Speaking in tongues

Brussels wants to reach out to the citizens of Europe. That’s why we're talking a lot about communication these days. There is even a white paper on communication. It all boils down to language, after all.

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Published: April 18, 2006 Last updated: December 2, 2015

In Sweden a provocative professor of Polish origin raised hell when he insisted in a book that we should get rid of Swedish and just speak English. I guess he hasn't listened to many debates in Brussels lately when the thing to do is to speak mediocre English. Good English, however, is a rare commodity, so why not use the interpreters when we're lucky to have them around.

I have a couple of examples. At a conference on communication, mind you, last week, there were some very interesting ideas floated, mostly from the audience. The language was English, mostly the violated kind of English we all speak as a second language. This meeting was not an informal thing. It was a big do, with hundreds of interested listeners, a lectern for the speakers and microphones. This time there was only interpretation into English and French which was unfortunate because some pearls probably got lost on the floor as we struggled to understand the true meaning of an Italian question in perverted English. A decisive step towards better communication is to use the interpreters. I would have appreciated interpretation at this seminar on communication.

At a press conference a couple of weeks ago, Commission President José Manuel Barroso and Commissioner Gunther Verheugen presented the Commission's plan to kick Europe's competitive butt into gear. The gentlemen spoke mostly English. It was partly intelligible, partly incomprehensible. Their English may be fluent, but the flow isn't English if you see what I mean. Mr. Barroso also answered questions in other languages and he is no doubt a great linguist, but not as good as the interpreters.

Both spoke very quickly and with a very strong accent in different ways. It was in the end, very tiresome for my little ears. The topic, the Lisboa process, doesn't shine like a button in itself and usually needs some bright spots to keep the listeners concentrated. It doesn't help that the whole process is stuffed with American sounding management terms, enough to turn you deaf at the best of times.

Why don't you use the professionals, I thought. Every interpreters' booth was full and these language supremos were busy interpreting away into Greek, Lithuanian and Swedish and what have you, but hardly anyone used the headphones, because, we sort of all know our English.

Don't misunderstand me, I comprehend spoken English, but it's not my first language and I have a great respect for English as a very difficult language to learn, speak and understand properly. Not to babble away, but to get a message across correctly is very difficult.
The dullest Brit usually outperforms outstanding speakers from other countries if the conference language is English. We have gotten used to conversing in mediocre English merely because we all live with the misconception that we know proper English.

If there is no interpretation, then you have to do with what you have, but many stick to English even when there is interpretation because they think it's the internationally-minded thing to do.

I tell you - please avoid English if you have a choice and it's not your mother tongue. If there is interpretation - use professionals to help your communication. They're better at it than you and I are. You will see faces light up and your audience listen to you in a combative and engaged mode, not the usual heavy-eye-lid-marked faces you're used to, as your audience listens to your message in a more direct way, in their own language.

At the Barroso-Verheugen press conference, I did what I've started to do when the interpreters' booths are filled: I switched on to the Swedish channel and this is what I got: A vitaminized, intelligent and dynamic version of the Barroso and Verheugen answers. Suddenly all the sleep-inducing competitiveness terms were all jazzed up in a much more attractive Swedish language, words that really meant something.

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This article originally appeared in the February 9, 2006 edition of The Bulletin, an English-language weekly published in Brussels. Communicate! thanks the author for her kind permission to reprint it here.

Recommended citation format: