



Swearing in a Foreign Language: The Multicultural Dimension of Rudeness

Jane Skirving: OK, everyone, it gives me great pleasure to introduce Marco Federighi who's from the electrical engineering department at UCL. Thank you very much.

Marco Federighi: Thank you everybody. So, I am an electrical engineer at UCL, which means I am a director of studies for all engineering. And the topic of, we're going to talk about, OK, you might have had this mentioned in seminar times, the title is this {puts slide up}... How many of you know what is the meaning of a four letter word, in English? You ever heard of this phrase? Four letter word? OK, four letter words in English are insults. If you wanted to insult somebody or to offend, to say something nasty, rude, normally the words you use are four letters. So, when in the newspaper you saw it say "Such and such politician has been using four letter words" and so on, and has been recorded without knowing it, you know that the guy, he has been using foul language. But, 'nice' n-i-c-e also consists of four letters. And that is not an insult at all. So, what I've put as the title simply, because what I want to discuss today, is about communication across cultures. When you can say one thing, meaning to say one thing, and be understood completely different. And that normally happens a lot when you go and work or study in a culture different from the one where you were born. Now, we all are from cultures different to the UK. I think you are. I certainly am: Italian, originally. So we all are people who at a certain time had to learn to communicate in English, brought up in an English speaking environment, and to deal with it. So it is all about cross-cultural communication. As an example of cross-cultural communication, I can put myself. My family has been around quite a bit. We come from Germany originally, my surname Federeghi means Fredericks, so we are followers of the heir of Frederick I Barbarossa. So, we went to Italy as sort of civil servants, and moved to Pisa, then they went as merchants to Constantinople (now is Istanbul), so in the great Anatolia, but in Italy they were involved in civil wars between the supporters of the Pope and supporters of the Empire. I have to say that they were involved on the losing side of the civil war, so they were kicked out and they have emigrated almost everywhere – to the UK, Spain, Germany, USA, Brazil. So all these people had to learn how to communicate, how to function in a different culture. And so there are stories more recent, this was an example from the middle ages. More recent examples are people like us – myself, and you. Movement of people across cultures and across countries is increasing, especially graduates. Graduates nowadays, especially good graduates end up working for multinational companies, or multinational institutions – governmental institutions, international institutions, and so on. Typically over the lifetime of a contemporary graduate one has to change job 3 or 4 times. I have changed job 4 times myself, and I think you will go through similar experiences. I have changed country twice, once, sorry, and probably there will be another change before I retire. And there are more recently global networks that have been facilitated by the internet. Even if we don't physically move around we communicate with people in different countries and in different cultures much more easily, by exchanging files, by exchanging e-mails, by talking. English isn't the worldwide language, but does the fact that English is a worldwide language really help? You and I are speaking in English, are communicating in English right now – it is not my native language, it is not yours, probably, for most of you. And English is now what Latin used to be, in the Middle Ages. But misunderstandings, even in English, are very common. Um, I give you an example of this, this is something that happened. The first dialogue happened in Malaysia, in the 50s. The first speaker was a British General, was talking to some people, lot of people who were working for him and they were not making him happy. And he started by saying "You are all *bastards*". And the translator said this: "His Excellency wishes to inform you that he is aware of the fact that your parents were not married when you were born". Now, I think obviously, the General, His Excellency, didn't mean that at all. What he really wanted to say was, "You are obstinate, bloody minded people, you are not doing what I want you to do". He didn't want to say anything about their parents! So clearly this is the case of massive miscommunication. The dialogue continued. The general said "I will show you that I am more of a bastard than you are!" Now I think most of you can guess what the translator said. He said "His Excellency admits, however, that his parents were not married when he was born, either". At this point communications broke down and it required some time for people to understand... This, by the way, it was not any general, it was the governor of Malaysia before independence. So, this was a misunderstanding that potentially could have quite some consequences. You think that diplomats are people who know what they are talking about. Well, yes and no. The language was English, and the double meaning of the word bastard. ... In other example closer to home, and more contemporary, at UCL. Misunderstanding at UCL. This happened in Engineering, in one of the departments in Engineering, I think it was Chemical Engineering. A certain professor said to a prospective student, you know we interview undergraduate students when they apply, to decide whether to offer them a place or not. So this was an interview, they discussed the formula, and the professor said to the student "Well done, you have a wonderful memory" after the discussion. This looks, like, innocuous enough. It's not a big problem. The student came to me (I am responsible for admissions, overseeing admissions process) and filed a complaint. And said that the professor had insulted me, had insulted him. Said that the professor implied that he had not understood the formula. Now, I talked to the professor and asked him "Can you tell me what you said? And what you meant to say?" And he said "Well I just said he remembered the

formula very well". I said "Did you say anything about his understanding?" And he said "No". Anyhow, personally, if I had been in place of the student I also wouldn't have been particularly happy. Because, to me, I studied mathematics in Italy. The way you study it in Italy, you are supposed to derive all theorems from first principles. We are not supposed to remember. Mathematics is not something about memory. If you say to somebody "You have remembered a theorem" you are implying that he can't work it out on its own. So, it is a sort-of put down – implicit, but it's a kind of put-down. So I told the student, I would have also felt insulted, probably would have, in his place, but I am sure he didn't mean it that way. This is Britain, when you study mathematics in Britain, you just study it, most of the students who study mathematics at A Level wouldn't be able to prove the theorems they have studied. That is not because they are not able, it is because they are not required to – they just remember it, and use it. So, in this culture, using memory in mathematics is not negative. In my culture, if you use memory in mathematics, it means that you're not good enough. So, again, this was a misunderstanding. The student was not Italian, but again he was from a country where the study of mathematics is done the same way as in Italy. So this was a misunderstanding – completely good intentions on both sides, but the student felt insulted and unhappy with the professor, out of an exchange that to an English speaking person, an English person from a British culture would have been perfectly normal. So this is another example, less funny in a way from the one in Malaysia, so, of misunderstanding. And so you think at UCL, in Engineering, more than 50% of the students come from outside the UK. And students here come from 140 countries, I think. Something like that. The teaching is all done in English. But it's done also by people like me, for whom English is not the first language. So the potential for misunderstanding is massive.

It is surprising it doesn't happen more often, in a way. What I do now, I give you some examples of possible misunderstandings throughout the area of communication between people, interpersonal communication. Very briefly. So. One example is body language. OK? And eye contact, or lack of eye contact. Are you supposed, when you talk to a person, or when you are in a meeting with a person, are you supposed to look people in the eye or not? In some cultures this is acceptable and in some cultures it isn't. There are differences in gender and differences between east and west, that is a gross oversimplification. Many cultures require eye contact as a sign you are communicating openly. The not looking a person in the eye can be seen as deceitful, that you want to hide something. In other cultures, however, looking people in the eye can be seen as aggressive, challenging. For example, in London it happens not often, the papers exaggerate things, but at least a couple of times I read that fights started because a person is looking at someone, in a train, in a pub, has looked another in the eye. The person says "Why are you looking at me?" and the fight ensues, a fight that in some cases has ended up with stabbing, so fairly serious stuff. So eye contact is something that has to be considered quite carefully. This is an example of body language where miscommunication can take place. Another one is the comfort zone. The distance between speakers. If you are, not like we are now, separated by a table, but if say we are in a party or a buffet lunch, where people walk around the room, with a glass in hand, and talk to each other, how far do you stay, do you stand from the person you are talking to? And here there have been studies that show that the comfort zone, which is the optimum distance speakers, varies quite a lot between countries. The English, for instance, like to be at a greater distance than people from the Mediterranean, like Italians, like myself. So, what can happen, it has been observed (I have never observed it myself), what can happen is that you have an English person and another person talking, the other person gets closer, the English person feels uncomfortable and [moves], the other one gets closer and the English person [moves] until the English person standing against the wall with the other one standing very close to him. Both of them feeling very uncomfortable. The other one say "Why is this guy trying to avoid me?". That sort of thing. So, again, even things that are fairly trivial like where do I stand when I speak to somebody, you talk about it. Then the sign, you have seen a sign that is telling somebody to get lost, or worse. And even a sign like that, a sign that is the epitome of Englishness, in a certain respect, but if you try to do the [?] sign, be very careful because you can end up in hospital. Finally, hands and feet. Um, hand shake is acceptable, not acceptable in some countries. Showing the palm of your hand can be offensive. Showing the sole of your feet or your shoes, like you have seen in movies, particularly North Americans, can easily see behind the desk with feet across over the desk, like this [gestures]. This, in many countries, is insulting, something you shouldn't do. So again, body language, I have looked at eyes, hands, distance, fingers, feet and heads. There is plenty of scope for misunderstanding here. Complicated. I am sure if you have been around enough you can give examples. For you have seen examples yourself of this kind of thing, when nonverbal communication can go seriously wrong.

Another example, conversation. Interruptions and overlap. Is it right or not to interrupt somebody when people are talking, and how fast? For example I, I have, I am a member here within UCL of several committees, and it is fascinating to look at the different personal styles in starting to talk. When somebody else is talking, some people frequently interrupt, or speak very fast, as soon as there is a pause. Other people feel they have to wait 2 or 3 seconds before interrupting, before starting to say what they want to say. Part of this is personal. I can't wait 2 or 3 seconds, other people jump in. This is partly cultural. There is a school of thought by Deborah Tann. Deborah Tann is an American, I think she's a linguist originally. She has written a couple of books, at least, in the communication styles of different cultures and different genders. She is an expert also in communication between men and women. And she distinguishes between high involvement and low involvement cultures. Where the conversational style is more lively, with exchanges that are quicker between those who are closer and speak louder – high involvement – which is common in the Mediterranean – or low involvement, more common in northern countries, where people speak softer, keep more distance, and so on. So there are personal and also cultural elements. The same with the volume and emphasis. And, I'm from Italy, and it is commonly said in a discussion in Italy, you win if you speak louder than everybody else. And shout louder. And emphasise things, bang on the table and, OK, not really true, but certainly people who are more forceful who will come across as more forceful win the argument.

Directness and indirectness. Again there are, I have written again east and west, which again is a simplification, but for example if you want to say yes or no, particularly if you want to say no, you can go from very direct American approach, say – ‘are you interested in this?’ ‘No.’ Fine. In many cultures it would be regarded as very rude, and to say you are not interested, you’d have to say something like ‘I will have to think about it’ or ‘I will consider it and come back to you’. So it may happen, for instance, that an American businessman discussing with another from a different culture say ‘I have this plan, have you read it, what do you think?’ I say. ‘Yes, interesting, I come back to you at some point’. Of course, doesn’t come back. And the first one wonders what has gone wrong, I expect an e-mail or something like that, and it is not happening. Because the other one, would simply mean ‘No, I am completely uninterested’, but simply saying so is not the done thing. So, in expressing refusal or expressing appreciation can be done very directly, or very indirectly. There is, I have read somewhere, again let’s take the English – whereas an American would say, at dinner, ‘Can you pass the salt please?’ and English would ‘I wonder if you can find the time, when you can, to pass that salt here please?’. Very indirect. Now this is an exaggeration, the sort of thing you see in a comic movie, but there is an element of truth. And of course things are very different when you have public and private speaking. The style of speaking changed very much if you talk with somebody close to you over a cup of coffee, than something like a lecture or whatever. And the style can change quite severely. So this conversation, again, like body language, potentially, is a minefield. What I am trying to say is that both body language and speaking are means of conversation, but if one is not careful they can be means of miscommunication. That’s why we must be aware of our other cultures.

The third example, and then I stop with my examples, is stereotypes. Cultural stereotypes. Now, you know them, and I think that most cultures have stereotypes about other cultures. Now, I take my own country, and my own culture, Italians: stereotypes for Italians are on the road very aggressive drivers, very undisciplined, it is said you have a head-on crash between cars and they were both heading for the same pedestrian, but the pedestrian jumped at the, at the last moment. That sort of thing. And loud speakers. And very fond of the family. Family ties come before everything else. And... not very orderly, and so on. Rather anarchic, individualistic. Very little sense of nationhood, of belonging to a group, and so on and so forth. So, the stereotype being posited, some negative. Italians are also known to be creative, for example. Artistic personalities. So, a mix of positive and negatives. So, stereotypes... some people say that stereotypes are all wrong, and we shouldn’t even consider them, we should be completely blind to stereotypes and forget about them. I don’t agree, personally. Let’s look at stereotypes in more detail. In Italy, there are different regions. You know that the country stretches for more than 1000 miles, north-west to south-east. Approximately. And it is said very very peacefully, so the culture of different people in Italy can be very very different. And two examples are Piedmont, which is in the extreme North-West, at the border with France, and Naples, which is centre-South. Not the extreme south, but south of Rome. Big city. And the two countries have developed in a fairly separate way, until 1860, when Italy was unified. So they are quite different places. And some people say that they are the ice and fire. Piedmontese people stereotype about Piedmontese people is that they are rude, reserved, fairly orderly, very well organised, more like north Europeans, more like British, or Germans, or so on. They speak a dialect which is like French dialect more or less, and they are very indirect, that sort of thing. People reserved. Neapolitans instead, they stereotype is that they are very open, very friendly, speak more loudly, more aggressive in what they do, less orderly, less well-organised, and so on. So very different, so in a way Neapolitans seem to be more Italian than Piedmontese. And there is an element of truth to this. I, when I did my national service in Italy, I was an engineer Italian and there were three companies. One was for people from Calabria – extreme South-West – one for people from Sardinia, out to the West – and the rest was from Piedmont, North-West. So they could have been from different countries altogether. The dialects, they could only understand each other if they spoke standard Italian, the dialects were too different. And dealing with them was very, very different. So, regional differences are quite [coughing].

Now, I come from Tuscany. Tuscany, um, has a very mixed image. If you talk to English people about Tuscany, what they think of is fine wines, nice villas in the countryside, towns, small towns full of art, nice buildings and so on. Culture, art, paintings, that sort of thing. Very nice, civilised lifestyle. If you talk to other, to Italians, their view is very different. The Tuscans are seen as not particularly hardworking. They swear like nobody on earth, or worse. And extreme people, Tuscans have provided the worst people on the left and on the right in Italian political history. So the nastiest people you’ve heard of in the political civil wars in Italy tend to be from Tuscany. And so on. So, very different image. Both of them to some extent are true. Let’s look at language. Language is an interesting point. I said that there are dialects in Italy. Standard Italian, the one that educated people speak, the one that is used in lectures in university, is a Tuscan dialect. Tuscan dialect at a certain point became the one used by writers. And it became standard Italian by and large, some differences, but not many. However, there are very strong differences in the way it is used in different cities. And one of the titles of his lecture was about swearing in a foreign language. Now, I say before that Tuscans swear like nobody else. To express strong emotions, people in the heartland of Tuscany – that is, Florence, Arezo, Sienna, and so on – they tended to use very strong words, including blasphemy. Blasphemy is something that is used in Tuscany, more than anywhere else in Italy. Very strong, very offensive, the sort of thing if you said in most countries you would be imprisoned or whatever. Or burned at the stake. Or something like that. That is not true, however, in my hometown, Livorno. Livorno is on the coast of Italy, about 50 miles from the heartland cities. So not very far. In my city, no one ever uses blasphemy. It’s just not used. To express emotion, people use one word only, with different intonations, and that word is ‘boya’ in Italian. Which means hangman, executioner. So this looks very strange. So I can express joy by saying ‘boya’, or express anger by saying ‘boya’ with a different intonation. Why do people use the hangman? Once it was part of blasphemy, from which the name of God was deleted. So why, in this town, people are less insulting than in the rest of Tuscany? Question mark. Well, the reasoning is that Livorno is on the sea and historically it was home, it was the only place in Tuscany with free trade without custom barriers. And where people were not Catholic were allowed to live. And so Livorno was for example an Anglican community, there was a

Danish protestant church, there was a strong Jewish community, Muslim community. There was there a mayor who was a Muslim Turk. So, is very different. In a place like that with so many communities, people had to develop the ability of not insulting each other. It was in a city[...] 24 hours out of 24. So it was that people learned to be more cautious, more respectful, and much less offensive in their language than standard Tuscans. The rest of Tuscany, there was no immigration, most of the time you found in a place like Sienna, people were not tourists, they had been brought up there, and will stay there all their lives, so there isn't any experience of diversity. So, you can understand why they [...] but if you use the stereotype of Tuscans, we used blasphemy all the time, this wouldn't be true of my home town. So what I'm trying to say here is that stereotypes have to be used carefully. In my personal view, in my experience, at least about Italians, stereotypes have a grain of truth. Take for example the stereotype that Italians are disorganised. Compare with Germans. Germans are taken usually as an example of very good organisation. It is generally true that a German company, or the German state, or the German army, is better organised or better run than an Italian one. And this is not a matter of opinion, it's a matter of really looking at the performance of Italian companies, or armies, or of Italian state or whatever. It can be taken as a fact. However, what I have been saying is that groups of Italians are generally less well organised than groups of Germans. So the stereotype normally what it does is average individual behaviour to a group. What one must not do is take the stereotype to predict the behaviour of an individual. That is where you go wrong. So, a stereotype if you use it to predict the behaviour of a large enough group, it's probably right. But it is not true that an individual will conform to the stereotype. For example, take the example of myself. One of the stereotypes of Italians is that they know about food, they like food, they know about wines, they know about drink, and they know about the arts. Artistic people, highly civilised. Well, in my personal case, I am a beer drinker, I know nothing about wine, and actually if I drink more than a glass of red I get drunk and end up under the table as I am not very tolerance for alcohol, very little tolerance. So, as an Italian in terms of drinking I am a complete anomaly. Art, I am just as bad, I am completely uninterested in art, I couldn't care less. I wouldn't recognise Leonardo da Vinci from Michaelangelo if I saw them over coffee at Waterstones. So, [...] what I find funny is that British people, English people let's say, tend to be more sensitive about groups than about individuals. Even people at UCL who have known me for 15 years, still think that when they have to buy wine they should ask me. Should have been evident from now, after so many years, that I know nothing about it. But still they think 'Marco is Italian, therefore Marco will know about wines'. Probably. Or 'Marco is Italian, so he will know about Renaissance paintings'. Obviously not! So clearly, when they apply the stereotype in individual they are making a mistake, and they are predicting my behaviour the wrong way, because I give them the wrong advice (which is also fun!) Anyhow, so, this is a matter, what I have written here is an introduction to statistics, and some of you will study statistics, some of you will study mathematics, anyhow you will know something about statistics, because statistics I use is probably the most difficult part of mathematics. Because it's not intuitive. The average simply tells you something about the norm, it doesn't tell you almost anything about individuals. But the average can be very useful. So, the point of stereotypes, or of averages, is how to use them and how not to use them. They should never be used for predicting individual behaviour. That is the idea. It is about statistics an experiment that was carried out by, actually the first professor of statistics at UCL, here somewhere of course, I can't remember the name. And it was carried out at the end of 1890 or something like that. And what it was was this: he went to a farmers market, where they sell agricultural produce and so and among other things they sell cattle. And they have, one of the entertainments was, to guess the weight of the cattle. And so there was discussion and people had to write their guess of the weight, give it to the person who was running the show, and then there would be a draw and one of the people would get a prize. This UCL guy collected after the show the tickets and made a statistical analysis of them. What he found was something really interesting. By the way, the weight was the weight of the cow after being butchered, interestingly. So not of the live cow, it was afterward. What he found was that none of the individuals had come close by more than 10%, by less than 10% of the real weight. But the average was within less than 1% of the real weight. So the individuals had all guessed wrong, the group had guessed right. Why? Well, I don't want to go on too long about it, but the key point was the group was made of different people, some were farmers, some were breeders who knew cows very well, some were people from town who were just there to have a fun day and had never even seen a cow let alone guessed the weight. They all made the wrong assumptions, wrong guesses. Because the group was very diverse, the mistakes cancelled each other, and the average was almost perfect. So this in a way is a statistical justification in having diversity. We say in a university we like diversity in the student intake, in the teaching intake, because diversity's good. Why is it good? In a sense it is more {?} because we want to give everyone the opportunity to study, whatever their culture and so on. Ok, that is fine. But the real reason why diversity's good, is if you have a diverse enough group, people with different cultures, with different personalities, different genders, their prejudices and wrong ways of reasoning will cancel each other, and the group will be stronger than any of the individuals, stronger than the smartest individual in the group. We did a collaboration with the University of Stanford in the US, and they have looked at the factors that determine the success of group projects in Masters in Design, Engineering Design, and they found that the most important factor is psychological diversity. To the point that now they've created groups by giving students a test and choosing the most diverse students for the job. So diversity's very important. Now, I have gone on very long, so I want to conclude. Since we're all in England, and not English, I want to conclude with some remarks about the English. There is a book which has this title, *Watching the English*. The author is a Cambridge or Oxford, I can't remember, social anthropologist called Kate Fox. And what she does, she has written about the way English people behave, so watching the English at work, watching the English at play, watching the English do sport, and so on. And what she has done is to reach a definition of Englishness. Again, this is a stereotype, so don't take it that all English people are like that. Personally, I have found that there is a grain of truth, but I disagree with some of the things. In her view, the core of Englishness is the social disease. Disease means being ill at ease. In her view, English people are not very good at socialising, unless they have some help, and the help are two things: drink, and humour. In her view, the fondness of English people for drink, and the fondness of English people for humour is simply because the two things are social lubricants. I think that there is, there is probably a core of truth. Italians socialise over coffee, not over alcohol, and coffee is not known for making people more outgoing,

alcohol is. Humour, if you take part in a meeting at UCL, or a meeting at an American university, is that in an American university no one cracks a joke. The meeting is all about business. At UCL the business is all interspersed with jokes, pleasantries, wit, and so on. So humour is used to make things happen in communication. Important factors for the English: class matters. There is a strong sense of social class. That is reflected partly in the accents of native English speakers. Whereas an Italian native speaker, you can't guess the social class of an Italian from the way he speaks. What you can guess is how educated a person is from the vocabulary. If he uses complicated words coming from Latin he's probably a well educated person. Or, from the accent, you can probably guess the region. A Tuscan is very easy to understand, there is a way of pronouncing the 'c' that is unique to that region. Here you can generally guess if someone is working class or other class also. Not so in Italy for example. So there are differences. And, a certain deference. Not only deference in the negative sense for class and so, but deference to achievement, status, and so on. These are values that matter. Fairness. This is, in my personal view, the thing that characterises the English in comparison to other countries. Fairness is not ... in Italy we don't have a word for fair. We use the word in English, we say 'fair play', we don't translate it into Italian, because Italian doesn't have a word for fair. We have a word that means 'just', morally, morally right, 'legal', 'righteous', but not 'fair'. So, this concept is, I wouldn't say uniquely English because I don't know other cultures outside Europe well enough. But certainly I would say in Western Europe, English, the English people have a much greater sense of fairness than other countries. In Italy we can decide whether something is legal or not, morally right or not, equal or not, but fairness is sort of mix of all three. In communication, English people understate. It is said an Italian can arrive 12 hours late because he has overslept, and talk about it the whole day. An English person will arrive 5 minutes late because there was a gas explosion that destroyed his house, will mention it when apologising at first and then say nothing about it for the rest of the day. That is an exaggeration that is close to the truth. So, understating, never boast, always say things in the less obvious way. And of course, indirectness. Indirectness – there is some people, particularly some Japanese scholars, have argued that Japan and Britain have many things in common. One of the things being a certain indirectness in communication, and they say that this is because they are island countries. When you are an island, it's like in Lego, in my home town, to have diversity you have to be with different cultures. So when you are in an island, particularly a crowded one, you have to learn to be controlled, not to be too open in communication, in order not to give offence. According to this theory, admittedly pretty hand waving, Japan and Britain have this in common. Now I don't believe much in this explanation, but certainly there is a preference in English people, as opposed to for example American people, for a certain indirectness, less bluntness of communication. So this is more or less a summary, and I am sure that Kate Fox whoever she is would disagree completely because I forgotten half the things she had written. But anyhow, this is a summary of a book written by an English person about English people and these are stereotypes, so of course there are English people who are unfair, English people who are very blunt, direct, rude and English people who don't care about class, who don't understate, there are plenty of them, but on average this is what comes across. Now I stop because I think in 10 minutes you have to go somewhere else and I would like to give you time to ask questions. Any questions? Yes?

Student: Your name is Marco, it sounds very Venetian, which city state are you from?

Marco: No, I am not from Venice, I am called Marco for two reasons. At least, my parents told me they wanted a short name, so it's one of the shortest. And also, I was born in March. March and Marco have the same root, the god Mars. So they thought it was appropriate. But it was the first name of this kind in my family, in Tuscany you don't use they same names in the family.

Student: What's the name of your home town?

Marco: My home town? Livorno. In English is called Legò. Other questions?

Students: Thank you

[applause]