

Cultural Differences: Belgium vs. the U.S.

IMA Alumni Dinner Speech, Limbergs Universitair Centrum
Dr. Michael R. Hyman
4 December 1992

Good evening, gentlemen and ladies. So far, it's a pleasure to be here tonight, but then, I haven't begun my speech.

Sinclair Lewis, the famous novelist, was once asked to speak at Columbia University. After reaching the podium, he looked out at his audience and asked, "How many of you want to be writers?" Many hands shot up. Immediately, he growled "Then why the hell aren't you home writing?" After that, he left the podium. . . . Although I'm tempted to try something similar, it's a long walk back to Hasselt, so my comments tonight will be somewhat more elaborate than those of Sinclair Lewis.

I believe that I know what each of you is thinking . . . although I know only a few of you. Nonetheless, I believe that each of you is thinking one of three thoughts. . . . And what are these three thoughts? At best, you're thinking:

He sounds just like American TV. . . .
I hope he's not going to be boring.

More likely, you're thinking either:

Here is where we REALLY pay for dinner by pretending that we're interested in what this American professor has to say.

or, even worse

When will this American professor finish his talk so that we may begin to eat dinner?

This last concern reflects one clear difference between Belgium and the US. . . . In the US, dinner is served and consumed before the keynote address. After they've eaten, US banquet guests are so sleepy that the keynote address, no matter how boring, is painless. . . . As a result, the audience appears attentive, and the keynote speaker may now delude himself or herself into believing that he or she has delivered an excellent speech!

The standard advice is to begin a keynote address with a famous and preferably thought-provoking quotation. As Paul's (Prof. dr. Paul Matthyssens) assignment to me for tonight was to speak about the cultural differences between Belgium and the US, my thought-provoking quotation should be about culture. Because the notebook computer I brought from the US contains a program entitled, "Correct Quotes," this seemed an easy task. Unfortunately, none of the quotes contained in the software package was applicable. However, I do remember one quotation about culture that I use in my Principles of Marketing class. It goes "Culture is what your butcher would have if he were a surgeon." This quotation applies to nothing that I will say tonight, but it is on the correct topic, and it is funny.

Which brings me to Paul's second requirement for tonight: I'm supposed make my comments humorous so that you can all pretend that I am not a university professor. Again I checked "Correct Quotes," but the only related quotes I could find were

Life is a tragedy for those who feel, and a comedy for those who think.

and

The world is a comedy for those who think, a tragedy for those who feel.

As these quotes are almost identical, I assume that nothing has been said about humor that will help me tonight. However, to put my effort in the proper perspective, please think about the famous dramatic actor who on his deathbed was asked, "Is dying hard." His reply was, "Dying is easy; comedy is hard." (If no laughter, then "And it is getting harder all the time.")

Furthermore, please note that I'm neither a sociologist . . . nor a cultural anthropologist . . . nor a stand-up comedian. . . . In other words, I'm totally unqualified to make tonight's speech. But, I know very little about

international marketing, and Paul had me teaching several such classes during the last two months. So, fresh from that success, I agreed to press my luck a bit further.

Right now Paul is wondering why he asked me to make this speech. He's thinking that once I leave Belgium he can pretend that he was fooled by some clever lunatic who took a two-month assignment at LUC by impersonating a US marketing professor. . . Don't believe him; I may be a lunatic, but I AM a US marketing professor.

So, what are the cultural differences between Belgium and the US? Clearly, there must be some differences. Paul believed that these differences were significant, and that I should know about them before I came to Belgium. Maybe he was afraid that I'd strut off the airplane in my cowboy boots . . . which I left in Texas . . . and my cowboy hat . . . which I don't own, or that I'd call every man I met either Bubba or Buddy or Billy Bob and slap him on the back and shake his hand until it fell off . . . or that I'd call every woman I met either darlin', or honeypie, or sweetie, or another silly-sounding southern term that you've heard J.R. Ewing say at least one million times on the TV show Dallas . . . Perhaps, because I now live in Dallas, Paul's concerns were understandable.

So, to prevent any such culturally-incorrect behavior, Paul sent me a four page fax entitled "Belgian Culturgram." Supposedly, this Culturgram explained all the important cultural specifics that any visitor to Belgium should know. And what's in this Culturgram? Here are some things that Belgians NEVER do:

They never blow their noses loudly when in public.

They never put their hands in their pockets when speaking.

They never wave their finger at anyone when they are trying to make a point.

They never ask about one's political views.

After two months, I am happy to report that Belgians do all these things, and they do them quite frequently. In fact, I've had more

conversations about US politics since I've been here than I've had in my entire voting lifetime. So, all my efforts to break myself of these habits before I came to Belgium were a total waste of time. Fortunately, I was totally unsuccessful in breaking myself of these habits, so I'm very glad that I didn't offend anyone.

By the way, even when the Culturgram was correct, proper execution was sometime difficult. The Culturgram states, "It is appropriate and appreciated for a guest to take the host or hostess a small gift of flowers when invited to dinner." Paul thought this so important that he wrote "Don't forget!" in the margin next to this sentence. So, a reasonable person would now believe that it must be very important to bring flowers when invited to dinner. However, the reasonable person is still left with many questions. Other than avoiding chrysanthemums, which the Culturgram clearly suggests are for funerals, what are the rules of flower-bringing? How many? Which ones? Potted or cut? This became a real problem when a colleague asked me to his home for dinner. So, I asked someone, who is in the audience this evening, for her advice. Other than her excellent suggestion that I should let the florist decide these matters, she claimed that I shouldn't give an even number of flowers--three, five, seven, nine--any odd number was acceptable, but six flowers, the traditional US half-dozen, was inappropriate. In all fairness to my advisor, she did say at the time that she had no recollection of why this rule should be followed, but she was reasonably sure that this was a correct rule of etiquette for Belgium. In the time since I have yet to find one Belgian who can confirm this rule of etiquette. So, to resolve this matter, I ask you: Is there such a rule of etiquette? (The consensus was "Yes" when giving roses; no otherwise.) I'll bet she feels much better now.

Despite all the supposed cultural differences, here are some cultural similarities between Belgium and the US:

! Everyone complains about the weather

Admittedly, it does rain a lot in Belgium. However, we have a saying in Texas: If you don't like the weather, wait five minutes. It'll change. So, unless you talk to

someone who lives in San Diego or Hawaii, you'll find that Americans also complain about the weather at every opportunity.

! Typical university attire

My parents lived outside London for two years during the late 1970s. . . . Naturally, they think of themselves as European experts, and as European experts, they warned me that Europeans dress more formally than Americans. So, begrudgingly, I packed every suit I that owned, and lugged them with me to Belgium. As I said, I've been here two months . . . and this is the first time that I've worn a suit! Thank goodness my parents were wrong; my brain goes to sleep when I'm wearing a suit . . . (LONG PAUSE; STARE AIMLESS AROUND THE ROOM; THEN CONTINUE) . . . which, of course, makes it difficult to write research papers or to teach classes. Fortunately, almost everyone at LUC, as at most US universities, has discovered jeans.

! University bureaucracies

There are three things that every university professor or student can count on: death . . . taxes . . . and that anything the university bureaucracy does will not work in your favor, but will take two months to happen, during which time there will be much confusion and many unfounded rumors.

! Most people have cars

Before they arrive, visitors are told that they will not need a car because mass transit in Belgium is much better than in the US. Furthermore, visitors are told that every Belgian owns a bicycle and rides it everywhere. Although these claims are probably true, every Belgian also owns a car and seems to drive it everywhere. This discrepancy confused me for several weeks, until I figured out the secret. . . . I know why visitors are told that they do not need a car. . . . It's to reduce the traffic jams by keeping them off the road.

! Grocery and department stores

The prices may differ some, Belgians must slice their own bread in the supermarket, and American food tastes like straw compared to Belgian food--especially Belgian chocolate, but clothes are clothes and sales clerks are confused worldwide.

! The way that parents discipline their children

I live in a studio apartment that faces a bicycle path into Hasselt. Occasionally, I am treated to a fifteen-second family drama from my window. For example, I saw a father and several young children walking home from town. By this time in their walk the youngest child--a boy I believe--was tired, so he begged his father to carry him the rest of the way. Of course, by this time father was tired also. So how did he respond? Of course . . . he walked on while waving goodbye to his youngest son. Within five seconds the boy, not wishing to be left behind, runs to catch up. You'd see the same scene every day in every US city. I suspect that child rearing is the same worldwide. Children will be children, and there are only so many good tricks to deal with their behaviors.

Still, there are some cultural differences. Here, in no particular order, are some that I noted:

! Food and Drink

Belgians eat pancakes for dinner and Americans eat them for breakfast. Fortunately, this was not a problem for me because the clock in my stomach is broken. When the remainder of the previous night's takeout pizza rested alone in my refrigerator, I've been known to eat it for breakfast. Perhaps I'm a typical American in this regard: many Americans drink Coca-Cola for breakfast.

Of course, Belgian beer is clearly tastier than US beer. Interestingly, especially for US professors who are

unaware of it the first time they go out drinking with their Belgian students, Belgian beer has at least twice the alcohol content of US beer.

! Restaurants

Every restaurant has a "Hawaiian" version of every dish. All I can say is that you all must really like pineapple. By the way, the Dutch word for pineapple is ananas, which is bananas without the 'b'. Who picked this word for pineapple? And including the 15% gratuity in the check is a clever trick that is bound to confuse visitors, who are likely, as was I, to add an additional 15% gratuity.

! Eating etiquette

Paul's Culturgram was correct in one regard: Belgians eat with their left arm on the table, not in their lap, and Belgians do not switch their fork from their left hand to their right hand. My eating habits seem particularly resistant to change, so please do stare, point, or giggle at me while we're eating dinner later.

! Toilets

Belgians must not be offended by the word toilet because that is the only word that they use to identify the room where they may relieve themselves. Belgians must also be less modest about using the toilet--unlike US toilets, Belgian toilets have no alcove area. Americans, however, must find the word and the activities surrounding the word objectionable because they continually devise new ways to say toilet, such as bathroom, rest room, washroom, (wo)men's room, little boy's (girl's) room, john, and for the nautically-minded, head. However, Americans are more democratic in one way: Americans may use the toilet in their movie theaters without charge.

! Computers

My computer experiences have differed in three ways. First, adjusting

to the Dutch version of WordPerfect was quite an experience, but perhaps using the local version was the best way to learn Dutch. After all, computer languages are almost universal. At least now I can pretend to know Dutch when an unsuspecting student asks me for help with WordPerfect.

Second, switching between the AZERTY keyboard connected to the PCs in the faculty PC room and the QWERTY keyboard on my notebook computer has permanently destroyed my already limited typing skills.

Finally, Belgian paper is roughly two centimeters longer than US paper. Although this extra-long paper must pose a major problem to students who often struggle to fill empty pages, it is clearly advantageous to long-winded professors, like myself, who write to the bottom of every page.

! Miscellaneous

I don't know what to make of these miscellaneous observations, but I will make them anyway.

A greater percent of Belgians seem to smoke cigarettes. Most public buildings in the US are smoke-free; during classroom breaks the hallways at LUC are filled with cigarette smoke. Perhaps the antismoking vigilantes have yet to visit Belgium.

I've seen more students write with fountain pens in the last two months than I've seen since the fourth grade, when I had a teacher who insisted that writing with a ballpoint pen would ruin one's handwriting. I only write with a ballpoint pen now, and if you could see my handwriting, you would know that she was correct.

Belgian advertising contains more nudity. Americans pretend to be sexually liberated, but most of them are prudes.

Belgian road signs are blue; US road signs are green. Belgian road cones are internally illuminated; US road

cones are highly reflective. I have no idea what these differences imply.

US houses are wooden-framed, brick-veneered, and will stand for fifty years. Belgian homes are all brick, built from the ground up, and will stand for 200 years.

Finally, Mannekin Pis is an unusual landmark. An American would show a visitor the Grand Canyon or the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. Perhaps small has its advantages.

What have I learned from my experience? I've learned at least two things. . . .

First, I now understand why non-English speakers who visit the US smile and nod a lot. What can you do when you have no idea what everyone is saying? That's right . . . you smile and nod approvingly.

Second, I've rediscovered the value of not taking myself too seriously. Belgians seem to laugh a lot and they seem to greatly enjoy each others company. American businesspeople, university faculties, and most students, are so serious about getting ahead and making money that they've lost their senses of humor. I believe that I've laughed more in the last two months than I have in the previous two years.

Finally, I'd like to leave you with one serious thought. This will take several minutes, so tell your stomachs to be patient.

I've commented often in the last two months how awed I am by the linguistic abilities of Belgians in general, and Belgian business students in particular. Perhaps my own inability with foreign languages contributes to my sense of awe.

As a grade school student, my French teachers could never convince me that learning any foreign language, let alone French, was important. At the time, I believed that foreign language classes ranked with physical education and art classes; trivial classes where nothing of lasting worth--unlike chemistry or physics classes--was taught. Perhaps the ability to read a foreign language was once helpful to access the writings of foreign scientists, but in the modern era anything of value would be

translated quickly into English. So, I believed that, at best, the ability to read or speak a foreign language was equivalent to an elaborate parlor trick.

Today, most Americans are not so foolish. In the 1960s, before the current influx of Hispanic and Asian immigration to the US, Americans could pretend that all the worlds' important people spoke to one another in English. Today, many US television cable companies carry one or more all-Spanish channels and Spanish newspapers fill US newsstands. Such common reminders underscore the importance of learning other languages and should convince even the most myopic American that many of the world's important people do not always communicate with one another in English.

With the decline of rampant language myopia, and with the incentives that encouraged Belgians to learn other languages now shared by the peoples of many lands, I predict that Belgians will lose their comparative advantage in languages. However, it's one thing to lose a comparative advantage to imitators--after all, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery--it's quite another thing to freely relinquish a comparative advantage.

I'm speaking of a comparative advantage of which you probably unaware. What you still have, and what most Americans have lost, is compassion for others. Let me give you some simple examples. On his or her first day, a professor visiting a US university is shown to his or her office and told "If you have any problems, please don't hesitate to ask for assistance." Unfortunately, short of collapsing in a hallway, that's probably the last time he or she will receive any help.

Now let me tell you about just a few of my experiences at LUC. One afternoon I asked for an external monitor for my notebook PC; within 15 minutes of my request, a slip of a woman from the computer services group had strolled several hundred yards, and down a flight of steps, with a 35-pound PC monitor. She is all smiles and seems surprised that I'm shocked by her prompt response. In the US, such a request would have taken weeks to fill.

Because I left my car in Texas, and my studio apartment is inconvenient to the bus lines,

getting to and from the university should pose quite a hardship. Yet getting to and from the university has been a pleasure. Why? Each day, one of several assistants drives me both ways. This seemingly effortless coordination among several assistants just happens, and instead of leaving me with the feeling that they've done me a favor, they all seem so pleased to be with me that it's as if I'm doing them the favor.

The faculty coffee room at LUC is a real joy. Three times a day--for the ten o'clock coffee break, for lunch, and for the three o'clock coffee break--many business faculty take the time to meet, to talk, and to laugh with one another. I spent seven years as an instructor and assistant professor of marketing at the University of Houston. Three years before I left, the College of Business moved to a beautiful new building with an attractive faculty lounge. Other than during formal functions, I never saw more than a half-dozen faculty in this lounge simultaneously. Despite my multidisciplinary interests, I left the University of Houston without ever having spoken with most of the faculty outside the marketing department.

In the last decade or so, most Americans have begun to act as if helping others or pursuing a more personable life is stupid--unless such efforts bring great material rewards. The business shelves in many US bookstores now contain many books with titles such as Looking Out for Number 1. Perhaps the words of Gordon Gekko, the avaricious character in the recently popular movie Wall Street, summarizes the current American attitude best: "Greed is good." In the US, money, possessions, and power are everything. People who help others, or who don't pursue material wealth quite as energetically, are called saps, suckers, fools, and the like.

Believe me; your truest and most important competitive advantage, both in business and in life, is your ability and desire to work together. The future will belong to the caring rather than the selfish. Thus, I urge you to continue to care about your friends, your families, your colleagues, and even strangers from far-off lands.

Mercifully for your stomachs, my time is up. Thank you for your indulgence. Enjoy the

rest of your evening . . . and remember to enjoy each other.