



BABEL BABBLE

BY DAVID LOWE

Why do the French go “plouf” and the English go “splash”? This seemingly stupid question is in fact of fundamental importance in linguistics. Language is what it is because we are what we are, or we are what we are because language is what it is. We speak the language or the language speaks us.

On Old MacDonald’s farm in England the ducks go “quack, quack”, but on Old MacDonald’s farm in France the ducks go “coin, coin” (“corner, corner”?). English pigs go “oink, oink” French pigs go “groin, groin”. English sheep go “baa”, French sheep go “beh”.

These are of course onomatopoeias – words that imitate the sound of the noise they describe, so apart from basic differences in spelling and pronunciation, the word should be roughly the same in both languages, unless of course some national trait intervenes.

“Atchoo!” or “atchoom!” Do the French really add an “m” at the end of a sneeze, or would they just like us to close our mouths (to pronounce the “m”) instead of leaving it open like at the end of an Anglo-Saxon sneeze? Tap on an English door and it goes “knock, knock”. Tap on a door made in France, however, and it goes “toc, toc”. English telephones “ring”, French telephones “dring”. “Zip!” went the *fermeture éclair*. There is a theory that language started with onomatopoeias. Like bad mime artists, man started to add noises when mimed actions proved insufficient.

Ugh, ugh, ugh... “tweet, tweet” – look at that little bird. Or in early French, Ugh, ugh, ugh... “cui cui”. Think of a stone-age Marcel Marceau not lost for words but lost for mimes – *parlez après le bip!*

National boundaries seem to exist at the very source of language, so man’s efforts to express objective reality through the spoken word is futile, not to mention the absurd waste of time in translating poetry. The wires are crossed right at the outset. Babel babble.

I’m bilingual so when so when I hurt myself in England, I go “ow!”, but when I hurt myself in France I tend to go “aïe!” In fact, I’ve started to notice that “ow!” and “aïe!” don’t convey exactly the same thing, just as the

music of Elgar sounds nothing like that of Debussy’s. Of course the universal popularity of super-hero comics has done much to harmonize the international use of onomatopoeias associated with violent action – “Wham!”, “Blam!”, “Whack!”, “Woosh!”, “Bam!”, “Zoom!”, “Zap!”, “Boom!”, “Wow!”, “Clang!” and “Pow!” – now need no translation. “Pan, pan” is slowly being replaced by “bang, bang”. In the animal domain, however, much is still yet to be done. French dogs continue to go “ouaf, ouaf” despite the insistent English “woof, woof”.

And of course most important for the French, how does the cock crow? “Cockle-doodle-doo” or “Cocoricco”? “Coco Rico” to an Englishman sounds like the name of a Mexican drug dealer. I’ve listened to cocks crow and as far as I can make out you’re missing a syllable. What does this say about the French? You’ve misunderstood your national symbol, truncated his discourse? What is the significance of this? I’m afraid I don’t have any answers, which is why this article is printed in *TGV Mag* and not in some internationally renowned scientific journal. “Rickity tickity tum”.



Lithographie de Roy Lichtenstein