The 1997 Steven Spielberg film *Amistad* opens with a gory scene of West African people escaping their chains from the cargo area of a slave boat and revolting against their Spanish captors. As the next scene opens, it is obvious that the Mende people’s inability to communicate with the Spanish and Americans, who will decide their fate, with spoken language will be the central conflict of the rest of the movie. Throughout the film, characters seem to take for granted the power of understanding each other’s language. They speak to each other assuming the listener will comprehend their words and become frustrated when progress is not made between the two groups.

This film was interesting in that the actors playing each group of people used the language the groups would have used in reality, but subtitles were used sparsely at times, especially in the beginning scenes, to translate the Mende or Spanish language for the viewer. As such, the audience is sometimes confused about the explicit messages spoken between the Mende people, just like the characters in the movie who do not speak the Mende language. Later in the film, subtitles are used to highlight the miscommunications between the American lawyer, the American linguist, and the Mende people. The textbook discusses how the rocky communications between the two groups began with the Circular Model of Communication (Morris, 2016). Each group had its own perception of the other, believing their audience to be simple-minded and easy to figure out. Their attitudes and observations, formulated their conclusions and judgements of the other, which led to poor communications between the Americans and Mende, not only with verbal language, but also with nonverbal actions, as the Mende and Americans walk away from each other in frustration. Finally, a proper translator is found, and language is no longer the largest barrier between these two groups of people; in its place rises differences in politics and cultures which must be roughly translated between the two groups of people.

While pursuing my Spanish minor, I took a class in translation and interpretation and learned that when translating from one language to another, one does not simply translate the words one by one; instead, one must consider the context and connotations of the concepts in the language of origin and translate this core idea into the target language. This is described in the 2009 *Translation Studies* Journal article entitled “Cultural translation: An introduction to the problem, and Repsonses” in which translation is described as “an essentially cultural task.” The author, Boris Buden, goes further to describe translation as a “tangent which touches the … original at one single point only, thereafter to follow its own way” (Buden, 2009). By this, Buden means that the objective of translation is not to carry the exact word-for-word meaning of an original text or quote from one language to another, but to transmit the singular message that the speaker wants the audience to take from the interaction in a way that carries the same emotions and connotations for the audience as the speaker meant for the message to be understood.

The film *Amistad* addresses both of these issues of communication between people who use different languages. At first, the American lawyer must find a way to translate his English words into words that the Mende people will understand. He employs a linguistics expert so that he can try to ask the Mende where they come from. When that does not work, he attempts to use visuals such as pictures drawn in the dirt and charades to communicate his message, which is much more effective. Using this method, he is able to prove that the Mende people have had little to no exposure to the English or Spanish language. This is because, although it is claimed that the slaves tend to speak their native language amongst themselves while working on a plantation, they are immersed in the Spanish language via their owners. According to a 2012 study, people who learn a language via immersion have near-native competence (Morgan-Short et.al., 2012). As the Mende were unable to understand the words “stand up” in English or Spanish, the court concluded that they were not slaves from a Cuban plantation but were captured in Africa, an act which was illegal at the time.

After making some progress with simple words and concepts, a former British slave from West Africa volunteers to help the lawyer translate, allowing for more complex ideas to be transmitted between the Mende and Americans. At this point, conflicts arise from the inability to communicate cultural ideas and values. For example, the Mende people do not have a way to express the concept of “should”. Because of this, the leader of the Mende people, Cinque, feels betrayed after his lawyer promises him that if he wins their court case, the Mende will go free, when in fact the government appeals the case to the Supreme Court. The lawyer attempts to explain the discrepancy by telling Cinque what he “should” have said, but his translator does not know how to translate the concept of “should” into the Mende language as it does not exist because “either you do something, or you don’t do something, no ‘should’.” The lawyer adapts his message to say that what he said was “almost” what he meant and so Cinque becomes frustrated that the lawyer did not say exactly what he meant. After this argument and a temporary halt in communications between Cinque and the lawyer, Cinque begins to ask questions about the international politics surrounding his situation and the team of American lawyers learns more about the Mende culture so that they can properly communicate their concepts to each other in terms they will each understand. In the finale, it is the (translated) words of Cinque that the American lawyer uses to convince the court that the Mende people deserve to go free back to their home.

While watching this movie, I assumed that being unable to understand the words that someone is saying about you is extremely frustrating. I made this assumption because it was frustrating to be unable to understand every single word that was spoken throughout the film. As my team and I work to help people learning English as their second language through conversation tables, I expect that some frustrations might become apparent on both sides of the table due to an inability to comprehend each other. However, after watching this movie, I hope to be able to be as patient with my fellow conversers as the American lawyer was when attempting to communicate with his Mende clients. Though our language barriers will likely not be as extreme as that represented in the movie, we may still encounter some cultural differences that will be difficult to navigate.

**References**

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