

Intercultural communication over

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- 2 • Receptionist: *Help yourself to a cap!*
- Shiva: *Pardon me?*
- Receptionist: *Help yourself to a cap!*

- Shiva: [blank stare]

This was a conversation I had in the reception area of a storage company on one of my first days in Australia back in 2008. According to the [Merriam-Webster Dictionary](#) 'cap' can refer to (a) 'a head covering,' (b) 'a natural cover or top,' (c) 'something that serves as a cover or protection,' (d) 'an overlaying or covering structure,' (e) 'a paper or metal container holding an explosive charge,' (f) 'an upper limit,' (g) 'the symbol \cap indicating the intersection of two sets' or (h) 'a cluster of molecules or chemical groups bound to one end or a region of a cell, virus, or molecule.' While I may not have had all these definitions at the top of my head, as someone who had studied English as a foreign language in Iran for many years, the general thrust of all these meanings of 'cap' was clear to me. The problem was that none of these meanings of 'cap' seemed to make sense in the context in which I found myself.

While I was frantically trying to figure out in my mind what I was supposed to help myself to, the receptionist noticed my incomprehension and beckoned me to follow him into a corner where there was a coffee machine. He pointed at the coffee machine and slowly started to explain that this was a coffee machine, that coffee was a beverage, that it was nice, and that Australians liked to drink coffee, and that there were different types, and that a cappuccino was particularly nice because it had a frothy top.

As it dawned on me that in the receptionist's variety of English 'cap' had nothing to do with 'coverings' of any kind but was short for 'cappuccino,' I was mortified. The receptionist had thought my lack of comprehension was a sign not of a linguistic problem but of my ignorance and backwardness. I was so offended that anyone would think a sophisticated Tehrani like myself didn't know about coffee! How dare he be so ignorant, insular and condescending?! Even so, I could not confront him. Fuming inside, I meekly accepted my bitterest-ever cappuccino. I took all the blame to myself for not having adequate English to have a smooth communication with 'a native speaker'.



Intercultural communication over coffee
(Source: Wikimedia Commons)

This humiliating encounter made me question the many years of English language learning I had been engaged in since my early childhood. Despite all my best efforts of many years and the investment of my parents, here I was in Australia incapable of effortlessly and gracefully accepting a cup of coffee without being taken for a barbarian. It all seemed extremely unfair and in the past four years I've often experienced a nagging feeling of jealousy that my English was still deficient despite all my striving while 'native speakers' could have it all – and without the least bit of effort!

I have also come to realise that 'English,' like all languages, is dynamic and subject to change and that even 'native English speakers' encounter new words every now and then and miscommunicate in unfamiliar contexts. This realisation has been one step towards healing my tarnished linguistic confidence.

Trying to extend myself and to understand my in-between position better, I undertook a postgraduate course in Cross-Cultural Communication, where most of the teaching and reading I was exposed to stressed **cultural differences** as the source of miscommunication in intercultural communication. This has been an ongoing source of puzzlement for me: in theory, it made perfect sense that Australian and Persians, for instance, had different cultural values and orientations and so, of course, there would be problems when they meet. In practice, however, none of the miscommunication I have experienced in Australia seems to have anything to do with culture. My humiliation at the hands of the receptionist had nothing to do with the fact that Persians prefer indirectness and elaborate politeness routines where Australians are direct and to the point. On the contrary, as far as culture was concerned, this was a misunderstanding between two coffee lovers, i.e. culturally similar people.

Despite the fact that I now hold an MA in Cross-Cultural Communication, my feelings of English deficiency together with a lack of real cultural differences has remained a brainteaser until a short while ago when I read [Ingrid Piller's new book *Intercultural Communication*](#) and there the explanation leapt out at me from Chapter 10: when misunderstandings in intercultural communication are derived from linguistic problems, they are often unfairly attributed to cultural issues as soon as it comes to "English-language learners, particularly if their proficiency is more than just basic" (Piller, 2011, p. 147).

So, my English is the proud result of my efforts, and Australians and Persians are pretty similar. It's just that newcomers and old-timers in this country find themselves in positions of unequal power (or legitimacy) which they like to dress up as cultural differences.

[Iranian coffee culture, by the way, dates back to the 9th century!](#)

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Shiva Motaghi Tabari

Dr. Shiva Motaghi-Tabari received her PhD in Linguistics from Macquarie University, where she is now an Honorary Postdoctoral Associate. Her PhD research focused on the intersection of parental and child language learning in migration contexts. She also holds an MA in Crosscultural Communication from the University of Sydney. Her research interests include intercultural communication, family and bilingual education and migration studies.

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