



connexions interview with **AITOR MEDRANO**

Transcript of the interview with Aitor Medrano, localization engineering manager in a multinational language service provider in Spain.

The interview was recorded for issue 3(2). It was conducted by Quan Zhou, via Skype, on November 4, 2015. The interview was transcribed from the recorded interview by Pana Moua.

The video recording of this interview is available on the *connexions'* Vimeo channel at <https://vimeo.com/156933445>

Can you describe your present career in light of international professional communication?

Certainly, so I work in a multinational languages and technology services provider, and I am responsible for teams of engineering and desktop publishing groups with offices in Spain, India... and I also frequently interface with other offices in Europe and also in the United States.

What previous experience in international professional communication, if any, has prepared you for your present career?

Not much in my previous, for professional multinational communication... I basically



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used to work for a local translation agency in Spain, so most of the clients were Spanish. I also did... was a customer support representative for a computer and translation software, so I did interface quite a lot with clients... with translators to give them support, but I did not interface quite frequently with people from outside of Spain. That said, I think some of the experience that I gathered while I was doing that job, even if not with multicultural or multinational aspects, would still prepare me for the job that I have at the moment.

What would you say are particular accomplishments of international professional communication practice, research and or pedagogy in your region of the world or elsewhere?

I think I'd like to start by giving some background on what I think, or what I consider multinational communication. I think when I was considering this question, I realized that modern multinational communication—I will refer to this as multicultural professional communication—assuming that those are... that we are referring to the skills of communicating with professionals and with colleagues from different backgrounds, not just from different nations but from different backgrounds, in different languages, different time-zones, different locations... basically because even within the same country, you can find obviously significant cultural differences that will make communication a challenge or, if not a challenge, at least something that you need to worry about. And, you know, there are aspects like the perception that you get when you communicate, the ways of addressing other people; that is in respect of whether you live in one country or the country next door.

There is a cultural component to it that will make me think that we should talk about this topic in terms of multicultural rather than multinational, and I am going to give you an example of how this will happen and typically within the same country. So, you have probably been in a situation where you are in a business meeting even within your same country and using the same language and you still face a situation where, for instance, a significant age difference between you and the person that you're talking with makes the communication not so fluid. Basically, because your goals—your objectives—are going to be different... or slightly different. Say that you are a young sales person going to a meeting with a marketing manager

who's in her 50s—late 50s—obviously your goals are going to be completely... very, very different, right? You, as a young sales person... you are going to be pushing to sell whatever you have to sell while the other person has a completely different goal, which is “Okay, I want to buy from you, but I may not want to buy anything. I just need to cover my needs internally, whatever strategy the company has.” So... your goals are going to be different. And it's going to be more difficult for you as a youngster to make a connection with someone who, you know, is almost double your age or... similar, right? In the end, it's about creating empathy... creating trust and, you know, developing that professional relationship and that comes with, you know, understanding the other person's culture more than being from one nation or another.

But to answer your original question on what are the accomplishments in this field, I will say that the ones I am more familiar with are in the teaching world, because of all the candidates that are frequently being interviewed for positions in my job. And I do see... I normally interview just graduates or people who took up post-graduate, so I see which of those skills that will help you in communication they have and which ones they lack. And I think based on... those interviews, what I see is that maybe skills required to communicate in an efficient way are not so much taken into account in the modules or the programs that they take. Or if they are covered—if these topics are covered—they are not given the importance that they should be given... meaning that even if you are not taking your degree in Marketing or in Communication, in a field which is related to Communications, regardless of the field of expertise that you're taking your degree on your post-graduate on, there should still be some training on... effective communication, on... building the relationship with the other person, building empathy, so there is a lot that, you know... that could be done in that regard. I know that there are modules in the degrees that students take where students learn about the culture, specific aspects of the culture—of the language that they're learning, in language studies for instance. So I would say that is certainly an accomplishment because it certainly helps them better understand the culture of the language that they are going to be speaking. So say if, you know, you learn French... you want to learn about French culture—just a little bit—just enough to give you a good understanding of... how French people think... what is the way of thinking and maybe even if you don't know all the peculiarities of

each region, at least you are going to be aware of the fact that one region may be different from another... or the expectations of a French person that you are speaking with may be different because of a cultural aspect that you may or may not be aware.

What would you say are challenges of international professional communication practice, research and or pedagogy in your region of the world or elsewhere?

Yes, I think... as I mentioned, when interviewing candidates, it would not seem to me like they have received very specific training about asking the right questions or structuring interviews for instance. So I do see in some of the candidates that they obviously are nervous because they are on a job interview, that's normal. But they could still have some control of the situation even if they are junior, even if some of this comes with experience and with having done interviews and having been in professional situations. I think having the basics... training on that... on communicating and being in a professional situation would certainly help them show a little bit of awareness about what the situation is and how they can react. Even if, you know, if by being junior and not having had the experience, you can still tell that they don't fully control the situation... the conversation. They are not very aware of what you really mean when you ask questions like "What do you expect to do in three years in your career?" So... I will say this probably comes from a focus on those degrees, focusing on the subject matter. So... let's say that you are doing Economics, you obviously want to do all your modules on economy numbers, digits, you know... finance, things like that. And I reckon that it is still very important in every degree, every professional training that we give students to include if not a module, at least some information about communicating, about presenting yourself. And the thing is, you know, you can be the best engineer, you can be the best designer, if you cannot sell yourself, if you cannot communicate, it's going to make things a bit more difficult for you to be successful in your career. And obviously the work environment is inevitably going towards a multicultural or multinational collaborative approach. So... this is where we're heading. These skills are necessarily needed. I think this is where, at least in the scholarship world, this would help students.

So... I will suggest for these modules or, let's say, for these degrees to include modules on multicultural communication... basic Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP)... negotiation, body language, public speaking, all these aspects where students may be focused, "Oh, no, I want to learn about economics!" Oh well, okay, but you are also going to be working in a professional environment with different cultures, so you are going to have to learn how to present, how to introduce yourself, how to, you know... how to negotiate.

So... you know, there are peculiarities to each culture, as I mentioned earlier, is something that you probably cannot reach to get from every culture. You won't be able to know every peculiarity for every culture, but the more you work with people from that culture, the easier it gets to understand and to learn from one experience to another. For example, you probably... here in Spain, if you'll want to get something out of somebody that you're calling to another office... to a client... if you want to get something from the person that you are talking to... you don't want to call that person at 2 p.m. on the phone. Basically because that person is either about to go for lunch or already at lunch and you are going to get very little attention from that person because he or she is already thinking about, okay "I'm going on my lunch break, and I don't... you know, I am not going to spend a lot of time listening to what you have to say." Similarly, for France for instance, you don't want to push a French client too hard. There are other examples, right? Irish people, they don't enjoy British accents, so maybe if you are building a strategy around having a conversation with an Irish person, you may want to avoid having a very thick British accent... person with a thick British accent in the conversation. So, all of those things. You will probably find it hard to compile everything in your head at once, but it's things that you learn over time and this sort of thing can be as part of the curriculum for students taking any degrees, I would say. It's certainly a challenge to cover all these cultural differences... but it's probably a good idea to start covering those regions, or those cultural peculiarities for those regions that are near where you work or where you intend to work and concentrate on the soft skills, right? On the skills I mentioned earlier, on public speaking, on introducing yourself, things like that, right?

How do you see technology or changes in technology impacting, maintaining or altering international professional communication practice, research and/or pedagogy in your region of the world or elsewhere?

I think the instant digital communication has dramatically changed the scenario where communications happen, right? We have access to information at any point from anywhere with any device, right? And also this information means also training, right? You can get training pretty much anywhere. You do... we do video calls which are, you know, a lot more interactive than just a phone call, basically because you can see the other person's reaction straightaway. You don't need to wait for a verbal reaction. So... that has certainly improved communication but also created some challenges. There are cases where you may not want to disclose your facial reaction or your body language, and if you're in a meeting where there's a video conference, well, it is what it is right. On the good side obviously, it gives us access to training... also to formal and informal communications. We can use technology to communicate not just in the business world but now, for a few years it's been accessible to anybody for informal communications. So... it also gives us access to information on culture and cultural aspects, right? Which we touched on before on the importance of being aware of what are the peculiarities of a specific region or specific culture, so having all that information at hand is certainly a plus, right? A big advantage. And also the fact that you can learn at your own pace. With distance learning, it means that you no longer have to go anywhere to get that training. You can watch training, you can listen to training, you can read training at your own pace. So that pretty much covers three out of the five senses. We'll see about smell and touch at some point, but... you know... watch, read and listen are things that you can already do with technology, right? To receive training.

I will say on the not so positive side, on the negative side of having things that technology has created is that there is too much information for some people to digest. And now the challenge more than getting all that information, which was probably the challenge that the previous generation was facing, "Where do we get information about from the library?" like 15-20 years ago. You had to go to the library to get access to the Internet, to get access to books or printed materials. Now we're well passed that and we have too much information—all the information that

we'll want, pretty much. It turns that we are probably missing the skills to filter that information, so that we get the part that we really need. It also means that people communicate... will communicate a lot more than what we used to in the professional world like 10 years ago... because we have more chance of communication and I have seen that, particularly in young people and students, that they're used to fast communication, which means that they type fast which leads to typos, grammar mistakes, interferences from all the language, right? Language interference. And I think proper writing, proper grammar and spelling is just a sign of respect to your interlocutor. So... whether it's formal or informal. Basically, obviously, in a professional environment you want to be a lot more formal, but if your... let's say if your informal communications with friends and family you're so used to... you don't worry about typos, you don't worry grammar, you don't worry about vocabulary, it's going to create some interference down the line when you get to the office and have to speak with colleagues and have to speak with clients, right? And I'm a bit surprised because the tools are there to prevent you from making those mistakes, we have spell checkers, we have word prediction when you type on your phone. So the tools are there but for some reason I see young graduates, like some of them are used to informal communication and they may find it difficult to adjust to a professional environment, I think.

One last point I'd like to touch on in this regard with communication and technology is that for developing areas, this has made a significant change. So... in regions where 5, 10 years ago it will be impossible—still today it's impossible to think about having a landline to get DSL connection or, you know, Internet connection. Now, everybody has a phone—a mobile phone—and that is a big gap. It means, you know, access to information. It means access to communication, so that has had definitely a significant impact on communications... probably more on the, I would say, on the informal communication—basically for personal communication more than on the business side. But still... a significant impact on something that will definitely develop in the future.

What kinds of international and intercultural experiences and skills sets has higher education taught students to help them transition to industry and in what ways could higher education do a better job preparing the next generation of graduates for international professional communication?

I think... students' exchange programs here in Europe have contributed a lot... have played a very significant role. Basically because it means that for students with language courses for any degree here in Europe, they could spend one year in a foreign country... not just learning the language, but more importantly learning about the culture. "Learning" simply being raising their awareness on the fact that there are cultural differences, and cultural differences is something difficult to be aware of if you haven't been outside. It may seem so subtle but once you live there, once you go to the supermarket, once you hang out with your friend... or with your new friends... at the bar, you realize that, you know, people, we are all different and we perceive things in different ways. Humor, as one of the vehicles for communication, and expectations in general. Apart from helping these students grow, mature... from being outside of home, I think they are forced to figure things out by themselves and they are forced to learn about the cultural specificities of each region, right? I think those exchange programs have been and are a good asset in, you know, that higher education has provided students with.

And there are two important sides to things that could... that higher education has given students is on the technical writing side of things, at least in the language courses that I'm familiar with. Putting a lot of pressure on proper writing has certainly helped. Not so much on technical writing, but on writing properly in your language. So my degree it was... I took my degree in translation and obviously when you get there you think "I need to learn the language, and the different languages" but in the end you could be a really, really good translator and not speak the language... the target... the foreign language so well if you write properly in your own language. Obviously you need to have a good knowledge of the foreign language, but you could be a better translator if you write properly in your own language. You could speak a foreign language perfectly well and be almost bilingual but if you write poorly in your own language, in your mother language, the language that you're translating into, your translation is not going to be very good anyway, no matter how

well you speak the language. I think putting an emphasis on proper writing for what I've seen in the degrees that I know of has helped students transition into the industry and... has continually helped them get there.

What has industry done well to help higher education to teach international intercultural experiences and skills sets, or to help their own employees develop such skillsets and what else might industry do to help prepare the next generation of graduates?

I think the industry in general... companies... frequently take part in workshops, presentations and conferences in universities and that is something that gives students an idea of what is out there... just a glimpse of what is out there... when you see professionals coming to the university. And also... I've also seen universities inviting professionals to teach certain modules, or parts of the module, for students. And obviously that gives students a much better view if you have a professional teaching your module, you're learning straight—not from a teacher who is doing research but from someone in the real, professional world. So I think that that is certainly a field to explore further.

And then... the industry in general... I think that here in Spain we have a program where companies have a government-driven fund, some budget which is reserved for employee training. So... companies have to use that budget for training, so if used properly, or if used for the right purpose, companies... at least here in... this is the policy here in Spain... could have the means to train their employees on multicultural communication, on soft skills as I mentioned, on NLP, on emotional intelligence, negotiation, things like that. And I think that is... that will be a suggestion I'll make to any company: invest in training your employees on communication. Not just on the verbal skills or the writing skills but also on the perception... on the skills of perception, on how to present information, how to negotiate. And... you know... I will say for this company it will be... it's important to have their employees develop in themselves in this area. And I think, you know, also for universities I would suggest that they frequently employ more and more professionals to ensure that the modules that they teach are up to date with the most recent advances in technology and processes and such.

Is there any else that you would like to add?

Not that I can think of... I mean... I think I touched on all the topics. Maybe for some questions I was preparing to mention something which I had mentioned previously, but I think that pretty much, yeah, covers what I wanted to mention. I think the main... well, let's say the first point I mentioned on the discrepancy, I think, I talked about when we first spoke is the difference I see between multicultural and multinational. To me it's more multicultural differences and the challenge, but then again from my professional point of view obviously I'm sure it's different than from someone who has done research... and proper research on results of studies. Also, when you teach communication you may have a different point of view. My view from a professional point of view is that, you know, I will appreciate if students or graduates or even candidates with some experience will come with these... those skill sets.

And I think that multinational simply means it's going by nationality, where national border versus multicultural, that's just the spectrum that it could more... sort of, it goes across these national borders.

Absolutely, and perhaps for those of you in the United States, it's even more important because you have so many different cultures within a very small region—let's say a small region can be a state, right? Even within your state, you're going to have people from so many different backgrounds and so many, you know... cultural references. So... for us here, you know, in Europe—particularly in Spain—it's going to be more, you know, neutral, or let's say the cultural differences you will find is, as I said, by age difference or maybe by background... which also comes with age, right? When I was, like, in my 20's and I would meet with someone in their 50's, it's a bit more difficult to make a connection. However, if within the same age, it doesn't really matter if you travel 50 kilometers from Barcelona or if you travel 1,000 to the other side of Spain, it's going to be very, very similar... while I'm sure in the States, and in other countries where a lot of immigration from anywhere, those differences could be... vary from one village to another, right, or from one neighborhood to another within the same city, so...

And by the way, Spanish is the fastest growing language in the United States.

Yeah, I know, I know. Well, it's interesting how, obviously because of the proximity of Central and South America, but I'm surprised that is not Chinese or another Asian language, right? Because you also get a lot of immigration from Asia. Yeah, it also creates Spanish growth in the United States. It also creates a very, very interesting mixture of variations of Spanish. If I listen to a conversation between two people from Puerto Rico I cannot understand a word. I need to use subtitles for some Mexican movies I don't understand. And it's the same language but it obviously creates... creates such a different... different flavor of the language with vocabulary, with pronunciation, with... yeah, words from... borrowed from English mostly... that, you know... it is a challenge... absolutely. ■