



Phyllis (middle) with his friends at a Japanese market

present ourselves. What they have in common is that they spread socially by copying. The meme machine starts with babies aping the faces presented to them and babbling the sounds they hear repeatedly. Later, it has the power even to convince teenage boys that underpants should be very visible above low-riding jeans. The subtle - or not so subtle – hints and signals of body language and ways of speech all contribute to identifying an individual as belonging to the group, and whoever doesn't exhibit the same neck-cocking, arm-waving, eyebrow-wiggling, underwear-revealing memes is probably an outsider.

Sometimes our memes come from the host country itself, but just as often they rub off from other expats. While in China I noticed that two Southeast Asian friends, a Thai and a Vietnamese-American, unconsciously used the characteristically Singaporean "is it?" after hanging around the Singaporean ladies in our housing compound. And it hit closer to home when my husband noticed that our son and I had both adopted a different cadence when asking questions after spending time with the British teachers at our Shell school. Whereas the typical American pattern is to end on a higher pitch, we'd started to intonate questions like the British, with a higher pitch in the middle, a bit lower after that, then ending at the same pitch as we'd started. Of course, initially we denied the allegation, but soon realised that he was right - just as he was about our enthusiastic application of straight away, brilliant and no worries – itself a meme picked up by the Brits from the Aussies. We had fallen victim to our internal meme machines, just as we had when we learnt *Lang Zal Ze Leven* from our Dutch friends after only a few birthday celebrations.

For better or worse, teenagers are really good at copying memes from both their host society and each other. It's important for social acceptance. For example, sprinkling Japanese into casual speech is part of the identity of our high school's student body, and newcomers risk delaying becoming cool until they can do it, too. It's also interesting to see which nationality's accent is adopted in a school culture where the English-speaking school is in a non-English speaking country. Although Americans are not the majority at our school in Japan, the accent leans toward a Yankee lilt when in mixed company. Accents must be something they think about a lot as I even overheard a group of giggly girls discussing which accent they were going to use on their way to Starbucks. Swedish that day, but it's hard to know why. These kids actually practise their accent skills, which is more evidence that expat kids' meme-machines work overtime. Fitting in must be especially important to the double-whammy of expatriate adolescence.

As a child I had a lot of practice meming to fit in. Without ever leaving the US, I grew up as a Shell Third Culture Kid and regularly experienced the culture shock of geographically close but culturally distant moves. Moving from Cajun country to suburban New Orleans, to rural Mississippi and back again in just a few years may as well have required passport stamps. After years of such moves, high school friends in a new town pointed out that I had picked up mannerisms from them and encouraged me to be myself instead. Trouble was, I didn't know what being myself should sound like! While they were right, I later realised that the instinctual ability to meme is an important part of fitting in new surroundings. I cursed it then, but now I thank my meme-machine for helping me



Phyllis and her husband, Pete at sushi counter

integrate and be understood, for until language lessons do their magic, the right combination of cadence and quick nods amongst a string of new vocabulary bridges many a communication gap.

One meme I'm picking up in Japan that I hope to keep when we move again is the ability to stay calm when tempted to express indignation. When none of your hosts loses their cool over your infractions of street-crossing rules or talking loudly on the trains, it acts as a good social Prozac. The Japanese have faith in the meme-machine's ability to do its job on newcomers, trusting that I'll get it eventually and thus there is no need for them to interfere. They trust that a polite smile with no hint of a smirk is just as effective as the direct, scolding wisecrack one might receive elsewhere. I hope I've forgotten how to do that one.

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Sharon, editor DESTNATIONS 2004-06, ponders luxury living.

WHERE DID I LEAVE MY LIFESTYLE?

SHARON MONTGOMERY

I've been an ex-espatriate for two years now, and feel pretty well absorbed back in my own country. I think I know the ropes. But recently I've been wondering if my life could be better. Each month a lavish free magazine is delivered to our house. There's no such thing as a free lunch, nor a free magazine – so this publication is coming to me for a reason. Do they think there is something lacking in my life? Let us look inside...

There are articles on property, investment, exotic holidays, costly beauty treatments, eating out, fast cars; there are features on celebrities; there are several pages of photos of what appears to be a lively social scene in my area: men in tuxes and well-groomed ladies in cocktail dresses smiling contentedly for the camera. I start to feel I'm missing out. I'm wise enough to know that this sort of smug editorial is there to carry advertising, so what are they pitching at me, a typical reader?

Kitchens. Huge sunlit kitchens in subtle creams and mossy greens, discreetly housing the latest German domestic technology. I start to salivate – but maybe that's because I love food and it's the association. But these kitchens don't look like the place where you'd prepare a humble shepherd's pie. I turn the page. Blinds – that's what we need, and not those cheap fabric ones with cords that get knotted. No, these are made to measure, in wood, plantation-style, and painted expensive muted colours to match my new kitchen units. And they're everywhere. In the ads for sofas, and for conservatories (have to get one of them, too). I flick pages to the beauty section. I'm clearly missing out here, never having contemplated any of the 'wide range of procedures' offered locally by efficient-sounding private clinics. I glance at the editorial – there's a piece on miracle creams costing five times what I pay for my moisturiser in Boots, and an obsequious interview with a woman who gives 'facials to the stars'. I concede that from her photo she's a good advert for the service she



provides – no sagging jowls or wrinkly neck - but she’s wearing more eyeliner and lip-gloss than anyone I come across in my daily life. It’s mixing with those celebrities, I suppose.

Towards the back of the magazine the adverts get more intriguing. Here’s one that’s asking me, via a series of bullet points, if I own: ‘a property on a corner plot’; ‘a dilapidated property’; ‘commercial premises that could be residential’. Ha, I know what they’re after, and no, I don’t. But thanks for asking. A photo of a charming, white-haired, mature couple, hugging and smiling, is there to interest me in ‘senior care’. Now this sounds great – ‘Five daily entertainments, activities and hobbies’ (why five, exactly? And what if you only want to do four?); ‘Restaurant dining three times a day’; ‘Separate, specialised dementia care neighbourhood’ (such a cosy word that, ‘neighbourhood’). Perhaps my ‘senior’ years will be rewarding and fulfilled after all; just hope I can afford it. Next page – apartments for sale in an opulent ‘gated’ community. Looks a bit ornate for my taste and the kitchen could only be used for the preparation of space food.

Now this one is really for me and my lifestyle. ‘Don’t gamble with the success of your next party!’ it says, offering a ‘mobile fun casino’ complete with ‘professional smartly dressed croupiers’. What’s more, my next coffee morning needn’t be humdrum, either – ‘Why not impress your friends with the glamour and excitement of a full sized blackjack table’, it suggests. Would certainly have more impact than a plate of chocolate Hobnobs.

So, is this what I should be aiming for, now I’m an ex-expat? I don’t have the ambition, nor the energy, I think, as I aim the glossy publication at the recycling box.

HAVE YOU EVER FELT LIKE THIS?

ALICE BRIGGS

Alice and Barnaby Briggs and their family recently arrived in Holland.



There is a moment when you want to give up. You have arrived in your new country. You have jollied the children along. You have done your time in temporary accommodation and it is now time to really get stuck in. As a parent and partner you have smiled constantly for the last year and told family and friends how excited, if a little nervous, you are.

You have quietly reassured your inner circle that you will see them often and be in constant touch. You have dug deep on behalf of your children and promised that their true friendships will endure. You have also, in order to ensure this happens, promised new laptops, spare bedrooms, large gardens, boats, bikes, pools - in short anything it takes to keep the show on the road.

And then comes the moment that you and your expat family arrive, with the removal lorry, to your new home. Instantly the house looks smaller than it did when you committed yourself. The months spent discussing which child should have which bedroom are forgotten in a flash - and if some kind of agreement had previously been reached it is all now resubmitted to the parents as a life or death scenario which would challenge even the most experienced and tactful of negotiators.

The removal men, cigarettes in hand, start to unload your belongings. This goes well until you realise boxes are not marked properly and furniture will not fit up stairs. Also fridge not working, sheets for beds nowhere to be seen and keys for anything you have locked in transit cannot now be found.

But this is merely a warm up for the total meltdown that comes about when you discover that you have no phone line and no Internet connection. While this is a state that is

perfectly acceptable for the busy wife/mother/grandmother-who-has-come-to-help, it is definitely NOT, and I stress NOT AT ALL, acceptable for the technologically advanced children in the family nor, and here's the tipping point, the employee of large multinational who cannot now be without a permanent hotline via three different types of handheld gadget to his ultimate owner - the company.

So what to do first? The beds. The tea for the removal men. Smile at the neighbours. Find some food. These thoughts all swirl. But it is obvious. The Internet and phone must be sorted and all else will fall into place. This naturally takes the form of umpteen very hot and sweaty calls from semi-functioning mobile. It becomes obvious that person-with-a-job will have to go to work to continue to smooth this path to cyber-reconnection. Thus leaving partner-without-a-job at home, for whom other priorities then pop up with alarming speed. How to get to school. How to find list for school uniform needed. How to convince children that this would be a fun thing to be doing now. How to ask neighbour who does not speak English where the dustbin is. And so on.

And then, just when all this seems too much to tackle, just when you feel like sitting in the garage, on your own, in amongst the bikes and the boxes and the blue packing paper, there is a knock at the door. And an angel appears. Someone you have never met, never heard of, and who has no duty towards you, smiles at you and says: "Hello. I thought you might like a cup of tea".

So you see this story has a happy ending. Because that one moment is when you think "I can do this. I have a friend". And all is OK.