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## Technical Writing across Cultures: Seven Philosophical Questions

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# Technical Writing across Cultures: Seven Philosophical Questions

## INTRODUCTION: The New Awareness

These days, nearly everyone, in every business, is trying to develop an international mindset. The words *globalization* and *intercultural* are now uttered more frequently than *proactive*, or *empower*, or even *quality*. In almost every instance, this new awareness means altering one's homegrown product (usually American) to make it more appealing to local consumers abroad.

There have been occasional dissents to this view. Back in 1983, Harvard's Theodore Levitt suggested in an *HBR* piece that local adaptation was nothing more than a diseconomy, and that global success would belong to those who economically marketed identical soaps and soft drinks everywhere. But, as Micklethwait and Wooldridge conclude in a recent compendium:

"The idea that most of the same products can be sold everywhere in the same way has been thoroughly discredited."

So, in the 1990s, while some American auto firms still refuse to make cars with right-hand steering wheels, all the while complaining about the "closed Japanese markets," other companies adapt to life abroad. McDonalds changes the name of its Japanese spokesclown from Ronald to Donald McDonald, because Japanese consumers have trouble with the initial R. And Pepsico changes the name of 7-Up when it learns that in Shanghai the phrase means "death by drinking."

Similarly, in the last 15 years or so, texts on business communication have assigned ever-larger sections to international and intercultural communication. Almost every course on the subject these days includes at least a unit on Edwin Hall's *High-Context/Low-Context* communication model, and, lately, Hofstede's dimensions of culture are becoming as commonplace in communication courses as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is in management courses.

Technical communication in general, and technical writing in particular, has been slower to develop the mindset. The technical writers most aware

are those involved in translation and in supporting the sale of products worldwide. Such communicators tend to be more business-oriented than, say, those who produce quality-control documentation or scientific papers.

What is driving the interest in intercultural communications these days is *business*: the desire to acquire new markets or prevail in global competitions. As I'll explore later, interculturalism, while its language often resonates with a kind of One-World spirituality, is mainly the study of profit-oriented business dynamics. Even Nancy's Hoft's scholarly book on the subject—*International Technical Communication*—has the word “export” in its subtitle. It is, in addition to being a survey and a textbook, also a polemic against business people who do not see the urgency for “localization” of information products, who subscribe stubbornly to the mistaken, (ugly American) bad-business beliefs that:

- Translation is all we need to do.
- Good technical writing is universally understood.
- We do not need to translate or localize anything. (119-121)

### **Technical Writing across Cultures**

Most advice on how to make technical writing more suitable for international use addresses one of three immediate objectives:

- Simplifying the text (or replacing it with pictures) for the benefit of weak readers
- Writing the text so that it lends itself to reliable translation
- Rethinking the approach and presentation to remove offending elements and to suit local expectations and cultures

Out of these scores of articles and manuals emerge two broad strategies that I call the **culture-free** approach and the **culture-fair** approach. The **culture-free** approach is classic technical writing ideology: namely, that the way to make a text easily understood and translated is, first, write it according to the strictest standards of clarity and simplicity and, then, to strip it of all local peculiarities, as well as all personality and author-culture.

The culture-free document contains no figurative language, no wordplay, no humor, and no expression of feeling. It prefers simple forms to complex, eschews ambiguity, and does everything in its power to rid the

document of any links to a particular writer, setting, or contingent situation. And it militates against words like “spokesclown.”

To illustrate, John Kirkman observes that: “Foreign-language readers have particular trouble when confronted by the common features of incompetent technical writing.” (347) And these “common” lapses include the topics of every basic course in technical communication: wordiness, ostentation, clumsy links, tense-problems, jargon, nominalization, passives . . .

In a more extreme form, culture-free writing entails the use of an artificial Pidgin English (like Basic English or Simplified English), with strict limits on vocabulary and sentence form. Even prohibitions against innocent but error-prone words like *until*. Technical writers learning these artificial languages are often shocked at how much editing their culture-free first drafts still need.

In contrast, the **culture-fair** approach to technical writing argues that it is not enough merely to remove the originator’s cultural baggage from the document. One must also add and alter elements to make the work usable and appealing to diverse readers. Indeed, Nancy Hoft believes that the best reason to produce a culture-free text (which she calls *internationalization*) is to make it ready for various adaptations, which she calls “localization.” Localization takes two forms:

- *General localization* focuses on superficial cultural differences . . . like language, currency formats, date and time formats . . . (alternate) spellings . . .
- *Radical localization* focuses on cultural differences below the surface . . . differences that affect the way users think, feel, and act, above and beyond the superficial differences cited previously. . . (including) learning styles . . . (11-12)

Thus, merely simplifying the English is not enough. And translating that English into the local language is merely a superficial form of local adaptation. So, for example, we learn from various authors, that if our English or translated culture-free document gives instructions in the imperative—commonplace in American manuals—we may upset the social order in countries with a more nuanced hierarchy connecting the reader and writer. One even occasionally reads the suggestion that

simplicity and clarity themselves are a cultural artifact, irritating to certain readers.

### **Seven Questions**

Viewed historically, little is new or remarkable in the discussion of technical writing across cultures. Indeed, the topic may be regarded as an elaboration on the prime directive of all rhetorical practice: audience adaptation. In some ways, the clash between those who will not adapt to cultures and those who do so eagerly resembles the ancient clash between philosophers and rhetoricians. Plato, for example, would have dismissed Nancy Hoff's radical localization as just so much "flattery." (Gorgias)

Moreover, the philosophical problems posed by this issue are far less serious or troubling in technical writing than in the broader field of business communication. If we radically localize our instructions for using a spreadsheet, for example, we are far less likely to injure or abuse our reader (or ourselves) than if we, for another example, modify our negotiation tactics to exploit local prejudices and religious beliefs.

Even so, I believe that there are important unresolved questions about the progress of international technical communication. They are philosophical questions—but with immediate practical consequences. Some of the questions, moreover, challenge the core beliefs of many professional technical writers.

My concerns are with

- Universality
- Univocality
- Translatability
- Motive
- Stereotyping
- Condensation
- Postmodernism

#### **1. Universality**

*Are the principles of technical communication—clarity, directness, simplicity, univocality—in any sense universal? Or are they “masculine” with “low context”?*

Until recently, one would never have suspected that clarity, simplicity, and directness were anything other than laws of human communication. At least for non-literary and non-expressive forms, there is a great consensus among American teachers of writing. Consider this from Richard Lanham’s *Revising Business Prose*:

[Business writing] ought to be fast, concrete, and responsible . . . Business prose ought, therefore, to be *verb-dominated* prose, lining up actor, action, and object in a causal chain and lining them up fast. (1)

(Even Lanham, however, does not extend this principle to other forms of writing. In *Style: An Anti-Textbook* he suggests that the goal of writing should be “self-conscious pleasure in words (18); this will, he believes, “aerate the vacuum of stylelessness into which prose-style teaching evaporates (19).”)

In my own book on technical writing I have advocated an “invisible style” and an ethic of editing that places, above all other considerations, reducing the reader’s burden.

I was astonished to learn at a recent seminar, however, that clarity and effectiveness (the other principal criteria of good technical and business writing) are considered **masculine** traits (in Hofstede’s schema) by those who study intercultural communication and, to make matters worse, typically American. Moreover, that precision of language may be irrelevant or counterproductive in “low-context” societies (using Hall’s term), where ambiguity is tolerated and much is left not only unwritten but unspoken.

This is a paradigm-shaking perspective, especially in an era when technical communicators ground their practices on findings from human factors research. Is it possible that simplicity is not universally desirable? Arthur Bell et al, commenting on correspondence with Germans, tell us that

Germans look on a sentence not only as an opportunity not only to express but also to support and qualify a single idea or related

idea. Several short sentences in a row, a pattern not uncommon in U.S. letter style, would seem inappropriately disjointed for German readers, perhaps signaling a lack of effort in expression or intelligence in thought. (225)

In German correspondence, the action statement more commonly appears as a polite and sometimes even hypothetical question: Might it be possible for you to mail your order by August 1 so that prompt delivery can be assured? (226)

Note that these observations, though couched in unemotional academic prose, are quite provocative. This is not small tactical advice, like a warning on the different way the Germans use an exclamation point or express numbers and dates. Rather, it is an assault on the efficacy of readability (short sentences) and directness.

Most technical writers, until recently, were mainly concerned with ways to realize clarity and simplicity—not with whether clarity itself is desirable. Moreover, the idea that well-made, culture-free technical prose and pictures should be universally acceptable is not at all an example of ugly-American boorishness, like the belief that everyone can understand English if it is spoken slowly. No less a figure than Ed Tufte has made the claim:

Principles of information design are universal—like mathematics—and are not tied to unique features of a particular language or culture. (p.10)

There is something to be said, I believe, for the claim that the American standard of technical communication is not merely a local cultural preference, but rather the distillation of the centuries of all that has been learned about how to make messages unambiguous and understandable. In this it is similar to Western scientific method, which is not (as some allege) a culturally localized way of solving problems but, rather, the distillation of everything that has been learned about the avoidance of Type I errors (false positives).

## 2. Univocality

*Is univocal English (or any other language) feasible or desirable? Does it require the skills of professional writers? If not, what kinds of professionals are required?*

Culture-free technical writing is also, to the extent possible, univocal. That is, **words should have one, apparent meaning, so that phrases and sentences will also have one apparent meaning.**

This attribute of language is, of course, a constant concern of students of rhetoric. All natural language resists such a single-meaning discipline. And it is the unstable, faceted, situation-dependent (and nowadays context-dependent) nature of meaning that makes it practically difficult, if not theoretically impossible, to construct logically compelling "demonstrations" with ordinary English sentences. This underlies the difference between mathematical and rhetorical proof, as well as the difference between formal and material fallacies.

Indeed, the word "univocal" itself is a back formation from "equivocal," the deliberate use of the many meanings of a single word to produce the pseudo-proofs known as *equivocation*.

The inescapable ambiguity of English is found not only in rich and evocative terms like *quality* or *transparency*, but also in innocent prepositions like *while* and ordinary accent words like *actually* (British) and *basically* (American).

The literature suggests that to achieve a level of univocality adequate for translation and international reading, companies (like all those in the aircraft industry) adopt artificially limited dialects of English such as AECMA **Simplified English**, which are, in turn, variations on Ogden's pioneering project: **Basic English**. One of my clients in the aircraft industry (where English is their second language) uses the AECMA product in a way that allows people who are barely fluent in English to *write service manuals*. But included in their rules of style were such prohibitions as a ban on using words that end with ING.

(This rule is meant to prevent the use of "emphatic" tenses, introductory participles, and other error-prone practices. It is, however, a severely constricting discipline for a person accustomed to normal English.)

It is clear now that, if we want to, we can do most business/technical communicating with a restricted vocabulary (about 2,000 words) and a small set of allowable sentence patterns. The research shows that technical writers can learn to “translate” natural English into Simplified English (and there are even software tools to help). It also shows that Simplified documents are easier to read and translate—although the benefits are greater when the translation language (or the first language of the reader) is a Western language like Spanish, rather than an Asian language like Japanese.

So it seems that univocality, unambiguity, if it is attainable at all, requires some strict limits on the freedom of authors. At the extreme of Simplified English, the task of the writer begins to resemble doing a word puzzle. Working in this mode provides little “self-conscious pleasure in words”; indeed, what one mainly learns at a Simplified English course is how to suppress the self and its irrelevant esthetics. (Most of the “engineered” approaches to writing require professional writers to kill the writers in themselves.)

And, if that were not problematic enough, there are many who challenge even the desirability of univocality in the first place. James Robinson tells us that the Korean is essentially and successfully ambiguous. (Note: Uncertainty Avoidance is another of Hofstede’s dimensions.) Korea is also a “high-context” country that not only favors speech over writing, but includes the “unspoken” in its communication, through such elaborate rituals as *munch’i*:

When a Korean uses this phrase [“We do not do it that way in Korea.”] he or she is providing the contents of the message that you should have said or at least thought in response to the series of *munch’i*-executed moves. (133)

Kohl et al tell us that Japanese ambiguity is regarded as helpful:

The ambiguity of the Japanese language can be seen as a contributing factor toward many aspects of Japanese communication:

- Greater reliance on oral, small-group communication, and less reliance on both large-group and written communication.
- Greater emphasis on visual communication
- The attitude that the reader/listener is primarily responsible for the success of communication

- Widespread use of English to communicate scientific and technical information (65)

The notion that the reader/listener is responsible to understand is perhaps the critical cultural problem for the Western technical writer. The entire rhetorical tradition places the responsibility for understandability on the **sender** of the message. Surveys and usability studies inform us of the readers' needs, but, ultimately, good technical communication is something the communicator accomplishes, not his or her readers.

So, it seems that the problem of univocality forces the professional writer toward one of two unpleasant extremes: either the use of Pidgin English (in which being a professional writer may be a liability) or the deliberate toleration of ambiguity (which violates a core value).

### 3. Translatability

*Is it really possible to write (communicate) across cultures? By definition, do not cultural differences uncontrollably alter, filter, and distort information? And if translation across cultures is possible, are cultures as sui generis as often held?*

In the middle of this century, everyone expected that one of the earliest and most wonderful applications of computer technology would be machine translation of natural language. It is a process that still largely eludes us, unless we use artificially restricted versions of the languages.

But beyond the technical problems of machine translation, there are some who wonder whether faithful, accurate, meaning-rich translation is ever possible—with or without machines.

Communication across diverse cultures, even within the same country or region, reminds us of a certain school of thought that regards all communication between humans as a flawed, imperfect, forever unattainable attempt to understand the messages of others. In effect, every time we interpret someone's meanings, we are making a bad translation. In a classic of its genre, *Language in Thought and Action*, S.I. Hayakawa puts the matter succinctly:

*No word ever has the same meaning twice.*

To insist dogmatically that we know what a word means *in advance of its utterance* is nonsense. All we can know in advance is *approximately* what it will mean. 60-61

The General Semanticists were a movement that warned of the widespread evil and injustice caused by naïve theories of meaning and language, in particular of McCarthyistic name-calling. But the theoretical issues they raised—the host of factors that influence, distort, shape, and otherwise **make** meaning—were the intellectual precursors of the study of communication across cultures and perhaps, even of the current variety of literary theory, in which the discourse context of an utterance gives meanings that neither the sender nor the receiver can apprehend until they are “deconstructed.”

In this connection, many undergraduate communication courses include a unit on the Benjamin Lee Whorf hypothesis (or the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis) that language, in effect, determines perception. In the most familiar example, Eskimos (now Inuits) have many more words for snow than English-speakers and, therefore, can perceive more kinds of snow.

The Whorf-Sapir hypothesis is, of course nonsense. People whose lives depend on noticing subtle differences in snow will develop a vocabulary to reflect those differences, in any language. For an illustration, listen to the snow vocabulary in ski-reports. And even though the poesy of language is lost in translation, the meaning and content need not be. (A character in a Nabokov novel remarks that Shakespeare is much funnier in German.)

As seductive as are theories on the impossibility of translation, as pleasurable to debate, the unmistakable conclusion of a lifetime spent in communication is that, between the occasional misunderstandings, a great deal of communication does take place. To fault the process for failing to produce identical understandings in the minds of sender and receiver is to miss the point that communication’s function is to enable people to interact in ways that are to their mutual advantage.

#### 4. Motive

*Is the current emphasis on international communication motivated by liberal impulses, or by the crassest of business motives? Are we studying intercultural communication so that we can exploit our knowledge of other cultures to the disadvantage of those other people? Are we merely looking for new peoples to sell cigarettes?*

In my youth, those who urged improved communication with other nations represented a leftish political perspective, which, in those days, was frequently labeled communistic. As recently as the Fifties, a person who advocated a strong United Nations, or studied Slavic languages in college, or even who purchased a foreign automobile, was viewed askance as the handmaiden of a foreign ideology. (This process is evident even today, whenever someone proposes alternatives to America's method of health care finance.)

In other words, the initial impulse toward international thinking and appreciation of cultures was a liberal impulse (what we nowadays call a postmodern perspective) and the seminal research in the area—such as that done at the East/West Center—was meant to produce a more unified world and even to heal the wounds between America and its various wartime enemies.

It was a radical idea, especially to the Babbitts of America, that any non-American process or product could be equal to, let alone superior to, its American counterpart. Thus, people who proposed such a notion—any form of cultural relativism or appreciation of foreign craft—were probably disloyal. Nor should this idea be confused with the Buy American rage of the 70s and 80s. In the 40s and 50s, the distrust of all non-American things by mainstream America was not a protective reaction to global competitors or foreign workers but, rather, a deep-seated xenophobia, a fear that America was an island of human dignity in a world of subhuman nations eager for its downfall.

Of course, there are still people today (they usually style themselves “social conservatives”) who are prone to the same prejudices. The strengthening links with old enemies, the enhancement of the United Nations, the tolerance of other religions and values, talk of a New World Order . . . such messages tend to inspire xenophobic tirades in Congress and apocalyptic visions in the right-wing pulpit.

But what is different is that the more traditional conservatives (an odd phrase), the business community, are far less likely to manifest such a response. Indeed, it appears that the sudden appreciation of world cultures is largely the result of commercial motives and invested capital. That is, a few years of emphasis on business globalization has done more to unite the world than decades of liberal polemic.

But why should this be a concern for technical communicators? *Because they are generally employed by corporations and because the motives and ethics of those employers must be taken into account.* It has always been ethically relevant to ask whether the work of technical writers was being used to increase justice and human dignity, or conversely, to abuse and exploit innocent people.

Those technical writers with a liberal sensibility still view our awareness of cultures as an opportunity to improve the world and elevate the species. Haas and Funk, for example, try to enlarge our conception of technical communication to embrace the Japanese ideal of “shared information.” This new awareness, they argue, is valuable simply because it is *good for us*:

Cross-cultural encounters may suggest to us ways in which our current conception of communication issues limit us, and can make us more aware of the myriad ways that people communicate with one another. Increasing our powers of observation and our options for communicating with one another, both within and between cultures, is a worthwhile and important goal. 386-387

That is, learning about other cultures broadens us, makes us better people.

In contrast, though, what shall we do with Witmeyer and Stevenson’s observation that in winning arguments with Russians one should appeal to “ideals,” rather than logic. Or with Casse’s claim that Latin Americans place a higher emphasis on loyalty than profit? Is this knowledge meant merely to broaden us?

No. When Bell et al urge us to learn about German communication practices (“American managers who choose to present ideas in somewhat more complex sentences than are common in U.S. letters can gain

persuasive advantage. (226)”) it is because “*Was der Bauer nicht kennt, das frisst er nicht* (226).”

Probably, most technical writers who produce manuals and customer literature do so in support of products that provide real benefits to customers and users. But there is still a need for vigilance against profitable products that, at the same time, pollute the environment and injure the health, products that narcotize their users and impoverish their customers.

The main offenders are obvious: tobacco, alcohol, fat- and sugar-filled food and beverage. But there are subtler issues as well. Should we support the internationalization of state lotteries? Should we help pharmaceutical companies to market drugs of questionable efficacy? Should we help enable security technologies that can be used to inhibit personal freedom? Shall we facilitate the use of powerful weapons by countries that might actually use them?

All these questions, of course, should be asked by technical writers working in the United States as well. Each of us should be concerned with whether our skills are being used to injure or exploit our fellow Americans. But I argue that we should be even more vigilant in international matters. It is obvious that many American firms are developing foreign markets to sell products (some call it “dump” products) that fail to meet local standards of health and safety, products that may even be outright illegal at home. Some are also interested in establishing business partnerships in countries where it is easier to exploit and abuse local workers so that they can, say, make an even larger profit on excessively overpriced basketball shoes, which they sell through manipulative advertising (with obscenely overpaid athlete spokesmen) to Americans who cannot afford them.

I do not wish to demonize business or vilify the profit motive. I have, during most of my adult life, been a businessman. Moreover, I believe that fully developed international commerce is one of the best preventatives against war. But I still want to stress that the current emphasis on international communication is being driven and financed largely by forces that believe that honesty and justice are virtues—but only when they are good for business.

## 5. Stereotyping

*Can one assess the cultures of other nations or groups without, at the same time, descending into shallow national stereotypes? Is the application of tendencies and trends to individuals not only bad statistics but bad behavior?*

Everyone knows that civilized people do make unkind generalizations about ethnic groups or nations. (Part of the appeal of Howard Stern and Rush Limbaugh is that they do that very “forbidden” thing, several times during each of their broadcasts.)

More-sophisticated people also know that it is probably unwise to make favorable generalizations as well. In a sense, it is as dangerous to say that a certain group is good with money as to say that another group is bad with money. It is nearly as unsophisticated to say that certain nationalities are especially intelligent, hard working, or artistic as to say they are dull, lazy, and graceless.

What then should we make of such claims as Casse’s that Latin American’s are always contentious (right or wrong) and that the Japanese are never contentious?

A favorite resource book among my students is Morrison et al, *Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands: How to Do Business in Sixty Countries*. This text is bursting with advice for business people abroad. Opening at random to the section on Honduras, I find the following:

- Do not overly admire another’s belongings. The owner may feel obligated to give them to you.
- Snap decisions are suspect; take time before announcing a final decision, even if your mind is already made up. (151)

Nor is the study of cultural differences limited to business communication. William Horton’s advice on illustrating computer manuals contains the following assessment of colors:

Culture	Red	Yellow	Green	Blue
Europe/West	Danger	Caution Cowardice	Safe Sour	Masculine Sweet Calm Authority
Japanese	Anger Danger	Grace-nobility Childhood- gaiety	Future Youthful- energy	Villainy
Arabic		Happiness Prosperity	Fertility- strength	Virtue, faith, truth
Chinese	Joy-festivity	Honor Royalty		

(p. 213)

The principal value of such research, of course, is to prevent embarrassment and misunderstanding: misinterpreted hand gestures, inappropriate greetings, offensive use of colors, boorish mishandling of business cards . . . Students cannot get enough, it seems, of these culture-specific “pointers.” Indeed, in a lecture or article about the nature of cultures, the complex and subtle ideas tend to be forgotten, while what is remembered is, for example, that an American businesswoman should not offer to shake hands with an Egyptian businessman.

Although I have no qualms with this kind of practical advice, I worry that it places an academic imprimatur on the practice of ethnic and cultural stereotyping. Even if we allow that most stereotypes have a kernel of truth in them, we must always be worried about the motives of the stereotyper and be uncomfortable with any conception that treats members of a group as instances of a profile, tokens of a type, rather than as human beings.

I also am concerned with the reliability of these cultural stereotypes. It is always a fundamental blunder to believe that the next event in a series will match the trend of that series; it is the worst form of incompetence to expect every member of a defined group to have any of the properties of the group as a whole. (For example, in a collection of test scores, it is unlikely that one single score equals the group mean.)

Granted, it is useful to know (as Morrison at all point out in their section on the culture of the United States) that Americans expect you to call before you come by for a visit. But do all Americans?

Although the dimensions of culture are real, the national tendencies on those dimensions may be quite misleading. Within any company, within any household, you will find a mixture; and within an individual, you will find changes over time.

For technical writers, these choices are a part of what Hoft called “deep localization,” adapting to the basic ways that the local reader thinks, learns, and evaluates.

And yet, there are dangers. Is it safe to believe that every company matches its national culture, or that every department, or every key person fits that profile? Is not merely thinking about people in this way somewhat dehumanizing to them? If I write a sentence that begins with the word “Southerners,” am I not in the process of blunting my own powers of observation?

Clearly, the emphasis on cultural differences is an attempt to correct for the biases inherent in our own cultures, the belief that, as G.B.Shaw once mocked, “the customs of our tribe are the laws of human nature.” But this does not mean that ethnographic generalizations are not another form of blindness. Nor does it mean that there is no such thing as human nature.

## 6. Condescension

*Is not tolerance the subtlest form of intolerance and condescension? If the client is never wrong (if the local culture is always to be respected) are we not obliged to overlook beliefs and behaviors that we judge to be immoral, superstitious, or unproductive? Are we obliged, for example, to believe in luck and magic?*

Our current quickness to adapt to local cultures is a kind of reversed, mirror image of an earlier virtue: hospitality or *gastfreundschaft*. In Western Civilization, especially in Western literature, it is clear that no good host ever lets a guest feel uncomfortable, no matter how the host may feel. Everything the host owns should be at the disposal of the guest; every objection to the guest’s behavior must be swallowed. If the guest breaks one of the good wine goblets, the host breaks one too.

If the principle of *gastfreundschaft* were extended to business, then the burden would be shifted. We would study Japanese culture not so that we could change our own, but, rather so that we could do everything possible to please our Japanese visitors.

In business, however, the burden of adaptation is clear. The customer is always right and the seller must make the adaptations, even if the seller is the guest. This means that when we want a good response from another culture we must alter our practices to please it, even if the action is a bit repugnant.

My concern is that, in acquiescing for the sake of the deal, we are not really respecting the other's culture: we are tolerating and pandering.

Although tolerance of other cultures may seem more civilized than intolerance, in fact tolerance itself is a form of condescension. Speaking of religious freedom, Thomas Paine once wrote that:

Toleration is not the *opposite* of Intolerance, but the counterfeit of it. Both are despotisms. The one assures to itself the right of withholding Liberty of Conscience, the other the granting of it . . .

So, merely saying that you will adapt to the eccentricities of foreign clients places you in a condescending mode, as though you were *granting* them the right to their peculiarities.

Of course, we know from our research that it is rude to stick a Japanese person's business card into our pocket or wallet without looking at it and admiring it. But when we fuss over the card (secretly feeling that this odd show of enthusiasm will endear us to him), have we really engaged in a respectful exchange? If we are only doing it for the money, if we view it is a meretricious charade, and if it succeeds, have we not in the process formed a permanent feeling of superiority to the client, even the belief that this client is easily manipulated?

So, if I revise my clear austere instructions into prolix, passive, and indirect instructions as a kind of radical localization for the Germans, and if I succeed, what have I done to my relationship with the German people?

From a certain perspective, granting legitimacy to the culture of another country—for the sake of expediency or gain—is an act of arrogance.

## 7. Postmodernism

*In this postmodern era, must we believe that all attempts at cultural conversion—imposition of our own culture of technical writing, for example—are automatically immoral or even ineffective?*

Many of the conflicts raised in this essay may be regarded as the continuing argument between the philosophers and the rhetoricians, or between the universalists and tribalists, or between the modern and post-modern.

Modernism, to put it a bit too simply, is a belief in the perfectibility of knowledge and process. Modernists believe that human kind knows more and understands more today than yesterday and that today's way of doing things is better than yesterday's. Modernists believe in the inevitability of technology and also in the advance of artistic form, so that a work of art judged modern or contemporary is probably more sophisticated, technically demanding, and intellectually rewarding than its predecessors.

In contrast, post-modernists will respect earlier knowledge, knowledge not sanctioned by modernists, forms from every era, unschooled "native" forms.

In Kostelnick's version, "modernism tends toward the universal, the rational system, the one-size-fits-all and the generic, [while] postmodernism pulls in the opposite direction—toward focused adaptation and contextual goodness of fit. (189)" In his discussion of information design, he arrays the approaches on these scales:

	Global (Modern)	Culture-Focused (Post-Modern)
Design Assumptions	Images can be simplified and homogenized to make them accessible to diverse audiences	Something is lost in simplification, or the generic images are culturally freighted
Design Goals	Systemization, conventions & standards; generic forms erase cultural differences	Design must be adapted to cultural context, partly by invoking familiar conventions
Modes of Reception	Universality of visual language is certified by perceptual psychology and empirical research	Users interpretations create meaning; visual language is learned experience

(p.184)

For modernists, the main problem with post-modernism (called “political correctness” by its detractors) is that it is forgiving and tolerant toward nearly everything: folk medicine, magic, Kraft-Ebbing sexual preferences . . . Moreover, in the post-modern era, any sort of preference or superstition (from performing animal sacrifices, to embedding metal objects in one’s face, to deliberate sexual excess) insists that it be regarded not as an eccentricity or aberration but as a “community.” Today, even a company’s accumulated prejudices and habits tend to be called its “corporate culture.”

The recurring question is that, given the need to adapt (or pander), *must one always, in every case, yield to the local?* The problem becomes acute in business relations when one is, for example, asked to violate one’s own religion (food), or morals (doing business in a brothel), or ethics (offer bribes). These situations require us to differentiate our business and professional objectives from what the ethicist Thomas Donaldson calls “core human values” or *hypernorms*, upon which we make the occasional decision to resist or oppose the local tradition. But do such acute questions of value arise in technical writing? Should there be hypernorms of technical communication that override the pressures for localization?

There are for me. For example

- I will not, absent some compelling need, ever make a document longer or more difficult than it needs to be.
- I will not, absent some compelling need, write English in a way that I believe damages the power or precision of the language.
- I will not, absent some compelling need, tolerate contradictions or other violations of the Aristotelian Laws of Thought.
- I will not, absent some compelling need, lend my authority to superstitions, the belief in luck, pseudoscience, or any other clear case of a Type I error.

Moreover, I shall unashamedly do whatever I can to promote English—natural English, not Simplified English but the English of Shakespeare and Milton—as a *lingua franca*, not because I believe it to be in any way superior to other languages but rather because it has achieved the momentum needed to perform that service. As in other matters of evolutionary development, it is not necessarily the survival of the best adapted, but rather the survival of those with the greatest presence and influence. (Like Windows.)

I sympathize fully with those who fear the erosion of their language. Just this week (Associated Press, March 27, 1997), French Foreign Minister Herve de Charette complained in a letter to the president of the European Commission that there was too much English in the several European Union websites. DeCharette reminds us that there are eleven official languages in Europe not one.

Of course, we may doubt the French minister's sincerity; he would probably have no complaints if French were the universal language of Europe, as it once aspired to be.

But still, the English language juggernaut is one of the greatest embarrassments for English-speaking post-modernists. It mows down languages like a clear cut logger mows down animal species. When I propose that English be more aggressively taught and promoted about the world, I would be a bit more comfortable if I, myself, had been forced to learn it as a second language, rather than receiving it more-or-less as an unearned gift.

But the trend is unmistakable. Writing five years ago, Guy and Mattock reported that while English was the first language of only 300 million

people (a surprisingly low figure), it was used daily by about 800 million. Moreover, 75% of the world's mail was in English, 80% of its stored computer data, and about half of its scientific publications (132). And, if anything, all these numbers are higher today.

Spoken English is, of course, endlessly variegated. In a city like Toronto, for example, one can go hours at a time speaking English and never hearing the same accent twice. People from New Zealand and Jamaica will have trouble understanding each other's speech, but not—and this is the key—each other's technical and business writing.

Again, the style of communication that most American technical writers endorse is clear, simple, and direct. In fact, those of us who teach spend years trying to impress these virtues on members of our own culture. Even if students of culture discount this style as American or masculine or Low-Context, I still argue that it is the best way—dare I say it, the right way—to write manuals and instructions and to communicate most business matters. This attitude does not, I think, make me an ugly American.

### **Final Thoughts**

Technical communication in general (and technical writing in particular) may be considered a discipline for the management and elimination of cultural problems in human interaction. In much the way that the goal of the scientific method is to eliminate Type I errors of inference—also known as false positives and superstitions—a primary goal of technical writing is to allow human beings to abstract from their cultural differences when communicating about matters of fact, process, or logical inference.

This culture-control function is evident even when the communication is between two people who speak the same language and have shared experiences. The more international and global the exchange, the more complex the problems for technical writers and *the less literary—the less writerly—the solution*.

In its most effective forms, technical writing provides few esthetic satisfactions to a "writer." Abstracting from feeling, opinion, analysis, digression, humor, allusion, and poesy . . . all tend to frustrate the needs of the writerly personality. Technical writing, when it is held to standards of corporate cost-effectiveness and judged against usability criteria is

more an engineering problem than an artistic one. And technical writing across diverse cultures and languages exaggerates, exacerbates, this distinction even more.

The research suggests that there are two broad strategies for achieving successful international technical writing.

The first is to use an especially austere and limited form of English (with artwork), expunged of all language that confuses or distracts, expressed in a stingy set of sentence patterns, stripped of its author's cultural baggage. In effect, this is the creation of an artificial language, or Pidgin, which is **based on English but not English**. This is true whether we adopt one of the formal Simplified or Controlled versions or whether we merely discipline ourselves to radically constrain our diction and syntax.

The second strategy is "local adaptation." Through both translation and local modification of the materials we try to reflect the habits, preferences, and prejudices of our target audience, which process we'll call satisfying the customer. This may oblige us, for example, to be ornate where we would prefer to be plain, or to write in the third person when we would prefer to write in the second, or to eliminate pictures of women from our literature, or to provide (what we consider) irrelevant digressions and justifications in a simple job aid.

The problem is that both of these strategies are even more frustrating to a traditional writer than technical writing within one's own cultural community. We are asked either to write in a Pidgin English or to write in an unfamiliar dialect, or even to violate what we have always considered universal principles—hypernorms—of effective communication.

Perhaps the next era of technical communication will not require the talents of a traditional writer at all. We have reached an odd moment when the books and articles we write *about* technical writing do not resemble technical writing at all. (Note that if the books about technical writing were written like manuals, no one would be able to read them for more than a few minutes at a time.)

Perhaps all our research in the last decade has reduced the technical writer's job to that of a skilled technician.

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