

FEATURES

Learning when and how to talk the correct talk

I RECENTLY visited my sister's family in Scotland where my niece talked about the laird (lord) of the local estate, his weans (children), and the chavs who caused trouble in the local shopping mall.

When I asked for a translation of chavs, she offered "council house and violent", ie hooligans.

We are all used to the need for these kinds of translations as we cross dialect boundaries: New Zealand car parks are US parking lots, and the car boot is the trunk in the US. More subtle and less easy to negotiate are the rules for speaking appropriately in different cultures. Do you greet the bus driver and if so how? Do you speak to people you meet on a walking track (or trail),



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WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

or in the lift? When is small talk appropriate and what topics are acceptable?

I became very aware of these subtleties as I worked for a couple of weeks in Hong Kong. I walked into the open-plan administrators'

office the first morning and cheerfully greeted people. Some politely responded, but I became aware that my behaviour was regarded as distinctly bizarre. Generally people were heads down working, and they saw no need to be interrupted by a greeting, far less by small talk about the weather (it was very wet from my perspective and thus worth comment). Someone kindly left an umbrella on my desk, but rain was not a hot topic for discussion.

This experience brought home to me once again how easy it is to take one's own norms for speaking for granted, and to consider those who don't follow them as rude or bad-mannered.

I should and do know better. We

have had people from Hong Kong and China on our Workplace Communication Skills course, and one of the areas that has generated a good deal of discussion has been when and how much small talk to use.

A highly qualified business analyst, whom I will call Jeff, was clearly doing brilliantly at the business aspects of his job in the company that had taken him on as an intern. But when his adviser and support person went to talk to the other staff, it was obvious that there were some problems. Jeff would arrive at work, go straight to his desk, turn on the computer and get down to work as soon as possible. And he didn't take a break for morning tea. This might seem ad-

mirable. It certainly explained why I had encountered problems with my cheery greeting in the Hong Kong office. The issues Jeff's colleagues identified were the exact reverse of mine; they thought Jeff was unfriendly and too work-focused. They interpreted his behaviour using New Zealand norms.

This raises interesting issues for those teaching workplace communication skills. If we genuinely value diversity and wish to nurture a more multicultural society, then we could perhaps inform Jeff's colleagues how his socio-cultural norms were different, but equally valid. On the other hand, Jeff wants a permanent job, and so he needs to learn how New Zealand communicative norms differ from

his own. Then at least he has the information about how his behaviour will be perceived, and he can choose whether to conform or perhaps even to discuss these differences with his colleagues.

This is a tiny example illustrating the value of courses for professional migrants, such as Victoria's Workplace Communication Skills course. This helps them work out why they are not getting permanent jobs. The reasons are often simply lack of familiarity with typical New Zealand ways of interacting at work.

Despite their professional expertise, these migrants sometimes don't fit in because they are unaware of the social rules.

It is therefore a great pity the

grants that enabled migrants to enrol in this course were one of several cuts affecting migrant support in the May Budget.

In the five years that the course has been running, close to 85 per cent of the participants have found relevant employment within six months of finishing the course. There is no doubt that the skills acquired on the course contributed to this success. It is hard, in the light of such figures, to understand the reasons for axing these grants. Perhaps we need to start engaging in big talk as well as small talk.

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■ Send your questions about language to words@dompost.co.nz