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Do's and Taboos of
Humor
Around the World

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Do's and Taboos of Humor Around the World

Stories and Tips from Business and Life

Roger E. Axtell

Illustrations by Mel Casson

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To my father, Albert E. Axtell

(For the story behind this dedication,
read the postscript at the end of this book.)

vi
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Contents

Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	1
1 Words	7
Confusing—and Funny—Words	8
Humorously Idiomatic Words	13
Laughably Confused Words	14
American Words vs. British Words	17
Wrong Words	21
Right Words	23
How and When to Use Humor Abroad	24
More Advice	24
2 The “S” Word—Sex	27
Amusing Traditions	28
Strange Sex	31
Humorously Misunderstood Sex	34
How and When to Use Humor Abroad	38
More Advice	39
3 Interpretations	43
Humorously Misinterpreted Words	44
Laughably Misinterpreted Phrases	48
The Funny Process of Interpretation	52
Pronunciation	56
Silly Misinterpreted Signs	57
Cunning Cognates	60
How and When to Use Humor	64
More Advice	64

4	Protocol	67
	How and When to Use Humor	72
	More Advice	73
5	Exporting American Humor	77
	Different Types of Humor	77
	Where Humor Can Be Difficult— Even Dangerous	79
	A Few Funny Stories That Travel Well	81
	How and When to Use Humor	87
	More Advice	88
6	Gestures	91
	More Silly Stories about Gestures	95
	One Dozen “Be Careful” Unintentionally Funny Gestures	99
	How and When to Use Humor	102
	More Advice	102
7	Cruising	105
	Some Humorous Cruising Stories	105
	How and When to Use Humor	115
	More Advice	115
8	Business Bloopers	119
	More Funny Business Blunders	123
	How and When to Use Humor	126
	More Advice	126
9	Foods and Dining	131
	Wacky Meals	133
	Funny Eating Techniques	137
	How and When to Use Humor	141
	More Advice	141

10	Toasts	145
	Wittily Worldly Toasts	146
	Generally Funny Toasts	149
	How and When to Use Humor	152
	More Advice	153
11	Travel Talk	157
	Travel Titters	160
	Funny Travel Trick Number One	163
	Travel Bathroom Humor	164
	One Man’s Travelogue	167
	Funny Travel Trick Number Two	170
	Clearing Customs in Style	171
	Unintentionally Humorous Travels in England	175
	How and When to Use Humor	179
	More Advice	179
12	Misunderstandings	183
	Clearly Funny Communication	184
	Americans Say the Darnedest Things	185
	Carrying Our Misunderstandings Abroad— with Humor	189
	How and When to Use Humor	194
	More Advice	194
13	Miscellaneous Humor	197
	The Book Tour: Ten Humorous Discoveries	200
	Funny Stories from the Global Platform	203
	Postscript	213
	Index	221

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Acknowledgments

Arch Ward, the late, great columnist for the *Chicago Tribune*, many years ago wrote a daily sports column called “The Wake of the News.” In almost every column, he repeated this well-known two-line motto:

The Wake depends
upon its friends.

In those six simple words, Ward voiced the needs of writers throughout the ages.

In compiling this book, I had help from many such friends:

Sally Wecksler, my literary agent, has not only guided me through eight books but deserves total credit for suggesting the content of this one. I never would have thought of a book on humor until one day she remarked, “Oh, it’s obvious what you should write about next.” And so I did.

Larry Greb served the Johnson Wax Company in international marketing for almost thirty years. In addition, Larry is a great storyteller, and he graciously provided a number of his stories for this book. Larry is president of the Wisconsin World Trade Center in Milwaukee.

John Hough is still making marathon business trips around the world at age eighty-one, and he never fails to send me clippings and excerpts containing amusing incidents from everywhere.

I liked **Mel Casson**, the illustrator for this book, from our first telephone conversation. He was an absolute delight to work with, instantly converting some of my clumsy descriptions into clear, bright, and amusing illustrations.

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Kiki Clark in faraway Ethiopia represents the kind of young person who provides hope for our future. Serving there for two years as part of the Peace Corps, she took the time to describe several amusing incidents when I'm certain her daily surroundings were far from humorous.

One day, I cranked up my courage and telephoned the internationally known columnist and humorist **Art Buchwald**. Nervously, I stammered that I wanted his permission to reproduce his poem titled "The Tourist's Prayer" in my book. "Sure," he said quickly. "Send me the form. I'll sign it and fax it back." Much relieved by his casual, down-to-earth manner, I ventured that several years before I had followed him on a speaking engagement in Vancouver. "Yeah, I remember Vancouver," he said. "And I don't think they've paid me, either." My thanks to a gracious and very funny man.

Harry Franke is a highly respected lawyer in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, but he is also a poet, a perennial master-of-ceremonies, and an all-around talented fellow. He kindly sent me the unique toast reproduced in Chapter 10.

Thank you all.

1

Words

I once sent a fax to the manager of our factory in Peru. In the message I explained that I needed a head count. I said: “I need to know the number of people in your factory, the number of people in your office, broken down by sex, and I need the information immediately.” The manager dutifully replied: “Here is your head count. Here we have thirty-five in our factory, ten in the office, and five in the hospital—none broken down by sex.”

Later, in a footnote, he added: “If you must know, our problem down here is with alcohol.”

Words are the common denominator in our communications. Spend a few years in international travel or international business, and the impact and the worth of even a single word becomes startlingly clear.

For example, during World War II, a misunderstanding over just one word—the verb “to table”—created great debate and ill will. According to the memoirs of Sir Winston Churchill, he and his staff were discussing with their American allies whether they should “table” a certain issue. However, when Americans “table” an issue, it means they set it aside for consideration at a later time; when the British “table” an issue it

means to place it on the table for *immediate* discussion. “A long and acrimonious argument ensued,” Churchill wrote, until finally the two sides discovered their respective cultures had contrasting definitions for the same term.

If you are still curious about the impact of single words, study the word “foreigner.” We use it quickly and easily to describe any person from another country. However, check a dictionary and you’ll find it means an “alien,” or an “outsider,” someone on the outside of our comfortable sphere. We also refer to a “foreign smell” as something odd and objectionable; we say that something strange and unfamiliar has a “foreign taste”; and, finally, we may observe that we have—God forbid!—a “foreign object” embedded in our fingertip. “Remove it. Quickly!” we might say to a friend, nurse, or doctor. Also, we regard others as “foreigners,” but we never see ourselves that way.

So, here’s the test in discipline: Try to eliminate the word “foreigner” from your vocabulary. Instead, use the phrase “international visitor” or “our visitor from (name of country).”

At the end of this chapter, you’ll find a segment titled “More Advice,” with a series of tips on how to avoid mishaps and misunderstandings over innocent words whether you are traveling for business or pleasure. Meanwhile, the theme here is that communication between different cultures—even when *single words are involved*—can be difficult but also humorous. Following is a series of stories that demonstrate that point.

Confusing—and Funny—Words

In a number of Latin American countries, the word *chili* is used to refer to a certain part of a man’s anatomy, probably because of the pendulous shape of a chili pepper. A friend of mine at a large American manufacturing company once invited his distributor from Venezuela to the home offices in the United States for business discussions. The two men worked in the office for much of the day and then took time off to play golf. As it happened, it was a cold and rainy day. After the

round of golf, they went back to the clubhouse and took a hot shower. As the Venezuelan departed the shower, towel hanging around his neck, another club member walked by and said: “Pretty chilly.” The Latin thought for a moment, looked down, and then politely replied, “Thank you.”

‡

An American female student at the University of South Carolina was helping to host a group of students visiting from Australia. At that time in South Carolina, there was a popular dance among the young people called the “shag.” Unbeknownst to the American girl, in Australia “to shag” means to have sexual intercourse. At a beach party one night, the girl innocently approached a young Aussie male student and said, “Would you like to shag?” Amazed, the boy replied, “When?” The girl answered, “Now.” Unable to believe his ears, the boy stuttered and asked: “Well . . . where??” And, naturally, the girl replied, “Right here, of course.” It took quite a few moments of great anxiety before the boy realized she was merely asking him to dance.

‡

Maria Paz traveled from her home in Buenos Aires to a small town in the Midwest as a high school exchange student. One phrase that was used repeatedly by her American friends was “Holy cow!” which was meaningless to her. Furthermore, when she tried to use that phrase she didn’t pronounce it quite right. As a result, it came out “Only cow!” (Try saying that. It becomes infectious.) Another word that often baffles our international guests is “awry.” I have even heard Americans mispronounce it, saying “AW-ree.”

‡

Individual words and how you pronounce them are equally important in other languages, too. Take, for example, the letter

“n” in Spanish. When the symbol “~” (called a tilde) appears over the letter “n” in Spanish, it signifies a different sound—the “n” sounds like “nnn-yey.” When the tilde does *not* appear, the “n” sound in Spanish is the same as in English. What happens if you use the wrong form? Cross-cultural trainer Tom Newman learned that lesson when visiting Spain. Wishing to tell his Spanish interpreter he would return to Madrid in “one year,” he said *un ano* (without the tilde). He should have said *un año* (with the tilde). As a result, what he said was not, “I will return in one year.” What he said was, “I will return in one anus.”

Here are some other stories about confusing words from Tom Newman:

- In Venezuela, he saw a billboard advertising the classic movie *Grease*. The huge sign announced John Travolta was starring in *Vaselina*.
- In Italy, his friend was struggling to remember and say the word for “onion.” He stammered for a while and finally said: “It is the fruit that makes you cry.”
- Walking along the Yangtze River in Shanghai, China, a young Chinese man approached him and asked in English: “Do you want me to cut your face?” Happily, he soon discovered that the Chinese man was asking if he wanted him to cut out a silhouette of his facial profile!

+

The pastor of our local Lutheran church regularly receives messages from members of his congregation whenever they visit Norway. It seems there is a city there named Hell, and his church members who discover this fact delight in writing that they are “visiting Hell, and almost everyone here appears to be Lutheran!” As a postscript, the same pastor asked me, “Did you know that Adam was a Lutheran?” When I questioned how he knew that, he replied, “Only a Lutheran would stand next to a naked woman and eat an apple.”

+

The owner of a firm in Las Vegas, Nevada, that rented recreational vehicles to tourists received a fax from a potential client in Germany. He replied by fax with descriptions of the vehicles available, along with his price list. The owner closed his message with assurances that the German client “would receive the pick of the litter.” The German replied, “No thanks, and I am offended that you would rent trashy vehicles.” (What the German obviously had done was to refer to his English dictionary for the definition of “litter.”)

+

Irish comedian Hal Roach explains that some of his countrymen take written instructions quite literally. One Irish friend, he explains, while visiting New York City, used the subway system rather late at night. As he exited his train and walked toward the escalator he spotted a sign that read: DOGS MUST BE CARRIED ON THE ESCALATOR. Pausing for a moment, the Irishman thought to himself: “Where the hell am I going to get a *dog* at this time of night?”

Humorously Idiomatic Words

American idioms cause non-English speakers a great deal of confusion. We sprinkle our conversation with phrases like “It’s raining cats and dogs” when, taken literally, that phrase is not only confounding but also impossible. For example, eating dog is a delicacy in many parts of Asia, so you can imagine what someone from that part of the world might envision when hearing “it’s raining cats and dogs.”

+

A student from Korea told me that American idioms were particularly difficult to comprehend. He said he had studied En-

glish for nine years in preparation for attending the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. On his first day at the school, as he was walking on the campus, an American student casually greeted him with the phrase, “Hi! What’s the good word?” The Korean boy stopped in his tracks. He thought to himself: “I *don’t know* the good word! You would have thought that in nine years of studying English, *someone* would have told me what ‘the good word’ was!”

Later, trying to solve this puzzle, he decided to turn the tables and ask an American, “What’s the good word?” and listen to his reply. So, approaching a fellow student, he repeated, “Hi! What’s the good word?” The quick response was, “Oh, not much. How about you?”

+

You should know that other languages have weird-sounding idioms as well. Here are just four of them:

- In Dutch, when saying that something tastes good, the literal translation would be: “It’s like an angel peeing on my tongue.”
- In France, when you say, literally, “There are many men standing on that balcony,” that also happens to be an idiom meaning “That woman has a big bust.”
- In Germany, when you wish to say the equivalent of “Let me pick your brain,” you say, literally, “Let me pull some worms from your nose.”
- In France, it is bad luck to wish someone “good luck.” Instead, you wish them *merde*, which is the word for . . . well, “horse manure.” (The explanation is that since “horse manure” is about the worst thing you can encounter, anything else will be better.)

Laughably Confused Words

Why is English so difficult? Just consider these anomalies as pointed out by people like author Richard Lederer and humorist Garrison Keillor:

1. We drive on parkways, and park on driveways.
2. There is neither pine nor apple in pineapple, and no grapes in grapefruit.
3. Why do we have interstate highways in Hawaii?
4. And what about those outdoor billboard signs that say “Learn to Read!” Just who are those signs aimed at?

‡

My instructor in a Berlitz course was a woman from Argentina who married an American and settled in Milwaukee. She said during her early years in the United States, she was bedeviled by the nuances of English pronunciation. She confessed her worst mistake happened at a school PTA meeting. When attendees were polled on what they would bring to a potluck dinner at school, she stood and eagerly offered to bring a chocolate sheet cake, but unfortunately, in front of thirty other parents, she pronounced it “shitcake.”

‡

S. I. Hayakawa, professor of semantics and former U.S. senator, enjoyed telling this story to illustrate how confusing English can be. It seems one of his international students asked about the meaning of the word “frog.” Hayakawa explained, “It’s a small green amphibious animal that lives in a pond.” Puzzled, the student asked, “Then why did my roommate tell me she had a frog in her throat?”

‡

In somewhat the same vein, travel magazine editor Alan Fredericks was traveling in China when one of his hosts asked for an explanation and description of the word “turkey.” Fredericks explained that it was a large bird with huge tail feathers and a distinctive call; Fredericks even imitated the “gobble, gobble” sound of a turkey. He also provided a lengthy explanation of how the turkey became a symbol of Thanksgiving in America, explaining in tandem what Thanksgiving represented. Finally, to demonstrate his full knowledge of turkeys, he related the largely unknown fact that Benjamin Franklin had proposed the turkey become America’s national bird instead of the bald eagle. At the end of this admittedly long explanation, Fredericks finally asked, “Why? Why do you ask?” “Well, tell me, then,” the Chinese gentleman said softly, “what does it mean when an American says, ‘Let’s get this show moving, you turkeys.’”

+

At one point in his career, the dean of Tufts University Law School in Boston spent time in Sudan. After returning to the United States, he received a letter from a Sudanese professor who obviously had intended to write, “Do you still have a soft spot in your heart for Sudan?” Instead the letter read, “Do you still have a soft point in your head . . . ?”

+

For decades, Danish-born pianist and humorist Victor Borge has poked fun at American English. For example, he asks, “Why is it that [in English] you say you sit *down* in the daytime, but you sit *up* at night?” Borge also tells of going to a U.S. Amtrak railway station to buy a train ticket. “One round-trip ticket, please,” he said. The ticket agent asked, “To where, sir?” To which Borge replied, “Why back to here, of course.”

American Words vs. British Words

People who travel overseas take comfort when visiting other English-speaking countries such as Great Britain, Ireland, Australia, and so on because there is no language barrier. As we learned earlier from Mr. Churchill's story about the verb "to table," however, that is not exactly the case. There are hundreds, even thousands, of significant differences between British English and American English. In fact, there are large dictionaries now available listing the different word usages between the two. One prominent example occurs when we visit England and rent an automobile. First, as most people know, the British drive on the left side of the road. But that's not the only difference between our two countries. As it happens, *every part* of an automobile seems to have a different name from those we use in the United States. For starters, you don't "rent" a car in England; you *hire* a car. Then, in Britain the hood is called the *bonnet*, the windshield is called the *windscreen*, the dashboard is the *fascia*, the muffler is the *silencer*, the trunk is the *boot*, and on and on.

I once discussed this situation with a businessman from Sri Lanka, who explained, "Yes, in my country we speak British English, so we use many of those same British terms." But then he added, "However, even we have a few variations." When I asked him to mention one, he said, "Well, for example, we don't call the trunk the boot." I asked, "What do you call it?" He replied, "We call it the *dickey*."

Curious, I asked about the origin of that term, but he didn't know why that particular word had been chosen. So I continued: "Well, how has that caused problems?" He answered, "I was in New York City on a business trip and took a taxi from the airport to my hotel. Naturally, we put my luggage in the dickey. As we approached my hotel, I saw my friends waiting to greet me. Since I wanted to exit the taxi quickly, I shouted to the driver, 'Quick! Quick! Open your dickey! Open your dickey!'"

After a pause, my friend from Sri Lanka sheepishly added, "I won't tell you what that cab driver told me to do."



Here is a list of common, innocent American words and terms that will cause a British person to blush with embarrassment.

stuffed	fanny
randy	buggered
sharp	vest
napkins	on the job

Now here is how a British person defines each of those terms:

stuffed: Vulgar slang for “having sex with a woman”; or if used as *Get stuffed!* it means “go to hell!” Another bit of British slang meaning “to engage in sex” is to *bonk*.

fanny: In England, this word does not refer to a person’s derriere but instead to a female’s genitalia. Similarly, a *willy* is, for an Englishman, his penis. (Which makes one wonder what reaction the British had over the American stage play and movie *Fanny* and the more recent movie *Free Willy*.)

randy: This is not the familiar form of the name Randolph; in England, it is synonymous with the American word “horny.”

buggered: An American might say, “I’ll be buggered,” meaning confused or confounded; or we might refer to a cute child or animal as “a cute little bugger.” But in England, to be *buggered* is to commit sodomy. In English business lingo, the *buggeration factor* is akin to Murphy’s Law (i.e., “What can go wrong usually does”).

sharp: If an American describes a colleague as “sharp,” it is a compliment, meaning the person is quick, intelligent, and able; but in England, it means the person is devious and unprincipled.

vest: What an American calls a “vest” is known as a *waistcoat* to an English person; a *vest* in England is an undershirt, so

Americans should be wary of admiring an Englishman's vest.

napkins: In England, *napkins* are “diapers,” also referred to as *nappies*; a table napkin in England is called a *serviette*.

on the job: In England, this is a slang expression for “having sex,” which explains why one British gentleman expressed delight when an American acquaintance casually mentioned that his father “was eighty years old when he died on the job.”

In a turn of the tables, the following is a list of British words that will fall oddly on American ears but are as innocent as a baby's smile in England:

pecker	bangers	to knock up
rubber	pissed	scheme
cheap	homely	to bomb
vet	tinkle	spotted dick

Here are the definitions for those words when used in Great Britain:

Pecker refers to the chin; so don't be surprised if a Britisher says to you, in an attempt to perk up your spirits, “Keep your pecker up.”

Bangers are sausages in Great Britain, which means you might hear a pub patron order “a beer and a banger, please.”

To knock up can be used with complete impunity in several situations in England. It can mean “to wake me up” on the telephone; or, in the game of tennis, it can mean rallying the ball back and forth in practice before starting a game. (Note: On my first trip to England, I was invited to play tennis with a charming young lass who coolly inquired, “Would you like to knock up first?”)

Rubber is the word for “eraser”; therefore, you can under-

stand why a Florida PR executive was once shocked on hearing an English architect friend cry out, "Who nicked my rubber? It was my favorite rubber. I had it for over three years!" Later, the PR executive deciphered his friend's complaint to mean "Who stole my eraser?"

Pissed is not an expression of anger, as it is in the United States; in England, it usually means someone is very drunk.

Scheme, for most Americans, is a negative word, because we consider a scheme something that is a bit sly and slick; in England, however, it is just a synonym for the word "plan."

Cheap, for Americans, connotes something of poor quality; in England, however, it is used more often to refer to something inexpensive, as in a *cheap day ticket* on the railroad.

Homely does not mean unattractive in England; rather, it is just the opposite—a person in England who is homely is "homelike," meaning a warm and comfortable person.

To bomb in the United States is decidedly bad. A show that "bombs on Broadway" is a failure. But in England, something that "went like a bomb" is a great success.

Vet does not refer to a veterinarian; instead, it is used as a verb and means "to thoroughly check something over," as in the phrase "Let me vet your proposal before we send it."

Tinkle is used as in the statement "Give me a tinkle," which means to phone someone. The British would also say, "I will *ring* you tomorrow."

Spotted dick is a pudding, and the "spots" are ordinary raisins; you'll find this unique dessert listed frequently on English menus.

Wrong Words

The English language has many quirks, twists, and surprises. One of the best known is an oxymoron, meaning a pair of

words that actually contradict each other. Common examples are jumbo shrimp, bluegrass, plastic glasses, evaporated milk, and the reference to a golf club as a “metal wood.” Also, in Washington, D.C., a well-known U.S. senator once referred to the Iran-Contra scandal as a “transparent cover-up.” That’s an oxymoron of the first order.

If that isn’t bad enough, even though there are about 750,000 words in the English language, we have a social situation in North America for which we do not have an agreed-upon label. That occurs when your son or daughter is living with someone of the opposite sex and they are not married—what is the proper way to introduce that person? Terms like “friend,” “sweetheart,” “roommate,” and “partner” are sometimes heard, but they all have well-established separate meanings. One phrase that has gained modest popularity in the media is “significant other,” but in everyday conversation, that term has still not gained widespread acceptance. In the U.S. census of 1990, the government tried to solve this problem by labeling such people as “POSSLQs,” meaning “persons of the opposite sex sharing living quarters.” That hasn’t been adopted, either. How many times have you heard someone introduced as “my POSSLQ”?

On two occasions, I have challenged audiences to solve this problem. In one instance, a person responded that he used the phrase “err ah.” When I asked him to explain, he said his reply was, “I say, ‘I’d like you to meet my errrr . . . ahhhh.’”

On the other occasion, I said to a group of business executives and their spouses, “This is a creative group. Let’s try to solve this problem. Let’s decide what is a good term to use when introducing the person living with your son or daughter if they are not married. What should we call him or her?” A woman in the back row jumped up, clearly agitated, and said, “That’s easy! I call him ‘that son-of-a-bitch.’”

‡

The wrong words can also create serious consequences. During business negotiations with a Japanese businessman, I once

said, “Well, our thinking is in parallel.” He went away and I didn’t hear from him for weeks and weeks. Finally, I phoned him and said, “What has happened? I thought our discussions were moving along nicely.” He replied, “I did, too. But you used a word that I didn’t quite understand so I looked it up in the dictionary. The word ‘parallel’ means ‘two lines that never touch.’”

He thought I was saying, “Our thinking is separate, apart . . . and will never touch.”

Right Words

The worst offense Americans commonly commit about their neighbors to the north, Canadians, is to stereotype them as “just like us.” Canadians have a very proud heritage—many can speak two languages fluently—plus they are proud of their diverse ethnic makeup. Consequently, from Canada come these definitions:

1. Americans are said to be “benevolently ignorant” about Canadians. Meanwhile, Canadians are said to be “malevolently well informed” about Americans.
2. One definition of a Canadian is “an unarmed American with health insurance.”

Sir Winston Churchill was apparently one of those who could fashion just the right retort, or the perfect rejoinder. Here are just two examples:

- When Lady Astor said to him, “If you were my husband, I’d put poison in your coffee,” Churchill replied, “If you were my wife, I’d drink it.”
- George Bernard Shaw invited Churchill to the opening-night performance of his play *Saint Joan*. At that time, Churchill had just lost a parliamentary election and, twisting the knife, Shaw sent two tickets with the message “One [ticket] for yourself and one for a friend—if you

have one.” In response, Churchill wrote that he could not attend but asked if he could have tickets for the second night’s performance—“if there is one.”

†

Americans are notoriously ethnocentric, especially about their language. A standard joke among worldly travelers is to ask this series of questions: “What do you call a person who speaks three languages?” Answer: “Trilingual.” “What do you call a person who speaks two languages?” Answer: “Bilingual.” What do you call a person who speaks only one language?” Answer: “An American.”

H. L. Mencken, the American editor, critic, satirist, and author of works on the American language, cleverly summed up the American narrow attitude toward learning other languages like this: “If English was good enough for Jesus Christ, it’s good enough for me.”

How and When to Use Humor Abroad

We Americans tend to rely on single words to evoke humor: the surprise ending, the exaggeration, the last-second twist, the shocker. Other languages do the same. But as we have learned here, while the wrong word in the wrong place at the wrong time can be funny, it can also lead to damaging misunderstandings. So, as you travel abroad, in your early relationships with other nationalities, *it is best to tread lightly when relying on individual words or phrases to generate humor.* As you become better acquainted with each other you will discover—slowly—what makes each of you laugh. Let those discoveries be your guide.

More Advice

By this point, I hope it’s obvious that single words (and phrases)

can be like those old-fashioned exploding cigars: when they blow up, everyone around you laughs, and you end up with soot all over your face.

Following are a half-dozen tips for communicating more effectively in American English when traveling the globe or when hosting international visitors.

Tip #1 Speak and write using simple vocabulary. Avoid all of the following:

- idioms (“flatter than a pancake.”)
- slang (“We don’t want any hanky-panky with this business deal.”)
- euphemisms (“I need to visit the little boys’ room.”)
- sports terminology (“This project will be a slam dunk.”)
- acronyms (“We need an answer ASAP.”)
- jargon (“My modem is 33 BAUD, but with fiber I’ll be up to 56.”)

Tip #2 Speak slowly and distinctly. Among international travel savants, it is said you can determine who the experienced professionals are by the slow pace of their speech.

Tip #3 Enunciate clearly. This means avoiding those words and contractions we Americans seem to slur into one clipped word:

gonna	comin’
wanna	goin’
wouldja	whatcha
oughta	saying “ya” instead of “you”
shoudda	saying “em” instead of “them”
	saying “yeah” instead of “yes”

Tip #4 If, in your conversations or discussions, you sense that something has suddenly gone sour—a stiffening of the body, a grimace of the face, or a general coolness in manner—

stop and reflect on, or even inquire, if perhaps you used a word or phrase that caused confusion.

Tip #5 As you'll read in Chapter 5, Exporting American Humor, avoid any play on words, double entendres, complicated metaphors, or unusual analogies.

Tip #6 Be sensitive about accents and pronunciation of certain words. For example, some international acquaintances may have difficulty understanding Americans with southern accents. Or they may have learned British English, where many words are pronounced differently from American English. Examples: SHED-ule for schedule, la-BOOR-itory for laboratory, PAHS for pass, PAH-don for pardon, and so on.

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For more tips on avoiding confusion, refer to the section "More Advice" in Chapter 12, Misunderstandings.

