

My Life as a Linguist

I have lived in five foreign countries. Six if you count California. My daughters all speak three languages fluently, two of them speak four. I claim to be bilingual as well. I speak fluent American but since I lived in London some years ago, I understand English pretty well too.

I have a very good ear for the rhythm and pronunciation of languages but I am memory challenged, shall we say, so language is hard work for me. Accordingly I have made mistakes in every language to which I have been exposed. The problem was I traveled a lot in my job and worked in offices in which the only common language was English. So I never acquired proficiency in any of them...but, as my children know, that did not deter me in the slightest. I knew enough to get along but was the living embodiment of the aphorism “A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.”

For example, I can say to taxi drivers “left, right, straight ahead” in six languages. Important because that gives me at least a 50-50 chance of being taken to my home in that country. While admirable in itself, this accomplishment does not entitle me to be called “fluent.”

My first linguistic test was Japanese. By the way, lest anyone doubt my stated directional expertise, “Left, right and straight ahead” in Japanese is “*migi, hidari, masugu.*” These words are especially important in Japan where houses aren’t numbered consecutively. The number of the house corresponds to when it was built. So #145 Yamamoto Dori could be right next to #9 on the same street. Number one is the oldest house on the street.

I lived in Kobe, home of the very best beef in the galaxy, for over a year. As it turns out, learning to speak Japanese is not as difficult as it might appear, though to read and write is impossible for a foreigner, especially using *Kanji*, the borrowed Chinese pictographs. The Japanese language is as regular as Latin, both in verb constructs and syntax. Memorizing vocabulary is complicated because there is no root similarity with English as there is in French or Spanish. And there are cultural variations which depend on one’s social station, from very formal for the aristocracy to very familiar for the average person....and some other anomalies in between.

For example. One evening in Tokyo I was in my favorite bar, *Joukaku* (The Castle), playing “look ahead eightball” with one of the hostess girls when a large American guy dressed like a pimp, open shirt, medallion, hairy chest

visible, greasy ducktail, came in with his Japanese girlfriend. I was instantly impressed with his fluency with the language as he spoke to his waitress for several minutes. My poolmate, though, was obviously amused for some reason, putting her hand to cover her mouth as Japanese women do because it is disrespectful to laugh at someone, especially a regular customer.

At last, about an hour later, the guy swaggered out of the bar with his girlfriend and my partner almost fell on the floor laughing. I was puzzled.

“What’s so funny?” I asked her.

“All Bar hostess speak baby talk Japanese,” she explained. “Big American *gaijin* (foreigner) with hair on chest speak baby talk to everyone because he learn from girlfriend who is bar girl. He very good baby talk, but most funny to every Japanese.”

There are often cultural mistakes made too when one is unfamiliar with customs in a foreign country. There was the time my boss and I were invited to a geisha house by our customer, Mitsubishi Bank, to celebrate the completion of a very complex computer project. After an evening of splendid sushi, sashimi and gallons of sake, he, as the boss of our project, was asked to tell a story. Many high level executives were present, both from our company and the bank. Most of them were older Japanese, probably old enough to have lived through the end of the second world war.

Much Suntory whisky had been consumed following dinner on top of the astonishing amount of sake , so that explains the story he told. It went something like this:

“It was near the end of WW II,” he began, lighting up a cigarette and blowing smoke in the air to accentuate his opening line.

“Oh my God,” I thought having heard this one many times. “He can’t be serious.” But he damn well was.

“One morning before dawn, on the deck of the last Japanese aircraft carrier afloat,” he proclaimed, looking around at the Japanese executives, exhaling another puff of his cigarette, “the Claxton sounded and all the pilots struggling against sleep, came out on the deck, bleary eyed.”

The story continued relentlessly. The commander said, “Listen up. Notice, no parachutes. Notice planes full of bombs and dynamite. Notice only enough fuel to get to American fleet. Fly plane to fleet, ignore ack-ack, ignore planes try to shoot you down, pick boat, aim plane at water line, accelerate and smash into boat. Any questions?”

There was a long pause. Then one solitary skinny arm rose up from the back of the entourage. “Yes?” the commander said. “What is question?”

“In a high, squeaky voice, the pilot said, ‘Are you out of your f***ing mind?’

There was polite laughter but almost any other story would have been more appropriate. Suntory whiskey reigns supreme at these kind of events.

In Italy, my family and I were having eating dinner in Sabatini’s, a wonderful seafood restaurant in Trastevere on the other side of the Tiber River. I ordered a fish concoction that defies description it was so good. Unfortunately it came with peas, “*piselli*” in Italian. I hate peas, so I ordered the meal without peas, thank you. My children immediately protested. I required them to eat all their vegetables, so I should do the same, they complained. Being the person I am, I said to the waiter, “*uno pisello*”, one pea, I thought. My children all collapsed with laughter. As it turns out there is no Italian word for “one pea.” “*Pisello*” is a childish Italian word for penis, like “wee-wee.”

To his everlasting credit, the unsmiling waiter said to my children, “Tell your father that wee-wees are not in season right now. He should come back in the Spring when they are plentiful.”

And then there was the heated dispute I had with two young Communists in an apartment in Parioli one New Year’s morning after many Sambucas, a licorice tasting really nasty Italian liquor, with coffee beans floating in the glass which one crunches as one drinks. I assure you my abilities with Italian are modest, but I found myself arguing the efficacies of Democratic Capitalism and holding my own. It suddenly occurred to me that I couldn’t speak Italian this well, so I told my wife it was time to go. As with Suntory whiskey, enough Sambuca can make linguists of us all.

In Germany, I gave a presentation on the latest high technology trends in computers and communications to the Messerschmitt aircraft company, a very important client of my employer. What an opportunity, I thought. I had been

waiting all my life for this. It turns out I had a world class story about their airplanes. So at an appropriate time in my speech I started:

“It seems a German pilot defected just before WW II, went to England, joined the RAF and became an ace fighter pilot for the English,” I began.

As the story goes, after the war he emigrated to the United States. A local high school principal heard about him and asked if he would give a presentation to the student body about his daring exploits. The war hero agreed and found himself standing in front of two thousand teen-age students and their faculty in the giant auditorium.

“Boys undt girls,” he began. “I vas flyink over the Red Sea. I looked up undt dere vas two Fokkers trying to shoot me down. I did a double Immelman, a snap roll undt came in back of dose Fokkers undt shot dem down. Den I spotted more Fokkers coming up from below....”

The principal interrupted quickly. “Boys and girls, you must all understand something. Holland build a splendidly maneuverable plane called the Fokke Wolfe. It was nicknamed “Fokker” for short and was used extensively by the German air force during the war after they invaded Holland.”

The pilot interrupted. “Nein, nein!,” he protested. “Dose Fokkers were Messerschmitts.”

I was lucky. All these German executives spoke English well, found my dumb German accent amusing and had not heard the joke before. They laughed. Hard. And I don’t think out of pity, but who knows?

My French *faux pas* were modest when we lived in Paris. Asking the barber to cut my horses instead of hair (*cheval* instead of *cheveux*) is a good example among many. I asked a policeman for directions, “*vitement*” instead of “*rapidement*.” That is, “fastly” instead of “quickly.” At least I didn’t tell any off color jokes as far as I know. The French are not overly fond of bad jokes about their culture especially told by someone with modest command of their fine language.

So here I am in Mexico, my newly adopted country. Do I make mistakes? I was told not to order “*buevos*.” Male unmentionable anatomical things might be involved. When I heard the guys who are renovating our house call each other *cabrón*, laughing, slapping each other on the back, I figured it was a term of

endearment. But they were horrified when I called it out to my daughter in the yard. “Well, is it a bad word?” I asked. “It depends,” they said seriously. I guess it is the same with “*pendejo*.” “Bad word?” I asked. “Depends,” they answered. It could mean ‘jerk’ or something much worse they said. I’m afraid there are way too many “it depends” words that come from the *amigos* working around our house so I am very careful to run them by my Spanish teacher before I try them on people at large.

I could probably try translating some stupid joke into Spanish but I have been told by my Spanish teacher that it might not be a good idea. Humor, he says, is difficult, often is in the mind the beholder and generally doesn’t translate well in other cultures...well, duh! I guess I should know that by now. I do know the words for “left, right and straight ahead” however: “*Izquierdo, derecha y derecho*.” Is that confusing or what?

Maybe I should stick to Latin. It never changes, dead as a doornail for centuries. I was an altar boy and also studied Latin in school for some years. I’ve never heard a dirty joke in Latin. I don’t think they exist, or if they did, Cicero was the last person to tell one. And neither the Romans nor the Church were known for their hilarious approach to life anyway.

So, “*De gustibus non est disputandum*,” says it all. “Of taste, there can be no dispute.”

On the other hand, my wife keeps reminding me of my very dubious taste in all six languages. Seven, if you count Californian.