

# *Sketch*

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## Zpeaking

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## Zpeaking

Rachel Mullen

I first realized I had the language competency of a French four-year-old upon meeting a native Quebecois the final week of school. The problem was, this revelation came a week and a half before I was set to study in France for two months.

I was riding around the parking lot of Brookside Park on a friend's mini motorcycle, one similar to the type you see clowns wobble around on in slow paced parades. My friends and I had all taken a spin on it, some better than others, when a tall, dark haired man wearing a large camera and strap around his neck walked up to us.

"Hallo. I was wondzering if you could tell me what is zat?" he asked my friend Steve.

A small red siren went off inside my head. *Mon Dieu!* Zat was a Frenchman.

"Did you hear him?" I whispered to my friend Missy, my eyes wide and eyebrows arched. "He's French. I know it. I just know it."

I watched him ride around the pavement, his mouth open and laugh high. As he dismounted the vehicle made for parading Shriners and posed for a picture with it, I approached him, ready to make his night by speaking to him in the language of love. This man probably hadn't spoken French in weeks, even months. I would be performing a service for the greater good of our global family.

"Are you from France?" I boldly asked him as he muttered his "Zank yous" to Steve and the rest of us.

"No, I come from Quebec. I am studzying Enzineering here for za zemester," he responded.

Ah, not a true Frenchman, but a breed nonetheless. I could still use my skills and expertise on him. "I wondered because I speak French," I said, my voice leaping an octave.

"Really?" he said.

He went on in French. At least I thought it was French. This is what I heard in English: "I have not fdjsiflf soklestw in the United States."

"What?" I said, my neck jutting forward like a clucking chicken.

He repeated again, "I said, I have not afjklcxui person in the

United States.”

“Oh, *oui*,” I said, my head nodding enthusiastically. I heard his entrancing, nasal-heavy French and in thwarting contrast, responded in my disjointed grammatical French. “I to understand now.” I lied. I had no idea what this man was saying. All I understood was that he needed to slow the hell down if he wanted to continue a conversation with me.

“I go to the France this summer,” I told him, hoping to talk about topics I generated, and, therefore, had some sort of frame of reference as to what was being discussed. “I live in the Lyon city. You know this city?”

“I aifsix Canada. I know aifwib France aifeif iffi not very well,” he muttered looking confused. I realized I had just expected this man to know where Lyon, France was like I should know where Liverpool, England is. I wasn't even sure if Liverpool was in England.

“Oh, I sorry,” I said as I smiled awkwardly. Geez, this man must think I am an idiot and a half. I attempted to rekindle the relationship and obscure my ignorance by focusing back to him. “How long you be in United States?”

“I leave tomorrow. Today is paocitleabes day. I coaet zpleitlsotlapco,” he said, eyeing the mini motorcycle behind us.

“Good,” I said, my mind still trying to decode the last two words. In a desperate attempt to screen my bogus proficiency, I added a pursed lip for sympathy or deep thought. I wasn't sure which one was actually appropriate. “Good thing.” Good thing I still didn't know what he was saying. I searched the deep caverns of my brain for the simplest of phrases I had learned in third grade: goodbye.

“Well, I aizcpeq friends cpaicpaentpcia in the park. I apc-paelte go apela,” he said, fumbling with the lens cap of his camera.

“Ok. It good talk you,” I said, realizing he was bored out of his mind with my humanitarian efforts for enhanced world peace and understanding.

“Don't wozicpe. Zaplccoe your French apcieclepaci will be better cialept zcpiea summer,” he said as he shook my hand goodbye.

*Excusé-moi?* “Ha. I hope it true,” I say, pulling my hand away from his quickly. Do you know me? Was that necessary?

“Goodbye. Safety travels,” I say, waving to his backside, my teeth clenched.

Oh *merde*, I thought, making use of the street talk we had learned from one of our younger teachers. *This is going to be a long summer.*

In the weeks that followed, I realized I needed to do some major review. I borrowed my brother's eighth grade French book titled "*Entre-Amis*" (between friends) to re-learn phrases such as, "Which way is the swimming pool?" and "Yes, I would like some mustard with that." I told myself the reason the conversation had gone so poorly with the Canadian was because I was in too advanced of courses in college. We didn't waste time talking about juvenile things such as what the weather was like outside or what the word for cow was. No, we spent our time discussing the symbolism and metaphorical value of an Arthur Rimbaud poem in relation to Victor Hugo's epic, *Les Misérables*. Give me any literary topic and I will blow the cork off the wine bottle, I thought. But the word for sink, I know not.

I had to go back to the basics. But the basics were boring; I was too good for them. I looked over the chapter on beach vocabulary and animals, found myself approaching the chapter on the parts of a car, and decided it best to give the textbook back to my brother. I would go cold turkey until stepping foot in the country of wine, cheese, and smoking.

Our director, Jean-Pierre, a French native and professor at Iowa State, had come to pick myself and the other Regent's Program students up from the Lyon *aéroport*. He was a small, balding, thirty-something year old man, with a small frame. Our welcoming present to France was a whiff of the block of cheese he had just bought as a gift for the driver of our charter bus, Gerard. He walked around with the package open, making us all smell it, despite the fact most of us were fully aware of its odor from two feet away. As he held it out on his palms in front of me I coughed, then gagged, begging my stomach to keep the peanuts and apple juice from the plane right where they were.

After we had all found our luggage on the carousel or gone to the lost baggage office to hear we wouldn't have clean underwear for three days, we loaded the bus. I moved close to Jean-Pierre as we stood waiting for others to figure out where their

suitcase would fit in the puzzle that was the storage compartments. I had formulated something profound in French from the airport to the bus.

"I am excited for the France," I told him smiling, proud of this enthusiastic comment I had carefully constructed.

"Oh, Rachelle," he said, leaning his head back. "The first thing I will teach you in France: try not to say 'I am excited,'" he paused after speaking very slowly and clearly. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand," I smiled and nodded, but forgot to make my eyebrows and eyes comply with the statement. I blinked quickly and rapidly, shouting a secret "SOS" code.

"No, listen. It is different," he said, chuckling. "Excited does not mean the same thing. Is that clear now?"

"Hmmm, ha," I said, trying to force air through my throat as my face turned red like a well-cooked lobster. Welcome to France, Rachelle.

Over the next two weeks, by the end of each day, I felt like someone had pounded my head with a rubber mallet several times in a row. After listening to and speaking French all the time, I was unremittingly frustrated with my inability to articulate any thoughts or emotions. I couldn't even *tell* my French parents I was in pain or pissed off. I didn't know the words for it. I was pretty sure they thought I was dumb or at the least, a stupid American.

I discovered the easiest way to respond to something you didn't understand was to nod your head yes violently. "*Oui, oui*" was the response to every complex phrase demanded of me. If I acted like I understood, there were no more questions asked. If I didn't understand, it meant a thirty minute conversation, only to find out that yes, I *could* eat an apple from the fridge if I was hungry. I had the intellectual capacity of Lilou, the three-year-old granddaughter of my French parents, for the only time I understood everything they said was when they talked to her. "Do you want a cookie?" my mother would ask in French. "Where is your doll? Are you tired?"

The conversations I did have with them were run arounds. I found fairly complex and intricate ways to avoid saying nouns I didn't know. When I needed a spoon for example, I said, "I have need of the thing that you eat cereal. It is metal. It does not have

lines. It is circle, not lines.”

My French mother opened the silverware drawer. “A spoon?” she said, a sound of disbelief in her voice.

One day, I needed a clean towel to take a shower. I had completely forgotten this word, along with the other fifty thousand household items previously stuck in short term memory before vocabulary tests freshman year of high school. How was I supposed to know then I would need a towel, let alone be taking a shower in France someday?

I had a revelation that I knew the word for napkin. This was close enough and served roughly the same function as a towel, but on a much larger scale and for bodies. Again, carefully mapping out what I needed to say, I approached my French mother.

“I have need of a big napkin. It is for the bathroom and the shower. It is for to dry,” I said with a half-smile and cocked eyebrow.

She walked me to the linen closet and pulled out a purple cotton towel. “A towel?” she said, her face confused again.

I triumphantly showered that day and hung my towel up on the thing; that thing on the back of the door in the bathroom where one puts their robes and towels when they are wet.

My parents Gerard and Suzette were used to my scattered vocabulary, but the rest of France was not. This was not to my complete disadvantage, as once I did get three scoops of ice cream instead of two from the local ice cream shop, *Nardone*. Granted I was charged for it, but decided not to complain as I had made the owner explain the 26 different flavors to me in French for ten minutes.

In French class, I suspected that the teachers had signed contracts permitting them to rip our speaking into tiny shards. This proved true the third week of oral class. My teacher Françoise was wearing the usual flowered scarf around her neck and making floaty movements with her hands when I decided I had formulated a good response to how the weather was today. I raised my hand confidently, “Today, it makes very hot outside for the weather.”

She clicked her tongue against the back of her mouth and shook her pointer finger at me.

*Merde*. I braced myself against the desk for the full blown attack. What had I done now?

"Yes, Rachele it is very hot today, but what is this word you say, "tray"? What is it? Is it an American word?" she paused for dramatic effect. "I think what you want to say is *tr(hack)ès*. Yes, *très* hot. In French, the r is prettier than in English. You must use your throat. *Très*. Now do it."

Good God, what was this woman doing? Did she really expect me to cough up a hairball? "*Tr(hack)ès, tr(hack)ès, tr(hack)ès,*" I aggressively shot from my mouth.

"Almost," she said for the next five minutes, her hand whirling around, perpetuating this vocalized embarrassment in front of my peers. Why was I the one who was being picked on? My friend Joe could barely pronounce 'l'.

"Better," she said. As her hand finally stopped, all of the phlegm settled on my tongue. "You need to work on this at home. It is your homework. We will listen as a class on Wednesday."

"*Tr(hack)ès* stupid," I muttered to my friend Sarah leaving class.

I made my second visit to Paris in my life about a month into the program with some fellow American students. On the second day there, we decided to go to the Eiffel tower. This day, the weather decided it would be 95 degrees.

Carrying my Nalgene bottle, I probably had already refilled the one liter jug three times before arriving at the Eiffel tower. Needless to say, I needed a bathroom, and I needed one fast.

France is an interesting place. There are no gas stations to take a quick pee break in, and it is completely uncouth to go to the bathroom in any restaurants or stores, even McDonald's. That is, unless you have handed over a few Euros to the establishment. On this day, my only hope for relief was in the public restrooms on the streets. Even then though, I could be very unlucky and find it had no toilet paper, soap or seat. Better yet, I could have an even greater joy in finding it was a Turkish toilet, or rather, a tiled hole in the ground one squatted over.

But none of this really mattered, because while Paris is the city of love and romance, it is also one of the dirtiest places I had ever been to in my life. Paris smells like pee, or rather, more simply put, one big toilet. Dogs, chipmunks, cats, birds, all of the millions of people that live there urinate on the streets. In essence,

the cleanliness of the bathroom didn't matter. I just needed one.

I had started to get more confident in my speaking abilities, to the point that I would walk up to any French person, fully aware that they would not understand everything I said, and ask a question nonetheless. It was a fun game, like Stump the Frenchman Into Thinking You are not as Dumb as You Sound. I was confident and brash, speaking what I wanted, how I wanted to. This sometimes came at the cost of a disgusted or appalled face in reaction to my question. "How dare you do that to our language," I imagined them thinking. Specifically in Paris, once they figured I wasn't faultless in my French or that I was American, it would go like this; I spoke to them in fairly complex French. They responded in English.

Approaching the Eiffel tower, I picked my victim to aide me in my search for a *toilette*: a Frenchman about my age standing at one of the vending stands. He was selling silver threaded t-shirts saying "*Paris! Je t'aime!*" and stuffed Eiffel Towers with faces to whiny American children whose parents couldn't say no.

I walked up to him and smiled. He was good looking and young. He probably knew English, which was to my advantage as I really needed to go pee.

"Hi," I said, "Do you know where I find a bathroom?" I asked, my accent better with the help of Françoise.

"A bathroom?" he said in French.

I nodded. Yes, you understand.

"Like this?" he said as he started to do the pee dance, his legs going up and down in a suspended run as he held his crotch. "Yes, there is one behind the leg of the tower on the left. You must go down some stairs and then it is there," he said pointing beyond the iron structure.

He understood me. And I understood everything he had said. I didn't even need to ask twice for directions. I decided to make a bold move and attempt more complex dialogue. I asked him if the bathroom was clean.

"Oh, I don't know. I just piss in the trees," he said as he pointed to the wooded area to the left of us.

Gosh, I thought, (thanks for sharing), but as I walked away from him, I felt both disgust *and* pride. I had conquered language barriers and conversed successfully with a Frenchperson for the first time in my life *sans probleme*. As I jogged through the mob of people speaking hundreds of different languages, I thought

about how far I had come. I thought about what I knew. I knew *trois* would equal three scoops of tasty ice cream instead of two. I knew you wanted a circular *cuillère* to eat your Frostie Flakes, not a lined *fourchette*. I knew I wasn't really excited about France, but rather *tr(hack)ès* happy to be there.

And, I thought with confidence, I now knew why it smells like pee everywhere in Paris.