

A Lesson in Language

by Robert Piwower

Incarceration has forced me to postpone my plans of travelling to the continents of Europe and Asia. Six years into a twenty year sentence for manslaughter, watching Globe Trekker on PBS or flipping through vacation mags in the prison library is the closest I get.

My travels to Quebec and Mexico taught me that every street sign, television or radio program, menu, and all product packaging provides a lesson in language. Simply going about a regular routine in a foreign land, the language teaches itself to you. This form of pedagogy may not be as effective as buying a Rosetta Stone DVD or enrolling in a Finnish 101 course, but it gets the job done. Infants learn to speak a language in a similar way, interacting with the people and world immediately around them.

My ideas about what constitutes language have changed greatly in the harsh environs of a maximum-security prison. Body language reveals mood and character more than the spoken word. It's important to observe and express with care.

Facial ties, clenched jaw or fists, a cold stare, even a veve of the hand can convey meanings that lead to violence. I've learned the art and science of reading people, how to listen intently even when not being addressed, how to discern silent tones of anger, fear.

Yet even behind thick, thirty-foot high concrete walls and razor-sharp concertina wire, foreign languages are available.

Spanish novelas or variety shows on Univision provide daily opportunities to learn juicy phrases such as: ¡Tenga cuidado! (watch your step!) or buena suerte (good luck) or No hay vida sin fatigas (there's no life without hardships).

For the truly motivated and fortunate enough to receive a call-out to the library, the equivalent of winning the daily lotto numbers, one can check-out a beginner's Spanish or French textbook.

Speaking with my friend Max, who grew up in Colombia, has accelerated my understanding. Max is in his mid-fifties and enjoys a calm, friendly disposition. Gray hair and round frame glasses give him a scholarly look. He's been "down" (in prison) over twenty-two years. Young Latino prisoners ~~en~~ address him as "viejo".

I often engage him in Spanish while we sit in the dayroom, waiting to go to program or to the yard.

"Buenos días, Max. Como está?"

"Muy bien, Bobby. Está bien?"

"Así, así, otro día en la vecindad."

(So, so, another day in the neighborhood)

We have acclimated ourselves to the neighborhood of prison. Prison has a language all its own. Correction officers are referred to as "C.O.'s", "hecks" or "police" when they're not present. A prisoner despises the term "inmate", preferring "convict" or "prisoner". A prison sentence is a "bid". Anything modeled into a weapon is a "shank" or "gun". A "bug" or "bug-out" is a ~~cray~~ crazy or insane person. A bug-out with a shank is a dangerous combination.

The dayroom we sit in is a twenty-five by twenty foot area at the front of two galleries in honor block. Furnished with black vinyl couches, overstuffed chairs, round Formica tables, and a large color tv, it's a casual place to converse.

The concrete floor is painted a rustic red hue.

About ten people sit waiting for the hall captain to call for honor block yard over the squawk box inside the c.o.'s bubble. Honor block is a small section of the prison reserved for those who have demonstrated ~~good~~ a pattern of good behavior during their bid. It accommodates roughly seven percent of the population. Honor block affords us privileges: more time out of our cells, larger cells, unlimited showers, cooking facilities, refrigerators, and a private yard. The rest of the prison populus get two showers a week, no access to cookware or refrigerators, and far less movement from their cramped cells.

Max is speaking to Shabib, a fortyish, balding man from Turkey. I've learned some Turkish and Arabic from him, but nothing of any consequence. I've found that unless I practice a language frequently, I tend to forget it. Shabib speaks in a clipped, distorted English, often blurring pronunciations. He often asks me to help him.

"I have a new strategy to work out,"
he says to me and Max.

"What's your new tragedy?" I ask.

Max laughs heartily.

Shabib says, "What, I say something wrong?" exchanging glances with us.

"The correct word," I say, "is street-e-gy. So, what your new workout plan?"

"Yes, yes, my plan. Thank you very much, Bobby. Now I do light weight, many, many, reps. No heavy, only light, much reps.

Our conversation is interrupted by two short rings of an alarm bell.

A fight has broken out somewhere in the prison. We return to the gallery - a security routine that everyone knows.

The rumor mill begins immediately. I hear someone say it's a fight in C-block, while another insists with vehemence that it's in D-block. I think about Seneca's essay, On Noise, where he speaks about empty vessels and mindless chatter.

From our vantage point in front of long windows and bars that border our gallery, I can see c.o.'s moving quickly through the corridor toward A-block.

"They don't call A-block Afghanistan for nuthin," Penems says, "shit's always poppin' off."

Penems is a short Spanish kid (under twenty-five) with spiked hair. He goes by "Penems" because he says he was born there, but he doesn't speak a lick of Spanish. Most of us doubt that he's from Penems. Prisoners mirror society's deceptions. Prisoners alter their history, pad their exploits, embellish stories, outright lie. We have our own language for this too. We call it freestyling, fronting, being stunters, tooth-twister with lip blisters.

Everyone on our ~~company~~ gallery is looking out the windows, trying to figure out what gallery on A-block the fight is on. Jorge, a rotound fellow, emerges from his cell. His bleary eyes tell us he just awoke. Bumping into Max in a googgy state he asks,

"Que pasó?"

"Tontería!" Max snaps "Acuestete!"

Laughter erupts.

"Yeah man, take yo' ass back to bed," his neighbor says.

A running commentary evolves around the bells breaking our routine.

"Peepk be wilhin, son."

"Problee [sic] the po-lease beatin on someone for nuthin."

"This shit is crazy."

"Another dey in the neighborhood," I say.

Everything will be on hold until the "all clear" is given. This could be in as few as twenty minutes for a minor skirmish or as long as all morning in a rare major fight.

"Man, my stragedy is messed up," Shebih says

Prison language Transitions over Time.

Some terms endure while others fade away. Recently I heard an antiquated yet accurate word to describe some. An old-timer told a friend, "That guy Sonny is really 'châteauing' up in honor block. Then he added, "yeah, he's 'stretching out', let me tell ya."

Both terms mean someone who's relaxing during their bid, more concerned with personal comforts, food, and leisure than anything else.

The flip side of châteauing in honor block is "the box", officially known as special housing unit (SHU). Fighting with a weapon or getting a dirty urine test are the two most common routes to the box. There, nearly all privileges are stripped away, personal property is denied, any belongings confiscated. You spend twenty-three hours a day in a reined cell, most likely next door to a bug-out. ~~That~~ The incident we're writing on is likely to send someone to the box.

Thirty minutes have passed since the bells tolled. A steady rain begins to descend from dark gray nimbo-stratus clouds. They nix my plans to workout in the yard. Seagulls bleat noisily while perched like sentinels on the fl-block handball court wall. They're engered by the deluge as well.

I return to my cell, gathering clothes to wash and iron. I expect a visit tomorrow, so I select my best items: Long sleeve, cotton Nautica button down shirt, white Henes tee, Nike socks, and standard issue green pants. The letter provided by the state.

While washing clothes in a five-gallon bucket in a slopsink on the backside of a prison gallery I learn from the tag on my Nautica shirt how to say, "Machine wash, cold, gentle cycle, tumble dry, warm iron," in French. I can hear the mellifluous sound of a nylon-string acoustic guitar floating from Max's cell. He plays to relax. I imagine being on the Pacific shore of Colombia, watching cobalt blue waves gently blanket the white sand. The ocean is swallowing a burnt ~~orange~~ orange orb as I sip a mimosa.

A stream of people flowing off the gallery into the day room tells me that the "all clear" has been given.

Routines begin anew. I can feel the tension and anxiety that was ~~on the~~ present begin to subside. Pent up tension will lead to bad things in prison.

Last week, waiting in the humid corridor in two by two formation, a c.o. barked ~~at~~ on the guy in front of me.

"Who you eye ballin', asshole?"

The guy kept staring, did not flinch. The c.o. stood there for a moment, then, obviously intimidated by the guy's stature, turned away. The line proceeded to the academic building. About thirty minutes later the c.o., accompanied by a sergeant and another c.o., stood outside the prisoner's classroom. From the office I work in I could see them take him out of class into the hallway staircase. Within five seconds I heard the thumping and pounding before the bells chimed.

After washing and hanging my clothes to dry I return to my cell. I pick up a pen and notebook from my desk. Looking out past the windows and bars I write a Haiku

Cold Steel Prison Bars
Twenty years to pass behind
Rain falls, Hope must rise.

I return the notebook and pen to their place on my desk. I take my silver and blue Bulova wristwatch off its clear plastic stand. It's a Rolex by prison standards. Miraculously, it slipped through property room scrutiny. According to written directives regulating property, watches are limited to a value of fifty dollars. The instruction pages contain a plethora of languages. I try to read how to set the stopwatch and activate split-time measurement in Korean, German, Chinese, and Norwegian.

If I had been born in Helsinki I would master at least three languages and serve only one-third of my sentence with good behavior. In the U.S., however, English ~~is still~~ remains the sole standard. Xenophobes view prisoners with the same disdain as immigrants. Learning foreign languages continue to be as eccentric as drinking absinthe or listening to polonaise.

The following day I prepare early for my visit. On my thin mattress, I neatly lay out the clothes I will wear. My mood is happy, upbeat.

A sonata plays quietly from my radio.
 When we were children, my brother and I would attempt to decipher the Polish that our parents sometimes spoke. They used it to veil their subject. Our grandfather, ~~was~~ who was born in Krakow, Poland, had a Polish dictionary that we'd use in our investigation. When our translating hit a wall, we asked our grandfather directly.

"Dziadek (grandfather) what does spokojne mean?"

"It means quiet."

"What about sobota?"

"Saturday"

"How bout,..."

"Dzieci spokojne" (Children, quiet)
 "Get the dictionary, I'm trying to read the paper."

The visiting room is vastly different from any other part of the prison. Brightly colored murals of Niagara Falls, downtown Buffalo, and lower Manhattan cover the walls. Women and children's voices are a welcome, pleasant change. Tall, clear windows allow natural light to fill the room. Walking through the entrance door after being pat-frisked I quickly spot my brother Martin, his wife Kristen, and their ^{two-year old} daughter Jenna. After checking in with the c.o. at the front desk, I approach their table with excitement. I embrace all of them individually. Sitting, talking with family during a visit is the closest to freedom a prisoner experiences. It's an escape, briefly, from confinement.

During our visit Martin brings up a phone call he was expecting from me last weekend that I didn't deliver on.

"Oh, we got burned on Saturday and stalled on Sunday." I say.

Kristen looks puzzled, "You got burned?"

"Yeah, that means the c.o. didn't let us out at night to use the phone."

"He stalked us on Sunday, didn't let us out at the proper time."

I realize that I've learned a language from a foreign land, developed over years by the denizens of incarceration Nation.

As I hold Jenna on my knee she smiles, places her tiny hand on my bearded chin and says,

"Hi, Unka Bobby."

A lesson in language.