



SHARED SERVICES:

Socio-Political Considerations -- Language

| KAREN BEAMAN

The social and political issues intrinsic in national differences present substantial challenges to scaling up Shared Service Centers (SSC) to a global level. Within one country, an SSC can ordinarily function within just one governmental framework and one or two languages. The management of an SSC can assume that it shares a common set of social and business norms with its customers. But a truly global operation has to deal with many languages and many different political frameworks. National and cultural differences abound that present the potential for miscommunication. The central challenge is how to communicate the common shared content in many languages while showing locally appropriate faces. In doing so, Global Shared Services contend with substantial diversity in socio-political factors such as:

- Language,
- Culture,
- Business practices,
- Government, and
- Data privacy regulations.

It is an unfortunate myth that English is the only language needed to do business around the world. In fact, the world is very diverse linguistically. English is just one of the world's major business languages; it is the mother tongue of only about five percent of the world's population. But there are limits to linguistic diversity: fewer than 100 languages account for some 95 percent of the world's population; the top ten languages spoken around the world can be seen in the following table. Mandarin alone accounts for 20 percent of the world population. Adding English, Spanish, Russian, and Hindi, raises the coverage to 45 percent, and adding German, Japanese, Arabic, Bengali, Portuguese, French, and Italian brings the figure to 60 percent. (Katzner 1975).

Any global SSC needs to accommodate a number of the languages listed in the following table, and possibly others, depending on where the company operates.

<u>Language</u>	<u>Primary Country</u>	<u>No of Speakers</u>
1. Mandarin	China	1,262,358,000
2. Hindi	India	366,000,000
3. Spanish	Spain	358,000,000
4. English	UK/USA	341,000,000
5. Bengali	Bangladesh	207,000,000
6. Portuguese	Portugal/Brazil	176,000,000
7. Russian	Russia	167,000,000
8. Japanese	Japan	125,000,000
9. German	Germany	100,000,000
10. French	France	77,000,000

Ethnologue. Summer Institute of Linguistics (www.sil.org)

Issues of linguistic diversity, however, go beyond the question of how many languages must be accommodated. Both within and between languages there is a multiplicity of differences in areas such as terms of address, degree of directness/indirectness, approaches to agreement/ disagreement, as well as lexical differences. Informal terminology and local expressions present further communications complications: sports metaphors, for instance, may allude to baseball or American football in the U.S., but to cricket or soccer in England.

Even within the same language, substantial dialectal or regional differences can obscure meaning and be cause for miscommunication and conflict. Frequently the same thing may be referred to by different words in different places. For example, the British live in “flats” where Americans have “apartments,” they “queue up” rather than “line up,” and wear “plimsoles” rather than “sneakers.” To the British, an American car’s “trunk” is the “boot”, the “hood” is the “bonnet,” the “windshield” is the “windscreen,” and the vehicle runs on “petrol” not “gas” (Ferraro 2002). Road signs like “free recovery” and “soft verge” may make perfect sense to the British driver but be completely unintelligible to the American.

Conversely, some languages may have just one word covering a range of meanings expressed by two or more words in other languages. For example, the Sotho language spoken in South Africa has one word for both “green” and “blue.” So a call center representative, who tells a caller to fill out the “blue” form instead of the “green” one, could leave the customer very perplexed, without either of them being able to figure out where the miscommunication lies.

Other potentially more detrimental situations can occur when two expressions have radically different meanings in different languages or dialects. “To table something” means to defer it for a while in American English, whereas in British English it means to give it a prominent place. Finally, the most seriously damaging situation can result when a common expression in one language or dialect has a rude or inappropriate meaning in another culture. For example, if the call center representative asks a caller from Australia to hold on for a minute while he “roots around” for her paperwork, he’s liable to have the caller hang up on him, as “rooting around” is an expression for sexual intercourse in Australia.

Some strategies for dealing with linguistic diversity in a Global Shared Services environment include:

- Operate the Global Shared Services Center in a predetermined minimum number of languages (e.g., English only, or perhaps English, Spanish, and Chinese). While this reduces costs and complexity, it also limits accessibility to some potential users (e.g., can a local manager in Indonesia speak English well enough to discuss his hiring needs with a Shared Service Center operator in India?). This strategy is appropriate only for certain types of companies that have a high use of English as their corporate language or for Shared Services Centers that serve only managers.
- Establish regional Shared Service Centers, each of which functions in a small number of languages and benefits from regional cultural similarities. Typical language requirements in regional Shared Services Centers might be:
 - U.S and Canada: English, French for Quebec
 - Latin America: Spanish, Portuguese
 - Western Europe: English, French, German, Italian, Spanish
 - Asia Pacific: English, Japanese, Chinese (Mandarin)
- Conduct language training programs for Call Center operators to make them aware of regional differences and to help them avoid the blunders associated with regional variations.
- Provide dialect neutralization training courses for Call Center operators to help individuals avoid becoming victims of the stigma associated with certain regional stereotypes (e.g., Southern American English and East Indian English).

Jeitosa has extensive experience working with a number of companies in deploying global shared services operations. Future newsletter articles will share more of our experiences and insights. 🌐

***About the Author:** Karen Beaman is Senior Global Advisor, Chief Executive Officer, and the Founder of Jeitosa Group International. She has 25 years of experience in human resources from building strategies, designing systems, and deploying technology for both global and domestic organizations. She can be reached at karen.beaman@jeitosa.com.*

Copyright 2010. Jeitosa Group International. All Rights Reserved.

www.jeitosa.com
