

Murdering the English Language

One of the pleasures of being an expatriate for me at any rate - is the plethora of cultures one comes across every day. In some ways, being British, I'm lucky (though I regularly cringe when I see the way Brits behave when they are abroad). I'm referring to the fact that English is now so widely used in every corner of the globe that it has become the *de facto lingua franca* in so many countries. But the downside is that it makes us lazy in not mastering the basic language skills of another country especially if we are guest workers in that altogether different environment.

OK, well perhaps all is not quite lost for me yet. I've lost count how often across the Middle East I have been grateful for the French and German I learned when I was at school; for the Dutch I learned from my wife; from the smatterings of Indonesian and Japanese I learned from long past girlfriends. But Arabic? No matter how much I have tried including attending three Arabic courses I have to admit myself a failure. And that hurts. Surely it can't be that difficult?

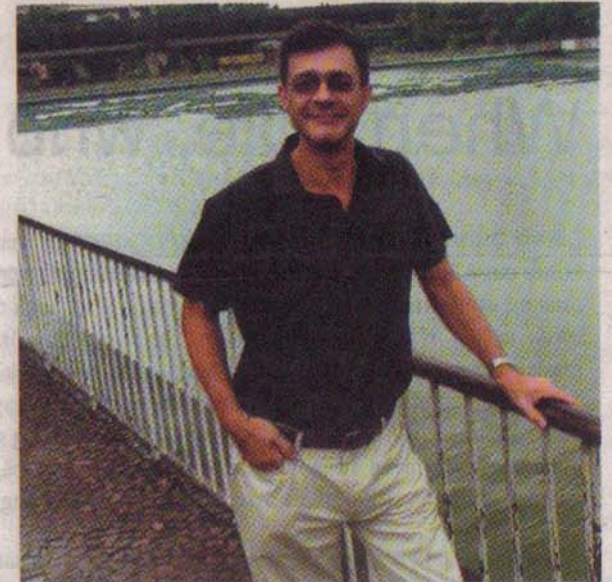
So I am the last person to make fun of any other culture in their use of the English language. Yet, in the same way that I can give amusement to a Frenchman, or a German, a Dutchman, an Indonesian or a Japanese when I screw up in their languages, I hope I can be forgiven for seeing the funny side of what they come up with in English.

Take the highway linking Abu Dhabi with Dubai for instance. For there you will see four examples of my favourite road sign. "Beware of Road Surprises" it reads. And believe me, I have thought long and hard about that one. I mean, *can* you be aware of something that takes you by surprise? Someone must have thought up that slogan, and what is more, persuaded others that it was worth actually constructing massive roadside signs to proclaim that thought to all passing motorists. Could it perhaps have been a sheikh? Or some other high up official, since who in their right minds would otherwise not dare to point out the illogicality of such an admonishment? It sure beats the other signs on this stretch of roadway "Safety in Safety Belt". Errr, right!

Few months ago, free buses have been introduced onto the roads of Abu Dhabi. They are smart blue and yellow buses imported from China which of course explains the Chinese ideograms decorating the sun visor in front of the driver. The only other signs in the entire bus are "Stop" and "No touching". Now, *Stop* I can understand. The sign lights up when the bell is pushed and the bus slowly inches its way forward to the next available taxi stand to relieve itself of its passengers (only a very few bus stops have so far been introduced, so I suppose there is a twisted logic in utilising taxi stands instead).

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Brian walking the pathway along Lapu-lapu Shrine in Manila.

But *no touching*? In a bus that is designed for around 50, but in actual fact has around 90 all hanging on for dear life, I wouldn't have thought that would be the first thing people thought too much about. But then what do I know? In Paris, for instance, we are warned "défence de cracher" no spitting; or in Italy "é pericoloso sporgesi" - it's dangerous to lean out (of a window all of six inches, or 15 cms, high!). So if the Emiratis don't want anyone to touch, then who am I to complain?

On an Emirati government web site, the careers page tells us "Colleagues can expect to learn things that have never been learned before." I'm intrigued. And the transport department advertising for security staff describes "Jobs for men to take care of stations and guard it", which is all the more intriguing since as far as I am aware there are absolutely no trains running in Abu Dhabi!

Meanwhile over in Saudi Arabia, some of my fondest memories of Riyadh are the shop signs that had been written by Filipinos who had been briefed by Saudis. There you would read about special offers on "much rooms" or "pup hires" or even "snopiz" and every week, my grocery shopping was a delight.

When visiting the souqs, I would always keep an eye out for electrical goods imported from China. And that would make a good party game for you next time you have guests round. Read out the item description and see how many can work out what it actually is. Here's one for starters: "An over voltage fuse built in adapt to various plup right contact, safe and durable". (I think this is where I'm meant to insert the Latin word 'sic' to show you that the spelling is exactly as shown on the packet!)

But enough of such frivolity! If I could write Chinese, or Arabic, or even Tagalog half as well as these people have done with their English I would be a happy man. For who was it who famously said 'if ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise'?

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