

Almost American

INSERT TRAVEL QUOTE

Usually when I travel, I try to find a common ground. and usually it brings a comfort. A comfort that I have discovered in the case of Ghana was being “lulled by ignorance.”

Several years ago, when I was first beginning my annual trek to Africa, I was walking around in Zogbedgi with Taouvik and met a young woman who spoke to me in English. I was impressed and after we expressed pleasantries and she left I beamed at Tao, “She speaks English!” “No,” remarked Taouvik, “She is speaking Ghanaian.” I did not realize then the complications - and sometimes humorous outcomes – for assuming a language and probably the culture associated of being almost American.

Initially, one hears Ghanaians speaking English and thinks, “Ah! Mother tongue!” First mistake. I have had some interesting deals fall apart (later gratefully) because of my inability to know what I was saying. Like the time I went to buy a toilet seat and became incensed when they wanted ninety dollars for it. After I left the shop I was educated that what I wanted was a “toilet lid” not a toilet that you sit on, “toilet seat.” You “seat” on a toilet.

Ooops.

I spent five minutes arguing with a woman on the phone trying to place an order and getting no where until a friend stepped in and in moments resolved the matter. It was a matter of interpretation. I was speaking American and asking for a pizza (PEET- ZAH). The problem was that she was listening in Ghanaian and was listening for pizza, (PEH - SAH). Who knew? Oh, the company? “*Pizzaman!*” I kinda assumed I would be understood. . . a common misconception on my part.

I really should know my communication limitations better. I was at a roadside convenience market near my house and asked for canned tomatoes even though I was hoping for tomato paste. The shopkeeper smiled and with great enthusiasm dove into the back of her half-container shop. She emerged moments later with a shallow box. “You take your choice. 15 cedis!” she happily declared and showing her sale on toothbrushes.

She did not understand “canned tomatoes.” I ended up going next door to the vegetable stand to borrow a tomato; although, by that point it was a wasted effort. You have no idea how frustrating it is to look learn language one stumble at a time. But until I find a dictionary of common terms I learn through experience.

Some times it is because I speak too quickly. I flagged down a water hawker and asked for two bottles of water from the bin on top of his head and was told he doesn’t have that.

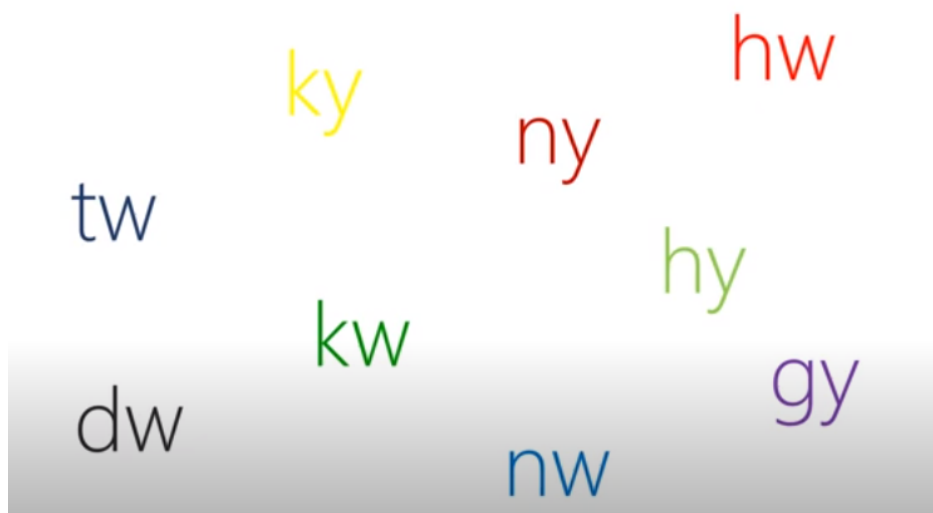
Or imagine being told (when you are pointing at the noodles and asking a price) that there is no pasta available. Only spaghetti. And no sauce, only stew.

There are five tribal languages spoken in Ghana. There is Akan, also known as Twi, (pronounced Chee). I was tired of my friends laughing at me on my pronunciations of words and decided to try and learn one of the languages. There is a big debate on which language better represents the culture, primarily because the tribe that speaks "Ga" is larger and claims dominance. But language schools prefer Twi. And so it is. Twi, like so many other things, is also almost American.

The Akan alphabet has 22 letters instead of our 26. There are six missing letters and two from Akan that are unique:

a b d e ε f g h i k l
m n o ɔ p r s t u w y

You will notice the Upper Case script E but lower case here. It has a longer, softer vowel sound. There is also the letter after "o" that looks like a backwards "c." It also has a modified vowel sound somewhat similar to the vowel before it. This within itself does not look that difficult. But then you learn about diagraphs. Diagraphs are two successive consonants that have a sound distinct from either by itself. So in English we would take "ph" and pronounce it "f." Think "photograph." In Akan there are nine diagraphs and several diagraphs have no equivalent in English.



"dw" is pronounced "Ju" like in "justice."
"tw" is pronounced "ch," like in "church."
When people would ask me where I live (Ashley Botwe) they would laugh at my response of "Ashleigh Baht-tway." The district is "Ash-A-Lay Bah Che." Once you get past the

diphthongs and diagraphs and you get somewhat comfortable wrapping your lips around new combinations you realize that Ghanaians, like Americans, in some cases pay no attention of how the word is spelled when it comes to common pronunciation. Think maybe, “going to” and “gonna.”

There is a video class available on YouTube taught by a local teacher, “Yao.” This helps immensely. This word is Akan (Twi) for “any.” To you or me, we would probably rattle off “e-bee-are-ay.” But in Twi the “r” in a word like this is not pronounced and they glide over it. So it is vowel sound gliding into the final vowel. This word is “eh-bee-aahhhh.”



What prompted all this (other than the idea that I would like to know what people are saying)? I was at a police checkpoint when an officer approached the car, looked at me and asked, “Etesiene?” (Eh - teh - sane. . . how are you)? I verbally stumbled and just looked at him. He smiled and said, “You are here in my country. It would be nice if you would learn our language.” I said I would and he said, “Good. Because if I stop you again and you cannot reply I will just have to arrest you.” Then he smiled broadly and walked away. The proper response is “Me ho ye.” (I am fine) which I knew but doubted myself. In Ghanaian, “me” is pronounced as we would – me. And it means “my,” “mine,” or “I am.”

Since the incident I have been taking classes most mornings. It helps me learn to read signs and to pick up more snatches of conversation. I start gaining more confidence in my ability to navigate Ghanaian. . . until I run into something else:

“We do not repair window screens. We don’t have them. Only window nets.”

And once again realize I have lot to learn in a place that is vastly different from what I first perceived as “Almost American.”

As an aside, if you are wanting to keep up with area politics, there is an international organization that establishes reports on the corruption level of a country and makes recommendations on how to improve. They recently released their annual report on Ghana with a recommendation that since there has been no reduction in the three years of the study, perhaps it might be good to have someone other than the president running the reform effort.