

The strange 'phonetics' of language

By Brian Lockhart

I have never been able to master another language.

In fact, I'm pretty much uni-lingual although I did learn enough Italian words at one point that I could sort of follow the conversation at a party one night when everyone was speaking Italian.

That's when the daughter of the woman I was 'speaking' to approached, and said, 'You know, he's not Italian!'

I got a quick apology from the woman and a quick switch to English, but it was all good because I thought it was pretty funny.

After five years of taking French in school, it seems the only thing we could say was 'un stylo' and 'un crayon,' as well as some articles, I think they are called, and maybe some verbs. But no one could actually string a sentence together or carry on any kind of conversation.

If I was in France or Quebec, and urgently needed a pencil or a pen, I was all set.

I think to really learn and grasp a different language you must be immersed in it and surrounded by it all the time.

I was speaking to a couple of guys who were Spanish speaking, but had been sent here to do some work for their company which was based in Mexico. They had learned enough English before coming here that they could speak very well and were easily understood.

They told me their language trainer suggested that to really learn the language, they had to start 'thinking' in English. I guess that makes sense, but it would be pretty hard to do.

If you are born in an English-speaking country, learning the language, of course, is just a natural thing.

However, when you really look at the language there are a lot of peculiarities that I'm sure makes it difficult for many people to pick up on.

I used to work with a Polish woman who had immigrated to Canada in her early 20s. When she first heard of a 'spelling bee', she couldn't believe it. She told me she wondered what kind of contest could there be for spelling? To her, it was common sense how to spell a word.

It was only after she started learning English that she realized why we have spelling bees.

She said in Polish, everything is spelled phonetically, and any word is easily spelled by anyone.

I also worked with a Chinese guy for a short time. Although he was a qualified and certified electrical engineer with a degree from the University of Nebraska, no one would hire him because his English just wasn't up to snuff. I guess in the engineering world, a mis-translation could really cause problems.

He used to come into work and ask me the meaning of certain words. He would hear a new word on television, and if he didn't understand it, he would ask me to explain it to him.

There was more than a few times where a word with a double meaning came up, or a rather obscure word, that is rather difficult to

explain the real meaning.

It was things like the difference between 'bye' and 'buy' or 'boy' and 'buoy' that left him shaking his head. It made perfect sense to me, but little sense to someone trying to learn the language.

I also had a hard time explaining spelling, like why does 'though' have a 'g' in it, and why 'knight' is spelled with a 'k'.

It definitely is a strange language.

We're all familiar with Elizabethan English - the kind of prose we all learned from Shakespeare. At the same time, I recall my English teacher explaining what half the words actually meant.

If you go back a few hundred years earlier, you would be in the Old English period, and would not understand a single word spoken by 'English-speaking' people of the era.

There are so many quirks to the language I'm surprised anyone can learn it.

For example, why isn't the word 'phonetically' spelled with an 'F'?

Why does the word 'queue' have so many letters? It's just a 'Q' followed by four silent letters.

We drive on parkways, but park in driveways.

If you transport something by truck, it's called a SHIPment, but when you transport something by SHIP, it's called cargo!

You recite in a play, but also play in a recital. If you have 'finger tips,' why don't you also have 'toe tips'?

The list goes on.

At least if I'm ever sitting in a café in Paris and need to sign the bill, I can say 'Serveur! Un stylo s'il vous plaît!'