

« The Power of Bonjour »

Par Emily Monaco, Wall Street Journal, 28 janvier 2016

There's an expression in French: *Simple comme bonjour*, simple as hello. But for expats, even seasoned ones, bonjour is anything but simple.

As an American who's lived in France for nine years, I'm often sought out by new arrivals wanting to commiserate over shared visa horror stories or interactions with "rude" locals. But I would knowingly shake my head at their stories, convinced they were due to simple cultural misunderstandings, the most common of which is the use—or misuse—of the word bonjour.

When entering a shop, a restaurant, a café, an American is happy enough to smile broadly and say: "Do you have this in a size 8?" or "We're going to be five for lunch." In France, this is abhorrently rude. No matter the declaration, whether it's, "One coffee, please," or "Could I use your phone to call an ambulance? My wife appears to be in labor," it must begin with bonjour. Omitting it is tantamount to a spit in the face.

Though I spouted this advice for years, I didn't truly understand the power of bonjour until I began working for a small media company in Paris three years ago. For two years, I believed that we all got along quite well, until the day my work best friend confessed: "People don't really find you all that friendly."

I balked. I've done my share of smiling too much in Paris (where grins are hoarded for close friends) to the point that my local fishmonger proposed marriage. When I pressed my colleague for details, he said that my problem wasn't smiling but greeting. Upon arriving at the office, he said I shouldn't start the day reading emails or checking backups, but rather by saying bonjour to all 30 employees, one by one. When I frowned and said I'd rather get right to my desk, he told me that in that case, I should say bonjour the first time I saw each person—every single day.

No wonder you never get anything done, I thought. But as time went on, I began to see that my friend's logic was rooted in that all-important French concept: *égalité*, equality. [. . .] Modern France was envisioned as a country of equality; bonjour is an acknowledgement of your interlocutor, a nod to your coexistence. Omitting it isn't just rude, it's a refusal to see the other as an equal.

Simple comme bonjour... n'est-ce pas?