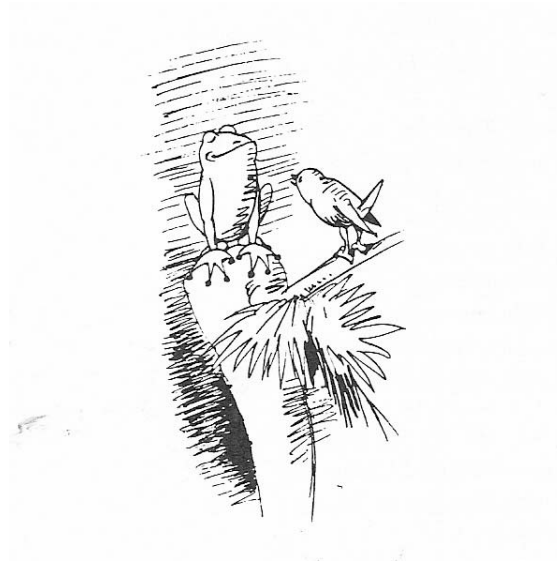


**Relevance in conversations in Busa (Nigeria):
Barking up the wrong moon¹**

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This is what Wilhelm Busch, the wise cartoonist, has to say about what we might call the aesthetic and ethical problems of acquiring second language (L2) behavior, and about the 'relevance' of songs which toads learn to sing:



Wenn einer, der mit Mühe kaum
Gekrochen ist auf einen Baum,
Schon meint, daß er ein Vogel wär,
So irrt sich der. (Busch 1974: 213)

If someone who has barely managed to climb a tree thinks he is a bird, he errs. Acquisition of L2 behavior will not make toads sing or fly. But let us suppose our toad is an accomplished language learner: a singing toad with perfect L2 phonetics and all the idioms. Now up there at the top of the bird's tree: will it sing about things in the world of the birds?

It is often the case that learning to speak a second language is practiced by learning to say nothing. Most of us who have gone through the usual school curriculum think this is part of the nature of 'second languages'. It even strikes us as extraordinary that in the African tradition, for instance, language learning always is linked to the need to communicate and to be relevant.

Our language learning techniques are practiced in 'course' or 'school' contexts where it often appears that little of relevance can be said² - certainly little of relevance beyond the language learning context itself. The artificial set-up has become so 'natural' to us - and on some level of competence the language learning is often so successful - that many teachers and learners are no longer aware of its artificialities and dangers. The toad does learn to sing. But in the process of doing so it also learns how to be perfectly irrelevant.

Consider the following two conversations, both of which took place in the same setting in a little village near Kaiama, Nigeria.³ The speaker introduced as A is one of the village elders, B is me, the L2 speaker of Busa.

*Conversation 1.*⁴ Time: an evening in 1969. Topic: events and activities of the day, and implicitly: practical ethics.

A1: And you, what have you been doing?

B1: I have been writing.

A2: (acknowledges)

B2: Writing proverbs.

A3: (acknowledges)

B3: Let me tell you one.⁵

(1)

blo¹ ke¹ di¹re² i³ mu¹su³

toad which climbed tree on-top

A toad which has got to the top of a tree

gban¹-n¹-loh²

bird-it:is-not.

isn't a bird yet.

The conversation then continued and enlarged on the topic of presumptuous and inappropriate behavior for a while. In retrospect, I consider this conversation a felicitous piece of communication. One reason for this is that Wilhelm Busch's wise saying was, so to say, accepted into the genre of Busa proverbs. This in itself was pleasant to observe, whether Aesop had prepared the way or not. Busa proverbs can be illustrated by the following two-liners both of which are not very different from that of Busch:

(2)

to³ ban¹ zi¹ kun¹ bi³ta³,

if a:bird age held much,

Even if a bird may have got very old,

e¹-e³ li³ kun³-ro².

it-FUTURE tree hold-not.

it won't remove trees. (Wedekind 1970b; 1972: 100)

(3)

bo³-n³ ti¹ i³ da²,

what?- is a:robin mother,

How small the mother robin is,

be¹re³ a¹ ne³!

even her child!

and how much smaller her child! (Wedekind 1970b; 1972: 102)

The second reason why this conversation was satisfying is because the subsequent contributions enlarged on the subject in a meaningful, coherent way and this not just for politeness' sake, but under the rhetorical principle of 'relevance'.⁶ Now compare this with the second conversation.

Conversation 2. Time: an evening in 1969. General topic: events of the day.

A1: (Short silence)

B1: A man has been walking on the moon now.

(There follows a short explanation that he flew there)

A2: (Silence. Then, as the silence begins to get awkward:)

A3: Is there good soil for farming up there?

B3: No.

A4: (Silence. Change of subject)

B4: (Perplexed)

Today, we might get a reaction like A3 from 'progressive' Western conversation partners, but this was in 1969, and it was in the quiet Busa culture of the Nigerian countryside. While the first conversation can be considered felicitous, this second one was a failure. But why did it fail? There are several explanations I have to offer.

1. My limited L2 competence. (Possible, but my conversation partners did not give up on me in other conversations.)
2. Disbelief. The men thought I was lying. (Not impossible, but, as far as I remember, this would be the only instance of such a reaction, and not consistent with the reply given, A3 above.)
3. Religious indignation. My conversation partner was a Muslim who did not like to see the moon treated irreverently. (Possible, but not typical of Busa religious behavior, and not consistent with reply A3.)
4. Irrelevance. If the topic 'moon' did not relate to meaningful Busa values or concepts and propositions such as the lunar and religious calendar or the need for good farming land close at hand, then the topic was for the foreigner alone, and it had no place in the Busa world of discourse.

The conversation simply tailed off at that point. I do not remember how I had expected the conversation to continue, it simply did not. Nor do I remember what kind of reply I had anticipated from the elders. In my naive enthusiasm about the news I had just heard on my short-wave radio I must have assumed the 'moon' I was talking about and theirs would be identical they were not, they were hardly related to each other. For both conversation partners, a large amount of mental processing would have been required to create a meaningful link between the one concept 'moon' and the other (the right one and the wrong one), so much processing in fact that both of us gave up and considered the matter irrelevant.⁷ With this built-in irrelevance in my contribution, communication was probably doomed to break down and leave all of us perplexed.

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¹ The Busa people near the Benin border number around 50,000. They are the only people as far east as Benin and Nigeria speaking a Mantle language. The events described here occurred during field studies in 1969. For details see note 2 below and Wedekind (1972).

² 'Relevant' is understood as 'contributing to the conversational goal' of speaker and hearer (Leech 1980: 94, redefining 'relevance' as defined in Smith and Wilson 1979: 177).

³ For a little more than two years my family and I lived in Gbangizin, a tiny village north of Kaiama.

⁴ The transcription is phonemic/orthographic (see Wedekind 1970a, 1972: 221-263). CV_n marks nasalization, -h marks the closed set in a vowel harmony, and for practical reasons, tones here are given as numbers: Low CV¹, Mid CV², and High CV³.

⁵ Busa proverbs (ga¹ ra³) take the form of two lines, and the Wilhelm Busch translation was easily acceptable within this framework.

⁶ Grice (1975) speaks of a 'politeness principle' in interpersonal rhetoric, as different from the effort to be 'relevant'.

⁷ Also, see Wilson and Sperber (forthcoming: 21) 'the greater the amount of processing, it [ie., a new proposition] requires, the less relevant it is'.