

Cultural Analysis 文化解析

“I am sorry”

Q – Sometimes foreigners in Taiwan are surprised because they hear people around them say they are “embarrassed,” because the meaning of the word seems to resemble the English expression, “I’m sorry.”

A – I have noticed that, yes. A friend of mine came late for an appointment yesterday and said in Chinese that she was “embarrassed” (不好意思). Was she really embarrassed? She didn’t look that way.

Q – That’s right. That was your friend’s way of saying, “I am sorry I’m late.”

A – Why didn’t she just apologize by telling you she was sorry?

Q – In fact, bu hao yi si (不好意思) means both “I’m embarrassed” and “I’m sorry.” She could have said “I’m sorry that I’m late” (對不起，我遲到了). But it’s perfectly fine to say “I’m embarrassed that I’m late,” too (不好意思，我遲到了). They actually mean the same thing.

Making a joke about a swimming class

Q – Last week my classmate and I got caught in the rain on the way to English composition class. We were so wet! When we arrived at our classroom, our teacher made a joke.

A – Was your teacher angry with you?

Q – Oh, no. He is an American, and he likes to make jokes.

Q – Well, what did he say to you?

A – He shook his head sadly when he saw how wet we were, and said, “Too bad this is a composition class, and not a swimming class.”

Q – What did he mean?

A – You don’t understand the joke, do you?

Q – No, what’s funny about a swimming class?

A – Well, the rain made us so wet that it was as if we had fallen into a swimming pool.

A light fragrance

Q – People in different cultures may use special “beauty products” to make themselves feel good.

A – What do you mean by “beauty products”?

Q – Oh, a female college student may use a bit of perfume on her skin to make herself feel sweet.

A – Yes, and her perfume may make a girl seem “sweet” or “sexy” to guys.

Q – Of course! But guys sometimes use aftershave or cologne for the same reasons.

A – Oh, I agree. After I play basketball, I like a hot, soapy shower. And then, afterwards, I put some aftershave on my face. It feels refreshing on my skin.

Q – Do you use a strong aftershave?

A – Oh no, it's just a light fragrance.

