

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 28, 2010

The Importance of Language

“The number of languages you speak is the number of times you are human.” - Slovak proverb

Exiting the arrivals area of Casablanca's Mohammed V International Airport, we descended the main escalator to the adjacent train station and immediately put my French degree to work. At the booth labeled “Billetterie”, I inquired when the next train to Rabat would be departing, requested two first-class tickets to the Rabat-Agdal train station, and confirmed the departing train's track number. At noon, we settled into our seats aboard ONCF's bright, spacious, air-conditioned train bound for Rabat - a thorough contrast from the trains that moved us up and down the Nile in Egypt. Glancing at my ticket, I realized we needed to switch trains in Ain Sebaa to a second train bound for Rabat-Agdal, and I asked the train conductor (again, in French) how far it was to Ain Sebaa.

With no snafus along the way, we stepped into April's ocean breeze at Rabat-Agdal around 2 pm and promptly headed into the thick of Agdal – an upscale neighborhood south of downtown Rabat – in an attempt to find our apartment. Wandering up the wide, tree-lined streets dotted with cafes, patisseries, smoothie restaurants, shoe stores, and boutiques selling athletic apparel, we puzzled over where Avenue Tansift might be found amidst the unlabeled streets and boulevards. Stopping twice along the way, I asked both a guard near the train station and the security personnel at a large bank whether we were headed in the right direction. Those on the receiving end of my questions both spoke fluent French, and sent us off with clear instructions. Having relied heavily on my French, we confidently navigated ourselves with few problems from Morocco's international airport to our apartment on a tiny side street in a little neighborhood of the country's capital city, all in two and a half hours. This was a noticeable contrast to our first day in Egypt.

Standing puzzled in the heat and smog outside Terminal One of Cairo's International Airport, surrounded by twenty buses filled with chain-smoking Egyptians who stared at us with intrigue, we had no idea what to do next. Internet research told us that bus #356 would take us from the airport to downtown, where we could catch a taxi to Mason's apartment in Mohandessin. In reality, each bus in front of us was covered with about six sets of numbers, none of which said #356. With a combined knowledge of ten Arabic words, we were unable to ask anyone around us which bus was actually #356. We wandered around aimlessly for an hour, arguing whether it was worth shelling out 40 pounds for a taxi when the bus only cost two, before succumbing to the tourist's way of traveling and hailing a cab. Using six of the ten Arabic words we knew, we managed to be dropped off within walking distance of Mason's apartment. Locating Mason ensnared us in another three hours of confusion, comprised of broken Arabic-English conversations with the son of the neighborhood's pharmacist and a multitude of pointing and hand gestures with locals living in nearby apartments as we tried to find out which apartment Mason lived in. Five exhausting hours after landing in Cairo, we finally met up with Mason.

Contrasting these experiences, I realized very quickly how important language is, and how knowing a local language can create a completely different experience for foreign visitors. In Egypt, even after three weeks when we had picked up enough Arabic to have a basic conversation with a taxi driver, we relied on Mason's growing knowledge of ameeya (Egyptian colloquial Arabic) to get around. Even still, not knowing Arabic in Egypt meant we were largely outsiders – tourists excluded from everyday exchanges, unable to navigate confidently within a large city, helpless when in a taxi whose driver was lost and only spoke Arabic, and struggling to be largely independent travelers in a country that has so

many “off the beaten path” activities to offer.

Having a shared language as common ground opens up other countries and makes them accessible to the tourist or foreigner. Other cultures become more readily accessible, and barriers to understanding begin to be broken down. Within my first days in Morocco, where the two most widely spoken languages are Arabic and French (thanks to Morocco's status as a former French colony), I have been able to ask anyone for directions, order what I want off a menu instead of guessing blindly, talk with our landlord about problems with our apartment, get to know our building's “gardien”, and exchange pleasantries with the cashier at the grocery store rather than standing there silently while she rings up my purchases. Language seems to not only makes travel easier, but allows one to get to know a country more intimately.

I am lucky enough to speak English and French fluently, I can understand and speak enough Spanish to get by, and I am in the midst of learning Arabic. Highlighting the importance of language as a means of bridging cultural barriers, it is estimated that between 60 and 75 percent of the world is bilingual. Yet, according to a 2005 U.S. Senate resolution, only 9% of Americans speak both their native language and another language fluently. Faring slightly better is Canada, where 36% of the population speaks more than one language (half of these being individuals who speak both English and French). In contrast, a recent European Union poll in an Associated Press article shows that 50% of Europe's citizens can speak a second language “very well”, with this figure rising to 80% for students.

Of course, English is the world's lingua franca, the language of international business, an official language of 53 countries, and an official language for the EU, NAFTA, the UN, NATO, and many more international organizations. Yet, the fact that we, as Americans and Canadians, speak the “default” language doesn't mean that we should assume that it is not necessary to learn a second or third language (I have seen too many Americans during our travels who are insulted that an announcement isn't in English or a restaurant menu isn't provided in English, but I'm sure these same Americans would expect Egyptians or Costa Ricans to speak English when in the U.S.). Bilingualism and multilingualism not only has clear benefits within a continually globalizing world where commerce is conducted between borders every day (which I won't get into here), but also provides the somewhat selfish ability to communicate with other cultures, feel less cut off, and be more integrated in countries where one would otherwise be an outsider. Simply put, speaking the language gives you an “in”.

In a relatively recent Gallup poll, only 19% of Americans said that it is essential to learn a second language. I wonder if the opinions of the other 81% would change if they were standing in the middle of a bus station in a large, Arabic-speaking nation amidst dozens of Arabic people who spoke no English, trying to figure out how on earth to get on the right bus to Midan Tahrir.