

Why Culture Clashes at the Olympics Matter

Differences in language and customs will inevitably lead to miscommunications and misunderstandings among the athletes

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The unified Korean team at the 2018 Winter Olympics opening ceremonies. Credit: Roland Harrison Getty Images

The Winter Olympics opening ceremonies demonstrated that cultures necessarily collide as athletes from 206 countries compete over the next few weeks for gold, silver and bronze across 102 events in 15 sports. This year's events in Pyeongchang, South Korea began with the noteworthy handshake of the sister of North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un with South Korean President Moon Jae-in.

As a professor at Northwestern University teaching courses on linguistic and cultural diversity, I see this biennial demonstration of the world's languages and cultures as instructive and emblematic. As a psycholinguist, I see language and culture closely intertwined, and the Olympics often attest to that with fascinating examples.

As we've already witnessed, North and South Korea present a real-world laboratory that shows how languages can diverge at the national level due to opposing influences from cultural and political pressures. For example, athletes from North and South Korea who are on the first-ever joint Olympic team are finding it difficult to communicate with each other despite ostensibly speaking the same language.

That's because many words that exist in Korean (for example, words based on English or another foreign language) have been eradicated in North Korea and have been replaced with newly created originals, leading to a need for North Korean-South Korean dictionaries.

This North Korean attempt to manipulate language is reminiscent of George Orwell's "Newspeak," used to control the thoughts and beliefs of people in the novel 1984. It is rooted in the Whorfian hypothesis that language and thought are connected, and takes it to the extreme that language change can be engineered to influence thought.

My fascination with languages, cultures, and the Olympics includes first-hand experience with the games in 1996, when I worked as associate envoy for the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games. From the time the athletes arrived until they left, I lived in the Olympic Village alongside them. I participated in the opening and closing ceremonies, attended practices, games, competitions and social events, spending nearly every waking moment with athletes, coaches, team staff, doctors, and government officials.

As someone with knowledge of Russian and Romanian languages and cultures, my role was to help team members navigate the linguistic and cultural differences they might encounter in a foreign country.

These differences were not limited to the language barrier, although having someone translate for athletes and team officials was certainly valuable. Beyond language, there were cultural and social variables that all foreign teams encountered, and the more distinct their culture, the more differences they faced.

For example, at one point I found myself an intermediary in a courtroom as a foreign team official was accused of sexual assault after groping a female driver. What counts for friendliness and openness in one culture was interpreted as an invitation and consent in another culture. Unfortunately, issues related to sexual assault and what constitutes consent are still with us today.

In another surprising turn of events, I assisted several Olympic athletes in legal meetings as they either defected or sought political asylum in the United States. Rooted in cultural and political differences, such acts have a history in the Olympic landscape and are likely to continue as athletes make powerful statements on and off the field. And sadly, the threat of terrorism remains a concern in 2018 just as it was in 1996.

From encountering unfamiliar foods in the Olympic Village dining hall (“What is this?” and “How do you eat this?” were frequent questions) to relationships to exploring the host city, there was endless potential for foreign team members to find themselves in complicated situations. I often had to assist when athletes got on the wrong bus or went to the wrong venue because of linguistic and cultural differences in how messages were communicated.

And, of course, the Olympic Village sees its share of friendships, competitions, gossip, rivalries and sex. These are expected when high-energy, high-intensity, hormone-fueled young people come together by thousands. While the 1996 games took place before cell phones became ubiquitous, this year every step and misstep will likely be documented on social media, as it has been for the past decade.

Complications will continue to happen no matter what country the Olympics are held in, as we saw at the last Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. What can help minimize missteps are cultural awareness, basic linguistic knowledge, strong ethics and clear communication.

Social media, as well, can be used to capitalize on instant communication and provide direct access

to millions of people to seek and share information. Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook and Twitter can bridge across languages, countries, and people in ways that were not possible before.

As in every Olympics, summer or winter, no matter where they happen on the globe, some things will go awry, some things will be funny, many things will be awe-inspiring.

I remember the young girls from the Romanian, Ukrainian, Russian, American, Canadian and French gymnastic teams whose conversations I overheard on the way to various Olympic venues. They worried then about the same issues my own teenage daughters worry about—friends, parents, school, looks, boys, happiness—in addition to the grueling training and competition schedule, and the hard work and dedication that it takes to be a world-class athlete.

In spite of all the anxieties, there is more laughter, camaraderie, joy, pride, enthusiasm, excitement, and energy in the Olympic Village than I’ve seen anywhere else. Socializing with celebrities or athletes from other teams at meals and parties, and in between events, leads to making friends from around the world and lifetime memories that will remind the Olympians that they are part of a global network.

I imagine this Olympics will be no different. We will watch the athletes go after their dreams, succeed, or stumble. In their humanity, they will remind us all that we are connected, that we are all part of the same network that transcends borders. This is true even as we witness how things work differently in Pyeongchang and how South Korea differs from the United States and other Western countries.

This year, there will be many firsts at the Olympics. Six nations are participating in the winter games for the first time (Ecuador, Eritrea, Kosovo, Malaysia, Nigeria, Singapore) and four new events are making their debut (big-air snowboarding, mixed doubles curling, mass-start speedskating and the Alpine team competition). Individual athletes ranging in age from 15 (halfpipe skiing) to 51 (curling) will amaze with awe-inspiring accomplishments. And the Winter Paralympics that follow soon after will inspire their own moments of awe.

The Olympic Games are a symbol that underscores that differences between cultures, countries and peoples not only can be overcome, but can be capitalized and built upon to make us stronger, faster, better, to inspire and propel the human race forward.