Center for Intercultural Dialogue

Constructing Intercultural Dialogues
Case Study #7

When the East Meets the Middle East

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Context

I had just moved to Israel. I wasn't my first time living as an American expatriate since I had spent the previous seven years in Taiwan. This was, however, my first time moving to a country where I didn't speak the local language. It was also my first time making an international move for someone else, rather than for a job opportunity or for personal enrichment. My Chinese skills were sufficient to grant me employment as a Mandarin-English interpreter for various Israeli companies. As international meetings that involve translation and interpretation are still a relatively recent addition to Israeli business, whatever accommodations are made often happen on an ad hoc basis, including providing interpretation. Other accommodations, such as those resulting from knowledge about Chinese culture, are still far from being implemented. For example, different styles of communication or preference typically are not considered, such as what food Chinese delegations might like to eat or the extent to which personal relationships should be cultivated before diving into business matters.

Participants

I was hired to interpret for a week of meetings between a renowned Israeli company and a Chinese delegation coming to finalize a deal. The deal was for the Chinese enterprise to walk away with Israeli intellectual property to aid in Chinese industrial advancement. One of the Chinese engineers served as their interpreter, and I, the only outsider to the industry, served as the interpreter for the Israeli company's president.

Description

The majority of the interpreting took place over the course of multiple three to four hour-long meetings where both parties reviewed contract variations and enjoyed presentations on patent specifications and technological advances. As interpreters, we were responsible for conveying the material from designated speakers giving

presentations, and from the presidents and team members when they wished to share thoughts or raise concerns.

Israelis have few qualms about speaking directly, in a style known as *dugri*, in Hebrew. As Katriel (2004) remarks, *dugri* speech is characterized both by its confrontational qualities and as "an idiom of participation in a social world in which disagreements can be aired, information is shared openly, and a basic sense of mutuality and trust prevails" (p. 165). Bluntness is viewed as both positive and appropriate by Israelis in many contexts where other cultural groups prefer indirection. Katriel talks about this in relation to Arab cultures, but it can be equally true of Chinese groups.

When I began interpreting for the president of the Israeli company, I conveyed his direct manner of speaking with sentences such as, "If X cannot be achieved, then we cannot collaborate with you." Luckily, the Chinese engineer/interpreter was far more familiar with the cultural finessing needed between the two cultures before being delivered up to her boss, and she immediately stepped in, softening the statements to the more respectful, nuanced phrases expected in Chinese negotiations, amendments such as "*Actually*, what he meant was, perhaps we could work more on adjusting X in the future, if it's convenient for us."

Tangibly, as Blum-Kulka (1992) notes, in Israeli conversations, overlap among speakers is common. This represents a high level of participant involvement, and thus is viewed as both appropriate and good. When the Israeli team faced a point of contention, often concerning contract specifications, multiple members of the team would begin vociferously arguing at once in Hebrew. This would frequently continue for some time, without a recap provided in English when the conversation returned to more standard turn-taking patterns. During one particularly long turn, the Chinese team leaned across their half of the circular table to ask me in Chinese, "What are they talking about?" In all honesty, I answered, "I have no idea, I only speak basic Hebrew."

To pass the time, and in an attempt to provide some cultural insight, I shared some of my personal experience integrating into an Israeli family, as a form of relational sharing. "Actually, this is exactly what the dinner table at my boyfriend's family's house sounds like." This admission opened a side conversation in Chinese about cultural differences between Israelis and Chinese while we waited for the side conversation in Hebrew to finish.

Dialogic features

During the negotiations, varying cultural norms were unknown to the Israeli and Chinese teams about their respective cultures and, as such, expectations for the interpreters were not discussed ahead of time about how directly or flexibly to stylistically convey communication patterns. This particular intercultural dialogue managed to succeed due to efforts on the part of both interpreters to prioritize a successfully completed project over the accuracy of communicating individual words and stances, especially in relation to cultural styles.

In other instances, where valued patterns of communication differed culturally, such as conversational turn-taking and inclusivity, luckily, both parties were able to remain somewhat flexible rather than expecting mutual compromises to happen in every instance.

Lessons learned

Building rapport and trust occurs in stages. During preliminary stages, communication accommodation can go a long way toward bridging the distance between various groups who do not yet understand one another's expected modes of respectful behavior. As two countries with an appetite for rapid advancement, neither hesitates to learn on the go, even if this means in the midst of unfolding negotiations. Chinese companies and delegations continue to flood Israel with investment capital and an appetite to learn from the Start-Up Nation (Senor & Singer, 2009). It will remain largely in the hands of interpreters, who are typically contracted on only an ad hoc basis, to make communication accommodations on the fly. This crucial task can be made exceedingly difficult especially when both parties try to save time and money by requiring simultaneous interpretation.

Ideally, the leaders of each team would receive basic cultural training, rather than leaving this essential work to intermediaries who craft their superiors' emails or translate contracts. Furthermore, hiring consistent interpreters would ensure that they are able to work within specified fields for prolonged periods of time, learning at least minimal history and politics of each field as well as the specialized lexicon required. When the fate of multiple million dollar deals rests within the hands of the few who can unbuild the Tower of Babel, it would be wise to ensure that they be given adequate time to prepare.

References

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