

Mediterranean Editors and Translators Meeting (METM) 2007: Exploring Cultural Differences

Gregory Morley

Cultural differences are a source of endless fascination and also a potential cause of strife. Those who live away from their native culture and those who work with clients from other cultures should always be aware of potential differences. The 2007 Mediterranean Editors and Translators Meeting (METM), held on 26-27 October 2007 in Madrid, Spain, with almost 100 delegates from different traditions and cultures, provided ample opportunity to explore those differences in the relaxing surroundings of the Jardín Botánico.

Contrastive Rhetoric

When my (Spanish) wife says to me “¡Te mato!” (literally “I’ll kill you!”), I like to think this is a rhetorical device. Although it is common in Spanish, I cannot recall hearing many wives say something similar to their husbands during my admittedly sheltered upbringing in Britain. That example of different uses of rhetoric is, of course, taken from everyday language. You might think that in the objective world of academic writing, cultural interference becomes irrelevant and a well-edited or well-translated English text would fully meet the expectations of a reader whose mother tongue is English or, in other words, be indistinguishable from a text written by a native English speaker. Ana Moreno, of the Spanish Council for Scientific Research, Madrid, the keynote speaker at the 2007 METM, showed that it could be a dangerous assumption.

In her presentation “Cross-Cultural Differences and Similarities: What Do We

Really Know about Cultural Differences in Written Communication? A Realistic Review of the Contrastive Rhetoric Literature”, Moreno summarized this complex theoretical field in an accessible way for those (like me) with little grounding in linguistic theory. Contrastive rhetoric began in the 1960s when Robert Kaplan studied texts written by English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Kaplan R. Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education. *Language Learning* 1966;16[1]:1-20). Kaplan identified four ways in which paragraphs are developed in different languages. English was considered to have a more linear development than other languages. Attention has since been drawn to major design flaws in the original studies using Kaplan’s approach. For example, early research was based on the writing of students who were probably not expert writers in their native languages. Also, given that texts written by native English speakers—even those who are expert writers—can contain different paragraph developments, the contrastive-rhetoric hypothesis has been revised. It is now recognized that various paragraph development is possible in any language, but it is not equally common, and each language has its preferences. More specifically, it has been hypothesized that polished, published English tends to be deductive (that is, information is organized in a general-to-specific pattern), whereas some other languages, such as Asian languages and Spanish, tend to be inductive (that is, a specific-to-general pattern has the thesis statement in the final position). Another possible contrast is between “writer-responsible rhetoric” (for example, English), in which the onus is on the writer to be clear, and “reader-responsible

rhetoric” (for example, German), in which it is up to the reader to make the effort to understand what the writer is saying.

To test those hypotheses, studies should compare like with like, for example, texts written by expert authors writing in their own native languages on the same subject. Sample sizes (corpora) need to be large enough to provide reliable statistical results. The new generation of research is following that principle, but readers were cautioned against taking older conclusions at face value. A number of structural aspects can be and have been investigated with better designs. It has been possible to investigate the extent to which authors in different languages hedge or intensify the force of their conclusions by using premise-conclusion sequences. So far, studies have shown that French, Finnish, Bulgarian, Spanish, and Dutch writers tend to be more prescriptive, authoritarian, and categorical than their English counterparts. Other variations in rhetorical structure, particularly in papers in the hard sciences, include construction of a gap to justify and highlight the contribution of a study to a research field. According to Moreno, that introductory rhetorical device is more common in English than in other languages, such as Spanish, Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian. A speculative explanation is that writers in Spain, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine do not feel as fierce competition for research space as their Anglophone counterparts.

Moreno presented an interesting study comparing the critical attitude of Spanish academic book reviewers with that of British and American academic book reviewers. Critical acts (both favorable and unfavorable) were identified and analyzed. In general, the British and American book reviewers were markedly more critical than

GREGORY MORLEY is a freelance medical writer, translator, and editor in Madrid, Spain.

the Spanish ones. The study was followed up by an e-mail survey of reviewers. From the responses, it appeared that the British and American reviewers differed from their Spanish counterparts about the function of a review—for the British and American reviewers it was to evaluate the book, but for the Spanish reviewers this function was blurred with other social functions, such as publicizing the book and acknowledging the prestige of the book's author.

All in all, Moreno's presentation provided a unique opportunity for people who are primarily language practitioners to receive a theoretical background of aspects of language and culture that we might intuitively grasp without knowing why. I would like to think that it was also rewarding for a theoretician to present language theory to people who will be able to apply it daily.

Working the Market

In addition to the plenary lecture, this year's METM had a number of workshops and panel discussions with a more practical feel. In particular, a couple of panels were dedicated to "working the market". Many of the aspects discussed could be applicable to almost any freelance worker, but some might be more specific to the Mediterranean region. For example, word of mouth might be a more important means of generating work in Mediterranean countries, and reputation is a key marketing tool. The METMs provide a valuable opportunity for networking, particularly because freelancers working primarily in or into English and living in the Mediterranean region have tended to be isolated.

In addition to the perceived greater importance of word of mouth in Mediterranean cultures, there are related differences. A meeting with a client in a northern European country might appear more "business-like" in the sense that provider and client meet, discuss business, and possibly reach an agreement. In a Mediterranean setting, however, there will probably be more social discourse (although providers should be wary of considering clients as friends), and this can last weeks or even months. A more contentious point was made by Mary Ellen Kerans, the MET chair, who claimed that Mediterranean culture was more "oral", meaning that oral agreements (including those reached by telephone) often carry as much weight as contracts, even for relatively large jobs. Writing up an agreement, even by e-mail, is mainly to ensure that no one forgets the details.

The question of prices and fees was also discussed. In the Mediterranean region, as elsewhere, there is downward pressure on the prices that language consultants can charge. In the case of Spain, translations from English to Spanish may suffer because of competition from South America, and this may in turn affect translations into English. The panelists were at pains to point out that the most effective antidote (for both editing and translation) is to produce high-quality work and aim for the top end of the market. Of course, consultants who can provide added value to their products (translators who point out inconsistencies in the source text or editors of scientific articles who point out scientific shortcomings) will also find it easier to

justify high prices. But that works only if the client can appreciate the added value. One of the avowed goals of MET is to raise awareness among clients of the importance of selecting the right provider and of the need for quality.

Educating the Client

In view of the perceived need to "educate" clients to ensure that they are fully aware of what can be expected from a professional language consultant, the MET Client Orientation Document was presented during the General Assembly. The document was drafted by a committee comprising Joy Burrough-Boenisch (UK), Valerie Matarese (Italy), and Felicity Neilson (France) and aims to provide a guide for users of English-language support services. It will be translated into Mediterranean languages to make it more accessible to potential users of communication support services in this region. The document is to be posted on the association Web site (www.metmeetings.org).

Onward to Split

Finally, an important item in the General Assembly was the official announcement of the venue for next year's METM. This year's METM was held outside Barcelona for the first time, and next year's—in Split, Croatia, on 11-13 September 2008—will be the first outside Spain. Although MET already enjoys a healthy diversity, this spread from its Spanish roots will help it to become a truly pan-Mediterranean organization. 🌍