When languages and etiquette collide

Interpreters are accustomed to being flexible and adapting their language use to the situation. Tourism and service industry workers are, too. The perfect match, right? Not always.

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“Français, Nederlands, English, Deutsch?” A security guard at Brussels airport needs to frisk a passenger and is inquiring as to her language preference. The passenger stares back blankly, leading the security guard to the conclusion (admittedly improbable, given that we are in Brussels) that she speaks none of the above, whereupon he proceeds to his back-up plan of communicating through gestures.

In actual fact, the passenger is an interpreter who speaks all of those languages, and her hesitation is due to the fact that she is trying to place the security guard’s accent so that she can respond in the language most convenient for him.

This is just one example of a situation where multilingualism, instead of facilitating communication, simply gets in the way. The guard needs to do his job, and is happy to do so in any of the four languages he offers. The interpreter, being used to trying to adapt her language use to her interlocutor’s needs, unnecessarily wastes precious time trying to figure out which is his native tongue, instead of just picking one randomly and moving on to the duty-free shops.

I’m ashamed to say that the interpreter in the story is none other than myself. Why do I spend so much time in these and similar circumstances trying to decide which language to speak? Is it due to some deep-seated reluctance to give in to the global trend of using English as the lingua franca? Is it related to some unconscious desire to show off my language skills, which I’ve worked so hard to acquire? Do I want to prove to the world – one security guard at a time – that I’m not a hapless, unilingual business traveller straight off the boat? Or is it because my profession has taught me to value others’ language needs over my own?

To tell you the truth, it’s probably all of the above. Anyway, for one reason or another, I find myself in this sort of uncomfortable situation all too often. I get it in hotels (where the friendly receptionists usually start off in English or French, switch to Spanish when they see my home address, then get confused when I pull out the Dutch passport and the German credit card). It happens in cafes and restaurants, too, where I usually try to order in the language of the country but sometimes find the waiters switching to another language when they detect an accent (oddly enough, they often seem to want to speak to me in Italian!). At 30,000 feet up as well, I often spend more time trying to identify the flight attendant’s mother tongue than thinking about what I am going to order in that language when she finally gets to my seat.

Lately, I’ve tried to simplify my life by developing a few easy rules to follow in situations where I am dealing with multilingual services staff. I’ll share them with readers here, on the assumption that
these tips may come in handy for other polyglots on the move this summer:

1) **Let your context be your guide:** Try to use external factors wherever possible when choosing a language for communication. If you are in Rome (and speak Italian), do as the Romans do. Context markers may also include the airline you’re flying with (is it Air France or Iberia this time?) or the type of restaurant you’re in (Italian and Greek restaurants in particular seem to consider offering table service in their language part of the package).

The context-based approach may not solve all your problems, of course, especially in places like Amsterdam or Copenhagen, where the natives pride themselves on their English skills and will switch to English at the slightest whiff of an accent in Dutch or Danish. But at least it’s a start.

2) **Let your partner lead:** If, for whatever reason, your interlocutor decides to switch to another language, don’t fret, just go with the flow. Mostly, services staff will switch languages because they think they are doing you a favour, or because they have been instructed to speak English with all foreign guests. You may find it frustrating, especially if your Polish is better than their Globish, but as long as it gets the job done, then everyone can go away happy. Also, they may switch to another language because it suits them better. At least once, I have had a Brussels receptionist reply to me in English because, as she herself shyly admitted, she spoke neither French nor Dutch.

Of course, your interlocutor may pick a language that you don’t understand (I really do get people speaking to me in Italian a lot!), in which case you can choose to either knit your brow and do some deciphering or point out gently that communication might flow better in a different language.

3) **Don’t despair:** Remind yourself that it is a good thing that both you and your waiter speak several languages, and take comfort in the fact that sooner or later you will manage to agree on one and give your order. After all, multilingualism is to be celebrated wherever it is to be found, especially in these days of Globish for All.

4) **If all else fails, invest in some lapel pins:** I often see hotel receptionists sporting little badges or pins with flags representing the languages they speak, and have wondered if it might be worth investing in a few for myself...

Happy travels!

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