FLARR Pages #54: Isn't culture a blast!

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“Isn’t Culture a Blast?”
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Elementary language books are filled with exciting cultural information ranging from the origins of Paris when its inhabitants, *les Parisii* (also called *les Parasites* by some scholars), were planning to build an Eiffel tower with bamboos and shoe laces, to the daily life of Georg Brücke dreaming about buying a grey Mercedes while chewing on a pretzel, or Jorge Puente’s Saturday at the bullfight, where his wife dragged him because she is in love with the torero. No doubt students find such insights into the swinging life of foreigners as fascinating as the story of US farmer George Bridges raising sheep or polar armadillos in rural Minnesota. However, statistics actually show that students have little interest in culture, in spite of the sincere efforts of their teachers, who will dress up as a *mariachi* or a *gendarme*, yodel in public and bring back suitcases of realia from trips abroad they can barely afford. The source of the problem is neither the teachers nor the students; it is the books. The cultural items of our manuals are often presented in such a dull way that our dear language pupils quickly consider majoring in more exciting fields such as Accounting or Library Science. What the students read usually seems much less interesting than their teacher’s misadventures in Beijing or Oslo. Example: Miss Dupont, a young French teacher, got locked up in the Zoo de Vincennes, not because the guards thought she was an inmate, but because she had fallen asleep, exhausted, on a bench near a gorilla’s cage. In the morning, the guards were alerted by the screams of the monkey, who could no longer stand the smell of his new neighbor, and they arrested the poor girl for squatting in an area reserved for animals and uniformed beings. A few weeks later, when Miss Dupont told her story in class, she was a huge success and none of her words were ever forgotten. Even fifteen years later, her worse student, Paul Paulson, now a successful undertaker, still proudly recalls her adventures, even though it took him one minute to forget the name of the Alsatian artist who created the Statue of Liberty.
This being said, I would also like to mention that culture taught in class is sometimes limited to what is politically correct in this country. On the beaches of Rio, it is quite acceptable for a girl to show her buttocks, or her breasts on the French Riviera, but you may hesitate to tell that to your high school students for fear that they might parade naked in the parks of your hometown. Although the atmosphere of the city would greatly improve, the principal and the trustees might seek the origin of this sudden display of freedom and have you excommunicated or worse. I know that you have to be more careful in some circles, but if you teach college, where people are broad-minded, at least in front of a class, there is no reason to ignore genuine cultural aspects of a society just because they might inspire one of your students to become a stripper in the jungles of Africa or a licensed scuba-diving instructor in the Sahara desert.

After the above circuitous digressions, which may qualify me for a career in politics, I am going to talk about a cultural aspect that is typical of France (and also very appreciated in Quebec): spoonerisms or, as they say in the land of Lafayette, contrepèteries or contrepets. Spoonerisms exist elsewhere, but they do not seem to attract so much attention. If you told one on Jay Leno’s show, you might get booed.

Some literary contrepets contain both the first and the second
Les jeux de fous mettent le feu aux joues (Crazy games make cheeks red).

Les pieux abbés suivaient les bœufs à pied (The pious abbots followed the steers on foot).

Ce Bruand était intrigant, ce truand était un brigand (That Bruand was a schemer, that gangster was a bandit).

Now, let us move to the type of contrepetaries you are all expecting. One word of warning though: If the fathers of your high school students wait for you after class with a shotgun, if your favorite colleagues report you to the principal, or if the Baptist church brands you as a sinner or even a potential child molester, do not blame me. I am just trying not to ignore an important aspect of French culture.

La speakerine expose un fait grossier (The female announcer reveals a crude fact) will become La speakerine expose un gros fessier (The female announcer exposes her big buttocks). The next one is quite clever. La jeune alpiniste est prête à une ascension soutenue (The young female mountain climber is ready for sustained attention) will turn into La jeune alpiniste est prête à une ascension toute nue (The young female mountain climber is ready for a climb stark naked). The last one was attributed to Voltaire, and it is definitely funnier than his books. Les Italiennes sont folles de la messe (Italian women are crazy about mass) is more interesting when we twist it into Les Italiennes sont molles de la fesse (Italian women have soft buttocks).

As I said, contrepeteries do not come much cleaner that the ones above, and I, good old Midwestern boy that I am, might be embarrassed to declaim some of them in public. If you wish to become more familiar with them, get hold of a good slang dictionary and books such as Manuel de Contrepet, by Joël Martin, Le Tout de mon cru, by Jacques Antel, or L’Art du Contrepet, by Luc Etienne. The solutions of the spoonerisms are usually printed at the end. And if you want your promotion, do not call your busy dean a “dizzy bean.”
To: All foreign language teachers of the Red River Valley area:

On behalf of the ad hoc committee charged last spring in Moorhead with the preparation of a proposal for a Red River Valley language organization, I cordially invite you to what we hope will be the first of a long series of programs for teachers of foreign languages of our area.

The meeting will take place in the Memorial Union at North Dakota State University, Fargo, N.D., on Saturday, September 22, 1973, from 10:00 a.m. to approximately 4:00 p.m.

The program has been divided into two parts: 1) a discussion concerning the formation of the area language group and 2) a series of informative seminars on various aspects of language teaching. A tentative list of events has been enclosed.

To help offset initial costs of planning the program, a registration fee of $1.50 will be necessary.

A luncheon will be served, and I request that you make reservations with me by September 17. The cost will be approximately $3.00 per person, and may be paid at registration.

The success or failure of this initial conference and the proposed language organization will depend entirely upon your interest. We are looking forward to seeing you all at NDSU on September 22.

Cordially,

Greg F. Lacy