America is one of the few cultures with insults for smart people

NEW YORK –

There was controversy about it, but the Inuit famously and really do have at least 50 words for snow. The Scots have 241!

The Sami people of northern Scandinavia and Russia use more than 1,000 words for reindeer.

Sanskrit, the language of the Kama Sutra, offers 267 words for love.

Languages tend to evolve to reflect the cultural and practical priorities of the societies that speak them.

This linguistic truism came to mind recently when, as part of research for one of my cartoons, I turned to Google Translate in search of a French translation for the English word “geek.” There wasn’t one. Nor in Spanish. All the Romance languages came up short; Google suggested “disadattato” in Italian, but that’s different — it means “misfit,” or “a person who is poorly adapted to a situation or environment.”

A “geek” — “a person often of an intellectual bent who is disliked,” according to Merriam-Webster — is decidedly distinct from a misfit.

You can tell a lot about a culture from its language. I had stumbled across a revealing peculiarity about American English: We insult people for being intelligent.

That’s not true about most of the rest of the world.

At least among Western cultures and compared to many others, we
Americans enjoy the dubious distinction of having a high degree of linguistic diversity when it comes to mocking the smart and the educated (who, I can attest as the expellee-cum-graduate of an Ivy League school, are not always the same).


Esoterically, doubledome.

You have to journey far away from the areas dominated by the Indo-European language group in order to find direct equivalents of words like “nerd.”

On the other hand, languages like French are extremely rich in insults for stupid people: “bête comme ses pieds,” or “dumb as hell,” literally means “as stupid as his/her feet.” Apparently this derives from the fact that feet are the body part furthest away from your brain. More zoologically, “blaireau” (badger) refers to an idiot.

When you think about it — which, being American, we rarely do — it should come as little surprise to realize that few insults string the French more effectively than being called stupid. France, after all, is a country with a 385-year-old parliamentary body composed of academics and other notables who rule on the usages, vocabulary and grammar of the national language, the Académie Française, and where one of the most popular television programs in history featured intellectual authors smoking like chimneys as they ruminated over the cultural and political controversies of the day, “Apostrophes.” After food and wine, the French worship the life of the mind.

The United States, on the other hand, elected Donald “Celebrity Apprentice” Trump over Hillary “I Have a 12-Point Plan” Clinton.
George W. Bush over Al Gore.

Dwight Eisenhower over Adlai Stevenson. Twice.

As City University New York professor Deborah M. De Simone notes in her essay discussing Richard Hofstadter’s classic Pulitzer-winning book “Anti-intellectualism in American Life,” the 2000 Democratic nominee’s IQ proved divisive: “Al Gore was both mocked and applauded for the depth and manner of his oratory while George W. Bush was both ridiculed and embraced for his unsophisticated vocabulary.” A reporter assigned to cover Gore’s campaign complained about getting stuck with “the government nerd.”

Bush wasn’t really stupid. The point is that he pretended to be, and rather convincingly. After losing an election in Texas, young Dubya had sworn, Scarlett O’Hara-like, never to get out-countrified again. Bush won re-election in 2004, in part because voters infamously told pollsters they’d rather drink a beer with him than with the more intellectual “French-looking” John Kerry.” (Talk about dumb! Bush was a teetotaler.)

Trump won the beer poll question during the 2016 presidential campaign. Like Bush, he doesn’t drink.

Europeans make fun of dumb people.

Americans elect them to high office.

Despite the rise of Silicon Valley and its technoeelites, the Revenge of the Nerds in the South Bay has managed to line stock portfolios without moving the needle on America’s cultural values. Jocks still rule high schools that spend millions on new football stadiums while starving the arts.

Faced with foreign policy crises, even “liberal” congressmen reflexively endorse bombing over diplomacy to look “tough.”
Scientific geniuses like the late Stephen Hawking are framed as cultural curiosities to marvel over rather than heroes to be emulated as are football players, rappers and movie stars (specifically buff men who act in action movies).

One can reasonably argue over which country, the U.S. or France, is superior in various respects. But how, as we transition to an information-based economy, can we doubt that elevating intelligence as a sociocultural ideal is, well, smarter than elevating buffoons?

Maybe it’s time to take a cue from our proudly pro-intelligence and pro-education cultural cousins across the Atlantic. Point at President Trump and other public figures whenever they say anything that sounds less than intelligent, and laugh at them. Not only for being racist, rude or insensitive — but just for being stupid.

Dumber even than their feet.

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