Too clever by half

How to brandish arguments while harbouring doubts when assuming your responsibilities.

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Many years ago I learned that the plural of “ail” is “aulx” – garlic, garlies. I came across this gem at a meeting on customs tariffs in the fabled Manhattan Building in Brussels because someone referred to “des aulx deshydratés”. I call the place fabled because those of us of a certain age who worked there in the late 1970s and early 1980s see it as a kind of badge of honour. Quite why remains a mystery; the building’s main claim to fame was caustic coffee and a ventilation system that took its fresh air from the underground car park. Luckily they’d invented the cough button.

The plural of garlic (aulx) sounds just like the word for water (eau); it’s a homonym and I would like you to think honestly about what you would have done. In a split second we had to figure out what dehydrated water was.

You can hear your teachers’ admonitions to make sense (Smith, you nit, are you likely to catch your teeth in a sewing machine? The Swiss fishing fleet!? [1]) so you know that there is probably no such thing as dehydrated water.

We did have the document, some 900 pages in length, and colleagues helpfully looked up the item under the correct code, only to find we had the document in French only. Luckily the French colleagues next door could see there was something of a flap in our work space and wrote it down for us: “garlies”. Teamwork.

Fired with this knowledge I decided to try it out at my local corner shop, a place that sold life’s essentials such as wine, chocolate, water and garlic. I needed to buy two bulbs and said with aplomb “Deux aulx si’il vous plait” “Oui, monsieur, vous voulez du Perrier, Vittel, Spa…?” I sheepishly pointed at the pungent rascals.

I had a similar experience years earlier. I did a gap year before we started calling it that, back then it was known by other names: “piddling around” (my mother); “you jammy sod” (my friends); “an opportunity to perfect my knowledge of foreign languages” (me with a straight face).

I worked at a hotel in Hannover, Germany, and as far as I can remember spent a lot of time vacuuming carpets (this explains my life-long aversion to housework). I was happily vacuuming one day when someone approached me and asked, “Wo kann man hier austreten?” Or “where can one step out?”. He must have seen my bafflement and quickly asked me to point him to the toilets. But I liked the phrase; it had a refined and upper class ring to it. I just had to try it out.

You are a clued-up bunch who can anticipate verbs at fifteen paces, so you know it did not turn out as I had hoped. “Wo kann ich austreten”, piped the youthful me. And I was politely directed to the exit.
Of course the language we hear at work is often a long way from normal, everyday speech. Think of the expression “we must assume our responsibilities”. It sounds to me like it’s been translated from another language and I have always taken it to mean, “we should do what we are paid to do” but have never quite mustered the courage to translate it that bluntly. If I were to use the expression back in the old country people would look baffled, or think I was offering to get a round in.

Such language is known only within the hallowed halls of international organizations where people are used to such flowery turns of phrase.

Only at meetings do we harbour doubts – if I used that expression down our way someone would ask me the cost of the mooring fee. The same applies to brandishing an argument, you might brandish a sword, or a piece of celery for that matter, but an argument? We recognize delegates and entertain proposals, and it is accomplished with all due respect. We appeal to common general knowledge.

And let’s not forget, the standing committee sits.

[1] It’s a German tangle: the words for sewing machine and mower and the words for teeth and toes sound alike to an anxious student - Nähmaschine/Mähmaschine and Zähne/Zehen. On the fishing fleet it was in fact Sweden, but I was nervous. I’m generally calmer now but telling the story can bring on palpitations.

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