

You Just Said Something Terrible

And nobody is going to tell you. The words, gestures and rituals that misfire across borders, with a 106-entry field glossary

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About this report

Every substantive claim in this report carries an evidence classification and, where applicable, a numbered source. Facts are separated from vendor claims, third-party estimates, the author's assessments, and untested hypotheses. Forward-looking sections use scenarios with observable tripwires rather than point forecasts. Stated assumptions are listed before the analysis begins.

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The Tuesday problem

Content note. This document prints offensive words in full, including the strongest word in British English. It is written as a reference work and handles that material the way a dictionary does: the word appears, the meaning is given in clinical terms, and the usage is described rather than performed. If you would rather not read that, stop here. Nothing later in the report softens.

FACT I was running a training course with a cohort that included a large contingent from the United Kingdom. We had sessions scheduled through the week and the next one fell on a Tuesday. At the end of the call, cheerfully, on camera, to about forty people, I said: see you next Tuesday. The British half of the room detonated. I could not work out what was funny. Nobody would tell me while the recording was running. Afterwards, one merciful person explained that C, U, next Tuesday is a long-established British euphemism for the word cunt, and that I had just said it to the entire class.

FACT The construction is documented. It is a backronym, a phrase built so that its initials spell something else, and it has been in circulation since at least 1989, appearing in slang dictionaries by the mid-2000s. It gives British speakers a way to deploy the strongest word in the language without technically saying it, which is precisely why it survives in offices, on television and in polite company. ^{[3] [4] [5]}

ASSESSMENT What made it land was not rudeness. It was fluency in the wrong dialect. Every word I used was ordinary American office English, arranged in an ordinary way, and the arrangement happened to be a loaded gun in another room. I have never said it again. I have also never stopped noticing how many other loaded arrangements are sitting in plain sight, and how badly served professionals are by the material that claims to warn them about it.

ASSESSMENT Most of that material is listicles recycling the same twelve anecdotes, and roughly a third of those anecdotes are false. So this report does two jobs at once. It assembles the working glossary I wish someone had handed me, 106 entries across seven categories, and it audits the

famous corporate blunder stories against the record, because a warning built on a myth teaches nothing except that the teacher did not check.

Scope and evidentiary standard

This covers language and non-verbal behaviour that a competent professional could deploy in good faith and have land badly across a cultural border. It is scoped to business settings: meetings, email, sales calls, training rooms, contract negotiation, gift-giving, and the ten seconds either side of a handshake. It does not cover deliberate abuse, which is a conduct problem rather than a translation problem, and it does not attempt to be a language course.

The published material on this subject is unusually bad, and the reason is worth stating before any of it gets cited. Almost all of it is content marketing produced by translation agencies, travel companies and language schools, whose commercial interest is in making cross-cultural error look frequent and expensive. That interest shows up as unsourced dollar figures, anecdotes with no date or company confirmation, and the same handful of stories copied between sites until repetition passes for verification. Two of the most repeated examples in the entire genre, the Chevrolet Nova and the Pepsi ancestors slogan, are documented fabrications.

Against that, the strongest evidence available on this subject is regulatory. The UK communications regulator Ofcom commissions periodic quantitative research into how the British public rates the strength of specific words, most recently in 2021, and publishes the word lists. That study is the closest thing in existence to an authoritative severity ranking for British English, it names its methodology, and it is not selling anything. Where it can carry a claim in this report, it does. Where it cannot, the claim is labelled accordingly and the reader can discount it.

One structural limit applies throughout. Every entry here describes a tendency, not a rule. Register, region, age, tone and relationship move all of it, and a word rated strong by a national survey can be affectionate between two people who have known each other for twenty years. Treat the glossary as a list of things worth knowing before you say them, not as a list of things nobody says.

Label	Definition	How to treat it
FACT	Verifiable in the cited primary source: a filing, press release, official documentation, or standards body announcement.	Reliable as stated. Check the source if the exact wording matters.
VENDOR CLAIM	Reported by a vendor about its own business or product. Self-measured and not audited by any third party.	The vendor said it. Directionally useful, not a measurement. Definitions of the metric are usually undisclosed.
THIRD-PARTY ESTIMATE	A research firm forecast or survey result. Methodology is proprietary and generally not reproducible.	Use for direction and order of magnitude only. Do not build a model on it.

Label	Definition	How to treat it
ASSESSMENT	The author's reasoned judgment from the cited evidence. Falsifiable, and the reasoning is shown so it can be argued with.	This is analysis, not reporting. Disagree with it where your evidence differs.
HYPOTHESIS	A proposition offered for testing. Not currently supported by sufficient evidence to assert.	Treat as a research question, not a conclusion. Each one names what would confirm or refute it.
SCENARIO	A structured future state with a stated subjective probability. The probability is the author's judgment, not a calculated figure.	Use the leading indicators attached to each, not the probability. The indicators are observable; the probability is not.

Assumptions this analysis rests on

The reader is a native speaker of one variety of English operating in rooms containing speakers of others, or of no English at all. If the reader is a professional interpreter or a localisation specialist, most of this is already known and the glossary is the only useful part.

Ofcom's 2021 word ratings generalise usefully from broadcast to workplace. This is the largest assumption in the report. Ofcom asked what is acceptable to broadcast, not what is acceptable to say to a colleague, and the two are not the same question. If it is wrong, the severity ordering in the British section is still directionally useful but the specific bands should not be treated as precise, and the chart built on them overstates its own precision.

Relative severity moves more slowly than usage. Individual words drift in and out of currency quickly, but the ranking between them is comparatively stable, which is why a 2021 study is still worth citing in 2026. If this is wrong, the half-life section understates how fast the whole document decays.

The reader's exposure is professional rather than social. Nearly every judgement here about what is worth avoiding assumes a setting where the cost of being misread is commercial. Socially, most of these entries are jokes. If your context is social, the risk ranking in this report is the wrong ranking.

Gesture meanings reported by travel and etiquette sources are weaker evidence than language meanings. Language has dictionaries, corpora and regulators. Gesture has one serious cross-national field study from 1979 and a very large amount of repetition. The gesture section is therefore labelled more cautiously than the language sections, on purpose.

The call

ASSESSMENT The real exposure in cross-border business communication is not the rude word you say by accident. It is the identity word you say on purpose, because it is neutral where you come from. Profanity gets laughed at and forgiven inside a day. Language touching race,

nationality, caste, disability or sexuality does not, and the survey evidence shows the two categories are not remotely comparable in perceived severity. Corporate training has this backwards, drilling gestures and gift etiquette while leaving vocabulary alone. I would drop this position if a serious employer study showed cross-border reputational damage actually clusters on profanity and gesture rather than on identity language. I have not found one.

My judgment on the evidence assembled here, nothing more. There is data I can't see and data I may have missed. New evidence can move me, including to the opposite position, and I reserve the right to move.

Executive summary

Five distinct failure modes are usually treated as one topic, which is why the training aimed at them rarely works. They have different causes, different costs and different fixes, and only one of them is expensive.

FINDING 1 The severity data says the risk is not where the jokes are.

FACT In Ofcom's 2021 study, only two of 29 general swear words rated by British participants landed in the strong band. In the race, nationality and ethnicity category, 22 of 42 did. Swearing is tolerated in British public life to a degree that startles Americans. Language about identity is not, and the gap is not close. ^{[1] [2]}

FINDING 2 The words that ambush Americans in Britain are mostly anatomical, and mostly moderate.

FACT Fanny, knob, bollocks, twat and spunk all sit in Ofcom's moderate band for words describing body parts. Cunt sits alone at the top with four other terms. Pissed, which Americans use constantly to mean angry, is rated mild and means drunk. ^{[1] [2]}

FINDING 3 The expensive failure is not obscenity, it is the polite no.

ASSESSMENT A Japanese counterpart saying a proposal is chotto muzukashii, a little difficult, has ended it. A British colleague saying an idea is interesting has rejected it. Nobody laughs, nobody corrects you, and you keep spending money on a dead deal for another quarter. This costs more than every profanity in the glossary combined. ^{[8] [9]}

FINDING 4 A third of the famous corporate blunder stories are false, and they are the ones being taught.

ASSESSMENT Of fifteen widely circulated cases audited here, seven are documented, three describe real events wrapped in embellished narrative, and five have no supporting evidence at all. The Chevrolet Nova sold well in Mexico and Venezuela. Pepsi was not selling in China in the era the ancestors story requires. ^{[10] [11] [12]}

FINDING 5 Gesture risk is real but the evidence for it is far thinner than the confidence with which it is taught.

ASSESSMENT The serious cross-national field research on gesture distribution dates to 1979. Almost everything published since repeats it or invents around it. The thumbs-up warning in

particular has been contradicted by observed adoption of the Western meaning across the Gulf since 1991, and no one repeating the warning mentions that. ^{[19] [20]}

FINDING 6 The emoji layer is now a legal layer, not just a social one.

FACT In 2023 a Saskatchewan court held that a thumbs-up emoji constituted acceptance of a contract, awarding roughly 82,000 Canadian dollars. The Court of Appeal upheld it and the Supreme Court of Canada declined to hear a further appeal. Separately, the same gesture is read by a meaningful share of younger professionals as dismissive. ^{[13] [14] [17] [18]}

FINDING 7 The one-line fix for most of the language entries is cheaper than any training programme.

ASSESSMENT Say the thing literally. See you on Tuesday. Postpone the motion. Cheering for you. Trousers. Almost every entry in the glossary is a shortcut, an idiom or a compressed phrase, and the unambiguous long form costs a syllable or two and no dignity at all.

Five ways a professional gets ambushed

These are not variations on one theme. They fail differently and they need different countermeasures, and lumping them together is why the standard cultural-awareness deck bounces off everyone who sits through it.

ASSESSMENT The first is the backronym or hidden phrase. Innocent words in an order that spells or sounds like something else, of which see you next Tuesday is the archetype. The speaker cannot detect it by inspecting their own vocabulary, because no individual word is the problem. This is the only category where you genuinely cannot see it coming, and the only defence is having been told.

ASSESSMENT The second is the false friend. One word, two languages, two unrelated meanings, usually because both inherited it from Latin and then went different ways. Gift meaning poison in German. Preservatif meaning condom in French. Coger meaning something entirely different in Mexico City than in Madrid. Predictable, learnable, and the most heavily documented of the five. ^[35]

ASSESSMENT The third is the register flip. The same English word, the same meaning, radically different strength or valence. Pissed. Pants. Table. Quite. This is the sneakiest category, because both speakers understand the word perfectly and neither realises they have understood different things. Nobody stops to check a word they both know. To table a paper is the sharpest case: in Westminster usage it means to bring the thing forward for discussion, and in American parliamentary usage it means to shelve it, so the same motion carried in the same room produces opposite outcomes. ^{[6] [7]}

ASSESSMENT The fourth is the non-verbal, which covers gesture, gift, seating, business cards, numbers and colour. It is the category corporate training loves, because it is concrete and demonstrable and makes for a good slide. It is also, in my assessment, the least expensive category in practice: locals overwhelmingly forgive a foreigner's hand, and increasingly expect a Western default.

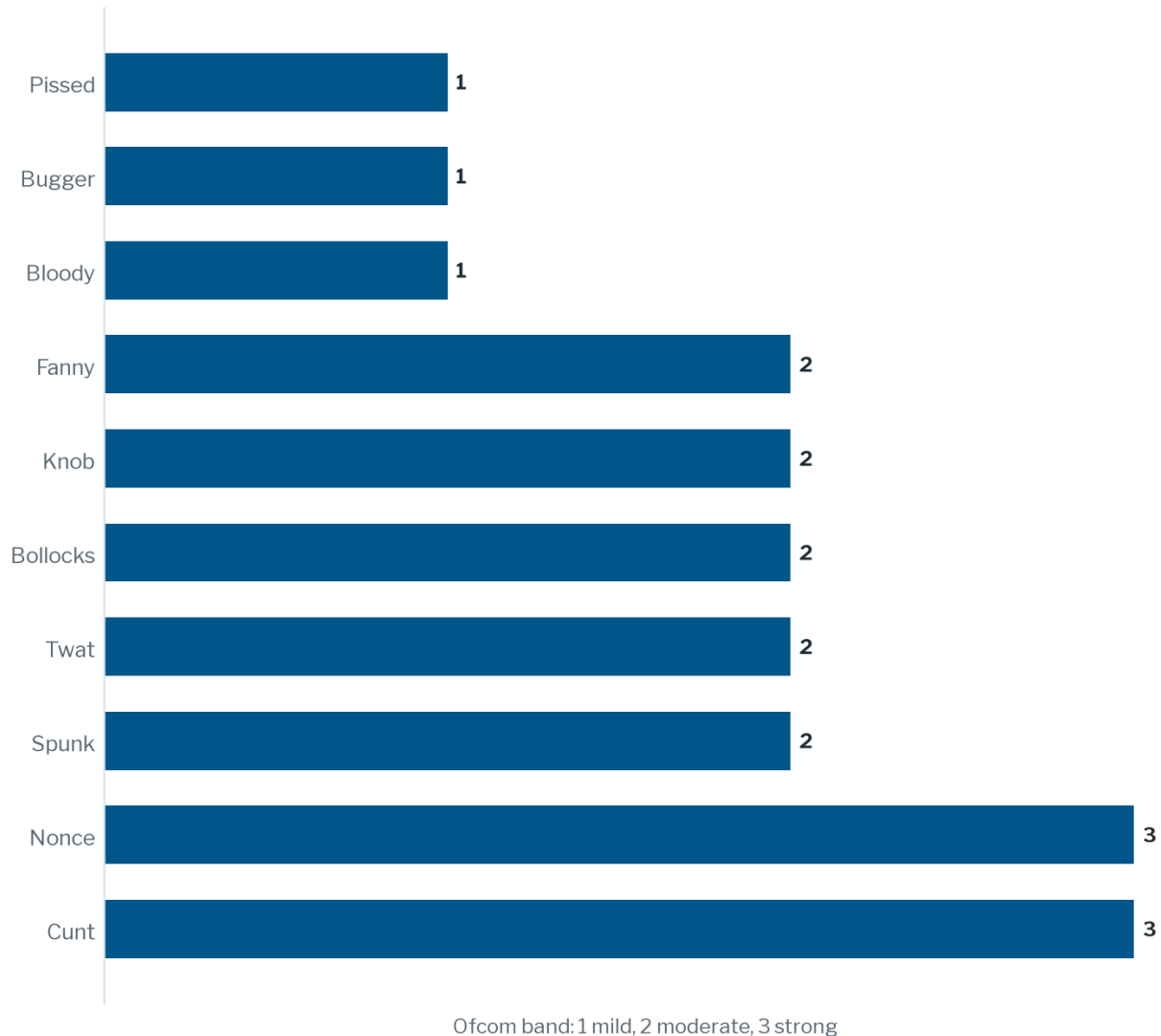
ASSESSMENT The fifth is pragmatic failure, the polite no. Not a word problem at all. Both parties produce grammatical, courteous, mutually intelligible sentences, and one of them has said no while the other heard maybe. This is the only one of the five that reliably costs money, and it is the one almost nobody trains for.

Britain has the highest density, and there is data on it

Britain is the hardest English-speaking market for an American to talk in, and the reason is not that the British swear more. It is that Britain has an unusually large stock of anatomical and sexual vocabulary that is regarded as mild to moderate, used casually, and shares its surface form with ordinary American office English. The overlap is what does the damage.

FACT Ofcom commissioned Ipsos MORI to survey public attitudes towards offensive language for broadcast, published in September 2021. The quantitative strand ran over five days in February 2021 with 368 respondents each rating 186 words, supported by 37 online discussion groups and 25 depth interviews. It is the largest recent structured attempt to rank the strength of specific English words, and the word lists are published in full. [\[1\]](#) [\[2\]](#)

FACT Cunt and motherfucker were rated the least acceptable of all 186 words tested. In the qualitative groups cunt was consistently identified as the strongest word in the language, though Scottish participants described its use as an affectionate term, as in calling someone a clever cunt, which tells you how far context moves even the extreme case. [\[1\]](#) [\[2\]](#)

FIGURE 1 Words an American can walk into, and where Britain puts them

FACT Band assignments are Ofcom's; the numeric encoding is mine, so the bar lengths carry no more information than the three-band label. The study asked about broadcast acceptability, not workplace acceptability, which is a real gap and the reason this chart is directional rather than precise. [\[1\]](#) [\[2\]](#)

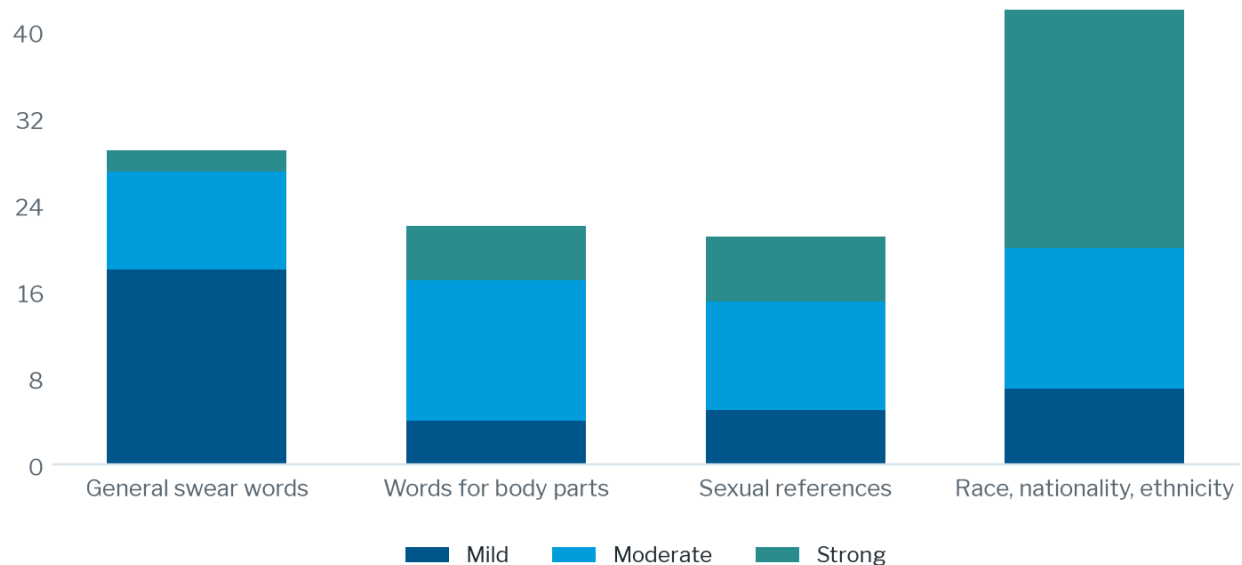
ASSESSMENT Read that chart for the middle band rather than the ends. Everyone already knows the top of it. The useful information is that fanny, knob, bollocks, twat and spunk are ordinary moderate vocabulary in Britain, which means they will be said in front of you without ceremony and will be noticed instantly if said by you. The asymmetry is the trap. Hearing them is unremarkable, so you conclude they are safe, and they are not safe for a foreigner in a client meeting.

FACT Nonce deserves its own warning for anyone in technology. In British English it means a convicted sex offender, particularly against children, and Ofcom rates it strong. In cryptography a nonce is a number used once, a completely standard term that appears in protocol documentation, code reviews and security architecture discussions. Saying it aloud in a British engineering meeting produces a silence you will remember. [\[1\]](#) [\[2\]](#)

The words that end careers are not the rude ones

The single most useful thing in the Ofcom data is not any individual word. It is the shape of the distribution across categories, which contradicts how nearly every organisation allocates its attention on this subject.

FIGURE 2 Where British participants placed words, by category



FACT Counts of words placed in each band by Ofcom's 2021 research. Category sizes were chosen by the researchers, not by me, so the totals are not comparable across rows; the internal shape of each row is the point. Words recognised by fewer than 40 percent of respondents are flagged in the source and are included here. [\[1\]](#) [\[2\]](#)

ASSESSMENT Swearing in Britain is close to unremarkable. Two words out of 29 in the general category reached the strong band, and the modal rating was mild. Language about race, nationality and ethnicity inverts completely: strong is the modal rating, and the category holds more strong words than the other three combined. British participants who described themselves as desensitised to swearing described the discriminatory terms as harmful rather than merely offensive, which is a different kind of judgement entirely. [\[1\]](#) [\[2\]](#)

ASSESSMENT The operational conclusion is unglamorous. If your organisation has budget for exactly one hour of cross-cultural training, do not spend it on gestures. Spend it establishing which terms for people are in current acceptable use in the markets you operate in, because those are the ones that produce a formal complaint rather than a laugh, and they are also the ones that move fastest and therefore date fastest in any handbook you write.

ASSESSMENT One further asymmetry sits inside the same data and is worth naming. Ofcom's respondents rated words for female anatomy as less acceptable than words for male anatomy, and described terms like pussy as carrying an extra charge because they are used to mean weakness. Any severity ranking of this vocabulary is therefore also a map of what a culture holds in contempt, which is a more uncomfortable finding than the glossary format makes it look. [\[1\]](#) [\[2\]](#)

The polite no, and other things you will mishear

This is the section that actually saves money. Everything above is about embarrassment. This is about spending two quarters and a travel budget on an opportunity that was declined in the first meeting, courteously, in a sentence you understood every word of.

FACT In Japanese business usage, *chotto muzukashii*, literally a little difficult, functions as a refusal rather than an obstacle. So does *maemuki ni kentou shimasu*, we will consider it positively. Both are standard, both are polite, and both signal that the proposal is finished. Practitioner guidance is consistent on this to the point of unanimity. ^{[8] [9]}

ASSESSMENT The British version is the same mechanism with different vocabulary. British professional English runs on downgraders, and an American ear reads a downgrader as a hedge rather than a verdict. Interesting means no. Quite good means disappointing. I'll bear it in mind means it is already forgotten. None of this is deception, and treating it as deception is the standard American error; it is a register in which strength of feeling is signalled by the size of the understatement rather than the size of the word.

ASSESSMENT The most widely circulated version of this, the anonymous table headed what the British say and what the British mean, has been passed around the internet since at least 2011 with no author, no date and no source. I am reproducing part of it below because practitioners consistently confirm it, and I am telling you it is unsourced because a table that has been copied ten thousand times is not thereby verified. Treat the British rows as folk knowledge with strong practitioner agreement, not as research. Erin Meyer's work on downgraders is the serious version of the same observation. ^{[29] [30]}

What is said	What you probably hear	What it means
Chotto muzukashii (Japan)	There is an obstacle we can work through	No. The proposal is over.
Maemuki ni kentou shimasu (Japan)	They are keen and will get back to us	No, delivered kindly.
Zensho shimasu (Japan)	They will handle it properly	They will not be handling it.
That's an interesting idea (UK)	They like it	They do not.
With the greatest respect... (UK)	Deference is being offered	I think you are wrong, and possibly a fool.
I'll bear it in mind (UK)	It is under active consideration	It has already been discarded.
Quite good (UK)	Good, maybe very good	Disappointing.
I'm sure it's my fault (UK)	They are taking responsibility	It is your fault.
We must have dinner sometime (UK)	An invitation is coming	A goodbye.

What is said	What you probably hear	What it means
This is a bad idea (NL, DE, DK)	A personal attack, a hostile room	This is a bad idea. Nothing further is implied.
Let me see what I can do (IN, Gulf)	Work is now in progress	Often a refusal that spares everyone. Ask for a date.
Silence (FI, JP)	Disagreement, or disengagement	Thinking. Do not fill it.

ASSESSMENT The countermeasure is not to learn the table. It is to stop accepting agreement that has not been made specific. Ask for the next step, the owner and the date, in writing, in the meeting. A polite no cannot survive that question, in any culture, because there is nothing to put in the fields. This works in Tokyo, London and Amsterdam without you having to know which of the three you are in.

Hands, heads and objects

The non-verbal material is the most confidently asserted and the least well evidenced part of this whole subject. It deserves a place in the report because some of it is genuinely consequential, and it deserves a warning label because the confidence in the sources is unearned.

FACT The serious cross-national research base here is Gestures: Their Origins and Distribution, published in 1979 by Desmond Morris with Peter Collett, Peter Marsh and Marie O'Shaughnessy, which mapped twenty gestures across forty locations in twenty-five countries using field interviews. Almost every gesture guide published since draws on it, directly or at several removes, usually without saying so and without noting that the fieldwork is now nearly fifty years old. ^[19]

ASSESSMENT The thumbs-up is the clearest case of a warning that has outlived its evidence. It is repeated everywhere as a grave insult across the Middle East. United States military language guidance records the Western meaning being adopted across the Arabian Peninsula after 1991, and forty years of satellite television and social media have not made local audiences less familiar with it. My assessment is that the risk is now materially lower than the guidance implies, and that repeating the warning without that caveat is what makes the whole genre hard to trust. ^[20]

FACT The gesture with a genuinely current problem is the OK ring, and the problem is not the one usually cited. In 2019 the Anti-Defamation League added it to its Hate on Display database after a trolling campaign turned it into a white supremacist signal, a use that was then adopted sincerely. The ADL's own director of the Center on Extremism stressed that context decides, and that the organisation had been reluctant to list it. This is a risk in Boston and Sydney, not only in Rio and Istanbul. ^{[17] [18]}

FACT Two of the gestures in the table have documented histories, and knowing them is what actually stops you making them. The Greek moutza, an open palm thrust toward the face, traces to a Byzantine punishment in which the faces of shamed criminals were smeared by an open hand, which is why an American counting to five toward a Greek colleague is not making a small mistake in that colleague's eyes. The British palm-inward V sign, by contrast, has no verified connection

to Agincourt; the longbowmen story first appears in print around 1900 and the historical record does not support it. [\[32\]](#) [\[33\]](#)

Gesture	Harmless in	Reads badly in	Note
Thumbs up	US, most of Europe, and increasingly everywhere	Parts of Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Greece, West Africa	Contested. Adoption of the Western meaning is documented and widespread.
OK ring	US, most of Europe	Brazil, Turkey, Greece, parts of the Middle East; and, separately, listed by the ADL since 2019	Two unrelated risks sharing one hand shape.
V sign, palm inward	Nowhere	UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand	Palm outward is fine. The Agincourt origin story is folklore.
Open palm thrust, the moutza	US, as stop or five	Greece, Cyprus	Counting to five toward a Greek colleague is how this happens.
Fig sign, thumb through fingers	Brazil, as a luck charm	Turkey, Greece, Russia, Indonesia	Both readings coexist inside Brazil.
Corna, index and little finger	Rock concerts, Texas	Italy, Spain, Portugal, Brazil, Colombia	Pointing up it says your partner is unfaithful.
Beckoning, index finger, palm up	US	Philippines and much of East and Southeast Asia	Used for animals. Beckon palm down, whole hand.
Using the left hand to give or receive	Europe, the Americas	India, Sri Lanka, much of the Middle East and Africa	Use the right hand, or both.
Showing the sole of the shoe	Nowhere in particular	The Arab world, Thailand, India	Crossing an ankle over a knee does it without you noticing.
Nodding for yes	Almost everywhere	Bulgaria, and inconsistently in parts of Greece, Albania, Turkey	Reversed. Confirm verbally, every time.
Patting someone on the head	US, UK	Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Sri Lanka	The head is the most sacred part of the body.
Sustained direct eye contact	US, northern Europe	Japan, Korea, parts of West Africa	Reads as challenge, particularly toward a senior.

ASSESSMENT The object and ritual material is better evidenced than the gesture material, because the meanings are lexical rather than behavioural. A clock is an unwelcome gift in China

because the phrase for giving one is a homophone for attending a funeral rite, and homophones are checkable in a way that a hand shape is not. This is why the table below is more reliable than the one above, and it is a distinction almost no published guide makes. The same holds for the Korean protocol around two-handed exchange, pouring, and never writing a living person's name in red, and for the Japanese handling of a business card, all of which are codified rather than folkloric and can be looked up. [\[21\]](#) [\[22\]](#) [\[34\]](#) [\[36\]](#)

Thing	Where it matters	What it signals
A clock as a gift	China, Hong Kong, Taiwan	Song zhong, to give a clock, is a homophone for attending a funeral. It reads as waiting for the recipient to die.
A green hat	China	That the wearer's partner is unfaithful. Do not brand anything green and headwear-shaped.
Knives, scissors, anything sharp	China, Italy, much of Latin America	Severing the relationship.
White or chrysanthemum flowers	China, Japan, Korea, France, Italy, Poland	Funerals.
The number 4	China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan	Homophone for death. Buildings skip the floor. Never price anything at 44.
The number 17	Italy	Roman XVII rearranges to VIXI, I have lived, meaning I am dead.
A name written in red ink	Korea, China	Reserved for the dead.
Chopsticks stood upright in rice	Japan, China	A funeral offering.
A business card taken one-handed and pocketed	Japan, Korea, China	The card stands for the person. Two hands, read it, set it on the table, never write on it.
Tipping	Japan, Korea	Can read as condescension rather than generosity.
Yellow flowers	Russia, Mexico, Iran	Separation, death or grief, depending on where you are.
Alcohol as a corporate gift	Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, and to observant Muslim colleagues anywhere	Illegal, or offensive, or both.
Anything supplied in a set of four	Japan, China, Korea	See the number 4. Sample kits and gift sets are the usual accident.
Writing on a received business card in front of the giver	Japan	Defacing the person. Note it afterwards.

The emoji layer is now a legal layer

Everything above predates the medium most business communication now happens in. The interesting development of the last three years is that emoji have acquired both a generational register problem and, in at least one jurisdiction, contractual force.

FACT In *South West Terminal Ltd. v Achter Land and Cattle Ltd*, decided in 2023, the Saskatchewan Court of King's Bench held that a thumbs-up emoji sent in reply to a photographed contract and the words please confirm flax contract constituted acceptance, and awarded roughly 82,000 Canadian dollars. The Court of Appeal upheld the decision, and the Supreme Court of Canada declined leave, so it stands. The court relied on the parties' prior course of dealing, in which short replies like ok and yup had confirmed contracts. ^{[13] [14]}

ASSESSMENT The narrow reading is that this is a Saskatchewan case about two people who had been doing business by text for years. The broad reading, and the one I would act on, is that any acknowledgement you send in a channel where deals get agreed is capable of being read as assent by a court that examines what a reasonable bystander would conclude. If you mean received, not agreed, type received, not agreed.

THIRD-PARTY ESTIMATE On the register side, the reporting traces to a Perspectus Global survey of 2,000 UK respondents aged 16 to 29, in which the thumbs-up ranked first among emoji that make the sender look old, and to subsequent workplace commentary describing roughly one in four younger professionals reading it as curt or hostile. I have not located the survey's published methodology, only press summaries of it, so treat the number as indicative and the direction as reliable. ^{[15] [16]}

ASSESSMENT This one is not worth much anxiety. Being read as brusque by a colleague under thirty is a recoverable, low-cost misunderstanding, and it will keep moving. It appears here because it is the same mechanism as everything else in the report, a token that carries different force for the sender and the receiver, arriving in the medium where most of your sentences now live.

The corporate blunder canon, audited

Fifteen stories carry almost the entire genre. They appear in translation agency blog posts, MBA slide decks, keynote openers and etiquette handbooks, usually without a date, a source or a named executive. I checked them. The results are not flattering to the people teaching from them.

FIGURE 3 Fifteen famous international marketing blunders, checked



ASSESSMENT My audit, my categories, and the selection is the fifteen stories I found repeated most often rather than a sample of anything. Documented means a primary or contemporaneous record exists. No supporting evidence found means I could not locate one and the fact-checking literature says the same; it does not prove the event never happened. [\[10\]](#) [\[11\]](#) [\[12\]](#)

Story	The claim	Verdict	What the record shows
Chevrolet Nova	No va means it does not go; sales collapsed in Latin America	False	It sold well in Mexico and Venezuela. Pemex sold petrol branded Nova. Debunked in detail.
Pepsi in China	Come alive with Pepsi became brings your ancestors back from the grave	False	Pepsi was not sold in China in the period required, and that was never the campaign line.
Coca-Cola, bite the wax tadpole	Coke launched in China under a name meaning this	Embellished	Shopkeepers improvised characters before the company selected its own. Coke did not ship the bad name.
Mitsubishi Pajero	Renamed because pajero is Spanish for masturbator	Documented	Sold as Montero across Spain and most of Latin America, and as Shogun in the UK.
Honda Fitta	Renamed because fitta is Nordic vulgar slang for the vulva	Documented	Launched instead as Fit and Jazz.
Buick LaCrosse	Renamed in Canada over a Quebecois masturbation reading	Documented	Sold as Allure in Canada from 2005; the name reverted in 2010.
Mazda Laputa	The name splits into la puta	Documented as a name	The name is real. No evidence of commercial

Story	The claim	Verdict	What the record shows
			damage; the joke travelled further than the car.
Nike Air flame logo, 1997	The stylised flame resembled Allah in Arabic script	Documented	Nike recalled 38,000 pairs, apologised, and funded a playground at an Islamic school under an agreement with CAIR.
Umbro Zyklon trainer	Named after the Nazi gas	Documented	Launched 1999, withdrawn in 2002 after the Simon Wiesenthal Centre intervened. Umbro apologised.
Siemens Zyklon trademark	Applied to trademark the name in 2002	Documented	The application was abandoned after public objection.
KFC in China	Finger lickin' good became eat your fingers off	Unsupported	No contemporaneous primary record located. The China business grew regardless.
HSBC, Assume Nothing	Mistranslated as Do Nothing; a 10 million dollar rebrand followed	Embellished	The rebrand is real. The figure and the mistranslation trace only to secondary press.
Braniff, fly in leather	En cuero was heard as fly naked	Unsupported	The Spanish reading is real. No contemporaneous evidence the campaign error occurred.
Gerber jars in Africa	Labels there show the contents, so a baby's face implied the contents	Unsupported	No evidence for the labelling convention or the incident. The framing is also condescending.
Electrolux, nothing sucks like an Electrolux	An American campaign that embarrassed the company	Embellished	It ran in the UK, deliberately, and it worked.

ASSESSMENT The pattern in the false cases is worth more than any individual entry. Every debunked story shares a structure: a large foreign corporation is humiliated by a mistake so obvious that a first-year language student would have caught it. That is a satisfying story, which is exactly why it survives without evidence. The documented cases look different. They are unglamorous, they involve a company catching the problem and renaming quietly, and in the two worst of them, Nike and Umbro, the offence was religious or historical rather than sexual, and was raised by an organised group rather than discovered as a joke. [\[10\]](#) [\[11\]](#) [\[26\]](#) [\[27\]](#) [\[28\]](#)

FACT The three car cases are the cleanest evidence in the table, and they all run the same way. Mitsubishi sold the Pajero as the Montero across Spain and most of Latin America, and as the Shogun in Britain. Honda dropped Fitta before launch and shipped the Fit and the Jazz. General Motors sold the Buick LaCrosse as the Allure in Canada from 2005 and reverted the name in 2010. Nobody was humiliated in public in any of the three. Somebody checked, the name changed, and the story only became a story afterwards. [\[23\]](#) [\[24\]](#) [\[25\]](#)

ASSESSMENT Which points at the same conclusion as the Ofcom data, arrived at from a completely different direction. Nobody was seriously damaged by an accidental obscenity. The two cases that produced recalls, apologies and payments were about faith and about genocide. The blunder canon has trained a generation of executives to worry about the wrong half of the problem, and it has done so largely with fiction.

Field glossary

106 entries, grouped by where the trouble originates. Definitions are given plainly, in clinical terms where the term is anatomical, on the same principle a dictionary applies. Nothing here is a rule about what people say; it is a list of what a word can carry when you are the one saying it.

British and Irish

Term	What it means	Why it matters in a meeting
see you next Tuesday	Backronym for cunt. C, U, next Tuesday.	Say see you on Tuesday and the problem vanishes entirely.
cunt	The vulva. As an insult, the strongest term in British English; Ofcom rates it strong.	Also used affectionately in Scotland and Australia between friends. Never available to you as an outsider.
fanny	The vulva. In American English, the buttocks. Ofcom: moderate.	Fanny pack is the landmine. Say bum bag.
knob	The penis. As an insult, roughly idiot. Ofcom: moderate.	Hardware vocabulary makes this constant. Turn the knob is fine; calling someone one is not.
bollocks	The testicles. As an interjection, nonsense. Ofcom: moderate.	The dog's bollocks is high praise. Bollocks on its own means you are being lied to.
twat	The vulva. As an insult, idiot. Ofcom: moderate.	Rhymes with that. Used casually and consistently underestimated by Americans.
spunk	Semen. Ofcom: moderate.	She showed real spunk is an American compliment that does not survive the flight.

Term	What it means	Why it matters in a meeting
nonce	A convicted sex offender, especially against children. Ofcom: strong.	Standard cryptography term. Genuinely dangerous to say out loud in a British engineering room.
minge	The vulva and pubic hair. Ofcom: moderate.	No innocent homophone. Listed so you recognise it, not so you use it.
pissed	Drunk. Ofcom: mild.	I was pissed at the client reads as I was drunk at the client.
taking the piss	Mocking, usually affectionately. Ofcom: mild.	Are you taking the piss means are you serious. Not an accusation of theft.
bugger	Historically sodomy; now a mild expletive, often affectionate. Ofcom: mild.	Bugger off is dismissive, not serious. Bugger all means nothing at all.
pants	Underwear. Also an adjective meaning bad.	Your deck was pants is not a compliment. Say trousers.
rubber	An eraser.	Ask an American for a rubber and you get a condom. Ask a Briton and you get a pencil eraser.
randy	Sexually aroused.	It is also a common American first name. Introducing Randy produces a pause.
knocked up	Woken by knocking on the door.	In American English, made pregnant. Older usage in Britain but alive enough to cause trouble.
keep your pecker up	Keep your chin up. Pecker here means the beak.	In American English pecker is the penis, which changes the encouragement considerably.
homely	Cosy, comfortable, welcoming.	In American English it means plain or unattractive. Complimenting an American's homely spouse ends the evening.
quite	A downgrader. Quite good means disappointing.	The most expensive single word in this table. See the polite-no section.
Bob's your uncle	And there you have it. Entirely harmless.	Included because Americans assume it must be filthy. It is not. Enjoy it.

Australian and New Zealand

Term	What it means	Why it matters in a meeting
root	To have sexual intercourse.	I'm rooting for you is the classic. Say cheering for you.
rooted	Broken beyond repair, or exhausted.	The server's rooted means it is dead, not compromised.
thongs	Flip-flops, the footwear.	Wear thongs to the barbecue is not what an American hears.
Durex	Sticky tape, in older Australian usage, from a former brand.	Pass me the Durex in an Australian office is a stationery request.
spunk	An attractive person, of either sex. Complimentary.	Positive in Australia, obscene in Britain, meaningless in America.
yeah nah	No, with the objection acknowledged first.	Order decides everything. Nah yeah means yes.
crook	Unwell, or broken.	I'm feeling crook means ill, not criminal.
chuck a sickie	Take an unearned day of sick leave.	Do not say this about yourself in front of a client. Or a manager.
cunt	Insult or endearment, decided entirely by tone and relationship.	The most context-dependent word in the anglosphere. Never attempt it as a visitor.
pissed / pissed off	Drunk / annoyed, as in Britain.	Same trap, same fix.
fair dinkum	Genuine, true, on the level.	Harmless. Included because it sounds like it should not be.
how are you going	Hello. Not a question about a journey.	Answer good, thanks. Do not describe your travel plans.

South African

FACT South African English carries a documented set of regionalisms, most of which are harmless and one cluster of which is not. The time words are the problem. Just now, now now and right now form an ordering that is close to the opposite of what an outsider assumes, and every scheduling failure I have heard reported from that market traces to it rather than to anything rude.

[31]

Term	What it means	Why it matters in a meeting
just now	Later, at an unspecified time. Possibly hours.	Sounds urgent, means close to the opposite. The single most common scheduling failure with South African colleagues.
now now	Soon. Minutes rather than hours.	More urgent than just now, which is counter-intuitive to everyone else.
right now	Immediately.	The only one that means what you think.
robot	A traffic light.	Turn left at the robot. Directions go strange fast.
shame	An expression of sympathy or affection.	Ag shame about your news is warmth, not pity or judgement.
howzit	Hello.	Not a question. No answer required.
braai	A barbecue.	Also a primary business networking venue. Accepting matters.
is it?	Really? Or simply oh.	Conversational acknowledgement, not a challenge to your facts.

Indian and South Asian English

Term	What it means	Why it matters in a meeting
revert	To reply, to get back to you.	I will revert means I will respond. In a software release thread an American reads it as roll back the change. Genuinely dangerous.
do the needful	Please handle what is required.	Reads as vague to American ears. It is a complete and specific instruction.
prepone	To move to an earlier time.	The opposite of postpone, and now in the Oxford English Dictionary. A useful word English otherwise lacks.
out of station	Out of town, travelling.	Not a comment about railways or radio.
passed out	Graduated.	I passed out in 2019 is a graduation year, not a medical event.

Term	What it means	Why it matters in a meeting
kindly	Please.	High-frequency and formal. Not sarcasm, not passive aggression.
same same	Identical, or near enough.	Regional across South and Southeast Asia. Harmless.
update, upgradation	Update and upgrade used as nouns.	Standard in Indian corporate English. Not an error to correct in someone else's document.
the head wobble	Acknowledgement, agreement, or I hear you.	It is not a no. It is often not a yes either. Ask for the commitment in words.

American words that misfire abroad

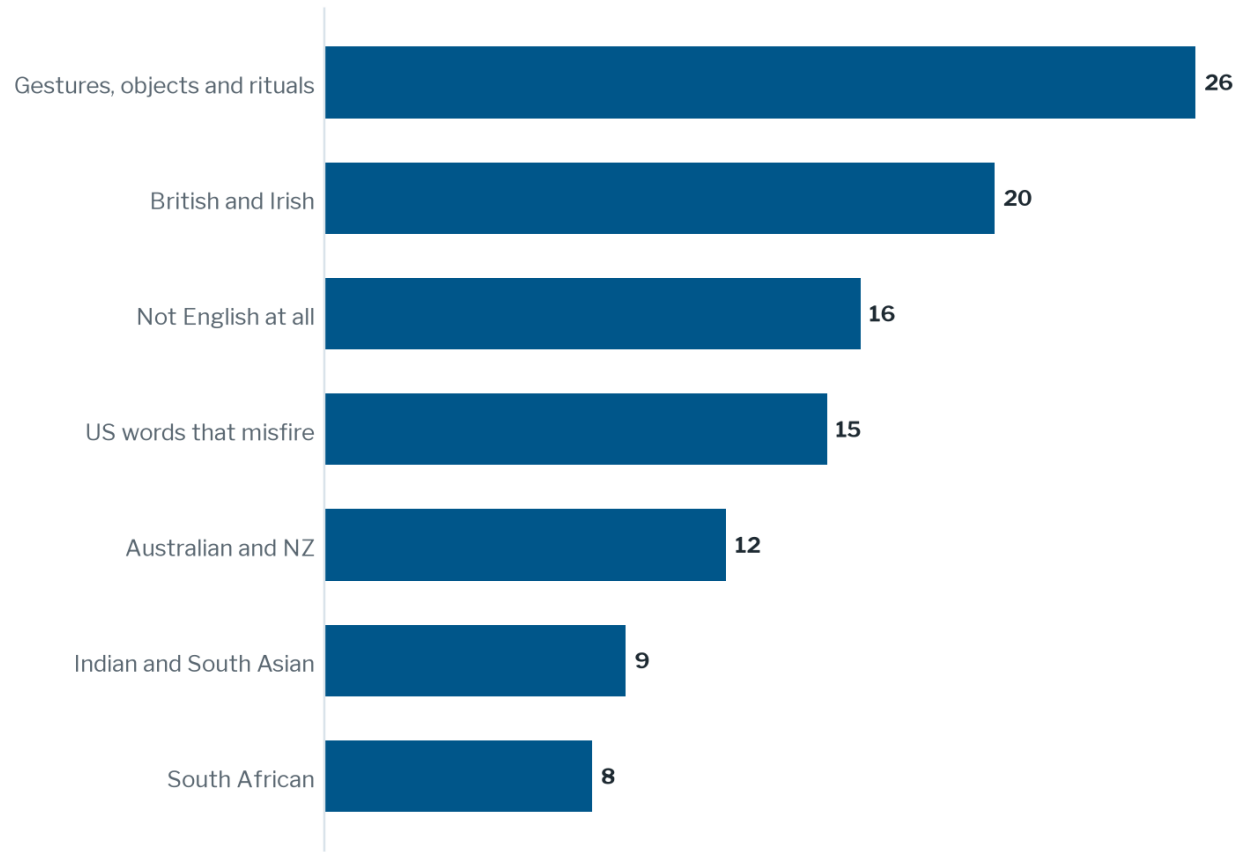
Word	In American English	Elsewhere	Say instead
table (verb)	To postpone or shelve	UK: to bring forward for discussion	Postpone, or put on the agenda
pissed	Angry	UK, IE, AU, NZ: drunk	Annoyed
pants	Trousers	UK: underwear, or bad	Trousers
fanny	The buttocks	UK, IE, AU: the vulva	Bum bag, for the pack
rooting for	Cheering for	AU, NZ: having sex with	Cheering for
first floor	Ground level	UK and most of Europe: one floor up	Ground floor, or level one
public school	State funded	UK: private and fee-paying	State school, or independent school
momentarily	In a moment	UK: for a moment	Shortly
nonplussed	Unbothered, in informal US use	Everywhere else: bewildered	Avoid the word entirely
quite	Very	UK: somewhat, or not really	Very, or fairly, chosen deliberately
homely	Plain, unattractive	UK: cosy, welcoming	Welcoming
rubber	A condom	UK, IE, AU, IN: an eraser	Eraser
suspenders	Braces for trousers	UK: a garter belt	Braces
scheme	A shady plot	UK: a programme or plan, as in pension scheme	Programme
knock up	To make pregnant	UK: to wake someone by knocking	Avoid in both directions

Not English at all

Word	Language	What it actually means	How it goes wrong
preservatif	French	A condom	Asking whether the catering contains preservatives.
excite	French	Sexually aroused	Je suis excite about the partnership. Say enthousiaste.
baiser	French	As a verb, to have sex	The noun means kiss. The verb does not. Use embrasser.
Gift	German	Poison	Here is a small Gift for you, said while handing over a bottle.
Mist	German	Manure; a mild expletive	Naming a product Mist. It has happened more than once.
Handy	German	A mobile phone	Not convenient. A very handy device means a very phone device.
bekommen	German	To receive	Not to become. I want to become a steak is the standard example.
coger	Spanish (MX, AR, CL, PE, UY)	To have sex	Voy a coger un taxi is unremarkable in Madrid and startling in Mexico City.
concha	Spanish (AR, UY, CL)	The vulva	It means seashell elsewhere, is a pastry in Mexico, and is a woman's name in Spain.
embarazada	Spanish	Pregnant	Estoy embarazada is not an apology for a mistake.
pajero	Spanish	A masturbator	Mitsubishi renamed the vehicle Montero for exactly this reason.
molestar	Spanish	To bother or annoy	No quiero molestar is polite. The English cognate is not.
rapariga	Portuguese (BR)	A prostitute or a mistress	In Portugal it simply means girl. The most dangerous word between the two countries.
preservativo	Italian, Spanish, Portuguese	A condom	The same trap as French, in three more markets.
fitta	Swedish, Norwegian, Danish	The vulva, vulgar	Honda renamed the Fitta to Fit and Jazz before launch.

Word	Language	What it actually means	How it goes wrong
puta / puto	Spanish, Portuguese, Tagalog	Whore	Force varies enormously by country. Never a safe intensifier.

FIGURE 4 What the 106 glossary entries cover



ASSESSMENT Entry counts from this document. This is a map of where I looked, not of where risk is densest. British entries are over-represented because Britain has the best severity data and because the report started with a British incident, not because Britain is necessarily the most hazardous market.

ASSESSMENT Two absences in that distribution are deliberate and worth naming. There is no Chinese, Japanese or Korean vocabulary section, because the failure mode in those markets is pragmatic rather than lexical: you are unlikely to produce an accidental obscenity in a language you do not speak, and very likely to misread a refusal. And there is no African or Middle Eastern language coverage beyond gesture and ritual, because I could not find sources on those markets I was willing to put a FACT label on. That is a gap in the report, not evidence of a gap in the world.

What to actually do about it

Three audiences will read this differently, so the guidance is separated. All of it assumes you are not going to learn a language, because you are not.

If you speak or teach across borders

ASSESSMENT Strip idiom out of anything scheduled. The words that ambushed me were not vocabulary, they were a compressed farewell, and compression is where the risk lives. Say see you on Tuesday, cheering for you, postpone the motion, moving the meeting earlier. It costs a syllable. Then, separately, ask one trusted person in each market to read your standing materials for anything that lands wrong, which will find in ten minutes what a handbook will not find in a year.

If you run a team that spans markets

ASSESSMENT Move the training budget off gestures and onto two things. First, current acceptable terms for people in each market you operate in, refreshed annually, because that is the category that produces formal complaints and it is the category that moves fastest. Second, a hard rule that verbal agreement is not agreement: every meeting ends with next step, owner and date in writing. That single practice defeats the polite no everywhere without anyone needing to know they are being defeated.

If you are buying cultural training

ASSESSMENT Ask the vendor which of the fifteen stories in the audit table they teach, and how they source them. Anyone still teaching the Chevrolet Nova is reading from a deck they did not check, and the same lack of checking will be in everything else they sell you. It is a thirty-second test and it is the most informative question you can ask in the room.

What this document cannot answer

Whether any of this costs measurable money. There is no employer-side dataset linking cross-cultural language error to deal loss, complaint volume or attrition, and the dollar figures circulating in the translation industry are unsourced. Answering it would need a survey of legal and HR functions at multinationals about the actual incidence and disposition of cross-border language complaints, which nobody has published and which would be commercially sensitive.

Whether the severity gap between profanity and identity language holds outside Britain. The Ofcom research is the only large structured word-rating exercise I could find, and it covers one country. Whether Australian, Indian, Nigerian or Singaporean English shows the same asymmetry is an open question and the answer would change how this report generalises.

Whether gesture risk has decayed as far as I think it has. My assessment that the thumbs-up warning is overstated rests on adoption reports rather than fieldwork. A replication of the 1979 Morris study across the same sites would settle it, and it is the single most valuable piece of primary research anyone could do in this area.

How much of this survives machine translation and real-time captioning. If most cross-border business conversation ends up passing through a model that normalises register, several categories in this report become historical. I do not know whether that is two years away or twenty, and I have not seen anyone measure whether current systems handle the polite no correctly, which is the case that matters.

Half-life of this assessment

Six months. The emoji register material, which is generational fashion and already shifting; younger professionals reading the thumbs-up as curt is a 2022 to 2026 phenomenon and there is no reason to expect it to persist. Also the specific currency of Australian and South African slang entries, which turn over faster than the British ones.

Twelve to twenty-four months. Everything resting on Ofcom's 2021 ratings, since a further wave will restate the bands and some words will move; the 2016 and 2021 waves already differ. Also the OK sign, whose extremist association is recent, contested, and could either harden or fade.

Architectural, and unlikely to move in a decade. The false friends, which are fossilised divergences in Latin-derived vocabulary and have been stable for centuries. The homophone taboos in Chinese, Japanese and Korean, which are properties of the languages themselves. The register flips between American and British English, which have survived two hundred years of contact without resolving. And the polite no, which is a feature of how high-context cultures preserve face and will outlast every word in the glossary.

The corporate blunder audit does not decay, it only accumulates. The debunked stories will keep circulating regardless, which is the entire reason the table is in here.

Limitations

I have no commercial relationship with any translation agency, cultural training provider, or publisher of etiquette material, and this report is critical of that industry's evidentiary standards. It was not commissioned by anyone. I have deliberately avoided citing the sector's own content marketing except where the claim is checkable elsewhere.

The evidence base is lopsided by design and by necessity. One category of claim, the British severity ratings, rests on a large regulator-commissioned study with published methodology. Everything else rests on reference works, contemporaneous press, one court judgment, one book of field research from 1979, and practitioner consensus. Where I am relying on practitioner consensus, the label says ASSESS and you should read it as one experienced person's reading rather than as evidence.

Ofcom asked about broadcast, not about work. That gap is the largest single weakness in the report and I have not closed it. A word acceptable to broadcast after nine at night is not thereby acceptable in a client meeting, and the mapping between the two is intuition, not data.

The glossary is not a sample of anything. It is what I encountered, was told, or went looking for, weighted toward English because I speak it and toward Britain because that is where the incident happened. It will over-represent the traps that catch Americans and under-represent every other direction of travel, including all the ways I am certainly being misheard without anyone telling me.

Finally, every entry describes a tendency. Real usage is decided by tone, relationship, region, age and the room, and a word listed here as dangerous is used affectionately somewhere by people

who have earned the right to. Nothing in this document licenses correcting how anyone else speaks.

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