

**I came to Barcelona from the UK with the over-inflated and exotic view that I would be more politically stimulated here, that politics in my home country (this was pre-Brexit) was dull and business-like, that ordinary people there didn't discuss politics whereas across the shore in *Europe* they did. Yes, I know that technically we are European and that it's ridiculous to speak of the geographical continent, and at that time, Union that we are a part of, as something 'other'. But welcome to British exceptionalism, I've had to do a lot of deprogramming, and you can see where it's taken us..**

Language is only one element of communication and connection, used differently by people, cultures or classes. Cultures are often placed on a spectrum with the Spanish, Germans, Americans, and Chinese on the more direct side of the spectrum and the Japanese and British, living on the uncomfortably indirect side. It's commonly said that the British are too polite and I've often thought that the 'niceness' around British speaking patterns had to be a pretence masking superficiality, indifference, or worse. Being 'polite' and well-mannered reeks of class structure enforcing arbitrary standards of acceptability, and it could be argued, stands in the way of more honest genuine connection. Kindness should be demonstrated through action surely?

Working my first summer camp in Cardona was my first proper encounter with Spanish and Catalan kids. We don't have an equivalent in the UK and so I thought they must be living a dream to be able to go to summer camp. They were rowdy and full of fun and curiosity, but my god did they swear! The first time I heard little 10 year old \*Guillermo blast "*joderr!*" I rightly scolded him for his language. Or so I thought...

At some point in my first years here I worked giving English lessons to nurses and doctors. I had a beginner's class of three semi-retired nurses and I absolutely adored them. I remember once \*Paula was reciting the personal introduction she had written. "My name is Paula and I live Barcelona" she said. I corrected it to include "*in*" but before I could finish modelling the sentence I heard a big "*coño!*" ring through the class. Paula was rightfully frustrated, but my goodness I was stunned, it's like my grandmother all smelling of lavender shouting "*PUSSY!*" in my face.

Through these different confrontations I decided to override my shock and affectionately embrace this relaxed cultural approach to language. It's liberating, the language doesn't change too much for its audience, there's no preconception or restrictive norms for how an older woman should talk. As always I first went to look for the positive in this clash between my sensibilities and norms of expression here. What's more, people started to pick up on the gulf between our understandings of acceptability. We would discuss how the communication style here was better, more authentic, actually *kinder*. And to be honest, I agreed. I always felt back home that people made the right noises but if you actually turned up asking for help a door would be slammed in your face accompanied by a polite no thankyou. It pushed me to question the way I reacted to the world too, especially loud children, why the hell shouldn't they be loud in public? The process became a shaking off of formality that felt welcoming and challenging at the same time, but of course it's never that simple...

We can say it's generally true that there's a lack of authentic connection in the British way of communicating, where empty manners and vague utterances take the place of real action or intent. But we cannot use that to excuse everything deemed 'acceptable' here. The

phenomenon of corner bars being owned by the local Chinese population was something I didn't know before moving. People were always referring to the "Chino" and I have to say I was uncomfortable. My British conceited politeness and white guilt were being triggered at the same time and I couldn't navigate if I was overreacting or whether it was valid. Spanish and Catalan friends here dismissed it as overly sensitive. Maybe it wasn't culturally insensitive at best and racist at worst to refer to all businesses run by Chinese people as Chinos, maybe it was me overreacting from my own cultural guilt.

Hearing people use the word 'Paki' was clearer to me as this not only referred to the establishments run by what locals assumed were Pakistani people but also the men who sell beers in the street. I was told again that this is just short for Pakistani and that I was importing my nation's problems as *Paki* isn't a slur here. At this point I had to disagree. Just because the majority doesn't recognise it as a slur doesn't mean it isn't bad. It's differentiating based on race and ethnicity that isn't important to the topic of the conversation, which is where to buy a beer. I also started to wonder how a city so cosmopolitan and diverse felt like this was an acceptable way to categorise its residents, the issue of othering identities comes up in Barcelona again.

And now for the truth; I've never heard so many problematic racial utterances than here. I could be discussing human rights, democracy, and progressivism for the conversation to move on and in the next breath a joke is made using the n-word to represent a black person or to mimic what they think is funny 'urban' speech. I corrected a friend on his use of the word. His defence was a common one: other people's feelings should not stand in the way of his 'art', i.e the jokes he tells to friends in a bar. I am well used to this faux outrage at 'censorship'. This is awash on Twitter and in newspaper columns, but it's usually by 50+ year old white dudes and never have I seen someone defend their use of the n-word. This is another level and incredibly, it is not uncommon. I had an adult student casually drop the word in class and I told him in no uncertain terms that he mustn't say that again. This time the line trotted out was one I always hear; "but in OUR culture *negro* is fine". But you didn't say *negro* did you? It was the n-word, the slur, said with a hard 'r' and I don't think you can tell me that's acceptable anywhere in the world.

I've repeatedly been told that these racial issues don't exist here and it's my country and the USA that have these problems so it's irrelevant. It's in these moments that the previous positive bubble really bursts. If the direct communication patterns I witness here were supposed to build deeper understanding between interlocutors, how did that align with this? It is not kinder to continuously use a word that carries so many violent associations for a group of people, who share a society with you, in reference to that group of people. This is not the mark of honest, unafraid intention between humans but in fact an attitude which is more concerned with its own 'authenticity' than accommodating difference. I have yet to successfully persuade someone here who uses that word that my objection is not just a polite neurosis to be dismissed. I think that lack of listening, lack of accountability, and lack of generosity to learn about others is deeply troubling. So yeah, don't sit in your castle like a Brit extending formalities with little genuine intention but also don't continue to use language that is traumatising and dehumanising to people in your greater community. *Joder!*