without the normal implications of translation loss.

The best-translated message is quite often lost on people. This is due to small particulars pertaining to race, creed, cultural background, or regional differences in the country of origin. Other times it may fail, merely because it is so generalist and jargoistic that in order to achieve a basic linguistic standard, is merely localised to the elite, instead of reaching out to the most disadvantaged minorities/majorities who sometimes are the real target of the message in the first instance.

I remember spending endless and sometimes fruitless meetings to find a common wording acceptable to all levels of Greek speakers⁴ for an Australian Government Department project. Only after that, were we able to proceed to the next stage of pre-production of the final governmental message.

Some common western society ideas and attitudes, that none of us would ever dispute (such as government-sponsored child care), can irrevocably be against beliefs or mores in certain communities. No matter how much multicultural, multilingual, or aware I may be there is no replacement for a fully researched exercise, face to face or polled, with those communities.

⁴ *Not one of my languages*

The English version to be translated/communicated has to be concise, non-jingoistic, non-jingoistic, and in **Plain English** to be properly transmitted to each community language. It sounds hard, but it has been done and it is good fun.

2. CASE STUDY

Knowing the difficulties faced by the almost 200 different ethnic and linguistic communities in Australia, we opted for a thorough and widespread dissemination of information, in order to establish channels of communication capable of reducing language barriers and cultural differences. Almost 30% (thirty per cent) of the Australian population is overseas-born, with a fifth speaking LOTE (a language other than English) at home. There are vast pockets of the population, mainly most recent arrivals (under family reunion, humanitarian, or refugee programmes) that speak no English at all, and are at a loss in a very different cultural and linguistic environment.

Although we can explain the different socio-cultural backgrounds, political organization and lack of welfare-based societies it is hard to aim at such a varied group and expect to reap rewarding results when one is talking about child care, non-existent and alien notion in many countries.

We moved on limited by budgetary constraints to establish how many community languages would become targeted. Immediately after, we researched their ethnic networks, organizations and individuals, who if not totally representative, at least were capable of bridging the gap with their group members. This lengthy part of the project was aimed at increasing, through thorough research, our subject-specific project input.

For this project to be successful not only by the number of written/audiovisual mediums or of languages covered, we had to strive to get as much effective coverage as possible by ethnic organizations, welfare groups, lobbies, and all sorts of ethnic media, because ultimately they would define and decide the fate of such mega project.

After months of personal contacts, follow-ups, etc., we thought we had it cobbled together to achieve a long-term result as only the best-prepared campaigns can achieve.

From a *seller's point of view*, we had meetings with all departmental people who would, at some stage be involved or linked with the project, brainstorming what they thought was appropriate from their favoured positions to spread the Government's point of view. This was followed by an update of the info to be transmitted into the community, setting up immediate targets for all the next steps of the project, again limited by budgetary constraints and the enormous size of Australia.

How far could we go: only into major metropolitan areas, cities at state level, or deep country level? After that decision we had to target which languages would go into what areas, before we could organise a team of translators and proofreaders, capable of delivering the final product within relatively tight deadlines for printing and production.

We collected and analysed myriad statistical and formal data to identify the needs of each NESB group, creating patterns of client profiles, data collection mechanisms for future exercises, level of knowledge within each group of the departmental functions. All the while, we kept communicating with other government departments and agencies on a regular basis for interaction within their boundaries, finding out that although there were

numerous EEO (Equal Employment Opportunities) recommendations they had never been fully implemented, monitored or established, thus lacking statistical data to help us define our target groups. We had to rely on vague NATIONAL GUIDELINES FOR COLLECTION OF ETHNICITY DATA, to try to understand the high disparity of participation rates of NESB people and English speaking ones.

The work had hardly begun and it looked like we had been doing it for most of our lives. Only then did we start countless meetings with ethnic workers, media, and local individuals. This had to be done in stages since people were physically located hundreds or thousand of miles away. We discussed ad nauseam the various meanings, tonalities, and shades of many a word, so that when they were rendered into one of the selected 18 community languages, they had the most appropriate tonality or were less prone to offend the sensibilities of older generations. We took into consideration the various levels of register in languages as complex and alien to me as Greek or the Persian Farsi... so that we could pass on the message across into a culturally appropriate form, to be politically correct and capable of being well received and understood.

We had by this time defined what were the high need groups in terms of date of arrival in the country, lack or level of English skills, different cultural/welfare background, age, immigration status (i.e. refugee, family reunion, professionally qualified immigrants, qualified but not recognised professional people, unemployed, unemployable, etc.). In the end, we got support together with constructive and strong opinions from the members of the community that made possible such project.

We were still collating data before defining which languages we would select and were

already obtaining totally different results to what was perceived as the real needs of the community, from urban to country, from capital cities to small towns. We had to keep revising the number of leaflets, languages, and other mediums in accordance with our budget. It was a nightmare, since never before had it been attempted such a large-scale communication exercise in so many languages for so many people.

Once we defined the major 20 languages⁵, we had to decide which additional ones could be included between Armenian, Singhalese, Khmer, Thai, Russian, Hungarian, or Maltese?

Then we moved on to a major media blitz in order to get maximum exposure and coverage, whilst setting assessment values for the campaign, making sure all possible feedback would be treated and analysed with constant follow-ups.

Translation/interpreting and communicating had suddenly acquired new dimensions unbeknown to all of us

“Of all the language behaviours that the human brain is capable, translating and interpreting must be the most demanding”⁶ Steven Pinker said just a couple of years ago.

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<i>CHINESE</i>	<i>ARABIC</i>	<i>SPANISH</i>	<i>VIETNAMESE</i>	<i>PORTUGUESE</i>
<i>ITALIAN</i>	<i>GREEK</i>	<i>POLISH</i>	<i>CROATIAN</i>	<i>TURKISH</i>
<i>TAGALOG (FILIPINO)</i>	<i>HINDI</i>	<i>MACEDONIAN</i>	<i>KOREAN</i>	<i>BAHASA INDONESIA</i>
<i>TONGAN</i>	<i>FARSI AFGHAN/PERSIAN)</i>	<i>FIJIAN</i>	<i>LAO</i>	<i>SAMOAN</i>

⁶ PINKER, Steven (1998) in *Language International*, vol. 10.6

Here we were confronted with problems that no training, formal or otherwise, had prepared us to, there were no books to consult, no other colleagues who had experienced what nobody has ever done, no professional association capable of giving us some guidance.

In the end the support came from all corners, community groups, local municipalities, ethnic groups and individuals who were enthused by the novel approach undertaken, and were wondering why it was never done before, to achieve cultural acceptance of the alien child care concept we were dealing with.

We smiled hoping for a pat on the back. Instead, we got admonished because our campaign started at [Australian] State level had moved on to become a Federal issue covering most States and Territories, thus usurping the fief of the Federal Planners in Canberra... although they had no such plans or projects being undertaken or even considered.

The widespread process of research and consultation that appeared extensive and time-consuming was actually vital to explore all avenues of information to properly gauge community feelings and misconceptions, to produce material that was both culturally and grammatically *'user-friendly'* laying the foundations for subsequent productions.

The levels of consultation were so warmly received and acclaimed within the NESB⁷

⁷ NESB non English speaking background people

community that we were inundated with letters of support and praise. The entire credibility of the government department (at rock bottom before this project) was restored to certain heights. New commitments raised the expectations of the normally cynical communities, seeing an interdepartmental collaboration seldom observed before.

The pamphlets ended up being distributed at national level in all States and Territories, according to the concentration of specific ethnic groups, and in tandem with information agencies, resource centres, ethnic groups representatives and even consulates.

In the end after all praise was lavished and the project got nominated for the final "YEARLY MEDIA ETHNIC AWARDS", the bureaucrats killed the cat, cutting all funding for future follow-up projects.

I became a much richer person in cultural terms, capable of understanding disparagingly different cultures and linguistic backgrounds in areas where before I could not even suspect that cultural bias or ignorance existed. Ever since then I have been following a similar approach to any and every intercultural information project that I can lay my hands on, and believe me, it can be done in all areas of information from Internet localisation projects to mere translations aimed at far and distant countries sharing a common linguistic background.

Umberto Eco once said that "***translators are the major artisans for cultural and information transference, and the only ones capable of stopping the supremacy of the English language responsible for more than a century advance in the North American economy.***"

David Albahari wrote in 2000⁸: "***When you translate you have to transform yourself. You have to become the writer whose work you are translating...at least try to understand how his mind worked... When you translate, you simply become more aware of the power of language to create, and sometimes to destroy, the world.***"

Let us only hope that we are able artisans for such cultural and information transference, in order to preserve all languages and cultures in this age of global standardisation, always capable of following the example of those navigators of yore who faced Brave New Worlds never before visited...

⁸ Albahari, David, 2000, issue 19, *Filling Station magazine*, University of Calgary, Canada