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Lost in Translation

Tonight I am simply tired of dealing with people of a different culture, of always being the minority, of constantly having to explain or even defend my meaning and my motives when I thought I am speaking the language well enough to make myself understood. It is most stressful when I have to feel -and conform to- a whole group, instead of just one person whose thoughts, feelings and reactions I can more easily tune into and adjust to for the sake of clear communication.

It hurts to be misunderstood because I work very hard at getting my meaning across the barriers of language, culture and mentality, doing the best I can. But unless I express my thoughts perfectly in their culturally understood terms or unless people are truly listening with their hearts, they don't seem to be able to anticipate my meaning and honor my good intentions, and I end up having to address the confusion, face the consternation, apologize for hurt feelings or suffer someone's anger. It always feels like the misunderstanding is my *fault* and that I am expected to modify my speech or my delivery.

Because I strive to perfect my vocabulary and grammar, people tend to forget that I come from a totally different background. I don't get the same consideration and allowances as a person who speaks broken English, but I will always be a foreigner, no matter how well I speak. I still speak German, albeit translated into English. Unless someone has lived with people of a different nationality for a substantial length of time they cannot truly appreciate how hard, if not impossible, it is to translate one's culture but this is what foreigners attempt (and fail) to do.

Meaning, intent, feelings, judgments, perspectives, values, humor, taboos, customs, etc are rooted in culturally cemented norms that we unquestioningly accept as the common foundation for communication, verbal and otherwise.

In my communications I speak as correctly, clearly, openly and honestly as I know how, my intention is good and I don't mean to hurt or judge; yet I am told that my delivery doesn't *feel* right, that I need to say things differently. I truly do not know how to do that when I don't see what I am doing wrong. Is it the inflection, the tone of voice? My choice of words? I might as well be criticized for my accent which I've been told I have, but cannot hear myself while I form the words.

In my language words have specific meanings and when we speak we *have to* mean what we say. There are no two ways about it, nor should there be (in our understanding). When we don't have a word to be specific, our language allows us to form a new one that fits. In this way we can think and communicate our thoughts deeply and clearly and they are generally understood as they are meant. There is little room for insinuation or interpretation in our language as words are meant to reveal thoughts, not hide them. In order to speak people cannot be afraid to "be seen". Hence the stereotype of Germans (as seen by other cultures) as being dominant, forceful, abrasive, even rude. In American-English few words hold many meanings. Which one, depends on the circumstance, the inflection of the voice and other secrets I have not yet discerned. Empty fill words abound to distract from the content and little is said with many words. One can be vague and non-committal, not revealing one's own truth or feelings about something while carefully testing the ground with another's reaction. A very diplomatic language, -easy to speak but difficult to understand with too much room for interpretation. Hence the stereotyping of Americans as shallow, superficial and non-committal

With their foundation of understanding different from mine, it becomes very difficult to discern what exactly people reflect back to me based on the communication I have with them. The mirror in which I try to see and know myself is warped by cultural differences, so it's hard to discern whether the image itself is flawed or just the reflection. Am I communicating "wrong" or are the others at fault for misinterpreting my meaning? Who is to blame? In my experience it is automatically the foreigner who needs to change her ways, because she is not playing by the rules of the majority.

Tonight I feel misunderstood, defeated, left out, and like so many times before, I am discouraged that it will always be like this, as long as I am a minority living on foreign soil. I am so tired of trying to translate my very being, and of feeling that I will never be known for all that I am. A big part of me, the part that is rooted in the collective consciousness of my people always gets lost in translation.

In Europe the different nations live in close neighborhood and mingle so much on so many levels, that while there might not be full comprehension of another's culture and social conventions, at least foreigners are not expected to fit in the same box as the dominant culture. In fact, they are *expected to be different*. And when there is misunderstanding we know "They don't *think* like us."

I fully understand why minorities in this country don't even want to mix with the majority of Americans, why this country is not a melting pot: It is exhausting to live life on the mental, emotional and social terms of a dominating culture that doesn't know another language and has no intimate knowledge of another culture. Foreigners are not respected on their own terms but compared and judged according to how well they adapt to the American culture and social conventions. Fitting in is a hard, frustrating and often pointless effort and it is much easier and

much more comforting to move among one's own people who speak the same language based on the same understandings - and not just with words.