

Found in Translation

“Can multiple languages serve as a bridge, rather than a barrier?” by Marielle Velander, Dec 4, 2017

“Open government for us is a *coyuntura*,” explained David, the leader of a civil society organization in Guadalajara, Mexico. I was sitting in his office with my colleague Ana Maria, conducting one of our daily interviews. “Coyuntura?” I asked. I’d been a student of Spanish for over a decade, but had never heard that word. David and Ana Maria explained that the English word for *coyuntura* is “*juncture*” — but that translation doesn’t capture its full meaning. David had used *coyuntura* to describe a point at which different human, capital, and material resources meet and make things possible.

Our conversation on that autumn day stuck with me. As *coyuntura* slipped into our English-language reports, it raised a critical question for me. Since my team works with people around the world, is there a way to not only navigate language barriers, but also use them to our advantage?

I’m intimately familiar with language barriers. Growing up speaking both Swedish and English, I quickly understood the power of communicating fluently in two languages, but just as quickly learned that meanings could be lost or mysteriously transformed. A simple one that usually tripped me up was the word *eventually*; the Swedish equivalent is *eventuell*, but it means that something might or might not happen, whereas the English word connotes that something certainly will happen.

Linguists have studied these incongruences for decades. Take, for example, a [recent study](#) published in the Scientific American that found that reading moral dilemmas in a foreign language led participants “to place greater weight on outcomes and less weight on intentions” than in their native language. In other words, if we hear something in a language we don’t know well, we may focus more on the *what* than the *why* of another person’s decision — ultimately decreasing our empathy and understanding.

These shifts in moral judgment have likely affected international negotiations, cross-cultural business deals, and conversations between [English-speaking doctors and Spanish-speaking patients](#).

At the social impact firm where I work, [Reboot](#), language is at the heart of our qualitative research. For instance, ethnographic methods require in-depth conversations to capture experiences; when these conversations happen in an unfamiliar language, we need to carefully process them to [check for biased interpretation](#) and pull out meaningful insights.

Our work is global, and often involves working closely with people who speak English as a second or third language. We have to work intentionally to mitigate language barriers, and caveat what might be lost in translation.

Here’s how we do it:

1. Use local researchers

We often rely on the acquired language abilities of a permanent staff member (for example, me in the Spanish-speaking world). This certainly has drawbacks; for one thing, consider how dialect and slang are so variable. I experienced this when I took notes in a focus group with Dominican women in New York City. Having studied Spanish in Ecuador, I found it tricky to follow along the entire conversation because the Dominican dialect shortens the endings of most words. For example, when

saying, “we go to the city,” Dominicans would say *vamo a ciudá* instead of *vamos a la ciudad*. To fill in the details I relied on our local researcher, a Puerto Rican woman who had lived in the community for 10 years.

Local researchers not only act as interpreters, but as connected community members with deep understanding of the local context and customs.

The native speakers we engage do more than just translate words; they explain how and why those words are used in order to deepen our research insights. In Mexico, my colleague Ana Maria helped me contextualize *coyuntura* in a way Google Translate never could.

2. Take your time

Nuance can easily be lost in translation, and especially if you squeeze the translation into a short time. For example, in a recent training session with local researchers in Brazil, the English phrasing of the project objectives and methodological terms did not easily translate to Brazilian Portuguese.

This is why we approach training as an ongoing process throughout the project, rather than containing it in a one-day workshop. As we work closely to uncover, discuss, and resolve different interpretations, we are able to not only translate but also adapt our principles and methods to the local context over time.

3. Use your “outsider” status wisely

It’s important to overcome language barriers, but the term “barrier” can also be misleading; while a shared dialect can be an invaluable connector, so can differences. An “outsider” may open new and deeper lines of questioning. I’ve found that I can use this role to ask questions about aspects of a language that native speakers take for granted; it often allows me to gain a deeper understanding of what makes a particular context unique.

That’s what happened with the word *coyuntura*. If it hadn’t been foreign to me, I never would have reacted as I did, and connected with David during our interview about our different interpretations of the term. The untranslatable quality of the word ignited a conversation that helped us bridge understandings, rather than add to the misunderstandings.

Approached in this way, differences in language can serve as a bridge to connection, rather than a barrier to communication. Lauren Collins recently wrote [an article](#) about learning to speak her French husband’s native language; as she poignantly put it, “If first languages are reservoirs of emotion, second languages can be rivers undammed, freeing their speakers to ride different currents.”

The social impact world hasn’t openly talked about language — including how to turn barriers into bridges.