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Jerseys, Baseball Caps, and “How are you?”

Language is the culmination of a culture’s traditions and aspirations. It embodies the spirit of a people, as expressed in its spoken and written word, in gestures, and in the forms and symbols of its arts, sciences, and pastimes. But it can also be a source of frustration for a visitor, unless one uncovers the often implied meanings behind the language. Being brought up on English, and schooled in the best the land has to offer with English as the medium of instruction, I shouldn’t have any trouble, right? Not quite. So here are but a few distinct cultural differences behind assumingly the same language, but used in very different contexts.

“How are you?”

This is the usual greeting in the Midwest, a cultural region in which Michigan is part of. I still think that should apply to states west of the Mississippi River, and Michigan should be Northern USA, but that’s the way it is. “How are you?” is the Midwestern way of saying hello. Visitors would take it as a concerned inquiry into the state of their health, which I belatedly discovered was not the case. They don’t really want to know how the trains’ rumblings and blaring kept you up all night, or how your week-long, winter-induced cough might be turning into pneumonia. They just want to greet you, acknowledge your presence. The proper response is “Very well, thank you”, or simply “Good”, to which you return the compliment by asking how they are, and if conversation does not spontaneously ensue, you pleasantly part ways. I still complain about my gout or my grad school, sleep-deprived state of fatigue every time I am asked how I am, but I keep it curt: “Better”, or “Tired”.

Back home in the Philippines, the question is reserved only for those we really care for, hence is more personal and sincere, and we’re actually concerned about the other’s troubles. “Kamusta?”, which is pidginized “Como esta?” of Spanish, literally means “How are you?”. I guess traditionally as Asians, greetings were indirect and impersonal, probably even stated in the third person, until Western influence washed over our shores. Hence our word for “hello” had to be borrowed from a foreign tongue.

To greet a casual acquaintance, however, we're usually more interested in what mischief he may be up to today, and not his current state of affairs. "Saan ang lakad?" literally translates to "Where are you going?" but figuratively to "What're you up to?", as a polite means of divining what his devious plans might be, which is totally different from the generic "Wazzup?" in vogue here today. Or, if you've shared a beer or otherwise shady experience with someone once before, you might ask of him, "Ayos ba?" which translates to "Everything OK?", but which, though in the form of a question, is rather a confirmation of his being in the state that induced the mischief you once shared. Try asking those questions here, and unless you're really close, people will think you're too nosy.

Another distinction is greeting at a distance. When you're too far for an audible greeting, a wave is the universal gesture of hello for all cultures. But for closer distances, or when the other party is too engaged or has otherwise no time for explicit interruption, an alternative gesture for greeting here is a small nod of the head, more like an abbreviated bow, which may be an artifact of European tradition, to acknowledge the other person's presence. Back home, and especially to peers, the direction is opposite. A single, sudden upward jerk of the head, just like an assent but often accompanied by the eyebrows too, is more a confirmation of your own presence to him while simultaneously acknowledging his.

Jerseys and Baseball Caps

Never question an American's fanhood, even if he's just casually into sports. Back home, I bought a Raiders cap, because that's the handle I chose for membership in an airsoft club with other grownups who rush to accomplish their domestic chores so they can play weekend warrior like kids with high-tech toys. So imagine my surprise when the comely, aging guy behind the counter in the local post office asks me rather sarcastically, "You root for Oakland? But they just totally s**k!" Also back home, you tune to ESPN in October and invariably watch the Yankees beat any other team they face, and are lulled into rooting for them. So I wear my Yankees cap to a bar, which seems to be no-no anywhere else but New York. A fellow grad from Philadelphia says to me from across the table, loud enough for all to hear, "By the way, you've got an ugly hat". Or the time I visited at the home of a New Englander with the same cap on, and he looks at me dead seriously and says, "You're not coming over the threshold with that

cap on you head.” Geez! It’s just a cap! Back home caps, sweaters, jerseys, and team logos are worn mostly as fashion accents or accessories, chosen mostly for color, where the symbols mean almost nothing at all. Here, it’s a statement of identity, a source of pride, which could turn into unintended offensive intrusion for the unwary visitor.

I picked a silver star as a team logo for a sweater Sports Illustrated was gifting me as a loyal subscriber. Upon seeing it, a fellow grad says, “You like the Cowboys? But TO is such a cry baby!” To which I answer “Theo, whom?” Lowe’s gave me a complementary cap for shopping there once, and a classmate says, “So you like Jimmie Johnson?”. “Jimmy, whom?” I ask. He points at the cap and says, “The 48, that’s his number”. How should I know what all these symbols mean, whom they represent, and what context they take when worn in vicious territory? Back home, the only rabid sports fans are the spoiled brats from a few exclusive universities with time on their hands and cash and their Papa’s car keys in their pockets. So I’ve earnestly read all those issues of Sports Illustrated, and figured out Terrell Owens and the rest of the sports’ cast. Now all three offending caps are hanging on pegs in my apartment. The only ones I use are either plainly neutral or have Portuguese printed on the front. Not much anyone here can say about those. The offending sweater I use to keep warm in my dungeon of an office.

And then there’s football, but not played with a round ball. Just when I’ve finally figured out the game and how it’s scored, I find out there can be true freshmen, and red-shirted ones too, in the collegiate variety. So can there be differently color-clad, false ones as well? And don’t even get me started on how I still get carded by waitresses who are younger than my kids. “Relax and take it as a compliment!”, I am advised. Really?

Credit

I once firmly believed that if you can’t afford something, you have to save for it. Not true here. It seems you’re unbelievably bogus without a credit rating or a driver’s license. I took out a signature loan once to partially fund a trip to Brazil. Not being a resident, I couldn’t qualify for a direct loan. When all the documents were signed and processed, the lady instructed me not to accelerate my payments even if I had the capacity to. “But that totally contradicts all sensibility!”, I complained. She asserted that this was

the best way to build a credit history (and for the creditors to earn, I might add) if I cared to live well here. “We’ll Americanize you yet.”, she explained. I relented, dutifully followed her advice, and now hold four credit cards, over which I watch exceedingly carefully.

Food

There’s so much I can say about food, four pages wouldn’t be enough. We share a microwave in the dungeon, and since there are no windows, the other grads can always tell when I’m having lunch. But what I want to mention relates to an American favorite and how it is eaten – pizza! Back home, pizza is a treat, something you go out for when celebrating, and, as Asians, always have with hot sauce. Ah, spices, and the fabled Spice Islands. That’s what Columbus was trying to find a route for, that’s what Magellan almost got to, but which was held alternately by the English and the Dutch. Anyway, back to pizza, which is a staple here, what with all the pizza delivery guys going about even late at night. Pizza is always served during our grad meetings, presumably to enjoin attendance. Once, to my dismay, there was no hot sauce in the box (I found out later you don’t get any if you don’t specifically ask for it). So when I inquired as to the whereabouts of the hot sauce, I was reminded that I am in the Midwest. “So what do you put on your pizza?”, I ask. “Ranch?” was the instant answer. Seriously? So I devise myself a little experiment. I now bring a bottle of Habanero sauce, the hottest kind you can find, to our meetings, and silently observe who uses it and how much they put on. Definitely Koreans and fellow Southeast Asians, and others who have had influences in these regions. We’ve never had a Mexican grad, but neither would the South Americans touch the stuff. So did I learn anything worthwhile? Not much. Am I the wiser for it? Probably not. But it sure is fun watching their reactions as I dump the stuff on my slice! Mmmmmm!

So, blend into the culture without loss of identity or pride, study their habits, their language, their idiosyncrasies, their way of life. It matters not if you spoke or were instructed in English all your life. There will be variations, however subtle, in the way language, symbols, and gestures are used, but the consequences could be significant and entirely worth the effort deciphering. Watch, listen, read, and learn. It’s the only way. Have fun with your little experiments, making sure no one is slighted. And do enjoy your stay in this your adopted place of study, to make it worthwhile for all.