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Workshop in Comp ESL Fall 2013
Essay #3; Draft #1 – 11.19.2013
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The power and the price of silence

Ability to communicate is one of the most important skills captured by a human. However, after thousand of years we still do not master in using language without causing any misunderstanding. Incomprehension occurs because of various reasons: sometimes we simply do not speak in the language our interlocutor speaks. However, language, as a way of communication, is much more than words spoken in one of hundreds spoken languages in the world. Our face, body and the way we speak express more than the actual words. Surprisingly, cultural differences as well as difference of characters of individuals can create even more misunderstandings between interlocutors then the language barrier. I believe it happens because the language we can learn and even a foreigner can master the English language by a hard work. On the other hand, changing the way we speak is a much more difficult process. It is a process of changing your nature, which can be unsuccessful despite the effort.

It is not difficult to guess that I my English cause many misunderstanding in conversations with Americans. It is imperfect, limited, or even broken – in other words unintelligible for native English speakers. However, it is not my weird using of tenses, lacking of some crucial vocabulary or mistakes in pronunciation in long words that causes the most conflicts with my friends, teammates and strange people. It is my way of speaking: quietly as if I was afraid of being heard by my interlocutor, and slowly, to give myself some time to chose the right words,

especially while speaking in English. However, the most worrisome characteristic of my way of speaking, which causes the greatest misunderstandings and conflicts in my life is a fact that I actually feel very uncomfortable speaking. In other words – I do not speak... not at all, but I usually do not take a voice in discussion unless I am asked to do so and I hardly ever start a conversation.

I celebrate the silence and enjoy the calmness of wordless conversations. Conversations based on body language, reading the emotions from face and deep, critical thinking needed to discover the message that cannot be inferred from words. Nonverbal communication is for me the purest, the most honest and emotional way of learning about other people. It is like wild nature, walking alone in the forest, which sharpens your senses, makes you focus on details you never pay attention for when your mind is occupied with conversations. Staying away from taking a voice gives you opportunity to fully listen to people, observe how their face expression and ton of voice changes when they talk about things that make them worry, happy or angry. Careful listening, observations and drawing conclusions make you a good listener. In Poland like in most of Slavic countries, people tend to enjoy silence and be good listeners. Probably our behavior is connected with typical Slovak personality. We are calm and full of melancholy, which is misunderstood by other cultures as sadness. We avoid speaking a lot and loud because it may be considered as being selfish and disrespectful. It is unacceptable to interrupt someone in the middle of the sentence and speaking loudly is linked with negative emotions.

My Slovak nature, upbringing in the respect for my interlocutors and probably also my shy and calm temperament established the way I communicate

with people, which was not unusual in Poland but seems to be incomprehensible, quirky and critically judged in the United States. In the country, where people speak all the time, laugh loudly and treat everyone, even a completely strange person, as a good friend, I feel lost, overwhelmed and even scared. On the other hand, I am perceived as a person who is embittered always in a bad mood and who does not like anyone – as a martyr focused only on my suffering.

During the first month of practices is the swimming team, each of the coaches at least once tried to get me into conversation at the practice time. They did not suspect me of being dissatisfied or upset. Contrary, they were worried that I did not feel comfortable and self confident in a new group or with speaking in English and this was the reason why I prefer not to take a voice in conversations. Those messages I unintentionally was sending to coaches and teammates. Actually, the truth hidden by my silence at the practices is completely different – in Poland it was almost forbidden for swimmers to talk while training. Conversations were treated as not paying attention to sets and being disrespectful to teammates and coaches who were doing a hard work, while a lazy person was speaking. With this background from my home country, speaking during practice was the last think I wanted to do in a new group, starting cooperation with new coaches.

I had also some misunderstanding, with my teammates, who were unlikely to believe that I like them. They have built their opinion based on conviction that I do not take voice in discussion because I am bored: with their conversations, with their problems, with them. The unintentional messages sent by my non-participation in various discussions on a way to practice, by the lunch count or while sitting on a

carpet in a dorm's room after a tiring day were completely opposite to the truth. I do not say much during group conversations because I am interested, not bored, in their thoughts, in their culture, in their way of seeing the world. I listen my teammates, I try to pay attention to every word, to recognize their face expression and to understand what I hear and see. Body language, similarly to spoken language, takes different forms in different parts of the world. The other aspect of team conversations is that they are vibrant, full of energy, changing like a kaleidoscope. It is challenging for me as a foreigner and a non-English speaker to keep up with changing topics and opinions about something, I do not even know what it is.

The talks in a group of American teenagers are usually full of excitement: everyone talks loudly, girls squeal and most of people have a little idea what the actual topic is. This excitement shared by the whole American nation, which is so different from calm melancholy I know from home, is actually something that scares me. It always makes me feel uncomfortable, but I can tolerate it in a group of my friends. The situation looks completely different when a strange person bothers me. It was not once or twice, but almost everyday, that a person I see for the first time in my life starts talking to me in an elevator, at the bus stop or while standing in a queue in cafeteria. I am scared by their behavior, which is a way to direct and full of excitement for a strange person. People pull me out of my thoughts, ask me hundreds of questions or start narrate the story of their lives without noticing that those situations are uncomfortable and scary to me. I did not get use to them because back in home I have never met a strange person who has started talking to me. In Poland mothers say their kid: "Remember, honey, never talk with the people

you do not know”. In the country, where the percentage of crime is very high, those words are an expression of maternal care, not a suggestion to be rude. With this kind of background, can anyone imagine how I feel, when unknown people start to ask me personal questions, while reducing the distance between us. I had even a situation when a girl was complimented the color of my scarf and then, without the warning touched it to check if it is soft. I cannot describe how scared and pressed to the wall I felt when someone so grossly violates my personal space.

Usually, after a few seconds people notice how uncomfortable I feel with their talking and questions they ask. They see my frightened eyes wide-open and the expression of my face, which screams instead of my mouth that I am not pleased with this conversation. The only way they can think about me is that I am crazy because no normal person acts in this way, when someone starts a nice conversation with then. However, they do not know that talks with random people are completely abnormal for me. How can they know about it? My physical appearance is not different than other American teenage girl: blond hair, green eyes, and pale skin – it is nothing unusual here, in States. I wear American clothes and hold a cup from popular American café. They cannot expect me being a foreigner until they hear my accent and broken English. People think I am American; therefore, they expect me to act in a way the Americans does. I do not have my nationality written on my forehead to warn people or in Staples words, I have no visible characteristic that may warn people ahead of time like “the cowbell that hikers wear when they know that they are in bear country” (2). He whistles the melodies from Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* to calm scared by his physical appearance and

stereotypes about black men people, I am actually a person who need relaxing whistling in public space, but in some way we have much in common. Both he and me need to warn people in the public space about us to protect ourselves. However, whistling some Polish songs may not be a clear signal to disclose my nationality.

Without taking whistling or singing into consideration, I took several steps to do not cause embarrassing situations with involves strange people. Firstly, I have started wearing headphones. I do not exactly listen to music; I use them as a warning to potential unwanted interlocutors. I noticed that people are less willing to start a conversation, when I seem to be occupied with other activities. Despite the fact that wearing headphones to avoid stressing conversations is really embarrassing, this ruse does not always work. There are still people who start conversations with me without noticing the headphones I ostentatiously wear. And whenever I hear someone talking to me I cannot help taking the headphones off. I simply cannot force myself to act in a rude way and to ignore that person. But I also cannot help feeling uncomfortable and sending true but unwanted messages thru my body language. Therefore, I try to force myself to delicately smile to people bothering me to neutralize the negative perception of me caused by the rest of my body. I cannot say if it works, but it is the best and probably the only acceptable for me solution I have found so far.