

Communicating with International Audiences

Introduction

Issues of international cooperation in the CHI community were made personal for me when I moved from the United States to France in July of 1996. Things that I should have noticed before, and which had slid right by me, all of a sudden became salient. For many people already immersed in internationally diverse work environments, much of this will probably be familiar. For those who tend to work within their own national environment, here are some observations and suggestions based on my experiences working in France that I hope will be of help. The most practical of these suggestions involve how to give a talk for an international audience, whether or not you're a native speaker of the meeting's target language.

Background: Kinds of Differences

In terms of general observations, I've seen a number of differences among communities. These differences involve research traditions, professional roles, and ease of including people in professional activities.

Defining Communities

Language communities tend to define research communities. By this, I mean that different countries may rely on different research traditions even in areas that apparently are the same. In the case of France compared to North America, here are a couple of examples:

- When thinking of cognitive models for HCI, North Americans are likely to refer first to Don Norman, or maybe Allen Newell and Herbert Simon. The French, like most Europeans, are likely to cite Jens Rasmussen.
- When discussing usability testing methods, North Americans are likely to cite Jakob Nielsen. French

researchers are likely to cite Christian Bastien and Dominique Scapin.

If we extrapolate this to other issues and other countries, one can reasonably surmise that there's a lot of research outside one's own language community that is probably worth noting.

Defining Professions

Job categories differ by country. In North America, a specialist in HCI is likely to be a computer scientist or a psychologist. In France, the specialist is likely to be an ergonomist. In North America, manuals tend to be written by professional technical writers. In France, manuals tend to be written by professional engineers.

Building Activities

It's easier to exclude people than to include them. As a result, HCI people who live and work in single-language communities often do not make a sufficient positive effort to include people from outside their language community in their professional activities. This results in two kinds of losses. First, the organizers lose out on (a) diversity of methods and perspectives that might help them reach innovative "outside the box" solutions, and (b) the joy of encountering and learning something new. The excluded, other-language people lose out for similar reasons, and also because their capacity to contribute is stymied. Single-language people should appreciate how daunting communities such as the North American CHI community may seem to someone else. And cultural differences may make "outsiders" even less likely to seek to participate. So, the next time you're putting together a workshop or panel, do more than just "round up the usual suspects".

Preparing and Presenting a Talk

More practically, members of the CHI community who present talks in nationally diverse settings face challenges in being understood. Based on my experiences over the last few years, in places like France, Mexico and Japan, I have a number of suggestions for both native and non-native speakers of a conference language.

Suggestions for Native Speakers

Not every understands your language as well as you speak it. In talks for international audiences that don't have simultaneous translation, I recommend the following practices for people who are giving a talk in their native language.

- **Speak slowly.** This is easier said than done, though. I've attended a number of conference sessions where someone in the audience asked the presenter to speak more slowly in order to let non-native-English-speakers follow the talk. The speaker always seems to graciously acknowledge the request, then speak as rapidly as ever within 10 to 20 seconds of starting up again. There are a couple of ways to help yourself speak slowly in international presentations. The first is to plan ahead by realizing that the amount of material you'll be able to present will have to be reduced. You can't cram 20 normal transparencies worth of talk into a 25-minute slot. Plan on using maybe one transparency for every three minutes of talk. The second way to speak slowly in presentations is to practice. You can

practice not only in your run-through (you *do* have a run-through, right?) but by yourself anywhere you won't bother other people. Try talking even more slowly than you eventually plan to do at the presentation. This should give you an ability to regulate your pace.

- Be careful in using humor. I think we all know that some kinds of humor can offend and that a lot of humor may simply escape members struggling just to understand basic content of a talk. What's more, speakers who customarily use humor in their talks may find themselves flustered by the audience's lack of response. When I first got to France, I found that my talks seemed to fall flat. I'd been used to getting a lot of non-verbal feedback, much of it based on humor; it turned out the audiences were understanding and appreciating the talks, but the humor part just went right by them. Of course, I figure I must be missing a significant amount of the beauty and subtlety of talks given in French.
- Imagine what listening is like from a non-majority-language perspective. At SIGDOC 99 this year, which was held in Quebec City, Carl Stieren started his talk in French, using a title transparency in French. Most of the (English-speaking) audience had some flustered moments until he grinned and started over in English.
- For talks to audiences primarily made up of speakers of two languages, consider distributing copies of your slides in the "other" language. Carl Stieren used this idea very effectively at SIGDOC by providing French-language slides for those who wanted them.

Suggestions for Non-native Speakers

For presenters who plan to speak in a non-native language in which they do not feel comfortable, there are some ways in which you can get your talk across more effectively.

- Do not read your paper out loud. Do not read a prepared talk out loud. Do not just read your slides out loud, either. Actually, this advice goes for native speakers, too. Any of these approaches will put your audience to sleep faster than you can believe, and once the audience has "checked out" it will be very difficult to get them back into the flow of the presentation. Instead, even if it's very hard for you, try to talk spontaneously. Use the audience's non-verbal feedback to see if they're following you. Do not be afraid to ask questions of the audience to check their understanding. Remember that you'll have to be *more* interactive than native speakers, because feedback-understanding is easier for them.
- If possible, practice your talk for people who are proficient speakers of the target language. Find and memorize key technical terms or expressions.
- Speak slowly. Just as it's hard for non-native speakers to follow a native speaker, native speakers will probably find it hard to understand someone with a "foreign" accent who speaks rapidly. Remember that you will have succeeded in your talk if the audience can remember even one main idea; after all, most audience members won't retain more than a sentence's worth of content of the talk a few days later anyway. So be clear and deliberate in getting your main ideas across. What is your claim? Why is your claim true? Why is this important?
- If you have access to computer-based display for transparencies, use presentation features that present bullet points or other elements one-by-one as you discuss them. This will help the audience to follow where you are in the talk even within a transparency. Meriem Chater used this technique effectively at HCI-Aero 98 in Montreal.

- If you are truly uncomfortable in the target language, get someone else who knows the work and who is a proficient speaker of the target language to present the paper for you. You can participate by clarifying, adding, and then answering questions.

Resources

Those who want to appreciate and understand differences among national communities may find it useful to consult books on culture shock or adaptation to new cultures. For example, I found Polly Plat's book "French or Foe" (Culture Crossings Ltd., 1995) to be useful in understanding business and academic life here. There are many such books across a wide range of cultures and countries, including the "Culture Shock!" series, which covers about 40 countries ranging from Borneo to the United States (and the U.S. South has its own edition).

For people who feel more or less outside the CHI community, the SIGCHI mentoring program can be an excellent resource. Robin Jeffries and John Tang served as the mentoring coordinators for CHI 99. This program helps people prepare submissions to SIGCHI conferences. Information on this program can be found in the SIGCHI Web pages.

Experience is a resource, too. I expect as I continue to learn, I'll find new kinds of differences, new ideas and perspectives, and better ways to communicate.

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