

# JAMES FALLOWS

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## Ivory Coast = France = Japan, in language habits at least

31 Oct 2009 01:54 am

In this scene from Dan Chaon's very bleak but memorable mistaken-identity novel [Await Your Reply](#), a young American woman named Lucy goes into a hair salon in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire. The country is French speaking, and Lucy is apprehensive about communicating. She addresses an African woman in the shop:

"Excusez-moi," Lucy said stiffly. "Parlez-vous anglais?"

She was aware of how clumsy she sounded... She remembered how, back in high school French, Mme Fournier would grimace with pity as Lucy tried to bumble her way through a conversational prompt. "Oh!" Mme Fournier would say. "*Ca fait mal aux oreilles!*" ... The African woman nodded at her politely. "Yes, mademoiselle," she said. "I speak English..."

The woman's name was Stephanie, and she was from Ghana, she said, though she had lived in Cote d'Ivoire for many years now. "Ghana is an English-speaking country. That is my native language," Stephanie said. "So it's pleasant to speak English sometimes. That's one characteristic with the Ivoirians I don't understand. They turn to laugh at a foreigner who makes a mistake in French, so even when they know a little English, they refuse to speak. Why? Because they think the Anglophones will laugh at them in turn!"

I can't help myself, so when I read this passage, I thought not so much about French and English but about Chinese and Japanese. With allowances for obvious differences, it's useful (as I've mentioned before) to think of Japan's attitude toward its national language as being similar to France's, and China's attitude as being similar to America's.

That is: in France and Japan, the deep-down assumption is that the language is pure and difficult, that foreigners can't really learn it, and that one's attitude toward their attempts is either French *hauteur* or the elaborately over-polite and therefore inevitably patronizing Japanese response to even a word or two in their language. "*Nihongo jouzu!* Your Japanese is so good!" Correspondingly, like the Ivoirians in this novel, Japanese people (to generalize) often seem self-conscious about potential errors in English. Of course, French speakers of English are marvelously non-self-conscious, even jauntily willful, about retaining their French accents, especially the trademark "z" sound for "th." "Zees ees what I mean..." (Yes, I am aware that the fricative *th* phoneme is the most difficult sound in English for non-native speakers, our counterpart to *r*'s in French.)

The American attitude towards English is: everyone should get with the program, there are a million variants and accents of the language, all that really matters is that you can somehow get your meaning across. Because there are so many versions of Chinese in use within China, my impression is that the everyday attitude of Chinese people toward language is similar: You're expected to try to learn it, no one will spend that much time mocking your mistakes, mainly they are trying to figure out what you are trying to say. Probably both the U.S. and Chinese attitudes reflect the outlook of big, continental nations that encompass lots of internal diversity -- and in America's case, absorb huge numbers of immigrants. In any case it was interesting to see what I am considering the French/Japanese outlook also depicted in Francophone Africa.

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 The Daily Wrap  
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**11.5.09 2:45 P.M.**

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 The Rundown, 11/6  
**11.6.09 6:00 A.M.**

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**Jeffrey Goldberg**  
 The Origins of Israel's Tech Miracle  
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**Clive Crook**  
 Why Democrats are...smiling?  
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by James Fallows

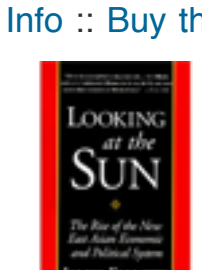
  
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