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Decoding the Rules of Conversation

by Pamela Druckerman • March 16, 2015 • 3 min read • [original](#)

PARIS — MY kids have recently picked up a worrying French slang word: bim (pronounced “beam”). It’s what children say in the schoolyard here after they’ve proved someone wrong, or skewered him with a biting remark. English equivalents like “gotcha” or “booyah” don’t carry the same sense of gleeful vanquish, and I doubt British or American kids use them quite as often.

As an American married to an Englishman and living in France, I’ve spent much of my adult life trying to decode the rules of conversation in three countries. Paradoxically, these rules are almost always unspoken. So much bubbles beneath what’s said, it’s often hard to know what anyone means.

I had a breakthrough on French conversation recently, when a French sociologist suggested I watch “Ridicule,” a 1996 French movie (it won the César award for best film) about aristocrats at the court of Versailles, on the eve of the French Revolution.

Life at Versailles was apparently a protracted battle of wits. You gained status if you showed “esprit” — clever, erudite and often caustic wit, aimed at making rivals look ridiculous. The king himself kept abreast of the sharpest remarks, and granted audiences to those who made them. “Wit opens every door,” one courtier explained.

If you lacked “esprit” — or suffered from “l’esprit de l’escalier” (thinking of a comeback only once you had reached the bottom of the staircase) — you’d look ridiculous yourself.

Granted, France has changed a bit since Versailles. But many modern-day conversations — including the schoolyard cries of “Bim!” — make more sense once you realize that everyone around you is in a competition not to look ridiculous. When my daughter complained that a boy had insulted her during recess, I counseled her to forget about it. She said that just wouldn’t do: To save face, she had to humiliate him.

Many children train for this at home. Where Americans might coo over a child's most inane remark, to boost his confidence, middle-class French parents teach their kids to be concise and amusing, to keep everyone listening. "I force him or her to discover the best ways of retaining my attention," the anthropologist Raymonde Carroll wrote in her 1987 book "Cultural Misunderstandings: The French-American Experience."

This is probably worse in Paris, and among the professional classes. But a lot of French TV involves round-table discussions in which well-dressed people attempt to land zingers on one another. Practically every time I speak up at a school conference, a political event or my apartment building association's annual meeting, I'm met with a display of someone else's superior intelligence. (Adults don't actually say "bim," they just flash you a satisfied smile.) Jean-Benoît Nadeau, a Canadian who co-wrote a forthcoming book on French conversation, told me that the penchant for saying "no" or "it's not possible" is often a cover for the potential humiliation of seeming not to know something. Only once you trust someone can you turn down the wit and reveal your weaknesses, he said. (I think the French obsession with protecting private life comes from the belief that everyone's entitled to a humiliation-free zone.)

At least it's not boring. Even among friends, being dull is almost criminal. A French entrepreneur told me her rules for dinner-party topics: no kids, no jobs, no real estate. Provocative opinions are practically required. "You must be a little bit mean but also a little bit vulnerable," she said.

It's dizzying to switch to the British conversational mode, in which everyone's trying to show they don't take themselves seriously. The result is lots of self-deprecation and ironic banter. I've sat through two-hour lunches in London waiting for everyone to stop exchanging quips so the real conversation could begin. But "real things aren't supposed to come up," my husband said. "Banter can be the only mode of conversation you ever have with someone."

Earnestness makes British people gag. Viewers respond to the "gushy, tearful" speeches of American actors at the Oscars with a "finger-down-throat 'I'm going to be sick' gesture," writes Kate Fox, author of "Watching the English." Moralizing politicians get this, too.

Even British courtships can be conducted ironically. " 'You're just not my type,' uttered in the right tone and in the context of banter, can be tantamount to a proposal of marriage," Ms. Fox writes.

Being ridiculous is sometimes required. The classic British hen night — a bachelor party for brides — involves groups of women wearing feather boas to a bar, then daring one another to “kiss a bald man” or “remove your bra without leaving the room.” Stumbling around drunk with friends — then recounting your misadventures for months afterward — is a standard bonding ritual.

After being besieged by British irony and French wit, I sometimes yearn for the familiar comfort of American conversations, where there are no stupid questions. Among friends, I merely have to provide reassurance and mirroring: No, you don't look fat, and anyway, I look worse.

It might not matter what I say, since some American conversations resemble a succession of monologues. A 2014 study led by a psychologist at Yeshiva University found that when researchers crossed two unrelated instant-message conversations, as many as 42 percent of participants didn't notice. A lot of us — myself included — could benefit from a basic rule of improvisational comedy: Instead of planning your next remark, just listen very hard to what the other person is saying. Call it “mindful conversation,” if you like. That's what the French tend to do — even if it ends with “bim.”

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