

When in Rome

People say, ‘when in Rome, do as the Romans do,’ but things are not that simple. There is no universal rule: what do you do when you are in Rome with people who are not Romans? What should you do when you are in a mix of Romans and non-Romans? Even a simple greeting can sometimes be bewildering.

I was born and raised in Japan. I received a Japanese public education in the suburbs of Tokyo and, until I was an adult, I hadn’t experience living closely with people who had roots outside of Japan. As an adult, I have lived in several countries, including China, for study and work, but I was never confused by greetings – that is, until I went to France.

When it comes to greeting customs, the biggest difference between France and the places I had experienced before was physical contact. Did you know? The common greeting in France is called ‘*bise*.’ The basic form is to put cheek to cheek, and to make a kissing sound with your lips. What makes it difficult is deciding with whom, and in what circumstances, you should exchange a *bise*. Another problem is whether the *bise* is accompanied by a hug, or how many times you do it, depends on the region and the relationship. In the region where I lived for the first time in France, it was often done once between acquaintances or when in a real hurry, and twice between friends after getting to know each other a little better. But in some regions, it’s even done four times; a *bise* is exchanged both when meeting and parting, and it accompanies every ‘hello,’ ‘good morning,’ and ‘see you later.’

At first, when I wasn’t used to the greeting, I would get a bit flustered because the other person’s face was so close to mine – but, I didn’t mind it, because I enjoyed the stronger sense of intimacy. However, in *Rome* – or rather, France – I was never able to exchange a *bise* if the person I was talking to was Japanese. Having grown up in Japan, I felt that the physical closeness of a *bise* was only appropriate between me and my romantic partner – and that was a passionate feeling, one not for other’s eyes. In Japan, I felt that that kind of closeness should be avoided in public. It seems this sense was shared by the other Japanese people I met in France, which resulted in a strange phenomenon – where French and Japanese people mingled, *bise* was practiced between French people, and between French people and Japanese people, but not between Japanese people, even when in the same place.

The story gets even more complicated when you are with someone who is neither French nor Japanese. I would like to share one experience that left a strong impression on me.

At the time, I attended a hobby meeting once a week. Most participants were foreigners, including myself, although there were some French people. Most were Europeans, but there were a few Chinese. One person was from Korea. Then there was me. Once everyone was together, it was somewhat awkward, but almost every combination exchanged a *bise*, just as *Romans* – sorry, the French – do. My exchanges of *bise* with the other Asians was a bit more hesitant than with the Europeans – it seemed the other Asians were hesitant, too – but it was not as intimidating as with other Japanese. Interestingly, and the reason I said, ‘almost every combination exchanged a *bise*,’ was that I never saw Chinese people do it together. I felt a sense of similarity there.

One day in the early afternoon, as I was waiting at the local prefectural office to extend my residence permit, a Chinese man I had met at the hobby meeting came in. He was waiting for the same procedure. We were surprised at the coincidence, and as we exchange ‘hellos’ and ‘have you eaten?’ we did the *bise* as usual. I was called first, and when I returned, he was still in the waiting room. We chatted some more, and then his name was called. According to the ‘norm’ of the occasion – the normal local rules, which we’d done at our meetings, or when we had just met a few minutes earlier – we should have exchanged a *bise*. But we didn’t. After a moment’s hesitation, we both stepped aside and said a simple ‘see you later.’

Why did we do a *bise* when meeting, but not when parting? There was only one rational reason I could think of; language. Before I was called in for the procedure, we were speaking French. But after the procedure was over, our chatter had shifted to Chinese. We got into the topic of a book he had been reading while waiting, which was written in Chinese, and Chinese was easier to use when that

happened.

The same two people, in the same place, would exchange a *bise* when using French, but avoid it when speaking Chinese. It was as if their respective judgments about how it was appropriate to behave were influenced more by language than by location. ‘When in Rome’ is really not so simple, after all.

Questions, Answers and Hints:

- 1. The title of the passage is ‘When in Rome’ – A shortened version of ‘When in Roman, do as the Romans do.’ A similar expression exists in Japanese – what is it?**

Answer: 郷に入っては郷に従え (ごうにいてはごうにしたがえ: gō ni itte ha gō ni shitagae).

Hints/Clues: No specific clues as such in the passage, although several references are made to the metaphor throughout the text, so students should hopefully be able to discern the meaning even if they have not heard the expression before. Students should be encouraged to think, but may look up the answer if necessary.

- 2. The French greeting, *bise*, is central to the narrative. What do you think *bise* is in English?**

Answer: Kiss.

Hints/Clues: Students should be encouraged to not look this up, but to think for themselves. They may be given a further hint from the description of the greeting – ‘the basic form is to put cheek to cheek, and to make a *kissing* sound with your lips [...]. whether you *really put your lips to the other person’s cheek* or just make a sound depends [...] – they can be given the hint that the typically English translation is

- 3. When talking about *bise*, the narrator says, ‘I felt *that that* kind of closeness should be avoided in public,’ using two ‘thats.’ This sometimes happens in English, but how are these two ‘that’s’ different?**

Answer: The first ‘that’ is a conjunction (接続詞), the same as in ‘I think that ~.’ The second is a demonstrative (指示詞).

Hints/Clues: Not particular hints in the text, this question is intended to draw attention to a sometimes confusion aspect of English. The students may answer using grammatical jargon as above, otherwise explain to their best ability, or provide a Japanese translation.

- 4. Despite being born, raised, and educated in Japan, the narrator can converse in Chinese. Why do you think this is?**

Answer: She has stayed in China for either study or work, or both.

Hints/Clues: Unusual for this class, this is explicitly stated – the narrator has ‘lived in several countries, including China, for study and work’ – there is a degree of ambiguity as to how she spent her time in China, specifically, but it is clear that she has spent a degree of time there.

- 5. The narrator states that she never saw Chinese people exchange a *bise* together, and that she ‘I felt a sense of similarity there.’ What was this sense of familiarity, and why do you think she felt this way?**

Answer: Both cultures maintain a degree of physical distance.

Hints/Clues: This is explicitly referred to several times throughout the passage, including the narrator’s reflections that ‘having grown up in Japan, I felt that the physical closeness of a *bise* was only appropriate between me and my romantic partner,’ and that ‘exchanges of *bise* with the other Asians was a bit more hesitant than with the Europeans.’ This can be expanded upon in a discussion about physical closeness norms across cultures. (Also, student’s memories of

3.5 *A Very Good Holiday*, might be refreshed, in which the French narrator was happy that he saw his Thai wife become more comfortable with exchanging *bise*).

6. Why do you think the narrator did not exchange a *bise* with the Chinese man when they parted?

Answer: “The same two people, in the same place, would exchange a *bise* when using French, but avoid it when speaking Chinese” – this is explicit in the text, but students should be encouraged to give more thorough reasoning (points may be awarded for the explicit answer alone).

Hints/Clues: Although not included in the passage, the narrator shared her thoughts on this phenomenon: “it was through the language used that the implicit [cultural] rules about ‘what should we do here and now?’ was decided. I believe that there was an implicit mutual understanding, perhaps not conscious, that determined this. This could lead into an interesting discussion point for students to consider and to share some of their behaviors that are determined in a similar way.