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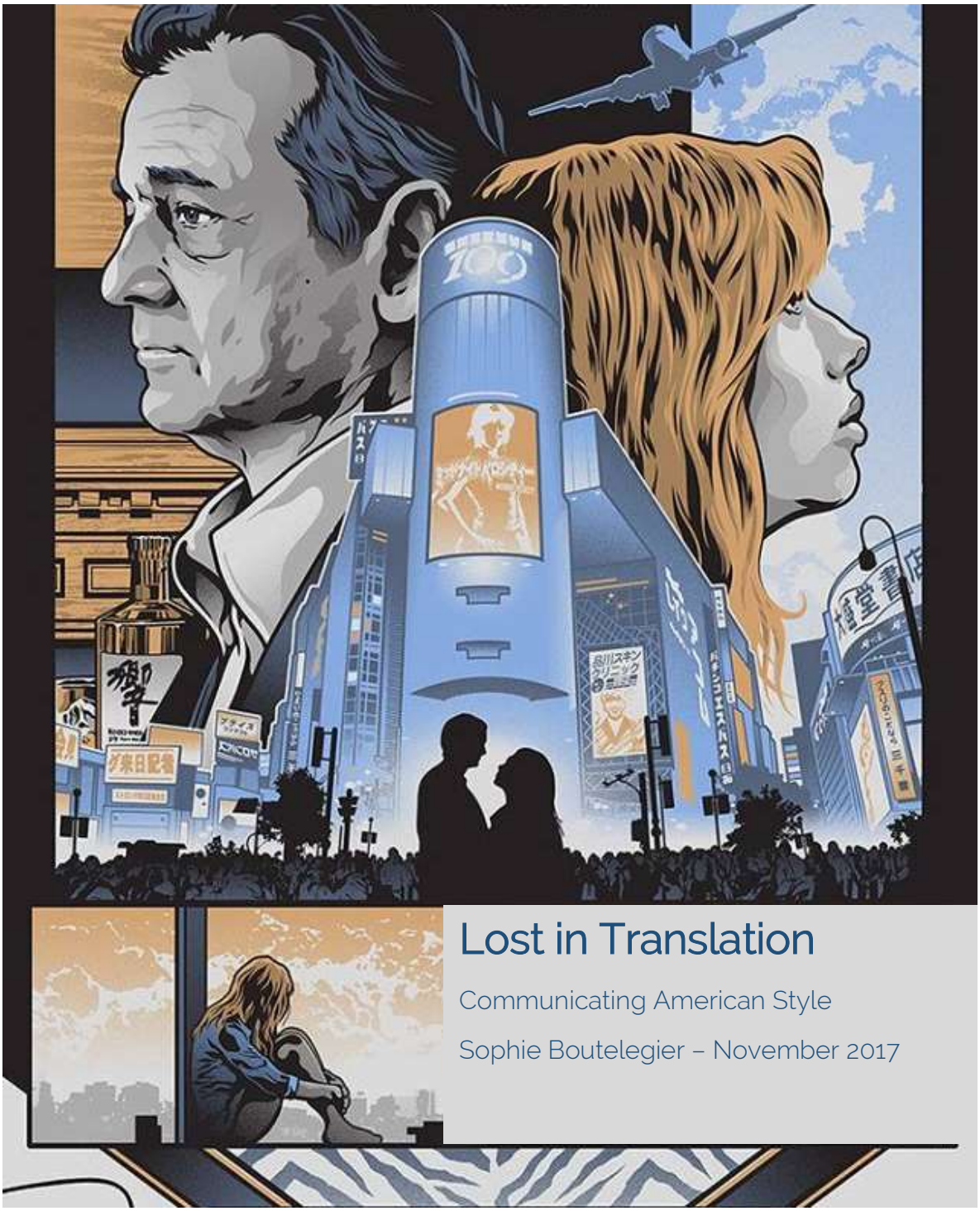

Lost in Translation

Communicating American Style

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Lost in Translation - Communicating American Style

It is in interesting paradox…everybody knows the United States from movies, music and other media and that gives many people the feeling to know the country. Managers who wish to expand their business to the US often don't realize how big the culture difference can be. A very important piece of the cross-cultural puzzle is communication. How you communicate depends on many factors: the circumstances, who you are talking with, your mood etc. Although it is hard to generalize about communication, it is certainly possible to recognize a typical American communication style.

Cut to the chase | Americans use very direct and clear communication and leave as little room as possible for ambiguity or interpretation. They say exactly what they think or want without expecting others to read between the lines. They like to get to the point quickly and tell it like it is.

Time is money | Being direct goes hand in hand with the high value Americans place on efficiency. Straight talk saves a lot of time as you don't have to find out what the other person exactly means. For an American, the best meetings are those that are not a minute longer than they have to be.

Cards on the table | When you ask an American what they think about something, most find it more important to give you an honest answer rather than to spare your feelings. They find it also relatively easy to say 'no' and turn down a request. Being direct in their answers, Americans also tend to be direct in their questions. If they need or want something they will simply ask and is up to you to answer 'yes' or 'no'.

Awesome! | Americans converse informally with people from different backgrounds and they use first names early in a relationship. Americans insist on always looking on the bright side and avoid sounding negative at all times: it's not a 'problem' but a 'challenge' and being 'bossy' means you have 'great leadership skills'. Another American characteristic is the tendency to exaggerate: Why settle for 'good' when you can use 'great'; why say 'interesting' when you can say 'awesome'.

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Let's recap | As Erin Meyer describes in her book 'The Cultural Map', the traditional American rule for successfully transferring a powerful message to an audience is: "Tell them what you are going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what you've told them". The tendency of Americans to clarify and repeat themselves endlessly may be perceived as patronizing by other cultures.

The Eye of the Beholder

How you perceive the American communication style depends on your own culture. The Dutch and Germans don't find Americans especially direct or blunt as they are even more direct than Americans. The French on the other hand are more subtle in their communication, they like to convey their message implicitly and expect the listener to read between the lines. They are sometimes offended by the direct communication style of Americans. And Americans, well they sometimes perceive the French style as secretive and non-transparent.

Some Theory

In 1976, the American anthropologist Edward T. Hall proposed that cultures can be divided into two categories—high context and low context.

High context cultures use communication that focuses on underlying context, meaning and tone in the message, and not just the words. People in a high context culture such as Japan and France tend to place a larger importance on long-term relationships and loyalty and have fewer rules and structure implemented.

Low context cultures expect communication to be explicitly stated so that there is no risk of confusion of misinterpretation. People in low context cultures such as the US and the UK tend to have shorter term relationships, follow rules and standards closely and are generally very task-oriented.

Some advice for communicating with Americans

- Be as transparent, clear and specific as possible
- Don't expect Americans to read between the lines
- At the end of a phone call or a meeting recap the most important items and action points, or send an email repeating these points afterwards
- If you don't understand a question or a task, ask for clarification.
- If you can't deliver, clearly say so. Americans will be offended if you say yes when you mean no
- Only say yes if you really mean yes

If you are interested to learn more about collaborating successfully with Americans, please contact me to learn more about our workshops.

If you want to learn more about how Expandify can help you to grow your business in the US, contact me on info@expandify.eu or visit www.expandify.eu

Have a good one!

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