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The Kink's English – Episode II

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The Kinks' English

Being an account on the life of a bilingual individual on a monolingual world

Leonardo Villarroel¹

Episode II – El supercool cómics.

Ok, so I'm typing this on an airplane on my way “home” to Santiago. You do know I work away, I told you last time. My good friend Loreto got me the job.

I spent the whole week trying to figure out what to write about. I had a general plan for this column-like article, back when I wrote the first one. I even outlined up to episode IV of the tiny little bugger. Advice for the young at heart there in the audience: whenever you have an idea for writing something, GO AND WRITE IT

Seriously, don't let time slip away, or else you'll end up writing nothing at all, or worse, writing about how you spent the whole week trying to figure out what to write about.

Originally, the very last paragraph of the first episode claimed the next one was called “chopping at the mall”. My editor, Manuela, in all her infinite wisdom, decided to cut it out from the final product, and thus involuntarily gave me leeway to write about ANYTHING I could possibly conceive.

And there my problems began.

¹ After being dramatically exposed to gamma radiation, thus splitting his personality into a rampaging hulk and a not-so-much-mild-mannered-as-kind-of-shy writer, Leonardo Villarroel thought there was nothing he could not handle and decided to work in the North of Chile as an educational consultant. He is just realizing the solar radiation in Copiapó might be too much for him. Also, he loves footnotes.

Because, you see, with writing as with many things in life, boundaries are, more often than not, your friends. If someone tells you to produce a written piece in 3789 words about the sudden loneliness penguins experience while nesting in Antarctica; well, you have a start. You know where to do the research, how to edit your piece to make it acceptable for the 3879-word standard, and so on. On the other hand, if you just know that you have the blank canvas all to yourself, well you can basically do everything. Do everything easily turns into do nothing as any college-level student knows. There was even a Sprite slogan that dwelt on the matter a few years back.

Fuck publicists, what do *they* know about writing?

And since we are on the subject, fuck journalists too. “If I wanted to make double the money by thinking only half of what I do, I’d be teaching journalists” were the immortal words of one of my Spanish grammar professors back when I was an undergrad. Utterly hyperbolic, but what gives? These are the days for exaggerated gestures. When speaking Spanish I add “hiper-” and “súper-” to every other adjective. In English, naturally, I lose the dash. It’s supercool.

These have also been the days in which the youth of my country has made me, for the first time in two score years and ten, I kid you not, proud to be Chilean. Finally fed up of the vacuous rhetoric of five generations past, these kids have taken to the streets, reclaimed our public spaces, and dragged us all who were too numb to do anything about it into consciousness and action. The first generation to be born in our restored democracy, I salute you with outmost thankfulness and admiration. I wish my generation was more like you and less like el Chino Ríos.

During the writing of this piece I also went through a phase of “I cannot write about the silliness² of correctly articulating the “sh” phoneme while my fellow countrymen who is fighting for a right to equality and justice is being mowed down by the riot police”. And thus I wrote not one but two columns, one of them entitled “White riot”³, the other one called “the perpetual machine”.

² The author would like to clarify his utmost respect for silliness as a concept and everything it entails. In fact, he devoted a significant part of last weekend to watch *Almost the Truth: Lawyer's Cut*, the six-hour documentary on Monty Python. Which he encourages you to watch.

³ "White Riot" ultimately ended up being: <http://lv55.blogspot.com/2011/08/la-validez-de-la-violencia.html>

Nope, they weren't any good, seriously. The first one can be read in a better version on my blog.

Time to turn the electronic devices off, wish me happy landings

Afterwards a great number of things happened: days came and went, planes took off and landed (some of them crash-landed, mind you), and in betwixt I managed to actually do what I am hired to do and take a good look at one local teacher's class. It was, mind you, a great class (not an English language class, that will surely make the topic of the next of these columns), and the children seemed able to grasp the gist of it all and were capable of telling the main characteristics of a legend. I was ecstatic, as I have seldom seen a really good class in the year I've spent in Copiapó. After a dynamic session, filled with creative activities and assertive timing, the teacher decided to introduce kinaesthetic learning into the classroom, by asking the children...

- Y ahora, quiero que adapten la leyenda en forma de cómics. Ya niños, hagan un cómics.

My ears were suddenly possessed of the latest dreadful Argentinian rhythm to invade our ears. Gua-chi-tu-rros.

- ¿Hagan un qué?

- Hagan un comics.

(repeat times forty)

Jesus H. Christ. One of the things that I just have no tolerance for is that super-annoying extra “s” when talking in Spanish.

- Es que yo soy fans del cómics de Superman.

That weird Spanish singular-with-an-s for "comic" and I have a long history. I started reading comic books pretty much the moment I learnt English. When I was ten I would arrive early to my lessons at the British Institute and sneak into the library, where the librarian would have had

set apart for me some old Look&Learn magazines. I would devour the last five or six pages of each issue, filled with continuing strips following the adventures of some sort of pulp character, never paying much attention to the articles, most of them seemingly vent on remarking the glory of the British Army or something of the sort. The librarian would always marvel at my capacity to go through the stacks of issues so fast. Already the little liar, I never told her I only read just the comic strip pages.

Later, when I was in high school, comic books were still considered to be childish things, the sort of which whose mere liking would make an instant pariah out of you and guarantee that no girl would ever seriously consider going out with you. It all seems like quite the bleak distant past now, specially considering how my generation ultimately carried comic books to our faculties and we went as far as making it part of the syllabi of whatever courses we could. Yes, we had made Harold Bloom's nightmare of English faculties concerned with the politics of Batman come true.⁴ Fuck you, Mr. Bloom. Still, during those years, it was to be expected that some people, older people, those who would follow Mr. Bloom's dictates before their own mummy's would commit time and time again the atrocity of talking about "el comics", sometimes to refer to a particular issue, sometimes to the entire medium. This was, however, pretty much a minority, a very geekish minority, concern. Outside the four-colour bubble, it was way more common to hear people proclaiming to be fans of someone or something. Damn those nineties. I blame Extra Jóvenes and the whole fan club subculture that was attempting to form in the pre-internet country. Even so, "club de fans" doesn't give you the right to be "un fans" more than "una manada de elefantes" makes the single pachyderm "un elefantes". Who taught these people their word-formation skills? Ahh, the state of our national education.

Things come and go. Planes fly and (a tiny percentage, rest assured) planes crash. Some things remain constant, though. Who knows what sort of disproportionate bauble of news our national media will be covering by the time you read this, but I'm sure there's going to be something

⁴ Somewhere in *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages*, a quite resented attempt at fashioning his adversaries as a "School of Resentment". Mr. Bloom would have been such a great villain for the camp Batman of the 1960's.

there. I'm fulfilling my part of the circle by typing these last sentences yet in another airplane. I'll fulfil my part in the erasing of the circle by immediately starting to write the next one. So it goes.

At least we have managed to change tiny bits and pieces, and reading comic books is no longer the mark of a pariah. It's actually kind of cool if you do it in the proper places whilst wearing the proper clothes. As with everything in this life. Trust me, that's something of a small victory for open-mindedness right there. There are some people talking of "el comics", but surely there are less and less saying "el fans". Maybe Facebook has something to do with that. People started to become a fan of way too many things not to realize the incoherence in the singular form. Or, more likely, they didn't realize anything at all, but were subtly trained to follow a convention. In any case, it's a good thing.

Maybe that's the one thing we have to be thankful of Facebook for.⁵

⁵ Hey kids, remember: the inadequacy of ending a sentence with a preposition is one of the Greatest Myths of the English Language. It is also one of the worst things to try and do in Spanish, as you end up sounding, at the very least, aphasic. Now *there* is an idea for a future column...