

# “WHEN THE GIST IS JUST NOT ENOUGH”

TRANSLATOR AND INTERPRETER AWARENESS DAY

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Although the words “interpreter” and “translator” are conventionally used to refer to spoken and written translation respectively, unless the distinction is important I will just use the word “translator” in this talk, and I include interpreters.

My task today is to tell you “*When it is that the Gist is Just not enough*”.

It never is.

There. Having spoiled the ending, what else can I tell you?

What I mean by “gist” in this context is a bit more specific. Not that specific. It’s not a term of linguistic art. It’s a colloquialism. I refer to situations where people settle for less accuracy in communication than they would if they were speaking their own language.

Most often used by the receiver of a message, someone who is listening to broken English, or listening to another language with only partial competency themselves. Or reading some butchered translation. It comes in the middle of a rationalisation. It is the rhetorical announcement of a compromise. And they are saying “that’s enough. Don’t need anymore”. And they often say it to me. We do work in factories, meetings, conferences, in the courts, with police, in film and television production. It’s not uncommon for people to say to us “Just gimme the gist”, “It’s OK, I’ve got it”, or “I’ll take it from here”.

But what is actually happening here? What are the mechanics of settling for the gist? They’ve got some bit called the “gist” but what haven’t they got?

The first thing that they’ve lost is the mechanism of self-checking. All language comes packaged with this function of being able to monitor your success. In speech, in a dialogue or conversation, me talking to you now, I am constantly harvesting feedback that tells me whether what I am doing is working. Like the way you laughed at my joke a minute ago. Or the way you didn’t laugh. This is all valuable information to me.

In writing we are at liberty to reflect on we are about to write. We can choose different words and rehearse them in our heads as a way of testing their comprehensibility. When reading we can compare things to their context, we’ve got all the information we need in an original text, to go back and test our comprehension. But these strategies in speech are a level of language competence far more advanced than being able to patch together a gist. And the ability to analyse a text is a level of sophistication much higher than giving up at the gist level.

So a gist is therefore unaccountable. Off it goes, free from any sort of relationship to the original, possibly a misguided missile. The other thing that happens when we settle for a rough idea of what someone is saying, we have to fill in the gaps somehow to turn it into a useful message. To do this we have to rely on our ability to interpret facial expressions, from our knowledge of faces in general. Our confidence in the underlying structure of a particular sentence will derive from our general knowledge of the grammar of that language.

In short, we will look inside our own head for the balance of the information, and all we’ve got to go on are general principles. In my little world of home-grown theory, language is a series of events, which then produce artefacts. Events and Artefacts. I like to divide up language in that way.

Spontaneous speech is an event. It’s something that is happening. Your memory of it is an artefact, already an artefact. Any recording, all other records, writing, books, signs, graffiti and so on are all

artefacts. Only artefacts can be analysed. It's the structure of artefacts alone that can be pulled apart, examined, resemblance noted, put together and collated into broad rules which are then posted as new theories blah de blah blah. The entire study of language is about artefacts. In all the publicity we overlook the fact that they are nothing more than a by-product of events.

And every time someone causes an event, opens their mouth to speak, puts pen to paper, there's a reason. That reason is the link between language and the real world. They are trying to modify the world around them, and sometimes the world within. It is a project with a plan and a measurable result. That checking I mentioned is the measurement of results. In speech it is the second-by-second updating of your perception of whether or not it's working, and you'll change what you are doing while you are doing it in response to this. Results are the only thing that matter to the author of a text or an utterance. Those results are the reason language exists. All discussion of the generalised rules by which language may be formed into sentences are completely subservient, and indeed depend for their existence on the desire of people to open their mouths and speak.

When people do this, they are not reiterating general principles, they are not producing anything that is useful in any other situation. They don't want to tell you the gist. If you've been paying attention you've already got that.

What they are doing is orchestrating a completely unique event, that brings together whatever they can muster of grammar, syntax, vocabulary, timing, inflection, intonation, implicature, all of these things, to produce an event that they, alone, own. And it is the sum of these things, it is the effect of all those elements in combination, that they are trying to get through to you.

When we settle for the gist, we're just picking out the easy bits and we're drawing the line well before we get to any of their beautiful craftsmanship. In other words we're chipping away all the things they care about.

I can report that in my work for people involved in trade between Australia and Japan, there are better rewards waiting for those who take the time to develop the relationships at a human level. It is a tenuous thing to strike a bargain that is solely contingent on the forecast production of something that is attractive so long as the exchange rate behaves. Those who put in the hard work to build a relationship at a human level will find that they have something as a basis that can weather a degree of disruption and be the fertile starting point of new business ideas and visions.

People have ideas and people have vision. And it's people who produce unique language events. You have to meet the people. They don't travel all this way from Japan to trade in gists. I've translated a lot of discussion between business people dinner and drinks and having moved well on from

- the weather and number of children supported, and
- unit price and shipping schedules.

They are getting to know one another, actually finding out the rhythm of each other's wit, and their upbringing and their humour and their relationship with their family and learning how they use hints and nuance, their religion and their sexual preference.

If you think this level of detail isn't important, next time you're having a meeting with your colleagues or a fight with your spouse, ask yourself would your interests be better served by having your thoughts written down in the words of a preschooler and then read out by a robot? I've interpreted for people who spoke English like that, and wanted to! To do business! Or do you need to be there, delivering your words, with all the unique, personalised attention that distinguishes the utterance as something you said, as part of something you did? I confess, I do. That's why I'm here today.

What's the alternative? Could we come away from a meeting or a fax with just the darlingbuds of uniqueness, and no gist? No. Can't do that. The event of language starts with the desire to exchange something and that desire modifies and governs the narrowing contexts. It's a logical hierarchy, that you have to have to understand any part of it. It's a tapering thing with a point on the top. The point

of opening your mouth. Language is like a spear, the shaft, 90% of it is nothing more than the means by which we deliver the spear head.

Under these terms, if you've got the gist, I still don't think communication has taken place. I don't think you've climbed Mt Everest until you've climbed the last three feet. And I don't think you've seen a naked breast, until you've seen the nipple.

Now, a lot of business people, will take any amount of this, but they're still going to sit there thinking "Hang on. We get by all the time by doing these things. We know the gist is enough, we've done deals before based on monkey talk." Fine. However I suggest that there's a lot of things that we now reject as unacceptable, that we "got by" on for many years. In human relations, in manufacturing, in diplomacy and in plumbing.

And we did get by too. We got from the point where these things were innovative to where they were anachronistic. Time goes by and the infrastructure that supports all these activities gradually evolves; there are technological breakthroughs in other parts of the whole, leaving some things looking more and more incongruous and out-dated, people notice, they start thinking, start talking about them at awareness days; and after a long period of time a consensus regarding the necessity to move to a better way takes root.

But first, why do we think it is alright? How do we continue to rationalise it?

The first reason, one contributing factor, I hope I've covered; we are not fully aware of the damage we do to communication when we don't go the hard yards to obtain accuracy. The next reason is that we have failed to characterise it realistically. A lot of what I would say were examples of this are concealed behind some pretty effective thought-prevention slogans.

One that I'm noticing more and more lately, we are told that "linguistic diversity is a resource". Now "linguistic diversity" means where several languages are spoken amongst a group of people, without there necessarily being one language common to all.

As a person paid goodly amounts, regularly, to help out where just two people speak different languages, I have to say this is utter Newspeak. It's tosh.

Linguistic diversity is not a "resource". In an effort to ensure the smooth operation and development of business relationships and a civil society we spend a lot of money just making sure that the basics are understood by everyone fairly. If that isn't time lost that we could have been talking about more advanced issues then you must have a new kind of arithmetic by which you divide up 24 hours and the legal aid budget.

When you add all the minutes and hours it takes for court interpreters to transmit messages back and forth between a row of well-paid barristers in front of a judge, associate, reporter and tipstaff it is obvious that in this instance (played daily in the courts of Australia) that it is not a resource; it is an enormous burden. I'm not denying there are benefits. But you've got to do your sums. If the benefits minus the burden are a net resource for Australia I'll eat my dictionary.

Just this week in the Age there's an article describing how the FBI failed to understand the significance of documents that were apparently related to September 11 because they were written in Arabic. Within the article the author persists in calling linguistic diversity a "resource". But apparently what they need is more Arabic graduates. This sort of thinking is a huge handicap for us. What they need is good translation.

I don't see how having more Arabic graduates is exploiting the resource of linguistic diversity. Any person with the aptitude can master a second language, and then master the quite separate skills of translation. But there's no necessity that these people are drawn from one of the cultures that diverge from the so-called mainstream. It's wrong-headed to suggest this. The ability to translate has nothing to do with a person's ethnic background, and that's what the FBI needed.

We live in a society that if not taking for granted, at least aspires to:

1. standardised manufacturing processes to ensure consistent quality and safety in consumer goods
2. equality of all before the law
3. a single, unambiguous language in domestic and international commercial transactions
4. uniformity of opportunity if not outcomes in education,
5. everywhere the emphasis is on anything but diversity, for very good reasons.

“Languages barriers” are just that, they are impediments to these things being easily achieved, and to overcome these barriers society needs the work of translators, and needs to pay for it. This is a fact of life, and we should honour the facts in description. And our commitment and ability to solve a problem will be greatly assisted by getting our mouths around the word “problem”.

Now there’s another reason we don’t readily see these things as problems.

This is a very fundamental issue. As I have described above, every live instance of language, every language event, consists of a person bringing together various potentials, and creating a unique moment that serves their personal interests.

But because the vast majority of experience that people have of language exemplifies this highly personalised function, we have instilled in us from the earliest years of our life that language is insolubly bound to our person. My seven year old says this much more succinctly: “what you say is what you are”. Language is personality. It’s your identity. And this proposition remains unchallenged for life in all people (except professional translators and those who write anonymously for a living).

Language is a lot like skin. It is analogous in many ways. We all have one, when we are babies we show it off any which way but as adults we exhibit it to others only under the strict control. This control is built up during childhood where we are taught through embarrassment which bits are ok and which aren’t. We need to be confident about it as adults and it is mildly threatening or annoying for someone to point out defects in it.

In surveys, public speaking rates ahead of being burnt alive on a list of phobias, and well ahead of appearing before them naked.

The surgeon stands apart from not just the GP, but from all normal people in that as a matter of daily routine they must take sharp knives and slice through the skin of sometimes healthy people to find out what’s going on inside. So are translators obliged to go where no one else will go for fear of offense, and slice through the surface of language to find out what’s going on within. Both actions I believe are instinctively repulsive acts for healthy human beings.

When people are thrown together in trade, with those of another language group, there is a strong tendency to reaffirm the more universal principles of human interaction with an all-purpose cross-cultural Readers Digest courtesy. And obviously to avoid doing anything repulsive. To acknowledge that a language problem is compromising business interests is to threaten what a lot of people, in all cultures, think is a highly personal area.

I have worked on jobs where several millions of dollars had been invested in a piece of equipment, and a Japanese engineer was engaged at a cost of several thousand dollars per day to train the two people here who were to run this very complicated technology, efficiently enough to recoup the investment in a planned period of time. I turned up a week after they started their training. For a whole week, this transfer of technology had been based on phrases like, “When starto, zis, no good. Stop. OK.” If these words had come from a white face, born and bred in Melbourne they’d have thought him retarded. But people make incredibly costly allowances for language because they are given the person, the person is foreign, and that’s as good as it gets.

This is the abyss of unawareness that this day hopes to address.

We're doing a lot of work for an automotive engineering company. They make engines. When you make engines you have to cast metal into big complex shapes, and then machine them to precise dimensions. The tolerances in machining are nowadays so stringent that they would not have been believed 20 years ago. The machines that do the work are works of amazing precision, they're incredibly costly, their maintenance highly controlled, the operating procedures standardised and the training of all the operators and maintenance personnel very rigorous.

This is an industry where divergence from the specification of mere microns, of hundredths of a percent, will see a supplier's product sent back as rejected. It is one of the most intolerant environments in an otherwise tolerant nation. Yet this rigid adherence to standardisation and consistent quality has made it one of the most successful Australian exporters and employers. Except they seem to have none of those expectations when it comes to language.

We turned up half way through this job as well. They say people are a company's greatest resource. They are certainly the most expensive. That's why they keep trying to replace them with those beautiful machines. And yet look at the care and maintenance that people give to the tool that we use to develop and manage and monitor the performance of people. Language. This job we're doing at the moment is no better than the other job I told you about! The whole thing so far in baby talk and mud maps. And we're talking hundreds of millions of dollars worth of investment.

The automotive industry is nevertheless the best example I have of why we should not try to rationalise quality in individual instances. Every time you talk like this to any of our customers they're still thinking "Geez I dunno. \$60 an hour just to interpret. There's gotta be times when I can get by without it..." They're dividing it up. They're trying to assess each instance.

In the automotive industry, we got by for years with very poorly made cars. And after years of experience they now know that quality must be uniform and consistent, throughout a complex system like a car, to guarantee safety and remain competitive. We know that to achieve that, "quality" must be a principle to be generally upheld, not debated on a case-by-case basis, and that to achieve this, you need good people, trained to approach everything they do with the same high expectations of quality. Quality in language is not just analogous here. It is a critical part of that process.

When any number of people, greater than two, gather in order to achieve something; manufacture the car; hunt the mastodon, reform the banks or raise the children, they will go further and better if they speak the same language.

When that's not possible, will we get over all the problems I've described? Will we understand language to be that critical component? Not just a tool, but the primary means by which people get things done? The first and most crucial interface with our greatest resource of all: people. Will we lavish the care on it that we do on our capital equipment, call a problem a problem, and look for the best possible solution by calling a translator?

Imagine that! When that happens, we won't need Translator and Interpreter Awareness Days! Won't need 'em.

Thank you.