

Have Tongue Will Travel

By Bill Young

As an international, senior executive communication coach, living in New York, I find myself in the privileged position of being the confidant in the mysterious drama of the misunderstood global traveler. I'll show you what I mean.

“What *ret* wine are you talking about?”

A Swiss banking client of mine, now living in New York, could never understand why every time she ordered a glass of red wine, in a trendy bar, with the newest in ambient-noise, she always got white instead. She said this never happens in the quiet intimacy of her Upper Eastside wine shop.

Two Fridays ago she went into the fashionable Campbell Apartment, in Grand Central Station, around 6:30. At that time of evening the decibel level is up, the conversation heady. She ordered a glass of red wine, 95 Celine Cabernet Sauvignon. In a leisurely flash—a glass of white wine appeared. It happened again.

As I listened to her travails, it was obvious what was happening. In the Swiss-German language, the letter “d” at the end of a word sounds much closer to a “t.” I pointed this out and asked my client to name the colors of the American flag. “*Ret*, white ant blue,” she said. “Once again, much slower this time” I said. “*Ret*, white. . .” with a look of pure delight she said, “Oh my *lor*t, ah, *lor*d” with a strong, obvious *d*, “I was never aware I was doing *dat*.” “That,” I said with a smile. “But, why would *that* make a difference?” she asked.

I pointed out, in a noisy place, when a waiter or waitress is asking for the order, what he or she is probably going to hear is the click of the “t” at the end of the word. When she tested my theory, sure enough, she heard herself begin the word “red” with a very soft “r” that sounded like a cross between an “h” and a “w.” What it sounded like she said was “*hwet*.”

Totally pleased, and with an intelligent twinkle in her eye, my client looked at me with curious amazement and said “*vell*. . . let’s celebrate my new revelation over a *colt* beer.” “Sounds mostly good to me” I replied.

A *Womb* for Three Nights, s'il vous plait

At the registration desk of a five star hotel in the Midwest, a very senior, internationally renowned French advertising guru, nearly rewrote The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. He stepped up to the desk and told the attendant, "I'd like a *womb* for three nights." "Excuse me, sir?" replied the polite young man. "Are there any *wombs* left for the evening?" Marc asked. The silence that followed my traveling companion's inquiry was epochal.

"I am sorry sir, you'd like a . . . what?" "A *womb*, a place to sleep with a bed in it!" "Oh" resounded the voice of the beleaguered customer servant, "a room." "Yes, a *womb*, that's *white*." "Sir, you can have any colored room you want, we feature. . ." Now impatient, my client snapped, "I don't care what color the *womb* is." A perfunctory silence fell across the desk as the pen moved over the surface of the registration card.

At dinner, after everything settled down, my French protagonist asked our waiter for some more "bwead." Caught off guard, "some what?" asked the waiter. "Some bwead, you know like a woll." At this point I quickly interjected and said, "we'd like some more bread, please." "Yes sir, right away, sir" said the voice, quickly slinking off toward the kitchen.

The "r" in English offers a real challenge to most speakers who come to the language later in their phonetic development. For a native French speaker the "r" sound actually happens at the opposite end of the tongue, in relation to the English or American "r." The initial and final "r" in the word *river*, is made from the back of the tongue in French not the front. "River" sounds more like "*hreevairah*." I suppose one could refer to a river as "the water that flows under a *bwahidge*," but, that still doesn't solve the problem of how to curl the tongue to sound like the English "r." Here's how you do it. Put an "er" sound in front of the initial "r" and "*voilà*" the word comes out sounding like the real thing: "*eriver*."

The Last Laughs on Me

One of the reasons I know something about the complexities of the French language is I married a French woman. My wife came to me to significantly neutralize her Parisian accent and ended-up marrying me instead. Now, being born in California, and having very little language facility, sooner than later the proverbial *oiseau* had to come home to roost.

For me the agony of the traveling tongue started when I was trying to identify my wife's father's place on 19 rue de Chagall in St. Denis. I got the Chagall alright because he is one of my favorite artists. It was the simple word "rue" that just about undid our marital bliss. When I'd say "eroo" it sounded like I was asking for a tree root without the "t."

As hard as I would try I couldn't get the tongue to do what it was supposed to, in order for me to be understood. One evening, out of genuine kindness, my wife sat me down to give me a lesson on how to say "street" in French.

"I've been thinking about this," she said, "and if you follow a few easy steps the word *rue* will sound perfect." With lips puckered like the sweetest little kiss, the word blew out of her mouth like a soft Caribbean breeze at sunset. "You try it" she implored.

"Errroooo." Immediately I realized I had transposed her evening breeze into Hurricane Alex. "No, please, try again." Still no success. Our lesson ended dismally. The next morning, before I went to work, my wife said with a smile, "I've got it, just follow these four simple instructions."

"Here, you just do as I show you." "One, push your tongue hard against your lower teeth." "Dike dis?" I asked. "Perfect." "Now, suck in your cheeks, just a little." It was impossible to say anything at that point, so I just did as she told me. "OK, pucker your lips like a string bag being pulled closed." At least I *looked* like I could say the word right. "Finally, blow a soft little tone through your lips and hear what happens."

After some real suspense, and trying to imagine what the word would sound like before I said it, I let my aural creation free. A more perfect "rue" had never been spoken. Delighted, my lovely wife exclaimed, "exactement."

To this day, I still go through this little personal ritual so carefully passed on to me by my wife, but it works. Try it, you'll see.

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