

THE EXPAT MEME MACHINE

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Have you ever noticed after arriving at a new posting how, without your permission, local mannerisms start to implant themselves, like weeds, in your interpersonal repertoire? This realisation hit me between the eyes while going through Immigration in the US recently. After a year in Japan I automatically initiated a bow to the puzzled agent who had stamped my passport and allowed me through. I caught myself on the way down and chuckled at yet another “meme” gaffe in my expat life.

What is a meme? Some memes are semi-conscious habits picked up in the host country, like taking shoes off at the door in Asia, or handling money with the right hand in Africa.

Others are the little nuances of rhythm or intonation that are unconsciously incorporated into speech patterns. Take the different ways gossiping women show disbelief and dismay. From the deep, prolonged, guttural “Ehhh?” in China to the pointed, high-pitched “Eh?!” in West Africa, women around the world have their own ways of saying, “you have got to be kidding!” It’s easier to notice as a newcomer because only then are you released from the need to actually understand a word that is said!

Like their more famous biological cousins the genes, memes spread through populations by replication and can mutate and evolve along the way. Memes can be large cultural constructs like



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.

Phyllis Griffard is a biology educator, freelance editor and armchair evolutionary psychologist. She enjoys witnessing behaviors around the world, starting at home with their children Emile and Gabriel, who haven't yet exhibited the boxer shorts meme. Phyllis, her husband Pete and their children currently live in Japan and will soon move to Doha.