Good afternoon,

Let me, first of all, thank you for coming and let me also thank the Indiana Institute for Intercultural Communication and its director, Dr. Ulla Connor, for hosting us today. I would also like to express my gratitude to Nancy Newton and her colleagues in the Spanish program of the Department of World Languages and Cultures of IUPUI, and its chair, Dr. Gabrielle Bersier, for organizing this conference and for giving me the opportunity to come back to the States, a country which, in spite of its differences with Spain, has always been one of my favourite destinations whenever I take a plane.

A bit of my background

1. Culture shock

   When I first came to the United States, 20 year ago, I had no idea there was something called culture shock. I was excited, nervous, anxious, stressed, but I did not know there was a name for that. Now I know there is: culture shock. There are even five stages commonly described for this process of immersing oneself in a different culture. You just have to surf the internet to find out. Of course there was no internet at that time. Looking back I have tried to reconstruct my own culture shock and link it to what I see everyday having six thousand foreign students under my responsibility throughout the year.

   - The first stage is called the honeymoon stage: According to different sources, prior to the trip you are quite excited and anxious about the forthcoming experience. You may have some knowledge of the country you are going to, mainly based on movies, readings and stories from friends. You have a lot of mixed feelings: challenge, anxiety, curiosity, fear, etc. Then, once there, everything seems to be O.K at first. People seem to be more or less friendly. Not everything is absolutely different. You are still alive. It can’t be that bad.

   I personally always wanted to come to the United States. Before coming here for the first time, as everyone in my generation I had watched hundreds of American movies, I had listened to hundreds of American songs and the United States were quite frequently in the news. American culture was part of everyone’s life. I went a bit further: I decided to study English at the University of Salamanca and during that time I had the chance to meet many American students with whom I liked to hang out. I liked the culture, the language, everything about the U.S. (well, not absolutely everything) I loved the American accent (as opposed to the British). I could not wait to set my foot on American ground. I was as anxious about coming here as Neil Armstrong
about stepping on the surface of the moon. When in 1985 I finally had the chance to come, it was a dream come true.

The same works for American students when they first arrive in Salamanca. I usually ask them to write a composition about their first impressions a week after they get there. They are usually very happy. They have the feeling they’ve made it. Even if their Spanish is not so good they can buy things, they love to be able to walk everywhere and they enjoy the relaxed atmosphere and way of life they think we lead. The following are some excerpts of compositions written after 10 days.

I love Spanish cities because you can walk everywhere

I can’t believe that I have just spent ten days here in this wonderful city. Everyday I find something wonderful in this different culture. I love it here. People here are not always in a hurry as we are there. I like people in the streets. I love the food.

The ten days I have spent so far in Salamanca have been an adventure, with challenges and good times. Before coming I was excited and I felt a bit nervous. Now I feel more confident. People are very nice. My family is very understanding. And above all, the city is so full of history....

The second stage is the crisis stage: Shortly after arriving you begin to experience problems doing ordinary things: from expressing yourself (all your previous practice with the language seems to fail and you come across very common expressions which no one ever taught you before) to buying food, getting sick [anecdote with “Estás fatal” or solving minor problems. You feel helpless. You start to realise the differences in your host country. Sometimes you think that everything is better in your home country. You get frustrated, lonely and wonder why you decided to come. The monster of homesickness haunts you as in a Stephen King novel.

I remember my first days at the University of Georgia in Athens, back in 1985. No matter how many films I had watched, I had never realised how important the car was in the United States. Except for the campus, you could not go anywhere walking. It was weird. It was like being handicapped. Then it was not easy to make friends. Social life was quite restricted except for meetings in the Spanish department and occasional parties. Food, banking, bureaucracy, everything seemed to pose a problem. At that point it was hard to realize that this is quite normal whenever you move to a new place, specially if you are short of money. You want to go back to the safe womb of your country which you start to miss more than you ever thought you would.

American students complain about their homes (they cannot take long showers or have the lights on in their bedrooms for a long time or bring friends), they meet other Americans, but do not get much chance of interacting with locals, some people are rude to them and they do not
know how to deal with that, etc. In a way they probably set their expectations too high. They thought they would increase their fluency at a faster pace. Some even thought they would be bilingual after 3 months. In fact, most of them do quite well, their listening skills improve enormously. They can understand almost everything that is said to them directly. But, of course, they still keep the accent, their grammar is influenced by their mother tongue and they still have a long way to store the 60 or 80 thousand words an average educated native speaker has acquired throughout his/her first 20 years.

Let’s see some of their comments:

*People in Spain are very slow. When I got to the airport my suitcase got lost. We were standing in line for 45 minutes and it did not move and when we finally got to the counter, the clerks there did not care at all. Then at home I realised the same thing with my mother. And all people I have seen working are the same: waiters, bank clerks, street cleaners, shop assistants.*

*Something difficult for me is the use of electricity and hot water. It is very annoying here. My Spanish mother just lets me take one shower a day and for no more than 5 minutes. I have to turn the lights off or she will shout at me.*

*The main difference is language. People here speak a completely different language from the one we speak in the States. Sometimes I think I understand the words, but do not get the meaning. Some other times I say exactly what I want to say, but people do not understand me, maybe because I speak English with Spanish words.*

- The third stage is the turning point. At a certain point, after having spent quite a lot of money in phone calls to your home country and going thru the dark side of the experience, you get to a turning point. Either you leave or you change your attitude and you stay.

I myself decided to leave, to go back to Spain. After almost a year in Georgia, I packed my bags and flew home. Now looking back, my decision was made probably because my expectations had been too high at first and my previous knowledge of the American way of life was very superficial. Life seemed easier at home. In my later experience I have seen this pattern repeated many times. For example, at the University of Salamanca we have a training program to send young teachers to the States. Although they can stay for 3 years and they have far more specific information about what they are going to experience than I did, most of them go back to Spain after the first one.

What about American students? Well, what happens is that they usually stay for three months and a half or so, so that the turning point is active when they have to leave. Some of them feel relieved, some others wish they could stay for another semester, because it was just then when they were starting to be part of the culture.
I thought my country was the best in the world and that everybody wanted to be American. That is what we were taught at school. Our country is the best one, the most powerful. Now I have changed my mind. There are good things in the United States, but there are very bad ones too. It is something you learn when you are abroad.

The fourth stage is called integration stage: You start understanding that although things work differently in your host country, it does not mean that it is worse; in fact there are wonderful things which you had never dreamt of. And life in your own country was not perfect either. You start accepting your new life and try to get the most out of it. This is the case with me now. After the Georgia experience it took me almost ten years to come back to the States, and then I saw things differently. I did not have to worry about some of the problems of the past and could enjoy all the good things this country has to offer with an open mind. You may laugh at me but one of the things I enjoy the most in the United States is spending a couple of hours in a big bookstore just looking at books, buying some and having a cup of coffee in the bookstore. So far we have imported Burger King and MacDonalds but not Borders or Barnes and Noble.

To go back to the other end, many of the students who spend two semesters in Spain integrate quite well into the Spanish way of life and are pretty sad when they have to leave.

I would like to live here. Life goes at a slower pace and people seem to enjoy every moment of their day. They have more free time. In the States people just have a week of vacations as opposed to the month they have here.

Food in Spain is healthier. They eat more fruit, more fish. Food is more natural. That is probably why there are not so many fat people there.

Re-entry shock: Then as it happens with spaceships re entering the earth’s atmosphere, there comes the re - entry shock. You miss the things you could have, experience or enjoy before, not many people can share your experiences, you may even have changed your ideas and your mind about some issues, etc.

2. Why do we go thru a culture shock?

Basically, we learn and get used to certain patterns of behaviour which make life predictable. When we switch cultures, those patterns may vary and in fact vary and we have to readjust and accommodate to the new settings. In addition to that, as the language is different, it is more difficult to both understand what is going on and express how we feel. Let’s see some examples

Differences in the physical context
- Vertical and horizontal. I have been always used to walk everywhere. Now, although I love driving (it is a way of relaxing for me), I know I can walk everywhere, but when I came to the States walking was quite restricted. You walked from one building in campus to the other or from the groceries corridor to the ice cream counter of the supermarket. Spain, as opposed to the United States (except for the big cities) is built vertically whereas most American towns are spread across acres and acres of land. The Spanish model has the advantage of being able to walk and projects social life onto the streets which are usually full of people, walking, window shopping, taking the kids to school or to the doctor. So one point for Spain, but (there is always a but) this way of life means less home space. Spanish apartments are quite small in comparison to American houses. Everything is bigger here: from coffee cups to pharmacies. So every American house has its driveway, garden, bigger rooms. I miss walking, you miss space.

- …

- Differences in daily routines

- Having a cup of coffee: Let’s say you come to the States from Spain and want to have a cup of coffee. You go into Starbucks and everything is different:

  - You stand in line to ask for the coffee, and then you move into the next line to get it, either you are called by your name or the employee shouts out the kind of coffee you asked for.
  - There are, according to an American newspaper, more than 3,000 different options if you take into account: size, milk, flavours, and so forth. How many are there in Spain: basically three solo (black) con leche (with milk) and cortado (black with a squirt of milk).
  - Then you get plastic cups as opposed to the porcelain ones; huge quantities of liquid as opposed to the little ones, you walk with your coffee cup all around, you drink your coffee in the cafeteria

For the Spaniard Starbucks is kind of a maze at first; our cafeterias may seem terribly boring for the American taste.

- Eating

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>An American restaurant</th>
<th>Spanish restaurant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The host or hostess will lead us to the table</td>
<td>We may do it ourselves or be seated by a waiter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiter will come, introduce himself with a smile and probably name, recite the specials and ask us what we would like to drink</td>
<td>Waiter will hand out the menus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hi folks, how are you doing? My name is Jesus. I’ll be serving you tonight. Our specials today are tomato soup, crab cake... Would you care for something to drink?

Once food is ordered, the waiter will come now and then and ask us if everything is all right. If he notices that our glasses are empty he will ask us if we would like another drink.

Is everything all right?
Would you like another beer?

Once finished we may ask for the check or the waiter will bring it without asking him for it.

He will expect a tip of around 15 per cent

Spaniards do not necessarily like being interrupted so much while eating. They hate having to pay an extra 15 per cent

American complains that the service in Spain is not very good

- We could collect more and more examples. Even watching the news is different. One student said:

  Everyday at two I watch the news. Most of them have to do with dead and injured in car accidents. People drive too fast. In the States it is not such a big problem. On the other hand in American television, dead and injured are mostly in gunfights, robberies, etc. It seems to me that Spain is safer than the States and crime is not such a big issue

- Differences in communication, in styles, for example, indirectness

Learning a language is not just memorizing verb forms, sentence structures and cramming lists of words. To sound natural in a foreign language it is necessary to know which structures are used in different situations. For example, if I were to order a soda, I most likely would say something like Can I have a soda, please? If you translate this structure into Spanish and use it in the same situation, it is perfectly grammatical but absolutely inadequate. The waiter will understand what we mean if we say ¿Puedo tener una coca-cola? But no native speaker would say so. On the other hand, the common Spanish structure used for asking drinks or snacks ¿Me pones una coca-cola? if translated literally would sound quite awkward in English Do you put me a coke? But things go far beyond this point. Let me give just one example concerning indirectness.
An American student of mine, a really brilliant one, Holly Hightower, was doing her masters degree in Spain in Spanish as a second language. As one of the requirements, she had to write a dissertation on some topic related to the field. She had been noticing since she came to Spain that Spaniards tended to be more direct than Americans. For example, she was once at a lecture and when the speaker started talking no one could hear what he said. The microphone was out of order or not working properly. So, someone at the back cried out *No se oye.* (we can’t hear). She thought that to be quite rude and direct. Then, people would ask for a coffee or any drink with the usual Spanish formula *Un café* or *Ponme un café.* It is not that you cannot say that in English, but it is not common and not polite, whereas in Spain no one seems to be offended.

The next step was to make a survey with series of situations and possible answers and hand them to a group of American students in Salamanca and to a group of Spanish students to see how they would react linguistically. I will give you three examples:

[You are in a coffee shop and you want to have coffee with milk, with little coffee and with saccharine. You ask the waiter]

- a) I want a coffee, short on the coffee and with saccharine.
- b) Give me a coffee with milk, short on the coffee and with saccharine.
- c) Coffee with milk, short on the coffee and with saccharine.
- d) One with milk, short on the coffee
- e) I’d like a coffee with milk short on the coffee and with saccharine.
- f) Can you give me a coffee with milk short on the coffee and with saccharine

Estás en una cafetería y quieres tomar un café con leche corto de café y con sacarina. Se lo pides al camarero:

- a) Quiero un café, corto de café y con sacarina
- b) Ponme un café, corto de café y con sacarina
- c) Un café, corto de café y con sacarina
- d) Me gustaría un café, corto de café y con sacarina
- e) ¿Me puede poner un café, corto de café y con sacarina?
- f) ¿ Me pones un café, corto de café y con sacarina?

What do you think each group chose?

Americans preferred: e I’d like a cup of coffee

Spaniards opted for c and then b: *Un café... and Ponme un café...* (rejected by Americans)
[You are hungry and you don’t feel like getting up from the sofa where you are watching a great game. You ask your mother if she will make you something to eat]

a)  Mom, will you make me a sandwich
b)  Mom, I am really hungry
c)  Mom, would you do me a favor and make me a sandwich?
d)  Mom, the game is really interesting, would you make me a sandwich, please?
e)  Make me a sándwich, mom
f)  Mom, could you make me a sandwich I am dying of hunger...

[Tienes hambre y no tienes ganas de levantarte del sofá donde estás viendo un partido de fútbol. Le preguntas a tu madre si te hace algo de comer]

a)  Mamá ¿Me preparas un bocata
b)  Mamá, tengo mucha hambre
c)  Mamá ¿Me harías el favor de prepararme un bocadillo?
d)  Mamá, el partido está superinteresante ¿Podrías prepararme un bocata, porf?¡
e)  Hazme un bocata, mamá
f)  Mamá, ¿Me podrías hacer un bocadillo? Me estoy muriendo de hambre...

What do you think each group chose?

Americans preferred: c Mum, Would you do me a favour..

Spaniards went for a and e ¿Me preparas un bocata? And Hazme un bocata

[What would your mother say if you are with her in the kitchen and she needs your help to set the table]

a)  Set the table
b)  You can set the table now
c)  The food’s almost ready
d)  Do you mind setting the table while I finish making the food?
e)  Could you set the table?

[Qué diría tu madre si estás con ella en la cocina y necesita ayuda para poner la mesa]

a)  Pon la mesa
b)  Ya puedes ir poniendo la mesa
c)  La comida está casi lista
d)  Te importa poner la mesa mientras acabo la comida
e) ¿Podrías poner la mesa?

What is your guess now?

Americans preferred: e Could you set the table?

Spaniards went for: a Pon la mesa

Basically, what she found out is that Americans and Spaniards tend to be direct if there is a difference in the status of the participants in the verbal exchange, but that when there is no such difference, when the participants are relatives or friends, Americans still resort to indirectness, whereas Spaniards walk along the direct path.

When you are in a bar in Spain, people always say: Gimme a beer and in the U.S. we say Could I have a beer please?

The first time I ate with my host family in Spain, my host mother said: "Anna Maria, Come here. I thought she was angry at me because she did not say please. After some time I learned that she would say that quite often and that she was not angry at me at all. It was just how they say it

Spaniards are very direct and the way they speak is quite harsh. They say what they think. Americans are more polite. They try to avoid conflict. ... but I do not think one is better than the other. You have to accept people as they are. Cultural differences are a part of life

This last comment is a very sensible one. When a Spanish mother says Pon la mesa , Set the table it does not mean that she is angry or that she does not love her children. The appropriate intonation would be used if these feelings were to be expressed.

There are many other differences concerning the use of polite formulas such as Thank you, please, have a good day, thanks for coming, etc, interpersonal distance, etc

Cultures, then, differ in how we say things and what we mean by it, as do genders or generations. When a woman sees her husband worried and asks him What is the matter? And he answers Nothing, he means Leave me alone with my problem, I am a man and I am supposed to face my problems. I need no help, although she may understand he does not love me, he does not want to share anything with me. Along the same lines, and very simply expressed American interaction prefers indirectness and respect to Spanish solidarity and closeness. Some cultures are formal, some not so formal (Japanese versus American); some love talking (Spanish or American) some love silence (some native American ones). We think too many formalities is a sign of distance, we fear silence… don’t we?

Different attitudes towards conflict: conversation.
Americans have the impression that Spaniards talk extremely fast and loud and that we are always engaged in hot arguments, almost on the verge of an actual fight. In addition to that when they participate in a conversation they very often feel they are threatened and need to react defensively. Spaniards will question why is there a death penalty, why so much access to guns, why a need to conquer the world (as if we in Spain, throughout our history, had not done the same when we held a similar position in international politics as the U.S. today). When Americans answer evasively, Spaniards have the impression that they are naïve, superficial or just dumb. Michael Agar, anthropology professor at the University of Maryland, in his book *Language shock* has formulated it in the following terms:

...The conversations you have over dinner aren’t the same way everywhere. I grew up with a saying, “Never talk about sex, politics or religion (in fact when I first went to Ireland to learn English, that is exactly what the man in my host family once mentioned to me) Such topics may upset people, cause trouble and start arguments. The most important thing was to keep it smooth, keep everyone happy and friendly.

It took years until I felt comfortable with Austrian conversations, because they talk about sex, politics and religion all the time. And they do not coat their opinions in sugar, either. They start with things like “That’s wrong”. When this happened, even though I was right along the ride as far as grammar and vocabulary were concerned, I’d feel uncomfortable, as if the social event were on an express train to hell.

American conversations emphasize servicing the relationship. Austrian (and I would add Spanish) conversations assume the relationship is fine and go to direct debate. For the Austrians, a contradiction is not a threat to the relationship; for Americans, it is. Americans worry about the “I am O.K, your are O.K.” aspect more than the Austrians.

The result is that Austrians stereotype the Americans as superficial. Americans never get an interesting debate going. The Americans stereotype the Austrians as arrogant. They just jump right in and tell you you are full of waste material and that they know better.

- Different attitudes towards knowing

When American students take classes at a Spanish university with Spanish students (not in programs just for Americans within a Spanish University) they are shocked by the differences between the academic systems. What they usually see is a professor lecturing for the whole period of class and students writing at an enormous speed, noting down almost everything that is being said. On the other hand, they have no quizzes, no class discussion, no mandatory attendance, seldom papers. Just a final examination. In addition to that, Spaniards concentrate on a discipline at the undergrad level. For instance they may begin medical school when they are 18. Spanish students, on the other hand, have the feeling that Americans know nothing about history, geography, mathematics and so forth.
The current education attache at the Spanish embassy, Miguel Martínez once told me: Education in the Status focuses on skills whereas in Europe (and in Spain) it focuses on contents. This leads to the European impression that Americans have no culture, and probably we are perceived as not so practical.

Ignacio Bosque, probably the best Spanish grammarian alive, once lectured about the differences between the American and Spanish University systems. He first referred to the contrast between the invidualism typical of the American student as opposed to the more gregarious attitude of their Spanish counterparts. He mentioned how European Professors teaching in the States were quite surprised at the fact that students will quite easily participate in class making daring hypotheses about topics they often know not that much about, although sometimes they show an excellent insight whereas Spanish students are extremely shy about participating in class and feel uncomfortable if asked questions. They think the job of the student is to cram as much material as possible and throw it out in the examination. Some of them, though, have an excellent scholarly background.

3. Conclusion

Coming to a conclusion, there are different settings in which human activity takes place. In these settings we are used to certain ways of behaving which we have learnt since our childhood and which filter our perception of the world. Noone ever asked us where we would like to be born. Fate has spread us all over the world and we have acquired a language, a set of habits, traditions, a perception of the world or Weltanschauung as Germans say. Cultures are not necessarily better or worse (bad things and good things are all over), but when we go abroad, even if we have a command of the formal aspects of the language or have read about the history or the art of this particular place, we may feel strange, foreigners, awkward, bad, angry. That is why fostering a feeling of empathy towards others without losing our own identity is a good vaccination against intolerance and misunderstanding. In a nutshell, we do not see things as they are, we see things as we are, but we can learn to see with other eyes.