

Your English Is So Good

There's a language instruction course I turn to quite often. Pimsleur, it's called, and I first used it in 2006, when preparing for a trip to Japan. "I am American," I was taught to announce, somewhat sheepishly, at the start of lesson one. Half an hour later, I'd advanced to 日本語がお上手ですね, which translates to "Your Japanese is so good!"

It seemed a bit early in the game to be receiving compliments, but still I learned to recognize the phrase and to respond to it with ありがとうございます、ですが私はまだそんなに上手ではありません ("Thank you very much, but I am not really skilled yet"). This came in handy as, once I got to Tokyo, every time I opened my mouth I was clobbered with praise, even if I was just saying something simple like "Huh?"

The same was true with a number of other phrases I'd considered unnecessary but heard again and again once I arrived in Japan. The fact is that, unless we're with friends or family, we're all like talking dolls, endlessly repeating the same trite and tiresome lines: "Hello, how are you?" "Hot enough out there?" "Don't work too hard!"

I'm often misunderstood at my supermarket in Sussex, not because of my accent but because I tend to deviate from the script.

Cashier: Hello, how are you this evening?

Me: Has your house ever been burgled?

Cashier: What?

Me: Your house—has anyone ever broken into it and stolen things?

With me, people aren't thinking *What did you say?* so much as *Why are you saying that?*

I know that Pimsleur offers an English course for native Spanish speakers, but I'm not sure if it's geared toward U.K. English or what you hear in the United States. The former would most certainly include "At the end of the day..." Turn on British TV or follow anyone named Ian for more than a few minutes, and you're guaranteed to hear it. In France the most often used word is "*connerie*," which means "bullshit," and in America it's hands-down "awesome," which has replaced "incredible," "good," and even "just OK." Pretty much everything that isn't terrible is awesome in America now.

Pimsleur has made me hyperaware of the phrases I hear most often over the course of an average day, so aware that I've started jotting them down in hopes of putting together my own English program, one for business travelers visiting the United States. Let's start at the airport newsstand, shall we? There, you'll lay a magazine upon the counter and be asked by the cashier, "Do you need some water to go with that?" This will be said as if the two things should not really be sold separately, as if in order to properly read a copy of *Us Weekly* you'll have to first rinse your eyes out with a four-dollar bottle of Evian.

The practice of pushing more stuff on you is called "upselling" and is one of those things that, once you notice it, you can't stop noticing. At the airport in Baton Rouge a few years back, I ordered a coffee.

"Do you need a pastry to go with that?" the young man behind the counter asked.

"I wasn't too shy to order the coffee," I said, "so what makes you think I'd hold back on a bear claw if I wanted one?"

The fellow shrugged. "We have Danish too."

This made me furious. "On second thought, I don't want anything," I told him. Then I went a few doors down to Dunkin' Donuts and said, "I would like nothing but coffee. Just coffee. Period."

The woman behind the counter crossed her arms. "No cup?"

"Well, of course I want a cup."

"No milk or nothing?"

This always happens when I try to make a point. "And milk," I told her. "Coffee in a cup with some milk in it but nothing else." Then, of course, my flight got delayed by two hours and I had to go crawling back for some Munchkins. "Do you need coffee or a soda to go with that?" the woman who'd replaced the one I spoke to earlier asked.

Increasingly at Southern airports, instead of a "good-bye" or "thank-you," cashiers are apt to say, "Have a blessed day." This can make you feel like you've been sprayed against your will with God cologne. "Get it off me!" I always want to scream. "Quick, before I start wearing ties with short-sleeved shirts!"

As a business traveler, you'll likely be met at your destination by someone who asks, "So, how was your flight?" This, as if there are interesting variations and you might answer, "The live orchestra was a nice touch," or "The first half was great, but then they let a baby take over the controls and it got all bumpy." In fact, there are only two kinds of flights: ones in which you die and ones in which you do not.

Next you'll meet the desk clerk at your hotel, a woman most likely, in her mid- to late thirties. She won't know if you've driven to this city or flown and will ask after taking your credit card, "So how was your trip in?"

There's really no answer but "Fine." I mean, there is, but I'm guessing she won't want to hear it. *Or would she?*

Her: So how was your trip in?

You: Well, I was originally going to fly, but then this tiger

offered to carry me very gently in her mouth. I said OK, but you know what? She wasn't gentle at all. One of her teeth pierced my small intestine, so now, on top of everything else, I have to shit in a bag every day for the rest of my life!

Her: Well, that is just awesome. We're all so glad you made it.

After the desk clerk hands you your key, the bellman will grab your suitcase and ask, "So where are you coming in from today?" Like everyone else at the hotel, he doesn't really listen to your answer. His words are just a hook to hang a tip on. You could say you're from a town ten miles down the road or from another dimension. Either way, you get the same response: "You're a long way from home, aren't you?"

I object to these questions, not because they're personal but because they're *not*. "Instead of asking how my trip in was, why not ask...I don't know...if I have a godson?" I said to a desk clerk not long ago.

She took off her glasses and rubbed the bridge of her nose.

"All right, do you have a godson?"

"I do," I said. "He's eight years old and is named Tommy. How about you? Do you have any godchildren?"

"No," the woman told me. "I have not had that pleasure."

She smiled like someone who'd learned to do so in a book, and I realized that if I wanted to make contact I needed to dig a little deeper. "He has cancer," I said.

The desk clerk put her hand over her heart. "Oh, poor thing!"

"That's OK," I sighed. "I'm sure that within a year or two someone else will ask me to be a godfather."

It wasn't true that Tommy had cancer. I just wanted to get a rise out of her, to feel some kind of pulse. I knew that the young woman had a life. She'd gone to school somewhere. She had friends. I didn't need a fifteen-minute conversation, just some human interaction. It can be had, and easily: a gesture, a joke, something that says, "I live in this world too." I think of it as a switch that turns someone from a profession to a person, and it works both ways. "I'm not just a vehicle for my wallet!" I sometimes want to scream.

Go to a restaurant anywhere in the United States, and three minutes after your food is delivered, your server will return to the table, asking, "How's that Southeastern Lard Pocket?" Once, in Kansas City, this was amended to "How's that Southeastern Lard Pocket tasting for you?" As if the lard pocket had the tongue instead of me.

"Mmmm," I said, my mouth full the way it always is when the server returns.

"Awesome," I was told. "I hope you're saving some room for dessert." This, with the chuckle that means "Wouldn't it be funny if what I just said was funny?"

The following morning you'll wander to the hotel breakfast room and tell the hostess that there is only one in your party. She'll pick up a menu and lead you to your table, asking, "And how is your day going so far?"

"You mean the last twelve minutes?" you'll ask. "OK, I guess."

And she'll say, "Awesome."

If you've come directly downstairs, this might be the first time since last night that you've heard this word. That doesn't make it refreshing. Rather, it's like being in Alaska and getting bitten by your first blackfly of the day. *I am going to be bleeding by sunset*, you'll think.

More often than not, your breakfast room will have a TV in it, tuned to a twenty-four-hour cable-news network. Sometimes you'll see two TVs or more. At a place I stayed at in Kentucky one year, there were eight. After I ordered, the waitress went around with her remote and activated each one, making me think of a lamplighter, if lamps were instruments of torture rather than things that make it easier for you to see how old and tired-looking you've gotten. "People like it," she said when I asked if it was really necessary at six o'clock in the morning.

You hear this a lot in America, especially when you're complaining about televisions, or loud music, or, more common still, television *and* loud music together in the same room. "People like it."

"Yes," I always want to say, "but they're the *wrong* people."

On leaving your hotel, you'll likely be offered a bottle of water, and urgently, by the fellow who just brought your car around. "You'll need this for your trip to the airport."

"I'm actually not *walking* there," I always say. "This car is taking me, and I should arrive in no time."

Everyone in America is extremely concerned with hydration. Go more than five minutes without drinking, and you'll surely

be discovered behind a potted plant, dried out like some escaped hermit crab. When I was young no one would think to bring a bottle of water into a classroom. I don't think they even sold bottled water. We survived shopping trips without it, and funerals. Now, though, you see people with those barrels that Saint Bernards carry around their necks in cartoons, lugging them into the mall and the movie theater, then hogging the fountains in order to refill them. *Is that really necessary?* I think as I stand behind them with an aspirin dissolving in my mouth, fuming.

Should you wander into a shop during your visit to the United States, you can expect a clerk to ask, "So what are we up to today?" "We," as if the two of you had made plans you forgot about.

"Oh," I usually say, already sorry I walked in, "I'm just looking around."

"Awesome."

If you purchase something, you'll be asked at the register what you're going to do with the rest of your afternoon.

"Umm, I don't know. Buy more shit?"

My friend Ronnie manages a shoe store, so is fluent in this kind of talk. When we're out together, she takes over, and effortlessly, while I look on, amazed. "Doing about as well as can be expected," she says when asked about her health by someone who could not possibly give a fuck. Because she lives in California, Ronnie is on the front lines.

"Did you catch that?" she whispered one afternoon in San Francisco. "That salesman just said, 'Welcome in.'"

"So?" I asked.

"That's the latest thing," she told me. "I'm hearing it everywhere now."

"Should we add it to the list?"

"Definitely."

"The list" is a growing collection of words and phrases we'd outlaw if given the power to do so. It includes "awesome," of course, and "It is what it is," which is ubiquitous now and means absolutely nothing, as far as we can see.

"Isn't that the state motto of South Dakota?" I said the second or third time I heard it.

Some of my additions to the list were things that Ronnie wasn't familiar with. "We're all going to the same place," for instance. This is what novice fliers in group five say when they get caught trying to board with group two. Sure, we're all headed to St. Louis. The difference is that some people (me) are going to find room in the overhead bins and others (you) are not.

These same passengers can be counted on to catch my eye and moan, "Hurry up and wait," when traffic backs up on the Jerseyway.

I cock my head and look at them with an expression that translates to *Why is stuff coming from that hole in your face?*

Another word I've added to "the list" is "conversation," as in "We need to have a national conversation about ____." This is employed by the left to mean "You need to listen to me use the word 'diversity' for an hour." The right employs

obnoxious terms as well—"libtard," "snowflake," etc.—but because they can be applied to me personally it seems babyish to ban them.

I've outlawed "meds," "bestie," "bucket list," "dysfunctional," "expat," "cab-sav," and the verb "do" when used in a restaurant, as in "I'll do the snails on cinnamon toast."

"Ugh," Ronnie agrees. "Do!—that's the worst."

"My new thing," I told her, "is to look at the menu and say, 'I'd like to purchase the veal chop.'"

A lot of our outlawed terms were invented by black people and then picked up by whites, who held on to them way past their expiration date. "My bad," for example, and "I've got your back" and "You go, girlfriend." They're the verbal equivalents of sitcom grandmothers high-fiving one another, and on hearing them, I wince and feel ashamed of my entire race.

The weak link of my American English for Business Travelers program is the "business" part. It used to be that I could eavesdrop on a conversation and learn that the two men at the next table were doctors, or that one was a massage therapist and the other sold life insurance for cats. Now, though, I have no idea what anyone does, especially if the people I'm listening in on are under forty. I hear the words "integration" and "platform" a lot, but not in any recognizable context.

Theirs are the offices, I imagine, where Kayson rides his scooter down the concrete hallway, passing a warren of workspaces that resemble cages. And no one's shirt is tucked in. That's one phrase that won't be in my English book: "Nice

suit." Twenty years from now they probably won't be making them anymore. Dressing up will mean wearing the sweatpants without paint on them to your father's funeral.

My American English for Business Travelers will teach you to recognize the most often repeated words and phrases but hopefully leave room for wonder. I'm constantly surprised and delighted by some of the things I hear while traveling across the United States. I'm thinking of a fellow bus passenger who turned to me as our driver barely missed a pedestrian, saying, "See, he don't love life." Of a Memphis panhandler who called as I passed, "Hey, man, why don't you buy me a Co-Cola?" Of the newsstand cashier who did not suggest I buy a bottle of water but, rather, looked at the price of my *Sunday Times* and said, "That's five dollars, baby. You OK widdat?" Or of the pilot who somberly said as he turned off the seat belt sign at the end of a flight, "All rise."

Now *that's* what I'm talking about.