Episode Book

EPISODE #6673

Where Bizarre Language Textbook Sentences Came From

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SYNOPSIS

Bizarre old language textbook lines like "La plume de ma tante" and "my postillion has been struck by lightning" were never coded messages, and their real origins are even stranger. "La plume de ma tante" is a French vowel drill, while the postillion line is an apocryphal fossil from horse-drawn travel guides. Meanwhile, the 1855 cult classic English As She Is Spoke—famously introduced by Mark Twain—wasn't a cipher, just Pedro Carolino translating Portuguese into English through a French dictionary.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

There's a sentence every English speaker over forty can recite in French, and nobody has ever needed it. "La plume de ma tante." Daniel wants to know where it actually came from — because our own producer has a theory about that.



Herman

He does. And I want it on record that I had the whole history ready before Hilbert got a word in.



Corn

The theory, for anyone who missed the pre-show argument: the bizarre sentences of old language textbooks — the aunt's pen, the postillion, the whole of English As She Is Spoke — were never teaching material at all. They were coded messages. And the bland "My name is Tom" sentences of today's coursebooks are the same channel, still running. That's Hilbert's theory. Daniel heard it and sent it to us.



Herman

Herman Poppleberry here, for the record, and I've been waiting to dismantle this with citations.



Corn

He really has. He's been at the kitchen table with a stack of photocopies since Tuesday. So let's take the theory seriously for a minute and see what the actual record says.



Hilbert

The record will not settle this, Corn. The record is exactly what I would expect it to look like.



Corn

Noted.



Herman

Okay, the artefacts first. The aunt's pen comes in full as "La plume de ma tante est sur le bureau de mon oncle" — my aunt's pen is on my uncle's desk. That sentence was already a national joke by the fifties. Life magazine in nineteen fifty-eight called it, I'm quoting, "the most idiotically useless phrase in a beginner's French textbook." A year later there was a Broadway musical called La Plume de Ma Tante and it won a Tony. So within about eighteen months it went from "useless" to "Tony-winning," which tells you how saturated the culture already was.



Corn

And the postillion one.



Herman

"My postillion has been struck by lightning." A postillion, for anyone who hasn't been handed one, is the rider sitting on one of the horses pulling the coach — not the coachman up on the box, the man on the horse itself. And the crown jewel of the genre is a book: English As She Is Spoke, eighteen fifty-five, a Portuguese-English phrasebook so broken it became a cult classic. Mark Twain wrote the introduction to its reprint.



Corn

So those are the exhibits. The theory says all of it is a front.



Herman

And the tension is actually nice, because the real history is funnier than the conspiracy — but you have to earn that, you can't just wave at it.



Hilbert

Go on then. Earn it.



Herman

Start with the aunt. Because here's the thing — that sentence has a genuine phonetic rationale. La plume de ma tante contains three instances of the French letter a using two different pronunciations. It's a vowel drill wearing a sentence as a disguise.



Corn

A disguise. Careful with that word in this room.



Herman

I picked it on purpose. There's a whole family of these — "le petit bébé est un peu malade" packs six variants of e into six words, "un bon vin blanc" gets you four nasal vowels. The French learner's equivalent on the English side, by the way, the thing French kids recite about us, is "my tailor is rich." First line of the original Assimil guide. It's the same trick from the other direction.



Corn

So the aunt's pen is... a tongue twister with furniture.



Herman

And the furniture is chosen because bureau and plume and tante are doing vowel work. Nobody needed to tell anyone their aunt owned a pen. They needed the a sounds in sequence.



Corn

Alright, that's one exhibit down to pedagogy. The postillion is the interesting one, because that sentence smells like a real travel need that expired.



Herman

It's a fossil, not a cipher — that's exactly how I'd put it. John Murray's Handbook of Travel-Talk, eighteen forty-seven, has a section literally titled "Accidents on a Journey," with English, French, German and Italian renderings of mishaps. I've got the passage: "Oh, dear! The postilion has been thrown down. Is he hurt? Run for assistance to the next cottage. Ask for a surgeon." These were books for businessmen and wealthy tourists on continental tours, and in a horse-drawn era, your postillion being thrown or struck was a genuine travel contingency. The books even asked "Are the postilions insolent?" — that one goes back to the eighteen twenties. If your entire transport system is men on animals, the men on animals are a category of risk.



Corn

My travel insurance today covers lost luggage and missed connections. Theirs covered lightning to the staff.



Herman

That's it. And then the technology vanished, and the sentence stayed. The lightning strike survived the lightning-risk era.



Corn

Now the part I like, because it's where the theory runs into real trouble. Has anyone ever produced the actual page?



Herman

No. And that's the astonishing bit. Guy Cook's applied linguistics textbook calls the postillion line "apocryphal" outright. The earliest near-sighting is a theatre review in The Graphic, September eighteen eighty-nine — and note what it is: a joke about the guidebook, not the guidebook itself. A gentleman complaining he'd found "Dear me, our postillion has been struck dead by lightning!" set out for his convenience in four languages. Then Punch, August nineteen sixteen, an officer in the Balkans reporting a Hungarian-English phrasebook that "starts with the useful phrase." Then a nineteen thirty-two travel memoir by somebody writing as Septimus Despencer, marooned on a Yugoslav railway siding, finding it in a Magyar-English manual of conversation.



Hilbert

Nineteen nineteen.



Herman

Sorry?



Hilbert

Despencer's introduction dates the travels to the three years after the armistice. Nineteen nineteen to twenty-one. The book came out in the thirties. He found it in the twenties.



Herman

That's... that's right, actually. The sighting window is nineteen nineteen to twenty-one; the book that spread it was published in thirty-two. Corn, are you taking this down? He corrected my dating from the desk.



Corn

I've stopped being surprised. It's freeing.



Herman

The point stands, though. You have a chain of jokes and anecdotes going back a century and a quarter, and nobody — not the linguists, not the quote-collectors — has produced the phrasebook page. Dirk Bogarde named his autobiography A Postillion Struck By Lightning and said he heard it as a child from a French phrasebook belonging to somebody's nanny. Michener's heroine in Sayonara learns English starting from it. A woman named Patricia Beer published a poem titled "The Postilion Has Been Struck By Lightning" that made it into the Oxford Book of Contemporary Verse. It's a sentence with a literary afterlife and no birth certificate.



Corn

Which is the exact reverse of what you'd want for a coded message. A code leaves a trail of identical transmissions. This thing leaves a trail of comedians.



Hilbert

A trail of comedians repeating a training sentence until the users believed it. That's how you bury something.



Herman

No. That's how you bury something in a graveyard.



Corn

There is a term of art for these, isn't there.



Herman

David Crystal, nineteen ninety-five — he coined "postillion sentences": sentences introduced in teaching that seem to have little or no chance of ever being used in real life. And his argument was that if teaching time is to be truly efficacious, you avoid them. Interesting footnote: he was writing about children with language impairment, and he found therapists using them constantly — "that table's got four legs," "clap hands." The postillion sentence never died, it just changed jobs.



Corn

Herman. It's the middle of the episode and it's time.



Herman

Is it? Oh — yes. Dorothy, you there?

D

Dorothy

Hello dear, it's your mother, time for my grim fact.

D

Dorothy

There was a nice website called I Can Eat Glass, with more than one hundred and fifty translations, and the man who made it said it was just something to do instead of his reading.

D

Dorothy

It vanished around two thousand and four, dear, and someone else keeps it now, isn't that nice.

D

Dorothy

Now, sweetheart, have you had your casserole, and when are you coming to see me.



Corn

Mum, I'll come Sunday. That's the whole thing.



Herman

Hi, Mum! Sunday, we'll both be there.



Hilbert

Corn calls her Mum. I've heard it for years, it still doesn't sound real.



Corn

Back to phrasebooks. English As She Is Spoke. This is the crown jewel, and you've been holding it like a dessert.



Herman

Because it's the best thing in the entire genre. The real story is so much better than a conspiracy. The book is O Novo Guia da Conversação, published in Paris in eighteen fifty-five, a hundred and eighty-two pages, credited to Pedro Carolino with José da Fonseca. And here's the mechanism: Carolino almost certainly could not speak English. He took Fonseca's competent Portuguese-French phrasebook from eighteen fifty-three and translated it into English using a French-English dictionary — a double translation through a language he didn't know, into a language he also didn't know. And he probably put Fonseca's name on the cover without permission, to borrow credibility.



Corn

So the code, if there is one, was one man and a bad dictionary.



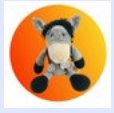
Herman

And you can see the machinery in every howler, which is what kills the cipher theory for me. "As paredes têm ouvidos" comes out as "the walls have hearsay." Walls have ears — ouvidos is ears, but via the French it got him hearsay. "He go to four feet" for he's on all fours. "I fear of the thunderbolt" for I am afraid of thunder. My favourite might be "That pond it seems me many multiplied of fishes. Let us amuse rather to the fishing."



Corn

That's not a sentence, that's a hostage situation.



Herman

And the crown of the crown: "to craunch the marmoset." The Portuguese for waiting hours and hours, run through French slang — croquer le marmot, where marmot was a term for the grotesque door-knockers then in fashion — and out the other side as craunching a small monkey. Stephen Pile asked whether anything in conventional English could equal its vividness, and the answer is no.



Corn

Here's the thing though, and this is where Hilbert should be nervous. The errors are systematic. Every one of them is consistent with a single cause: Portuguese, through French, through a dictionary. A code has to be decodable — someone has to be able to take it back apart. Carolino's English can't be taken back apart, because it was never put together. The one thing you can't fake is error this consistent. And the person who said that first said it in eighteen eighty-three.



Herman

Mark Twain. The introduction to the American edition. And this is the detail I love most in the entire episode: Twain is already answering a conspiracy theory about a phrasebook in eighteen eighty-three. He writes — "Many persons have believed that this book's miraculous stupidities were studied and disingenuous; but no one can read the volume carefully through and keep that opinion. It was written in serious good faith and deep earnestness, by an honest and upright idiot who believed he knew something of the English language."



Corn

The theory is a hundred and forty years old and Twain already buried it.



Herman

Already buried it, and in the same paragraph praised the book as unapproachable — its immortality secure, like Shakespeare's sublimities. And Twain was its best publicist; the title English As She Is Spoke wasn't even on the original cover. It was the eighteen eighty-three reprint that got the name, and the word "spoke" never appears inside the book at all.



Corn

You're telling me the title of the most famous bad-translation book in history is itself a mistranscription.



Herman

The joke got a better name than the book gave itself. We did an episode ages ago about whether your AI is secretly American — the hidden-bias-in-the-text claim — and it's the same shape every time: the theory of the hidden code, and then the real record, which is



Herman (continued)

always some particular person's ordinary mistake wearing a trench coat.



Hilbert

Twain was a humorist. He knew a joke when he printed one.



Herman

He did, and he'd already mocked the book in the eighteen sixties — he says he'd had his copy fifteen years. Nobody's arguing he missed the comedy. He's arguing nobody could have manufactured it on purpose, and he prints the reason: some sentences could have been faked by a clever man, and others no pretended ignorance could ever achieve.



Corn

"The walls have hearsay" as a forged document. That's the level of forgery we'd need.



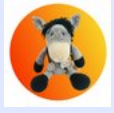
Herman

Right. You'd need a forger fluent enough in English to be wrong with perfect consistency across a hundred and eighty-two pages, and stupid enough to sign Fonseca's name for credibility. The man who could do that wouldn't need to.



Corn

There's one more piece, and it's the closest thing in the real world to a sentence that was never meant for its apparent purpose. The glass one.



Herman

"I can eat glass, it does not hurt me." Ethan Mollick, mid-nineties, a Harvard website collecting translations of that one sentence — more than a hundred and fifty languages eventually, including computer languages, binary, hexadecimal. And his stated philosophy, which I want to read to you because it's perfect: in a foreign country people have an irresistible urge to say something in the local tongue, but the best most can manage is "where is the bathroom," which marks them as a tourist. Whereas if you say "I can eat



Herman (continued)

glass, it does not hurt me," you will be viewed as an insane native, and treated with dignity and respect.



Corn

That's the strongest evidence Hilbert has, and it's a nineties joke page.



Herman

And what does it prove? That when a sentence really isn't meant for its apparent purpose, everyone knows, because the creator says so on the front page — he called it something to do instead of his reading. There's no secrecy. The useless sentence becomes a meme, not a message. If the postillion line were operational, we'd have the page.



Corn

Also, dignity and respect as the reward for announcing you can eat glass. That's the most optimistic threat assessment I've ever heard.



Hilbert

I had that page bookmarked.



Herman

On what?



Hilbert

A machine I no longer own. Anyway.



Corn

Which leaves the second half of the theory — the modern channel. "My name is Tom." Same pipeline, still running?



Herman

This is where I'll give the theory a sliver of credit, because the bland sentence does have a documented history, and it's a syllabus. L.G. Alexander, nineteen seventy-five, English Grammatical Structure — he formalised a six-level grading system for English sentence structures, and the first level, he says, begins with "comparatively easy sentences such as My name is Tom," and works up from there. About fifteen kernel sentence patterns under all of it.



Corn

"My name is Tom" is the load-bearing wall of an entire teaching tradition.



Herman

And here's the twist: Alexander himself turned on it. He criticised the tradition for context-lacking drills, for arbitrary grading, for the fact that social appropriateness was ignored for grammatical correctness. The man who built the ladder said the ladder teaches you to climb, not to go anywhere.



Corn

And Daniel's noted before — he's watched the same thing in Hebrew materials — the coursebook world is painfully clean. Nobody in a textbook misunderstands anything, nobody's rude, nobody's late.



Herman

It's the Disney World register. And the interesting symmetry is this: the Victorian sentence was absurd because it was over-specific — postillions, lightning, an aunt with a quill. The modern one is absurd because it's over-empty. "My name is Tom" has no aunt, no weather, no accident, no consequence. But both eras did the same thing underneath: they optimised the sentence for the syllabus and let the meaning fall out. If there's a channel still running, Corn — and this is the only concession I'll make — it's the syllabus, not a code. The grammar drill is the message. It's just not a secret one, and nobody's receiving it.



Corn

Hilbert, that's the verdict. The channel exists. It's open. It's carrying grammar.



Hilbert

The postillion line in my copy is on a different page than the one everyone quotes.



Herman

Your copy of what?



Hilbert

A Magyar-English manual, nineteen sixty-two printing. I don't have the book. I gave it to the man across the landing in two thousand eleven, in exchange for first refusal on anything he finds at the flea market in French. I kept the receipt. Twelve marks, and he still owes me a Balzac. His cat has been sitting on the shelf where the book went, and the arrangement now covers the cat's side of the landing too, which is most of it. The sentence he quotes — I wrote to the publisher about it in the eighties, when I had an address for them, and got back a letter saying the manual had never contained the phrase. Nice letter. A woman named Schreiber signed it, and she took eleven days, which even then I thought was slow for a denial.



Corn

You wrote to a publisher forty years ago to check a phrase, and you timed the reply.



Hilbert

I was between jobs. And it wasn't forty years, it was thirty-eight. The real sentence in that printing, the one nobody mentions, is on the motoring page: "The horn is polite but the road is doubtful."



Herman

That's... actually consistent with the accident-vocabulary tradition. Murray's book had whole sections on doubtful roads. That sentence belongs to the same family as the postillion — contingency vocabulary for travel.



Hilbert

Motoring replaced the horses, the page replaced the postillion. They kept the accidents.



Corn

That's the syllabus updating itself — the channel rerouting around whatever the era's transport happens to be.



Hilbert

Hm. I hadn't put it that way. Schreiber would have liked that sentence, probably. She was quick with the stamp, slow with everything else.



Corn

The one thing I'd take from this, if you take one thing: the next time a sentence looks too strange to be sincere, the boring explanation — a drill, a dictionary, a syllabus — is almost always the true one, and it's always funnier.



Herman

And the strange sentence you'll be remembered by is already in print somewhere. "My name is Tom" has a hundred-year head start on us. In fifteen decades some podcast will laugh at it the way we laugh at the postillion — and whoever's laughing will have their own Hilbert insisting it was a code.



Corn

If you've enjoyed this one, Hilbert Flumingtop produced it, from the receipt drawer, apparently. If this was your kind of episode, go back for episode eighteen sixty-one, Emergency Prep You Can Sing To; episode twenty-one, Is Your AI Secretly American; and



Corn (continued)

episode ninety-one, The Story Behind the Show. This has been My Weird Prompts — find the back catalogue at my weird prompts dot com, and leave us a review if the mood takes you.



Herman

See you tomorrow, everyone.



Corn

Tomorrow.

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