

Languages, accents, and then English

(and the age of the internet)

A British person called an Italian ticketing office.

"Allo," said the Italian person, listening in on the call. "Ok, sir, Oldon(Hold on.)"

"What do you mean all done? I haven't given my details yet," the British person complained.

"Oldon, please,"

"No, all done. Take my info," now the British person was getting impatient and angry.

"Oldon, sir, oldone," the Italian kept saying, getting desperate. Back and forth, one was getting angry, the other nervous and desperate.

What was the problem here? Pronunciation, and accents in the different languages.

Nothing opens up your mind more than learning a new language. It's revolutionising. It keeps your brain sharp.

A foreign language makes you understand about other cultures. It makes you feel closer to the people whose language you are learning; you want to know more about them, understand what makes them different from or similar to you.

Learning a foreign language is an eye-opener into how people different from you think and reason. You also get to

appreciate and understand your own language from a different perspective.

Knowing and understanding basics of a foreign language can be helpful in many instances and/or, that knowledge could even be a lifesaver, and when out there in the world, it might make going around easier.

One person, for example, told me that once while driving on Germany highways, he kept seeing the name *Ausfahrt*. For kilometers on the road, he silently wondered; *where is this place Ausfahrt? How come we are never getting there?* Only to realise far into his journey, that *ausfahrt*, meant exit. Luckily, he found out the meaning just before he had to exit the highway.

My Italian boss at one hydroelectric project, and before I learnt any Italian at all, used to call one of the expatriates on site, *Danielle pronto*. For weeks, I thought that this gentleman's full name was *Danielle Pronto*, only to discover *pronto* was, in radio language, *over-as* in *Danielle, over*. *Pronto* is also how you respond to a telephone call in Italian, as in, *hello*.

When I was a kid, and the first time we heard Madonna's song *L'isla Buonita*, with no knowledge of the Spanish language at all, we used to sing the phrase as, *lakislaborita*. *What does that mean?*

Back then, it wasn't the age of Google where we could google words we did not understand. Things are much easier now.

Nelson Mandela said: To speak to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. To speak to him in his language, that goes to his heart.

If you are in a foreign land, for example, nothing feels better than understanding and speaking the language the people speak. Your communication with that community becomes easier; you look friendlier, appreciated, and even accepted most of the time. Because the way you talk to the people goes straight to their hearts. They feel like you are part of them.

People learn many languages for different reasons: for fun, to move to different countries, some for work, relationships, etc. But the one language everybody in the 21st century is trying to learn, is English. At least, that's the general impression.

For example, once, while in one South American country, I was explaining myself in Spanish, but failing (I only knew two words, maybe?). The lady I was talking to said,

“Just speak English.” Embarrassed but relieved, I told her I was happy she spoke English, to which she simply replied,
“Who doesn't?” Right? But no.

The Italian taxi driver, who, according to taxi driver recommendations, was supposed to learn a few phrases of English to facilitate communication with the Expo Tourism of 2015 said:

“If someone comes to Italy, they should be able to communicate in Italian. Why should I be the one to learn English?”

True. Why, according to him? Different people see knowledge of English differently.

English has brought so many people together. It's a barrier breaker, and a bridge over so many rivers. The relief, when in circles of people who don't speak your language, you get to find people who speak a common language, English, is undeniable.

For many years now, even if Mandarin was and is still a serious competitor, being spoken by over a billion people, English has been gaining a solid stand as the communication language in so many fields. For example, in 1919, after the Treaty of Versailles, English replaced what had been, for a long time, the language of diplomacy, French.

In the past years, learning English was all about proper pronunciation, correct grammar, and the elegance of sounding like the queen herself. You had to get it right, or you just didn't use the language to avoid getting looked at like: *Is that English you are speaking?*

Nowadays, learning English is about making yourself understood. Are you able to put your message through? Can you exchange your ideas with another person?

There are millions of accents worldwide, some more complicated than others. Accents that are influenced by what we call the L1 language. That is, your native or mother tongue.

It is incredible how strongly our L1 language accents influence our pronunciations of certain words, no matter the language, but, especially in English. Take British colonisation for example, especially in Africa and Asia.

Even if in many of these countries English became a national language, a language spoken at a mother tongue level, many people can still not change their accents to make English sound more English, making it sound instead, more like their local language.

For example, I recently learned why Ugandan army senior officers are called, AFANDE.

I always thought this was a Swahili word, as Swahili was, and still is, the army language in the country: I remember when I was a child in the 70s and 80s in Uganda. During the civil instabilities, every time you heard Swahili spoken, it was better to run off to safety somewhere. Because that could mean a robbery, violence, the army exercising their right to interrupt your freedom and peace, and so on.

In those years, Swahili was the language of authority, both positively and negatively. Thankfully, it eventually became a more commercial language than otherwise.

During the colonisation period in Uganda, when the British officers noticed that the locals were not so keen on greetings, they decided that the white senior officer would greet you with, "A Fine Day." As a reply, you had to say, "A fine day."

But the locals' command of the English language was not top-notch, and thus, them saying, 'a fine day,' sounded more like AFANDE. In the end, senior officers got to be called Afande. Accents!!

I also think back to when we were kids and how, while we skipped rope, we would chant: 'Public Van no. 28'. We, however, had the wording all wrong. We used to sing Babligan, babligan number 28. I went for a ride, but now I stop underbreak. (some used to say Bubbly gum) Why? Because, whoever we heard and learnt the chant from, and whoever they learnt it from, got it all wrong.

The problem of getting it all wrong is because of who is teaching you the language, what accent they use or have, and how much knowledge of the language(any language) they have.

Saying babligan, for example, instead of Public Van, is way off, especially for a word that doesn't even have meaning.

If, for example, you put a Nigerian and an Indian in the same room and told them to have conversations in English, you would wonder if they are both speaking the same language or not.

The similarity between them, though, would be that, they would both speak English, yes, but like it was a syllable-based language.

That's because, like many Nigerian languages, many Indian languages, too, are syllable-based. English, on the other hand, is a stress-based language. Try to listen, for example, to Dr. Alban's 'It's My Life.' How does he pronounce the word 'dangerous'? Is it, Da-nge-ros?

Still talking about foreign languages and our accents, in Italy, for instance, African street vendors are called Vucumprà or Vucumprà. The actual phrase is, *vuoi comprare?* Meaning, do you want to buy? How did it become a name?

In the late eighties or early nineties, there was an increase of African immigrants on Italian streets, whose main occupation was merchandising. To communicate and attract their customers, they needed to use the phrase, *vuoi comprare?*

Due to a lack of proper command and familiarity with the Italian language, however, these immigrants couldn't correctly say the phrase, making it sound instead like, Vucumprà.

That was the birth of that word and that's how these vendors came to be known and called vucumpra. The name stuck.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg as far as accents and foreign languages are concerned. There are people who, however much they have a good command of a foreign language, their accents are a giveaway; try to tell a French person to say, 'happiness'. Does it sound like, ha-ppe-nis? Or an Italian to say the phrase, I am a humble man.

Many Italian speakers or learners of English usually put an H in front of vowels. On the other hand, the H in Italian is silent. Remember 'Oldon' instead of 'Hold on'. I am a humble man might sound something like, High Ham Ha umble man.

Meanwhile, another group can have the perfect accent, proper pronunciations, and all, but with poor command of the language.

There are many people, me inclusive most of the time, who usually get the accent right that, when you say those two words you know of a foreign language, the impression is that you are conversant with that language. But, no, sorry. I only know those two words, lo siento. Nothing more.

Pronunciations and accents can be so good in some cases yet so bad in others. But the important bit is that you can communicate without offending speakers of a language that is not your own.

Watch out for things like false friends, for example: Like the word embarazada in Spanish and embarrassed in English. Sound the same, right? But in Spanish, embarazada means pregnant, while in English, well, aren't you embarrassed that you don't know?

The world has become a global village so, learning a bit of a foreign languages may help us communicate with ease and with a smile. Understanding what you are trying to say, and connecting with the people whose language you are speaking

is becoming more essential by the day. If we all spoke a little bit of each others language, the world would be a better place. No doubt about it. I am glad I can speak three international languages, and two of my local languages.

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