

BRIDGING DIFFERENCE THROUGH CLASSROOM MISUNDERSTANDINGS

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Abstract

Cultural misunderstandings often arise because of the unstated assumptions or “background books” that each of us has. In the classroom, such misunderstandings can make for uncomfortable moments, but they can also lead to fruitful teaching experiences for teacher and student alike. Using a variety of examples that arose while teaching a module called “Canadian Culture” at a Slovenian university, I argue that such moments – such as when students seem not to have heard what I think was a clear message or bit of information – the resulting cultural misunderstanding can be educationally rewarding. They force us to break out of the question-and-answer routine that is often a part of the teaching process.

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Anyone who learns a foreign language runs into misunderstandings. These misunderstandings can be of various types. They can be lexical, resulting from lack or misuse of vocabulary (such as when I complimented a Slovenian waiter on his “bradavica” /nipple/ rather than his “brada” /beard/); they can be phonetic (such as when a waiter looks quizzically at me whenever I try to order something in a language other than English); and sometimes, perhaps more disturbingly, they can be more broadly cultural. This last type occurs even when the speaker and the listener share a vocabulary, understand all the words and still cannot communicate smoothly. They both do and do not speak the same language.

It is this third type of miscommunication or cultural misunderstanding that is the focus of this paper. Beginning with a close examination of an obituary gone wrong and the cultural factors that led to that mistranslation, the article moves on to a more theoretical examination of messy cultural encounters that occur even when the differences between cultures are relatively minor, before offering a trio of classroom examples. Though the examples are derived from my own experience teaching Canadian culture in Slovenia, they should prove valid and useful for other European classrooms. Each of the examples I reproduce here interrupted the smooth flow of the classroom by introducing misunderstanding. My argument is that course-related cultural misunderstandings are often memorable and beneficial for learning. A silky smooth class does not necessarily mean much learning has been done; it is educationally rewarding to break out of the question-and-answer routine or planned discussions that govern many classes.

An Odd Obituary

I will start with an obituary that lost or gained in its translation from an English-language source text into a Slovenian version that appeared in *Delo*, the leading Slovenian newspaper. My close reading of just a few lines will, I hope, show precisely the mechanisms which produce misunderstandings. The Toronto-born actor William Hutt died in 2007. As a July 3, 2007 *Delo* report read, “The Canadian stage actor [...], who died [...] in Ottawa at 87, ranked among the most respected [...] in the world, [and] in the view of some he was the greatest classical stage actor in the world.”¹ So far, so good, so

¹ My back-translation. The original reads: “*Kanadski gledališki igralec William Hutt, ki je umrl za levkemijo v Ottawi, star 87 let, je sodil med najbolj spoštovane umetnike svoje zvrsti na svetu, po mnenju nekaterih je bil sploh največji klasični gledališki igralec na svetu.*”

accurate. But then came a cryptic line in the obituary: Hutt “insisted that actors speak in pure, *uncorrupted* Canadian English.” What is “uncorrupted Canadian English?” I wondered. Given the “uniformity of Canadian English from Ontario west to Vancouver Island” (Brinton & Fee, 2001, p. 425) and the widespread Canadian belief that we all speak English in the same way, this focus on linguistic corruption seemed odd. Moreover, it seemed an unusual point to focus on for a Slovenian audience. Why should Slovenian readers be concerned about potential subtleties of non-Standard Canadian English?

What the newspaper had printed was a cultural mistranslation of what novelist and former actor Timothy Finley had said about Hutt: “He was the first one among us [...] to insist on speaking [Shakespeare] in pure, unadulterated Canadian” (“Canada’s great classical actor,” 2007). Hutt’s view was that Canadian actors should perform in their regular accent and not imitate a foreign one – that is, they should not pretend they were from London, England, if they were from London, Ontario. As Hutt biographer Keith Garebian notes, Hutt “dared to be unabashedly Canadian” (1988, p. 344). This was no small feat at a time when Canadian actors would have been regarded as provincial and necessarily second-rate, not least because of their “non-English” accents. It appears that forty years ago, Canadian audiences were complicit in this mimicry: “The colonial mentality in Canada decreed praise for English accents, but Hutt [...] resisted this denaturing” (1988, p. 344). Hutt’s immediate aim, however, was not only to achieve fame for himself by speaking in his more natural accent, but to bring Shakespeare closer to Canadian audiences. In the vocabulary of translation theory, his aim was to domesticate the Bard on Canadian stages by rendering *King Lear* and *Hamlet* and so on in an accent his audience would more easily understand.

The Slovenian reader of the obituary, accustomed to the tradition of fine public speaking or “stage Slovenian”, would likely understand the phrase incorrectly. His or her comprehension of proper “Canadian” would be coloured by a least two bits of background information:

- a) The awareness of the Slovenian tradition of speaking “properly” on stage – using stage pronunciation or “standard pronunciation”. (This concern with so-called standard or proper speech is of course not limited to Slovenian stages; German theatre circles also train actors in the “Bühnenaussprache” or “Bühnendeutsch.”)

b) The tradition of using Slovenian words rather than loan-words ones in formal settings, such as at school.² The Slovenian reader would make use of this information to understand that Hutt preferred Canadians to use words such as “trunk” and “sidewalk” rather than the potentially misunderstood British words “boot” and “pavement”.

The *Delo* translation of the Hutt obituary is a distortion of the original meaning because it is overly determined by Slovenian previous knowledge and assumptions; hence the twisting of the phrase “pure, unadulterated Canadian English” into a Slovenian phrase that could be paraphrased as “local English, spoken the way it ‘should’ be on a public stage – in a way that by no means degrades Canadian English”.

On the other hand, my own critical reading of the Slovenian translation was coloured by 1) what I think I know about Canadian theatre traditions, and by 2) what I think I know about Slovenian language norms and traditions (a point to which I return in the conclusion). I begin with this example to point out the gnarled nature of so many cultural encounters – even if it is as simple and textual as me reading an obituary in Slovenian, being confused, stepping back and trying to think like what I deem is typical Slovenian thinking.

Messy Cultural Encounters

When cultures meet, as they necessarily do in translations and, as we shall see, in the classroom, there is a temptation to establish a confrontation between *types* rather than individuals. Very often, discussions of cultural misunderstandings assume that an archetypal American (whatever that is) encounters an archetypal German (whatever that is). The German thinks the American is insincere because s/he smiles “too much” and s/he asks “How are you?” without listening much to the answer. The American thinks the German does not like her/him because s/he does not smile often and does not ask how s/he is. Each thinks the other is to “blame” for the conversational friction; and neither is entirely right.

The goal of courses on intercultural sensitivity is to help us navigate foreign waters by studying useful generalizations, perhaps even stereotypes. For example, a

² This tradition of using “pure” Slovenian a tradition so strong that even the oft-used German-derived “luft” (for “zrak” – i.e. “air”) is omitted from Slovenian dictionaries, since they are (regarded as a “degradation of the language” (Reindl, 2008, p. 187).

recent guide to Bulgarian life informs the reader that “conformity is always the better policy” and that “if you want to succeed you should rely solely on yourself” (Tzvetkova, 2015, p. 36). For the manager coming fresh from New York and with visions of teamwork and originality, these pithy insights into the way Bulgarian business runs are surely a useful warning. However, if a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, a little bit of knowledge of cultural mores and habits can be perilous because, rather than mitigating culture shock, this newfound knowledge can intensify that shock. In the rest of this paper, I hope to show how this inadvertent misunderstanding that is born not of ignorance but of knowledge comes to be.

If I am speaking to a Slovenian, experience tells me that I can be more direct. The Slovenia version of the Culture Smart³ series informs me that Slovenian conversation “is more direct and less irony-filled” (Blake, 2011, pp. 82–83), whereas Canadians are more reserved, “courteous and mild mannered” – to the point that “if you make a social blunder, you may never find out because no one will mention it!” (Lemieux, 2016, p. 88). On its own, each of these generalizations is useful foreknowledge ahead of a visit to a foreign country. But what happens when the direct Slovenian hears a should-be indirect and understated Canadian verbally attacking him? This can be a recipe for further misunderstanding, even an escalation of tension caused by a cultural understanding of how the other should be behaving.

Of course, the phrase “cross-cultural misunderstanding” provides a convenient out and a path to reconciliation, as George Bernard Shaw neatly shows in his 1923 play *Saint Joan*. In one scene he highlights the use of an acknowledged linguistic misunderstanding as a means of defusing a tense situation. When an English chaplain calls a French cleric a “traitor,” the bishop threatens him with hellfire. The Earl of Warwick intervenes: “I apologize to you for the word used by [my countryman]. It does not mean in England what it does in France. In your language traitor means betrayer: one who is perfidious, treacherous, unfaithful, disloyal. In our country it means simply one who is not wholly devoted to our English interests.” The Frenchman, Peter Cauchon, issues an immediate apology (“I am sorry: I did not understand”) and “*subsides into his chair with dignity*”. For at least a few moments in *Saint Joan*, cultural translation and the admission that cultural misunderstandings are inevitable but surmountable keeps tension at bay.

³ For the sake of convenience, I quote from the Bulgarian, Canadian and Slovenian editions in the Culture Smart! series, a book series which aims to help reduce cultural misunderstandings and missteps.

In the language and culture classroom there is little pedagogical value in keeping tension at bay by writing off course-based misunderstandings as intercultural mix-ups, much less in subsiding into our teacherly chairs with Cauchon-like “dignity”. Nevertheless, the temptation not to see potential sources of misunderstanding is acute because misunderstandings are disturbing for the teacher: they interrupt the comfortable flow – the serve-and-volley – of question-and-answer classroom rituals. They can, however, be useful for transmitting day-to-day cultural knowledge; as I hope to show, they can effectively be put to use as a teachable moment.

Most of the literature on language teaching in cross-cultural situations focuses on major differences between cultures – such as is the case when one travels from the United States to teach English in China – or when people want to learn English but are politically wary of the countries that speak it.⁴ As readers of a certain age will know, the political implications of teaching English behind the Iron Curtain were many; today, teaching English in Iraq is not a neutral, apolitical undertaking. Judith and Sherwood Lingenfelter write in *Teaching Cross-Culturally* of the need to recognize one’s own cultural biases and that, “[o]nly by understanding the other-culture context can we identify appropriate alternatives for teaching that will have maximum effectiveness for student learning” (2003, p. 31). The model is obviously one of exchange rather than one-way trade in English. Their advice is crucial and valid but (one hopes) obvious to the point of banality for any teacher heading to another country to teach English.

Sandra Lee McKay reminds us in *Teaching English as an International Language* that “Selecting a form [of classroom task] that is not appropriate to the context can lead to cross-cultural misunderstandings” (2002, p. 74). For example, a language-learning exercise that involves minimal touching (such as tracing words on a classmate’s back or whispering in his/her ear) may not be socially acceptable in North America, where personal space is measured not in centimetres but in yards. Similarly, though humour is an effective means of encouraging participation and also enlightening students about cultural differences, as Kirsten Hempkin argues, one must be vigilant. She informs us that in parts of Asia a mother-in-law joke “may seem odd or indeed even inappropriate to someone from an Asian culture” (Hempkin, 2008, p. 172). At the same time,

⁴ As Robert Phillipson points out, “Linguistic imperialism was manifestly a feature of the way nation-states privileged one language, and often sought actively to eradicate others, forcing their speakers to shift to the dominant language” (2013, p. 57). This “linguistic imperialism” is not limited to postcolonial contexts.

examining what is odd or culturally inappropriate is a very useful inroad to examining foreign mores, values, and traditions.

These observations on teaching outside of one's home country emphasize the now-obvious need to learn about the foreign culture, not to feel superior, while reminding teachers that they have to be a "cross-cultural communicator", since this will "help educators teaching abroad avoid pitfalls" (Slethaug, 2007, p. 11). The vocabulary in such guides is slightly fear-inducing, as the teacher is warned about "pitfalls" and concerns about being deemed "not appropriate", "odd or indeed inappropriate". It all sounds very dangerous indeed.

Minor Differences

For a Canadian, teaching in central Europe is cross-cultural, but only to a point. It is difficult to speak of a "culture shock" or "culture clash", when arriving in continental Europe from Canada. Cars are driven on the same side of the street, the metric system is in use, and even the cuisine is relatively familiar, snake-free and not overly spicy. Central European students might be less chatty in the classroom, but by the time young Slovenians or Bulgarians arrive at university, they will have had about a decade of fairly rigorous English language instruction, often with a heavy emphasis on grammar, that has been supplemented by hundreds of hours of *Game of Thrones* and *American Idol*⁵ and whatever the latest reality show is.

European students' familiarity with recent movie stars and sitcoms makes teaching relatively easy in terms of making connections. One can ask students to, for example, examine stereotypes about Canadians perpetrated in the show *How I Met Your Mother*. Informed by especially American or globalized popular culture, most European students enter university with fairly entrenched views on America.⁶ And there's the rub. Slovenian students' comfort with English and American culture can prove unsettling *precisely because minor cultural differences often go unnoticed*. What is more, the popular culture knowledge that students do possess camouflages the knowledge they lack.

To provide a trivial but telling lexical example, a few weeks ago, the word "mullet" came up in class and, to my surprise, every single one of the fifteen students

⁵ In Slovenia, foreign-language television is sub-titled, not dubbed, so students have grown up with (usually American) English in their ears. I thank Diana Yankova for informing me about the teaching situation in Bulgaria.

⁶ Admittedly, they are less familiar with Canadian culture, often regarding it as a minor variation on American culture.

knew that the word designates a very unfortunate haircut where, as the Urban Dictionary informs us, “the front is cut trim, but the back is long, left wild and often uncut. Even when the back is cut, it is still longer than the front.” Another example: when I wanted to explain the acronym “PSYCH 101” to a group of first-year students, it was clear many of them already knew the associations and connotations of what is perceived as an easy course. They knew, perhaps from films or maybe pop music, or even comedy routines, that “Psychology 101” is a course that many freshmen take even if they major in Spanish or History or Economics. In Slovenia it is remarkable that students know these little facts and details like “mullet” and jokes behind “PSYCH 101.”

But there is a *but* to this abundance of knowledge: despite the students’ acute awareness of contemporary slang, there is not necessarily an accompanying background understanding. The students may know “PSYCH 101” and the idea that “101” is the designation given to introductory university courses in North America, but many are not familiar with what a liberal arts college is (i.e., a small university that imparts general education in a variety of areas). Thus, discerning or divining what students *don’t know* on the basis of what they do know is difficult precisely because they often seem versed in American culture. However, as I show in the next section, the common cultural bedrock on which conversation depends is not as uniform or solid as it first appears. In contrast, if you are teaching the History of the English Language or American Ethnic Literature, you can safely assume students know little at all about the topic. You can safely start from scratch without running the risk of being pedantic or redundant. Finding the path between redundancy and information overload is difficult.

Three Examples

In the balance of this paper, I provide three specific examples of cross-cultural misunderstandings from my own classrooms. These examples are illustrative in and of themselves, but they will also prove useful for teachers who can adapt or adopt them for their own classes. Each example is taken from a third-year BA Canadian module that consists of a literary and a general cultural component. The cultural part of the module is a year-long introductory course containing a bit of history, a bit of geography, music and the visual arts, humour, the various education systems, and so on.

When discussing education in Canada, I have the students put together a four-year English programme from the University of Toronto. This fun exercise allows

students to see how different studying English in Canada is compared to doing the same at their home university. I distribute a list of English courses offered, along with these requirements for a specialist degree:

1. At least 1.0 FCE from Group 1 (Theory, Language, Methods)
2. At least 1.0 FCE from Group 2 (Canadian and Indigenous North American Literatures)
3. At least 1.0 FCE from Group 3 (American and Transnational Literatures)
4. At least 3.0 FCE from Group 4 (British Literature to the 19th Century)
5. At least 1.5 FCE from Group 5 (Literature since the 18th Century)⁷

Each year I carried out this exercise, the Slovenian students were surprised, even stunned at what studying English at a large Canadian university entails. Their questions and comments included the following: “You can get a degree in English without passing *Syntax*?” “There’s *no* formal grammar class? How do you learn to write?” “You only need 10 English courses out of 20 to be an English ‘Specialist’?” and, most tellingly, “You only have 5 courses a year? We have 15! University over there is easier!”

Based on their questions, you can easily divine that grammar is a great concern to these students and that they spend far more time in the classroom, even at the university level. No matter how many times I tell them that the students in these courses often meet for three hours a week, that there is (often) much more reading involved, generally more reading to be done at home, more discussion in class, more essays to write, and firm deadlines, they tend to hear primarily what they want to hear – five courses is less than fifteen courses, and the grass is greener on the other side of the Atlantic.

But why is there such a reluctance to hear the literal meaning?⁸ Much of what we hear and process is determined by our expectations and assumptions, by our cognitive horizons. Umberto Eco touches on this point in an essay from *Serendipities: Language and Lunacy*. There he explains that Marco Polo saw unicorns on his travels. Why did Marco Polo see the mythical creatures? Because he had heard of them in his literal and figurative background books. “[T]he influence of these background books,” writes Eco, “is such that, irrespective of what travellers discover and see, they will interpret and

⁷ The programme list is available at: <http://www.english.utoronto.ca/undergrad/programs.htm>.

Slovenian students, who have relatively little freedom of choice in selecting courses, are surprised to see courses such as “The Graphic Novel” (ENG235H1), “Queer Writing” (ENG273Y1), “Fantasy and Horror” (ENG239H1) and “The Digital Text” (ENG287H1).

⁸ This reluctance or inability to hear is of course not limited to a second or third language.

explain everything in terms of these books” (p. 54). We align what we see with what we expect to see, which is why if we head to a country expecting to see generosity, we will be pre-conditioned to spotting the same. This pre-conditioning is why the young Venetian saw beautiful black unicorns with heads like “wild boars” and “hooves [...] as big as elephants” (p. 54). In Eco’s portrayal, Marco Polo was naïve, had not read much, was ignorant of the rhinoceros, and was in search of adventure and wondrous beings.

But the students I encounter, as mentioned, are not “naïve” – they arrive at university with firm ideas about (especially) American culture, including firm movie-inspired ideas about what it is like to study at a North American university; of course, that does not mean that they will shed their Slovenian background books. If there is any sort of discussion or interaction in the classroom, we teachers pick up signals – if someone looks confused, maybe we should repeat or rephrase a concept, or use a synonym, and so on. Those are the easy cases.

Then there are the times when an innocent question shatters your illusions of a having delivered a smoothly effective lecture. For example, I once taught a class on sport in Canada, which too often comes down to ice hockey. In my hubris, I thought I had finely explained, among other things, national sporting symbols, so-called “90-minute nationalism”, and the widespread belief that one is actively participating in nationhood by watching sports on television. When I asked if there were any questions, this painful dialogue ensued (I reproduce it in full in order to reproduce also the extent of the misunderstanding):

Student: “Yes. Where do they keep the hooligans?”

Me: “What?”

Student: “You know, where do the fans fight?”

Me: “They don’t... the tickets are too expensive ... and there’s no tradition of fighting in the hockey stands ...”

Student: “Ah, they fight out on the streets!”

The initial question and my subsequent confusion indicated a massive cultural gap I had failed even to see, much less bridge. Obviously the students had taken a European football template; they had, understandably, assumed that because mass sport look much the same all over the world, and because mass sport can be a site of fan violence, there must be hooligans in hockey culture. Hockey is a fairly violent sport; therefore there must be violence among spectators. The logic is almost syllogistically sound.

Though the class was not as smooth as it might have been, this misunderstanding about North American fan culture gave rise to fruitful discussion – in the metaphor of my title, the misunderstanding led to bridge-building between cultures. Because it was unplanned, we necessarily broke out of the repetitive role-playing that so often occurs in the language classroom: with martial enthusiasm, the teacher relates a series of questions, the students answer the questions, and the sense is that one has effectively learned. Like question-and-answer drills (“Did you go to the store?” “No, I *did not* go to the store.” “Did you go to the zoo?” “No, I *did not* go to the zoo.”), such questions can give the illusion of a smooth class and learning. Like grammar drills, sets of packaged cultural knowledge can be “highly repetitive, controlled, tedious and mind-numbing” (Johnson, 2017, p. 221). (“What is the national animal of Canada?” “The beaver is the national animal of Canada.” “How many provinces does Canada have?” “Canada has 10 provinces.” And so on.⁹).

My students will likely remember that confused classroom exchange about hooliganism and hockey; they will remember the simple question that led to it; and they will remember the natural conversation that ensued about different sporting norms in different countries. We broke out of the frontal, drill-like and automated pedagogical model and moved closer to “the real thing”, to what Keith Johnson calls “the other end of the spectrum”, where language is used for “holding conversations, having discussions” (Johnson, 2017, p. 221) and, in this case, probing into aspects of Canadian culture.

My final example is related to something that is particularly resonant in a post-socialist teaching context: high university tuition fees. Canadian tuition fees run to about 4000 euros, which is far less than many universities in the United States but still shockingly expensive for my students. There is a widespread belief among my students that paying to attend university means passing automatically and even getting high grades (this mentality is not absent in North America, of course). For many students, the market analogy is simple: paying tuition is a financial transaction that is somewhere between buying a hamburger and outright bribery. The student pays, it seems, not for the service of being educated but for the resulting degree and the various grades leading to that degree.

⁹ A further downside to a strictly fact-based approach to culture is that learners might be “left with a random collection of facts that describe the other culture” (Woods, 1994, p. 80); nevertheless, some basic knowledge of dates and names from history are crucial to understanding any culture.

Just how difficult it is to dismiss this (anti-)capitalist mentality became evident when I was grading a short test. A simple question was, “How many chances do you have to pass an exam or individual essay at a Canadian university?” (This question was in fact a pre-question to “Name one advantage and one disadvantage of this”.) The answer is *one*. At least a third of the students, who had prepared well for the test, replied, among other possibilities: “As many as you want.”; “Three.”; “One, but you have to be satisfied with your grade!” Each answer was wrong but understandably so. The students clearly combined their understanding of paying-for-education with their own experiences of having a few chances to pass an exam. They were unable to “un-think” their own university experience. Evidently, I had not devoted enough time to helping them rewrite their background books and to emphasizing what to me seemed a self-understood point about exam dates and grading in a Canadian university context.

As we all know, reflecting on another culture means reflecting also on one’s own culture. When I read the students’ surprising answers to what I had hoped to be a simple pre-question, I was forced to reflect on North American academic culture. I was also forced to recall an incident from my first year of teaching in Slovenia, when a student asked, “When can I retake the exam?” At some point somebody at my university must have told me that students can re-sit certain types of exams if they fail or even if they hope to earn a higher grade. Like my students who were confronting a different system, I neglected to listen to or to believe the information I had received. Coming from an Anglo-American university environment, I was certain that having one opportunity to pass a test was the “natural” way of educating students.

Several years after that experience, my views have become less entrenched – less archetypically Canadian or North American, you might say. I now think: if a student wants to re-sit an exam because s/he hopes to study more and receive a higher grade, why not let her/him? Knowledge acquisition and learning do not stop on May 14 just because that happens to be the exam date. This seemingly simple example about exam dates links back to the bridge in my title and also to the advice of Judith and Sherwood Lingenfelter about the need to see one’s own cultural biases and to understand “the other-culture context” (2003, p. 31). As teachers, of course, we want our bridge to extend to the students, so they can walk along it on their path of learning. In an intercultural situation, however, the teacher and the students meet in the middle to exchange knowledge about cultures, background books and assumptions that would otherwise go unexamined.

Conclusion

I started with an example of a cultural mistranslation in hopes of showing how cross-cultural misunderstandings can occur when unquestioned assumptions about one's own culture are stamped onto a foreign culture. At the outset, I focussed on the word "uncorrupted", which is the English for "*nepopačen*". Now I should make a confession: when I donned my Slovenian glasses, hoping to make sense of a peculiar sentence, I had assumed from the outset there was a mistake in the translation. Why else would I have misunderstood a Canadian topic? Having established that mistake, I sought out the Slovenian assumptions that would produce such a mistake. One of the dictionaries I consulted, much later, provided "unadulterated" as the English for "*nepopačen*". But I, looking for a cultural mistranslation as I played dress-up and double agent in the no man's land between languages and cultures, remained unaware of this tertiary dictionary entry. I was seeing what I wanted to see, doing precisely what I have accused my students of doing. At the same time, I have clearly remembered the Hutt obituary and the information about speaking Canadian English onstage precisely because of my initial misunderstanding. A smoother initial reading of that obituary would have results in forgotten water under the bridge.

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