

Globish

PARIS — It happens all the time: during an airport delay the man to the left, a Korean perhaps, starts talking to the man opposite, who might be Colombian, and soon they are chatting away in what seems to be English. But the native English speaker sitting between them cannot understand a word.

They don't know it, but the Korean and the Colombian are speaking Globish, the latest addition to the 6,800 languages that are said to be spoken across the world. Not that its inventor, Jean-Paul Nerrière, considers it a proper language.

"It is not a language, it is a tool," he says. "A language is the vehicle of a culture. Globish doesn't want to be that at all. It is a means of communication."

Nerrière doesn't see Globish in the same light as utopian efforts such as Kosmos, Volapuk, Novial or Esperanto. Nor should it be confused with barbaric Algol (for Algorithmic language).

A retired IBM marketing executive, Nerrière speaks excellent English but switches to Globish if he is not getting through. "I look at their faces. Lack of understanding is very easy to decipher."

The main principles of Globish are a vocabulary of only 1,500 words in English, gestures and repetition.

Globish also includes song lyrics because Nerrière reckons this is an excellent way to learn words, even if they are not on the Globish 1,500. "Strangers in the Night" is one choice, but what is the student to do when Sinatra goes "scoobie-doobie-do"?

The point, he says, is to reach the threshold of understanding. But neither threshold nor understanding is on the 1,500-word list. "In Globish it would be the target, the goal, the objective. I use three words to reach the point where you would be understood everywhere."

The list goes from "able" to "zero." Niece and nephew, for example, are not included, "but you can replace them with the children of my brother," Nerrière says. He feels he erred in putting in both beauty and beautiful and in including "much" and "many" but not "lot."

"Much is for ideas, many is for things you can count. A lot works for both cases, the others require a little more understanding."

The seeds for Globish came about in the 1980s when Nerrière was working for IBM in Paris with colleagues of about 40 nationalities. At a meeting where they were to be addressed by two Americans whose flight had been delayed, they started exchanging shoptalk in what Nerrière calls "une certaine forme d'anglais perversi." Then the Americans arrived and beyond their opening phrases, "Call me Jim," "Call me Bill," no one understood a word. And Jim and Bill, needless to say, did not understand perverted English.

One might say that, except for Jim and Bill of course, everyone was speaking Globish though they didn't know it. "They all, like me, spoke low-quality English, not really Globish. One might have a vocabulary of 2,000 words, another of 1,200 and not the same words. One of the things of interest in Globish is that with 1,500 words you can express everything. People all over the world will speak with the same limited vocabulary."

With many corporations imposing English as the lingua franca wherever their base, Nerrière sees a great future for Globish, which he has trademarked. Learning it by computer and

practicing it by free-access telephone will make things even easier. And there is a new law in France that gives employees the right to 20 hours per year of instruction in a given subject. "The idea is to increase their employability by teaching them skills unrelated to their present employment. For me, the odds of someone asking for a course in macramé are very small and the odds of asking for a course in Maltese are also small. Why not Globish? If it could be of use in this small grocery shop where I work maybe it will help me in the big hotel where I hope to be."

Nerrière reckons that with 182 hours plus learning "Strangers in the Night," the student should be able to communicate in Globish. It is not a pretty language - full of redundancies and lumpy constructions - but Nerrière repeats that it is nothing but a tool when proper English is not understood. "It is not the language of Hamlet, Faulkner or Virginia Woolf," he explains. But the worst thing for the French about this international language is that it isn't French. Nerrière argues rather subtly that if people learned Globish, the French language would remain unsullied because *français* would die out.

"It would end this crazy French terror about English and francophonie. The French say you are killing the French language and I say, no, we are saving it from being killed by English." There is one possible hiccup in this scheme. The fluent Globish speaker will not be understood by native English speakers. No problem: Nerrière already is preparing a Globish version in English in addition to the Italian and Spanish editions, which will be out shortly. So he is not only protecting French from invasion but he is getting Americans to become, so to speak, bilingual.

"Absolutely!" Nerrière says triumphantly. "This is the way to get Americans to learn another language."

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