The UB Foreign Language Roundtable

The Purpose of the Publication

To provide UB students with knowledge of the target cross-world cultures and societies, in a relaxed non- or semi-academic manner, in order to promote mutual understanding and respect among the people living in the target countries.

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Table of Contents

International versus Multicultural.................................................. Thomas J. Ward
Where It All Begins.....................................................Douglas J. House
An Appetite for Life—Agriculture and Traditional Markets in France...Justin Hume
Embracing Negative Culture..................................................Ikuko Anjo Jassey

The UB Foreign Language Roundtable is published by the International College twice a year: Spring and Fall.
International versus Multicultural
Dr. Thomas Ward
Dean of the International College

How do the terms International and Multicultural differ from each other? If one considers the etymology of the words, “international” literally means “between or among nations,” while “multicultural” means “many cultures.” In the American lexicon “multicultural” has come to refer to the many cultural overlays that shape and inform the United States. It is not an exaggeration to say that the United States of America is the most international country in the world, a venue which continues to attract new immigrants from all around the world. Whereas a century ago, the United States attracted Irish, Italians and Germans, today it attracts Russians, Mexicans, Chinese, Jamaicans and Nigerians. The United States’ immigration law was reformed in 1965 to end the bias that heavily favored those of northern or western European origin over other parts of Europe and made immigration from Africa or Asia virtually impossible.

As America’s ethnic and cultural make-up has broadened over the past fifty years, the need for an inclusive America has becoming increasingly apparent. Courses have developed in business schools on multicultural management and in schools of education we find courses on multicultural education. Courses across the curriculum, but especially in the social sciences and the humanities, have been transformed in order to allow American children to learn more about the many cultures and peoples that compose America, rather than only stressing America’s European underpinnings.

Indeed, America has made dramatic strides over the past half a century; however, we still have a long way to go. America still remains committed to the view that the United States is a melting pot into which the strengths of many cultures have been poured. Perhaps it is my own delusion as an American but when I listen to people from Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand speak, there is something common in their accent. I don’t hear the same thing in American English.

When I studied linguistics many decades ago, I was taught that whenever two languages come together, one language will become the spoken language but it will be very influenced by the language with which it has interfaced. In my view, the American accent differs so strongly from many other English-speaking nations with a majority European population because American English has been forced to rub shoulders with so many languages over the past four centuries. Yet American English remains the dominant language even if it is shrouded by the accouterments of the other languages that it interfaced with over this time. American multiculturalism allows for bilingual education in American schools but the eventual goal is for everyone to speak and work in American English.

One finds more than a dominant language, however, in the United States. There is also a dominant culture to which people are expected to adapt. In that sense, America appears to continue to subscribe the view that the United States is a “melting pot.” Eventually all of the cultures melt into and contribute to American culture, which has its distinct values and perspectives that continue to evolve over time. The United States is known for its pluralism, for its tolerance of almost
everything except intolerance. It fosters a worldview of acceptance and openness that many countries in the world are resistant to embracing.

In the nineteenth century, the United States and some other major Western powers fancied themselves as a civilizing force that brought God, freedom and prosperity to those who would embrace the philosophical underpinnings of the American worldview.

Over the past five decades, however, not only have the demographics of American immigration been transformed but the world order itself has undergone a shift. By 1990 the center of world trade no longer included the United States. For the first time in a century, the fulcrum of trade and economic growth again shifted to Asia. Also, we quickly approach a day in this century when the largest religion in the world will no longer be Christianity but Islam.

The dominant Western culture still stirs the pot in the United States but it does so, less and less, on the world scene. We increasingly live in an era in which a world-level melting pot of Hegelian liberalism, as had been foreseen by Francis Fukuyama in his article on “The End of History,” has become illusive. We live in an era when a new orientation is increasingly needed in education. In addition to multicultural education, there is now the need for genuine “international education.” International education does not have the “melting pot” as a part of its near term agenda. It seeks to understand other cultures in the world and to learn how they function. It discourages judging and encourages understanding without imposing a melting pot template, which, at this stage in history, is destined to fail.

When The Ugly American by William Lederer and Eugene Burdick appeared in 1958, it confirmed what we all knew too well—Americans can be brutally insensitive and deflate the morale of foreigners because of our insensitivity and an implicit sense of superiority. We need to learn about other cultures and not judge them pre-emptively because of ostensible contrasts with our own culture. We need to learn other languages and, in the process, discover the enviably respectful ways in which people of some countries relate to their friends, their spouses, their children, their elders and their guests.

One of the most remarkable experiences that you will ever have is the day when you are able to think in a language other than your own; on that day and perhaps on that day only can one begin to understand that there is more than one way to view the world and its challenges.
Where It All Begins
Professor Douglas J. House

I recall very clearly a rather portly, elderly woman walking into my third grade classroom one day. She stood about five foot five, had dyed red hair, gaudy jewelry, and a fashion sense that would have probably raised eyebrows among her peers. Yet, kindness was generated by her; a sweetness, really. As time would pass, her love for children would come to be manifested in so many ways. She was introduced by the homeroom teacher that day as our “French Teacher”. During the course of the next academic year, she would come for an hour or so twice a week to open up to us the world and culture of the French language.

For that hour, English was not spoken and she would begin with simple phrases: “Bonjour classe. Comment allez-vous aujourd’hui?” (Hello class. How are you today?). The correct responses became second nature to us. “Bonjour Madame. Nous allons bien, merci.” (Hello Madame. We are well, thank you.) And so would begin a linguistic journey. It was not so much a journey of memorizing French vocabulary or studying French verb tenses, but rather one that began by flirting with the French language itself; playing with it, learning its rhythm and cadence, listening as it was spoken and constructing phrases as new words were explored. There was no pressure but rather an environment where anyone who “tried” could be successful, whether blessed with a “language gene” or not.

As I think back to those days, I wonder how many others reflect about where their love of language began. As is so often the case, it begins in childhood. Studies have documented that childhood is the time to begin learning a foreign language. At times, others have raised concerns that learning another language can confuse young children when it comes to English, or whatever their native language might be. History, however, seems to prove this wrong. Children seem to be able to compartmentalize easily when it comes to languages. Consider, for instance all the children who grow up in bilingual families. Rarely is there confusion for children who can easily vacillate between English and the other language.

In addition, studies have demonstrated that the studying of foreign language early on in a child’s life assists him with a better understanding of English grammar. The ability both to use grammar and to understand how it works can serve later on as important building blocks for better writing. Studies have also demonstrated that children who receive bilingual instruction show stronger capabilities in creative thinking and learning (Bamford, K.W., & Mizokawa, D.T. (1991). Other interesting data seem to indicate that students who have studied foreign languages during all four years of high school tend to perform better on Scholastic Aptitude Tests (College Entrance Exam Board, 1992).

So where does this leave us when it comes to the studying of foreign language and children? Childhood seems to be a natural time to introduce foreign language study. During these formative years, children are learning so many things, from how to kick a soccer ball to the implementation of proper social graces. They are learning about themselves, discovering their likes and dislikes as well as what makes them tick. At this time of life, they should be developing a love of learning which can carry
them throughout their scholastic years. The introduction of foreign language study seems to be a natural component of their development as children.

It is a fact that not all children will grow up to be linguists. The study of foreign language can be as challenging to some as mathematics can be to others. Still, exposure to foreign language study can offer its own rewards. Among those benefits can be sensitivity towards other cultures, a worldly view of life, and a better understanding of the role language generally plays in human relationships. In addition, foreign language study can be as much fun as any other element of a child's life. For those who will end up going into diplomatic work or simply charting a course toward advanced academic degrees, foreign language study as a child can be where it all begins.
An Appetite for Life – Agriculture and Traditional Markets in France
Professor Justin Hume

There are few subjects that are as quintessentially French as their love of food, and the relationship they have cultivated with the land. For centuries, farmers have been the bedrock of French culture, and their work, and the rhythm of the seasons have been their rhythm of life. Festivals celebrating Nouveau bring in the fall, while salades and cool white wines are a reminder of warmer months. While it is often noted that large scale farming practices and American-style grocery stores have had a major impact on France, there is still a certain romance that lingers on in people’s minds whenever the conversation of food is brought to the table.

Indeed, in spite of the fact that many young people have left the rural life for new opportunities in the city, the memory of La Vielle France steadfastly remains. In truth, a number of websites have even been created that cater specifically to the challenge of bringing young women and relationships to the four percent of the French labor force that still remain on local farms, and that often represent the bucolic ideal to the rest of the country.

One factor that contributes to this idea may be found in the cultural and social value that is placed upon the market, building that worth through the relationships that are created, and through the pleasure that is experienced both in anticipating a meal, and also in the casual banter that often precedes it there, and in the home. It is in these environments that a palpable backlash can be felt in people’s combating the agro-giants and large grocery stores such as Monoprix, Shopi and Carrefour. In these markets, peaches and pears are labeled according to the town from which they come, farmers sell their produce personally, and they often offer the freshest of ingredients, knowing what will be perfectly ripe by that afternoon, as opposed to later that evening or even the next day.

These market’s continued existence is fuelled not only by the obstinately local, and the stubbornly traditionalist, but also by a long stream of food activists who have set out to educate people about slow food and ‘natural’ food, telling people about the sort of things that take place in larger outlets, and explaining what must be done to maintain the role of the small farmer and the biodiversity that their methods help support.

Indeed, not only have people like José Bové famously come through the lines, protesting McDonalds for its hormone-treated beef, but also certain initiatives, such as the Confédération Paysanne, have been set up to support humans and the environment, non-invasive farming practices, and fair trade for all in artisanal food production. This movement has been so appealing that Bové both ran for president in 2007 and even got elected to the European Parliament in 2009.

Still, the strongest supporters of French agriculture are often found in government, and in those areas where the traditions of old have not been diminished in the face of modern production techniques— in winemaking, in cheesemaking, in dairy farming, and in other areas where small variations in quality make all the difference in either achieving the sublime or in simply producing the mundane. In these areas, the local environment is almost inexorably linked to the concept of food. Quality is found in the grass that cows eat, the yeasts and pollens in
the air, the bacteria that grow, the molds that are produced, and the character of the soils that all of these creatures live upon, or grow within. In essence, it is the terroir that trumps all else. In just one particular region – Bordeaux – there are over 60 different Appellations d’Origine Contrôlée that are designed to govern, amongst other things, geographic boundaries within the region, maximum yields, percentage alcohol in their wines, composition of those wines, and soil type to describe one area’s particular characteristics as opposed to those of another, using microclimate, and even locations on a river in speaking about the character of that individual spot. The relationship between the location, the environment, and the resulting product is therefore codified by law.

Emanating from this understanding is now a rising tide of farmers in France and elsewhere who are beginning to move past more intensive agricultural practices and into the areas of agroecology through their realization that sound environmental management policies and terroir are really quite natural companions to each other. Through this change taking place, people’s understandings of the environment and the farmer are deepened to include both that farmer’s plot as well as everything else surrounding it. The farm is therefore not an island floating upon the sea of local context (terroir), but rather, it is part of that ecosystem itself. With this understanding, farmers are beginning to move past synthetic fertilizers and chemical pesticides and are beginning to realize that their work should celebrate not just the harvest, but also soil and biodiversity, because, at its heart, that is what terroir is all about.
Embracing Negative Culture
Dr. Ikuko Anjo Jassey

Before I moved to the United States eighteen years ago, I hadn’t truly realized that Japanese culture was fairly negative, compared to that of the United States. Now I’m fully aware of the fact since I’m “out of the box.” Yet it’s not easy to adapt to a new culture. My husband from time to time would point out a certain expression I used as a negative one in this country. Well, the humble terms, such as “my pig-like son” [豚児] or “my stupid wife” [愚妻], which were still used when I was younger by older people, are certainly classical today. Nobody uses them anymore. And yet negativism in linguistic expressions is lingering clearly in Japanese society and culture.

I assume that Japanese mothers even today speak to their children, “Why don’t you understand it? How many times do I have to explain it to you?” while helping their children do homework or when they did something they had been told not to do. Sometimes after these two utterances, “You’re such a fool” might be added. In general, Japanese people don’t think these remarks are particularly negative. It is the traditional way to “encourage” their children, and Japanese parents believe that it will help their children do better. In other words, there is a belief in Japanese people that the shame one feels becomes a trigger to improve oneself. On the contrary, it’s unacceptable in American culture due to a psychological reason that it discourages children. So Americans will say, “Come on. You can do it. Let me explain it again.” After these remarks, “Do you want a little break?” might follow. Here is another example. My Japanese friend, who works as a substitute teacher at a middle school and high school in this area, reiterated, “I told the students who didn’t study, ‘If you don’t study, you can’t be anything in the future.’” Japanese people don’t regard this utterance as negative but rather take it just as a matter of fact. Most Americans would consider, however, it is negative. Perhaps they would restate it something like “Listen to me. The more you learn, the better off you will be.” What a difference there is in the way of encouragement!

While writing this article, I recalled one linguistically intriguing incident that I had observed in The Scribe, perhaps ten years ago. A Korean reporter—I presume this person was Korean because of his name—made an “apology” to the newspaper, claiming that one of the questions he used in his interviewing a professor had been negative. He used “weakness” about buildings on campus in the original interview and rectified it to “need to be improved.” The use of “weakness” is not wrong in Korean culture, but it isn’t appropriate for American readers because it sounds negative. Although this student happened to be Korean, he could have been Japanese.

Also this negativism in Japanese culture greatly affects their translation from Japanese into English. There is a strong possibility that I myself may make an “iffy” translation if I am not careful. Among older Japanese people, taking medication often becomes the topic of a conversation and they say, “Once you start to take this medicine, you have to continue taking it until you die.” This way of speaking Japanese is not unusual for Japanese people, but it is for Americans. It is not only
odd, but hilarious. To native English speakers, it could sound like “you have to continue taking the medication to kill yourself.” What Japanese mean with the sentence above is “Once you start to take the medication, you have to continue taking it for the rest of your life.” Here are some more examples. When I was scanning a textbook of the Japanese language, whose authors are all Japanese, I found a sentence that was very Japanese. It goes this way: 一生懸命に勉強しなければ、試験に受からない. It literally means, “If you don’t study very hard, you will not pass the examination.” I assume that Americans would say, “If you study very hard, you will pass the examination,” instead. When the child is sick and doesn’t have an appetite, his/her Japanese mother would say, “If you don’t eat, you won’t be well,” instead of saying, “If you eat, you will feel strong.”

Accordingly, Japanese are, by and large, inclined to use more negative expressions, whereas Americans use more positive ones. However, what is important to recognize here is the fact that what is considered negative for Americans is to be viewed by Japanese people as a natural way of thinking. In other words, everything depends on the eye of the beholder in one’s culture. When cultures are different, people think and act differently, following their own cultural norms.

This article is based on an essay included in Japanese and American Cultural Snapshots published by Eishinsha (Jassey, 2008) and the open-public lecture given by the author at Sacred Heart University in Fall 2008.