

# Surviving Globalisation



## A Newsletter from John Alexander

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Awesome, Cruel and OK – Global Signs of Approval



This is a picture from a recent seminar. In the background is a list of three words voted by Swedish radio listeners as the words that best describe 'Swedishness'.

'Public right of access' ('Allemansrätt'); 'moderation and balance' ('lagom'), and midsummer – a celebration of Nordic paganism. It is a reminder that one word can never define a culture, just as three words cannot either. Every language is a manifestation of cultural values and priorities, and the words we use provide some fascinating insights into cultural differences. The simple act of expressing approval conveys a breadth of intercultural diversity. In England you can say 'rather good', which can also mean 'rather bad'; in the US 'bad' sometimes means 'good', and in Sweden 'cruel' (grym) means very good, and 'not stupid' ('det skulle inte vara så dumt') means 'outstanding'. It seems the American expression 'OK' has been adopted internationally (see Lagom Sisu Manana about its origins), while in Australia – where we are known for concision of language, approval is expressed with the single letter 'A', prefixed by the great Australian expletive. Most puzzling is the ongoing acceptance of the expression 'awesome' that reminds me of a celebrated Hollywood anecdote concerning the actor John Wayne during the filming of *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. He is cast – or miscast – as a Roman centurion who has

just witnessed the crucifixion of Christ. In the scene the heavens open up and thunder and lightning crash down upon the spectators. John Wayne's single line – spoken with his customary 'who cares' drawl, is: 'this truly is the son of God.' The director, becoming increasingly frustrated with his deadpan delivery, take after take, finally breaks down and says: 'John – this is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. God has just unleashed the wrath of the heavens. Please – say this line with awe.' The cameras roll, and John Wayne turns and says: 'this truly is the son of God...or?' Now is that OK, cruel, or just not so stupid?

### **Belarus — “reflect, then act...”**

I was recently in touch with Ludmilla a translator/interpreter from Belarus, just a few days before I was to meet a group of some 50 researchers from Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. I was curious about the emerging cultural identities of especially Ukraine and Belarus, and how different words might help explain some of the cultural differences.

In Belarus, writes Ludmilla, 'we have an expression 'pamiarkouny' [Pron; pam-yar-kou-nee] which means "never in a hurry to say or do something, plus a bit reserved, plus trying to reflect first and only then to take some steps". Every grown up Belarusian will tell you about being "pamiarkouny" as the basic quality of Belarusians...”

Shortly after Ivan commented on the [www.lagomsisu.com](http://www.lagomsisu.com) site:

”It is, actually, a rather proper word for my country. It does not only have these qualities, but also something like 'indifference', 'slowness' and 'reluctance', combining both joy and sorrow, tranquility and despair, tiredness of numerous changes and courage to stand in hard circumstances. There is a saying in Belarusian language "Maja hata z kraju" (literally meaning "My house stands aside", i.e. "I don't care", "I go with the flow", "I keep a low profile" etc.).

Interest in the Belarus language is increasing – currently 5% of the population speak Belarus, but it's popularity is increasing. Ludmilla comments that the expression she is asked to translate most often is 'how did you like your draniks?' "Draniks" are the most favourite dish of the national cuisine - pancakes made of raw potato!

### **Danisha – ‘Please sit...’**

As a reminder that a culture can never be summarised in a single word, there have come in some contributions of different words explaining the complexity of different cultures. Linda, from Sweden, working for a time in Kurdistan, writes:

“In my experience there is particular word important all over the Middle East.

...the word I had in mind is "danisha". That's Kurdish and means "sit". This is what people say as soon as you meet them, whether it's a business meeting, a private visit, a visit at some public office etc etc. People always want you to

sit - which of course means don't rush, have some tea, talk a bit, "hang out". When you ask someone what they did yesterday when meeting with their friends they often replay "danishtuin" - meaning "we sat" or "we hung out" basically.

The word is used in the same way across generations – it's a way of socializing, a gesture of politeness, and describes the culture in general. This means sitting together with friends, family, colleagues, drinking tea, exchanging polite conversation. In Kurdistan, and elsewhere in the Middle East, business people often miss out and lose contracts, by being too 'business-focused' and not understanding the importance of the social aspect. At least 15 minutes of tea and small talk is mandatory at a Kurdish business meeting.

“Danisha” – ‘please sit’ – might not sound so cosy at first, but it is actually the same concept as "gezellig" or "gemütlichkeit". It is about creating a friendly and relaxed atmosphere, socializing and just enjoying each other's company.

### **Gol o bolbol – Persian Roses and Nightingales**

I met an Iranian researcher at a conference recently. He said that for many Iranian people Persian culture is associated with the beautifully sounding expression 'gol o bolbol'.

The theme of rose and nightingale, *gol o bolbol*— is a sub-theme of flower and bird painting. *Gol o botta* or *gol o mor*—was the principal theme of the decorative repertory of the Safavid (1501-1722) and Qajar (1785-1925) eras. *Gol o bolbol* designs were used to beautify all manner of objects, from prosaic ceramics and woodwork to the most precious regalia and manuscripts. For more, see:

<http://www.iranica.com/>