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 and saccharine, 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:
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 sandwich, mom
f) Mom, could you make me a sandwich I am dying of hunger...

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: *Could you set the table?*
• Spaniards went for: *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 María, 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 individualism 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.

**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 Weltanschaung as Germans say. Cultures are not necessarily better or worse (bad things and good things are all over), but when w ego 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 prlace, 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.

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