

“Over There, They All Speak English.”

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It happened again the other day. As I was walking through Nürnberg, Germany, where I live, a couple of tourists from the US asked me, in English, for directions to the Christmas Market. I was happy to help and showed them the way. But it would have been nice if they had first asked me, “Do you speak English?” instead of simply assuming that I did.

I also come from the US, and my first language is also English. Maybe these tourists thought that I was one of them – something about the way I walk, or my face, or my clothing perhaps? I was wearing a pair of pants I bought in the US (and made in Romania) but my coat was a German brand. No, I suspect that they simply assumed that everyone here speaks English.

In my experience, this is not an isolated event. Last year, on a Lufthansa flight leaving from Frankfurt and going to the US, a man sitting behind me suddenly asked, in English, “When do we arrive in Boston.” There was no “hello,” or “Could I ask you a question?” I don’t believe I had said anything or done anything to suggest that I spoke English. And it was a German airline.

I was in a bad mood that day, and instead of simply answering him, I asked him in a not-so-friendly voice. “Why do you assume that I speak English?” In response, he challenged me on my “bad” attitude. “Don’t take out your frustrations on me,” he said. “I was just asking a question.” I chose to apologize for having said what I did, because I had taken out frustrations on him. He could have reciprocated, and it could have opened up a dialogue. But he didn’t.

Another example, this time from an experience I had in France recently. I was sitting in a restaurant outside of Paris, at a table by myself, reading a German book and eating dinner. A father and son from the US sat next to me; I suspected that they were from the east coast based on their accent. Without first saying “hello” or even, “Can I ask you question,” the son suddenly asked me in English, “What’s that you’re eating?” I paused, took a breath, remembered my last experience on the Lufthansa flight, and this time, simply answered him.

A little later, as they were finishing dinner and ordering desert, I had another opportunity to hold my tongue. The father wanted a big cup of coffee, exactly like he could get in the US. Trouble is, he had been at a Starbucks in Paris and got his tall filtered coffee just the way he wanted it. He thought he could get the same thing in this small, local restaurant. In an increasingly angry tone of voice, he told the French speaking waitress that the espresso she had served him wasn’t what he wanted.

As I listened to him, I thought, “She’s not going to understand him.” He was talking in circles, in run-on sentences, using slang, speaking faster – and louder -- as he got more frustrated. Finally, his son intervened and explained to him that he wasn’t going to get his coffee here the way that he was used to in the US. Astoundingly, the father didn’t understand that: if he could get his coffee at Starbucks, why not here? After all, there’s a Starbucks in Paris. “Ah,” I thought sarcastically, “one more reason to boycott Starbucks. They’re helping to export a cherished US value: “I want what I want when I want it.”

I sometimes wonder if there’s another value being exported, this one from the folks who don’t want other languages spoken in the US: “English Only.” Recently, on a local train departing from the main station in Nürnberg, a young US soldier in civilian clothes asked me and a couple of other passengers if we knew the train schedule. I guess I really hadn’t learned my lesson from the Lufthansa flight, so I decided to challenge him. He got defensive, too, and told me, “I’ve lived here for a couple of years, and they understand what I’m saying. Everyone here speaks English.” He was headed to a village near a US army base. I know this village. There are other US citizens living there, and they certainly speak English all the time. But in my experience, the locals speak dialect most of the time, and it’s likely that some of them, and maybe many of them, don’t speak English very well.

I live in Germany now, married to a German, and have made the decision to learn and use German when I’m in public places and in most social settings. My German isn’t great – I make mistakes all the time, and sometimes it takes a little patience to understand me. And as a 58 year old, it hasn’t been easy to learn a new language in the last couple of years. I’m told by Germans that it’s rare to find a US citizen who speaks German. I’ve met US (and British) citizens, some of whom have lived here for over a decade, who have told me, “I’m not going to learn German. I don’t need to. At work, we speak English, and when I go shopping, people understand me.” I’m sure that there are enclaves of US and British citizens living around the world and who don’t try to speak the local languages.

I’m not surprised that so many US citizens make the assumption that everyone outside the US speaks English. It is a dominant language in multinational corporations, and many young people in Europe study English in school. Here in Germany, many Germans and non-US immigrants understand some English and can speak a few words. But not everyone; about 50% of the people here claim that they speak some English, which means that at least 50% don’t. My in-laws, for example, are in the second category; my mother and father-in-law don’t even speak the high German that I’m learning. They speak a dialect that I can barely understand. Even among those Germans who have taken English in school, many are nervous about speaking English, for fear that they will mispronounce something.

So I am troubled when US citizens immediately use English here, without first checking out if the listener can, or wants to, use English. I see this assumption of English fluency as a reflection of the privilege that comes from being a US citizen and having English as

a mother tongue. This may sound harsh, but to me, when US citizens behave this way, it comes off as, “We’re from the US. We don’t have to think about how to communicate with others. They need to adjust to us.” I call that arrogance. It’s indicative of the arrogance of too many people from the US. It’s indicative of US economic and political policy towards the rest of the world. “We’re from the US. We’ll call the shots. We’ll decide how others are to behave.”

The next day after the restaurant experience with the father and son, I was boarding an Air France flight to the US. The man sitting next to me -- from his accent, I assumed that he was a native French speaker -- wanted to know if I was willing to change seats with his friend a couple of rows back, so that they could sit together. But before he asked me that, we exchanged a few words in both French and English, to decide which language we could and would use. We ended up using both. In my experience, this is a frequent occurrence in Europe: negotiating the language we’ll use in a given situation. And sometimes, two or more languages are used simultaneously, each person choosing the one that they want to use, either for comfort or for practice. For someone listening in to the conversation, it may seem strange, but it works just fine.

I don’t expect tourists from the US and England visiting Nürnberg for the Christmas Market to learn German. I do expect them to be aware of language differences and to negotiate in some small way when communicating with non-native English speakers. So, my request is a simple one: first ask, “Do you speak English?” It would be nice if they also learned a few basic words in German, like “hello, thank you, and goodbye.” “Sprechen Sie English?” would get them bonus points. Using a little German, and demonstrating their awareness that not everyone does or wants to speak English, would be interpreted by me as an act of humility.

I’m aware that there is nothing new in my comments here. When I shared these incidents with someone recently, she said, “yup, the Ugly American.” I don’t expect that a small gesture like asking, “Sprechen Sie English?” or “Parlez-vous Anglais?” will lessen the level of arrogance projected by US citizens onto the rest of the world’s citizens. It will take strong leadership and radical change in values in the US for that to change. But in the short term, I’d appreciate a simple “Do you speak English?” It would be a step in the right direction.