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# Dress in the United States: A Language and Cultural Perspective

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DRESS IN THE UNITED STATES:  
A LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Master of Arts in Teaching degree  
at the School for International Training, Brattleboro, Vermont

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This project by Loretta Diane Garden is accepted in its present form.

Date Sept 28/84

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Project Reader Nanci Leitch

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Inspiration for this project came from Dr. Alvino Fantini, who was my teacher for Language Acquisition, Anthropological Linguistics, and Bilingual-Multicultural Education. The project topic was selected through discussions with Dr. Barbara Lotito, who has been teaching culture and developing cultural materials for many years. Bob Meyer provided invaluable technical assistance in the project production. Nanci Leitch assisted through her knowledge and expertise as a photographer.

Very special thanks are extended to Tim Wolf, who was a consultant on the production of the audiotape and who donated many hours of recording studio time.

## ABSTRACT

This project consists of a presentation of one hundred forty slides of people and their dress in three United States cities: Brattleboro, Vermont; Hartford, Connecticut; and New York City. A sixteen-minute audiotape of segments of interviews examining the significant factors influencing dress accompanies the slides. The material was developed to teach United States culture in the classroom, through presenting a wide range of people living in three northeastern cities. In order to work with students of different levels of English, the teacher has the option to show the presentation as a whole or to work with individual slides and segments of audiotape. Ideally, the creative teacher can use these materials to teach culture or to work in any of the four skill areas.

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## INTRODUCTION

In learning a second language, the ultimate goal of the student is to communicate with native speakers. Whether the student lives and works with them or hopes to visit their country someday, the primary concern is successful interaction, to understand and be understood. To facilitate this goal, the teacher's responsibility is to look at all aspects of communication in the second language. If language teachers understand and accept that one language is not a translation of another, that each language reflects a unique world view,<sup>1</sup> then they must recognize that teaching only the linguistic side of language will not lead to a fully communicative person. They need to provide the opportunity for students to learn about the culture which the language is inseparable from.

A serious attempt must be made by teachers to develop materials and lesson plans which will take students beyond the linguistic knowledge of the language into the area of culture. In some classrooms, to teach culture is to show slides of a particular country and talk about its holidays. There is a deeper level to be investigated which involves not only how people act but their reasons for doing so, and their feelings about their behavior. Through observation, students can examine the target culture and their own as well, in order to reach that deeper level of awareness. They can develop objectivity in viewing human behavior. The materials developed for this project are an attempt to facilitate this growing awareness, specifically for students of English

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<sup>1</sup>See Dwight Bolinger, Aspects of Language (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1975), and Benjamin L. Whorf, Language, Thought and Reality (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1956).

as a Second Language who are learning American English. It is hoped that this project will serve as a model or as inspiration for the development of cross-cultural teaching materials. The possibilities for teaching culture in the classroom are open and endless.

Dress is a part of culture. People throughout history have worn clothes as protection, for display, and sometimes to conceal the body. How they have done so has varied tremendously by period, region, class, occupation, sex, and age. Examples of style changes are: wearing wigs, tunics, and various kinds of jewelry and accessories; the raising and lowering of skirt lengths; changing hair color; and body painting and body mutilation such as pierced ears and noses, and tattoos.<sup>2</sup> From a historical perspective, the way someone dresses is actually very similar to the others of his or her social group and era.

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<sup>2</sup> See Desmond Morris, Manwatching (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1977).

## THE PROJECT

I became interested in the subject of dress during a teaching internship in Mexico. While living there, I observed my own dress in relationship to others and received comments from some of my Mexican friends about the way I dressed. They expressed interest or concern about whether or not I wore make-up, how I wore my hair, when I wore pants as opposed to skirts, and the type of shoes I wore. They informed me of their image of and reactions to people from the United States, much of which was negative. They were sincerely concerned about my not being viewed in this way and were gently pressuring me to conform to their standards.

I began to think about how people are judged by their physical appearance and how each person does in fact communicate something by the way he or she dresses. What the person thinks he or she is communicating may not, in fact, be what others interpret. It appears that standards do exist and that these standards vary according to locale, age, sex, occupation, ethnic background, social group, and situation.

This project on dress consists of one hundred forty slides and a sixteen-minute audiotape. A videotape has also been made of this presentation. The people I photographed and interviewed were randomly chosen as I walked the streets of Brattleboro, Vermont; Hartford, Connecticut; and New York City. These three cities were selected in order to capture the diversity of the northeastern United States. The interviews were extensive, with people answering the following questions:

- Is dress important to you? Why?
- On what basis do you select the clothes you buy and wear?



- Does the occasion or situation affect how you dress?  
In what way?
- Do you feel you communicate something to others by the way you dress? What? How?
- What does someone's physical appearance say to you?  
Does it influence whom you associate with?
- Is there a dress code where you work?
- How do you choose your children's clothes?

In the editing process I selected statements from people and pictures of their dress which would demonstrate the greatest range of people living in these three cities. Almost all are native English speakers. A few people from other countries are included in order to see whether students can detect them and why.

The results of this study can also be read in the transcript provided. All of the responses people made to the interview questions fell into five categories, with the exception of purely descriptive responses. These categories are: Function; Display, which is subdivided into fashion and accent, attract and impress, age, and location; Societal Expectations; Social or Political Statement; and Self-Expression. I edited in such a way as to present statements that were reoccurring and significant. The narration was added to clarify and to pose questions for thought and discussion.

## TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: Location of each slide change has been indicated throughout the transcript by a dot (●).

● I think...ah...dress has several functions 'cause it reflects  
● your lifestyle, your taste, and your comfort. I think it  
gives one a sense of one's completeness. If you've got on  
● clothing that you've selected represents your sense of  
● appropriateness, your sense of color, your sense of enjoyment  
● and...ah...that's very important in personalities.

NARRATOR: Dress in the United States: A Language and Cultural Perspec-  
● tive. Is dress important to you? Why? What do you like to wear? ● Does  
the situation or occasion influence what you wear? Do people communi-  
● cate through their dress? The people you will see and hear were photo-  
graphed and interviewed in Brattleboro, Vermont; Hartford, Connecticut;  
● and New York City. Their responses to these and other questions about  
● dress fall into five basic categories: Function, Display, Societal  
● Expectations, Social Statement, and Self-Expression. First we will look  
at Function. A very basic reason people dress is for protection from  
● the elements and for comfort.

I've grown up in a northern climate where it's very cold in  
the winter and there's the absolute physical necessity to  
● dress warmly. Simply you need to protect yourself from the  
elements. You need to wear clothes that will keep you warm

and dry and these clothes are usually functional, not fashionable. Looking good is not the priority in this case.

It's raining today and it's very muggy and I didn't wanna wear anything nice 'cause I'm sweating and I don't wanna... um...ruin any of my nice clothes. When the weather's like this I dress very poorly.

I have to get up and I have to get dressed. I have to be comfortable, I have to. I don't have a lot of time to spend on what I'm going to wear so I keep a stack o' this and a stack o' that and they're all exactly the same in different colors.

Since it is a casual summer, it's...ah...basically jeans and maybe a comfortable cotton shirt.

Basically the way I pick my children's clothes is: I try to buy mix-and-match clothes for them so that if they get half of their outfit dirty I only have to change that half and I can go grab another garment that will match the clean half. Um...fashion's not really a primary factor in...um...choosing of my kids' clothes, but when I do buy something for my daughter, I try to buy something for her that I would like to wear if I were little, nothing too cutesie, just... um...plain, comfortable clothes.

What can we Americans or people wear in this century that makes us feel really good, that makes us be able to get through a day? To wear wonderful clothes one does not have to be vain and to wear comfortable clothes one does not have to be ugly. ● 2 sec.

● 2 sec. ● 2 sec. ●

NARRATOR: Clothing, hair, make-up and jewelry can be worn to accent the body and for display. Fashion is important to many people.

I wanna be first. I do not want to do it next year. If that's the hottest thing now, I want it now. I don't wanna wait 'til everybody else is wearing it.

I do find that I'm very attracted to someone who is wearing especially very modern clothing or very flashy or bright, something with a lot of style, especially something that is atypical.

And I think colors are really important. They can...they can wash a person out, they can brighten a person up, they can enhance their hair, their eyes, their face. Colors can make you look slimmer, wider, taller. It really...colors really are the most important thing.

NARRATOR: People can dress to attract and to impress others.

When I see someone well-dressed it...it's pleases me...um... especially if it's a woman who's well-dressed. It's a nice

sight, and it's...ah...it's kinda like a treat.

The way I dress is not to attract every man I meet. The way I dress is to make me comfortable.

Actually, I feel that I dress for other women. It matters more to me what another woman thinks about what I'm wearing than what a man thinks about what I'm wearing. The reason being is I feel I've outgrown the need to impress men with what I wear but I don't think you ever outgrow the need to impress other women.

NARRATOR: Age is a factor in how one dresses.

Between the ages of 25 and 40 you'll find that your style does not particularly change until your body starts changing in size with aging.

I don't think my style of dress has changed that much over the years at all. I pretty...maybe it should have but...ah...of course as I got older there's a lot of things I can't wear anymore and I...I don't believe in dressing too young.

I think in my...ah...middle life when I was much more involved in social activity that it was...ah...far more important to be dressed according to the latest style and perhaps to dress

in...ah...fancier clothing. By fancy I mean up-to-the-minute  
in...in style and...ah...perhaps a little more noticeable,  
memorable and...ah...as I've gotten past that stage and...and  
society's judgment is not so important to me, I now dress  
much more for myself, what I think is comfortable, what I think  
is appropriate to the way I live.

NARRATOR: Where people live, such as a big city versus a small town,  
and which particular city or town, affects their choice of clothes, how  
they wear their hair, and their total appearance.

I do think about clothes a lot, especially in New York City  
when it seems like almost every person you meet is extremely  
fashion-conscious.

If I go to the city I try to dress in a more stylish way,  
according to the fashion of the time, whereas that's not  
really appropriate for a small town in Vermont.

The concept in Brattleboro is that the people who are the  
presidents of the bank wear three-piece suits. Everyone else  
can dress in a very casual type atmosphere. Whether it's a  
restaurant, or the museum opening, or just out to dinner and  
a movie, there are opportunities and most of our customers  
here dress for those occasions.

The richer a country gets, the more casual they dress and the more out of style, the more they lose style. Americans don't really have any style.

NARRATOR: People are conscious of how they and others dress and they are aware of a standard of what's acceptable, not only for their locale but for their sex, their age, and their profession.

It's a fact, people do judge others by the way they dress. It's something you have control over and you should take advantage and dress well. You can tell if someone's an organized person or if they're completely disorganized and you can tell almost where someone comes from, what type of background they have.

I've realized that the clothing I wear can communicate things to other people. For instance, it's important for me to be able to go in and out of different situations, say from the city to the country and be accepted by people as one of them.

The way other people dress certainly has an effect on the way I think about them, not so much style-wise...um...cleanliness, for one thing; if their clothing is...ah...not of the best quality that's fine; if it's clean, that's all that really matters to me. If a person cares enough about their appearance, then I feel I can trust them.

I have learned over the years that you really can't judge someone by the way they look or the way they dress, so while I'm being...while I'm maybe instinctively responding to whether they look neat or messy or put-together or disheveled or whatever, I also have an awareness that any impressions I might have could be incorrect, about what they're really like.

Dress is important to me because it's a key to getting into certain situations. Basically I try to dress for comfort but I try to dress in such a way that I'm visually accessible to the widest range of people. It's important for me to be able to feel comfortable walking down any street in this city. I want to be able to go anywhere and do anything and not have my clothes get in the way of that.

What I wear is very important because of the business that I'm in. I'm before the public every day. I find that I try to project an image...ah...for my customers.

We look for good taste in dress, particularly in our customer service area, where the public comes into the bank.

People who dress nicely enhance their chances to...to get ahead. I like to always dress the way the person dresses who has the position that I want, so if I want to become a vice-



president I look to see what the vice-president's wearing.  
I think the best approach is if you look at the job and  
decide how much client contact you have...um...I was in  
public relations. If you work in advertising, if you work in  
banks, anything where you go out and meet the public or you  
meet your markets and you have to present a professional  
image...that's...that's where it's important how you dress.

NARRATOR: Some people dress to make a social or political statement.

The new look is androgynous, which is male and female dressing  
alike. Women are wearing suits and very short hair...I mean  
the hair has no sex...men and women in the same haircuts.

I've been mistaken for a boy. I'm not offended by that and  
I'm not at all threatened by that. I like it, as a matter of  
fact. Maybe people will have to approach me differently,  
they'll have to come up to me and just talk to me as a person,  
not as...um...a 21-year-old woman. I don't want to be totally  
...ah...accessible to everybody I meet. To me I like to  
challenge people.

I like to wear sophisticated things, but I like to shock people  
with what I wear, but not outrageous. I like wearing...um...  
I don't know...like...things in magazines, and things that  
most people in the town don't wear, just so you look different.

Other people's reactions to the way I dress are usually...  
 they usually feel pretty uncomfortable, I think.

I dress to shock people. I've been beat up many times for the  
 way I look. Either that or they shout obscenities at me, or  
 stare. I wanna challenge people, to force them to react, to  
 ● 3 sec. ●  
 make them think.

I...I dress very unpretentiously I think. I don't think that  
 I have to make a statement by the clothes that I wear.

NARRATOR: Each person expresses something of him or herself through  
 dress.

I like to wear red skirts and cherry shirts and white shirts  
 and white T-shirts and white cats and purple and blue shorts  
 and those sandals. I like to wear dresses.

I choose my clothes depending upon what mood I'm in. If I'm  
 in a real lousy mood I tend to put on anything, I don't really  
 care about how I look, and if I feel in a good mood I tend  
 to put on a fresh, clean shirt and a nice pair of pants and  
 sorta express my mood through what I'm wearing.

I like to wear something that's comfortable, something that  
 says...ah...look, I'm easy to get along with and....

I think the most important thing about any look is that you feel comfortable in it, and if you're comfortable in what you're wearing or the way that you're dressing, it reflects in your whole personality.

Do your own thing. Be your own person.

I happen to admire clothing that...ah...enhances the person... ah...shows the figure, their coloring, their style of walking and that suits their whole physical being, as well as their personality. Everybody is expressing personality with everything they select...that, that is what personality is.

NARRATOR: What does your dress say about you, and what does it say about the society you live in? 2 sec.

This presentation was produced by Lori Garden. Project Supervisor: Dr. Alvino Fantini; with assistance from Nanci Leitch, Dr. Barbara Lotito, Bob Meyer, and Tim Wolf. Research and development was supported by the Orientation Development Project, International Programs Division, The Experiment in International Living, under a grant from the United States Information Agency, The President's International Youth Exchange Initiative. Copyright, The Experiment in International Living, Brattleboro, Vermont, 1984.

## CLASSROOM APPLICATION

The presentation is designed for use with students of all levels of English. It can be shown as a whole or it can be stopped at any point for further examination or discussion. The slides can be shown without the audiotape and can be viewed and discussed individually. The audiotape can be used alone. As the tape is of authentic language, much of it is fast and potentially difficult to understand, so it can be listened to in pieces. There is a large amount of material in the sixteen-minute presentation; it can be used over a number of class sessions.

The following questions and topics are suggestions for stimulating classroom discussions:

A. Looking at the Target Culture

1. Where do you think the person/people in the picture are?
2. What are they doing? Who are they talking to? Where might they be going?
3. How are people dressed compared to each other and to those in the background? How much variety of dress is in this scene?
4. What is the relationship of people in the picture?
5. How do you think these people feel about each other?
6. How old do you think they are?
7. Background: people, buildings, countryside, store and office interiors, storefronts, streets, and objects such as food, cars, toys, strollers, bicycles, signs, pictures, park benches, furniture, and office equipment

8. Objects of dress: articles of clothing, eyeglasses, sunglasses, make-up, nail polish, purses, handbags, briefcases, belts, shoes, clothes with words, jewelry, hats, hairstyles, hair color, wigs, facial hair, and condition of clothes
9. Body position, body proximity, body language: What are these people communicating? How can you tell?
10. Do you recognize any of these people as not being from the U.S.? Why?

B. Contrasting Cultures

1. How does your dress differ from or resemble what you see in these slides?
2. What range or variety of clothes do you wear and what determines that? What about the other people in your country?
3. Do people dress differently in the city and in small towns? How does age, sex, and occupation influence dress in your country? Are there other important factors?
4. How do children dress in your country? The elderly?
5. Does climate affect your dress? Do you need to wear protective clothing?
6. Is comfort or style more important to you?
7. Does a standard exist where you live? Who shares it and how does it differ for others in your country? How closely do you observe it?
8. Do you feel you communicate something by your dress? What do you want to communicate?

9. Does the dress of other people influence what you think about them?
10. Do you judge others by their physical appearance?

Students can be sent out into their communities as researchers, whether they are in the United States or in their own country. They might interview people, take photographs, or merely observe, with a set of guidelines and questions previously decided upon.

Three books listed in the References which can aid teachers in cultural exploration are: The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in Complex Society (Spradley), Manwatching (Morris), and Your EIL: A Guide to Field Language Acquisition and Cultural Exploration (Fantini, Andre, McCoy et al.).

In addition to teaching culture, the project materials can be used for linguistic work. For example, the slides provide images for vocabulary development, including articles of clothing; people, their relationships to one another, their physical characteristics and emotional states; and objects in the environment. Grammatical constructs can be formed through sentence building, using the pictures as stimuli. Stories can be developed through both speaking and writing.

The audiotape provides material for listening comprehension. The teacher may select segments which demonstrate specific grammatical forms, while exposing students to authentic speech. The transcript provides reading material and the teacher can use this to examine the differences between spoken and written language. With these materials, the creative teacher can design lessons not only in culture but in all four skill areas.

## CONCLUSION

Through the design of these materials, I attempted to provoke thought, to raise questions. I did not attempt to be conclusive but rather put forth questions and ideas for the students to discuss and respond to. The research was done over a six-week period, with a time and budget limitation. The study is not conclusive; however, it does represent some of the diversity of dress and the beliefs of people living in the United States. My hope is that students will learn more about themselves and others, and how much each of us reflects our own culture. This project is but a step toward a long-range goal of communication and understanding between people of different cultures and countries.

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