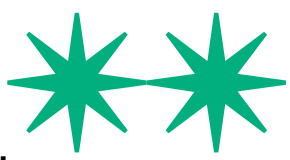




TRYING
BRIEFLY
REMEMBER
DISINTEGRATING
EATEN
DREAMS
IMPOSSIBLE



DEAR FRIEND,

I imagine you can relate: we recently moved from a large European city where almost everyone spoke English to a small European city where everyone speaks the language we grew up with. Partly because of Covid, partly because it was time, partly because of money.

The first thing to return was a pervasive sense of anticipatory guilt. Before moving, our first language had been only spoken at home with my partner, on the phone with my parents, or down in the pub with Esa. This had been a language of nurturing, affirmation and collective ranting: a language of care. Now, the same language was everywhere, but it was a language of blame and enforcement, which quickly colonised our insides. The guilt wasn't for anything we had done, it was for everything else: being was *being towards* being judged. But these rules had been created together, and this was the language we'd grown up with—how could we complain?

* * *

I began thinking that this collective guilt was like an invisible, ever-growing lattice of moss that covered everything, everywhere, and maybe I had just not been perceiving it in the large European city in the same way I was perceiving it here. Maybe that moss was an excretion of language, and I simply wasn't immersed enough in English to be affected.

In any case, the point is this: in English, I had felt freer. It hadn't bothered me that whenever the native speakers said 'we', I was never sure if I was included or excluded. The International Art School English had bothered me at first, but after a while it turned into a spectacular game of alchemy and ellipsis, where meaning was occasionally brushed against—but never organised into—enforced units. Communication was difficult but with wider horizons than I had been accustomed to. In hindsight I wish I didn't take it all so seriously back then.

I think partly the reason I'd felt so free was because lots of the connotative baggage—the dead weight of an over-extended sense of self-reflection—was suddenly gone, or at least completely non-applicable. I could write, I could speak, I could text, all without worrying about who or what my choice of register reminded the recipient of. The tradition of all dead generations no longer weighed like a nightmare on the brain of the living.

What makes English wonderful for second-language speakers is that it takes from everywhere, you can add from anywhere, and no one speaks it perfectly. And if they do, they're the minority, and so soft-spoken and polite that it doesn't really matter (or: they would never dream of explicitly enforcing their orthographic views on the rest of us). English homogenises, but it's also a place where you can escape, both from yourself and your first language:

"I value too much our beautiful Polish literature to introduce into it my worthless twaddle. But for Englishmen my capacities are just sufficient: they enable me to earn my living."
(Joseph Conrad)

What is key here is the notion of sufficiency. English seems to be an evidently sufficient language. English is often like going to Lidl or Aldi: you know you'll get everything you 'need', even though it might not be exactly what you 'desire'. There might be special weeks now and then, but otherwise—for anything unusual—you have to venture out a bit further. But it's so cheap! Feel free to stack your basket all the way to the brim!

But when can you say someone's use of language is sufficient, and to what purpose? The relative ubiquity of English and the multitude of its uses and users has (at least from my privileged position) removed the possibility for external authorities to have any meaningful say on this. Instead, discussions on what is sufficient or what is elegant are best left to the participants of the individual communicative act itself, which can then become a joyful discussion on language itself:

"It's as though one friend says to another, 'How good it is to say 'How are you?'" The other replying, "When I answer 'I am well and how are you,' what I really mean is that I'm delighted to have a chance to say these familiar things—they bridge the lonely distances." (Don DeLillo, *The Names*)

However, it's not just about the familiar things. Like most languages, English is at its best around the edges, when things are just about to snap off the grid. When we run out of words, when we start using words we don't quite know how to pronounce (or all the meanings of)—when the sufficiency of English words is no longer sufficient in terms of what we want to say.

This is what I miss the most, and what I've found the most difficult to replicate.

* * *

They gathered around the table, tore pizza to pieces, added sriracha mayo, wiped mouths with backs of hands, shared toilet roll, leaned elbows on tables, chewed with mouths open, pointed oily digits at each other. They spoke in accented English about how crazy it all was nowadays. When they were trying to articulate something delicate that they deeply cared about, they found that English would not do. Even though English was a necessary condition of their friendship it wasn't a sufficient one. So they dropped in a word of Romanian, Swedish, Finnish, Portuguese, Greek, Korean. The word was translated and repeated, it was whirled around mouths, examined and compared. It felt like a gift, like an opaque piece of glass that fit the palm of your hand perfectly. It felt like a True Name, a name that connected language and the world and expanded them both in a way English was incapable of doing. Then they continued in English.

KIND REGARDS!
TUOMAS
KORTTEINEN