The Unkindest Cut

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Children overcome the primal fear that a first haircut strikes in their hearts. It's a rite of passage, the moment when a total stranger wields sharp objects in that frightening space next to your ear but outside your field of vision. If you’re lucky, a mother or father stands a close vigil, assuring you that this strange ritual is harmless and will all be over soon. Perhaps a calming voice from a skilled practitioner—someone who has escorted hundreds of three-year olds through their first shearing—also helps you through the ordeal.

Still, as soon as the drape falls over your neck, your pulse quickens and the nape of your neck flushes red. Each snip of the scissors elicits a shudder. You survive, of course, but you never really forget the dread it inspired. And last summer, a good thirty years removed from my childhood, I learned that the barber’s chair in a foreign land can be the site of fear and trembling for reasons that have nothing to do with scissors.

It was May, and I was traveling with my wife Danielle in Yogyakarta, a city of 450,000 on the Indonesian island of Java. She was conducting interviews with Indonesians for her dissertation, which left me plenty of time to explore a country where I’d never been and where my vocabulary was limited to less than 100 words.

Those 100 words were courtesy of my daily one-on-one intensive language training sessions at Wisma Bahasa, the county’s best private language school. It
has a track record of converting even us resiliently monolingual Anglophones into people who can speak Indonesian, at least haltingly. But I was finding that spending hours surrounded by an unfamiliar language scrambles the senses. Flash cards flipped over at rapid succession, and the forms folded one into another. A familiar feline figure becomes not a cat, exactly, but something at the edge of your consciousness and almost at the tip of your tongue.

Add the equatorial heat of Java to the equation, and all normal cognitive function evaporates. As the noon hour approaches and the mercury climbs to the highest Celsius register, even “My name is John—Nama saya John” might leave me in knots. I started doubting instincts I’d learned to trust over the course of a lifetime. I knew the red light in the center of the road means “stop” in any language, but what would happen when I started speaking Indonesian and “go” came out instead?

Of course, I elicit little sympathy in a world where everyone learns English as a second language is the linguistic coin of the realm. I elicit even less sympathy since Indonesian is considered a very easy language to learn. It’s a recent innovation, formalized in the early 20th century as a nationalist project to unite the Dutch East Indies—a collection of hundreds of ethnic groups on more than 1,000 islands. It has its origins in the Malay trade language that has permeated the Indonesian archipelago for centuries of maritime commerce.

Finding a linguistic vehicle to bring together such a disparate population in the modern era requires a commitment to simplicity. People won’t give up their own languages unless you make it worth their while, so you can’t hold on to archaic conventions and quirky rules solely for the sake of posterity. The new language must be sensible, convenient, and above all rational—the linguistic equivalent of the metric system.

Making it easier for the linguistic newcomer, Indonesian uses the same alphabet as English—a benefit that most American travelers to Asia can only dream of. Those 26 Roman characters create a comforting sense of familiarity from the outset, whereas Chinese, Japanese and Korean pictograms seem deliberately designed to disorient the uninitiated.

A novice should also be comforted by the fact that Indonesian verbs don’t have tenses and never need to be conjugated, so there’s no endless series of “amo, amas, amat” exercises for the beginning student. If you, I, he or we love someone—even if we ever loved someone—“cinta” will do. That may seem confusing at first, but you learn to pick up the meaning from pronouns and context. And do you have trouble remembering when the rules of English require you to use “good” and when you are supposed to use “well”? No such problem exists in Indonesian, since adjectives and adverbs are usually the same word.

Like most aspects of Indonesian life, the national language incorporates foreign influences when they’re found to be suitable. In addition to the language’s Malay roots, there’s a sprinkling of Dutch words. No reason to reject the colonial language out of hand when it’s found to be useful. There’s a light Portuguese linguistic footprint as well, owing to these Europeans’ presence in Indonesia in the 16th century (they stayed in East Timor until the 1970s). Throw in a few words from the Islamic language of Arabic, some Sanskrit terms from Indonesia’s Hindu forbears, and you’re in business.

Unless, like me, you’ve lived in an English-only bubble for most of your life and struggled through high-school Spanish. In that case, each session of Indonesian class becomes a test of willpower and endurance. The heat, the unfamiliar sounds, the forced repetition, the teachers’ intent gazes. At the end of each class, I was ready to confess to a major crime.

You wouldn’t know it from this melodramatic description, but 90 percent of my Indonesian language training sessions actually took place in English. My instructors speak my native language better than I do, so much that I’m surprised when they ask after the meaning of some American idiom I’ve employed. (“So you’d say ‘dinner’ instead of ‘supper’ in this case?” asks Lily, a woman from the Islamic University who jazzes up her more traditional Muslim attire with a tiger-striped headscarf.) My language lessons aren’t the prisoner-of-war situation I make them out to be in my head, where I’m caught far behind enemy lines. There’s always a ready escape hatch of English, an escape hatch I readily employed on many occasions with little shame.

Still, these Indonesian lessons were the first time in a while I’d been on the receiving end of the inherent power relationship embedded within language. In a world where everyone learns English as a second lan-
guage. I usually wield the whip hand, whether I realize it or not. I try to remember this when I’m caught in line in the United States behind someone struggling a bit with an English idiom.

Back in Yogyakarta, however, my four-hour language sessions had me at the breaking point. A neurologist could probably diagnose exactly why there’s dispiringly small space left in the adult brain to acquire language. I really wasn’t looking for a diagnosis, however. I just knew something had to give, so I asked (or had my wife translate my request) to reduce my sessions to two hours a day. Mercifully, the school agreed.

I celebrated the first day of my newfound freedom—two hours each day in the late morning—with a trip to the barber. I’ve surely learned enough Indonesian, I thought, to handle this basic task. I usually cut my own flat-topped hair with clippers, but an unfortunate accident with a wattage converter had rendered my electric shears useless and threatened to start a small appliance fire. Still, with my close-cropped hair, it wasn’t like much could go wrong with a trip to the barber. Or so I thought.

I wanted to get my hair cut at Yogyakarta’s “Obama” barbershop. Indonesians feel a special connection to the 44th president owing to the four childhood years he spent in Jakarta. It’s not uncommon for the Indonesians who start conversations with me on the street to approvingly shout “Obama!” when they find out I’m from the United States.

I never made it to the Obama barbershop, however. The intense late morning heat—and my comically misguided attempts to ask for directions—had me detour instead to a nearby salon that billed itself as “styling for women and men.” When I stepped through the front door, the stylists looked at me a bit quizzically. Does this guy want a perm or something?

A few seconds of halting dialogue between us, and they quickly realized that my Indonesian wasn’t sophisticated enough to articulate or comprehend such advanced hairstyling concepts as “layers” or “highlights.” And with my hair, it’s not like Rapunzel just walked in. At a loss for the right Indonesian words, I drew my hand over my short locks, pantomiming what I envisioned as the universal sign for a Johnny Unitas flat-top.

My stylist nodded in what seemed liked agreement, but somehow I ended up being escorted over to the sink. Before I knew it, there was shampoo in my hair. This was a bit more than I bargained for, but with the exchange rate in Indonesia, it was all going to come out to less than $3 anyway, so I figured I might as well smile and enjoy it.

Once I was back in the stylist’s chair, he proved a bit more fastidious with the clippers than I was expecting. To my mind, there’s only so many ways to style a flat-top, but I appreciated his sense of professional dedication. Maybe fifteen minutes later, I was back at the shampoo station, having my hair rinsed. Shouldn’t be long and I’ll be out of here, I thought.

At that point, however, I was handed off to what I presumed was another stylist. She showed me the haircut in the mirror and asked a question, which in my haste assumed to be Indonesian for the international stylist’s standard, “Do you like it?” question. Ready to leave the salon, I nodded yes and enthusiastically proclaimed “Bagus,” which I had learned as the all-purpose Indonesian version for “It’s good.”

Having expressed my satisfaction, I expected this new stylist to pull off my smock and bring me over to the cash register. Instead, she started anointing my scalp with oil. This was pleasant enough, but it seemed curious. Wasn’t the haircut finished? When I said, “Bagus,” had I fully understood the question?

She continued running her fingers over my scalp and down my neck. By the time she reached my shoulder, I realized, to my horror, that she must have asked, “Would you like a massage?” And I, in deploying the little Indonesian I knew, had nodded my head resolutely and said, to her ear anyway, “Sounds good! Sure!”

Before long, I was having my shoulders poked, my back prodded, and the space between my fingers probed for their pressure points. The stylist—or perhaps she actually was the salon’s in-house masseuse, what did I know?—wasn’t shy about putting her hands down the back of my shirt to get those treacherous knots that were only tensing up more as my shock increased. It’s usually relaxing to have a massage, but I was desperate to find a way to call for this relaxation to come to an end.

But how would I do that? I had just learned that using “bagus”— “it’s good”—would only bring on another round of potentially more compromising contortions. Bagus apparently means “Yes, please, more!” in this sympathy.
context. In the Indonesian language unit on bargain-
ing, I’d learned the phrase you are supposed to use when you wanted to bring the haggling to a close. What was it?

The massage continued, and continued to become more personal. As my fingers were being bent in every direction, vocabulary lessons flashed before my eyes. I started imaging my wife calling the U.S. consulate. (“My husband left for a haircut this afternoon. And I haven’t heard from him since. I’m getting a little wor-
ried.”)

Back in the chair, I flipped through my mental Indo-
nesian flash cards with the hopes of finding the linguis-
tic equivalent of a ripcord. I could say “rice.” “Clock.” Probably “airplane” if I really thought about it. But what message would that send? They’d probably be harmless nonsequiturs, and they certainly wouldn’t help me out of my predicament. Worse yet, by saying “airplane,” would I unwittingly be calling for some more complex and potentially permanently damaging chiropractic maneuver?

My brain, at the breaking point as the masseuse’s fingers grasped at my scapula, finally alighted on “Ti-
dak apa lagi,” or, “No, nothing more.” After all my complaints about language immersion, I was suddenly painfully aware of the merits of intensive classes. As the massage continued, I bided my time, confident that the next time the stylist cum masseuse spoke, I could pull the plug on the whole thing.

“Tidak apa lagi,” I said a few minutes later, and with that, deliverance. At that moment, they were the three most beautiful words in the Indonesian language.