

PARDON MY FRENCH

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Most of us have forgotten how difficult it can be to learn a new language! It is just as well that we pick our first words while our eyes and ears are yearning to explore the world around us, and our little grey cells are not yet saturated with unnecessary facts. Placed in a situation of swim-or-sink, the young child is forced to expand her vocabulary in order to communicate meaningfully with the world around her.

Thoughts of this nature swept through my mind as I began navigating the intricacies of French-- a language I have wanted to learn for pleasure as far back as I can remember. Having finally enrolled in a beginner's course at an evening school, and struggling desperately with vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar, I am prepared to drop the words "for pleasure" from this weekly activity! When I explained to my Haitian instructor that I wanted to learn French so I could speak the language when I eventually visit Paris, she looked me squarely in the eye and observed that the French usually revert to English to prevent a foreigner from massacring their beloved language.

It is said that only the Frenchman can make the recital of a grocery list sound romantic! Indeed, when spoken correctly, every French word in a sentence meshes with the next one resulting in a seemingly long musical word. There was an article in the Harper's magazine in the 1930s about an American philologist's attempt to count the number of syllables needed to

translate the Gospel of Mark into different Indo-European languages. Despite its reputation for terseness, it took 36,000 French syllables to say what English does in 29,000 (the Indo-Iranian group, by contrast, required 43,100 syllables on average). If different languages sound faster or slower, it is simply because this speed is an indicator of the information content, and ultimately the compression efficiency, of the language. In other words, assuming that every race of people thinks at the same rate, a faster-sounding language has more inherent redundancy as it needs more words or syllables to get the same idea across (one only needs to think about the famous scene with the Japanese director in *Lost in Translation* to appreciate this!).

However, language is not an exact science. And as any artist will testify, perfection can only be achieved by painful practice. Unfortunately, in our awe of the final result (and our impatience to reach there), we often overlook the dedication and diligence that goes into mastering a skill-- be it an artist's magnum opus, or an infant's first sentence.

AFTERTHOUGHT

*Why can't the English
Teach their children how to speak?
Norwegians learn Norwegian,
The Greeks are taught their Greek.
In France, every Frenchman
Knows his language from A to Zed
(The French don't care what they do actually,
As long as they pronounce it properly!).*

Alan Jay Lerner, *My Fair Lady*

* 'IncogRito' prefers to remain incognito and we are committed to honouring the request. An engineer by profession IncogRito's writings have occasionally been published in various periodicals.