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Culture Shock and its Ethnocentrism: Roots of Language and Mislistening Revealed

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Trained in both applied linguistics and counseling psychology, Donahue, Senior Vice President (academic affairs), Global Listening Centre has worked to reveal the perceptual pitfalls in communicating across cultures, particularly how mass media present cultural others in journalistic news reports by stereotyping or sometimes worse. For example, he finds a lack of critical listening (term, see Harris, 2017) by even the elite journalist in reporting the decades-long automotive trade disputes between the U.S. and Japan (e.g. Donahue 1998, 2017), by which biased reporting sometimes substitutes cultural stereotypes in place of the hard facts that might

undermine their country's position in the dispute. Or sometimes distorting what trade representatives say in keeping with apparent presumptions of the journalist.

Presently, Donahue finds similar dynamic in a curious case of culture shock felt worldwide from the misidentity of a Japanese manga star by Western media in their mislistening of the Japanese producer. Simply a matter of language mistranslation, it is not. This case goes well beyond the mere mangling of words between cultures. If it were this simple, then people could rest easy crossing cultures with smart phone in hand and an eye on the translator app. In fact, what happened was a complex of missteps by both the "news"-breaking journalist and a U.S. museum curator expert on Japan, and subsequent media who further distorted the original Japanese message, leading various "netizens" to voice vitriol against Japanese people in general, or at least re-invent stereotypical notions about them, a veritable manufacture of racism.

At root was widespread mislistening by failing to confirm or disconfirm the "strange logic" by the Japanese as originally reported. Furthermore, an interesting aspect of the unique writing system of Japanese, even different from Chinese, is revealed showing how recent convention permits sophisticated nuance that English comparatively cannot render;¹ and which was employed in this present case but unfortunately overlooked by even some Japanese journalists themselves. This "enhanced" feature of Japanese orthography shows that the Japanese are logical as any other people, and if the journalists in question had examined the language at the Japanese producer's website, they would have found a perspective toward cartoon characters not unlike that reserved for special iconic characters in their own cultures. Although important, this Japanese orthographic feature was secondary to the larger role of mislistening by the players themselves in creating the fiasco, aside from any linguistic gaps or miscues.

The overall research purpose here is to demonstrate how even experts or accomplished people can err interculturally and the unfortunate outcome of cultural stereotyping or worse. The case further illustrates listening at work in the professions (e.g., journalism, media, cultural studies) and how vital the skill. Furthermore still, the case should interest interculturalists how it can illuminate principles of comparative culture.

¹Indeed English can render it in language but not by manipulating the symbols of its orthography like the Japanese can their phonetic syllabaries (not by *kanji* or Chinese characters in this case).

References

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