

Soda and Nylons— Learning English Was No Pignic

— GUILLERMO LINARES —

LEARNING ENGLISH HAS BEEN a lengthy process for me. My first episode with the language came during the summer of 1965 in Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic. I was 14 years old and it was the first time three of my brothers and sisters and I were in a bustling city far away from our farm in rural Cabrera.

Our parents were in New York. They had finally received their Green Cards and immediately petitioned for four of the seven children they left behind. In Santo Domingo, we would wait a half a year for our flight to New York. We stayed at the home of a family friend in a rough neighborhood called Villa Juana.

Santo Domingo was under U.S. military occupation at the time, and we were forbidden to wander the streets. Machine gun fire accompanied our breakfast and lunch and shattered the evenings. Indoors and bored, one day I asked one of the young men living in the house how to say *adios* in English. "Goodbye," he responded. Minutes later, I saw a U.S. military Jeep passing the front of the house and I cried out to the soldiers the word I had just learned, waving to them in a gesture of friendship as they drove by. The young man who had taught me the word looked at me with disbelief. He rushed out of the house to catch up with the passing Jeep and started shouting, "YANKEES, GO HOME! YANKEES, GO HOME!" He wanted to make sure that the soldiers understood

that they were rejected, that they were part of an invading force. I did not fully comprehend the context of the military invasion until my college years, when I read about U.S.-Dominican history. Then, I understood his anger.

We were so excited to finally join our parents at a six-story apartment building in the East Tremont section of the Bronx. My first day there, my mother sent me on an errand. She gave me a dollar and asked me to buy a "soda" at the neighborhood bodega.

When I entered the store, I began to look around and the owner asked me in Spanish what he could help me with. I told him and he pointed to a refrigerator full of soft drinks. I simply stared at the bottles. He asked again, and I told him I was looking for something in a box, not in a bottle, and that it was not cold. I told him it was *bicarbonato de soda*. He led me to an aisle where he dusted off a box and handed it to me.

When I came home with the box, my mother was surprised and told me that that was not what she wanted. She had forgotten that we use the word *refrescos* for sodas in the Dominican Republic. I went back to the store, embarrassed to exchange the baking soda, and the owner admitted that he had been surprised by my request.

The same week that I arrived, my mother successfully lobbied the owner of the grocery store, Don Rafael, to hire me. One day he had to run an errand and left me in charge. A lady came in who looked Latina, and I expected familiar words. "Can I have a pair of stockings?" she asked in English. I had no idea what she was talking about and I looked at her with a big question mark on my face. "Do you have stockings?" I remained silent. The third time she said it, she pointed to the wall behind me to help me find whatever she was in search of. I turned and saw shelves and racks of just about anything and everything, and I began pointing at different things, hoping to match something with whatever she wanted. I pointed to a can of sardines, to boxes of cake flour, then to a sack of rice. She shook her head and huffed. "Nylons—nylons—nylons," she demanded. I breathed a sigh of relief. I knew what nylon was.

It was the line I used to go fishing in my hometown. I looked frantically all over the wall to find the fishing line, but it was nowhere. Steam seemed to lift out of her head. Just then Don Rafael walked in and plucked a pair of stockings from a rack.

I eventually left my job at the bodega after a guy entered with a double-barrel shotgun. I didn't need any translation.

I had worked for more than a year in the bodega and was learning English little by little, enough to move on to a neighborhood supermarket. One afternoon there, a customer dropped a bunch of glass bottles in one of the aisles. The assistant manager summoned me to the scene and asked me to run to the back room and get some "sawdust." I stood still for a moment, not understanding. Before I could say anything, he screamed at me to go and hurry back. I could not understand why he was asking for "sodas" when something was broken on the floor. But I ran back and picked up a large box of Coca-Colas and returned with the heavy box. When he saw me turn into the aisle with the box, he put his hands on his head and screamed, "What the hell are you doing?" He ordered me to leave the box and get the sawdust. I followed another clerk with the same task to the back, and finally it all made sense.

During my third year of high school, a cousin of mine traveled from Venezuela to finish school in New York and learn English. I had just started working in another supermarket and managed to get him a job.

On his first day at the supermarket, we worked at opposite ends of an aisle, sticking prices on cans. Most of the customers in the store only spoke English, so when he was approached the first time for assistance, he sent the person to me. By then, I had a grasp of English from practice at work and school.

My cousin referred another customer to me. Then a lady approached him and in a loud voice asked, "Do you have Spic and Span?" He matched her loudness. "Yes, Yes, I speak Spanish! I speak Spanish!" The lady could not make sense of his response and

wasn't sure whether he was making fun of her. I explained that he didn't know English and offered to help her find Spic and Span, a product to clean floors.

During my first semester in college, I took an English writing class. On the first day of class, the teacher asked each student to write an essay about a summer experience. I decided to write about a family picnic in Cabrera. When the teacher asked for volunteers to share their stories, I was one of the few who jumped at the chance. He asked all of the volunteers to write the title of their story on the board. As I wrote mine, I heard giggling and whispers behind me. The teacher said there was an error with the one of the words I had written. I took another look but could not find a mistake in my title, which read: "My Experience with a Pignic in the Dominican Republic." The teacher and students said that I had misspelled the word *picnic*. But I was like one of the old mules in Cabrera. I told them that when we had picnics, or *pasadiás* in my hometown, my family always roasted a pig.

Reading textbooks in college, then teaching fifth- and six-graders in elementary school, and more than 15 years of volunteer work teaching English as a Second Language, high school equivalency, and literacy to adults—all this lay the foundation for the English I speak today.

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