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ABSTRACT

Problems frequently encountered by Americans visiting or studying in Mexico are described. Idiomatic phrases that might confuse an American Spanish speaker are highlighted to illustrate how the Spanish taught in classrooms differs from the Spanish spoken in Mexico. The relevance of nonverbal communication norms to cultural assimilation is examined as another facet of language that is not taught in the classroom. Specifically, such topics as walking, dating, bargaining behavior, personal touch and space, chronemics, and apparel are addressed. Although these topics are not taught in Spanish language courses, they are vital to meaningful assimilation into Mexican culture. If these topics were presented in the classroom or in orientation sessions, a visit to Mexico would be more comfortable, enjoyable, and rewarding for the American visitor. (RW)

Americans in Mexico: Learning the Language Is Not Learning the Culture

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Most papers typically sponsored by the Interpersonal Communication Interest Group discuss the results of an experimental study or even a synthesis of literature focusing on specific communication theories or areas of specific interpersonal communication research. This paper, however, focuses on a frequently occurring problem confronting many of us interested in better understanding how people from one culture relate to persons from another; specifically, this paper focuses on some of the problems frequently encountered by Americans visiting or studying in Mexico.

As a Mexican-American whose first language was Spanish, I have long been intimately familiar with the problems that Hispanics have when attempting to assimilate or coexist in American culture. But the problems encountered by Americans when adapting to Mexican culture only became particularly clear to me during the past several summers, when I participated in three different language programs sponsored by American universities in three Mexican cities—Mazatlan, Guadalajara, and Morelia. I learned from these programs that there is a basic assumption made by most language programs which does not begin to map accurately the more likely relationship between language learning and cultural assimilation. The basic assumption made by administrators of language programs is simply that in learning a specific language one learns about the culture that uses that language; hence, the title of this paper. There are fundamental reasons for challenging this assumption, the most important of which is to understand that the Spanish taught in the United States is frequently not the Spanish taught or used in Mexico. Historically, Americans have preferred to learn what is called "Peninsular Spanish," meaning Spanish that is practiced in Spain and which is only practiced infrequently in Central and South America. Thus, whatever cultural information

is assumed in the Spanish taught in the United States, it is very probably different from the actual culture existing in Mexico. Mexico is at least as different from Spain as the United States is from Britain. To illustrate the problems encountered by many Americans who have been taught Spanish in the United States, one need only note some of the frequent surprises experienced by Americans in visiting Mexico. One of my former students, Meryl Nadler, the coauthor of this paper, recently completed a year of study in Mexico City. The following are a few of the awkward experiences she and some of her friends encountered when attempting to use in Mexico the Spanish they had learned in the United States.

Common Spanish Instruction Errors and Oversights

Gorda or Gordita. In the United States, both of these words are described as referring to someone who is overweight. The American equivalent, as identified in most Spanish dictionaries or language classes, is "fatso" or "fatty." Rarely, if ever, is it brought to the attention of American students that these words are quite commonly used as terms of endearment, especially among women acknowledging or interacting with their close friends and intimates. Imagine the embarrassment and awkwardness experienced by an American in Mexico when she is addressed as "Gorda" by one of her new-found Mexican friends. The initial impression is one of having been insulted, and the interaction requires some accompanying explanation in order for the aggrieved person to understand the intended and commonly accepted positive and affiliative meaning behind the word's usage.

Señora vs. Señorita. In the United States, invariably these two words are distinguished from one another according to only one consideration--age. If the person being addressed is relatively young and probably unmarried, then American Spanish instructors encourage the use of the "Señorita." If the woman is clearly older and probably married, then the term "Señora" is

suggested. This, however, is not enough information to use the terms appropriately as they are conventionally used in Mexico, where until one knows with certainty that a woman is married, that woman is addressed as Señorita. Whether the woman is very old or feeble does not matter; she is addressed as Señorita until or unless one clearly knows that she is married. This is a courtesy extended throughout Mexico but not frequently discussed in American language texts or in American Spanish courses.

Discutir. In American language courses, this word is frequently interpreted as the verb "to discuss." Yet, it means something quite different in Mexico, something closer to "to argue." An American wishing to discuss a fee or charge with a Mexican would not want to use this word. The sentence, "Quiero discutir con Ud. la renta" may be intended to mean "I would like to discuss the rent with you," but the perceived meaning would be more similar to "I want to argue with you about the rent." The latter message would hardly contribute constructively to a positive and accomodating interaction. Rather than use the word "discutir," it would be more appropriate to use the words "hablar," "charlar, or "platicar." While all of these words mean something slightly different, they can all be used to mean "discuss" or "chat" and are preferable to "discutir," which clearly denotes argumentativeness rather than a sharing interaction.

México vs. Méxicо. When in Mexico, Americans will commonly hear a Mexican making reference to a recent trip to Mexico or their intentions to return to Mexico. This usually confuses the attentive American who believes that "Mexico" refers only to the country. In practice, Mexicans use this word to refer to the capital, Mexico City. Technically, Mexico City is a federal district within the state of Mexico. The word "Mexico" is commonly used by nearly all Mexicans in this fashion, but this fact is seldom discussed in American Spanish language courses.

Direct vs. Indirect Commands. Perhaps one of the most commonly occurring negative impressions that Mexicans have of Americans is that they are perceived as pushy and rude. No doubt one of the reasons for this impression stems from the mistaken impression held by many Americans that either direct or indirect commands are equally acceptable in Mexican society. Such is not the case. In the United States it is common and accepted practice to say to a waitress or waiter, "I'll have another cup of coffee." The statement is not a request and clearly identifies the status differences between client and waitress/waiter. But in Mexican conversation, rarely do people use command forms of this sort. In a restaurant setting, for instance, a customer wanting another cup of coffee would politely ask, "¿Me trae otro cafe (cafecito)?" meaning "Would you bring me another cup of coffee?" Also, adding the request words "por favor" is extremely important. Another way of expressing this request would be to say, "¿No me trae otro cafe (cafecito), por favor?" Translated, this means, "Won't you bring me another cup of coffee, please?" Both of these expressions stress the courtesy directed toward the person of whom a favor is being asked. In the United States, since we stress our task more than our socio-emotional activities, it is considered less important to express courtesy. This is not to say that we Americans are discourteous, but only that our expressions are less concerned with courtesy than with efficiency and the need to clearly imply status differences.

What Spanish 101 Never Taught You: The Relevance of Nonverbal Communication Norms to Cultural Assimilation

Even if the Spanish taught in the United States were more similar to the Spanish used in Mexico, there would still be another, even greater problem with presuming that language learning itself guarantees cultural sensitivity and training. During the past two decades, much research has clearly demonstrated the tremendous impact that nonverbal communication has on the initiation,

maintenance, and demise of human relationships. Mastering a foreign language does not guarantee that one is able to master the nonverbal communication strategies and sensitivities that normally accompany the effective use of that language. Certainly, the rote repetition and concentration on vocabulary and grammar so common in foreign language curricula cannot speak to the effective mastery of nonverbal communication norms. The following are some of the experiences encountered by many Americans unfamiliar with Mexican nonverbal communication norms.

Physical Environment--Zocalo or Plaza. Unlike the United States, each Mexican town or city, even the smallest, has a town square (zocalo or plaza), in which the majority of townspeople meet to walk and chat with their neighbors and friends. The significance of these squares is that they provide a focal point for social interactions. In the larger squares on weekends, bands commonly play, with or without the accompanyment of singers and dancers, but even if there are no special events planned there, the townspeople nonetheless congregate; in this manner they are able to maintain some continuity in their social lives. There is no equivalent structure in the United States. While we have parks and recreation centers, few of us can point to a central location in our cities and towns where the majority of our citizens, young and old, gather on a regular basis. While the "zocalo" or plaza is sometimes discussed in Spanish-language textbooks, it is so radically different from the American experience that it is unlikely for Americans to have a clear understanding or appreciation of its relevance without having actually experienced its use.

Chronemics. One of the common stereotypes about Mexicans portrays them as not being trusted to arrive "on time." While there is some truth to the observation that Mexicans are somewhat more flexible or tardy in maintaining appointments, it does not follow that they are habitually tardy. Differences in time orientation between the two cultures can more accurately be ascribed to

the differential emphasis placed on meeting social or affiliative versus task objectives.

For instance, in the United States holidays are commonly scheduled for Mondays so as not to interrupt the work week. In Mexico, however, holidays quite likely occur on a Tuesday or Wednesday. To most Mexicans, a Tuesday or Wednesday holiday signifies a "puente" (bridge), an opportunity to take an extended four- or five-day holiday. To accomplish this, the weekend and the designated Tuesday or Wednesday holiday are merged with the intervening day (or days) which technically is not designated as a holiday. This convention allows the participants to enjoy a longer holiday than otherwise possible, at the expense of missing one or two workdays. This practice highlights rather clearly the differences between Mexicans and Americans in the emphasis given to work versus social activity. For Americans studying in Mexican universities, this particular behavior can be very distressing: upon returning from a weekend, they find that they are the only students arriving at Monday morning classes, with both the professors and Mexican students enjoying "La Puente."

Worth noting is that Mexicans tend to be polychronemic and Americans monochronemic. When going to a bank in the United States, one usually expects a clerk to be doing only one thing at a time. Thus, when cashing a traveler's check or making a deposit, one typically encounters a clerk who handles that particular transaction and none other. Not so in Mexico. Here it is not uncommon to find a clerk doing two or three different jobs (counting money, sorting receipts, whatever), and at the same time handling customer transactions or perhaps even answering a busy phone. The American, oriented to doing only one thing at a time before going on to another task, may feel that the clerk is discourteous or sloppy in his/her work. But this simply is not the way many people have learned to work in Mexico. This difference reflects yet another orientation toward time--whether one or more things can be done during the

same moment.

Artifacts--Apparel. Mexicans tend to be much more formal in their dress than Americans. Jeans and T-shirts are reserved for only the most informal occasions. Many Americans have been quite embarrassed when visiting Mexico to discover that the clothes they packed are not nearly as appropriate as those worn by persons in the host country. A particularly awkward message is conveyed when young women wear shorts or skimpy blouses in public. In Mexico, shorts are only worn in the beach resort communities. No matter how hot it is, shorts are not worn in other communities. To do so indicates (from the viewpoint of most Mexican men) that the wearer is available for flirtatious or sexual interactions. Many American women are totally unprepared for the unexpected and aggressive or suggestive comments and actions directed toward them when they were such apparel in public.

Walking Behavior. In the United States, it is not uncommon for women to make visual contact with men as they walk down a street, smile at them, and continue without expecting or soliciting further interactions with the men. In Mexico, women do not ordinarily make visual contact in this manner, and they certainly do not smile at strangers in a way that would indicate an intention or desire to pursue the relationship actively.

Mexican men are not accustomed to the gregariousness with which many American women focus their gaze on men as they stroll down a street. Not infrequently, they interpret the American woman's gaze as a signal indicating a desire for additional interaction. When the Mexican man acts upon this "solicitation," the American woman responds with confusion and anger, thereby suggesting to the Mexican that he is being teased; this, in turn, might precipitate an additional, perhaps more vehement, solicitation. Neither person understands the reasons for the other's behavior. It is an unpleasant and avoidable event.

In Mexico, as in most Hispanic countries, couples assume a specific

proxemic placement in public. The men walk on the side of the female next to the side of the road or street. This position is assumed because it allows the man to protect the woman from any dirt, dust, water, or other undesireable phenomena eminating from the street. Many Mexican men will explain this behavior by simply noting that it looks as if one is trying to "sell" his woman if he allows her to walk next to the street. Mexican women, reflecting a learned cultural norm, assume this position when walking with men. American men, unfamiliar with this custom, have often unwittingly insulted Mexican women by not taking the more traditional, protective position, i.e., walking on the outside next to the street.

Conversely, American women who have become accustomed to this Hispanic walking norm frequently have trouble readjusting to the behavior of their countrymen. The second author has a very good friend who, during her study visit in Mexico, was visited by a former boyfriend, a Columbian living in the U.S. for many years. While in the U. S., the Columbian had been socialized into disregarding the walking norms so typical of couples in Hispanic countries. "American women just did not understand why I wanted to walk on the outside," he said, "so after a while, I gave up!" When visiting his former girlfriend in Mexico, he felt nearly as awkward when readjusting to the Hispanic walking norm as his American girlfriend did when he did not automatically assume the more protective position. In both instances, neither felt comfortable adjusting to a walking norm that they both initially had learned in their native cultures.

Personal Space and Touch. One of the most frequently discussed differences between Hispanic and Anglo cultures is that of personal space and touch. Yet, neither of these phenomena appears to be discussed in Spanish language texts in a manner that accurately describes its functional value, especially in greeting contexts. In Mexico, when meeting a friend, a woman customarily hugs the friend and also kisses on the cheek. The custom also is to shake the other person's hand. Even very small children are taught to greet friends and their elders in

this manner. In the United States, this practice is used to a much lesser extent. Since greeting behavior is one of the most important of interpersonal skills to develop, emphasizing these greeting-behavior differences in Spanish language and culture courses seems appropriate. Yet, only infrequently is this information presented to students.

Dating Behavior and the Role of the Chaperon. Unlike the United States, young Mexican women, even older women, are accompanied by a third person when they go out on dates. Usually, this chaperon is a younger sister or neice, or perhaps a girlfriend. This custom continues to this very day in most parts of Mexico, except perhaps to a lesser extent in those areas of the country most heavily influenced by North American culture. In the U.S., women simply do not allow themselves to be chaperoned, unless it is by choice within the context of a group or peer activity.

American women living or visiting in Mexico either disregard or do not clearly understand the implications of their dating without the accompaniment of a chaperon. For many Mexican men, all too willing to accept the stereotype of American women as sexually free or promiscuous, not having a chaperon is perceived as an indication that the woman is available and desires physically intimate contact. For many unsuspecting American women, this circumstance has resulted in an embarrassing and avoidable hassle during what could have been an enjoyable and meaningful exploration of the culture. While many Spanish language courses briefly discuss this phenomenon, they seldom present the subject thoroughly and with its appropriate importance.

Bargaining Behavior. When Americans shop in any Mexican market, it is to their distinct advantage to be accompanied by a Mexican friend who can more likely obtain a fair price. Many Mexican merchants, seeing "gringos" admiring their wares and thinking that all Americans are rich, will automatically raise their prices. (This is related to the Mexican image of Americans, and, perhaps,

given the recent and drastic devaluations of the peso, this image is not without accuracy.) More than this, though, most Americans are simply unaware of how to purchase items in Mexican "mercados" (markets).

Unlike stores in the United States, most markets in Mexico do not have fixed prices. Hence, if a Mexican merchant quotes a price, he/she does not necessarily expect the customer to pay that price. Rather, the customer is expected to make the merchant an offer, which in itself presents a problem for the American. Only in specific contexts are Americans accustomed to bartering--in purchasing a used car or buying wares at a flea market, neither of which activity is nearly as pervasive as shopping at the central markets in Mexico. In addition, there are other, more specific bargaining behavioral patterns to learn. First, one must never show the slightest interest in the desired object. Specifically, do not fix a gaze on the desired object in a way that conveys interest and delight. To do so assures some loss of bargaining position. Next, after hearing the initial price, one must walk away from the stall or stand, seemingly disinterested in purchasing the item. Finally, making clear that one's funds are limited also helps. In playing this game and exercising some patience, a cheaper price can usually be obtained. But none of these skills comes easily for the impatient, rushed, time-oriented American.

Giving Directions. Frequently, many Americans in attempting to locate an unknown address will unfortunately ask Mexicans on the street for directions. Many Americans who know some Spanish, especially direction giving which is a classic assignment in Spanish language courses, think they can use their language skills meaningfully to find a given location. The problem with this assumption is that a common phenomenon in Mexico is for people to give strangers directions regarldlessof whether or not the directions are accurate. Whether Mexicans do this because they want to appear knowledgable and helpful or because they are embarrassed at not knowing specific locations or areas of interest is not clear. What is clear, however, is that more than a few Americans have been lost, sometimes

for hours, because they could not distinguish between accurate and inaccurate directions.

To avoid this problem, have some general idea of where the desired address is located and then solicit directions, attending only to those that appear to be roughly correct, ignoring the others that appear to be inconsistent with one's initial impression. Better yet, take a taxi (sitio), which is inexpensive, fast, and reliable.

The information presented in this paper represents only some of the areas not addressed in Spanish language courses, which are nonetheless vital to one's meaningful assimilation into Mexican culture. If this information were presented in the classroom or in orientation sessions before going to Mexico, the visit would be more comfortable, enjoyable, and rewarding than it is for many Americans. Very few, if any, of the situations discussed here are conveyed to Americans in formal settings and are the reasons that many Americans are simply unprepared to adjust to Mexican culture and why they frequently find their initial stay in Mexico uncomfortable and confusing. A service would be rendered them, and the image of their language instructors, if just some of this information assumed as much importance in the classroom as conjugating verbs presently does.