Shall We Prestidigitate?

HANS STEILBERGER

PROBABLY the most difficult task for an immigrant is the mastery of the language of his new country, especially for a European coming to the United States. Before the war thousands were able to make the voyage from restrictions and oppression to a new life in America. Unfortunately, many of them did not have the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the language of the land of their choice. As a result they faced a hard struggle when it came to settling down to the task of learning to speak in a new and entirely different tongue from the one to which they had been accustomed. I speak from experience when I say that life can become almost unbearable during this struggle.

Age is a predominant factor in one's ability to pick up a new language and new customs. It is much more difficult for older persons, who have become too deeply settled in their own habits, to make the change to new ways of speaking and thinking than it is for the youngsters, whose minds are still open and receptive to new knowledge and habits.

In December, 1937, the world looked bright to my almost 13-year-old eyes as I stepped off the gang plank of the "S. S. Hamburg" in New York. My journey to Indianapolis (a city swarming with Indians, I had been led to believe) and a new home was practically over. My entire English vocabulary consisted of two words: "yes" and "no." From having seen several American movies in Germany, I also knew the meaning of the phrase "no smoking," but I was not very sure of its pronunciation.

My first ride in a Pullman was a memorable experience. I shared a lower berth with another boy who had come over with me and whose knowledge of the English language was as restricted as mine. Our restless sleep was definitely interrupted with the coming of daylight, and we took great delight in watching the scenery pass our window. After passing scores of billboards we soon came to the conclusion that an epidemic was raging throughout the country. The reason for this supposition was the fact that we had noticed several advertisements for "Four Roses" whiskey flash past us. They all bore the legend: FOUR ROSES — THE GIFT HE'LL ENJOY! A bottle was pictured on the left side of the ad, while a holly wreath reposed in the upper right hand corner. Only one word in this display was familiar to us. It was the German word for poison — Gift. Interpreting the wreath as a sign of mourning, we gathered that a bottled poison had claimed its victims in many communities and that the posters had been displayed in order to save others from a similar fate. Weeks passed before the real meaning of the slogan became apparent to us.

There is nothing more discouraging to a monolinguist than to hear a strange language spoken in a conversational tone and know that he is supposed to learn, eventually, to speak it in the same manner. At that time he is ready to dispair and give himself to complete resignation. Imagine, then, my misgivings at hearing, after having been in this country less than two
weeks, that I would be starting to school. Fear of the prospect of facing children my own age, all well versed in the English language, for the first time nearly paralyzed me, and my food did not taste good for some time.

During the aforementioned two weeks I had been busily brushing up on the comic sections of the newspapers since I was at least somewhat able to interpret the actions in pictures. I was particularly fascinated by the comic strip “Just Kids,” which dealt with the adventures of one Mush Stebbins and his pals. One phrase, “Oh, boy, am I thirsty!” (uttered by “Mush” while trying to persuade his mother to advance him the cost of a soda) stuck to my mind. Not knowing what it meant, I was, nevertheless, very often repeating it and could not for some time, figure out why it was that every time I spoke these words in company, the hostess would get up and shortly return with a glass of water or a soft drink for me.

My fear of school was quickly dispelled on the first day. Since I was somewhat of a novelty for them, all children accepted me readily. Besieged with questions, I could only shake my head weakly while attempting to catch some of the conversation by leafing through my “kingsized” dictionary, which I constantly carried with me. But, somehow, I could never find the words when looking for them, for my untrained ears grasped only the phonetic sounds of the words while the dictionary, unfortunately, was printed in good old-fashioned English. The whole matter was very confusing.

Another fault of my dictionary was the fact that it was a very comprehensive one, giving several meanings for every word, and I invariably picked the wrong or obsolete one when I wanted to say something. Well do I recall the strange looks I received upon offering to prestidigitate, when all I meant to do was to shake hands.

The beginner in the English language finds it very hard to perfect the enunciation of the “th” sound. There is no sound in the German language which even approximates the “th.” Until the novice discovers the secret of the correct tongue position, he will, as a rule, pronounce the definite article as either “zee” or “dee.”

The letter “r” causes the German, whose pronunciation of the eighteenth letter is extremely guttural, even more trouble. He has to go through a series of bronchial contortions before he learns to approximate the manner in which the American speaks that consonant. I remember the difficulty which accompanied my trying to borrow a ruler in school. When no one would understand my “wuler” I shifted the positions of my tonsils slightly and then blared forth a raucous “rrrrruler” much to my embarrassment and the amusement of the others.

Very confusing is the multiple pronunciation of certain letter combinations in the English language. The “gh” link is an outstanding example to illustrate this point. Only through bitter experience does the unwary beginner learn that it can be spoken as “f” (laugh), “g” (ghoul) or be silent (through).

Enough to drive even the advanced student to drink is the use of slang in the English language. I’ll never forget my horror at the announcement that I was going to have “hot dogs” for supper. I had read somewhere once that the Chinese sometimes preserve worms and snails in honey, but I found it hard to believe that civilized Americans would turn to “man’s best friend” for their delicacies. It was with visible relief that I saw only a couple of innocent sausages on my plate that evening.

The fact that the English language con-
tains so many synonyms does not make its study any easier. The German has but one word, for example, for both hide and skin. But just compliment a lady on her lovely hide — then be prepared to make a dash for the nearest exit!

Ten years in this country have gradually done away with my heavy accent. True, a trained ear will still detect a “brogue” in my speech, but most of the time I am taken for American-born, possibly from the East. My dictionary now reposes in a dark nook in my bookcase. No longer do I have to consult it to find the English equivalent for the German word meaning “end.” Had I done so, however, it would not have surprised me to see myself concluding this article by saying: This is the LIMIT!

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Corot And Debussy

DIANA HARVEY

I have often sensed a likeness between the art of Corot and the music of Debussy. Both men picture a dreamy, make-believe world, peopled by slender, fragile creatures, who languorously drift their way through life. They have no cause to be different, for their world itself is languorous.

The trees and the grass — always shadowy and obscure with a gray veil of mist — have never bent or broken in a strong wind. They slowly sway to and fro, swung by a gentle breeze. The trees arch above the walks — tall and gray green, and along the walks beneath the trees, stroll the lovely pastel creatures of Corot.

Always in the air floats the music of Debussy — the ethereal music of dreams. It pretends to be the song of birds in this dream world and sings from every tree. If loveliness could be heard, it would sound this way.

Those who walk beneath the trees and those who lie upon the grass, gazing up at the vague, gray sky, do love to listen to this music, for it is part of their life. Without it their world would be deathly still, and as they live on beauty of sight, so also do they live on beauty of sound.

If the music were stilled, they would murmur softly among themselves; then gradually becoming still, they would finally fade away and die.