
Callum: Hello and welcome to Talk about English. Today we start a new series about culture and inter-cultural communication. It's called - Who on Earth are we? - and is presented by Marc Beeby.

Marc: Hello. I'm Marc Beeby. I'm white. A westerner. I was born in Australia and I went to school in England. The culture I grew up in was basically English. But what does that mean? What's my culture like? How has my culture affected the way I behave, how I see the world? And do I behave and see the world in a different way from you and the people from your culture?

Talking about culture in any way is surprisingly hard - even describing what our own culture is like can be difficult, and it's even harder to say how our culture affects the way we behave. And what about 'foreign' cultures? We may have a few ideas about what 'foreigners' are like, but are these ideas based on truth, or are they just stereotypes – simple and inaccurate pictures of people we don't know very well. Over the next twelve programmes we'll be thinking about these issues: we'll also be hearing about ways of describing culture, and exploring some of the major differences between cultures. Today, as an introduction, we'll be looking at a topic that will be central to all the programmes in the series: 'inter-cultural communication' - what happens when people from different cultures meet and communicate. But we start with what happens when communication breaks down. War.

Ilse Meyer

I was a child in Berlin in the first world war and I used to lie in bed at night, praying that God should give victory to the German soldiers until one night it suddenly occurred to me that at

that very moment French and English children might be lying in bed praying that God should give victory to their soldiers.

Marc: In 1945 the United Nations was established "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war". 55 years later, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan welcomed the latest attempt to build lasting world peace – the proclamation of the year 2001 as the Year of Dialogue among Civilisations.

Kofi Annan

The United Nation itself was created in the belief that dialogue can triumph over discord. That is why I have warmly welcomed the proclamation of the year 2001 as the United Nations year of the dialogue among civilizations.

Marc: This dialogue, this communication between people from different cultures, isn't something that's only relevant to politicians and representatives of the UN. It's personal. The world, we hear, is getting smaller. Global business, world-wide tourism, faster and more accessible ways of communicating all mean that most of us, at some point in our lives, will come into contact with people from cultures that are very different from our own. And when that happens we find ourselves facing some very interesting, very personal questions. Rebecca Fong teaches a course in intercultural communication at the University of the West of England. Here she is, a million miles away from war, facing up to flowers and the question of beauty...

Rebecca Fong

When I was quite young I went to live in Japan, and after having been there for a little while I was asked by some of the women I was working with if I'd like to do 'Ikebana' which is Japanese flower arranging. I decided not to but I did go to many flower arranging exhibitions and one day I was at one of these exhibitions and I saw an arrangement and I laughed and I said 'oh well that one was obviously done by a beginner ' and the person I was with who had been studying for a long time said 'no no that was done by an expert and I could never do that, that's very hard'. I later discovered that when the Japanese are looking at flower arrangement they see something that we don't see. Because they've been trained in flower arranging and

trained in the understanding or appreciation of the art of flower arranging they can appreciate it for its beauty in a way that I was completely unable to see when I first went to the country. Think about what this implies for the way that we see beauty. We were both looking at the same object at the same time but they were seeing something completely different. What this implies is that we're all wearing culture tinted glasses if you like. We're looking at things and judging their value from our own cultural backgrounds and our own experience, which is often very different.

Marc: Rebecca Fong. We look at things and judge their value from our own cultural backgrounds. No problem with that, of course.... until we meet people who see, judge, and do things differently. Here's Rebecca again, with comments by Guillermo from Venezuela, Kjung-Ja from Japan and Rajni from India.

Rebecca Fong

You don't actually notice culture very much until you meet someone from another culture. And in the first week or two or maybe even the first month or two, you might not notice any differences; you might get on quite well with that person. But then a misunderstanding might suddenly occur. The reason that something has gone wrong is that your culture and the other person's culture have collided.

Guillermo

When the Venezuelan president came to Spain for an official visit he came to the king in Spain and he hugged him. That's something that you never never do. You don't go and hug the King of a country just like that. And the president of Venezuela did it because he's used to that and for him I'm sure that was the normal thing to do and if that happened with a president and a king that happen everywhere.

Kjung-Ja Yoo

One of my husband's colleagues came to the house and he kissed me, kissed me, hugged me you know as a friendly terms. But in Tokyo I'm someone's wife and then someone - westerner

- kissing my cheek is an embarrassing thing. I didn't want to embarrass him, so I just accepted and then when I looked at my husband he just pretended - not seeing anything, typical!

Rebecca Fong

We all grow up inside our own cultures and what this means is that we assume without thinking a number of different values, attitudes, beliefs, ways of doing things, ways of saying things which come to us naturally - but the way we do things isn't necessarily the same as the way people in other cultures do them and it's not until something goes wrong that you're going to realise that the way someone else does something is different from the way that you do it.

Rajni Baldani

When I first went to England I was absolutely, absolutely shocked. There were three of us, two of us Indians and there was one English person, who whilst he was talking, right in the middle of the conversation he takes out a banana, peels it and starts eating it. And he's peeling this banana and eating it without even saying excuse me or whatever. We expect to be offered. That is something that is culturally very different.

Rebecca Fong

When there's a cultural misunderstanding like this, the temptation can be to think 'Well they've got a stupid way of doing it - why don't they do it like we do it ' and you find that your standards become the standards by which you judge everybody else. And lead to a lot of conflict .

Marc: So how can we avoid cultural misunderstanding and the possibility of conflict? What do we need to learn to be able to communicate better with people from other cultures and so become 'inter-culturally competent?' We could study the other culture - find out what food people eat, what their economy is like, learn about their history, read books, get the facts....

Rebecca Fong

Intercultural communication is a bit more sophisticated than that if you like. It's not really only about the knowledge that we gain by reading books or watching documentaries about a certain other culture. It's really much more about what happens when we meet someone from that culture and we interact with them. Their behaviour patterns will be culturally specific - just as ours are. So how do we act in different situations, how do we respond to things - do we respond verbally or non-verbally, how close can we stand to someone when we're talking to them. Time, how do we use time, how do we use space. So what that involves is not just learning facts about another culture but also the competence that you get from actually engaging in an encounter with someone from another culture.

Marc: Rebecca Fong. And we'll be looking in detail at all the aspects of intercultural communication that Rebecca mentioned over the next few weeks.

Studying culture and intercultural communication can help make communication across cultures easier. It can help make us more tolerant of 'difference' and things that are 'strange' or 'foreign'. But it's also great fun. I've been lucky enough to have met people from all over the world - and communicating with them has been an enormous pleasure and a great education. But, strangely, although I've learnt a lot about other cultures in the process, I've learnt more about myself. Which is not an unusual experience for people involved in inter-cultural communication. Here's Mahmood Jamal from Pakistan.

Mahmood Jamal

When I first came to Britain I did not know who I was. Over the years I began to discover, as I discovered Britain, I also discovered myself. and this is also very important in people who move from one culture to another, one place to another because it's not just discovering the other place you also discover who you are.

Marc: Mahmood Jamal

Callum: And that was Marc Beeby ending this edition of Talk about English, Who on Earth are we. Join Marc next time when he'll be trying to answer that most difficult of questions: what is culture?