



Croissants of the world
Copyright © 1991
Nic Bernstein

So, today, I was contemplating language, language and attitude. It came rather naturally, as I was sitting in a café, surrounded by the more affluent members of our community. I had ordered a croissant, and coffee, and received the usual odd look from the waitress due to my pronunciation, not only of croissant “œkrwah” sahn” but also of coffee “ækaw” fee.” I have grown rather used to getting funny looks for the way I say coffee, or fog for that matter. I once had a woman exclaim to me, “But you must be from Boston, the way you say fog. I’m a linguist you know, when did you move from Boston?” Needless to say, she was a little put off when I insisted that I had lived nearly my entire life in Milwaukee. I lost any shred of prestige she had conjured up for me. Once, however, a friend of mine who probably considered himself more cosmopolitan than any of the rest of my acquaintances considered themselves, told me, “You know, Nic, you pronounce it correctly, that’s the way it should be pronounced.” He then went on to order another cup of “ækah” fee.” Oh well... So, I was sitting in the “æka” fay”, drinking my “ækaw” fee,” and eating my “œkrwah” sahn,” all under the contemptuous eye of the “eway” tris,” and I was contemplating language and attitude. Granted pronunciation, not language, is what I’m actually referring to, but specifically it is the pronunciation of foreign words. And I say attitude because I was pondering my own attitude, and that of the waitress, with regard to my pronunciations of these two words “croissant and coffee. I shan’t thrust this all upon the shoulders of the waitress. After all, she was a rather small player in this drama. The burden of language abuse rests more rightfully with the aforementioned affluent members of society surrounding me.

It was when I overheard one of this group order a “ækroi” sahn” and an “æek” spres” oh” that I really got going. Who, I wondered, was being more arrogant; myself, for presuming to use the correct pronunciations of these foreign words, or this other knob for presuming to Americanize them? And, beyond that simple question, why is it that people constantly refer to espresso as though it were spelled expresso? Should people, for that matter, even be allowed to order things in public which they cannot pronounce, without at

least some penalty for not admitting that they can't pronounce them?

I'm not referring to the confused tourist who nervously orders a "eweese" beer in the German restaurant, looking at the waiter to see if they've said it right. No, I'm referring to the guy who struts up to the bar and orders a "ewls" beer, smugly looking as though he's part of some elite club, even though he hasn't the foggiest idea that what he really wants to order is a "evls" beer. The bartender, or waiter, if he has even the vaguest knowledge of German, will of course chuckle to himself more at the confident guy's foolish bravado than he will at the tourist's honest ignorance.

For my own part, I avoid such embarrassment all together " I don't drink beer. What is to be done, then, about this generation of semi-literates who surround us now? You know to whom I refer: That crowd which frequent the cliquish caf s, ordering " kroi " sahnts," " ek " spres " ohs," "ewls" beer, and " herb bred." Should they be forced to take language courses on tape? Should they be disallowed from indulging in their favorite foreign delights, until they can learn to pronounce the names correctly? Or, should they be summarily executed for having the audacity not even to recognize their precarious purchase upon their position in a world society where American is but one language, with a short and undistinguished career, amongst a plethora of others?

In closing, then, I would like to leave you with this to ponder: Many years ago, while I was spending my days in a decidedly blue-collar vocation, I worked with a man named Frank, Frank Olchewski. Frank had been born and bred on the Polish, south side of town. When I went to caf s with Frank, I would order a croissant, and he would order a butter horn. We both received the same thing, and neither of us embarrassed ourselves.

Note: This piece won an honorable mention in the 1994 Shepherd Express short fiction contest.