

Project Management – *Are we all talking the same language?*

Clearly not, as far as my experience shows. If you are, like me, dealing with an international audience then you will have noticed that as soon as you stray from English the language of project management changes.

English is a rich language, and has benefited from additional vocabulary as a result of various invasions. This has meant that over the years subtle variations in meaning have been applied to our words, which do not exist elsewhere. The growth of project management terminology has been very much pioneered through the English speaking peoples, such that even mainstream project management words like *scope* can be difficult to interpret exactly elsewhere.

The Project Management Institute has had to confront this problem when translating its various forms of guidance, not least the PMI Body of Knowledge. A member of the Italian committee for one of PMI's translations confided to me that many hours of discussion were spent determining the correct Italian word for *scope*. At last, the word *ambito* was agreed upon, but even this does not completely cover the extent of the English word. To make matters worse there is an Italian word that is very close to the spelling of *scope*, which is *scopo*. This word, however, has an entirely different meaning (i.e. *purpose*).

If you think this is frustrating, then what hope do you have of translating *scope creep*. In fact, it is almost impossible. Well, it is possible to agree on a form of words, and in the Italian case it is *apertura dell ambito*, but the man in the street is hardly going to recognise it. Only through widespread usage will the translation become well known. The best we can offer in French, for example, is *aller au dela du périmètre*. Small wonder that many French and Italian project managers prefer to use the English words.

The similarity to English of words in other languages is a trap for the unwary. One of the most famous is the German word for *get*, which is *bekommen*. This looks remarkably like the English word *become*, which is translated as *werden* in German. Learners of German are often told of the diner in a restaurant, impatiently waiting for his meal, saying to the waiter: "When do I become my beef steak?".

You may think it no big deal that there can be these misunderstandings. Perhaps everyone should use English as the project management language. I personally don't think like this. Few people add up the time lost through misunderstandings, duplicated work or blatantly incorrect work. As both a linguist and project manager, I recognise the importance of communication. Even with a team of native English speakers misunderstandings can occur. Add the foreign element and the risks of misunderstanding multiply.

It is not just the lack of suitable project management word translations that cause a problem; it is also how non-native English speakers interpret English words. Take the words *lend* and *borrow*, for example. These often only have one counterpart in other languages. A German project manager with a good command of English some years ago asked me to borrow him my book. It must be very confusing even for a good English speaker to understand the differences between *borrow* and *lend*. I knew of course what he meant, but did he? The concept of a loan (i.e. something that needs to be returned) is not so well built in to other languages. I lent him the book, but it was never returned!

In a safety critical situation, communication needs to be very precise. Interpretation and meaning of words must be assured. I wonder how many English project managers managing largely foreign teams (English speaking or not) fully appreciate this.

In order to understand the depth of the problem with respect to project management, I thought that I would try to compile a multi-language dictionary of project management terms. At least I would start with those languages of which I had a good grasp. Taking six languages other than English, I was surprised at both the variation and lack of formal project management terms. Few were totally universal. The words *problem* and *software* seemed to be much the same across my chosen languages of English, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Spanish and Swedish. Words relating to general business were much more mature than pure project related words. I should not be surprised at this. With nearly fifty years of project management terms, such as *earned value* and *work breakdown structure*, we are still at an immature stage of language recognition, and the English equivalents often remain the best translation. *Le work breakdown structure* must be abhorrent to a native French speaker, but it is certainly more precise than the nearest short equivalent of “*la structure du travail*”. To explain WBS to a non-English speaking French person is not going to be easy.

But then the language problems work equally the other way round. I am currently struggling with reading what are clearly inadequate translations of Proust’s *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time* or *Remembrances of Things Past* or whatever someone has chosen to translate the title as). Not only the overall title but also that of each book (there are six volumes) have been the subject of great translation argument. Some things just do not translate, yet somehow native speakers seem to fully comprehend the meaning!

But I digress. Project managers managing multi-lingual teams need to not only express their communications precisely but also to consider the risks of being misunderstood and of themselves misunderstanding what their team members are telling them.

We can all laugh at the mis-spellings or mis-use of English words that we receive in issue logs submitted by foreign teams, for example. Perhaps, instead, we need to be more sympathetic to those submitting them. Have they really understood the meaning of the English language they think they are good at? Or will they continue to aspire to borrow your books or become a Gantt chart?

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The first edition of John Bartlett’s *Polyglot Dictionary of Project Management Terms (Western Europe)* is available from www.greatstave.co.uk/Dictionary.htm priced £6.99

