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Toffee and Candy

Savita Iyer • Published on March 29, 2007

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My 3-year-old daughter was confused. Before she could see the pediatrician, a lady in a white sari, who everyone was calling “sister,” needed to take her temperature and weigh her.

“But she’s not my sister,” my daughter wailed. “I don’t have a sister, I only have a brother.”

Patently I explained to my daughter that here, in India, all hospital nurses are called “sisters,” even if they’re not one’s flesh and blood. She still didn’t get it—probably because she’s only 3, but maybe also because I have done so much explaining to her and her brother since I brought them to India, that I’ve completely confused her.

We moved to India a few months ago from the States



and since our arrival, my kids have had to get used to new meanings for a whole host of words. Potato chips, for instance, are called “wafers” in India; for us in Europe and the United States, wafers are a kind of biscuit. At a restaurant, my son gave me a hard time because he was served “Finger Chips” when he had asked for French Fries. (He could see, of course, that they’re one and the same, but he was still not convinced.) And every afternoon when he gets home from school, the babysitter reminds my son to change his “dress.” (Boys wear them too in India, you know.)

In India, I, too, have had to adapt to a whole new lingo. I have learned, for example, that the lady who comes in every day to clean my house is a “top servant” (even though the word “servant” always makes me cringe) because she does the “top work”—sweeping and scrubbing as opposed to chopping and cooking. When I go out to a restaurant, I make sure I ask for the “short eats” menu in order to select appetizers, and I also ask for “tomato sauce” when I want ketchup. I have only just got used to plastic bags being called “covers.”

Being of Indian origin, I have always been familiar with Indian English, and I love the fact that it is a form of the English language unto itself. Indeed, the best part about language is that it is not finite. It is constantly moving, changing through history, taking new forms in different places. Language is a manifestation of culture, an expression of the individuality of every part of the world.

My children, like all children, have adapted to Indian English fast, but they were born in the United States and naturally, still use elements of the spoken language that surrounded them there—not always understood by people here, and I often find myself having to translate. My kids also use words that I have unwittingly passed onto them as a legacy of my own childhood in Switzerland. A winter jacket, for instance, is for them an

“anorak,” an archaic term used for a dreary colored parka that only those who grew up in the 1980s in Europe would understand (although I am not sure if the word “anorak” even exists anymore in Europe).

We are lucky that we have been able to travel and absorb so much from so many different cultures. Being around so many different people has enriched us in many ways, and through the words we use, we will be able to take with us bits and pieces of everywhere we have been. My son spent the first three years of his life with a wonderfully warm Latina lady in New Jersey, from whom, in effect, he learned to speak English, and he still uses some of the words he took from her. They are a part of our family lexicon.

I am thrilled that my children are getting to travel the world and it's particularly great that they get to experience living in India. I think it's wonderful that after just a few months here, they have strong Indian accents and talk with the neighborhood kids as though they have always been here. When we move on, they'll probably still hold onto much of what they have learned here. I'm sure we'll always eat both “toffees” and “candies.” We might wear “glasses” instead of “specs,” but at least we'll know what the latter are.

I may have to draw the line at the usage of the word “rubber,” though. It's the only instance in which I have had to tell my son that for us, it is and always will be an “eraser”; a “rubber,” I tell him, is something else, and he'll discover its meaning later in life, on his own.

Savita Iyer and her family now live in Mysore, India.

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