

Strange or unique?

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“The way you speak sounds really strange and snobbish, I don’t like it!” When I was a small child, I lived in Ishikawa, but I didn’t speak the same way that people from Ishikawa spoke because my family was from Osaka. In elementary school, my friends didn’t like my dialect because they said that it sounded so different, compared to Ishikawa-ben. That made me sad because I love Kansai-ben. It has heartwarming sounds and it’s how my family spoke at home. I felt like those students were denying what I was.

In Japan, there is a proverb “The nail which sticks up gets hammered down.” It means that if you are different you will be forced to become the same. Simply speaking, different is strange. It’s bad.

Of course, this doesn’t mean everybody ends up being the same. Sometimes the hammer is slow and some of the nails get missed. My grandfather is definitely the “nail” in my family. Many people think he is too easygoing. One day, he told my grandmother he was going out, and he returned home 6 months later. He had traveled all over the world with his limited survival English. His stories were like fairy tales for me. And these stories motivated me to travel abroad.

My parents were really worried when I told them I made up my mind and decided to study English in America. My mother asked “Why do you want to do

something different from everybody else?” I told my parents that it was my dream to travel like my grandfather did. Of course, he also encouraged me and convinced them.

I went to the U.S. as a foreign exchange student last year, and I expected to be treated just like I was first treated in Ishikawa, as being strange. However, on my first day of school, people said “It’s so cool! You’re Japanese!” All of the American students and teachers who I met treated me as different but not as someone strange. They always asked, “So, what do you guys do in Japan?” They were very interested in my cultural background. They respected my different opinions and point of view.

In Japan, “being the same” has been an important part of culture for a long time. “Different” often means strange. In the U.S., they still have discrimination and other kinds of problems, but I felt the U.S. is a much more open society. “Different” does not mean bad, it means unique.

I am in the Department of International Trade and Transport. I study business, so I took an International Business class in America. One day, we learned about the various business manners all over the world. Do you know that each country has its own business culture?

For example, as you know, bowing is an important part of business in Japan. Being greeted by a handshake and kissing on the cheek is common in France. Egyptians tend to speak at a much closer distance than North Americans or the Japanese. And while this means OK in many cultures, the “thumbs up” sign has a

much different meaning in the Middle East.

I never knew that there were so many different business cultures in the world. I learned all of them are unique. No one can criticize which is right or wrong because it is important to respect each other when doing business. Everyone should appreciate differences. While International business-people often use a common language to communicate, their unique business culture, which comes from their different nationalities, is very alive. In that case, they should learn that each person may have a different way of thinking and acting. Business wouldn't be successful if they ignore the differences of culture, even though they use English as a *lingua franca* (global language).

I think that we have a great opportunity to learn and understand many things if we can accept that nothing is strange, just different and unique. There are so many differences in the world; nationality, culture, language, ethics, religion, and so on. And there are also so many people in the world with each, their own personality. If you really understand the points of view of others, you can succeed at business and at life. Please don't say something is wrong if it's not the same. Rather appreciate the difference and uniqueness. Thank you.