

SIGNSPOTTING

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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the only thing more staggering than the number of delightfully twisted English signs popping up each year is the spread of English itself. At the moment, roughly two-thirds of the people on the planet speak it as a first, second, or third language, and there are currently seventy-three nations (if you include commonwealths and crown dependencies) where English is officially used. It may not be much of a surprise that India has the world's largest English-speaking population with 350 million, but few would guess that the Philippines has more than twice as many English speakers as Australia; or that China has at least four times as many English speakers as the United Kingdom; or that New Zealand, one of the more famous English-speaking nations, has only the world's twenty-ninth-largest English-speaking population – even Denmark has more citizens who can converse in English.

Just as fascinating is the array of diversity within the English language. Wikipedia now lists 133 regional varieties of English (including twenty-eight just in the United Kingdom). There are also twelve

types of official English pidgins and creoles, such as Krio in Sierra Leone, Singlish in Singapore, and Bislama in Vanuatu. Plus there are twenty-seven noted portmanteaus, or newfangled English blends, such as Franglais (French and English) or Chinglish (Chinese and English), or the rather amusingly dubbed Dunglish (Dutch and English). Indeed, the lingual landscape is changing before our eyes.

This may help explain the proliferation of funny signs, at least in part, but it doesn't address the sensitivity. Who are we, after all, to laugh at someone else's mistakes? I think it's a matter of a little self-deprecation. As long as we understand that we'd fare no better trying to put up signs in foreign languages, there's no harm in enjoying the humor of these inadvertent gaffes. Most would readily agree that we Anglophones would have foreign tourists hospitalized with laughter if we tried to be as courteous, sign-wise, to them as they are with us.

There is one strange phenomenon in this regard: many of the very same Anglophones who would eschew responsibility for drafting public messages in a foreign language seem to have no problem offering up

their body to other linguistically challenged Anglos with tattoo machines. That is, if neither the tattoo artist nor you speaks, say, Chinese, it would logically follow that there's a reasonable chance a mistake could be made that neither of you would catch. And just a slight deviation in one of those complex symbols might alter the meaning altogether. It may take a trip to China (or the nearest Chinatown) to reveal that the "Inner Strength" shoulder tattoo you picked up in Miami, Dublin, or Auckland is actually proclaiming a weak bladder or a crooked nose. Given the number of such stylized foreign tattoos you see on the beach, at the gym, and on your favorite athletes and actors, it seems statistically likely that a few people (perhaps a thousand) are unwittingly walking around with inked blunders.

I'm no stranger to linguistic gaffes myself. As an expat trying to get by without my mother tongue, I commit more crimes of syntax and mix more metaphors each week than you'll find in the following pages. My six-year-old daughter happily points out most of them, typically in front of visiting guests.

THE AUTHOR

Doug Lansky spent ten years traveling the planet, during which time he visited 120 countries (if you count San Marino). He has written a syndicated newspaper travel column, penned several books, hosted a Discovery Channel show, and delivered his funny presentation on travel around the world. He has moved his base camp numerous times, and is now living in Sweden where he has “the ultimate Ikea kit”: a Swedish wife and three daughters. Doug started collecting funny signs during the first year of his travels, and it has turned into a disturbingly addictive habit.



LOCATION: DUBAI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES CREDIT: HANS ZANDBERGEN

Lions, please turn right. All other big game, straight ahead.



LOCATION: CHELSEA HEIGHTS, NEW JERSEY, USA CREDIT: YOLANDA NAGY

Would hate to see what they charge for overdue library books.



LOCATION: LEIDEN-HAARLEM CANAL, NETHERLANDS CREDIT: DONALD HASLETT

What happens when they let MC Escher design the driver's exam.



LOCATION: LANGLEY, VIRGINIA, USA CREDIT: STORM CUNNINGHAM

Collect the entire set, including: "The Osama bin Laden Center for Air Safety" and "Bill Clinton Center for Strategic Chastity."



LOCATION: YASS, AUSTRALIA CREDIT: PATRICK KONG

Yo, check out myass.



LOCATION: SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA CREDIT: HEATHER AUGAR

The fried crab is also nice.



LOCATION: WISCONSIN, USA CREDIT: CINDY TOBIN

Not sure which sounds less appetizing: the caramel pecan fish or a frozen burger made of butter.



LOCATION: TRINIDAD CREDIT: TERRY FIALA

Four-wheel drive and Zoloft are advised.



LOCATION: KLAMATH FALLS, OREGON, USA CREDIT: APRIL GRAY

The 255,026-square-kilometer state will hopefully reopen after renovations.



LOCATION: TASMANIA, AUSTRALIA CREDIT: ERIC STUMPF

Presumably it's a buying crossover with the vineyard across the parking lot – a case of Merlot goes great with bags of sheep manure.