

## We Should – A Ballad of the English Language

When Maria and Marco discovered that their eldest son had asthma, they began to speak in English so as not to worry him. It was like starting up a rusty machine – one which hadn't worked properly even before it was rusty.

"But if he will be sick again?" asked Marco in his shaky English. With two spoons, Maria took some salad from the bowl and placed it on the children's plates then replied in equally precarious English: "The doctor says to put his head on hot water."

"On the water?" he asked with surprise.

"Above the water," she said. She couldn't come up with a better way to explain that they needed to fill a bowl with hot water. She didn't know what the English word for bowl was.

"I don't understand," said Marco, while the little girl moaned that she didn't like the salad.

"He must breathe over the hot water."

"Steam!" said Marco, plucking the word from who knew where.

"Steam," said an approving Maria, amazed at the accuracy of the term.

"I can't understand what you two are saying. Why don't you speak in Italian?" said the eldest son, the one who had asthma, becoming annoyed.

Maria and Marco exchanged a look. They had just made a discovery: the sketchiness of their English was irrelevant compared to the usefulness of its secret new use in the family. For the first time in their lives they felt they were masters of a language which in reality they spoke badly, and which had made them feel inadequate every time they had needed to use it at work (which fortunately was only rarely).

"Learn to speak English too, then you'll understand," said an amused Marco to his son.

The child protested the injustice of the situation and got up from the table without having finished what was on his plate, in contravention of a longstanding rule. Maria and Marco didn't tell him off, considering his irritation understandable but in fact already knowing that they would ignore it. They felt euphoric.

A month later Marco's parents came to see them. They were to stay for the weekend and look after the children; Marco's mother would cook so that Maria could rest. Maybe they would even go to the movies, which they hadn't done for ages. But an issue with the towels changed all their plans.

This was because while she was looking for a towel in the bathroom cupboard, Marco's mother found herself holding a shower mat. "Is this a shower mat?" she asked, studying it suspiciously.

"Were you looking for something else?" Maria replied ingenuously. "What do you need?"

"Yes, but is it a shower mat?"

"I think so?" said a bewildered Maria, her own certainties thrown into doubt. "Doesn't it look like a shower mat to you?" In fact, from the way the material was woven you might even have thought it was a tea towel. It was hard to say.

But her mother-in-law didn't reply, and instead asked another question.

"Do you use it to stand on when you get out of the shower?"

"We have been doing, yes, but if it's not a shower mat..." conceded Maria, also willing to change the intended use.

"But it's unhygienic!" cried her mother-in-law in horror at that point. "You should tell Roxana to put towels and mats in two separate cupboards."

Given the situation with the cinema, Maria could have said, "Of course, you're right, I'll tell her," but instead she revealed that it had been her who had slipped the mat between the towels, and that the washing machine's 90°C programme had done its stuff on the germs in each of them, consigning them to a joint and democratic death.

His mother-in-law was silent for a few seconds, then, indignantly, posed the definitive query. It was as if outrage prevented her from formulating phrases that weren't questions.

"You're not going to tell me that children use them too?"

The children who in the meantime were wandering nearby, playing on the hall floor and preventing Maria from raising her voice as she would have liked. Instead, she limited herself to walking out of the bathroom, tearing away the strips of adhesive tape that were constantly stretched out between doors, between doors and sofas, and between one wall and another (they were Spiderman's webs). Walking furiously she unfurled a densely-woven rug of English words, formulated with a syntax at least as Italian as her accent, which fell with a bang at the feet of Marco, who was peacefully absorbed at his desk: "She's saying that to *me*, who has made twenty years of camping. It has to be me who gets a mother-in-law obsessed with cleaning!"

Then she slipped into the master bedroom with the aim of nursing her grudge and stoking the flames of her anger until evening. Except that, after lying down on the bed, to her own surprise she realized that she wasn't particularly angry. With that tirade against her mother-in-law, which she would never have dreamed of saying to her in Italian, she had let off practically all her steam, and the fact that her mother-in-law didn't speak English meant that she wasn't really in a position to

take offence. In fact, feeling guilty for rummaging about in cabinets that didn't belong to her, she organised a peace initiative by busying herself at the stove and preparing a roast with artichokes, which was Maria's favourite dish. And so the incident was forgotten.

Their domestic use of the English language continued to surprise them. It could be said that it changed the lives of Marco and Maria for the better. The fact that their linguistic level was mediocre made them feel closer, united by a common inadequacy, and prompted them to take linguistic risks that would have been unthinkable in public. Marco, who had learned English from listening to pop music, emerged from the safe but abstract territory of the song and tackled topics like: his eldest son's classmates' questioning of the existence of Father Christmas; the increasingly capricious behaviour of their youngest daughter; and an ovarian cyst which Maria had discovered she had.

Maria, who had learned English from grammar books and connected words to their spelling and never to their pronunciation, learned words orally for the first time and, resisting the temptation to check the spelling, freed herself from the tyranny of the dictionary. Apart from anything else, when the children went to bed, all the practical issues had already been discussed at the dinner table and there was more time left to relax, read, watch movies or make love.

In that period, they took a trip to Zurich, a gift from friends for their birthdays, which came at almost the same time, in November, and they left for a couple of days, leaving the children with their grandparents. Having become so practiced in the use of the language, they were surprised when Maria confidently addressed the receptionist of the pension where they were staying with "Good morning. We should... We should... We should..." But after those words she fell silent, her eyes wandering the room looking for handholds, finding none.

"Do you have a reservation?" asked the receptionist, in an attempt to meet them halfway, and at that point they had no problem saying yes, nor understanding on which floor and at what number they would find their room.

"We should ... we should!" they immediately began repeating in the room that smelled of clean sheets, laughing at the renewal of that ineptitude in using English of which, it was clear, they would never be free. Because in that moment they realised with certainty that practicing English at home and in private had little or no influence on the improvement of the public English which was necessary for practical and working life outside the home. They were adjacent rooms, but separated by a thick wall.

So when, upon turning on the shower, Marco noticed that the water which came out was rusty, and found his back stained with bronze-coloured encrustations, he hurriedly wrapped himself in his bathrobe and rushed in his slippers to reception. To Maria's ears, her husband's grievance was comprehensible, the demand to have a working shower perfectly logical, as indeed was his description of the problem as "the mouth of the shower that spits disgusting dust," the English word

'rust' eluding him. Yet the receptionist stared at him in silence, captivated by his copious gesticulation but completely deaf to the deeper meaning of his complaint. Anger made Marco's Neapolitan accent grow even thicker than usual, making his English incomprehensible: it canceled all his syntactic efforts and flattened his lexical choices, and only an abundant use of facial expressions and his miming of dripping taps, disgusted faces, fingers pinching noses shut and bad smells in the air induced the employee to leave her desk and check up on the situation in person.

The feeling of being misunderstood, ignored by a world that didn't appreciate their efforts and their linguistic progress, led them to snuggle up under the winter duvet, in a new room with a functioning shower, and to stay there for most of their short vacation. The only concession to the cruel world outside was a visit to the church of Fraumünster, where the stained glass windows by Chagall, his angels as sensual as strippers, restored to them a dimension of hope. To their surprise, the audio guide explained that Chagall had only started painting on glass at the age of seventy.

"If he learned how to make stained glass at seventy, what are the chances that we can't learn English at forty?" So they agreed that, once they returned home, they would attend a course to clean away once and for all the shame of speaking English badly. Maria would burn her grammar books and learn only sounds, sounds, sounds; Marco would abandon for ever the daring metaphors, the weird singer-songwriter idioms, and would focus on serious stuff which could come in useful in the future: rusty showers, worn-out clutches, long-term investments, life insurance policies. On the flight home, observing the huge, dense huge clouds, they held hands tightly on the armrest: it was nice to have a bit of time to focus on that shared project.

Maria carried out some in-depth research into schools and courses, evaluating each one's attention to her and her husband's specific problems, and what emerged from this comparative study, which took her several weeks, was that there was no one course which was suited to both of them. Marco would have had to follow a more traditional course, to study at least some of the rules he had always ignored, and she would have need hours of conversation, which would forcibly separate her from the safe and suffocating world of the written language. Neither of them liked the idea of not doing it together, so they stalled just long enough for them to realize with relief that the date for signing up had passed and that they would talk about again the following year.

They contentedly fell back upon their domestic English and, without their children realising, discussed many topics in front of them: the compliance of the elder son in giving in to his sister's blackmail, a staff cut in the company where Maria worked, and a worrying tremor in the hands of her father, who lived far away. The feeling of not having kept faith with their shared project was mitigated by its impracticability, the primary nature of that project being its implementation as a couple.

However, a few months later the staff cut that Maria and Marco had recently talked about turned

out to be larger than expected, and Maria found herself out of work just when they were planning a summer vacation in Calabria with their children. And so, in a kitchen made misty by the sticky heat of a very humid July, husband and wife found themselves discussing in English the best way to announce to the children that they would no longer be going away and that they would be spending the holidays in the city. The children cried, and they cried again when they had to say goodbye to Roxana, the cleaning lady they had known since they were born, since it was necessary to tighten the purse strings and Maria, who was now stuck at home, would be taking care of the housework.

Within months, that obligatory decision presented them with the bill.

"Me, who spent twenty years camping", said Maria.

"What's camping got to do with anything?" asked Marco.

"What it's got to do with it is that if you like cleaning, you rent an apartment for your holidays and you knock yourself out cleaning it. You don't go camping."

From that rather disjointed speech, something emerged that both of them had always known: Maria was not cut out for the life of a housewife, and the effect of a month of degreasers and ironing on her hadn't been positive. Marco realized that it would be wise to take remedial action and he suggested that she inquire about the training courses for the unemployed he had heard about in order to ease her return into the workforce.

The idea appealed to Maria, who had already shown that she was tenacious and dedicated when it came to researching, comparing and drawing conclusions, but the result of her investigation was rather unsettling. If you excluded a course to learn how to drive the forklift, one on welding and a slew of specialization courses for programmers, the only thing that might be useful was an English course. And although it would probably be the classic kind of course, which would be more helpful for Marco than for her, it was the only thing that might be of any use to her. And even if she didn't need it, it was still better than staying at home amidst detested washing machines and malicious vacuum cleaners.

With no other desire than to escape for a few hours, Maria signed up. They immediately provided her with books suited to her level, which seemed a bad omen, ready as they were to trap her back into the old prison of the written language. But the teacher, a fifty-year-old who had recently moved to Italy, never used them: he offered her and the whole group exercises in improvisation, guided conversation and oral comprehension. He had a background as an actor, and enjoyed speaking with an Australian, New York or Welsh accent, forcing students to adapt to differences in pronunciation. Maria was wrong-footed. But although the exercises cost her a superhuman effort - she felt as though she were adrift among indecipherable sound waves - at a certain point she abandoned herself to that unknown current, guided by the good humour of the

teacher and the example of her life without certainties. (The teacher had changed jobs so many times that he didn't even remember them all, and the different countries he had been in had greeted him with languages that reluctantly revealed their secrets to him).

Her ramshackle English made a sudden leap forward, and when it was time to discuss Christmas presents for the children, Marco found that his wife now had a much better command of vocabulary and no longer got into syntactic cul-de-sacs like that time with 'We should': she formed simple, straightforward sentences, the structure of the sentences no longer that of Italian but following a sparer, more streamlined form. Marco was amazed, in a way that terrified him. How? By what strange alchemy had the teacher had been able to accomplish this transformation, and especially in such a short time? He began to feel diffident about Maria's good mood the evening before the English lessons, studied with suspicion her comments on the lesson which had just finished ("It was so hard today, I'd never have managed it if it hadn't been for James"), and began to think with dislike of this teacher James, who didn't limit himself to the hours of English provided for by the course but also extended the teaching to the hours which followed, when the group (was it really the *whole* group?) gathered in a pub to relax, have a drink and eat a sandwich. Seeing Maria so pleased with her progress pained him and he couldn't help imagining a future image of her and James sitting at the airport, waiting for a flight that would take them to some former British colony, to a house with a porch and a lawn which was always mowed.

At the same time these feelings made him feel petty - it wasn't like him to get caught up in such mistrustful thoughts. At this rate he would find himself hanging around outside the windows of the famous pub to check what kind of issues were being discussed and by whom; or he would end up going through his wife's cell phone, including the chat of the group of parents of their children's schoolmates, looking for evidence of guilt. Marco was not that kind of person and he proved it by doing what he hadn't had the courage to do up until that moment: he bought a book of English grammar and began to study.

He did it in spare moments: at work, on his lunch break, in the toilet. The brevity and extemporaneousness of the study sessions was a prerequisite for learning a subject that had never been congenial to him. Some much-loved songs took on new and unexpected nuances, others revealed themselves to Marco in all their rebellious aversion to grammatical rules, making them – if it was possible – even more dear to him. He had to recognize that, contrary to what he had always asserted, the English language also had its own complexities which could not be completely ignored. So, when one evening he and Maria, both tense after a difficult day, began arguing in English about who should load the dishwasher, and Marco said: "Tell me why should I be doing it and not you?" Maria froze and stared at him with a disoriented expression.

"What did you say?" she asked him. And after he had repeated it, she commented with amazement: "Modal verbs. You used modal verbs!" Marco then revealed to her his secret, the

grammar and study sessions, and the dishwasher was forgotten, as were the dirty dishes and domestic disagreements.

In the spring a new job was found, Roxana was taken back on and Maria gladly gave up her exclusive on the housework. Returning to the office meant she lost the right to the English course for the unemployed and she no longer saw James, although, speaking to an acquaintance who was taking the course at the time, she was surprised to learn that her old teacher had radically changed method. He no longer did the imitations of accents or the theatrical improvisation exercises. He limited himself to following the program and the exercises in the book, with professionalism but without any particular enthusiasm.

"I don't understand it," commented Maria to Marco that evening. "How's it possible? What about all those things he was so passionate about?"

"Maybe it was something else that he was passionate about," offered Marco, understandingly. Maria felt herself flush. "Do you think so?"

"Do you think that I would have bought a grammar book otherwise?" he smiled, attentively constructing the complex phrase.

When summer and the time to think about holidays in Calabria came around, Maria and Marco were able to handle the topic of 'departure' confidently, partly because it was the same discussion they'd had the previous year before Maria's dismissal had sent everything up in smoke. "We could go snorkelling," they said, "But we could do some rafting as well." Yet despite the many possibilities that emerged, they felt dissatisfied with their plans. Over the last year it was as if something had changed, and things they would have found pleasing the previous summer now no longer satisfied them.

"Why don't we go to England?" suggested Maria on an impulse. "Maybe they'll understand us now."

"That's a cool idea," said Marco. "And we've never been." He was already beginning to list all the possible positives - avoiding the scorching heat of August in Italy, avoiding the traffic on the busy Salerno-Reggio Calabria motorway, visiting museums - when the eldest son gloomily threw his fork down on his plate and shouted in English, "No. No. I don't want!" And with a very respectable pronunciation blurted out that he had absolutely no intention of giving up swimming in the sea to visit a rainy city that he would in all likelihood be visiting on a school trip in a couple of years anyway.

Maria and Marco looked at each other without managing to utter a word. There was too much to say. Firstly, how long had their eldest son been able to understand what they were saying in English? Secondly, how was it possible that the state school, which had failed so miserably with them, had managed to get him to such a high level in a foreign language? Thirdly, since when did

elementary schools go on trips to foreign capitals, given that all they'd had had when they'd been in year three of high school had been day trips to Venice and Urbino?

They spent that summer in Calabria, in a house overlooking the beach and the islet called Cirella, which, overgrown with dense vegetation and with its ruined fortification, glowed golden in the distance at sunset and purple on rainy days. The children enjoyed themselves on the pebble beach, collecting small fragments of glass - green, brown, blue - that the stirring of the waves had made smooth and opaque.

Smiling tourists furrowed across the sparkling expanse of the sea aboard boats and pedalos, heading for the small island with its steep green banks. When they came back, they said that it was impossible to climb up but that there were beautiful coves full of fish below.

Their eldest son wanted to go, but Maria and Marco knew that getting there by boat with their little daughter, who never kept still for a second, would be, if not actually dangerous, at least stressful.

But they found it distressing. They would have liked to exchange opinions in English on the fact that it was a pity not to go, but by now their son could understand them, and this had made their habit futile and deprived it of its usefulness. Without a language to express it, the desire remained silent, unshared.

And yet it was so close at hand, not even an hour's rowing, verdant and bright with sunshine, and they were so near that sometimes, if you closed one eye and looked at your hand stretched out at the end of your arm, it looked as if you could grab hold of it, fortress and clouds all. So each day the older son repeated his request: "Are we going today?"

And they, who should have given a clear, definitive answer, looked at each other and - uncertain, each trying to guess the other's thoughts - in deluding him deluded themselves. "Later. Maybe tomorrow."