



Living in Australia – cultural differences and misunderstandings included

What is said can be very different from its meaning

It's not a surprise that a message can be interpreted in different ways from what is meant. Living and working in Australia I came across minor and major misunderstandings caused by this divergence of wording and meaning.

When dealing with a language other than your native tongue, reading between the lines can be quite tricky. It needs a great deal of attention, understanding of cultural background and sometimes investigation to get to know the real intention of the message.

This Info letter contains selected expressions that are commonly used and generally with consistent intention. Please have a read through these examples to get an idea of how orders, demands and suggestions can be expressed with native English speakers.

Feedback wanted?

A colleague asks your opinion on a presentation. After appreciating his work on the charts you address points which require more details as they will be new to the meeting. Nothing wrong with that?!

Well, the request was not necessarily meant to be taken literally. Telling your colleague how to do something "better" could be taken as saying she/he did a bad job.

Asking for feedback Australians do not expect to be criticised. If the over-all impression is ok, acknowledge the effort put into the presentation and only point out something you really like about it.

Pointing out the priority

Imagine you are busy working on a document which is due to be sent to the client when your manager asks: "When you have a chance, could you please send me the charts of our last meeting?"

The intro "When you have a chance" does not mean "When you have the time to do it..." It actually expresses the opposite and points out the priority of this task. It is a non demanding way of saying, "I'm ready for it now!"

Its importance is so high that the sender uses this wording to balance the request. It's a way to take off pressure of people and certainly a reason why the work atmosphere in Australia appears so relaxed to Europeans.

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Take a detour to your point

A colleague is meant to fly back to their office and you want to drop him off at the airport. You're having lunch together when you realise: 'It's nearly 1:00 pm. Time to head to the airport.' Now expressing this you have to take a little detour.

You: "Kris, I know you told me, but what time is your flight again?"

Kris: "At 2:00 pm."

You: "What time do you have to be at the airport then, half an hour before?"

Kris: "Yeah. 1:30 pm latest."

You: "It's 12:50 now. Should we ask for the bill? What do you think?"

Kris: "Yeah. Good call. We should get going soon."

Instead of making the suggestion to leave it is more effective to start off asking questions. Put things in a way so the questions lead to the point you want to address. Give the other person the chance to mention what you intended to suggest. Like this you are sure to make your point.

Why to give a generous offer a miss

You're flying to Sydney to catch up with friends. On the phone:

"Let me know what time you're arriving and I'll come and pick you up. Or I can send you the address of the venue if you want. It's really close to the airport."

The first offer, to pick you up, demonstrates the generosity of the person. But it would be inappropriate to take advantage of that. Imagine he'd have to renege as he is not able to pick you up. That would put him in an awkward situation which would make you feel uncomfortable, too. So what to do?

If an offer is accompanied by an alternative, that's the one to respond to: "Yeah, if you could text me the details that'd be great. I'll catch a cab and meet you there. Thanks mate!"

Think down under

It is not surprising that cultural differences lead to misunderstandings. These examples show how things are expressed different from what we are used to in Germany, certainly less direct and rather reactive than pro-active.

Thinking down under will help you integrate into your Australian surrounding or dealing with native English speaking business partners.


 A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Attif Gharbi".