

On Not Knowing English

by George Mikes

... When I was sent to England in 1938 I thought I knew English fairly well. In Budapest my English proved quite sufficient. I could get along with it.

On arrival in this country, I found that Budapest English was quite different from London English. I should not like to seem biased, but I found Budapest English much better in many ways.

In England I found two difficulties. First: I did not understand people, and secondly : they did not understand me. It was easier with written texts. Whenever I read a leading article in *The Times*, I understood everything perfectly well, except that I could never make out whether *The Times* was for or against something. In those days I put this down to my lack of knowledge of English.

The first step in my progress was when people started understanding me while I still could not understand them. This was the most talkative period of my life. Trying to hide my shortcomings, I went on talking, keeping the conversation as unilateral as possible. I reached the stage of intelligibility fairly quickly, thanks to a friend of mine who discovered an important linguistic secret, namely that the English mutter and mumble.

Once we noticed a sausage-like thing in a shop window marked Porks brawn. We mistook it for a Continental kind of sausage and decided to buy some for our supper. We entered the shop and I said : 'A quarter of pork brawn please.' 'What was that?' asked the shopkeeper looking scared.

'A quarter of pork brawn, please,' I repeated, still with a certain nonchalance. I repeated it again. I repeated it a dozen times with no success. I talked slowly and softly; I shouted;

I talked in the way one talks to the mentally deficient; I talked as one talks to the deaf and finally I tried baby-talk.

The shopkeeper still had no idea whether we wanted to buy or sell something. Then my friend had a brain-wave. 'Leave it to me,' he said in Hungarian and started mumbling under his nose in a hardly audible and quite unintelligible manner.

The shopkeeper's eyes lit up: 'I see,' he said happily, 'you want a quarter of pork brawn. Why didn't you say so?'

The next stage was that I began to understand foreigners but not the English or the Americans. The more atrocious a foreign accent someone had, the dearer he sounded to me. But time passed and my knowledge and understanding of English grew slowly. Until the time came when I began to be very proud of my knowledge of English. Luckily, every now and then one goes through a sobering experience which teaches one to be more humble.

Some years ago my mother came here from Hungary on a visit. She expressed her wish to take English lessons at an L.C.G. class, which some of her friends attended. I accompanied her to the school and we were received by a commissionaire. I enquired about the various classes and said that we were interested in the class for beginners. I received all the necessary information and conducted **a lengthy conversation** with **the** man, in **the** belief that my English sounded vigorous and idiomatic. Finally, I paid the fees for my mother. He **looked** at me with **astonishment** and **asked**: 'Only for one? And **what about you?**'

xxx