

Foreign languages can be used to impede communication

devblogs.microsoft.com/oldnewthing/20090702-01

July 2, 2009



Raymond Chen

One of the reasons people give for studying a foreign language is to increase the number of people one can communicate with. But what people don't mention is that foreign languages can also be used to impede communications, and that can be just as useful. (Be careful, though, because it can backfire.) During my visit to Sweden some years ago, I was walking back to my hotel room from the Göteborg train station. I had spent the afternoon visiting the nearby city of Alingsås, whose claim to fame is that they are the birthplace of the man who introduced potatoes to Sweden, although he is probably more greatly celebrated for introducing a related process to Sweden: the technique of fermenting potatoes to make alcohol. Anyway, the reason I was there was not to learn the history of potatoes in Sweden, but rather to pay a visit to one of my Swedish readers. Oh, wait, I was telling a story. I was walking back to my hotel from the train station, and as I crossed one of the plazas, a man approached me, speaking unaccented American English. He said, "Hey, you look Chinese. We have an organization for Chinese people, and the meetings are conducted in Swedish so you can understand!" Okay, let's see if we can add up everything wrong with this situation.

1. We're in Sweden, and I "look Chinese", so he decides to speak to me in English?
2. He's speaking English in order to convince me to attend a meeting conducted in *Swedish*.
3. If I'm Chinese, wouldn't "the language I can understand" be, um, say, some variation of *Chinese*?

I didn't feel like pointing this out to the gentleman. I just wanted to get back to my hotel, but he kept following me, repeating his spiel. I stopped and mentally enumerated the languages I knew how to speak.

- English: Obviously he knows English. He's speaking it.
- Swedish: We're in Sweden. There's a chance he knows Swedish.
- German: Göteborg gets a lot of German tourists. The tourism signs and tour buses are trilingual: Swedish, English, and German. So there's a chance he knows German.

- Chinese: Seeing as he's assuming that I'm a native Chinese speaker, yet he's speaking to me in English, it's a pretty safe bet that he doesn't speak Chinese. Especially if I pick a minority dialect.

I turned to him and said in my parents' native dialect, "I'm sorry, I don't know what you're saying." He was apparently not expecting this, because he paused for a moment before saying "Oh, Thai people are welcome, too." I guess he took what I said and tried to map the phonemes to English and somehow came to the conclusion that I said, "I'm not Chinese; I'm Thai." I merely reiterated my claim not to understand what he was saying and continued onward. He decided not to follow me any further.

I use this technique whenever I don't want to talk to somebody. And the trick works both ways: In Taiwan, when people try to talk to me and I'd rather not deal with them, I speak Swedish.

Raymond Chen

Follow

