

IN A WORD

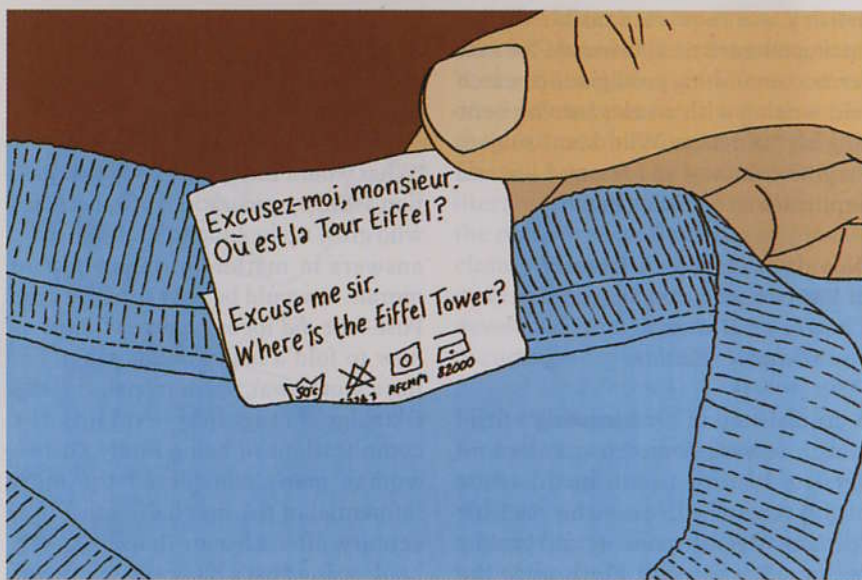
By Barbara Wallraff

SOMETHING I'VE ALWAYS loved about foreign travel is that every product package, shop sign, radio program, and menu is also a language lesson. Just go about your business and the language will teach itself to you. This isn't so different from the way infants learn to speak. It's not as systematic as signing up for French 101—but since time out of mind, it has done the job.

Foreign languages, like fancy French cheeses and paella and prosciutto, are increasingly available here at home. For instance, whenever I feed my cat treats—she likes Whiskas, made by the Mars company—the packet offers me a French lesson: “*Une gâterie irrésistible au centre mou, croquante à l'extérieur et tout simplement sublime.*” (Even in a language one doesn't speak, marketing hype is unmistakable, no?)

I've learned from my clothes how to say “Hand wash separately in cold water” in French and Spanish—even if I do ignore the message in all three languages and toss the garment into the washing machine. I've picked up “Please recycle” in Italian from my hair-conditioner jar. Stuff that comes with an instruction manual is the best. My new Miele vacuum cleaner's “turbo-brush,” for example, offers an ambitious comparative-languages program—in 13 languages, even unto Finnish and Greek. (Or if you treat British and American English as separate languages, the way Miele does, that makes 14.)

If I'd been born in, say, Denmark or Fiji, I would have grown up thinking it was normal to be fluent in more than one language. But to many of us native-born Americans, the ability to speak something besides English remains as exotic as drinking aquavit or kava. This just has to put us at a disadvantage. I'm not happy about many consequences of globalization. But I'm delighted by the globalization of the print around my house.



WORD FUGITIVES

THOSE THOUGHTLESS FOLKS who stop dead at the top of an escalator or walk four abreast on a busy sidewalk? Recently, Word Fugitives sought a name for them—and sorry, everybody who wanted to call them *tourists*, that's unfair. If you haven't noticed, locals can be clueless too. Geoff Webb, who submitted his suggestion as a comment on my blog, came closer to the mark with *detourist*.

Linda Jones Clough, of Costa Mesa, Calif., wrote to report that her father, the late animator and cartoonist Chuck Jones, referred to the people in question as the *Anti-Destination League*, and she included a link to a 20-year-old *New York Times* interview with Jones, conducted in a stretch limo caught in a traffic jam, in which he said, “You never heard of them? Well, they're all over the place ... Their job is to keep you from getting where you're going.”

The coinage *obliviots* had its partisans. *Impedestrians* was another popular suggestion. Carl Holzman, of Chicago, gave this idea a twist, proposing

impudestrians, and Cathy McNally twisted it differently in a blog comment, with *bipediments*. Readers whose minds headed off in unique directions include Steve Garnaas-Holmes, of Concord, N.H., with *sidewoxen*; Kathleen DeBold, of Burtonsville, Md., with *ignoraimlesses*; and Amy M., another blog commenter, with *in-the-wayfarers*.

Top honors, though, go to blog commenter Hank Horsey, for his showstopper of a coinage, *speed bumpkin*.

NOW DAVID K. PRINCE, of Lansdowne, Pa., writes, “Often my wife and I will decide to watch a DVD, and then she will delay coming to sit down, thereby subjecting me to the repeat-loop sounds and visuals of the DVD's main menu. What's the word or phrase for this interminable experience?” ■

Visit Barbara Wallraff's blog, at barbarawallraff.theatlantic.com, to see more commentary on language and to submit Word Fugitive queries and words that meet David K. Prince's need. Readers whose queries are published and those who take top honors will receive an autographed copy of Wallraff's most recent book, *Word Fugitives*.

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