

Cultural Misunderstandings

This is a collection of interesting (and sometimes tragic) incidents of cross-cultural miscommunication. They emphasize the importance of appreciating cultural differences when traveling or working abroad. If you know of other incidents I can add to this list, please [contact me](#). Enjoy!

An American supervisor on an oil rig in Indonesia shouted at his timekeeper to take a boat to shore. Since one never berates an Indonesian in public, a mob of outraged workers chased the supervisor with axes!

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Managers at one American company were startled when they discovered that the brand name of the cooking oil they were marketing in a Latin American country translated into Spanish as "Jackass Oil."

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Pepsodent tried to sell its toothpaste in Southeast Asia by emphasizing that it "whitens your teeth." They found out that the local natives chew betel nuts to blacken their teeth which they find attractive. Some were also offended by the slogan, "Wonder where the yellow went..." interpreting it as a racial slur. Ignorant of foreign language, 3M introduced its scotch tape in Japan with the slogan, "It sticks like crazy." The Japanese interpretation of the slogan was "it sticks foolishly."

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When Coca Cola was first marketed in China in the 1920's, the name was translated phonetically ("ke-kou-ke-la) to mean "female horse stuffed with wax" or "bite the wax tadpole" depending on the dialect. It was quickly revised to sound more like "happiness in the mouth."

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Columbia Pictures produced a movie in Egypt that resulted in all Columbia pictures being banned from the country due to the inaccuracies: accents were Pakistani, clothes were Moroccan, and behavior was American. Most offensive was the portrayal of Gamal Abdel Nassar, the Egyptian President, kissing his wife in public--highly unacceptable in Islamic countries.

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A company advertised eyeglasses in Thailand by featuring a variety of cute animals wearing glasses. The ad was a poor choice since animals are considered to be a form of low life and no self respecting Thai would wear anything worn by animals.

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Olympia office products attempted to sell its ROTO photocopiers in Chile, but did not realize until too late that roto can mean "broken" or designates the Chilean lower class.

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American Motors tried to market its new car, the Matador, based on the image of courage and strength. However, in Puerto Rico the name means "killer" and was not popular on the hazardous roads in the country.

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Ford had a series of problems marketing its cars internationally. Its low cost truck the Fiera meant "ugly old woman" in Spanish. It's Caliente in Mexico was found to be slang for "streetwalker." The Pinto was introduced in Brazil under the name of Corcel which was discovered to be Portuguese slang for "a small male appendage." Ford removed the nameplates and substituted the name, Corcel, which means horse.

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A major U.S. cereal company promoted a commercial in England featuring children and directed toward them. The English, however, dislike children being used in commercials and attempts to influence them, and forced the company to change the commercial. A sales manager in Hong Kong tried to control employee's promptness at work. He insisted they come to work on time instead of 15 minutes late. They complied, but then left exactly on time instead of working into the evening as they previously had done. Much work was left unfinished until the manager relented and they returned to their usual time schedule.

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McDonald's developed a series of "Hispanic ads." They considered all Hispanics the same until they received complaints from Puerto Rico that the "ads were too Mexican," and had to be changed.

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A shampoo was sold in Brazil with the catchy name of Evitol--which was translated to be a "dandruff contraceptive."

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Kellogg had to rename its Bran Buds cereal in Sweden when it discovered that the name roughly translated to "burned farmer."

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A telephone company tried to market its products and services to Latinos by showing a commercial in which a Latino wife tells her husband to call a friend, telling her they would be late for dinner." The commercial bombed since Latino women do not order their husbands around and their use of time would not require a call about lateness.

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Parker Pen is known internationally for its popular gift products, especially the Jotter style. It had to change the name for some Latin American countries where the term can mean "jockstrap." When they marketed the ballpoint pen in Mexico, its ads were supposed to say, "It won't leak in your pocket and embarrass you." However, the company mistakenly thought the word "embarazar" meant embarrass, but the ads said "It won't leak in your pocket and make you pregnant."

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Pet Milk had trouble promoting its products in French speaking countries. Among the many meanings, pet can mean "to break wind."

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The Sunbeam Corporation did not test market in Germany the name of its "Mist-Stick"-- a mist-producing hair curling iron. Mist translates in German as "excrement" and a "manure-stick" did not draw much interest.

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When Pepsico advertised Pepsi in Taiwan with the ad "Come Alive With Pepsi" they had no idea that it would be translated into Chinese as "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the dead."

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Esso S.A.F. discovered that its name translates as "stalled car" in Japanese.

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The soft drink Fresca was being promoted by a saleswoman in Mexico. She was surprised that her sales pitch was greeted with laughter, and later embarrassed when she learned that fresca is slang for "lesbian."

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A new facial cream with the name "Joni" was proposed to be marketed in India. They changed the name since the word is Hindi for "female genitals."

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A cologne for men pictured a pastoral scene with a man and his dog. Where it was marketed in Islamic North Africa a dog is considered unclean and a sign of bad luck.

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The American icon, Colonel Harlan Sanders' KFC, was resisted in Germany because it offended some consumers who associated "Colonel" with the American military. KFC also discovered that their slogan, "finger-lickin good," in China was mistranslated as "eat your fingers off."

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American tourists in Arabic countries have tried to expedite repairs on various items by setting deadlines. Typically, Arabs dislike deadlines and may feel threatened and cornered, with the result of never getting around to the work.

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General Motors couldn't understand why the Chevy Nova was not selling well in Latin America, until they were told that in Spanish, "no va" means "it doesn't go."

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Proctor & Gamble used a television commercial in Japan that was popular in Europe. The ad showed a woman bathing, her husband entering the bathroom and touching her. The Japanese considered this ad an invasion of privacy, inappropriate behavior, and in very poor taste.

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An American business person refused an offer of a cup of coffee from a Saudi businessman. Such a rejection is considered very rude and the business negotiations became stalled. A Japanese manager in an American company was told to give critical feedback to a subordinate during a performance evaluation. Japanese use high context language and are uncomfortable giving direct and confrontive feedback. It took the manager five tries before he could be direct enough to discuss the poor performance so that the American understood.

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Unlike visiting in the United States, when an American visitor brings a gift of food or drink to a Arab household, the hosts may be offended because such gifts imply that they cannot afford such items or are untrusted.

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"All Tempa-Cheer" was promoted successfully by Proctor and Gamble as a wide temperature range laundry detergent. The ad was nearly meaningless to the Japanese who usually wash clothes in cold water.

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An American couple traveled with their pet poodle in an Asian country. Dining at a restaurant they had difficulty communicating to the waiter that their dog was also hungry. They were initially pleased when the waiter took the dog to the kitchen, supposedly to be fed--but were horrified when the waiter returned later with the cooked dog! One company printed the "OK" finger sign on each page of its catalog. In many parts of Latin America that is considered an obscene gesture. Six months of work were lost because they had to reprint all the catalogs.

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Proctor & Gamble introduced Cheer laundry detergent in Japan with the add showing it rich with suds. However, the Japanese use large amounts of water and fabric softener and the suds did not develop. Cheer was also advertised to work at all temperatures, which is relatively meaningless to the Japanese who generally wash in cold water. In Africa, Gerber marketed its famous babyfood with the picture of the Gerber baby on the label. They did not know that this particular country uses labels only to present a picture of the food inside!

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An ad promoting United Air Lines indicated that "We know the Orient." To graphically support the point the ad paired the names of countries below the pictures of foreign coins. Many tourists were not convinced since the countries and coins did not correspond! Not to be outdone, for it's in-flight magazine, UAL headlined an article about Paul Hogan, star of Crocodile Dundee. The title said, "Paul Hogan Camps it up" which unfortunately is Australian slang for "flaunting homosexuality." Johnson baby powder was marketed in Japan but it failed on its first try. Japanese homes are very small and simplicity and neatness are paramount. Consumers could not tolerate the dust that collected everywhere when the box was shaken. (J&J later adopted a wipe on pad).

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Proctor and Gamble did not realize that Japanese parents change baby diapers more frequently than do American parents, but often do not have the storage space. Sales were poor until P&G realized their error and made smaller boxes and thinner diapers.

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General Foods tried to market Jell-O in Great Britain in the same way it had effectively marketed the product in the U.S. Unfortunately, gelatin is sold only in its jellied form and the powdered is not considered proper. Problems were barely avoided by a quick product change.

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Nike made a television ad promoting it's shoes, with people from different countries saying "Just do it" in their native language. Too late they found out that a Samburu African tribesman was really saying, "I don't want these, give me big shoes."

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A Hong Kong banker was discouraged because local customers would not come to his office. He asked local business people who told him it was due to "bad feng shui." He consulted a geomancer who advised him to move to another office that was more propitious--and his clients

eagerly used his excellent services. When President George Bush went to Japan with Lee Iacocca and other American business magnates, and directly made explicit and direct demands on Japanese leaders, they violated Japanese etiquette. To the Japanese (who use high context language) it is considered rude and a sign of ignorance or desperation to lower oneself to make direct demands. Some analysts believe it severely damaged the negotiations and confirmed to the Japanese that Americans are barbarians.

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Leona Helmsley should have done her homework before she approved a promotion that compared her Helmsley Palace Hotel in New York as comparable to the Taj Mahal--a mausoleum in India.

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Time Magazine ran an ad in Spanish in its Brazilian edition--forgetting that the primary language in Brazil is Portuguese.

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A shoestore in Bangladesh was destroyed when local Muslims became offended with a Thom McAn logo on some sandals was mistaken for the Arabic characters for Allah.

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McDonnell Douglas Corporation had difficulties in India with a promotional brochure of its aircraft. It had inadvertently used old photos from National Geographic that portrayed turbaned men who were Pakistanis, not Indians.

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In 1989 the Polaroid company decided to introduce a slide copier into the European market. The failed to realize that standard paper sizes vary considerably and made late adjustments at unexpected extra expense.

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A golf ball manufacturing company packaged golf balls in packs of four for convenient purchase in Japan. Unfortunately, pronunciation of the word "four" in Japanese sounds like the word "death" and items packaged in fours are unpopular.

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A major soapmaker test marketed a soap name in 50 countries, and what it found was enough to make them change the name. The proposed name meant "dainty" in most European languages, "song" in Gaelic, "aloof" in Flemish, "horse" in one African language, "dim-witted" in Persian, "crazy" in Korean, and was obscene in Slavic languages.

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General Motors of Canada was fortunate enough to sell 13,500 Chevy Malibu's to Iraq--only to discover that the hot and dusty climate was incompatible with the cars. Iraq refused delivery of 12,000, and while GM attempted to reengineer the cars, Iraq experienced political problems and the cars were never delivered.

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A college student was talking with an English friend, found her wardrobe attractive, and complimented her "pants." The friend laughed, knowing that Americans did not understand that "pants" to Brits referred to underwear.

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A soft drink was introduced into Arab countries with an attractive label that had stars on it--six-pointed stars. The Arabs interpreted this as pro-Israeli and refused to buy it. Another label was printed in ten languages, one of which was Hebrew--again the Arabs did not buy it.

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American medical containers were distributed in Great Britain and caused quite a stir. The instructions to "Take off top and push in bottom," innocuous to Americans, had very strong sexual connotations to the British.

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In 1985 Bechtel pulled out of a joint venture in New Guinea. It seemed flawed from the start. Bechtel had 33 months to build a new plant, organize services, and meet a production deadline or face financial penalties. They planned to place a mine at the top of a mountain in an isolated rain forest, creating a town of 2,500, camps for 400, a power plant, air strip, roads, hospitals, and support services (for natives who had never seen a Westerner). The natives who were recruited to work (while receiving 400 inches of rain during the rainy season) had no concept of private property, modern money, central government, or work regulations. The multicultural workforce of 5,000 was composed of mixed indigenous people and imported technicians from the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Korea, and Philippines. The road builders did not believe in working around the clock (the contractor finally went bankrupt). Natives also did not like the work schedule so they went with bows and arrows to shut down telephone lines, roads, and frighten personnel. There was an 85% turnover in the native workforce.

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FEDEX (Federal Express) wisely chose to expand overseas when it discovered the domestic market was saturated. However, the centralized or "hub and spoke" delivery system that was so successful domestically was inappropriate for overseas distribution. In addition, they failed to consider cultural differences: In Spain the workers preferred very late office hours, and in Russia the workers took truck cleaning soap home due to consumer shortages. FEDEX finally shut down over 100 European operations after \$1.2 billion in losses.

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Coca Cola tried marketing its domestically successful two liter bottle in Spain. It finally withdrew the bottle from the Spanish market when it discovered that the refrigerator compartments were too small to hold the liter size. [Note: a recent e-mail from a student who works for Coke in Spain refutes this, reporting that it was taken off the market for design and recycling reasons and later reintroduced-- Thanks Rob!]

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A U.S. napkin company advertised in Great Britain that "You could use no finer napkin at your dinner table." Sales were hardly brisk given that to the British "napkin" means "diaper."

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In Quebec an American-based canned fish manufacturer placed a newspaper ad that showed a woman in shorts playing golf with a man. The ad continued that she could enjoy golf that afternoon and still have time to prepare a dinner of canned fish. Too bad that the ad missed the customs that women did not wear shorts on golf courses, play golf with mixed teams, or serve canned fish as a main course.

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The Disney Corporation misjudged the amount of food and accommodation needs, and souvenir spending practices of people visiting EuroDisney in France. The demands were so low that the 1,100 room Newport Bay Club was temporarily closed during the Winter months of 1992.

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U.S. and British negotiators found themselves at a standstill when the American company proposed that they "table" particular key points. In the U.S. "Tabling a motion" means to not discuss it, while the same phrase in Great Britain means to "bring it to the table for discussion."

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An American banker in England drew nervous laughter when he unintentionally made an after dinner speech in which he indicated he was "full" and "stuffed" after dinner. The terms imply being drunk and sexually involved in British slang.

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McDonald's received many complaints from local authorities in 1988 when it displayed the Mexican national flag on its placemats. The Mexicans were offended by grease and ketchup defacing their national symbol and quickly confiscated the place mats.

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Mountain Bell Company tried to promote its telephone and services to Saudi's. Its ad portrayed an executive talking on the phone with his feet propped up on the desk, showing the soles of his shoes-- something an Arab would never do!
The American slogan for Salem cigarettes (Salem--feeling free!) was translated in the Japanese market as "When smoking Salem, you feel so refreshed that your mind seems to be free and empty."

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An American t-shirt maker in Miami printed shirts for the Spanish market which promoted the Pope's visit. Instead of the desired, "I saw the Pope," in Spanish, it proclaimed, "I saw the Potato."

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Chicken-man Frank Perdue's slogan, "It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken," was remarkably mistranslated into Spanish. A picture of Perdue with one of his birds appeared on billboards all over Mexico with the caption, "It takes a man to make a chicken aroused."

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In Italy, a campaign for Schweppes Tonic Water translated the name into "Schweppes Toilet Water."

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China is sensitive to Japanese economic overtures due to its conflict with them during the war. However, the growing economy in China has led Japan to introduce the Toyota Prado land cruiser sport-utility vehicle, to the car-hungry Chinese market. They unfortunately did not do much market research since the name sounds a lot like *badao*, which also means "to rule by force" or "overbearing." The ads also showed stone lions (traditional symbol of Chinese power) saluting and bowing to the Prado, which resulted in the Japanese formally apologizing for the 30 magazine and news ads.

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Think this is the last entry? Not on your life! Read the paper every day and you can find examples just like these...

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