

**The “Listen First, Speak Later” Approach
to Cultural Research**

by

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Stan Nussbaum, Draft of 30 July 2001

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Summary

"Listen First, Speak Later" is a particular form of cultural research (writing short cultural profiles based on common sayings) designed to be part of a pre-evangelistic approach to unreached peoples. Stan Nussbaum, staff missiologist of GMI (Global Mapping International) is developing a network of people interested in experimenting with this approach. This document explains the "Listen First, Speak Later" concept and includes some practical guidelines for implementing it.

I. Commitments of all researchers

A. To promote understanding not caricature

Most of the documents produced by "Listen First, Speak Later" researchers will be very short so they can be inexpensively reproduced and widely read. Many will be written in simple English for use in schools. The danger is that they will oversimplify the complex realities of a culture, giving a picture that is either too rosy or too negative.

B. To be continually open to local partnership, advice, and correction

Most "Listen First, Speak Later" documents will be written by outsiders, including many who do not yet speak the language. It is preposterous to think that such outsiders can write an authoritative guide to a culture in a few months. However, what they can do is write an interesting introduction to a culture that will get other outsiders off to a good start in understanding it. This introduction can be refined in a series of gradually expanded versions over the years. From day one of the process, the researchers must seek local partners (maybe even co-authors) and accept local correction. Local people will rightly resent and quickly undermine any outsiders who set themselves up as "experts" on their own.

C. To speak "later"

Cultural research is a prelude to evangelism not a substitute for it. "Listen First, Speak Later" researchers are committed to "speak," telling the good news of God's liberating control. The important points are when and how they speak—after listening well they can speak appropriately, often building on something expressed in a proverb.

II. Theological assumptions

- A. Cultures all have God's footprints on them somewhere. One part of evangelizing a people is to discover where God has already walked among that people.
- B. Evangelists have too often taken a bulldozer and steamroller approach to local cultures, flattening everything in order to "prepare the way of the Lord."
- C. Outsiders owe cultural insiders some respect, withholding judgment until we understand what we are judging. Cultural research is one way of paying our entrance fee into a culture.
- D. Cultural research has some value in itself, even if all it does is demonstrate respect to a

people group from Christians and/or promote peaceful understanding between this group and others. The cultural education aspects of a "Listen First, Speak Later" project are not window dressing to fool hostile governments. The researcher has not "failed" if no converts have been made by the end of the project.

- E. God is the evangelist who walks with the researcher, gives cultural insight, creates opportunities for witness and changes people's hearts. Like any form of human wisdom and learning, cultural research cannot guarantee spiritual impact.
- F. By studying values and proverbs of another culture, the researcher will very probably have some fresh insights into Christian theology and a deepened appreciation of the Bible, the book for all cultures. The light will dawn on some points where the researcher's culture had limited or distorted his/her understanding and experience.

III. Strategy

A. Connecting the idea to current goals, activities and staff

"Listen First, Speak Later" is more a concept than a project. It is not driven from the top. It will succeed only where a person or organization believes it will contribute to the achievement of some primary goal already held, such as gaining entry to a creative access country, opening conversations with a few cultural insiders, orienting potential evangelists, or encouraging prayer for a specific people group.

B. The "5/40 Approach" to the "10/40 Window"

The 10/40 Window will be the primary but not exclusive focus of the "Listen First" network of researchers. The "5/40" approach is setting the goal of discovering five key cultural values as summarized in forty common local sayings. (The numbers five and forty are admittedly a bit arbitrary. They are designed to serve as a useful but negotiable target for an initial project in a culture.)

The task of researching and recording the values and proverbs will bring the researcher(s) into non-threatening conversations with several bi-lingual members of the host culture. The written description of the values and proverbs (a pamphlet or booklet) will be useful as a cultural guide and conversation starter for anyone attempting to evangelize that people group. It also will be stimulating reading for anyone who is praying for the group.

C. Co-authoring with a local person

Because of the risks involved when outsiders write about a culture (see above under "Commitments"), it may be preferable to work on a book with a local partner such as a university faculty member, a writer/journalist or an English teacher. This creates a different set of problems and opportunities than writing alone. If the Lord provides the right local person, this could be a wonderful way to go. If not, it could destroy the whole effort.

IV. Explaining your goal to informants

To overcome the normal suspicions of local respondents and win their cooperation, researchers must be able to explain what they are doing and why they are doing it. If the explanation is good, the cooperation may even be enthusiastic. Here are some components of an explanation which may singly or in combination be appropriate for certain settings.

A. Organizational commitment to cultural sensitivity

"Our organization wishes to serve the people of your country/culture well. We are not here like typical foreigners who come merely to 'do a job.' We want to avoid the many mistakes that foreigners often make in your country. Therefore our organization is developing a short manual on your culture, using some of your common sayings to help outsiders understand what is very important to you. This will only be a few pages long, but it may help our staff to begin learning and discussing your culture. Can you answer a few questions that will help us on the project?"

B. International and/or multicultural project

"I am part of the XYZ project that is trying to promote cultural understanding around the world.

We believe the world should be a place of peace and that intercultural understanding promotes peace. Here is a leaflet that gives more details about our project. Could you answer a few questions that will help us understand your culture?"

Possible international and/or multicultural projects:

1. "Listen First, Speak Later." "An American scholar, Dr. Stan Nussbaum, is promoting proverb research worldwide. His concern is that Westerners should listen to local cultures around the world, not just talk to them as if all wisdom came from the West. He is editing a booklet series published by XYZ Publishers and developing a web site. Each booklet looks at five core values of a culture and explains forty common sayings that reflect those values. We would like to do a booklet on your culture to get it into the series and onto the Internet."
2. Community Action Group. "Here in Los Angeles [or other city] we are trying to promote awareness and understanding of the many ethnic groups we have. We are preparing a series of booklets about common sayings in the various languages. The sayings help outsiders get a little insight into the values held most deeply by in each culture. (We also have a sample booklet about the proverbs of white American culture, which may help other groups learn English and understand white American ways.) Could you answer a few questions to help us?"
3. Sister Cities. "I am one of five teachers from Colorado Springs [or other city], which is a "Sister City" of Bishkek, Kirghizstan [or other city]. We are here for a month to work on a short booklet in English about Kirghiz culture for use in the geography classes in our middle schools and high schools."
4. University department [this idea is on the drawing board, no further yet]. "The University of [] department of anthropology has launched a multi-year, grant-funded project to promote proverb research as a way of understanding 50 of the least studied major cultures in the world. Your culture is one of those selected. We are seeking local research partners to work on proverb research as the focus of an ethnographic study. Are you able to help us? Do you know someone else that you recommend we contact?"

C. Academic degree

1. Personal project. "I am researching your culture and especially your proverbs for my Ph.D. [or other degree] at University X. I will be relying on some of your elderly, respected people who are considered to be experts in using proverbs. How would you suggest I find these people and win their cooperation?"
2. College students on summer project. "I am with a group of students from X College/University who are here for cultural study for [4-10] weeks this summer. We are focusing on understanding proverbs as windows into a culture. We have a list of forty proverbs that we are discussing with various people. Can you talk to me about the five proverbs on the family [or other subject] that have been assigned to me?"

D. Improving the English classes in local schools

"Our organization wants to produce a booklet that can be used in English classes in local schools. Our idea is to write a short booklet on your culture using some of your common sayings as guides to key values. We have a booklet that shows how this method works to describe American culture [show the ABCs booklet]. Can you answer a few questions that will help us on the project?"

E. Cultural respect

"As a foreigner in your country/culture, I am often embarrassed by the insensitivity of other foreigners here. I don't think this is right. I can't do a lot to change it, but at least I wanted to do a little something as a foreigner to show some respect for your culture. I have decided to try to write a little booklet on a few of your common sayings. It is a good way to get to talk to people about what matters to them in life and how they do things. I don't know if I will ever get it published, but it will be valuable at least to me and my friends. We can fit in better with you

while we are here and we can do a better job of telling people about your culture after we go back to [home country]. What do you think of this idea?"

F. Cultural curiosity

"As a foreigner in your country/culture, I am fascinated by your culture. I love the food, the friendliness, the pace of life, the dress and the architecture, but I realize that all these are only the surface of your culture—the things that tourists come to see. I would like to go deeper and understand the way you look at life, what you value, what makes sense to you. I know I won't get too far on such huge things in the time I have here, and I don't speak the language [well] [yet]. I have decided to get started by making a list of common sayings, using these as windows into your culture. Pretend I am a child and you are trying to teach me to be a good member of your culture. What are a few of the proverbs you would want me to know and obey?"

V. Selecting informants

The cultural insiders you talk to will vary according to your situation and the size of your project. Here are some of the groups:

A. English speakers

It is possible in many cultures to do a small project relying only on insiders who speak English, but note these cautions:

1. English speakers may have been educated away from their own culture and may even have a condescending or hostile view of it. Avoid those who just can't understand why you want to bother learning "useless" local proverbs.
2. English speakers may live in a different world than other cultural insiders. They may speak English at home, work with English speakers, watch CNN, etc. They think they know how non-English-speakers live, but they may be quite out of touch.
3. English speakers probably understand Western values and may adjust their description of their culture in order to make it look better to Western eyes.
4. If you do not know the language, start learning it. Use the proverbs as your vocabulary builder list, and use the grammatical construction of the proverbs as your focus for grammar study (except in cultures where the proverbs use archaic vocabulary and/or grammar). You will not be fluent by the end of the project, but you will have something of a feel for how the language works and your informants will see that you are trying. Both these are very important for your research.

B. Translators

You may want to employ a translator to help you during interviews. The advantages and pitfalls are similar to those for working with a local co-author (see III, C).

C. Types of informants

1. People you rub shoulders with
These are your normal, informal contacts including colleagues at work, neighbors, domestic help, parents of your children's friends, shopkeepers, etc.
2. People whom insiders consider cultural experts
These will often be elderly people, they may or may not be highly educated, and they are likely to be leaders in traditional practices of religion, healing and/or relations with ancestors.
3. People to whom you would like to be connected
In some cases it may be more important to build a good relationship with one or more informants than it is to do the project itself. The project can be more a means than an end. This obviously will affect your selection of informants.
4. People you naturally and easily like
In a "Listen First, Speak Later" project, there is no penalty for liking the people you interview. Friendships may come easily with certain people even across cultural lines. Go for it. These friends may not be the most knowledgeable people or the most strategic people, but

they are the ones who are most likely to talk to you frankly. That is a huge asset in this type of research.

VI. Techniques for finding proverbs

A. Finding proverb lists compiled by others

1. If a proverb collection or even a short list of proverbs can be found, it can give a researcher a flying start on a project.
2. Local bookstores or a phone call to a local university can often establish whether a proverb collection has ever been published, or if someone is working on one now. Be sure to check or ask about grammar books or other language resources, since these often have a list of proverbs in a chapter or an appendix.
3. Internet searches are less likely to produce something, but may be worth a try on sizable people groups. Two sites to check are "African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories," www.afriprov.org (on Africa only), and "De Proverbio, the world's first multilingual electronic publisher of proverb studies and collections, <http://info.utas.edu.au/docs/flonta>"
4. Specialized bibliographies include an annual list of new (or newly discovered) proverb collections, compiled by the world's leading specialist in proverb study, Prof. Wolfgang Mieder. This is published in the journal, *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship* available from the University of Vermont Dept. of German and Russian, Burlington, Vermont 05405-0160. Prof. Mieder has also edited *International Proverb Scholarship: An Annotated Bibliography*, a two-volume work completed in 1993. It lists studies about proverbs, not proverb collections as such. On Africa, an annotated electronic bibliography of over 800 proverb collections is available on *The African Proverbs CD: Collections, Studies, Bibliographies*, edited by Stan Nussbaum, available from Global Mapping International, info@gmi.org.
5. You are encouraged to send a request to the "Listen First" e-mail network. Others may be able to look things up for you if you do not have ready access to the reference books and electronic sources.

B. Keeping ears open for "odd" English phrases

This is just a matter of being alert. For example, when you hear a phrase like, "Those two people are like chickens and ducks," you may be hearing an English translation of a proverb. Ask what it means and where it comes from. It may be a local proverb (like this one from Thailand). It may be the moral of a traditional story.

C. Using topics or values to find proverbs about them

This is what researchers would like to do, but it rarely works. If people are asked, "Tell me a few proverbs that you use all the time," they may not be able to think of any. A superb Ghanaian story explains the problem this way:

A king sent three messengers to ask a famous sage in a neighboring kingdom to tell them 100 of his best proverbs. He told them to sit down and close their eyes. For half an hour he said nothing more. Then he said, "Tell me your dreams." Puzzled, they replied, "How can we tell you our dreams if we have not slept?" He then sprung the trap by saying, "And how can I tell you proverbs if the situation has not arisen?"

Recent research on the brain has added a scientific explanation—proverbial speech is actually stored in a different part of the brain than ordinary speech. When a person is asked a question like, "Do you know any proverbs about patience?" he or she thinks with the "ordinary" part of the brain and often cannot think of anything. However, when a situation arises where patience is needed, this same person quotes an apt proverb that the other part of his/her brain has "magically" come up with.

D. Using key words to find proverbs

This works somewhat better than using values. A person who cannot think of a proverb about

patience may be able to think of one about a turtle or a snail. Sometimes the key abstract word is in the proverb—"Time is money," "Curiosity killed the cat"—but often proverbs use only figurative language—"Don't put all your eggs in one basket."

E. Using proverbs to look for more proverbs

Proverbs elicit other proverbs. Very often when hearing an English proverb, a local person will say, "Oh, we have one like that. We say, . . ." The proverbial part of the brain is activated by the first proverb, and the discussion gets under way.

Once you have some local proverbs, you may ask people if they can give you other proverbs on the same themes. Instead of asking for a proverb on patience, quote one on patience and ask if the person knows any others along that line.

Caution: as a tool of cultural research, this is severely limited. The content of the proverbs will usually be very close to the proverbs the researcher quotes (though some useful contrasts may also come out). The researcher may thus distort the research by his/her own selection of the proverbs being used as triggers.

F. Using stories or cases to evoke proverbs

In real life it is events or situations that evoke proverbs. You can approximate real life by describing a situation or case and inviting people to tell you what proverbs might apply. Here are a few samples. They will work better if you expand them, adding details that make them seem like they happened in your area. You may also replace them with an actual situation you have witnessed (but be careful to avoid embarrassing anyone involved).

Example 1: A mother discovers dirt on a bowl that her daughter washed. She thinks the daughter has been lazy and careless. What proverb will she tell her to teach the appropriate lesson?

Example 2: Two brothers become attracted to the same girl and get into a fight over her. What proverb will their father use to resolve the matter?

Example 3: An official is refusing to switch the electricity on in a new house until a bribe has been paid. The house owner is feeling angry, victimized and helpless. What proverb might the owner's friend quote to help him deal with this situation?

Example 4: A shopkeeper sells a customer a defective item but refuses to return his money the next day when he returns it. The customer then begins knocking things over in the shop. If another customer hears the argument, what proverb might he/she think is being proved true in this case?

Note: Though you may not be able to think of an English proverb for each of these stories, people in many other cultures will. They are rich in proverbs, and we are relatively impoverished.

Caution: Like the preceding method (using proverbs to look for more proverbs), this method can distort your picture of a culture, depending on which values you build into your cases and which ones you overlook.

VII. Sample questions

A. Tips on asking questions

1. You may ask one or two of these questions in casual conversation without explaining to your respondent that you are doing research. This is just normal conversation. (You may want to say, "I've been asking several people the same question lately in order to understand this culture better. [State your question.] May I ask you that question?")
2. If you sit down with someone to ask several questions and write down the answers, be sure to explain your rationale (see section IV above).
3. Put the respondent at ease. Assure him/her that these are all questions about opinion, not questions that have "right" answers. Watch for signals of nervousness and graciously stop the questions if necessary.
4. Be grateful. You want the respondent to be feeling good about you and the interview when you finish.

B. First-round questions:

1. What do you think are the key characteristics of a real Kurd [or other culture] man or woman? What makes a [Kurd] a "good [Kurd]"?
2. Finish this sentence, "A good [Kurd] would never . . ."
3. Finish this sentence, "A good [Kurd] is always . . ."
4. Finish this sentence, "A good [Kurd] would give up almost anything if he or she could have . . ."
5. Finish this sentence, "A good [Kurd] would think that life is not worth living without . . ."
6. Finish this sentence, "A good [Kurd] dislikes and avoids people who . . ."
7. A [Kurdish] proverb says [such and such]. Can you explain that for me? Perhaps you can use an example of a situation when you would use that proverb.
8. A [Kurdish] proverb says [such and such]. Why is that so important to [Kurdish] people? Are there other proverbs that make the same point?
9. In my country we have a proverb that says [such and such]. Do you think most [Kurds] would think that is good advice? Why or why not?

C. Follow-up questions:

1. From my conversations so far I have the impression that [Kurds] are people who [name one or two characteristics or values]. How accurate do you think my impression is? What would make it more accurate?
2. I have found three [Kurdish] proverbs about obedience so far. They are [quote them]. Do you know any more proverbs that are similar to these?
3. I am confused by something that people are telling me about [Kurdish] culture. On the one hand they say [such and such], but on the other hand they also say something that seems to be the exact opposite. What am I missing? How can both of these things be true at the same time?
4. One of the things I am learning about [Kurdish] culture seems to be very different than the culture I am from. We say [such and such] but you say [such and such]. Do you think the two cultures are really different on this point, or am I exaggerating the difference?

VIII. Interpretation and writing up

A. Finding published descriptions of the culture

While looking for proverb collections and lists (see Section VI, A, above), you may have found some ethnographic studies, collections of stories or other "oral literature." If you did not find anything then, look harder now.

"People profiles" are mostly demographic (statistical and geographical) rather than ethnographic (cultural), but they may give some useful background information. Check the "Joshua Project," "Bethany Profiles," and other links on the web at <http://www.gmi.org/mislinks/peoples.htm>

B. Sorting your proverbs

This will make or break your project. Unfortunately it is almost impossible to teach, since much of it is intuitive and it draws on your total experience of a culture, not merely your proverb research. Being subjective, it is also highly vulnerable to whatever biases you bring with you. Your mission is to identify the core cultural values, describe them and organize them into a coherent picture which a cultural insider will consider accurate and fair. It is similar to a child's "connect-the-dots" picture. The proverbs are the dots. If you do not connect the dots at all, you cannot see the picture. If you connect them in the wrong order, you get no picture or the wrong picture. But how can you connect them in the "right" order? You have to find out how the culture "numbers" or prioritizes its own proverbs.

For example, compare American and British culture. Though they share virtually all the same proverbs (or "dots"), the two cultural profiles are very different. The dots are prioritized differently and therefore connected in different patterns. The "Ten Commandments of American

Culture" (the ten proverbs which in my view have highest priority for Americans; see the introductory section of the "ABCs" booklet) are definitely not the ten highest priorities for British people.

As you look for the numbers on the dots, you have to look first for individual proverbs which are commonly used and second for clusters of proverbs around a theme. This is not as easy as it sounds. The primary obstacle is that proverbs are holistic statements, often combining several cultural values. They are a classifier's nightmare. If you give the same five proverbs to any three people to classify by subject, you will get a huge variation in their list of topics. For example, how would you classify the proverb, "Time is money"? Is it primarily about time, money, hard work, efficiency, responsibility, waste, or something else?

When writing *The ABCs of American Culture*, I began by listing each proverb under one, two or even three possible headings. After writing the complete first draft, I removed the duplicates, making sure that each section still made sense after the deletions.

You may find it useful to start your topic list by thinking through a skeletal outline of culture, seeking values which are ethnic, familial, social, religious, economic, political, associational, personal, gender-related, age-related, status-related, etc. Proverbs usually describe values more directly than worldview. Worldview is mostly what "goes without saying," that is, it is assumed or understood without being articulated in proverbs. For example, the concept of time as a measurable line is part of worldview. The belief that each unit of time along this line is "money" and can be "spent" is a value. Proverbs are usually devices for teaching and preserving values. As you set up your topic list and outline, the outline of *The ABCs of American Culture* may be useful in two ways. First, you may want to attempt to write two to four pages about "The Ten Commandments of Culture X," analogous to my introductory chapter. These "ten commandments" form a loose outline for the rest of my book, as your "ten commandments" could for your writing.

Secondly, my three chapter headings may be suggestive as a shell for your work, but do not try to follow me too rigidly (1. Cultural Values; 2. Human Beings and Society; 3. Outlook on Life in General). You may wish to write only something like the first chapter on values, though note that chapters 2 and 3 touch on things which could also be considered "values." You may wish to start with a section on "Human Beings and Society" (my chapter 2) before you describe "cultural values" (my chapter 1). Religious proverbs may be far more important in your culture than American culture, so the section on God (and/or spirits and ancestors) may need to be moved forward. You will probably need to add some sections on things which are not in my outline at all.

C. Testing your hunches

As you begin to do your research, you will have some hunches about what the core values are. Hunches are good servants and bad masters. Do not let your hunches or biases distort your vision. Test them carefully. Try out your ideas on various people, but avoid checking them with outsiders of two kinds—those who have been in the culture less than a year and those who have been in the culture a long time but have not learned anything since their first year. What these people lack in cultural insight they make up for in prejudices. They are the ones who should read your thoughts, not influence them.

Expect that you will have to pull your outline apart and put it back together several times before you settle on a good pattern. This is hard work and there is no way around it. The alternative is to settle for a superficial description, the "caricature" which we said at the outset of these guidelines was to be avoided at all costs (see I, A).

D. Re-writing and having advisers look over your drafts

I had about twenty people read the first draft of my ABCs booklet, half Americans and half from other countries. I made huge changes in the arrangement and tone of the book. For example, based on feedback from two especially insightful readers, I pulled together proverbs from several

other categories to create two new sections as core values (self-esteem and fun). I had noticed these values when I was writing the draft, but I had obscured them by spreading out the proverbs about them under several other headings. When I brought them together under their own headings, it greatly improved my sketch of American culture.

E. Printing/Publishing

The audience you address, the length of the document you write and the format in which you might publish it can all vary tremendously. One of the things I most look forward to in this experiment is the variety of brochures, pamphlets, booklets and articles that people will come up with. Here are just a few very general guidelines which I hope will not dampen your creative spirits:

1. Remember the basic commitments of "Listen First, Speak Later." Do not publish anything unfair or arrogant. Do not undermine any local author or publisher.
2. Think in terms of your organizational commitments.
3. Consult widely. Show local people photocopies of your work long before you go public with it.
4. Start small. A two-page flier on "the ten commandments of culture X" may be a very useful discussion starter with local people as well as a good first step toward orienting outsiders who are learning the culture.
5. Beware of political ripples from your work. You may be calling favorable attention to a minority culture which the central government is trying to ignore or attack.

IX. SHARE YOUR FINDINGS

A. Send questions or comments to the "Listen First" e-mail list

The "Listen First" e-mail list encourages discussion among field researchers and other persons interested in promoting "Listen First" research. This is a free service. Only members may post messages to the list and only members may read the messages. To subscribe to the list send a message to the moderator, Stan Nussbaum stan@gmi.org with the following information: your name, your organization, how "Listen First" research relates to your personal/organizational goals and activities.

B. Register with the directory of "Listen First" researchers

We plan to circulate a "Listen First" directory to the above e-mail list as well as put it up on the web in due course. Please make yourself known to the group by completing the form below and sending it to [<stan@gmi.org>](mailto:stan@gmi.org).

Note: submit only information that may be made public.

Name

E-mail address

Country/region of work

Ethnic group being researched

Organization(s) involved (your employer, local groups, universities, foundations, etc.)

Brief description of goals, methods and progress

Publications/documents available

Date of registration

Last update
