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A non-governmental, non-profit organization promoting bicycle transport, economic development, international understanding and safety education.

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## The Role of Language In Cross-Cultural Understanding

by David Mozer

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### Introduction

Much of our understanding of the world comes to by way of words: the words that others deliver to describe their experiences and impressions. Conversely, what others know, about what we have learned and experience, comes from the words that we choose to explain it. But what about our knowledge if the words that other use are misconstrued or not accurate? And, what is our responsibility as we disseminate information? To accurately and sensitively convey our experiences and impressions we need choose the best words for the job. The premise of this paper is that a lot of the words being chosen today to describe elements out of our culture need to be reexamined and often changed.

### Conveying The Quality Of A Foreign Culture

One step to creating better international understanding is to be very conscientious about using language that accurately conveys what we mean.

It's been said, many times in many ways, that language structures our thinking and opinions. The adage seems hold especially true for Westerners' perceptions of non-Westerners and more specifically non-White cultures. Take the words: "hut" and "palace". They probably create two very different pictures in your mind's eye. Let compare that with the following vignette.

The royal family left the farm to return to the palace. The palace is a large complex of detached, one-room structures commonly made of daga (clay or adobe). The buildings have a variety of purposes and come in a variety of shapes and sizes depending on their purpose: some are used for sleeping (bedrooms), some for congregating (living rooms), some for cooking (kitchens) and others for storage (pantries or granaries.) The foreigners, passing on the near by road, admired the huts.

A hut, as defined by Webster, is: 1. A crudely built dwelling or shelter. 2. A temporary structure for sheltering troops.

Had the foreigners stopped and spent the night should they have told their friends; 1) "I slept in a hut," or 2) "I slept in a palace." Depending on the words the visitors use to explain their experience their friends will have a very different image about your experience. You will influence, through your selection of words, how your friends will view your impression of the trip and through extension, the lives of the people of the area and their quality of life.

Clearly our choice of words can show our bias in how we view the world.

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## **Bias In Language**

The words and ideas that Westerners typically associates with Africa and other non-western cultures are: "Third World" "natives" who live in "huts" and practice "witch craft." Unfortunately the dominate messages we have received since childhood about our fellow non-western man and woman grossly simplify their lives and denigrates their state of being. It is a lexicon that has been generated, built and spread by ethnocentric western anthropologists, missionaries, educators and Hollywood.

The fact that non-Westerners also, when speaking our English and French, use terms like "natives," "huts," and "witch craft" to describe their culture doesn't validate the accuracy of the vocabulary. One of the longest lasting legacy of a foreign domination and oppression is language. The consequence of language legacy, beside being enduring is perhaps even more destructive and tragic because it structures thinking , configures opinion and then stamps an identity. To escape the pejorative labels and humiliation that language has brought to their indigenous culture and to boost their self-esteem, many people born into non-western cultures fell compelled "westernize", part of which is to be "educated", and then to adopt the western devaluation of their "uneducated" countrymen and women – who incidently may speak five or more different languages, have extraordinary medical botanists, be leading theologians and/or master agronomists in their home environment.

Though it is expedient, a lack of knowledge or a limited vocabulary is not justification for debasing and misrepresenting something. There is an axiom, "It is better to sit quietly and be thought a fool than to open your mouth and prove it beyond all doubt." Until we can learn accurately, find some new words and be descriptive about the broader world it is better to continue to research and explore, than expostulate. So how can we be more descriptive with language.

First, you might have to erase from your minds the vocabulary you use for non-western cultures and the values they embody. Starting with a clean slate, we can learn a vocabulary that imparts a greater depth of knowledge and understanding. Second, it is important to respect other people's terms of self-identification. Ask, learn, remember and use the descriptions that they prefer.

The following are some vocabulary tips. Though not an exhaustive list, it should help you be more sensitive, objective and accurate in your observations of non-western cultures.

## **World Order**

"Third World," though widely used, is a misleading and vague phrase. It is used so generally that it is difficult to determine what's being described. It implies a hierarchy. But who defined the order and on what basis was it established? Is the hierarchy really there? Does "Third World" refer to economics health, political sophistication, geographical area, social structure, arts and cultural complexity, national achievement, military might, or ethical and moral values?

On some scales of "development" a country with lower and more efficient energy consumption might rank ahead of a wasteful nonproductive energy guzzling nation. If we are discussing cultural character any ranking risks being subjective and entho-centric. Ranking the ethics and morals of other societies is always difficult especially when they are sophisticated and complex, and you don't understand them.

In talks about economics you can speak of "lower average per capital income countries." Politically the reference may be to "newly- independent countries." Geographically your subject may be "distant lands" or name the continent or country. Culturally, the reference is probably to societies that are "non-western", as oppose to a "third world culture."

Part of the lesson of being a sensitive student or traveler is that there is one (multicultural) world and each member has his/her own mix of physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual assets to contribute. Each deserve respect. None is second class. Though generally discounted, countries of "Africa, Asia, the Pacific, the Caribbean and South America" produce some of the world's best athletes, not second or third place competitors. They have been responsible for a variety of scientific discoveries that have changed civilization. By those who know, their cultures, artisans, philosophers and leaders are renown.

I also hesitate at the phrase "less developed." 1) The model for "development" is rooted in a paradigm that assumes human welfare is merely the sum of gross economic values. 2) The term implies that more filling of wetlands, cutting of forests, paving of valleys, polluting of water, poisoning of land, dirtying of air and consumption of resources -- e.g. "development" -- is better. And, 3) There is a cultural evaluation that a society that does employ as much new technology is a lesser culture. Our linking of development and culture is often ethnocentric and tends to misrepresents and undervalues the sophistication of the culture, values, ethics, morals and social institutions of other civilizations. To use the verb "developing" works better but can be vague

Hopefully we are all trying to improve the condition for life on the planet. Before we can make a useful measure of "development" we need to establish a new paradigm which is habitat-centered and sustainable. With these standards we may find that countries with large areas of urban blight, social dislocation and a toxic environments are further from the goal of "development" than a country with a sustainable agrarian economy and a tight-knit social fabric. Under this paradigm the former is "less developed."

## **Ethnic Identity**

As a noun, associated with non-western cultures, "native" is generally used to refer to an anonymous person. Whether it is meant or not there is an underlying tone of primitive and inferior life-style. Foremost, the people of the continent have identities, pride and dignity! They have roots in their continent, their modern nations, their racial background and their ethnic groups. They are "Africans," and "Pacific Islanders," or more specifically "Malian" and "Samoaan". Africans also identify by a number of linguistic/racial groups ("Nilotes," "San"). Better yet learn and use their ethnic group ("Fulani," "Kikuyu"). There are "natives" indigenous to most areas of the Africa and the world but in this form the word only indicates the location of birth and should be limited to that form without implication to culture or life-style (i.e. "Our visiting professor, Kofi, is a native of Ghana").

Similarly toss "tribe" for most applications. Tribe does not convey the depth of history, tradition, arts, social structure, cuisine, dress, ethics and rituals that these groups developed. We don't speak of the "tribes of Europe," usually "ethnic group" or nationality is used. Similarly Native Americans had their "nations" and confederations. Another choice is to refer to a "people". Again if possible and appropriate be more specific; "the Hausa people," "the Mande ethnic group," or "the Zulu nation."

## **Individual Integrity**

Among all populations there are "men", "women", "adolescents", "youth", "children", "boys" and "girls", as appropriate for their age. "Buck," "mammy," "maiden," "pickaninny," "coolie" and similar terms that are associated with specific ethnic groups are pejorative. Some ethnic groups have additional levels of passages such as "initiates" and specific names for level of maturity such as the Masaai's "morans," which can be used. When we learn these we will be even more informed and informative.

## **Applying Language To The Elements of Culture**

The word "native" is a weak choice as an adjective. You are probably discussing "customary" food, "local" music, "traditional" architecture, etc. Each of these adjectives conveys much more direct meaning.

The clothes that African people wear are not "costumes" per Halloween and "garb" is particularly crude and uninformative. "Native dress" has the same limitations as other phases containing the word native. In this case it carries the baggage of association with loin cloths or grass skirts, accessorized with a spear, that is virtually nonexistent and probably not what you are describing. Try to learn the names of the clothes or call them "suits," "outfits," "ensembles" or "national dress."

"Primitive", "savage", and "exotic" should used only when something truly demonstrates these qualities. Western carpenters use hammers which are relatively primitive tools, does that make them primitive people? Expand your repertoire of adjectives and limit what you are describing with them. Depending upon what you are trying to convey perhaps "traditional," "indigenous," "rustic," "rudimentary," "old-fashioned," "simple," "complex," "original," "countrified," "ornate" or the like, is more expressive.

"Hut" is a particularly empty word and should be avoided. Around the world people can be found living in "houses," "dwellings," and "high-raises" made of a variety of materials (cement block, bamboo, black sheep wool, clay block, mud-stick, palm fond and steel.) These different building or structures have names which may vary from place to place and can be learned for additional accuracy. Even when people describe structures by the building materials, it is interesting how they have become missed labeled – a great many of the “mud-block” and “mud-stick” buildings are actually made of clay blocks and clay-stick. Why would someone want to call clay “mud”? (Incidentally, clay hardens when heated and mud is wet earthy material.)

Don't confuse the words language and dialect. Worldwide people communicate using "languages." There are over 1000 distinct languages on both the African and Asian continents. Some languages have "dialects" but the definitions and characteristics of these are distinctions for scholars and indigenous speakers to debate.

Every continent has a wide variety of vegetation. The countryside in Africa, Asia and South America is savannah, grasslands, desert, scrub, alpine, conifer forest, tropical forest, equatorial forest and other classifications. Virtually none of it is "jungle." As you travel, concentrate on observing your surroundings and work to expand your vocabulary. There is no place where white men (tarzans) swing ape-like through the trees.

African people have medicine or "African science," not "witchcraft" or "juju" administered by "witch doctors" and "medicine men." African traditional or folk medicine is a treasure house of knowledge rivaling that of the Chinese. If AMA scruples prevent you from calling an African medical practitioner a "doctor," refer to him as a "healer" or an "herbalist" or "traditional doctor." What he practices, then, is traditional healing or herbalism. If he specializes in emotional disorders, he is doing psychic healing.

All people have their own system of religion and philosophy. Though it is not always possible to understand the spiritual power of someone else's belief, we can get clues to the religions of others by looking for similarities in some of the "differences" or belief: Many religions have some kind of food prohibitions: orthodox Jewish people keep kosher, observant Catholics don't eat meat on Friday, practicing Moslems fast during daylight during the month of Ramadan. To the faithful these are part of the religion, to the outsider these sacred beliefs and practices are "taboos" (derived from the Polynesian word), "fadys" (derived from the Indonesian word), or superstitions. So one person's belief and prohibition is another person's superstition. Interestingly, almost all religions teach the same underlying values.

To label the beliefs of others as "cults," "juju" or "witchcraft" when you don't understand it, is disrespectful and mocking. Their religious leaders are priests and priestesses, prophets, monks or holy men, not "fetishers" or "sorcerers". The place of worship is a shrine or temple, not "fetish house." The objects used in ceremonies are talismans, amulets, holy medallions, herbs, and sacred objects not "fetishes," "grigri" or "juju." Additionally, because of the overall structure of the culture the religious leaders may be de facto leaders of the society, at once psychologists, physicians, diviners, musicians and spiritual healers. Terms like "voodoo" and "shaman" have specific applications, but tend to be over applied.

Some of the most important cautions about vocabulary are very place specific. Be alert to these when they come up. For starters don't draw analogies between Africans and animals. Calling a north African a "horse" or comparing a sub-Saharan African to any other primate can be cause for a quick and nasty fight. As you travel and when you come home to describe it please choose your words with care.

For more information on traveling in non-western areas read "Bicycling In Africa", by David Mozer, International Bicycle Fund, Seattle, WA.