

The Charming Communication Style of Austrians

A look at the historical and cultural factors that have shaped Austrian communication style

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The majority of non-German tourists who come to Austria assume that the country is like Germany because Austrians speak German. And a quick look at their history tells us of an intertwining relationship to their northern neighbor. Austria suffered during World War II and all the other wars in which Germany was involved. One would think sharing a common historical fate, along with the same language and many similar cultural values, Austrians would have the same communication style.

Yet, Germans will quickly tell you that isn't at all the case. For them, Austrians seem to be unclear, "wishy-washy" when they communicate. You can note this in the language. When a German says he'll do something, he'll say "Wir **machen** es". You get a clear sense that the task will be done. An Austrian is more likely to say "Wir machen es **schon**". The underlying message is we will *try* to get it done.

Or take the Austrian concept of promise – *versprechen*. I learned it within a few days after moving to Vienna.

After my wife and I finished unpacking, we had a lot of cardboard boxes that belonged to the moving company. I called up and was told by a nice, young woman that a truck would come by on Friday. All I had to do was put the boxes out on the sidewalk, which I did.

But by Friday late afternoon, they were still there. I called the company and before I could say a word about this unpleasant situation, the young lady immediately apologized and promised me in a most charming manner the boxes would be picked up the next day. Her seductive charm melted away a potential conflict.

So I brought all the boxes back into the apartment and, the next day, dragged them all back out to the sidewalk. I assumed that a promise meant a promise, the way I experienced it in Germany. No, the boxes weren't picked up on Saturday. There were finally taken away on Tuesday!

Interculturalist Frank Brück writes in his book *Interkulturelles Management: Kultur Vergleich Österreich, Deutschland, Schweiz*, "Whereas Germans like to be objective, direct and credible, Austrians emphasize relationships and avoid conflict." And as one young Viennese summed it up to me, "*Die Österreicher sind ein fröhliches Volk*", always trying to smile and maintain *Gemütlichkeit* with others, even if it means not doing what they say they're going to do.

Why do Austrians have such different communication strategies than the Germans? I've been observing how they communicate and also done some reading. These three historical points may provide an explanation.

The Influence of Catholicism

Austria is a Catholic culture. Catholicism is a religion of synthesis, acting as a mediator between Man and God. It teaches sins can be forgiven through the act of confession. Psychologically, this has an enormous liberating effect -- the heavy burden of self-responsibility is gone. Light-hearted behavior is possible; sins can be washed clean; nothing is starkly black and white...

Not so in Germany, heavily influenced by the writings of Luther and Calvin. It teaches people that they have to find their own moral responsibility toward God through acts of honesty and the search of the absolute truth (*Wahrheitssuche*), even if it means hurting feelings of others. This emphasis on self-reflection and righteousness are, at times, placed higher than harmony with others. Moralistic, confrontational behavior is almost guaranteed.

A Conservative Tradition

Being right in the middle of Europe, Austria has absorbed contradictory currents of Western democratic thinking and Eastern despotism.

The relatively democratic and egalitarian spirit of Western European culture came from free City States like Venice, Frankfurt, Lübeck and Hamburg. People in these cities could question freely and without fear the status quo. They played a decisive role in the development of self-governing independent regions, which eventually evolved into a separation of church and state.

This never happened in Austria. Not one of its cities demonstrated any signs of independence. Vienna, Graz and Innsbruck were originally the residences of local nobles. Then they became administrative centers for the Habsburg rulers. Salzburg belonged to the richest and most powerful archbishop in the German-speaking territories.

Furthermore, historians point out the Habsburg's approach to governing was that of an alternate mixture of "humanistic absolutism", exemplified by Joseph II, and police-state controls, symbolized by Metternich — a sort of conservative Yin-Yang arc.

The upshot of this is Austrians are more likely to accept the status quo. They historically have never "burned down the house", like the French did in 1789. Rather, through the centuries they have learned to express dissatisfaction indirectly and frustration in a round-about manner.

Keeping a multi-cultural Empire together

There is a famous Latin proverb that every Austrian school child learns by heart: "*Bella gerant ali, tu felix Austria nube!*" In German "*Mögen die andere Ländern Kriege führen, Du, glückliches Österreich heirate*". In English "Let other countries carry out wars—you, lucky Austria, marries."

This saying probably best describes the Austrian character in a nutshell. They compromise and avoid conflict through charm and beating around the bush. The origins for this behavior can be traced to what it took to maintain the Austro-Hungarian empire.

For 600 years the German-speaking Habsburgs ruled a large territory--consisting of many different ethnic and cultural groups--Hungarians, Romanians, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Croats, Slovenians and Italians.

The ruling elite found out over time that it couldn't just issue orders and decrees and expect to maintain peace. There were too many cultural frictions and tribal issues. To keep this vast empire together at minimal cost and energy, the Habsburgs turned to multi-ethnic reconciliation: listening and compromise. They essentially became "cross-cultural swingers", working with a dozen competing value systems!

Anybody wishing to integrate and work successfully in the Austrian-Hungarian empire, especially in Vienna, had to demonstrate diplomatic skill. Making compliments and softening the truth became the *modus vivendi* of Austrians. Through time, and without realizing it "the country drew a good deal of its strength from the idea of the center, of compromise, exhibiting an almost narcissistic love of the middle way and a leveling of extremes".

This last statement is the key as to why Austrians are unique (and excellent) communicators and explains why they are such successful and subtle negotiators in Eastern Europe and the Far East.. They practice a byzantine-like strategy of tipping around firm positions. It's even become official government policy. The Austrian Post Office just recently put out a stamp that proudly states: "Austria is a labyrinth, in which each one finds their way".

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