

## Sorry, could you not imply culture when you speak, please?

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### The fork in the Road

Consider the following utterance: “*Our relationship has reached a fork in the road, and...ending it with Danny is the right...prong*”<sup>1</sup>. Unless one is native, a listener or reader that is faced with such utterance will probably have a huge question mark upon his/ her head. Thus, let’s imply that faced with this category of utterance many foreign language learners rush up to a common dictionary to find the meaning of “*prong*”. He/ she will find “*prong*” related to “*fork*” but this will still not be the solution to his/ her problems. On the contrary, the most common concept of “*fork*” a kitchen cutlery may lead this hypothetical listener or reader to picture an awkward, if not fantastic, image of a kitchen cutlery left in the middle of a road surface. Even though, this foreign language learner will be aware that this image does not fit to the context of the utterance. Other questions may come into his/ her mind: what is a “fork in the road” or why is such a weird expression used in the language? Is there any easier way to formulate this sentence?

Now consider the sentence: *Here’s to the ball and chain. If she makes it through the night, ba-bing! I think I’ll keep her!*<sup>2</sup> Here is another example that may puzzle the foreign language learner. To the Portuguese speaker for example will be hard to associate *ball and chain* to *wife* because he or she has not any similar expression in Portuguese that makes us realize what the subject really is – even if is contextualized.

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<sup>1</sup> This linguistic utterance is referenced from the script of the American Sitcom *Will & Grace* found in the following electronic address: <http://www.durfee.net/will/scripts/s0101.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Idem

At least two things are implicated in the comprehension of these sentences: the expressions are culturally embedded in English language and their translation to another language, as Portuguese for example, cause misfits of logic; also, to better understand these utterances some metaphor comprehension is necessary. Therefore, here one has to deal with two aspects that are very important when it comes to understanding some linguistics expressions in English. As RIVERS (1981, p. 315) puts: “language cannot be separated completely from the culture in which it is deeply embedded”. Then, given the broad use of English how are we supposed to be acquainted with all cultural aspects underlying it? This is what I intend to discuss in this article highlighting some important cultural aspects and how to approach them in an English language class.

### **Language & Culture**

In the *Oxford Advanced Learner's dictionary* culture is defined as “the customs and beliefs, art, way of life and social organization of a particular country or group (...), art, music, literature, beliefs, etc., thought of as a group” (p. 323).

Generally, when it comes to culture, one cannot find a clear mention to the language aspect. Some reasonable consideration on this matter is given by RIVERS (1981, p. 315):

“Language cannot be separated completely from the culture in which it is deeply embedded. Any listening to the utterances of native speakers, any attempt at authentic use of the language to convey messages, any reading of original texts (as opposed to those fabricated for classroom use), any examination of pictures of native speakers engaged in natural activity will introduce cultural elements into the classroom. (...) Mere fluency in the production of utterances in a new language without any awareness of their cultural implications or of their appropriate situational use, or the reading of texts without a realization of the values and assumptions underlying them – these so-called skills are of little use even on a

practical level, and certainly leave open to question the claims of language study to a legitimate place in a program of liberal education”.

So behavior, music, literature, cinema, dance, clothing, all these things are characterized by the culture of a specific nation, the culture of a specific group and time. By their turn all these subjects mentioned will be absorbed by language that transforms all these cultural features into words and sentences. We can picture that when a foreigner hears about Brazil probably he/ she will come across words like *carnival, football, beaches, Pele, Ronaldinho, bad politics, violence*, etc.

It is known that English is spoken in countries like USA, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and many others, and that all these countries presents a huge variety of regional differences with their own cultural background. To accomplish the task of understanding as much as possible about the culture of these English speaking countries would be quite hard. Even though teachers may profit a lot and students would profit even more if they make an effort to identify at least some important cultural aspects that implicates in the comprehension of certain recurrent utterances.

A suggestion of approach concerning cultural implication on language in an EFL class may follow some practical steps: to start, the teacher may research specific aspects of culture singular to the country and variety he/ she wants to approach; second the teacher has to find the language data that shows itself as an expression, as a manifestation of that culture on language; finally, the teacher may show examples of these data collected from a radio program, a television show, a piece of literature, music, etc. and analyse these language data in term of culture.

### **Gobbely-gook: the e-Mail Experience**

Focus and research on culturally implicated utterances can supply some basis to the explanation of certain singularities present in texts and speeches. The importance of these singularities of the language may be demonstrated by a teacher by showing how awareness of cultural implication on language means avoiding mistakes, being misunderstood, being in embarrassing situations, etc.

The following e-mail extracts<sup>3</sup> show some linguistic exchange between a Brazilian student living in England and another student from USA. Similar e-mails may be a helpful instrument to be used as examples of cultural implications in language and how awareness on this matter is practical to communication.

### **2<sup>nd</sup> e-mail exchange: Brazilian student (studying in England)**

*« Cheers Mate,*

*Tell me the name of some sites. Tell me also some news if you do not mind.*

*(...)By my turn, now and then, I send some kind regards to everybody.*

*Tell people I miss them.*

*See ya. Wouldn't wanna be ya. (I learned this from Will & Grace - What does it mean?) »*

### **3<sup>rd</sup> e-mail exchange: America student (studying in Brazil)**

*« Never call me "mate" again. I dont like that **British gobbely-gook**. I dont remember the names of those sites. You can google terms like "english etymology" and "French" and see what you find.*

*(...)*

*Oh, what you heard on will and grace is "**see you, wouldnt want to be you**". In other words, "**goodbye, and I am glad not to be you!**" ... Something little kids say, but it is still cute because it rhymes.*

*Well, whats new with you? What are your plans? When are you coming to Macapá?*

*Peace!*

*(...)Bye. Bye dude.*

The use of the word “mate” at the beginning of the e-mail was not on purpose but clearly shows a regional difference in the choices of vocabulary when referring to a friend. The

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<sup>3</sup> The original text has been slightly modified to fit the objectives.

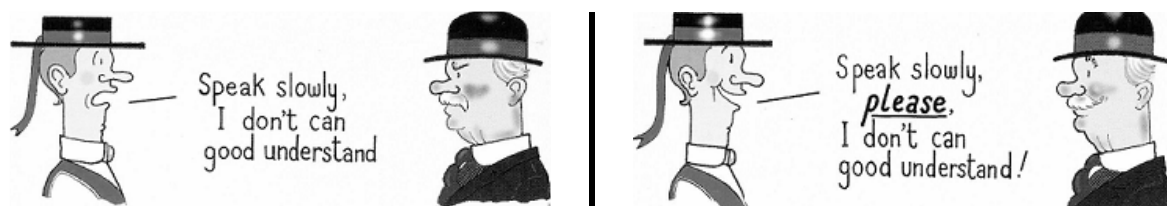
American student highlights this difference by faking offence, claiming that “*mate*” belongs to the British gobelly-gook variety. The Brazilian student awkwardly ends the e-mail with a typical expression from the American variety took from an American sitcom. The American student by his turn explains the expression as a habitual utterance from American kids. “*Dude*” closes the e-mail clearly to emphasize the opposition between “mate vs. dude”, two ways of referring to a friend – the former typically British, the latter typically American.

### **Sorry, please. Thanks!**

Learners of English as a foreigner language are generally aware of the British politeness. This is definitely one of the most known cultural characteristic of the British people throughout the world. English vocabulary and utterances are definitely affected by this aspect. When it comes to adjectives, for example, teachers always warn students to avoid words like *ugly*, *fat*, *stupid*, in favor of the more polite *not so beautiful*, *not so thin*, *not so intelligent* instead.

Some other grammatical aspects cannot be approached without mentioning English politeness. Such is the case of *would*, *should*, *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, used as modals in polite requests. In a grammatical consideration CRYSTAL (2004, p. 111) says for example that *could* “has little to do with past time, expressing such meanings as tentativeness, politeness, possibility and permission”. This may be proved by comparing “*can you be here at 3?*” and the more tentative “*could you be here at 3?*”

### **Fig. 1: Language politeness**



*The How to be British Collection*. Published by Lee Gone Publications, 11 Kenya Court, Windlesham Gardens, Brighton, Soussex, BG BN1 3AU. 2003.

Words like *excuse*, *sorry*, *please*, and *thanks* are highly recurrent in English spoken language. Indeed, these words should be previous to the so claimed verb *to be* in the *introduction* lesson of the students' books of English. FORD & LEGON (2003) explain in a witty way that “*thank* comes from the Old English *thonc*, which has the same root as *think*. Thus being polite is the same as being thoughtful”.

Some of these aspects may be illustrated by using the script from the television series *The Simpsons*. In the episode “*The Regina Monologues*” the Simpsons go on vacation to England and there they meet some British native and enjoy their hospitality. Despite being an adult cartoon that uses lots of stereotype in its gags, the linguistic occurrences are a significant resource of illustration. In the middle of the gags and jokes one can find some good examples of how politeness shows in English language spoken by the British. Also, the comic aspect of the script may keep students motivated. In the first part you will see the Simpson family being hosted by the Prime Minister Tony Blair. When an unpleasant gift is offered to Mr Blair, he politely refuses by saying “*No, but thank you.*” Again, when Mr Blair receives the proposition to cicerone the family throughout London he simply deny saying “*I'd love to, but no thanks.*” Teacher and students should proceed reading and identifying throughout the script the marks of politeness mentioned above.

### **When pig flies: idioms and metaphors**

Naturally, grammatical aspects do not finish the issue of culture and language. The previous illustration is nothing but a slight fragment of what cultural implication represents in terms of English language. A more deep level of cultural implication in utterances, more or less common to English native speakers, may take the teacher to analyze further some common idioms. Although these idioms sometimes belong to a specific region or time they are in some way well established in language.

*The Dead* by James Joyce transforms the cultural background of the divided Ireland from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century into literature and along with it some idioms proper from this setting. One of the character's remark "*I have a crow to pluck with you,*" is definitely the kind of idiom one cannot find in modern days literature or streets. Now a day it is more natural for people saying "*I have a bone to pick with you*" meaning exactly the same: "*I have an affair to discuss with you*". This is just one example among many idioms that may be restricted to the culture of a specific period of time and to a specific group.

In many characteristics this idiom represented in Joyce's work is similar to the idioms presented in the introduction of this article: "*Reach the fork in the road*" means "*to have a moment of decision that will decide one's future*", the "*right prong*" is an awkward way of going on with the original metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY, made by the character who is always struggling with language idioms: "*Ball and chain*" used to hold prisoners in jail are used simply to refer to *wife*, in the metaphorical concept<sup>4</sup> MARRIAGE IS PRISON. These idioms share the fact that they are metaphorically based and, concerning culture, they do not make sense if you translate to another language.

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<sup>4</sup> Metaphorical Concept is defined by & Johnson in *Metaphors we live by* (1980: 5) as the linguistic way of "understanding one thing in terms of another". Metaphorical Concept is explained in terms of A IS B where this relation embeds all metaphorical linguistic expressions.

Yet, one may find dozens of idioms to be puzzled with: “*the day the pigs fly*”, “*it’s raining cats and dogs*”, “*the lift doesn’t reach the top*”, “*catcher in the rye*”, “*to keep one’s nose clean*”, “*butterflies in the tummy*”, “*it rings the bell*”, “*it makes you tick*” etc. If translated literally to Portuguese these idioms would not make sense, but there are counterpart idioms in Portuguese that fit in the translation. The teacher role here is to find proper idioms in Portuguese that matches to English ones, or to explain the meaning and context of use, and ask students to find themselves the appropriate equivalent in Portuguese.

Unfortunately, the challenges do not finish here. When it comes to colloquial expressions one may have to put aside some further effort and time to fully comprehend cultural references. The next two expressions were taken from an episode of *Will & Grace*<sup>5</sup>: *Grace, that is so Barbara DeAngelis ‘Making Love Work.’ & If you were on ‘Jerry Springer,’ that’s the minute you jump out of your chair.*

These are two single examples among many expressions that imply reference to American culture on which the series is based. The celebrities and titles mentioned make reference to elements of the American television culture. The first sentence makes reference to a book by *Barbara DeAngelis Secrets for Making love work*, a famous writer of self-improvement books and a celebrity in American television. The second sentence refers to *Jerry Springer Show*, a kind of talk show where polemic guests are interviewed and the audience is allowed to express their opinion by jumping out of their chair and shouting against some outrageous behaviour.

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<sup>5</sup> *Will & Grace*. North-American Sitcom produced between 1998 and 2006 which plot turn around the lives of Will Truman (a gay attorney), Grace Adler (a interior designer and Will’s best friend), Jack (*flamboyant* and Will’s close friend; he is also Karen’s partner), Karen (*flamboyant* and filthy rich, Grace’s friend).



Uttered by the character *Will* these lines and the association they recall are suppose to be funny, but the viewer who do not share the same cultural background, on which the series is set, will surely ignore the wit meaning of the utterance.

These peculiar illustrations above are just a little representative number of utterances based on too specific cultural references. Learners of English as a second language, who are not fully aware of theses references, sure have lots of difficulty to comprehend these utterances. If the teacher work this in class, students will have a model of how and when to proceed faced with such utterances.

### **Final Considerations**

Being acquainted with all the cultural aspect underlying each sentence of English sentence is naturally an endless endeavor. There are many English speaking countries and consequently a huge diversity of culture embedding the utterances of the language.

Some of these cultural aspects are quite disseminated and most known throughout the world – the English politeness is a clear illustration of that. In such cases it is not necessary for one to struggle for further explanations regarding vocabulary and meaning. Other aspects are rooted in the expressions and metaphors used by the native speakers or writers, and these demand some inference and/ or a research work in order to find out what theses expressions and metaphors stand for. Definitely, to accomplish this task an excellent dictionary will be indispensable.

Finally, some cultural aspects are extremely restricted to some group or to a certain time of the history in a restricted community; these cultural aspects are too local to be understood by

those who do not take part in the speech community where the utterance was produced. When faced with such utterances the situation of the non-native-English-speaker or listener is a hundred times more confusing in terms of language.

Our modern days and technology presents us with a wonderful tool that may be extremely useful on our research endeavors: the internet. Googling, for example will fill the reader or listeners with information about a certain celebrity or place name, a book title, etc. that has been mentioned within an utterance. Also communities in the *Orkut* for example may introduce one into the lingo used by a certain group. And with some luck, the real time connection through chats and on line conferences may also put one across some willing native speaker ready to share some cultural background explanations about certain doubts that ticked one's mind for a long time.

Language reflects a nation, a group culture; in fact, culture many times shapes language. Naturally it is not necessary to understand all cultural aspects implicated in the language to understand English, but if we know a little more about the culture implied by the speakers/ users we are going to have a good source of reference to understand certain expressions, some idiosyncratic grammatical features, and many other singularities of the targeted language.

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