My accidental Greek wedding

I have an irrational passion for phrasebooks. Whenever I go to a country where I don't know the language I take along a phrasebook. I often take one with me even when I go to a country where I do speak the language. Sometimes in a foreign country I suddenly stop in the middle of the road. People walk into me, but I don't notice because my mind is wholly taken up by the question: Why? What are phrasebooks for?

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The first surprising fact about phrasebooks is that you hardly ever find what you want to say in them. Of course if you read them from cover to cover you will be able to note down some expressions, which will be very useful in many situations. Two I have just noticed in the last few seconds while writing this are I am not used to this and Is this a local or a national custom? These are both the kind of thing you can want to say about a dozen times a day when travelling. But phrasebooks suggest the idea that when you find yourself in a situation you will be able to turn to them and find a way to deal with it. This, I think I can say safely, never happens.

Perhaps you would like to receive coins as change. Your phrasebook will tell you how to ask for smaller denomination notes but will offer you nothing about coins. Perhaps you would like to say "this is poor quality", your phrasebook tells you instead how to say "this is very good quality". This is obviously due to the fact that there are just too many possibilities to cover. Perhaps the odds of finding something useful would be improved if people began to produce specialised phrasebooks - say Tibetan for Parents with Toddlers, Faroese for Old Fogies, Wolof for Worriers, etc.

But still I do wonder what the reasoning is behind the inclusion of some of the content. I once went to Egypt with a phrasebook published by the people who produce those travel books which are constantly warning you to beware of the locals. I recall that there was one page which had a series of questions which included: "What do you think about endangered species?" I had really set my mind on asking that, but I never got drunk enough. (By the way, some phrasebooks also have the phrase: "I am drunk". Theoretically, this may be useful, but what are your chances of finding it and being able to read it out if you actually are drunk?)

On the same page as the question about endangered species, there was also "Is there a pollution problem in Cairo?" I fearlessly - no, not fearlessly, bravely - asked this in Arabic of a taxi driver and in return I was treated to a tumultuous ten-minute speech of which I understood only the last two words, which were, in English, "No problem". I never tried that again, since I discovered that the traffic in Cairo is exciting enough without having your driver turn round to you every twenty seconds to emphasize an important point. I also have a Bengali phrasebook which also instructs you how to say "What should be done about endangered species?" and you can also ask the same question about deforestation, hydro-electricity, the ozone layer, toxic waste, etc. and etc. So obviously there is a belief that these are kinds of question you are likely to want to ask in Dhaka as
well as Cairo.

You may want to ask them, but my Egyptian taxi-driver example illustrates a major problem: you are not going to understand the answer. Phrasebooks are full of questions it is pointless to ask because of that snag. Here are some examples I have taken from the many books I have: How do you play backgammon? Is there anything I can do to help? What will you be when you grow up? When is the best time to go? or even simply Can you tell me the way to the station? I really cannot imagine any intelligible follow-up to "What do you think of endangered species?" unless you are having a conversation with a very talented mime. Of course there are questions that assume a simple answer, a yes or a no, and sometimes you do get one. But not in most cases. If, to take a random example, you ask "Is the museum open every day?", you are much more likely to have someone answer something like "Only on months with an R in them", "Nobody has ever known the answer to that question" or "This is not a museum, it's a model jail". When I was a schoolboy I remember that there came a day when I realised that teachers weren't really more intelligent than other people, they only had textbooks with answers in the back. I wonder whether there also might be Teacher's Phrasebooks with all the answers inside. They probably keep them under the counter in bookshops and won't sell them to ordinary people like me. They would seem to me to provide the only realistic way of using a phrasebook: you read the questions and a local reads out answers which you can follow in your own copy. I have an old French-German phrasebook which seems to operate on this principle. It doesn't have a date but from the way people behave it must be about 1905. Here are some very short extracts.

**A Gardener**

M. Hey! Gardener! Where are you? - Good grief, he's stretched out behind this hedge! Is that your idea of work?

G. Ah! Sir, I was only having a little rest. I have been working all day.

M. What have you done today?

G. I've cleared the caterpillars from the fruit trees, pruned the overgrown branches, trimmed the hedge, turned over the manure.

M. Do you think we will have a lot of melons this year?

(...)

**A Tailor**

A. I've been waiting all day for this tailor and I have so much business to attend to. I'm fuming. If I could get hold of him now, I would...

T. (Enters, carrying Mr. A's suit)

A. Ah! There you are! I almost lost my temper with you!

T. I couldn't come earlier and I had twenty people working on your suit. Would you like to try it on?

A. Yes, hand it to me. Do you think it fits?

T. I would dare a painter with his brush to paint a better fit.

(...)
phrasebook: "Modern Greek-Italian Dialogues". It has lost its cover but I vaguely remember that there was a picture of an Euzonos (one of those Greek soldiers with skirts) intersecting a Bersaglierie (one of those Italian soldiers with feathery helmets, who used to have to sleep with their bicycles). The author is one Al. Khatzimikhail. The Greek must be perfect because the Italian is appalling. The quality of the Italian is one of the reasons I like it so much (and I will try to reproduce the flavour of its strangeness). The other reason is the special kind of logic it exhibits. For example, on page one we find:

**Where is the railway station for Berlin?**

There are a number of very famous opening lines in literature - *Call me Ishmael* being the only one I can remember offhand - which shove you straight into the book, but this is even better. It sets off so many questions all at once it is like a little bomb going off in your head. First of all, I have lived in Italy for many, many years and I can assure you there is no railway station for Berlin or even any railway station which specialises in trains which go North as opposed to West, East or South. Italian cities have Central Stations and all major trains leave from there. And from what I recall of the Greek railway system, I very much doubt whether there is any station specialisation there either. But another strange thing about having this on page one is that if you actually manage to get a train to Berlin, what are you going to do with the rest of the Greek-Italian phrasebook when you get there?

I'm not sure whether we do find the station for Berlin because the next thing we do is buy a ticket to Holland. However, the author seems to have taken my point about the need to use the rest of the book because we specify "with a return" and two phrases down, we again say, "make sure it is with a return". We take a number of other forms of transportation of course. A ferry to Marseille. (*Does it have a cinema, a swimming pool, music? In how many ports will it come alongside? Waiter, I feel sick.*) Then we start looking for the "Olymbiac Aviation" offices (Aviazione Olimbiaca). We ask "will we be landing ourselves somewhere else apart from our destination?" and we call on the "Ostessa". (To me this sounds like a lady rushing around with a dozen foaming mugs of beer in her arms so I think "airmaid" is the most accurate translation.) I am very proud of this term and I hope that you will use it the next time you fly. We ask the airmaid: "Please, in what height are we flying?" To which the answer is the slightly alarming "In six thousand feet". Then we ask her "Please a little cotton for my ear."

We seem to have problems travelling whatever we take. On the bus we need to sit in front because the bus is bad for us. (We also worry whether "the way is unequal".) Then we take the car. There isn't a normal section entitled "cars", only one entitled "Car- damage". So it is no surprise when we immediately have problems and have to look for a "Vulcalizer" because "our rubber rims are broken" (sono guasti i nostri cerchioni di gomma). Unfortunately we don't have a "reserve of rubber rims". Here we begin to realise that we are Greek, because we say that we are travelling from Greece to Italy and have lost the road (perduto la via). We also look for a Greek hotel, a Greek restaurant and later a Greek film (Good luck).

In the hotel the waters aren't running, unfortunately. At the restaurant we ask for "an own plate" (*un piatto proprio*) and here we discover, I think, why we have such trouble with our stomach when travelling. We sit down and say: *Please, give me a portion of legumes, beef, fish, chicken, lamb, green salad, soup, meat broth, rost veal (vitello rosto), chop, sole. and then I would like as supplement: Maccheroni, beans, cheese, olives, risotto, turkish cheese, fried potatoes. We also have fruit, desserts and a selection of wines.*

We certainly don't do things by halves and whenever we buy something it is a kilo or two kilos. A kilo of beef, two kilos of veal, a lamb, a kilo of liver, two kilos of cherries at the herbage shop, a kilo of butter and (suspiciously) three kilos of soap. (Perhaps we slaughtered the lamb on the carpet.)
Now something else unexpected happens. As I said it is increasingly obvious that we are Greek. When we are looking for a job we say that "you can get references from all the banks in Greece." And we are also male. We have been to the barber's (be careful with my moustachio) and "in a shop" we have said "I would like also for my wife a blouse, six knickers, three slips and two bras", so it is quite surprising when on page 87 we suddenly announce "I am pregnant". (Maybe it's just a misperception caused by all that food.) I could quote many more interesting events but I would like to press on to what I feel to be the highlight of the book which is "fra inamorati" (between lovers).

I would like very much to speak to you. Unfortunately I do not know your language. I am a foreigner. I would like us to make company together. Tomorrow will you be free?

(You can't help but admire a person who can seduce someone while reading from a phrasebook. It is no mean feat.)

I felt a liking for you from the first moment I saw you. I am fond of you (: I love you). I cannot find words to express this what I feel. You have beautiful eyes. you have beautiful body. I like you a lot. I am absolutely sincere. You are too harsh. I am in love. I am jealous of you. I hate you. I would like to know what you feel for me. A small gift. I will come and ask your parents for your hand. since I really care for you I want you to become my wife. What is your opinion about marriage? Would you like us to try through engagement? Do you think we would be happier if...we married? Since we love each other shall we make our home together? Do you like...children?

That wraps the courtship up. She obviously is a woman of few words. Maybe she just nods. Which may be a problem. Because the rest of the book is only days of the week, months of the year and countries and capital cities. After marriage there does not seem to be much in the way of conversation (although I did learn that the capital of West Germany was "Bohn"). But perhaps there is a volume two: Modern Greek-Italian Marital Dialogues.

But probably not: because as an ending it is just as experimental as the Berlin railway station opening. Having now read this work from cover to cover I realize that phrasebooks are not about communicating with people. They are really avant-garde forms of literature. So in view of this I am going to institute the Al. Khatzimikhail Prize for Literary Excellence in Phrasebooks. Send in submissions to: sidewaysstation@vwsr3vgyyy.gmail.com.

In view of the larger reaction than expected which I got from the Cairo taxi driver, I have decided not to try out the Between Lovvers section experimentally myself. But if you would like to test it, I would be very glad to send you a photocopy of the pages involved. Please let me know if you accidentally get married.

(And, yes, I forgot to tell you that the gardener said that we will have a lot of melons this year).

Phillip Hill lives in Rome and writes just about anywhere. You can read more from him at Sideways Station.

Recommended citation format: