



## DIVERSE VOICES

# Who Am I? The Self-Perception Struggles of a Bosnian American

by Emina Herovic

University of Kentucky

It was not until just this year, my 22nd year of life, that I began identifying myself as more American than Bosnian. I spent most of my childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood struggling with my cultural self-concept; just who was I? While most people experience periods of identity confusion, mine stemmed from my early life experiences living in several vastly different cultures.

Born in the Balkan region of Bosnia, I was not yet three years old when war broke out in my native country. To escape the tragedies of war, my parents moved our family to Turkey where we lived for the next two and a half years. When our temporary settlement in Turkey expired, my father boldly decided to move us again, this time to the United States. So by the time I was five years old, I had lived in three different countries on three different continents and had experienced three different cultures and languages.

Can you imagine my confusion and frustration? Just when I began speaking fluent Bosnian, we moved to Turkey. Then, just when I was becoming fluent in Turkish, I was thrown into a totally different cultural environment that used yet another language I didn't understand or speak. I remember walking into my kindergarten classroom on the first day of school in the United States. After observing the other kids for a few minutes, I remember turning to my mother saying, "These kids don't know how to talk!" I learned later that I was actually the oddball. I struggled for many years with whether to perceive myself as Bosnian or American.

There was very little diversity among the people at the school I attended in the States.

I was obviously the only "foreign" girl. I was surrounded by English-speaking teachers and peers and was exposed to American society at full force. When I was home, however, I was once again immersed in my native Bosnian cultural tradition and language: My parents would speak Serbo-Croatian around me; I ate Bosnian food; and I celebrated Bosnian traditions and customs. My religious practices also differed from those of my peers. Raised a Muslim, my family and I celebrated Islamic holidays. I remember as a little girl, when it was the month of Ramadan, I would go to the library at school during lunchtime to avoid the bombardment of questions from my peers as to why I was fasting. When I would explain that it was a religious practice, some of them did not understand. Experiences such as these differentiated me from my peers and created a greater divide between my bi-cultural identities.

Whenever I was asked as a young girl and adolescent, I always replied without hesitation that I was Bosnian. I did not perceive myself to be American at all. During the summer of my seventh grade year, my family and I went back to visit Bosnia. Despite the American accent I now used when I spoke Bosnian, my trip back was pleasant. I felt accepted and "at home" around the people of my native culture.

However, this strong Bosnian self-concept diminished as I got older. As I spoke, studied, and wrote in English every day at school and was exposed to Bosnian language only at home, I started to speak Bosnian less fluently. I also began to understand the American way of life, humor, and culture more. So year-by-year, I began to see myself as a bit more American.

Seven years after that first trip "home" to Bosnia, I returned to Bosnia at the age of 20. This time, I felt like a foreigner. The country, people, food, and overall experience did not feel "home-like" anymore. Looking back, I attribute this to my change in self-perception. It became clear to me that I no longer identified more with the Bosnian culture than the American one. I was beginning to identify more with the "American side" of my self-perception.

However, things did not immediately become easier for me when I returned to the United States. I realized I did not feel American either. In my interactions with my American friends, my Bosnian side was evident. My home life and cultural norms were different from those of my peers and, for this reason, it was hard for me to feel fully connected with them. I was not the typical "American girl." My experiences as an immigrant child that defined me in many ways were vastly different from my peers. My peers could not fathom many of the hardships, circumstances, and events I had experienced growing up. So I realized I had become too "American" to be Bosnian anymore, yet I was too "Bosnian" to be American. In this sense, my self-perception actually became more and more unclear as I got older.

The speed at which the acculturation process took effect was incredibly fast. Yet, every part of me fought it. I wanted to maintain my Bosnian identity because without it I believed I would no longer have a strong sense of self. What would I identify myself as if I wasn't "Bosnian" anymore? I felt like I wouldn't know who I was anymore. Would I then be

fully American or would I be some mixture of both cultures? But, what would being a mixture of both cultures mean? This issue was especially pertinent to me because a strong sense of ethnic nationalism developed and grew steadily stronger amongst the Balkan people once the war ended. I was raised to be extremely proud of my nationality, culture, and country. Therefore, when I started feeling less Bosnian, I didn't understand what else I could be. I also felt a sense of guilt about losing the part of me that my parents had tried so hard to maintain in their children after we immigrated to the United States.

Now, at age 22, I have come to accept my self-perception based on my dual identification with Bosnia and the United States. I have also accepted that my American identity is now stronger than my Bosnian one. This was not something that just happened one morning, but rather, emerged over time. I have lived in the United States for most of my life. It is my home. I choose to acknowledge that being Bosnian will always be a part of me and I would never want to change that. It has educated me on the differences between the two cultures and I can look on the world more broadly and understand that everyone in the world has their own culture and customs. I know that other foreign-born Americans struggle with this aspect of self-perception. And that's why I have chosen to study this phenomenon in order to help others like me make successful self-perception transitions that honor their roots in more than one culture.

*Source: Reprinted by permission of Emina Herovic.*



## My Story of Cross-Cultural Adaptation

by Min Liu

Assistant Professor of Communication Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville

I was born and raised in China, which is a collectivist country. China also rates high on context (we prefer indirect face-saving communication over direct verbal language), chronemics (we value nurturing relationships over deadlines and schedules), uncertainty avoidance (we like rules and predictability), power distance (we respect hierarchical authority), and long-term orientation (we value perseverance over quick problem-solving). So I was raised very differently from people in the dominant American culture of the United States.

I arrived in the United States for the first time in August of 2002 to begin the Ph.D. program at North Dakota State University (NDSU) in Fargo, North Dakota. I chose NDSU for a number of reasons, but one that really stands out in my mind is the fact that Fargo was listed as one of the safest cities in the United States at the time. You see, my family was concerned about sending their daughter to study in the most individualistic country in the world. They felt a bit more at ease knowing I would be studying in one of its safest cities. Even my decision to attend NDSU was influenced by my family and our collectivist ideals. Little did I know how much culture shock I would experience once I set foot on campus.

When I arrived, I felt prepared to study in the United States because I had been trained to be a college English instructor back in China. I had also aced the English proficiency test (TOEFL) required of international students. I remember feeling pretty confident about communicating with my American colleagues. As I walked across campus for my first day of orientation, I thought to myself, "Worst-case scenario, I'll forget how to say something in English and that's what my digital Chinese-English dictionary is for."

I would soon learn, however, that the issue of translating vocabulary was not the worst-case scenario. I could not find an answer for most of my communication struggles in the dictionary. For example, in one of my first graduate classes, the professor asked everyone to call her by her first name (Deanna). Without hesitation, all my American classmates began doing so. Calling a professor by her first name was unheard of for Chinese students like me! As a sign of respect for their power and authority, we always call our teachers by their titles—Dr. Sellnow, Professor Sellnow, or Teacher Sellnow. Wherever you are on a college campus in China, it's clear who is the teacher and who are the students. I thought, "How am I to call a professor by her first name?"

For a long time, I felt torn as to what to do—continuing to call her Dr. Sellnow may seem too distant and she might correct me. I want to honor her request out of respect for her authority. But everything in my Chinese norms and values suggested that calling her Deanna was disrespectful. So I simply avoided calling her anything. This solution worked fairly well in face-to-face communication situations—I would walk up to her, smile, and then start the conversation. This approach was working fairly well for me until the day came when I needed to e-mail her. I remember sitting in front of my computer for almost an hour trying to fine-tune a one-paragraph e-mail. Soon I realized the message was fine. The reason I couldn't bring myself to press "Send" was because I had begun with "Hello Deanna." I finally changed it to "Dr. Sellnow," followed by an apologetic explanation asking her to understand my dilemma and why I addressed her in this way. To my surprise, she responded by saying there was nothing wrong in addressing her as "Dr. Sellnow" and that I should continue to do so if that is what feels most appropriate to me.

In another class, I studied intercultural communication concepts. What I learned there

proved helpful to me in reconciling some of the anxiety I was experiencing. As a Chinese, I grew up in a high power-distance culture. Professors and teachers are seen as having more power than students because, in my culture, people hold more or less power depending on where they are situated in certain formal, hierarchical positions. Students are to respect and honor their teachers by acknowledging their higher position of authority and status. The United States, however, is a low power-distance culture. People demonstrate respect for one another by addressing each other more as equals regardless of the formal positions they may hold. So, as uncomfortable as I felt, I tried to call my professors by their first names when they suggested it was appropriate to do so. I reminded myself that doing so was culturally appropriate and not a sign of disrespect.

Another culture shock experience I had to reconcile as a result of the differences between my Chinese norms and values and those of the United States had to do with disagreeing with my professor. In the United States, students learn to form opinions and defend their viewpoints and are rewarded for doing so in classroom presentations and debates. Professors perceive students who challenge viewpoints with evidence and reasoning as intelligent and motivated. Students who do so are perceived very differently in the Chinese culture, where public disagreement with an authority figure is not only rare, but also inappropriate. Because of this value clash, I found it difficult to express and defend my opinions in class, especially if they differed from something the professor said. Doing so, it seemed to me, would be extremely disrespectful. Yet I observed classmates doing so and being lauded for their comments. Many times, I chose not to say anything during a face-to-face meeting with a professor, but found the courage to write them in an e-mail later. In the online environment, I found I could be honest and explain my disagreement with respect. Fortunately, many of my professors soon realized my cultural-values dilemma and adapted their communication styles toward me. Still today, though, I prefer to present my

viewpoints concerning controversial issues in a paper, a letter, an e-mail message, or an online post rather than in a meeting or other face-to-face discussion. I have found a way to honor my Chinese norms and values in a way that also allows me to express myself in an individualistic cultural setting.

Finally, I recall struggling with how to behave in groups as a result of cultural differences. When I first arrived in the United States, I was very conflict avoidant, probably because in collectivistic cultures that value a high power distance and long-term orientation, maintaining harmony is a priority. The approaches I had learned to value and enact in small group settings were actually perceived negatively by my peers and professors in the United States. My conflict avoidant style—which I engaged in as a sign of respect—would actually frustrate some of my group members. They perceived it as a sign that I did not care about the group's success and was a "slacker." I felt frustrated, too, as I tried to help the group become more cohesive and successful by avoiding conflict! I eventually learned that, to be successful, we all had to begin by being upfront about where we come from and our values. Once we all understood the differences, we could create a workable plan for success.

I have been in the United States for several years now, am married, and have a son. I have also earned my Ph.D. and am working as an assistant professor of communication at the University of Southern Illinois at Edwardsville. Even now, I continue to learn new things about how to communicate best in this individualistic, low uncertainty-avoidance, low power distance, and short-term orientation culture as compared to my home in China. Based on my experiences, I would have to say the most important thing for successful communication when interacting with people who come from different cultures is for all of us to always be mindful of those differences so we can both perceive communication by others correctly and acknowledge and adapt our own styles accordingly.

*Source: By Min Liu, Assistant Professor of Communication Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville.*



## DIVERSE VOICES

### "Mommy, Why Does Raj Talk Funny?"

Raj Gaur, Ph.D.

University of Kentucky

I grew up in India. In my home we spoke Hindi, but from the time I began school at five years old, I was also taught English. By the time I was fourteen years old I was fluent in English—at least what I thought of at the time as English. Ten years ago, I came to the United States and have since learned that the English I speak is somewhat different from the English spoken here in the United States. These differences sometimes make it difficult for me to be understood by some Americans. You see, the English I learned as a child is a *nativization* of English that might more accurately be called "Indian English." What is nativization?

Nativization is the unconscious process of adapting a foreign language so it conforms to the linguistic style and rhetorical patterns of the native language spoken in a particular culture. You are familiar with the ways American English differs between regions and among groups within the U.S., as well as differences between British English and American English. If there are differences among native English speakers, imagine what happens when a cultural group like Indians, whose native language is Hindi, adopts English as a second language! As you would probably expect, they adapt English to include some of the grammar, syntax, and pronunciation rules that characterize their first language, as well as by adopting some of the rhetorical and idiomatic expressions that they use in their mother tongue. It's not that Indians consciously decide to make these changes. Rather, the changes simply occur as the new language, in this case English, is used in everyday conversations with other Indians.

Prior to coming to the U.S., most of the people I knew spoke English just like I did, and I had no problem understanding them or being understood by them. So imagine my consternation when after arriving in the U.S. some of my American colleagues, professors,

and students had trouble understanding me when I spoke. What made this particularly interesting was that they didn't seem to have trouble understanding what I wrote. Rather, it was when I spoke that I got quizzical looks and requests to repeat myself.

What I now understand is that there are major differences between the way certain words are pronounced by those speaking American English and those speaking Indian English. Some of these differences are due to the rules each type of English uses for accenting the syllables within a word. In American English, as a general rule, words with more than one syllable alternate between accented and unaccented syllables. So if the first syllable is accented the second is not and vice versa. But in Hindi, whether a particular syllable is accented or not depends on the sounds in the word. Some sounds always receive an accent and others do not regardless of their position in a word. So in Indian English, "pho" is pronounced the same whether the speaker is using the word *photo* or *photography*. If you speak American English, you are used to hearing "pho-TOG-gra-phy," but when I pronounce it in Indian English, I say "PHO-to-GRAH-y." If you're an American English speaker and you hear me say this, you may not understand me or may think, "Oh he just mispronounced that word." But to me, your pronunciation sounds just as strange because in India, that is how we pronounce the word.

There are also syntactic differences between Indian and American English. You will recall that syntax is the rules of a particular language for how words are supposed to be put together to form complete ideas. The syntactic issue that I have struggled most with is the use of articles (a, an, the, etc.). In Hindi, we may or may not use articles, and this practice also guides our Indian English. So an Indian English student may say, "I go to university in city of Mumbai," rather than

"I go to *the* university in *the* city of Mumbai. Another syntactic difference that is common to speakers of Indian English is to form questions without using an auxiliary verb (do, should, can, must, etc.). In Hindi, auxiliary verbs are not required when forming an interrogatory sentence. So in Indian English I may ask: "I know you?" Rather than "Do I know you?" or "I finish it?" rather than "Should or can or must I finish it?"

Nativization of English can also be perceived at the idiomatic level when I attempt to express Indian sensibilities and Indian realities to my American friends. To clarify, as a speaker of Indian English, I sometimes exploit the syntactic structures of the language by directly translating Hindi idioms to English. For example, I might say "wheatish complexion" in Indian English to mean "not dark skinned, tending toward light." Or I might use the phrase "out of station" to mean "out of town," which has its origins to denote army officers posted to far-off places during the British rule. Indians also commonly substitute "hotel" for "restaurant," "this side" and "that side" for "here" and "there," "cent per cent" for "100 percent," and "reduce weight" for "lose weight."

Any one of these English adaptations might not pose problems, but taken together they make the brand of English that I speak very different from that of my American friends. Indian English has evolved over a

long period of time, and English is now integrated into much of Indian culture. English is taught in schools, business is conducted in English, and English is used in government dealings. Nonetheless, the English of Delhi is not the English of London, or Berlin, or New York, or Lexington, Kentucky. And I find it ironic that after living in the United States for nearly ten years now and struggling to be understood by Americans, my friends in India now complain about my English too. They say it's too American!

### References

- Don't care for Nano or No-No: Mamta.* (2009, March 23). *Hindustan Times.* <http://www.hindustantimes.com>; Kachru, B.B. (1992). *The other tongue: English across cultures.* Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press; Kachru, B. B. (1986). *The alchemy of English: The spread, functions, and models of non-native Englishes.* Oxford: Pergamon Press; Guj riots a national shame, not IPL going abroad: PC. (2009, March 23). *The Financial Express.* Retrieved from <http://www.expressindia.com>; Patrolling intensified in sea, on shores in Tamil Nadu. (2009, March 23). *Press Trust of India.* Retrieved from <http://www.ptinews.com>; Wiltshire, C., & Moon, R. (2003). *Phonetic stress in Indian English vs. American English.* *World Englishes*, 22(3), 291–303; Zardari is 5th biggest loser in

UNIVERSITY OF COMPUTER EDUCATION  
NDTV. Retrieved from <http://www.ndtv.com>.

Source: By Raj Gaur, Ph.D., University of Kentucky.

LIBRARY

BOOK BANK



## DIVERSE VOICES

by Charles Okigbo

Professor of Communication, North Dakota State University and Head, Policy Engagement & Communication African Population and Health Research Center Nairobi, Kenya

It is ironic that time is universal in the sense that every society understands the passage of time as it is connected to growth, aging, and transitions from one life stage to another. And yet, the concept of time is so varied from one society to another. I have experienced this similar, yet varying sense of time in my own life, as I grew up in Nigeria, came to the United States for higher education, and have traveled between the United States and different African countries. In much of Africa, there are two time modes—cultural time, which is imprecise, and Western, or as we call it in Nigeria, “English” time. In Nigeria, we call this precise clock-based accounting for time “English time” because the British colonized us. Other African countries that had different colonists might call it by a different name.

Time in much of traditional Africa is seen as an inexhaustible resource that flows endlessly and is hardly in short supply. Growing up in my Igbo village in southeastern Nigeria, the setting for Chinua Achebe’s novel, *Things Fall Apart*, I saw my people mark time with the rising and setting of the sun. Longer periods were marked by the rainy and dry seasons, which could come late or early, and people’s ages were gauged by historic events such as the world wars, the invasion of locusts, or the British colonialists’ confiscation

## Changing Times

of all guns. Such loose characterization meant that precision was not possible. I vividly remember my people saying with utmost imprecision that a morning meeting would start “after sunrise” or “at the first cockcrow” or “after the morning market.” Whereas this would appear confusing and imprecise to Western time observers, to us, it presented no problems at all.

My first experience with Western time was when I went to kindergarten and later elementary school. We were taught to be punctual, and tardiness exacted strict sanctions, usually severe flogging. The severity of the punishment depended on how late one came to school.

When I came to the United States in 1978 for the first time for graduate studies at Ohio University, I was already comfortable with Western time and never had any problem with punctuality. In fact, many Africans in the United States who come from backgrounds of cultural time are often hypersensitive about punctuality issues and tend to be too punctual. This may be a case of overcompensating to avoid relapsing to cultural time. The adjustment to Western time can present some challenges, especially in situations when we have exclusive African events in the United States. For example, I remember as an African student and teacher in the United States, many meetings organized by Nigerian or other African students hardly ever started “on time” by Western standards because we often relapsed to our cultural time for exclusively African events.

So, we seem capable of successfully weaving in and out of cultural time depending on our expectation of whether the occasion is for Africans only or for Africans and “others.” When the “others” are people with Western time orientation, we make every effort to be punctual. But when they are people who seem to share our sense of time, we respond accordingly. This represents a chronemics co-orientation, by which I mean that unconsciously we size up the other to know where to position them on the continuum of “cultural” and “Western” time. If they are closer to the former, we expect them to have a more relaxed approach to time, but if they are closer to the latter, we try to be punctual and seriously time conscious in dealing with them.

The tendency is for people to adjust their sense of time depending on the situation or the expectation of the audience. Professional meetings, conferences, even appointments with doctors or lawyers are loosely treated depending on one’s expectations of how the other side sees time.

I must say that we Africans are not the only ones who could benefit from engaging in chronemics co-orientation. People who are usually Western in their approach to keeping appointments may decide not to be so punctual if they expect the other party will keep them waiting. For example, in the 1960s my village, Ojoto, was so small that we had no resident priest for the local church. Every Sunday, an Irish priest came from the cathedral in Onitsha to conduct mass. Whereas many priests observed Western

time and were usually punctual and expected us to be as well, Revered Father Nicholson was so native in his sense of time that the joke became that if Father Nicholson was the celebrant for the Sunday mass, you could go to the market and do five other chores and you still would not be late for Sunday mass! So, we could say that whereas sometimes Africans may need to adjust to the precision of Western time, at other times, Europeans and Americans who are dealing with exclusive African groups should consider adjusting to cultural time.

I have noticed that many African Americans in the United States are similar to Africans from the continent with respect to time consciousness, and many Native Americans in North Dakota and Minnesota share a similar cultural time orientation. So when African Americans host a party where most of the guests are also African American, the invitation may state that the party starts at 7:00 p.m., but the host may not expect most guests to arrive until after 9:30 p.m.

While both cultural time and Western time continue to guide human behavior, increasing globalization and the information technological revolution are dictating a global approach to time that runs by the precision of the clock rather than by the natural rhythms of the rising or setting of the sun or the beginning or ending of seasons. Whether this move is ultimately in the best interest of humankind remains to be seen.

*Source: By Charles Okigbo, Professor of Communication, North Dakota State University. Used with permission.*



## DIVERSE VOICES

by Saba Ali

Saba Ali lives in upstate New York.

Who knew that holding hands, the very act that signals the start of so many relationships, would be the end of mine? Growing up Muslim, I missed out on the *Dawson's Creek* method of courtship. For scarf-wearing Muslims like me, premarital interaction between the sexes (touching, talking, even looking) is strictly controlled. Men and women pray, eat, and congregate separately. At private dinner parties, women exit the dining room so the men can serve themselves. Boys sit on one side of the hall, girls on the other, and married couples in the middle.

My friends and I had high expectations for marriage, which was supposed to quickly follow graduation from college. That's when our parents told us it was time to find the one man we would be waking up with for the rest of our lives, God willing. They just didn't tell us how.

There were no tips from our mothers or anyone else on how to meet the right man or to talk to him. It's simply expected that our lives will consist of two phases: unmarried and in the company of women, and then married and in the company of a man.

It's all supposed to start with a conversation, but not a private one. My friends and I call them "meetings." The woman comes with her chaperone, a family member, and the man comes with his. Talking points include such questions as "What do you expect from your husband?" and "Would you mind if my parents were to move in with us after the reception?"

Yet now, at 29, despite all of my "meetings," I remain unmarried. And in the last five years I've exhausted the patience of my matchmaking aunties and friends who have offered up their husbands' childhood playmates.

All I wanted was to feel secure, to look forward to spending my days and nights with my match. Which is why my interest

## Close Enough to Touch Was Too Far Apart

was piqued last year when a friend from college told me about a radiologist in his early 30s who was also frustrated by the challenges of the contemporary Muslim hookup. Our first get-together was for brunch at a little French café near Central Park. I listened as he talked about his past relationships. Not the most appropriate topic for a first date, perhaps, but more comfortable for me than the typical pressurized questions: "Do you cook?" and "How many children do you want?" As he talked about the girls who either broke his heart, or whose hearts he had broken, I watched his hands, wondering what they would feel like to touch.

After brunch, we walked through the park. I spoke with ease about my own confusions, ambitions, faith, and fear of making the wrong decision about marriage. I told him I wanted someone who liked eating out, prayed five times a day and didn't drink alcohol, and who made eye contact when talking with girls. He said he wanted a wife who wasn't conservative and could fit in with his non-Muslim friends. He had most of the items on my mental checklist.

We kept getting to know each other by phone, often talking for hours at a time. If I was driving when he called, I would roam around aimlessly just so our exchange wouldn't end when I reached my destination. I hadn't yet told my parents about him, not wanting to get my mother's hopes up.

Our lingering problem, however, was the difference in how religious we each were; he hadn't planned on marrying someone who wore the traditional head scarf. His ideal woman was less strict, more secular. But I reveled in the recognition. Covering was a choice I had made in high school, partly out of a need for identity, and partly out of fear from what I had heard at Muslim summer camp. Instead of ghost stories, we had "judgment day"

stories about the terrible things that would happen if you strayed from God, which scared me enough to start covering and praying.

In the years since, that fear has evolved into understanding. Most girls will say the scarf is for modesty. I see it as a protection. It keeps me from making stupid decisions. To me, the scarf is more than a piece of fabric—it's a way of life. On my wedding night, going topless would mean unpinning my scarf and letting it fall down.

In order to get him over his hesitation, I planned our dates to take place in very public places. We played miniature golf, ate out at restaurants, and went blueberry picking. I looked at his objection as a challenge, a project. I wanted to convince him that even though I did stand out with my hijab, it didn't matter because no one really took notice of the scarf after the first glance.

And I had my own doubts, although I was afraid to admit them: Namely, why should I push forward with this when we weren't aligned in terms of our faith? How could we be a good match if he didn't approve of my hijab? Would I have to change? Should I?

One evening he called to tell me he had gone to a lounge with a few of his buddies. "I visualized what it would feel like to have you sitting next to me," he told me.

"And how did I feel?" I asked.

"Pretty good," he said. "Manageable."

After, I finally called my mother and told her about him.

Before him, I had never gone past the second date. But by now he and I were approaching our fourth date—plenty of time, in my mind, to decide whether a man is right for you.

And then came the night of the movie, his idea. I'm a movie fanatic and remember the details of almost every movie I've ever seen. I can't remember the title of the one we saw that night. I looked over at him and smiled, convincing myself that the weightiness I felt was because I was in uncharted territory. We were moving forward, talking

about meeting each other's families. So when he leaned over and asked, "Can I hold your hand?" I didn't feel I could say no. I liked him for taking the risk.

Nearly 30 years old, I had thought about holding hands with a boy since I was a teenager. But it was always in the context of my wedding day. Walking into our reception as husband and wife, holding hands, basking in that moment of knowing this was forever.

Non-Muslim girls may wonder about their first kiss or, later, about losing their virginity. I thought I was running the same risk, though for me it would be the first time actually touching the hand of a potential husband. How would it feel? Would it convince me that he was the one?

A lifetime's worth of expectations culminated in this single gesture in a dark theater over a sticky armrest. I'm not sure it's possible to hold hands wrong, but we were not doing it right. It felt awkward with my hand under his, so we changed positions: my arm on top, his hand cradling mine. It was still uncomfortable, and soon my hand fell asleep, which was not the tingling sensation I was hoping for. Finally, I took it away.

But the damage had been done. We had broken the no-contact rule, and in doing so, I realized I wasn't willing to be the kind of girl he wanted. I believe in my religion, the rules, the reasons, and even the restrictions. At the same time, I've always wanted to be married, and the thought of never knowing that side of myself, as a wife and a mother, scares me. Being with him made me compromise my faith, and my fear of being alone pushed me to ignore my doubts about the relationship.

When we took it too far, I shut down. It wasn't supposed to happen that way. So after the date, I split us up. And I never saw him again.

*Source: New York Times, October 12, 2007*



by Naomi Shihab Nye

Poets like Naomi Shihab Nye devote their lives to using words to communicate their feelings and ideas, yet when Shihab Nye, who is of Palestinian descent, encountered anti-Arab prejudice, she was unable to disclose her Arab roots and to respond.

The words we didn't say. How many times? Stones stuck in the throat. Endlessly revised silence. What was wrong with me? How could I, a person whose entire vocation has been dedicated one way or another to the use of words, lose words completely when I needed them? Where does vocal paralysis come from? Why does regret have such a long life span? My favorite poet, William Stafford, used to say, "Think of something you said. Now write what you *wish you had said*."

But I am always thinking of the times I said nothing.

In England, attending a play by myself, I was happy when the elderly woman next to me began speaking at intermission.

## Long Overdue

"Smashingly talented," she said of Ben Kingsley, whose brilliant monologue we'd been watching. "I don't know how he does it—transporting us so effortlessly; he's a genius. Not many in the world like him." I agreed. But then she sighed and made an odd turn. "You know what's wrong with the world today? It's Arabs. I blame it all on the Arabs. Most world problems can really be traced to them."

My blood froze. Why was she saying this? The play wasn't about Arabs. Ben Kingsley was hardly your blue-blooded Englishman, either, so what brought it up? Nothing terrible about Arabs had happened lately in the news. I wasn't wearing a keffiyeh [traditional Arab headdress] around my neck.

But my mouth would not open.

"Why *did* so many of them come to England?" she continued, muttering as if she were sharing a confidence. "A ruination, that's what it is."

It struck me that she might be a landlady having trouble with tenants. I tried and tried to part my lips. She chatted on about something less consequential, never seeming to mind our utterly one-sided conversation, till the lights went down. Of course, I couldn't concentrate on the rest of the play. My precious ticket felt wasted. I twisted my icy hands together while my cheeks burned.

Even worse, she and I rode the same train afterwards. I had plenty of time to respond, to find a vocabulary for prejudice and fear. The dark night buildings flew by. I could have said, "Madam, I am half Arab. I pray your heart grows larger someday." I could have sent her off, stunned and embarrassed, into the dark.

My father would say, "People like that can't be embarrassed."

But what would he say back to her?

Oh I was ashamed for my silence and I have carried that shame across oceans, through the summer when it never rained, in my secret pocket, till now. Years later, my son and I were sitting on an American island with a dear friend, the only African American living among 80 or so residents. A brilliant artist and poet in his seventies, he has made a beautiful lifetime of painting picture books, celebrating expression, encouraging the human spirit, reciting poems of other African American heroes, delighting children and adults alike.

We had spent a peaceful day riding bicycles, visiting the few students at the schoolhouse, picking up rounded stones on the beach, digging peat moss in the woods. Our friend had purchased a live lobster down at the dock for supper. My son and I were sad when it seemed to be knocking on the lid of the pot of boiling water. "Let me out." We vowed quietly to one another never to eat a lobster again.

After dinner, a friend of our friend dropped in, returned to the island from her traveling life as an anthropologist. We asked if she had heard anything about the elections in Israel—that was the day Shimon Peres and Benjamin Netanyahu vied for prime minister and we had been unable to pick up a final tally on the radio.

She thought Netanyahu had won. The election was very close. But then she said, "Good thing! He'll put those Arabs in their places. Arabs want more than they deserve."

My face froze. Was it possible I had heard correctly? I didn't speak another word during her visit. I wanted to. I should have, but I couldn't. My plate littered with red shells.

After she left, my friend put his gentle hand on my shoulder. He said simply, "Now you know a little more what it feels like to be black."

So what happens to my words when the going gets rough? In a world where certain equalities for human beings seem long, long, long, overdue, where is the magic sentence to act as a tool? Where is the hoe, the tiller, the rake?

Pontificating, proving, proselytizing leave me cold. So do endless political debates over coffee after dinner. I can't listen to talk radio, drowning in jabber.

But then the headlines take the power. "Problem is, we can't hear the voices of the moderates," said the Israeli man, who claimed his house was built on a spot where Arabs had never lived. "Where are *they*? Why don't they speak louder?"

(They don't like to raise their voices.)  
(Maybe they can't hear you either.)

*Excerpt from Naomi Shihab Nye, "Long Overdue," Post Gibran: An Anthology of New Arab-American Writing (Syracuse University Press, 2000), p. 127. Reprinted by permission of the author.*



by Mina Tsay, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Communication  
Boston University

Although I emigrated from Taiwan to the United States when I was only two years old, my memories are still surprisingly vivid. What I remember most is clinging to my mother as we faced our first blustery winter in Boston, Massachusetts. As a naturalized Chinese American growing up in Boston, I faced numerous challenges in managing competing group norms. I can probably best illustrate these challenges by focusing on my experiences (a) speaking Chinese at home and English at school, (b) attending both American and Chinese schools while growing up, (c) traveling to Taiwan to visit my extended family, and (d) engaging in rich interactions with Chinese international students at college.

The first conflicting norm I remember struggling with was whether to speak English or Mandarin, which is my native language and the most common Chinese dialect. I always spoke Mandarin at home but was expected to speak English at school. My parents made it very clear that they did not

want me to forget how to speak Mandarin. In fact, this norm was so important to them that they enrolled my sister and me in a Chinese school in a Boston suburb when I was in third grade.

I must admit I did not fully appreciate the workload at Chinese school during my early years. But, I developed several close friendships and gradually came to enjoy learning calligraphy, diabolo, literature, and dance. Being involved in these activities exposed me to Chinese art, culture, traditions, and rituals. Learning these customs was exceptionally rewarding, but being enrolled in both schools made it difficult for me to shift from the norms of one school setting to those of another, primarily in terms of linguistic expectations, standards of discipline, and social values. I often felt conflicted. In Chinese school, I became grounded in and celebrated my cultural roots. Then, when I went to American school, I found myself compromising some of my Chinese cultural norms to be accepted by my peers.

At home and at Chinese school, I adhered to norms focused on discipline, a strong work ethic, and respect for elders. At American

school, I had to adjust my norms in ways that seemed to conflict with those of my cultural heritage in order to fully engage in activities and to "fit in" with my American friends there.

Adjusting to competing norms at Chinese and American schools here in the United States was demanding, but I also faced this challenge when I traveled to Taiwan to visit relatives. In Taiwan, I would often sense a strong pull to adhere to norms in the other direction. On one hand, it was comforting to know that my extended family held similar politeness, spiritual, and collectivist norms. On the other hand, my relatives would sometimes say that I was acting more American than Chinese. At times like these, I again felt the struggle of trying to adhere to competing norms.

Back in the United States as a college student at the University of Michigan and then at Pennsylvania State University, I also recall feeling torn between competing norms when Chinese international students would make remarks that I had become "Westernized." Those

comments made me feel apprehensive about whether I was losing aspects of my cultural identity. Such realizations encouraged me to seek ways to consciously integrate the norms of two worlds in order to maintain my unique sense of self. As a result, I have negotiated standards and customs to both preserve my own Chinese norms and assimilate to American norms with regard to independence, discipline, religion, group identification, and life goals.

As a Chinese American, I continue to negotiate between competing norms, trying my best to integrate norms of both cultural worlds. When I meet new people and encounter new situations, I consciously try to adapt my behavioral norms in order to "fit in." Although these cultural negotiations are challenges, I choose to view them as opportunities to develop and cultivate a more refined sense of self. After all, I am a Chinese American, which means I honor and value both sets of norms, those grounded in my Chinese roots and those I have acquired as an American naturalized citizen.

*Used with permission.*



by Lily Herakova

Ph.D. student, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

I'll never forget the day—it must have been early October—the rural Minnesota town where I had arrived from Bulgaria to pursue my dreams of attaining a diverse and challenging education was still holding on to the warm traces of summer. In history class that day, the professor assigned us to work in what he called "problem-solving groups." We were to review each other's papers and offer suggestions for improvement. He said, "Use this not only as an editing exercise, but as a problem-solving activity. I want you to rely on your group partners' responses to move toward solutions of problems you might be having in your papers." Because I was not sure I understood the professor, I asked for clarification. One of my classmates explained that we were to identify problem areas in the papers and make suggestions for improvement to the author. Then, through further discussion with group members, the author was to make sense of the comments and use the ones he or she

## The Effects of Cultural Diversity When Problem Solving in Groups

agreed with to improve the manuscript. I realize today that the professor's definition of a problem-solving group was pretty loosely defined. We would not be working together as a group to arrive at a solution to one problem. However, we did have to work in groups to solve problems. So, to be most effective, it would be important to engage in shared leadership.

The bright sunshine outside the classroom window carried me away and, in my mind, I was back in my parents' bedroom in Bulgaria. That was where our family computer was and where, consequently, I did a lot of my paper writing and editing. (Nostalgia has a strange way of creeping in to the most mundane activities.) Although I hadn't ever been asked to do so in a class with my peers before, I thought to myself: "I know how to do this. I've done it plenty of times. In fact, it's kind of cool that professors here in the United States allow us time in class to 'problem-solve' and learn from each other." Confident in my understanding, I began reading my classmates'

papers. I was going to help “solve problems” and help my group mates improve their papers.

I was fairly confident because back home in Bulgaria my friends and I often reviewed each others’ papers and offered suggestions for improvement. Although I had never heard of the concept of “problem solving in groups,” it seemed to me I actually had experience in doing so. You see, in Bulgaria computers and printers were scarce and it cost a lot of money to hire someone to type and print your term paper. So my parents agreed to let my friends use our computer to type and print their papers. Because classes in Bulgaria were usually large lectures where we rarely knew our professors, our insecurities about expectations abounded. Our collaborative paper writing was our way of checking perceptions in terms of identifying and defining the goals (e.g., problem) of the assignment, getting information from each other (e.g., analyzing the problem), and developing papers that met the assignment guidelines (e.g., solution). So, we did actually solve problems in groups. It was just something my friends and I did informally as opposed to as an in-class activity.

My friends and I would assemble in my parents’ sunny bedroom to help each other prepare papers that met the goal. One of us dictated the draft of her paper while another typed using only her two pointer-fingers. The other group members listened and offered on-the-spot suggestions for revising the essay in ways that more clearly met the goal (at least what we believed it to be) of the assignment. In our informal problem-solving sessions, my Bulgarian classmates and I would offer conflicting opinions, argue, and laugh about our “mistakes.” We straightforwardly pointed out when we thought something in the text was wrong, and quietly swallowed our pride as the others made candid comments and offered constructive criticism. For example, members might say, “This sentence doesn’t make any sense,” “It’s grammatically weird,” “It’s completely missing a verb,” or “How is this even relevant?” Responses to this feedback ranged from anger—“I give up! No one seems to get me!”—to much quieter resignation—“Fine, I’ll just do it your way....” Most of the time, though, reactions fell somewhere in between. We often dove into long conversations about what someone actually wanted to say and why it wasn’t coming through that way on paper.

Though sometimes painful to hear, more often than not, these group sessions helped me. Comments sometimes hurt my pride but often deepened the analysis and always clarified my writing. Ultimately, we all benefitted because we produced papers that usually met and often exceeded the expectations of the instructor.

So, in history class that day in rural Minnesota, I felt I had the proper experience to participate effectively in what he called “problem-solving” groups! I proceeded confidently to read the papers. When I read one of the papers and it was mostly composed of incomplete sentences, I said to the author, “This will make so much more sense if you would write in complete sentences. It’s kind of hard to get what you mean when you’re missing verbs.” In retrospect, I only remember what I said because of the reaction that followed. She immediately raised her hand to call the instructor over to our group and said, “I don’t know why you let her respond to our papers. She’s not even a native English speaker, and she’s telling me I don’t know how to write! I want someone else to read my paper.” I believed I was acting appropriately in my role as an information analyzer, which was what our instructor expected us to do. My group member, however, was unwilling to listen (regardless of whether I may have been correct) because English was not my first language.

To this day, I don’t know for certain if her reaction was due to cultural differences (perhaps ethnocentrism), an inability to accept feedback (especially accepting constructive criticism), or some other issue. Throughout the years, however, this experience has stayed with me as an unresolved confusion—why did my nationality matter in terms of functioning as an analyzer in the group? Did it somehow automatically disqualify me from having a good command of the English language or a good understanding of history? I could have taken her response personally and been hurt by it, but, interestingly, this was not my reaction. Instead, I keep this question in the forefront of my mind when asked to work in a group to solve problems: How can we problem solve together without creating new problems out of our good-natured attempts to “help,” especially when cultural diversity might play a role?

*Used with permission of author.*



## by Sheila Wray Gregoire

So often we assume that those to whom we're speaking are just like us, but they're not. When my husband and I speak at marriage conferences, we're often paired with another couple where the man is a real man's man. My husband hunts. He fishes. He kills stuff. And his stories about hunting are side-splittingly funny. He tells them so well. And they illustrate some great points in marriage.

But one conference just happened to occur in Montreal. You don't talk about hunting in Montreal. My husband realized that after the first night fell flat, and then changed his talk for the next day.

In the same way, we need to be really sensitive about our audiences. Let me give you another example. I think the biggest difference [between] Canadian and American audiences is that Canadians don't see it as a plus to sell yourself. We don't brag about ourselves; we tend to brag about others. Saying good things about yourself sounds odd.

So, when an American is speaking to a Canadian audience, for example, you should use yourself as an anecdote, for sure, but don't do "I have arrived, or God has blessed me, and He will bless you, too." That comes off as bragging and that's a huge no-no. I see American speakers—even [best]-selling authors—do this all the time up here in Canada and they lose the whole audience. When you tell your own story, you must do it with humility, and with "here's what God is still teaching me," rather than "I'm so glad God taught me this. Now you should learn it, too." Perhaps that sounds like I'm being mean to Americans, and I don't mean to be, but in general Canadians are much more low-key about sharing our own successes. And it's important to know this about your audience if you're going to communicate effectively.

Another big difference: we're not as dramatic. Twice I have seen American speakers actually get down on the floor and act out a horrible

experience from their past, thrashing around down there and everything. Canadians would NEVER do this. (Note: both these speakers were speaking before audiences of thousands, and were headlining large events up here). When we tell our sad or difficult stories, we tell them quietly. We never act them out. It looks fake.

Where we do get loud and boisterous is in our humorous parts of our stories. So it's not that we're monotone; it's just that adding drama to the difficult parts of life is seen as gauche.

Canadians, when we're with American audiences, need to learn to turn it up a notch. Americans, when you're with Canadian audiences (and European ones) need to learn to turn it down.

Speaking is a form of communication. You are saying something that you want others to hear. But communication is a two-way street: you put it out there, but your listeners have to take a hold of it. And that means understanding and researching your niche.

Whenever I speak, I ask who is going to be in the audience. Are they married? Single? A blend? What [are] their ages? Do they work outside the home? Is it multicultural? Are they mostly Christians, or not? You have to know these things, or your talk may go right over their heads. If I find out, for instance, that many in the audience aren't married, I will always choose at least one anecdote that has nothing to do with marriage or children, and focuses more on one's workplace or something.

So know your audience. Don't assume they are just like you. Make sure you communicate in a way that they understand. And then your message is much more likely to get through!

Source: Gregoire, S. W. (2009, December 8). *Considering cultural differences when speaking. Becoming a Christian Woman's Speaker: With author and Speaker Sheila Wray Gregoire*. Retrieved April 7, 2012, from <http://christianwomensspeaker.wordpress.com/2009/12/08/considering-cultural-differences-when-speaking/>



## DIVERSE VOICES

by Neil Payne

Director, Kwintessential (a cross-cultural communication consultancy)

The public relations (PR) industry is responsible for creating and maintaining relationships between clients and customers. PR practition-

## Public Relations Across Cultures

ers are aware of how best to foster interest, trust and belief in a product or company when dealing within their own nations and cultures, however, when dealing with a foreign audience analysis is critical.

To illustrate the impact cross-cultural awareness can have on the success or failure of a PR campaign, consider these examples: Pepsodent tried to sell its toothpaste in Southeast Asia by emphasizing that it "whitens your teeth." They found out that the local natives chew betel nuts to blacken their teeth because they found it attractive. Had the PR company behind this campaign analyzed the cross-cultural issues related to Pepsodent's product, the failure of this PR campaign could have been avoided.

When Ford launched the Pinto in Brazil they were puzzled as to why sales were dead. They eventually found out that Brazilians did not want to be seen driving a car meaning "small male genitals" and promptly changed the name.

Finally, PR campaign materials such as logos, slogans, pictures, colors, and designs must all be cross culturally examined. Pictures

of seemingly innocuous things in one culture could mean something different in another. For example, a company advertised eyeglasses in Thailand by featuring a variety of cute animals wearing glasses. The ad failed as animals are considered to be a low form of life in Thailand and no self-respecting Thai would wear anything worn by animals. Similarly, logos or symbols are culturally sensitive. A soft drink was introduced into Arab countries with an attractive label that had a six-pointed star on it. The Arabs interpreted this as pro-Israeli and refused to buy it. (Payne, n.d.)

Payne, N. (n.d.). *Public relations across cultures: Building international communication bridges. All About Public Relations with Steven R. Van Hook.* Retrieved on April 26, 2012 at: <http://www.aboutpublicrelations.net/ucpayne.htm>



by Ann Neville Miller

One of the major differences in adapting to different groups is understanding their expectations and their reactions to your words. In this excerpt, Ann Neville Miller describes the different purposes of public speaking in Kenya and how those purposes influence how Kenyan speakers adapt their words to the expectations of their audiences.

Much public speaking in the United States is informative or persuasive in purpose; ceremonial occasions for public speaking are less common. This is due, in part, to the stress that mainstream U.S. culture places on informality. The average Kenyan, in contrast, will give far more ceremonial speeches in life than any other kind of speech. These may be speeches of greeting, introduction, tribute, and thanks, among others. Life events, both major and minor, are marked by ceremonies, and ceremonies occasion multiple public speeches.

This means that, unlike the majority of people in the United States, who report that they fear speaking in public, possibly even more than they fear death (Richmond & McCroskey, 1995), for most Kenyans, public speaking is an unavoidable responsibility.

## Public Speaking Patterns in Kenya

For example, when a Kenyan attends a church service or other event away from home, he or she will often be asked to stand up and give an impromptu word of greeting to the assembly. In more remote areas, where literacy rates are low and there is little access to electronic media, this word of greeting also can serve an informative purpose because the one who has traveled often brings news of the outside world. The *harambee*, a kind of community fund-raising event peculiar to Kenya, is characterized by the presence of both a guest of honor and various dignitaries of a stature appropriate to the specific occasion, all of whom are likely at some point to address the gathering. Weddings and funerals overflow with ceremonial speeches; virtually any relative, friend, or business associate of the newly married or deceased may give advice or pay tribute. Older members of the bride's family, for example, may remind her how important it is to feed her husband well, or warn the groom that in their family men are expected never to abuse their wives, but to settle marital disputes with patience. Even the woman selected to cut the cake expects to give a brief word of exhortation before

performing her duty. The free dispensing of advice, a hallmark of Kenyan wedding celebrations, would be out of place at most receptions in the United States, where the focus of speeches is normally more on remembrances and well-wishing.

In fact, when it comes to marriage, speech making begins long before the actual wedding day, at bridal negotiations where up to 40 or 50 people from the two families attempt to settle on a bride price. At these negotiations especially, but also in other ceremonial speeches, "deep" language replete with proverbs and metaphors is expected. The family of the man may explain that their son has seen a beautiful flower, or a lovely she-goat, or some other item in the compound of the family of the young lady and that they would like to obtain it for their son. In a negotiation of this type that I recently attended, the speaker for the bride's relatives explained that the family would require 20 goats as a major portion of the bride price. Because both parties were urban dwellers and would have no space to

keep that many animals, the groom's family conferred with each other and determined that the bride's family really wanted cash. They settled on what they considered to be a reasonable price per goat, multiplied it by 20, and presented the total amount through a designated spokesperson to the representative of the bride. The original speaker from the bride's family looked at the money and observed dryly that goats in the groom's area were considerably thinner than those the bride's family were accustomed to! This type of indirect communication, the subtlety of which affords immense satisfaction and sometimes amusement to both speaker and listener, is a form of the high-context communication described by [Edward T.] Hall. A full appreciation of the speech requires extensive knowledge of shared experiences and traditions.

*Excerpted from Ann Neville Miller, "Public Speaking Patterns in Kenya." In Larry A. Samovar, Richard E. Porter, & Edwin R. McDaniel, eds., Intercultural Communication: A Reader (11th ed., pp. 238–245). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2006.*



By Bill French

Co-Founder, MyST Technology

I was asked to present a 90-minute database programmer productivity session in many cities in Asia; starting in Singapore and ending in Taipei. All along the route, the conference promoters indicated there were no language translation issues or requirements; English and the programming languages of the products I was speaking about, dBase and Clipper would be enough.

Throughout Asia the presentations went exceedingly well; the turnout was phenomenal and the venues and presentation technology was extremely advanced with multiple large projection screens and high-quality audio-visual systems. In addition, the quality and depth of questions demonstrated deep understanding of the technologies and mastery of the English language.

When we arrived in Taipei, as was customary, I presented first. Also as customary, I started my session with a few questions to get to know the general knowledge and programmer demographics of the audience. It went something like this:

"How many of you use Ashton-Tate's dBASE?" (On asking the question, I raised my own hand.) The Taipei audience was almost unanimous in raising their own hands. I continued.

## "Language Barriers" Are Not Necessarily Verbal

"How many here use Nantucket's Clipper compiler for dBASE development?" (Again, I raised my hand first.) And once again, nearly 100% of the attendees raised their hands.

"How many of you use dBRIEF, the most productive editing system for dBASE programming?" Amazingly, nearly everyone in the audience raised his hand! Either I was staring at 700 copyright infringers who unabashedly proclaim their theft in public, or I was simply engaged in a monkey-see, monkey-do early morning exercise program for my right arm and 700 or so other arms. In a blink, I knew exactly what to ask next:

"How many of you want to be a fire engine?" Fearfully, I watched as everyone's hands went up. I might as well have been speaking to an alien society from Alpha Centauri—nearly 100 percent of the audience spoke Chinese, and only Chinese. It was very easy to see who in the auditorium spoke English, since they were the ones practically rolling on the floor laughing.

French, B. (n.d.). *Language barriers*. Public Speaking International. Retrieved on May 3, 2012 from <http://www.publicspeakinginternational.com/funny-stories/>