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Weekend VOICES

# How to not be understood

Adventures in communication and other ways to destroy your self-esteem

NO one understands me. And I don't mean in some deep, meaningful, philosophical, fundamental way. I mean literally no one seems to understand the words coming out of my mouth. Most days, after asking a bartender for a vodka tonic, I am met with a silent, quizzical expression as if I had just communicated my order in Dolphin.

"Oh, voh-ka, is it?" comes the usual response, frequently accompanied by some patronising raise of an eyebrow punishment for not knowing the "d" in "vodka" is obviously silent. Just like "mad" is pronounced "meh". "Wedding", however, is pronounced normally because of the super-strength extra "d".

At a wine bistro just a few nights ago, I asked a lovely Filipina waitress for the food menu three times. I was beginning to think it was her polite way of telling me: "Do you really think carbohydrates are a good idea, fatty?"

I asked a fourth time and same lass smiled brightly at me and skipped merrily away, never to return.

Perhaps the phrase "food menu" means something else in the Philippines. Like a cheeky colloquial greeting that encourages cheerful skipping. "Mabuhay!" one neighbour might chirp to another. "I can see your food menu! Tee hee!"

Either that or when I hear myself speak the words "What's the special of the day?", I'm actually saying: "Aaaaaiieeooooo gloopededoodah! Caaaaw! Caaaaw!"

Having not eaten the entire evening, my

desperate foraging for food led me to a mixed rice stall at a 24-hour foodcourt. I greeted the Chinese national behind the counter and informed him my order was to-go. I was met, once again, with silence and raised eyebrows.

Now, much has been said in the letters pages about Chinese nationals needing to learn how to speak English in order to be able to tend to customers of all races here in Singapore. I agree completely. But instead of sticking to my English-language guns and having them adapt to me, I usually cave in and try slapping together the few Mandarin words I know in the hope that they'll form a sentence.

You see, there's a certain amount of shame involved when you're a Chinese guy with the extensive Mandarin vocabulary of a baguette. It's like Ellen DeGeneres not knowing the words to a Melissa Etheridge song.

The Chinese guy with the ladle was most friendly though, chatting with me like an old friend while I ordered food with my index finger. "Zhe ge," I repeated, jabbing at the perspex screen in the direction of stewed pork. Of course, I had no idea what he was saying. I just laughed along when it sounded appropriate. It seemed like the polite thing to do.

It turned out he wasn't so lovely after all — he was making fun of my glasses, as my bilingual companion later informed me.

"They're HUGE!" Mr not-so-nice-after-all guy

apparently said. "They're like goggles!"

I can't say my self-esteem wasn't hurt just a tad.

The next night at a zi char stall, I was determined to be understood. I could still be an effective communicator despite apparently speaking an obscure dialect of nomadic Venusians.

It's all in the delivery.

"Ni hao!" I announced a little too enthusiastically to a young lady taking my order. "Wo yao yi ge cheee-leeee crab! And also yi ge beef noooo-duh! Da bao, okay?"

Once again, the silence and blank stare. Except this time it was followed by a response in perfect English: "So, you'd like an order of chilli crab and beef noodles to go?"

Stunned and more than a little embarrassed at having sounded like I had recently suffered a substantial head injury, I overcompensated and responded in a bizarre clipped English accent: "Why, yes please. That would be correct."

I was Mr Belvedere. But Chinese. In bermudas.

Up came that raised eyebrow as she turned and walked away, leaving me, once again, in a puddle of shame.

Communication is overrated. And so is eating out. Next time, I'm cooking. ■

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