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The Kinks' English

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The Kinks' English

Being an account on the life of a bilingual individual on a monolingual world

Leonardo Villarroel¹

Episode I - Fuck that shit.

So my good friend Loreto is now engaged to be married. Strike that. My not-really-that-good-of-a-friend/kind-of-an-acquaintance-really (but-hey-she-did-help-me-get-my-current-job) Loreto is now engaged to be married. Or so her Facebook status claims. Maybe she is one of those people who get lost in the translation of "engaged" for the not-as-definite Spanish "comprometido". Come on, we've all had one of those; the one who then writes those puzzled replies as to why people are congratulating him or her. But Loreto put an awful lot of pictures of her and her would-be husband so she must be serious, right?

Now, the thing is I need her to give me the number of a mutual coworker who just so happens to be in possession of the key to the apartment the company has set up for us in the North, but I don't really want to call her. See? We are not really that friends at all. I decide to text her, which is a most agreeable alternative to spending some eight hours in the cold of the desert night. It's either text or taking an advance course on coyote howling. So I choose text.

And here my problems begin.

You see, Loreto is one of those unbelievable sweet girls. Sweet enough to get a job for a jackass whom she has barely seen in her life, yet remembers from her college years as being whacky in a funny way. So congratulations on her engagement are absolutely due in this me-asking-for-yet-another-favor text. But since she doesn't read a word of English, I am faced with the possibility of

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sounding absolutely corny...do I say "Felicitaciones por *el* compromiso"? "Por *tu* compromiso"? "*En tu* compromiso"? Why can't I shorten "felicitaciones" without sounding like a completely moronic sixteen-year-old girl? Oh, if life were that easy, I would just text something of the sort of "blah,blah key...oh, and congrats on the engagement".

Congrats on the engagement. Look at the beauty of those four words. A shortened salutation, a definite article that says precisely what I want to say: We are not that close, but gee, I hope everything works out alright for you.

Not that it was much of a deal, really, but the moment managed to go back ricocheting in time to become yet another echo of every single time I have found myself knowing exactly what to say, with the right words, the precise feel and even the adequate sonority of the phrasing; one of those moments in which yes, actual proper communication is possible... and whoever it is I am talking to just doesn't speak the language. I take a deep breath, it's not their fault, the number of factors I have to reign in to grasp just why this moment of incommunication is actually happening is way too much. And then I begin to stutter my way through the dictionary of what is supposed to be my native tongue. If by any chance the person I am talking to barely knows me, he or she won't be able to tell me, the so-called learned bilingual individual, from a complete moron. So it goes.

Of course this condition has a noticeable flip side and it is that one of these days you can find yourself in an English speaking country in the middle of an important presentation and it is *that* the precise moment your mother tongue chooses to come back with a vengeance. I am trying to send a simple text message and the thought of all those times in which being fluent in two languages seems to play against you is just going on in my mind, like a ricochet. Ricochet, that's another of those lovely words. I learnt it with the manual of the original Super Mario Bros. game, so every time I use it I see little koopas being sent flying off by a turtle shell. Yeah, I am old enough to remember the manual of the original NES Mario. But I digress, and that ricochet is still going...

The ricochet is going back and forth, bringing memories of presentations and introductions, of the many times I have found myself pausing the extra second to think just how it is you say overlapped in Spanish or the one time my best friend Kate kept giving me a funny look in class, only to tell me afterwards that she was thinking in Spanish so she figured I would be the one to help her say what she wanted to say in her own native language. Back and forth. Kate always used to praise my use of English idioms and that has me wondering just what is my favorite phrase, or the one I miss the most, the one phrase that, were I living on an English-speaking country I would be using the most. Now I've had my share of opportunities and of patient enough audiences so that I've been able to blurt out "The rumors of my death were greatly exaggerated" from time to time. In fact, Mr. Twain's phrase works wonderfully in Spanish translation as well, regardless of how well acquainted people might be of the wonderful adventures of Mr. Sawyer.

Still, I keep thinking... and certainly wish I had a faster translation for "overlapped", or something that sounded as remotely cool as "impervious", but those will not do. I think once more of my friend Kate and I remember my going-away party/ happy hour at the Sign of the Whale, the bar that tricked us English grad students into winning week after week a happy hour for all of us. We were a large group so our chances of actually winning the weekly 2-dollar-bar were indeed high, but once we started going there we never, ever missed a week. As with all things, at first it was special and the sort of event you just can't miss, then it became something of a bore and ultimately we became regulars. We had been regulars for a while by the time my going away party came.

That night though, we weren't able to dance. Apparently some fraternity or really idiotic company had secured the room that is normally used to be the dance floor for themselves and decided to throw a dinner party. I figured it might have been some sort of psychological training for young lawyers, for what other possible purpose could there be to have such a big table circumventing a room in which people are constantly coming in with their faces filled with laughter, only to instantly turn it into a scolding look towards the idiots that were preventing the fun from taking place.

As you can probably guess, cheap drinks and no dancing equal... well, just the cheap drinks and people getting drunk way before their due time. Kate was sort of the host, for she had been the one who actually won the happy hour, and was going back and forth like an incredibly graceful and incredibly anachronistic host from those parties in the fifties, you know, the sort of parties that Orson Welles would attend, always finding her way between the myriad of drunk not-dancing people between the two large groups of English grad students. From time to time, in a fashion that would send all her gracefulness out of the window and yet still managed to look cool, she would do one or two dance moves and someone would follow. Then, the crowd of non-dancing drunks would somehow suffocate all these efforts of actually igniting the dance spirit. So it goes.

The solution came not like lightning but rather like thunder, in the form of a booming voice that to this day I think it was my good friend Regina, though I know it just could not possibly be her. You see, Regina, this massive afro-wearing party fiend, was at that time in the corner, politely holding two different cocktails and had assured me that it was her intention to keep both her hands fully loaded for the duration of the night. Anyway, the voice I heard, the thunder that started the party and let the good times roll one last time, cried:

"Oh, fuck that shit!"

And then someone laughed, and someone joined the freshly appointed dance floor, and then someone else laughed, and the domino effect took place at least for a couple of songs.

Leonardo Villarroel

I went home that night, all my farewells bid, and it was not until I had spent almost a month back in my home country that I realized that it was gonna be a while till I could use that precious expression.

As I was preparing to leave Santiago and head to the North of Chile I was subject to one of the most tortuous training process of my life. For an entire week I had to spend ten hours daily listening to a number of self-important people telling how they had made their enterprise work and how they self-promoted themselves infallibly into self-importance. I knew then precisely which would be the first three words with which my eventual resignation will start.

I gave it a second thought, and then a third one. Then I muttered an unintelligible "fckthatshht" and typed:

"Y Felicitaciones por tu compromiso!".

Yeah, fuck that shit, too.