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Those roundabout words that cause cultural crashes

THERE are many jokes about the idiosyncrasies of English overseas on notices that don't convey quite what was intended: for example, the detour sign in Japan "Stop. Drive sideways", or the Copenhagen airline office notice "We take your bags and send them in all directions".

Putting one's finger on exactly what has gone wrong here is not always easy. Many readers will have encountered similar examples on overseas adventures. Travel to places where English is used mainly for the benefit of tourists often leads us to reflect on the complexities of expressing meaning unambiguously, as well as on the interesting idiosyncrasies of particular languages.

Places where English is a foreign language are not the only overseas contexts in which miscommunication may occur. At a meal with some Singaporeans, a comment in Singapore English – "Today's meeting got say such things meh?" – caused complete bewilderment to a New Zealand businesswoman, until her Singaporean colleague laughed and translated, "Were such things really said at today's meeting?" Different varieties of English develop distinctive patterns, and occasionally the result is ambiguity or misunderstanding.

Even more interesting from my perspective was an experience on a recent trip to Hong Kong. Several times I was asked what seemed to me inappropriately direct questions, and I was generally ill-prepared with an evasive response if I didn't want to provide the information requested. Fortunately, the *South China Morning Post* included an article during my



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WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

stay providing advice about how to respond to personal questions at parties over the holiday season. The article suggested wonderful responses ranging from the polite and evasive to the downright confrontational.

In reply to "When are you going to start a family?", the article recommended, "You'll be the third to know!" And the suggested response to "Isn't it time you retired?" was "I just got here." It is hard to imagine hearing such questions in a public context in New Zealand.

Awareness of the politeness norms of other cultures is important when we interact with new immigrants to New Zealand too. We have been engaged in a research project tracking the experiences of migrants as they enter New Zealand workplaces after completing a communication skills course taught in our school at Victoria University.

The migrants are skilled professionals – accountants, doctors, lawyers, teachers, policy analysts. Their English is very good, but they have failed to obtain jobs that make use of their professional skills and experience. The course focuses on cross-cultural differences that may cause problems.

One of the participants, whose workplace communication we have recently

analysed, came from Hong Kong. One problem she seemed to be having at work was exactly the issue mentioned above – people experienced her as too direct. She said things to her supervisor like, "Draw up an agenda for our meeting next week" and "Give me some more time to finish this".

In the New Zealand workplace context, these utterances seem very blunt. Most New Zealanders in a similar situation would say something like, "I wonder if you could let me know what you would like to discuss at our meeting next week" and "I am afraid I am not quite finished. Could I have a little more time?"

The linguistic hedges ("I wonder if", "could I", "a little") soften the utterance and make it sound more acceptable to us. But to a Chinese person from Hong Kong, they sound ridiculously indirect and are perceived as beating around the bush. Why not get straight to the point?

Visiting another culture raises awareness of how culturally cosseted we are and how much we take for granted about the appropriate ways in which meaning is conveyed. We all find it difficult to escape from the assumption that our ways of saying and doing things are normal and even "best".

Travel is a useful way of challenging those assumptions if we are open-minded enough to see, hear and accept what others are writing and saying as their normal way of communicating with each other and with us.

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