

The Misfortunes of Simon Kuper

By Alain Borer

Translated by Jonathan Goldberg

Judging from one of the summer beach-read articles that he penned for *Le Monde*, Mr. Simon Kuper may have suffered the same misfortune as the young Englishman Rory Curtis – apparently the worst fate that can befall a British subject. According to a Reuters dispatch dated December 23, 2014, Mr. Curtis awoke from a lengthy coma due to a road traffic accident and, to his surprise, was speaking French, a language he had barely learned at school: “There I was, sitting on my bed,” he recalled, “I was just casually chatting away about how I was feeling in perfect French”.

Like Simon Kuper, rather than seeking solace in some proverbial silver lining, or rejoicing at suddenly being able to speak a difficult language effortlessly, the young convalescent saw this as the worst of woes. Exacerbating his ordeal, he said, was the realization that he was spouting a foreign language from his hospital bed “acting all French in their sort of arrogant yet sophisticated way. It wasn't me at all.” Simon Kuper, for his part, wallows in these stereotypes like a heifer in grass. The cliché about French “arrogance”, so prevalent in English-speaking societies, dates from when General de Gaulle, standing up to “indispensable America”, wrote in his *Memoirs of Hope* that he did not want the US “to set itself up as a universal judge and policeman”.

But for hapless Simon Kuper, the rotten luck is even worse. By saying, among other things, that French is becoming “useless” and pressing French speakers to seriously switch to English, it is he who is displaying multiple signs of total arrogance. Not just his own arrogance, but that of English speakers who see no need to study languages because the entire planet seems to be adopting theirs. They even regret the time wasted in the learning process, since all languages are now useless and, by the same implacable logic, basically inferior.

Thus Kuper is indulging himself by lecturing to French-speakers in order to pull them out of their backwardness (they are “provincial”, which implies inferiority), and he is shamelessly displaying a hegemonism that harks back to Manifest Destiny in the mid-19th century. This is just one of the countless ways in which the “master's language” dominates (as some people really believe), a viewpoint that tends towards total Louisianaization. It is surprising that *Le Monde* should be so complacent

towards such a militant vision, and that a *Financial Times* journalist should uphold positions that are worthy of a kid's comic.

For charity's sake, let's note just three of the many failings in this argument: ignorance, naturalness, and instrumentalism. Ignorance worthy of George W. Bush's "The trouble with the French is that they don't have a word for entrepreneur": Mr. Kuper is someone who, not knowing where they themselves come from (some 30,000 words, or 63% of the English lexicon, are of French origin), disregards any fruitful interaction between cultures.

As for naturalness, the representation of language as "natural" – the concept Roland Barthes valued as the ultimate "bourgeois vision" – is omnipresent. This is the mistake made by the Ancient Greeks, who believed that their language, which they conflated with reason and intelligence, was the "normal" language. Thus Anglo-American imposes itself naturally – and even retroactively, since the Ancient Romans obviously spoke it: Just listen to Charlton Heston in *Ben Hur*. Ditto the Ancient Egyptians, as Elizabeth Taylor demonstrated in *Cleopatra*.

One final and fatal intellectual error, widespread among politicians and financiers, is the instrumentalist conception of languages. If languages were tools, they would be found in a DIY store. But every language determines a certain way of thinking, an original vision of the world that is linked to a particular set of practices. The Chinese distinguish between 'full' and 'empty' words: full words refer to concrete things, empty ones to abstractions. Empty – or abstract – words no longer have the same denotation, the same connotation, the same extension. That is why philosophy consists in learning all languages to understand the world, and stupidity in learning only one.

By not respecting the French language he claims to speak, our penny-a-liner, as unscrupulous journalists were once called, is like the pianist who is bored with Mozart. He is missing Beauty (words like *amboise*, *fontaine*, *miroir*, *saumon*), because attractiveness surpasses grammar in French; he lacks precision (or *nuance*, that untranslatable French word), "clarity", which famously allows one to focus one's thoughts, and which lies in *vidimus*, that is to say, in the grammatical and oral verification through the written word that the French language constantly allows. All three of these failures are to be found in Mr. Kuper's series of summer articles.

Today, young Rory Curtis has fully recovered from his accident, but he continues, alas, like Simon Kuper, to speak French. We hope he doesn't suffer yet another shock, which might set him free.