Kluwer Mediation Blog

On [not] talking past each other

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This is not a really post about Brexit; but then again I do circle some of the themes that earlier post-Brexit Kluwer bloggers have addressed, in a series of thoughtful, passionate and concerned comments. “Brexit” has become, beyond the decision and its fallout, a placekeeper for a range of other concerns, about community, tolerance, dialogue, the quality [or decline] of political discourse, and the chasm of incomprehension created in this world of post-factual politics.

At about the same time as voters in the UK were opting to leave the EU – or, in too many cases, not bothering to vote to stay in – I was ending an 8-year posting at Singapore Management University. Moving from what had been home for those years, to the country that has been home for most of my life (along with the dilemmas created by that innocent question “where are you from?”) was marked by both comfortable familiarity of family, friends and conversation –

“Oh, the comfort, the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person; having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but to pour them all out, just as they are, chaff and grain together, knowing that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then, with a breath of kindness, blow the rest away.” [Dinah Maria Mulock Craik]

– and by the tangible discomfort of increasingly unaffordable housing, visible urban poor (and expanding wealth in other quarters) . . . which we share with so much of the modern world.

However, one feature that is both distinctively New Zealand, and which underpins this blog, was Maori Language Week during my first week back here. Te Reo Maori – the Maori language – is unique to Aotearoa/New Zealand and, at the same time, shares a migratory heritage with other Pacific languages. It also shared the possible fate with many other indigenous languages of being almost wiped out, both by conscious colonial policy and decades of neglect.

Through the course of that week, public radio and commercial television stations put stories about the revival and determined renewal of the language front and centre. For a number of years, kids have also been able to attend Te Kohanga Reo (Maori Language Nests) in order to have a large part of elementary education in Maori. Maori is, too, an official language and can be – and is – used in courts, parliament, and across the education spectrum.

In the weeks since that special “Language Week”, it’s also clear that the presence of the language is cemented: on national (public) radio, almost all reporters, newsreaders and radio hosts introduce themselves with a “mihi”, a greeting in Maori; and as I listen to radio conversations, I’m intrigued

to note just how many Maori words are simply a part of the everyday chat of so many people. In the same way that many English speakers would not be aware of the number of words that have been adopted from Hindi [bandana, bangle, jungle, loot, pyjamas, shampoo thug . . . and yes, even "Blighty"], many Kiwis will now have woven Maori "loan" words into their ordinary conversations. There is, of course, the occasional kerfuffle about removing a colonial place name and restoring an original Maori name; and many of us fluff the pronunciation. But the combination of modes is increasingly familiar and comfortable.

In a post-Brexit mode, this set me to thinking about language and the ways in which we do or don't speak in mutually comprehensible ways. The title of this blog is taken, in part, from the title of a book by renowned anthropologist, Dame Professor Joan Metge, who spent a lifetime conveying what she saw of Maori society and culture to the rest of New Zealand. But her concern, in her book Talking Past Each Other, was that we continued to be ships passing in the night – with mutual incomprehension at risk of being constantly compounded. This was written in the years before the now-established language revival programmes and the ongoing process of rectification of historical injustices, following land confiscations in the 1860s.

In thinking about that failure of understanding, and its risks of turning into impatience, intolerance, and an expectation that at least one side should just stop being difficult and "join the mainstream"; and in thinking about the collaborative implications of language programmes and policy, it seemed to me that three points could be made about language, shared understanding, decision making, and – in the end – civility. And, because this is ostensibly a mediation blog, there's a mediators' implication about how we make sure that we really do create and protect an environment in which the parties find common ground in the language used.

First, the big picture and a parallel. In the period immediately following the near melt-down of the global financial system in 2008, a small but articulate movement began to examine and rejevenate – and to change – the language of political, moral and economic discourse. Led in large part by Madeleine Bunting, a diverse group of writers, politicians, philosophers, theologians and others argued that what was missing in conventional discourse was a language, a mode of talking, that wasn't in some way captured by the orthodoxies of power and economics. See, for example: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/series/citizen-ethics. In a post-Brexit, post-factual world, that need is still there – and, as the American Presidential campaign illustrates, it's not an issue confined to any one country. What the citizen ethics campaign illustrated was the deep need to drill down through the substance of our conversations to what, in the end, is an epistemoligical level – a question as to how we are to have this conversation.

Any public programme such as that which celebrates the strength and resilience of a language is also, I think, a way of saying (even if obliquely) that the ways in which we pay attention to the terms of our conversations do really matter.

Second – and back to Joan Metge – we know as mediators (and as 'translators') that parties can all too easily miss meaning, nuance, content and subtlety, even if it appears they have a language in common. This is the power of those forms of mediation that are more consciously focussed on the narratives at the table – and indeed those narratives that preceded any mediation session. The problem, however, illustrated both by ongoing political campaigns and the pre-Brexit campaigns is that – to continue the shipping metaphor – even the strongest radar could hardly penetrate the fog of evasion, misrepresentation, omission, and ad hominem attack. At the risk of adding a slighly blue tone to the otherwise graceful air of the Kluwer blog site, some years ago, a writer on

education suggested that it was the purpose of education to equip every student with an infallible bullshit detector . . . and that need remains undiminished [and it must surely be a part of mediator education].

Third, and finally, there's a point that is more specifically focussed on the importance of language survival than on the quality of political discourse. The figures vary, but estimates are that, of the some 7000 languages still remaining, one dies approximately every 14 days. There's a whole separate discussion to be had about this, along with the disturbing evidence that even in the "major" languages there is a diminishing power of articulation and vocabulary. To paraphrase Paulo Freire, not to speak another language may be an inconvenience; but not to be able to speak your own is a tragedy. And your "own" language in this case may be be either one of the more international languages (the ones expected to survive this erosion) or it may be – as Maori Language Week underscored – a "minority" language that is, nevertheless, the language in which its speakers perceive, frame and tell stories about their worlds.

"Yes we speak of things that matter
With words that must be said . . . "
[Paul Simon, The Dangling Conversation"]

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