

2019

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Recommended Citation

Escudier, Meredith (2019) "The French are Coming! (well, sort of...)," *Résonance*: Vol. 1 , Article 21.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/resonance/vol1/iss1/21>

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The French are coming! (well, sort of...)

by Meredith Escudier

It made no sense at all, Béatrice thought, her heart pounding out of control as soon as she heard the news. *Why me?* A mere mid-level employee from Information Systems in Paris, Béatrice had somehow been singled out by higher-ups to attend her first international meeting in Boston: Boston, USA, to be exact, a faint, distant place on the other side of the Atlantic, so far from hearth and home and the comforting murmur of the French language that accompanied her every move. In tow, her sidekick, Bruno, even less qualified in the mysteries of the English language, would tag along to swell the ranks of the French delegates, bringing a hoped-for gravitas to the proposed powwow, although what was really called for in such circumstances was a healthy dose of levity.

Whose decision was it anyway? Human resources? The head of IT who had something better to do than to go to Boston and hobnob with his American counterparts? Or maybe (horrors), the powers-that-be had taken that English teacher seriously—the one who had trumpeted the grand purpose of developing an in-house language program for French professionals, who had sung the praises of improving the French company’s sphere of influence, who had promoted English as the inescapable lingua franc throughout Europe, the Western Hemisphere and (lest we be too modest) the world-at-large! *N’importe quoi*. Especially since that English teacher in question was me.

“English can be used to persuade others,” I had ventured, enjoying the sound of such a cogent argument as I puffed out my professional feathers. “With greater English proficiency, your personnel will be able to present projects, solve problems, iron out misunderstandings and...” (the kicker) “allow the company to speak with multiple voices.”

Multiple voices. What was I thinking? Multiple voices now included Béatrice and Bruno, for God’s sake, and the job of prepping them for their foreign journey, their grand tour, their integration into the giant American powerhouse fell to me—little ol’ me—their basically humble, but big-talking, blabbermouth of an English teacher.

Right.

“Come in tomorrow morning for a couple of hours, and we’ll start the training,” I said, doing my best to take the news in stride...as if a few hours over a few days would turn them into silver-tongued orators; as if a re-ordering of a tangle of auxiliary verbs could do the trick in short order; as if the introverted, easily flushed, unassuming Béatrice could undergo a massive personality change through the magic of English, transforming her into a self-deprecating, wisecracking, bantering, life-of-the-party magnet in whose light everyone longed to bask. Bruno maybe...there might be some hope for Bruno given his extraverted, natural charm, except for the unfortunate fact that he had heretofore shown little interest in acquiring actual elements of

language (such as words) with one notable exception: a fair rendition of *Roxanne* (between a growl and a whine), the song made famous by The Police. But would Roxanne help him in Boston? All bets were off. Still, they were game, and so was I.

“See you tomorrow, 9 o’clock sharp,” I said, “and by the way, drive carefully, watch your step, hold onto banisters whenever appropriate.” Something in their faces told me they were already entertaining the notion of a goof-up—a sprained ankle or a sudden onset of intestinal flu—anything to save them from the inevitable.

My own love of language had been the driving force that brought me to France in the first place. Mrs. Bartram, my eighth grade French teacher, lit a fire years ago in my yearning heart just by doing her job. *Bonjour classe*, she said upon entering room 122, and I would stifle a swoon. More than anything, it was the music of the language that carried me—the soft consonants, the nasal vowels, the inflections that always seemed to rise, bringing lift and flight and the promise of...who knows?...open-ended, philosophical reflections-to-come...obscure, convoluted, important!

Add to that the growing fascination that somewhere in the big wide world, perhaps in a fairyland of wonder and pulsating colors, there lived a whole population of French-speaking people: people who got up in the morning and drank coffee in French; people who could pronounce the word *croissant* without hesitation or embarrassment; people who lived, loved, learned and laughed all in French. Crazy? It was a heady notion for me and it nourished my imagination enough to land me on French shores a few years later, there to define, as it happened, the rest of my life.

“Do you love them?”

“Who?”

“Your students, your pupils, your...”

“My learners? Well, yes, I do.”

A would-be teacher asked me that question once; it was a blanket question to which I gave a blanket response. Many of my individual learners were lovable, yes: Camille and her irrepressible sense of fun, even after being laid low for months by a strange virus. Sébastien, a near-illiterate who learned to say “can you spell it, please?” as a way to slow down a speedy speaker. François who responded to the “how-are-you” question with “nice.”

- How are you, François?

- Nice.

And he was nice, actually adorable to be exact with his quiet way, slow smile, and pleasure at being nicknamed François I to distinguish him from the other François in his six-person group (François II, a perennial latecomer).

As their teacher and committed facilitator who gathered conspiratorially with them on company premises, I had become privy to their private lives. They were thirty to fifty-somethings, some of whom had worthless boyfriends; others who were discovering young parenthood; and still others like Nathalie who kept a teddy bear on her dashboard; or Nadine whose suitor indulged her taste for Prada handbags; or Sévérine whose sister had, unexpectedly and heartbreakingly, taken her own life. Together, they formed a faithful illustration of the quirks and suffering and general muddling along of the human story. But did I *love* them? In a way, yes, though I didn’t particularly love Bernard who was just marking time, benefiting from the prestige of private English lessons while showing no interest to review from one week to the next. I didn’t

love Daniel whose roving *regard* sized me up in my (gorgeous) pink angora dress even before nodding a greeting. And I didn't love Margot who haughtily tried to probe the veracity of my credentials in the presence of other class members. I didn't love *them*.

Still, I felt that love was part of the equation—love and respect for the act of learning, the vulnerability involved, the willingness to overcome potential humiliation lurking around every corner. Attempting to learn a foreign language as an adult, the first steps of which often require mopping up a messy mass of disparate vaguely retained language elements from a distant past, has always struck me as an act of courage.

Béatrice and Bruno arrived at the requested time, open-faced and hopeful, ruled notebooks in hand. One of them had a yellow highlighter, I noted; the other a gummy eraser. They cleared their throats and sat down.

“Get up,” I blurted, hailing them with a false, sing-song gaiety so as to practice the unavoidable ritual of greeting each other as if for the first time, in this case, over and over again. “Good morning!” I screeched. “Nice to meet you! Did you have a good trip? Would you like a cup of coffee?”

Just do the mirror thing, I advised. Respond in kind. *Nice to meet you, too!* Send it back. Say yes, nod pleasantly, smile and accept the terrible cup of coffee. Don't worry that it's not a steaming espresso or that coffee time for you has come and gone or that the copper-colored liquid is swirling around in a melting plastic cup. Just say yes. Say “yes, please.” So they did.

But there's no way to create language fluency in short order. The organ principally called upon to negotiate the overload of input—the human brain—saturates. *C'est normal*. Intensive workshops offering miraculous results in rapid language acquisition give credence to a misplaced notion of learning, a mechanistic approach to absorbing. Nevertheless, fully aware of the limitations, I once heard myself entreating Bruno to please assimilate the Anglo-Saxon distinction between *there is* and *there are*. “Put this into your head,” I said in a desperate, oh so misguided, foolish bit of wishful thinking.

Language is identity, and I knew that much for having embraced the French language long ago. I had allowed the passion for French to shepherd me to Le Havre, then to Paris, Pau, and Bordeaux at the tender age of twenty when it started to dawn on me that my new medium of communication, my new bridge to the outside world, my only overlap with my chosen (as yet foreign) community would be language and my ability to make it represent my person. But what about my person in this adopted mediation of self? As a pretty good imitator, was I a kind of fraud? An imposter? A comedienne with a touch of pathos? Could I build on my core identity or would starting over from scratch be the only option?

One has to be motivated. The world cannot be expected to uncover the interesting insider hovering within. No French person cared to know about Annette from the Mickey Mouse Club. Nobody would have been impressed by my ability to lip sync *Bye Bye Birdie* from beginning to end, or even by where I was when JFK was shot dead, a question I have never been asked in thirty-odd years of life in France.

Thus, not for me and not for Bruno or Béatrice can a language be stuffed into the head. In fact, it goes into the body, penetrates the cells, fiddles with the DNA, infiltrates the emotions and skews the vision, enters the dreams, co-exists and plays chaotically with a wealth of trivia—images from childhood alongside an article read only last week on—who knows what?—gene splicing. Like a super-charged playground—a basketball court super-imposed on top of a baseball diamond while a dangerous dodge ball game is in full swing and a disembodied voice cries out

“rotate!” before the next volleyball serve—language elements vie for attention, but need to integrate into a retrievable place, there to seek a semblance of harmony within a whole. The language learner plays the schoolyard monitor, that person with a whistle on yard duty trying to make sense and make peace before the bell announces the end of recess.

Honestly, given the enormity of such an undertaking coupled with the built-in anxiety of my two learners, who was I to try to prep them for an uncertain future, more specifically, for a meeting next week in Boston? Well, I was their teacher, that’s who – their guide, their cheerleader, their coach, their liaison into the world beyond. Béatrice and Bruno were going to...to America, and attention must be paid!

Strategies, we need strategies, I suggested. You’ve got to slow people down, break the rhythm, and find a way to tap into the overwhelming flow. Native speakers have no idea how fast they’re going, how they run syllables together into a fast-moving torrent that only an experienced kayaker in rough waters knows how to navigate. Telleryergonnacaller is actually tell-her-you-are-going-to-call-her, right? Knotevrybuddygettzit right off the bat. So my hopeful charges, unaware of the exact hurdles ahead, of the white water rapids soon to roar and send jets of spray into their innocent faces, practiced a polite little drill:

- Sorry, could you repeat, please?
- Excuse me, I didn’t quite understand.
- Would you mind explaining again?

But then, I had a brainstorm, a brainstorm of a doable nature, one where gene-splicing would not be required. “Here’s a phrase they’ll love, I guarantee it. You apologize for your English and then...”

“and then what?”

“then you say...*bear with me.*”

“How do you spell it? B-A-R-E?”

“*Mais non*, B-E-A-R. Bear, bear.

“Like in Yellowstone Park?”

“Well, yes, kind of, I mean, no. It’s the same word, but...” I tried to explain the cultural context. You see, bear as a *verb* actually means something like tolerate or endure bravely, and you’re asking your audience to make allowances for your...um... well, not exactly your poor performance per se, but, you know, your...your limited language.

“But why do you say ‘with me’?”

“Well, it’s just the idea that everyone is sort of in this thing together, and it’s like a solidarity thing,” I trailed off. Actually, it was hard to get across. They looked at each other nervously, their faces, blank and confused, unable to make the leap.

“Say it!”

“BEER WITH ME,” they chimed in unison.

I looked at them dumbly, then sat down, deeming this a far safer position from which to experience an outbreak of incipient hysteria. “Let’s take a break, shall we?” And they agreed. Besides, we were all feeling a bit thirsty by then.

I’d actually been teaching my whole life, starting with playing school in childhood in our family room. Day after day, I received my two six-year-old pupils, a younger sister and a devoted neighbor girl recruited for the circumstance, both of whom sat in docile expectation at the salvaged, scratched-up school desk supplied by my parents. Already realizing the importance of a well-rounded curriculum, I emphasized the three R’s, varying pedagogical activities between basic computation and reading comprehension. And the stack of leftover “dittoes” recovered

from a teacher friend of my parents heightened my status while simultaneously intoxicating our threesome with the residual smell from the mimeograph machine's purple ink. Ah, together, how we soared!

Pacing, however, remained a bugaboo for my 8-year-old teaching self. When one of my pupils, hence 50% of the class, struggled to keep up during the spelling test, I should have known something was off. How could I have failed to notice her scrambling efforts as she fell further and further behind—the frantic erasing, the flushed face, the gradual ungluing of her personality as she labored under the strain? Well, I regret my insensitivity as I look back on those first forays into the profession, and sincerely hope that I learned something. To make up for things, I allowed extra time for recess. It was the least I could do. Coffee was out of the question at the time (and so, obviously, was beer).

As for Béatrice and Bruno, things would more or less work out for them. They did go to Boston as planned. They consumed their coffee with shaking hands. They apologized for their English with a smooth formulaic introduction, and as a bonus, they fulfilled their secret promise to me to mumble “bear with me” at the appropriate moment. And when they did, their Bostonian counterparts (my long-lost, exotic, but still-familiar, fellow Americans; courteous compatriots; ambassadors of good will; easy-going, warm and friendly coffee drinkers...) reassured Béatrice and Bruno immediately, noting how superior their English abilities were compared to their own paltry French. But of course! Brilliant! Splendid! *Fantastique!* And how right they were, too.

All's well that ends well, I suppose, except that there is no exact end to learning and teaching. There is no real finality, no perfect moment to announce that something has been utterly achieved and arrived at, reliably transmitted or indelibly inscribed. Learning and teaching are inextricably interlocked. They define each other, reflect each other, resemble each other, and even in a flawed, so-far-from-perfect world, go on and on in one form or another—an insight, a re-discovery, a breakthrough, a sorting through, a connection, a recollection re-visited after a period of time.... As for Béatrice and Bruno, our two tentative warriors from France, their story will probably go on for a bit longer. At least it does in my memory. In fact, a quick calculation reminds me that they went to Boston nearly twenty years ago.