

## (1) Embracing the Absurd

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That long, skinny vegetable.

That colorful thing in the sea.

That thing that you close with a key.

These sound like lines from a fun board game, but are in fact desperate definitions I've uttered within the past week when the French term for 'leek' or 'coral reef' or 'lock' escapes me.

(2) I can speak quickly now, producing French at about the same speed as my native English, but that ability doesn't always disguise knowledge gaps: simple nouns and verbs that I missed or forgot along the way. I compensate with long, looping definitions, often punctuated by "you know".

(3) "So we bought some..." My story grinds to a halt. "*Tu sais*, that long, skinny vegetable?" The listener squints. They don't know.

"White and green, *tu sais*, makes a good soup?"

Over five years of dedicated language study and I'm liable to get tripped up on a leek.

(4) Cooking with a friend really drives the point home. "Could you pass the board for cutting things? Where is the bowl with holes in it? I need the thing for scraping, made of plastic." I sound weirdly literal, like an alien who has studied human life from afar. Either that or like someone who doesn't get out much. How have I made it this far and missed 'colander'?

(5) Learning the French language has been a first-class study in the art of French absurdism. This school of thought, motivated by nationwide dejection in post-war France, claims that our very existence is absurd. Certainty is impossible. Does life have meaning? The answer is paradoxical: a definitive maybe. (6) Existentialists sometimes bemoan this fact. Absurdists embrace it. It is by facing the void (and often, by laughing at it) that we can reconcile our absurd state. It is still possible, Absurdists maintain, to live bravely. To seek beauty.

(7) I read playwright Eugène Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve* senior year of college. This "anti play" employs language that does not result in communication. Thanks to the many missteps of my language-learning journey, this idea of language divorced from communication is an area in which I have lots of practice.

(8) Set in a proper middle-class English interior, the play opens with a Mr. and Mrs. Smith in the midst of a strange conversation. They speak in clichés and then are suddenly cold and literal, as if narrating their own behavior. They make statements and then immediately contradict themselves with no change in expression. Stage directions include: bursts into laughter, then she bursts into tears. Then she smiles.

(9) Soon, dinner guests arrive. Mr. and Mrs. Martin sit facing each other, without speaking. They smile timidly at each other. The dialogue which follows must be spoken in voices that are drawling, monotonous, a little singsong, without nuances.

(10) The dialogue which follows concerns how this married couple might know one another. Hmm, they wonder. Did we run into each other once, long ago? It seems we are both from Manchester. They deduce, finally, that they share a bedroom, and even a daughter! How curious it is, how strange! (11) Finally, Mr. Martin announces in the same flat, monotonous voice, slightly singsong, that "dear lady, there can be no doubt about it, we have seen each other before and you are my own wife... Elizabeth, I have found you again!"

The play ends with the characters screaming out rhymes, sequences of letters, and one-syllable utterances, shrieking together as the light is extinguished.

(12) But it has not yet ended. The stage lights come on again to show Mr. and Mrs. Martin, now seated as were the Smiths in the beginning. Thus the play begins again, with the Martins speaking the same lines as in the debut. The curtain falls.

(13) I wasn't expecting my French homework to send shivers down my spine. But this innocuous little play somewhere in the middle of my battered three-hundred page textbook did just that. I was early to class the next day to find out more.

(14) Funny, creepy, and like nothing I have read before or since, I would certainly recommend it.

When you think about how much can go wrong, the delicate balance of semantics and pragmatics, it's a wonder that we can even understand each other at all. *La Cantatrice chauve* takes this idea to an extreme, language's every possible ambiguity exploited. The results are far from pretty.

(15) Little did I know that I would be installing myself, post-grad, in the Smith's living room. In France, effortless communication was a thing of the past, replaced by accidental non-sequiturs, wild hand gestures, and desperate expressions. It was only a matter of time, I felt, before I would resort to full-on absurdism, to screaming incoherently into the night.

(16) It is difficult to exemplify the linguistic chaos that I have experienced, for I have tried to erase many of these gaffes from memory. I do have a few recent examples. You need only to imagine the complications that could result from mistaking *cheville* and *chevreuil*. These words, which sound fairly similar, mean 'ankle' and 'venison,' respectively.

(17) Last week I asked for ankle *pâté*.

My first week in Cannes, thanks to a one-syllable mistake, I asked a woman in a *boulangerie* if she knew of a nearby store where I could go run a race.

It is moments like these when the absurd is felt fully. I look respectable, I speak confidently and fluently...and I produce a sentence so unintentionally strange that I have learned to recognize a distinctive expression on the faces of strangers. It is marked by a slight widening of the eyes, a furrow between the brows. (18) There is perhaps a reevaluation of my mental state. Those few uncomfortable seconds are an eternity: the time it takes to cross the gulf between language and communication. My heartbeat seems to emanate from my eardrums.

These moments were once agonizing for me. I used to walk around thinking that everyone knew I was *une étrangère*: my non-native awkwardness surely as visceral as a bright bullseye painted on my back.

(19) It's not fun to be forced into a starring role in an absurdist play.

Until it is. I took a cue from the Absurdist and I learned to laugh. At myself, at ridiculous situations, at what we call communication.

In hindsight, I see that my seriousness and self-consciousness came from simple fear. There is, after all, something scary and absurd about starting over as an adult, struggling to communicate basic wants and needs. The disparity between my thoughts and the language I was able to produce frustrated me to no end.

(20) Time, experience, and improved language skills eased the fear. But even more significant was learning to lighten up. It's something I still work on, a skill like any other. But largely, I see my "failures" as

funny. It's not so life-or-death: and why, I wonder now, did I ever think that? There are no French grammar police hiding behind a tree waiting to fine me for incorrectly conjugating the subjunctive.

(21) Sometimes, even now, a notable language mistake or inability to communicate will make me feel like a child. But maybe that's not so bad. Babies have a big, beautiful world in front of them, full of unknowns, ripe for the exploring. So do we, the language learners, the close observers, the passionately curious; those of us who choose to implant ourselves into a mysterious new culture and start over: just for the thrill of it. Let's embrace the absurdity of communication. We need not run screaming into the night.