

down and use less tact. On such occasions, a socially and culturally sensitive interpreter would not faithfully translate verbatim. The following is an example:⁸

Before addressing a Chinese audience, a Western scientist noticed a number of children were playing and chattering in the aisles. To his dismay, no one was attempting to quiet them down. After impatiently waiting for a while, he exploded angrily at the interpreter, "Will you tell those little brats to shut up!" The interpreter quietly spoke into the microphone in Chinese what roughly translates, "Little friends, would you please be just a bit more quiet, if you don't mind?" (p. 265)

Humor is very difficult to translate. An important attribute of a good interpreter is the knowledge of what is funny in other cultures. Recall the story in Chapter 3 about an American executive in Japan telling his audience a joke. The interpreter probably knew the translation would not do justice to the joke and therefore told the audience, "Your American guest just told you a joke; you are supposed to laugh," and the audience responded with hearty laughter.

In translation, one can avoid potential minefields if one is aware that certain political issues are off-limits. For example, the Middle East is made up of a number of countries and cultures. A frequent mistake is the assumption that all are Arabs. This is politically and culturally a very sensitive matter to Iranians, Turks, and Kurds. A good interpreter would make an appropriate distinction and would refer to each culture accordingly.

Danish and Swedish Communication

In the Danish culture, the main purpose of interpersonal communication is maintenance of a familiar atmosphere and relation of affection. It is impolite to explain things, because such an act assumes that someone is ignorant. It is also impolite to ask questions on anything beyond immediate personal concern, because the respondent may not know the answer. It is often considered aggressive or offensive to introduce new ideas. One prefers to repeat the same old jokes. Discussion of politics or economics is taboo, except in marginal enclaves. Safe topics of intellectual conversation are art, literature, and music, on which people are expected to disagree without embarrassment.

In contrast, in Sweden, the purpose of daily interpersonal communication is transmission of new information or frank feelings. One prefers to be silent unless he or she has an important message, while in Denmark one must keep talking (p. 49).⁹