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Dear Colleague:

We all recognize the importance of knowing a foreign language or languages in modern society. On practical grounds, if Americans are fluent in, say, Japanese, they will be better salespeople in that part of the world. This motivation is, admittedly, rather crass. On educational grounds, knowing a foreign language enables American students to step out of their own cultural skin into that of another. On diplomatic grounds, the multilingual American will win brownie points with their foreign hosts. "The ugly American" is one who presumes that everyone in the world should, as a matter of course, understand his own mother tongue.

But life is not quite so simple. Despite what foreigners may say, their attitude to Americans who go temporarily "native" can be deeply ambivalent. I speak here from experience. In China, when foreigners come to visit us, we always say how pleased we are that they can speak--or at least--try to speak our language. And yet there is a sense of embarrassment--indeed of shock. Here is a woman of red hair and blue eyes, and she strides into our humble courtyard house wearing a Chinese dress--and she says, brightly, "Nie hao ma? (how are you?)". In an instant, we Chinese are made aware of the absurdity of our own costume. The kind of dress we wear and take completely for granted as inherently human suddenly seems totally arbitrary. And when she speaks our tongue, we become aware--at an even deeper and more traumatic level--that our very language is a mere convention. A foreigner, by demonstrating that language and costume can be put on and taken off at will, shakes in all innocence the foundation of the native's world.

Contact between people of different culture can generate indifference, misunderstanding, or shock. Shock is perhaps best, for it can lead to real understanding, as distinct from superficial understanding which, in its arbitrary selectivity, is really misunderstanding.

Best wishes,

