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## Business Day

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### ITINERARIES

## Not Lost in Translation

### A Few Phrases in Another Language Can Go a Long Way

By PAUL BURNHAM FINNEY

**W**ith corporate travelers now doing business in all four points of the globe, developing some fluency in foreign languages is getting to be as important as taking along a laptop on an overseas trip.

On a visit to Moscow a friendly *kak dela* (how are you doing?) can be an icebreaker when meeting a Russian contact, and an *obrigado* (thank you) when you exit a session in São Paulo may be just enough Portuguese to charm your Brazilian host.

Veterans of the overseas business circuit say that despite the spread of English worldwide, those linguistic gestures promote familiarity by showing that you have done your homework and care about getting along.

"I have five phrases wherever I go," said Sally A. Painter, a managing director of Dutko Global Advisors, a public-policy management firm, who takes overseas business trips two weeks a month to places as diverse as Argentina, Cambodia and Latvia.

"'Good day.' 'How are you?' 'Thank you very much.' 'It's been a pleasure to see you.' And 'many thanks,'" she said. "That's about it for my basic repertoire. I wish I had better language skills."

Business travelers insist that those snippets go a long way to impress foreign contacts. And it is no easy task mastering even a few phrases if the language is Mandarin, the hottest newcomer on the language-training scene.

"There is a big boom in the demand for it," said Thomas Uehara, director of United States operations for Berlitz International, arguably the best-known provider of language training. (Arabic is a distant second.)

Aware of the value of dealing in the mother tongue of their hosts, many traveling employees are now taking crash courses to develop more elaborate conversational skills.

"Business opportunities open up when you know what people are saying and don't just depend on what a translator can tell you," said Rosemary Feal, executive director of the Modern Language Association in New York.

"Our most popular course is five days — with give-and-take sessions for seven hours a day," Mr. Uehara said. "Our students say that after the second day, they start dreaming in the target language. That's when you



John Marshall Mantel for The New York Times



ROSETTA STONE

*Volker Helms, above left, learns Portuguese from Armando Sagasti, of Berlitz. The industry is at odds over whether live instruction or a CD-ROM, like those made by Rosetta Stone, left, works best.*

150 percent in our corporate business," the company's chief executive, Tom Adams, said. "Intel, for example, teaches its project engineers how to speak Chinese before shipping them to China."

Berlitz and Fairfield part ways on whether a live instructor or a CD program is a better teacher.

The instructor-student partnership, as Berlitz explains it, allows for considerable flexibility to fit individual needs. For instance, if you are about to make a swing through Latin America, Berlitz can rotate Argentine, Chilean, Colombian and Mexican teachers so that you can get acquainted with different Spanish accents.

On the other hand, the computer programs are versatile — you can plug them into your digital music player and learn while jogging or "killing time at the motor vehicle bureau," as one business traveler put it.

The venerable Berlitz, founded 128 years

know you're succeeding."

The price for such a weeklong course is \$2,500 plus study materials.

"It's lucrative — getting executives primed to go," said Mike Ferrari, director of merchandising at Barnes & Noble, who has seen a significant uptick in sales of CD language guides. "They'll pay a premium for fast training."

Leading the pack of today's high-tech trainers is Fairfield Language Technologies, which markets a CD-ROM self-learning system under the name Rosetta Stone.

"We're projecting annual growth of about

ago by Maximilian Berlitz in Providence, R.I., and now owned by the Benesse Corporation of Japan, is quietly updating its sacred methodology and going high-tech with what it calls Berlitz Virtual Classrooms.

It is really Berlitz online: you can be located almost anywhere in the world, and if you have a computer, a microphone and a headset or speakers, you can learn any of some 50 languages online.

Despite the itch to become language-smart, frequent travelers like Ms. Painter, the consultant, can easily fall back on English as the modern lingua franca of global business. It is the superpower's language — the one that foreign executives encounter worldwide in much the same way that French was a favorite among diplomats at one time.

"American business travelers assume everyone's going to know English," said Aaron Wunder, a project manager at Healthy Companies International, which advises executives on cultural matters like language fluency. "I haven't seen a big increase in the commitment to learn foreign languages."

In a 2002 survey of corporate executives, Healthy Companies found that most American executives could claim knowledge of only a smattering of another language. By contrast, Dutch executives on average could handle four languages.

"We couldn't survive in Holland without three or four languages at our fingertips," said Hans Buchenau, a Dutch businessman. "We speak Dutch, teach English as the second language, and border on Germany and French-speaking Belgium."

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## ***Mandarin and Arabic are popular right now on the language-training scene.***

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There is more reason to gain an aptitude in foreign languages than you might think, experienced world travelers say. For example, an American executive who was checking into the White Swan in Guangzhou, the former Canton, recalls how he was impressed by the staff's fluency in English until he asked for directions to the men's room and got a reply: "Your luggage will be delivered to your room." Rote word practice is not the same as understanding, he noted.

On a recent trip to Mumbai, India, Tom Russell, publisher of Random House's Living Language learning guides, ran across a commentary in a leading Indian publica-

tion that pointed out the hazards of the new "globish" language. It is a term used to describe the awkward English that is often spoken abroad "in fits and starts," he said. "It's just enough for a foreigner to get by in our tongue."

"Americans are getting a bit more adventurous with languages," he acknowledged, "but they're afraid of making fools of themselves."

In any case, major American companies are refining their thinking on how best to prepare employees for business dealings overseas. "They're letting them shop around and get reimbursed rather than pressuring them to attend corporate classes," said Mr. Uehara of Berlitz. Backing up this trend, Mr. Adams of Rosetta Stone said that "a lot of initiative is coming from individual employees."

To make learning languages easier, educators use every device from "Spanish for Dummies" and dolls that speak different languages to CD manuals you can play while driving. They stay away from brain-numbing recitations of French verbs.

"Tailor it to the customer," said Juan Gutierrez, president of the Ultimate Language Store in Richardson, Tex. "Some students learn from foreign TV stations and movies. We carry hundreds of foreign films. How about 'Lord of the Rings' in Italian?"