Chapter 5

Language

Topics

- **High- and Low-context Language**
- **Language Diversity**
- **The Language of Numbers**
- **Informal and Alternative Languages**
- **Forms of Verbal Interaction**
- **Linear and Nonlinear Language**
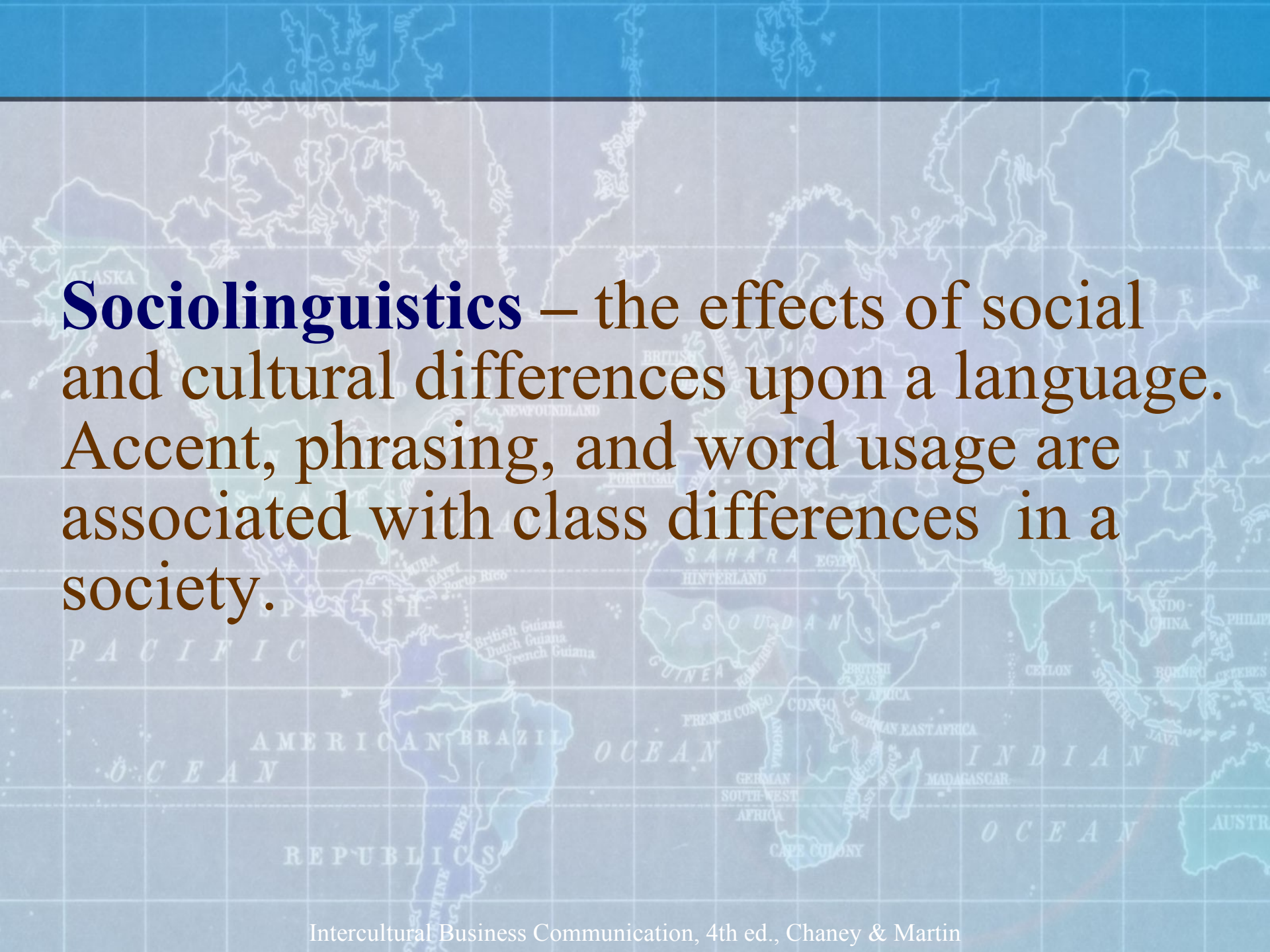- **Vocabulary Equivalence**

Topics

- **Parables and Proverbs**
- **Conversation Taboos**
- **The Nature of Language**
- **Translation Problems**
- **Interpreter Use**
- **Host Language**
- **Thought**
- **Language and Culture Interaction**

Example of Intercultural Miscommunication

An American magazine editor was hosting a group of Chinese when one of them said, "Please explain what is a turkey."
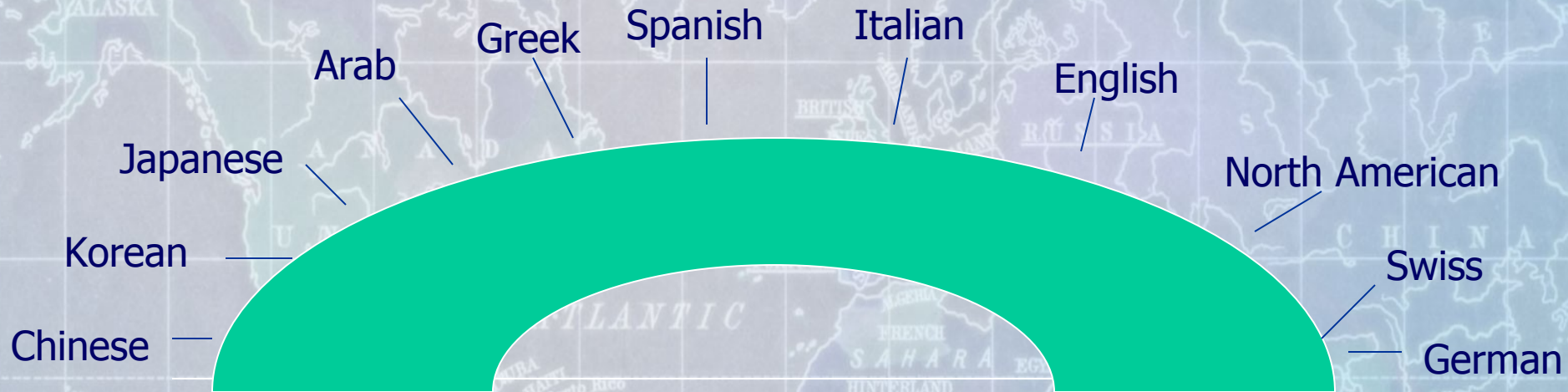
The editor launched into a lengthy explanation of the ungainly American bird that has become the centerpiece at American Thanksgiving tables. Then, of course, he had to explain about the American holiday, Thanksgiving.

The Chinese waited patiently and then replied, "Well, I still do not understand what is meant when you Americans say "Come on, you turkey, let's get moving."

Sociolinguistics – the effects of social and cultural differences upon a language. Accent, phrasing, and word usage are associated with class differences in a society.

High-Context and Low-Context Cultures

Chinese

Korean

Japanese

Arab

Greek

Spanish

Italian

English

North American

Swiss

German

High Context
- Establish social trust first
- Value personal relations and goodwill
- Agreement by general trust
- Negotiations slow and ritualistic

Low Context
- Get down to business first
- Value expertise and performance
- Agreement by specific, legalistic contract
- Negotiate as efficient as possible

Adapted from Hall (1976)

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High-Context Language

- **Nonverbal; cultural aspects are important**

- **Language transmits little of the explicit message**
  - **Example: Japanese language**

- **Restricted code - speech coding system of high-context languages; spoken statement reflects the social relationship**

Low-Context Language

- **Message is explicit**
- **May be given in more than one way to assure understanding**
- **Very direct and verbal**
  - **Example: U.S. (high-context language viewed as a waste of time)**
- **Elaborated code - speech coding system of low-context languages; verbal elaboration is necessary due to few shared assumptions**

Language Diversity Problems

- **Diversity of dialects and accents within a language (the U.S. has over 140 languages and dialects; in 14 percent of homes a native language other than English is spoken)**

- **Word meanings, pronunciations, and accents even among people who speak the same language**

- **Foreigners who speak their native language on the job or in the presence of members of the home country**

Language of Numbers

- **Comma and decimal point usage**
  - **8.642 in Europe equals 8,642 in U.S.**
  - **34,5 in Europe equals 34,5 in U.S.**
- **A billion (1,000,000,000) in the U.S. is a milliard in Russia, Italy and Turkey**
- **A trillion in the U.S. is a billion in Germany, Austria, The Netherlands, Hungary, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Spain, Portugal, Serbia, Croatia, and South American countries**
- **Other variations: Cross zeros and sevens; 1 looks like a V**

Informal and Alternative Languages

- **Informal language** – takes the form of slang, colloquialisms, and jargon in the United States.

- **Alternative languages** – give certain groups a sense of identity and cohesiveness; *Argot* and *Cant* are alternative languages.

Informal Languages

- **Slang** - Idioms (accepted expressions having meanings other than the literal)
  - Ex: bottom line

- **Colloquialisms** - Informal words/phrases often associated with certain regions of the country.
  - Ex: y'all (you all), pop (soda)

Slang Expressions

- **asleep at the switch: inattentive**
- **back off: moderate one's stand or speed if driving**
- **blockbuster: great success**
- **cutthroat: harsh**
- **eat one's words: retract**
- **garbage: nonsense**
- **get off the ground: start successfully**
- **have someone's number: know the truth about someone**

Informal Languages

- **Euphemisms** - Inoffensive expressions used in place of offensive words or those with negative connotations
  - Ex: pass away for die
- **Jargon** - Technical terminology used within specialized groups
- **Acronyms** - Words formed from the initial letters or groups of letters of words in a phrase and pronounced as one word.
  - Ex: RAM, ICU

Alternative Languages

- **Argot** – a vocabulary used by nonprofessional, noncriminal groups (truck drivers, circus workers)

- **Cant** – the vocabulary of undesirable co-cultures (drug dealers, murderers, gangs, prostitutes)

- **Ebonics** – language of African Americans – bad (meaning best)

Forms of Verbal Interaction

- **Repartee** - Conversation in which parties take turns speaking/listening for short periods.

- **Verbal dueling** - Like gamesmanship; purpose is to see who can gain dominance in a friendly debate.

- **Ritual conversation** - Involves standard replies and comments for a given situation.

- **Self-disclosure** - Form of interaction which involves telling other people about you so they may get to know you better.

Linear/Nonlinear Language

- **Linear Language**
  - **Has a beginning and an end**
  - **Is logical**
  - **Is object oriented**
  - **Linear languages look at time on a continuum of present, past, and future (English).**
- **Nonlinear Language**
  - **Is circular**
  - **Is tradition oriented**
  - **Is subjective**
  - **Nonlinear languages look at time as cyclical and seasons as an ever-repeating pattern (Chinese and Japanese).**

Vocabulary Equivalence

- All words in one language may not have an exact translation in the other language. Word pairs in English (far and wide, good and bad) do not carry the same relationship when translated to other languages.

- **Homonyms** (words that sound alike but have different meanings)

- Problems may occur when voice tone and pitch can change the meaning (Chinese).

International Blunders

Signs in shop windows:
"We sell dresses for street walking."
(French shop)
"Order your summer suit. Because if big rush we will execute customers in strict rotation."
(Tailor in Jordon)

Tokyo hotel posted this sign:
"You are respectfully requested to take advantage of the chambermaids."

International Blunders

When Pope John Paul II visited Miami several years ago, a local businessman thought he would profit by printing messages on T-shirts declaring in Spanish, "I saw the Pope." He earned more laughs than money; the shirts were printed with "La Papa" rather than "El Papa" and, therefore, proclaimed that the wearer had seen "the potato."

International Blunders

A toy bear, made in Taiwan, "sang" Christmas carols in English. One song, though, didn't quite come out correctly: It was "Oh Little Town of Birmingham." (It helps to know the story.)

Parables and Proverbs

- **Parable** - a story told to convey a truth or moral lesson.

- **Proverb** - a saying that expresses a common truth.

U.S. Proverbs

- "The early bird gets the worm."
- "Waste not, want not."
- "Better to remain quiet and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt."
- "He who holds the gold makes the rules."

Chinese Proverbs

- "Man who waits for roast duck to fly into mouth must wait very, very long time."
- "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."
- "Give a man a fish, and he will live for a day; give him a net, and he will live for a lifetime."
- "He who sows hemp will reap hemp; he who sows beans will reap beans."

German Proverbs

- "No one is either rich or poor who has not helped himself to be so."

- "He who is afraid of doing too much always does too little."

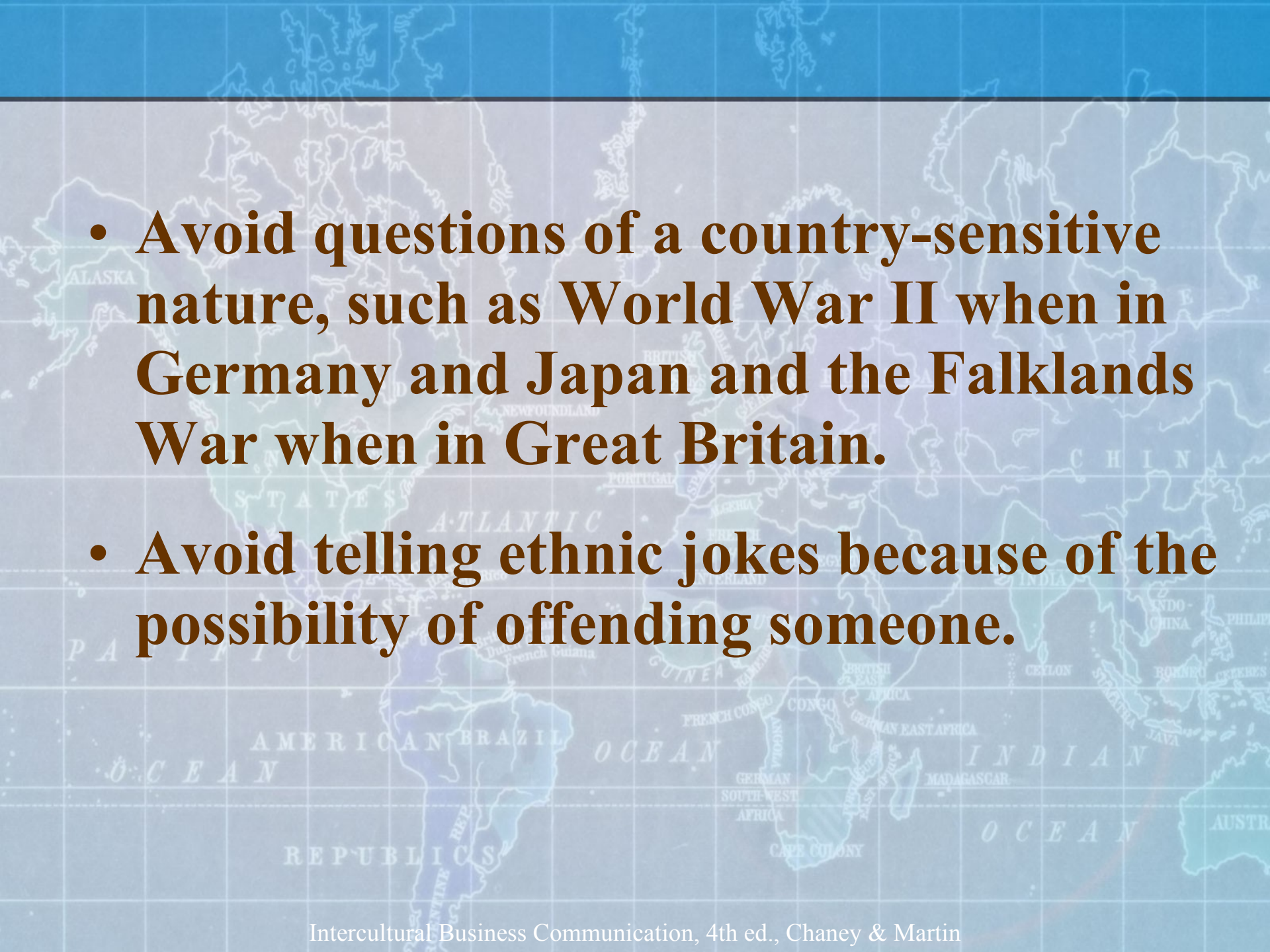- "What's the use of running if you're not on the right road."

Japanese Proverbs

- "The nail that sticks up gets knocked down."
- "Silence is golden."
- "A wise hawk hides his talons."

Conversation Taboos

General Guidelines

- **Avoid discussing politics or religion unless the other person initiates the discussion.**

- **Avoid highly personal questions, including prices, age, or personal life.**

- **Keep the conversation positive. Avoid asking questions that would imply criticism.**

- **Avoid questions of a country-sensitive nature, such as World War II when in Germany and Japan and the Falklands War when in Great Britain.**

- **Avoid telling ethnic jokes because of the possibility of offending someone.**

The Nature of Language

- **SEMANTICISTS** are concerned with the meaning of words.

- **GRAMMARIANS** see language as a series of grammatical forms, roots, and endings.

- **NOVELISTS** believe that language is a series of words arranged to produce a harmonious or logical effect.

- **LINGUISTS** focus on the phonetic aspects of language, defining language as a series of sounds produced by speakers and received by listeners.
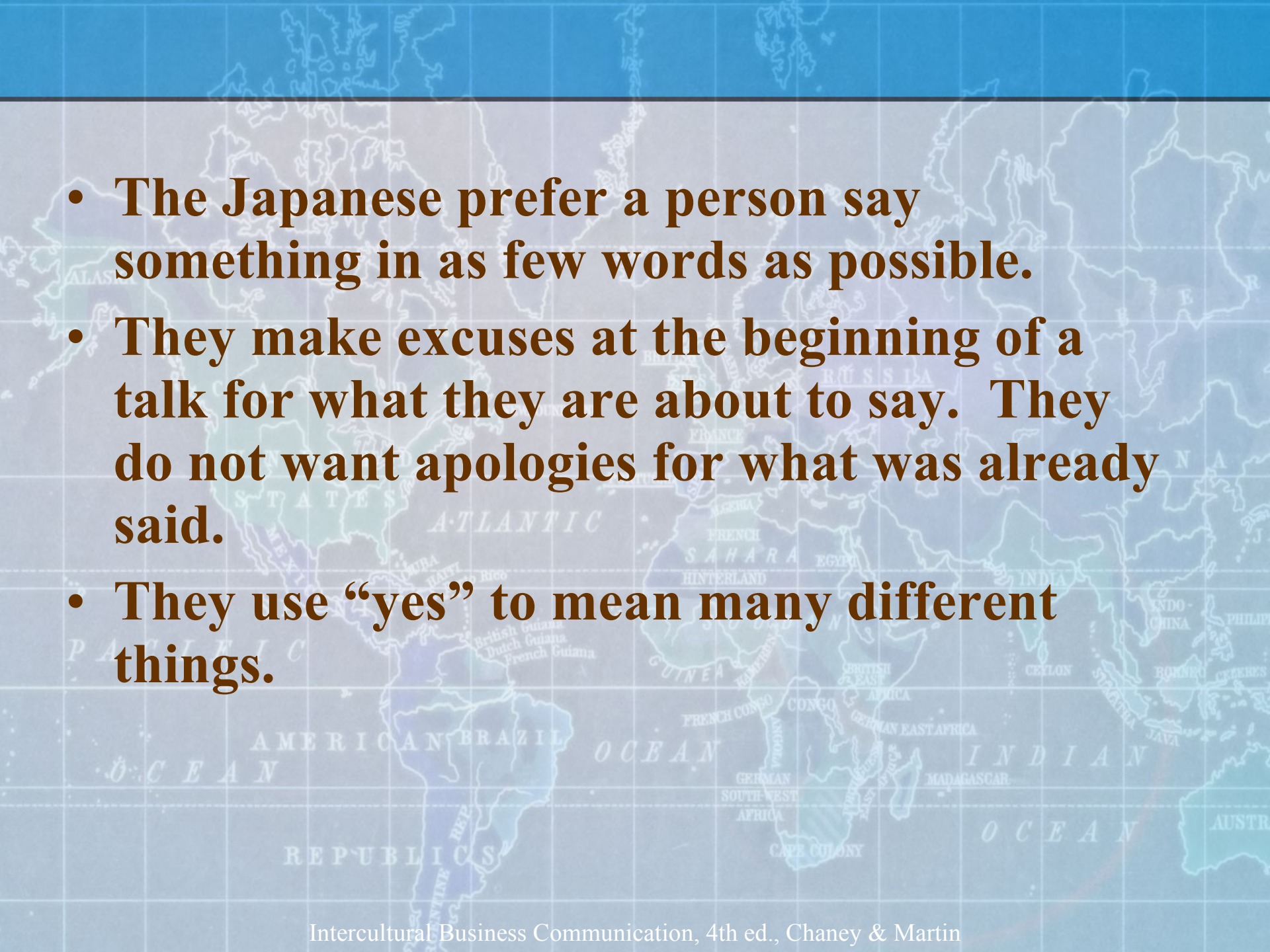
How Languages Differ

- **Syntactic Rules** – arrangement of words in a sentence. Subject, verb, object can be combined in six possible ways. English follows mainly a subject-verb-object order (as do French and Spanish). Japanese and Korean have the preferred order of subject-object-verb. Hebrew and Welsh follow verb-subject-object. The object does not come first in any language.

- **Meanings -** Denotative (Japanese Spider Crab), Connotative (Alaskan King Crab), and Figurative (kicking the bucket)

Variations in Verbal Style
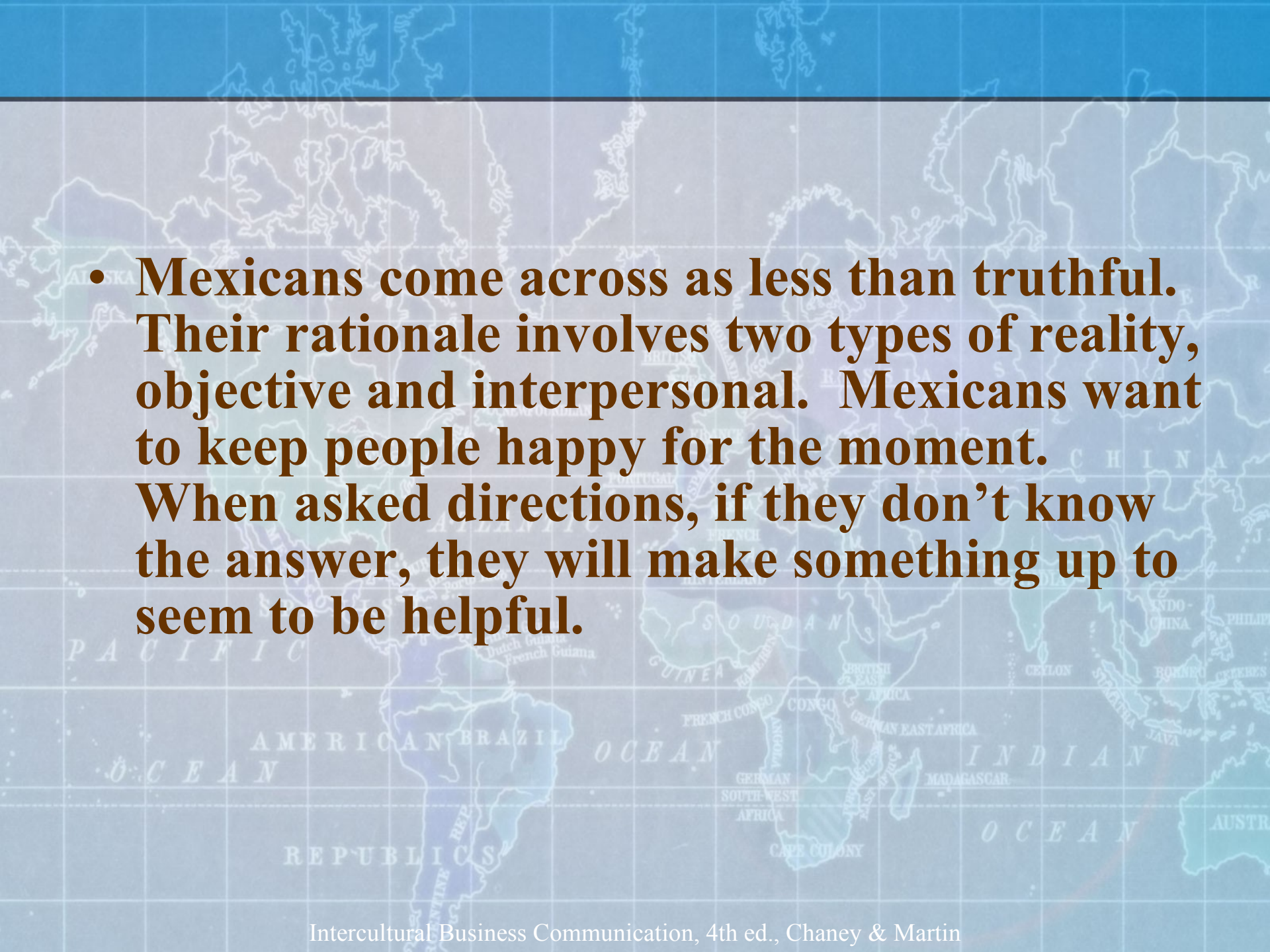## Japanese Verbal Style

- **The Japanese converse without responding to what the other person says. Emphasis is on nonverbal communication so they do not listen.**

- **They prefer less talkative persons and value silence.**

- **The Japanese prefer a person say something in as few words as possible.**
- **They make excuses at the beginning of a talk for what they are about to say. They do not want apologies for what was already said.**
- **They use "yes" to mean many different things.**

Variations in Verbal Style

Mexican Verbal Style

- **The Mexican style seems overly dramatic and emotional by U.S. persons.**

- **Mexicans rise above fact; they embellish facts; eloquence is admired.**

- **They like to use diminutives, making the world smaller and more intimate. They add suffixes to words to shrink problems. U.S. persons, on the other hand, like to augment everything. Other cultures think U.S. persons are boasting.**

- **Mexicans come across as less than truthful. Their rationale involves two types of reality, objective and interpersonal. Mexicans want to keep people happy for the moment. When asked directions, if they don't know the answer, they will make something up to seem to be helpful.**
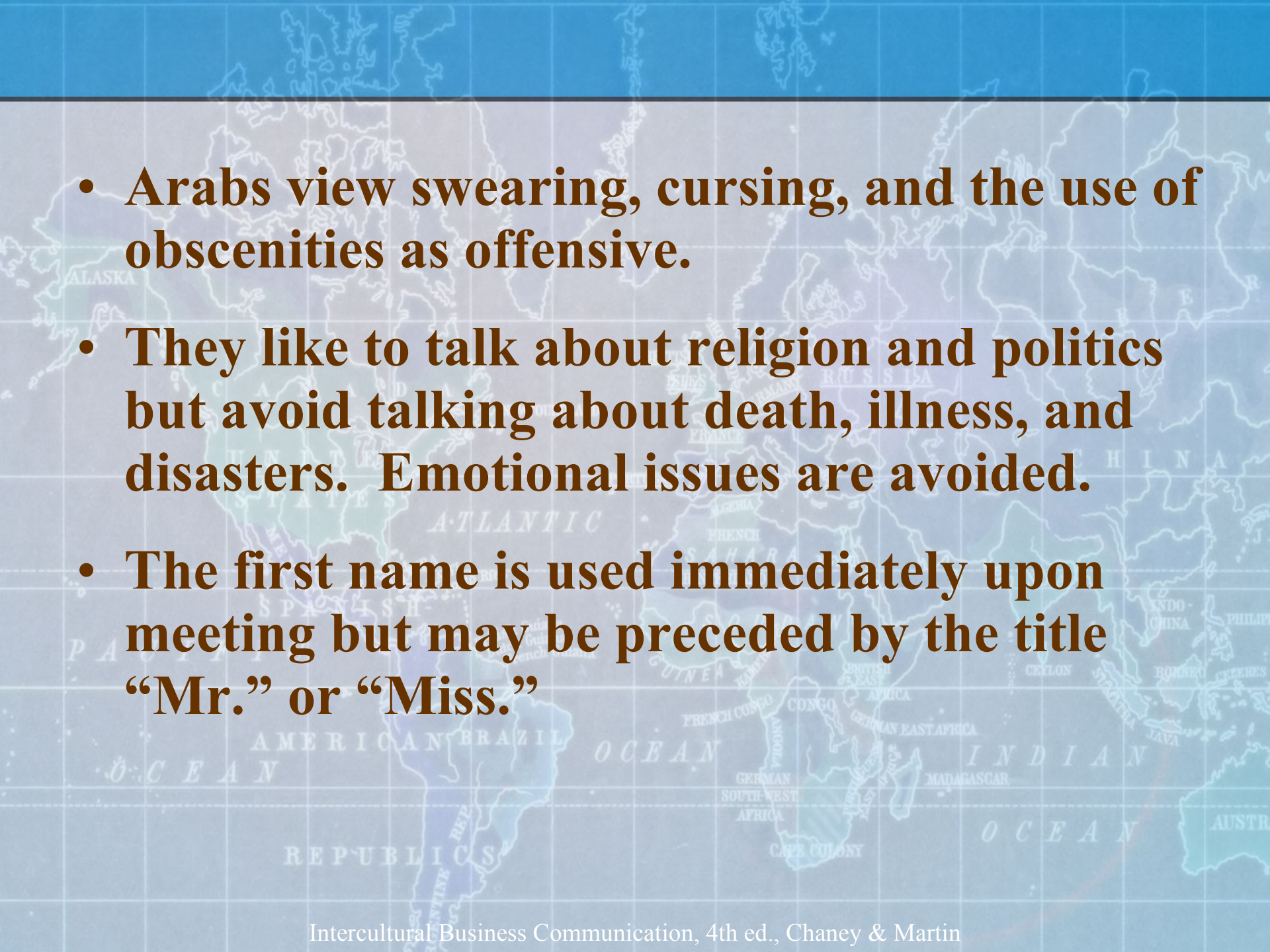
Variations in Verbal Style

Chinese Verbal Style

- **The Chinese understate or convey meanings indirectly. They use vague terms and double negatives. Even criticism is indirect.**

- **Harmony is very important. During negotiations, the Chinese state their position in such a way that seems repetitious. They do not change their point of view without discussing it with the group.**

- **They speak humbly and speak negatively of their supposedly meager skills and those of their subordinates and their family.**

Variations in Verbal Style
Verbal Styles in the Arab World

- The Arabs encourage eloquence and "flowery" prose. They are verbose, repetitious, and shout when excited.

- For dramatic effect, they punctuate remarks with pounding the table and making threatening gestures.

- **Arabs view swearing, cursing, and the use of obscenities as offensive.**

- **They like to talk about religion and politics but avoid talking about death, illness, and disasters. Emotional issues are avoided.**

- **The first name is used immediately upon meeting but may be preceded by the title "Mr." or "Miss."**

Variations in Verbal Style

German Verbal Style

- In the German language, the verb often comes at the end of the sentence. In oral communication, Germans do not get to the point right away.

- Germans are honest and direct; they stick to the facts. They are a low-context people; everything is spelled out.

- Germans usually do not use first names unless they are close friends (of which they have few).

- They do not engage in small talk; their conversations are serious on a wide variety of topics. Avoid discussions of their private life.
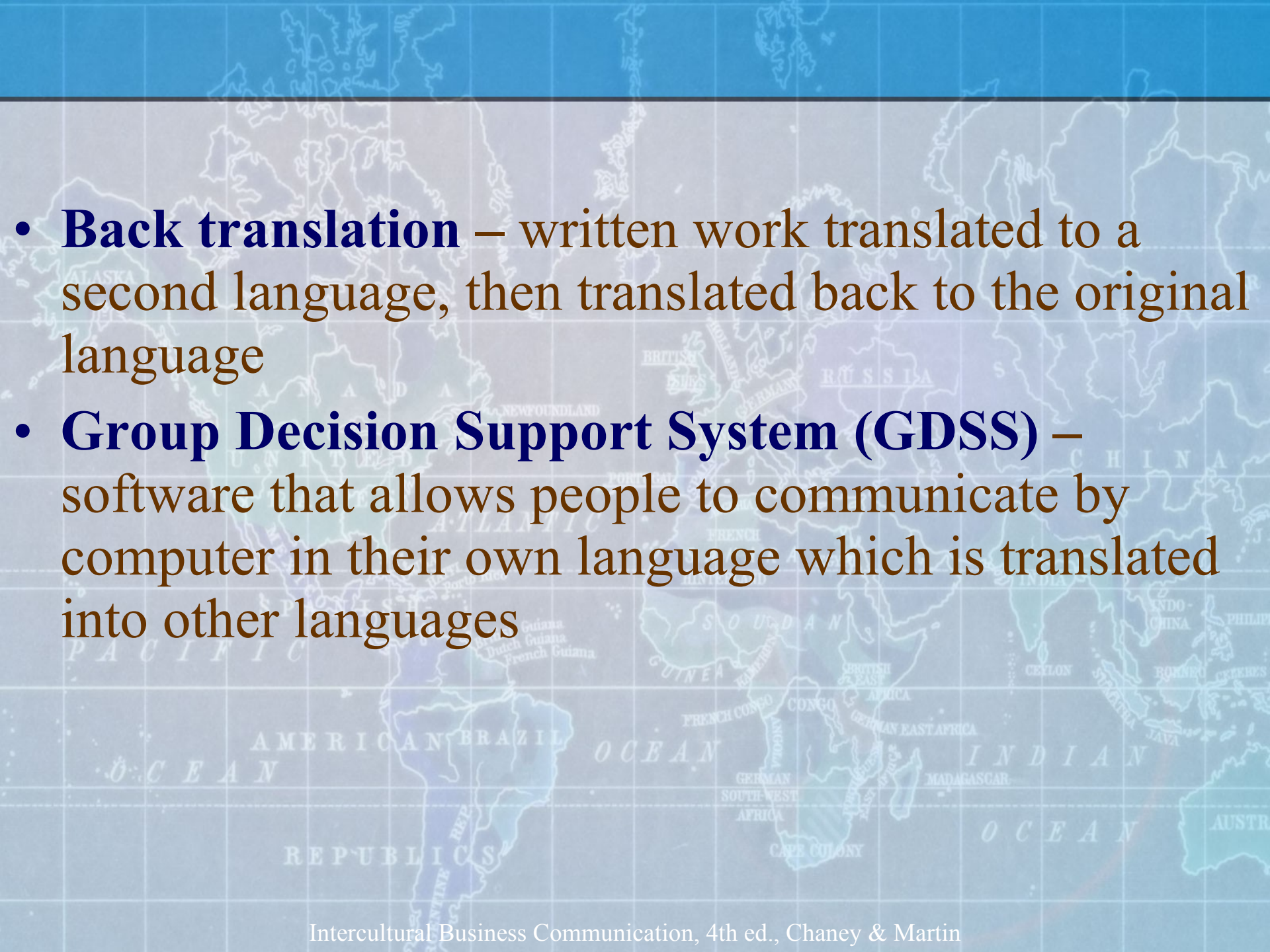
Variations in Verbal Style

Language Variations in the U.S.

- **Age - some words are specific to an age group ("cool").**

- **Gender - men speak more, and they repeat more often than women; women are more emotional and use such terms as "sweet," "darling," and "dreadful."**

- **Race - Black English includes such terms as rapping (a narration to a musical beat).**

- **Regional Variations - distinctive language patterns exist in various parts of the U.S.**

Problems with Translators

Former President Jimmy Carter's interpreter in Poland announced that the President was pleased to be there grasping their secret parts. If a President's interpreter could make such a blunder, it's reasonable to assume that your translator could do as much damage.

- **Back translation** – written work translated to a second language, then translated back to the original language
- **Group Decision Support System (GDSS)** – software that allows people to communicate by computer in their own language which is translated into other languages

English Abroad:
Something's Lost in Translation

- **Outside a Hong Kong tailor shop:**
  Ladies may have a fit upstairs.

- **In a Copenhagen airline ticket office:**
  We take your bags and send them in all directions.

- **In a Tokyo shop:**
  Our nylons cost more than common, but you'll find they are best in the long run.

- **At a Budapest zoo:**

  Please do not feed the animals. If you have any suitable food, give it to the guard on duty.
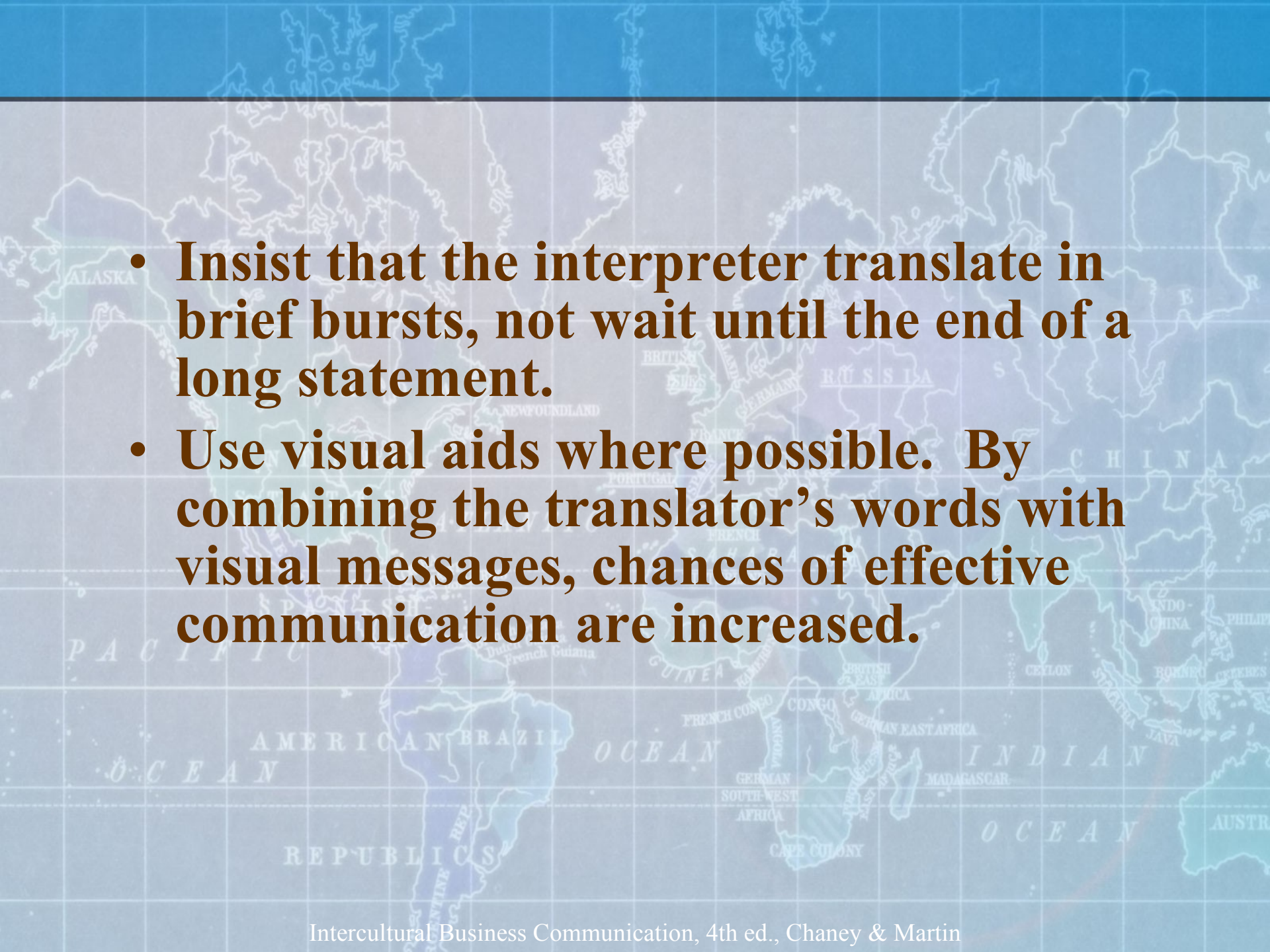
- **In a Paris hotel elevator:**

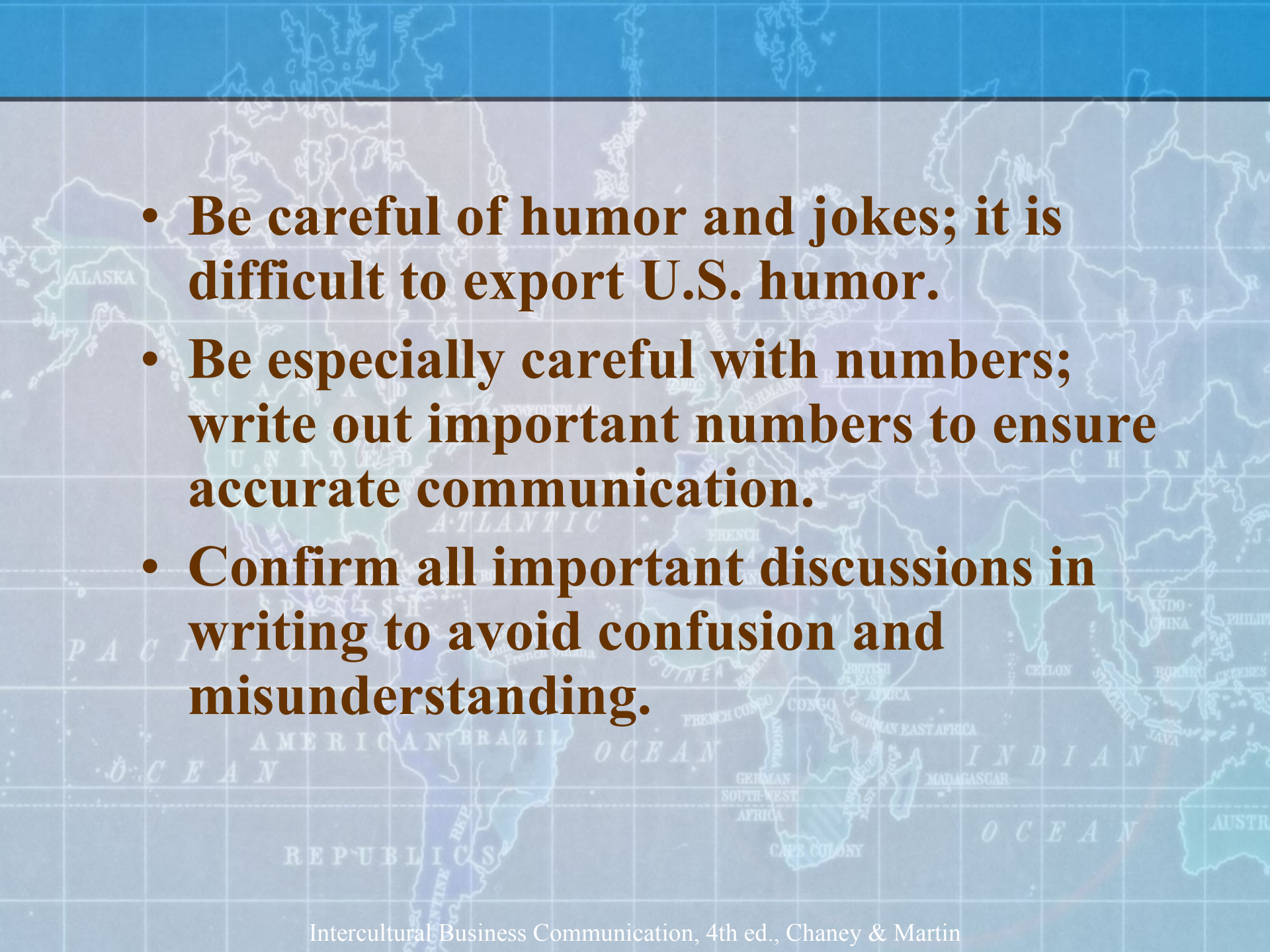 **Please leave your values at the front desk.**

- **In a hotel in Athens:**

  Visitors are expected to complain at the office between the hours of 9 and 11 a.m. daily.

Interpreter Use

- **Get to know the interpreter in advance. Your phrasing, accent, pace, and idioms are all important to a good interpreter.**
- **Review technical terms in advance.**
- **Speak slowly and clearly.**
- **Don't be afraid to use gestures and show emotion.**
- **Watch the eyes; they are the key to comprehension.**

- **Insist that the interpreter translate in brief bursts, not wait until the end of a long statement.**

- **Use visual aids where possible. By combining the translator's words with visual messages, chances of effective communication are increased.**

- **Be careful of humor and jokes; it is difficult to export U.S. humor.**

- **Be especially careful with numbers; write out important numbers to ensure accurate communication.**

- **Confirm all important discussions in writing to avoid confusion and misunderstanding.**

Host Language

When using the language of the host culture, avoid slang, jargon, and idioms. Use gestures cautiously. Determine if voice cadence and tone affect the meaning of the message.

Subjective Interpretation

An interpretation placed on the message that is affected by the thought processes – influenced by one's temperament, state of mind, or personal judgment.

Ways of Thinking

- **U.S.** – think in a functional, pragmatic way; they like procedural knowledge.

- **Europeans** – are more abstract; prefer declarative knowledge.

- **Japanese** – work with precedents and rules rather than abstract probability.

Thoughts Toward Nature

- **U.S. –** view nature as something to conquer.

- **Asians –** view nature as something with which to coexist.

- **Colombian Mestizos –** consider nature dangerous and have a fatalistic attitude toward it.

Language and Culture Interaction

- **Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis – The main idea is that language functions as a way of shaping a person's experience, not just a device for reporting that experience. Both structural and semantic aspects of a language are involved.**

- **Linguistic determinism is the assumption that a person's view of reality stems mainly from his or her language. Ex: The absence of the word *snow* in Inuit, the language of the Eskimo people. The language does, however, have numerous words for types of snow, while other languages do not have the equivalent of *flaky snow* or *crusty snow*.**

Bernstein Hypothesis

- **Explains how social structure affects language and is an extension of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.**

- **Bernstein considers culture, subculture, social context, and social system to be part of social structure.**

- **Speech emerges in one of two codes - restricted or elaborated.**

  - **Channels used in the restricted code would be oral, nonverbal, and paralinguistic. Restricted codes would include highly predictable messages.**

  - **Elaborated codes are used with strangers; involve messages that are low in predictability. Give very explicit information.**

  - **Verbal channel is important in elaborated codes, while restricted codes make use of nonverbal and paralinguistic cues.**