

ADDITIONAL READING

Exercise 55

Read the text and answer the questions that follow.

Vocabulary notes

1. a disguise - clothes to hide
2. an end - an aim
3. smattering - little knowledge
4. **frftught** with - full of
5. **slip** - accidental minor language mistake
6. obscure - vague, unclear

Language Problems in Diplomatic Intercourse.

"The man who speaks in a foreign tongue, not his own, is to a certain extent wearing a disguise. If one wants to discover his ideas, encourage him to use his own language."

Ernest Satow.

Unlike academics and intelligence analysts, diplomats must apply their knowledge of foreign culture and languages in their daily work. Diplomatic expertise with regard to a foreign culture and language is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end.

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of a thorough knowledge of languages for a diplomat. His value to the government increases with every fresh language he learns. In the matter of languages 'a little knowledge is a particularly dangerous thing' (*Essay on criticism* by A. Pope). Sometimes an amateur diplomat acquires a smattering of a foreign language and sets out to make use of it. When this happens it's time to take cover, for although many of his mistakes are merely amusing; some of them lead to trouble and misunderstanding not easily dispelled.

An Ambassador or a Minister who does not speak the language of the country is entirely dependent upon the staff of his mission to keep him informed, to make his communications for him, interpret **all** conversations, and carry on pretty well every step of his official **life**. A

thorough working knowledge of several languages is an **absolute** essential for a secretary, and should be considered practically an essential for an Ambassador or Minister. A minister who can spare time to study the language of the country to which he is sent, will find its acquisition of great advantage.

In diplomatic life we are at every step confronted with language problems. These, however, are of recent origin. For several centuries there used to be only one diplomatic language, Latin, and international affairs were conducted by professional diplomats only. Later French was recognized as the language used by all Ambassadors and other envoys. Then after the First World War under the Treaty of Versailles English and French became two official languages, which led to the appearance of a new profession, that of official diplomatic interpreter.

Interpreters have found that their work is most challenging. Every single word is fraught with significance and is closely watched by parties, so that any slip, or even weakness of the interpreter may have the most serious consequences. Interpreters should be able to grasp a meaning with lightning speed. If time and circumstances allow the interpreter should refer to all kinds of reference material. Should part of speech, or sometimes a whole speech be obscure, the interpreter must decide from his knowledge of the speaker whether **he intended to** be obscure, or whether it was accidental. Interpreters **should know the** basis and logic of the case their side wishes to make before they are called upon to render it into the other side's language. They can **play** an invaluable role in shaping arguments in ways that the other side can most easily understand and accept.

(from *On Diplomatic Practice*)

Notes to the text:

1. *Ernest Satow* is a distinguished British politician and diplomat.
2. *Alexander Pope* is an English poet.

Questions for discussion:

1. What is implied by 'diplomatic expertise'? Why is it not an end but a means?
2. Why does a value of a diplomat to the government increase with every fresh language learnt?