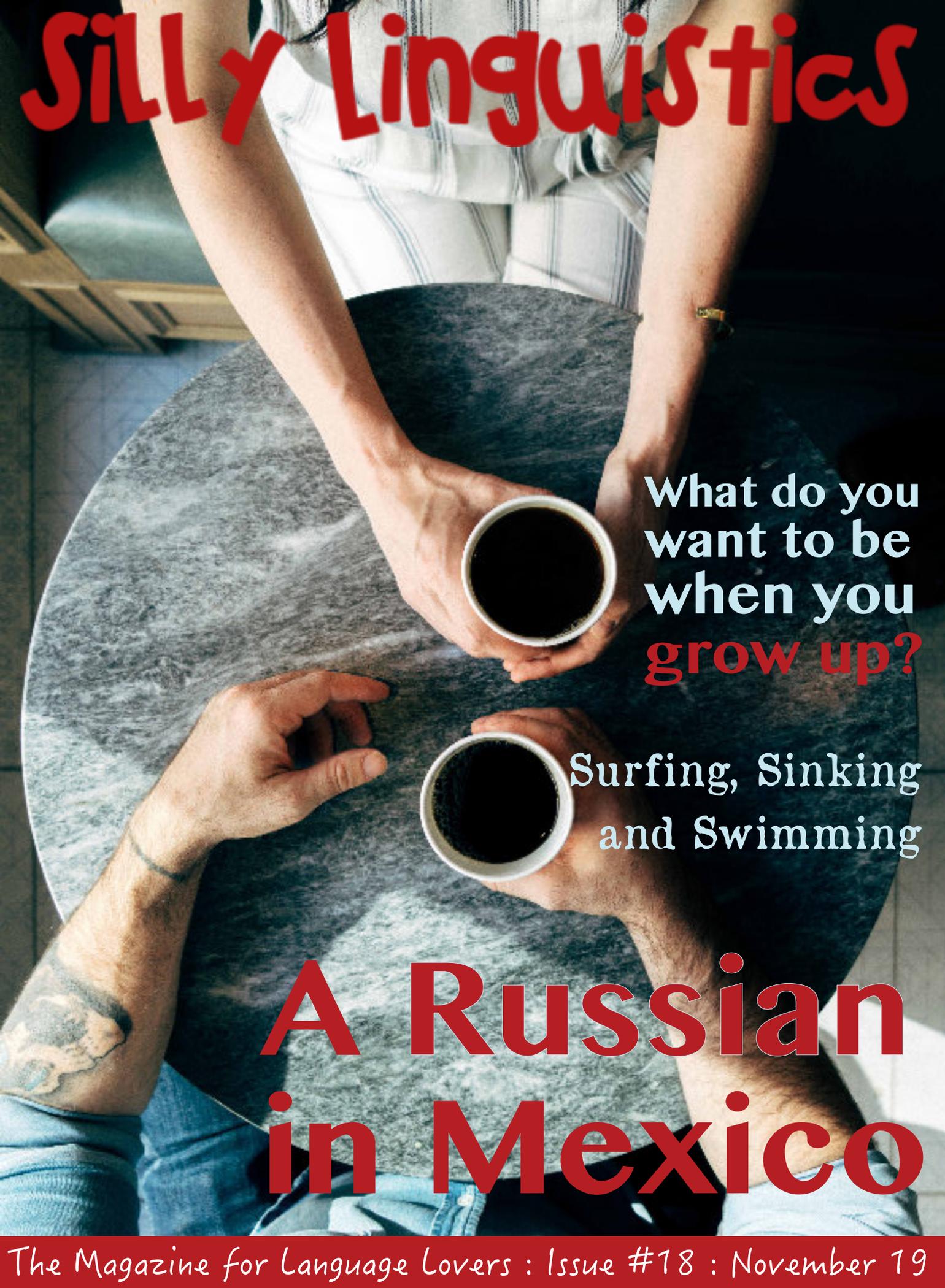


Silly Linguistics



What do you
want to be
when you
grow up?

Surfing, Sinking
and Swimming

A Russian in Mexico

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S is for...

Surfing, Sinking, and Swimming

■ **By Chris Davy**

I can't surf. I mean, I'm pretty confident that I could. I'm pretty good at sport. I've always been fairly athletic. I even grew up by the coast; not in a town where you could really 'surf surf', but in one where you can windsurf, and kiteboard. My point being, those things aren't entirely alien to me like some of you city dweller or deep in the countryside folk. I had the surroundings to be able to practise and perfect these things if I wanted to. For the record, that town is Exmouth, Devon. But windsurfing and kiteboarding never took my fancy enough to bother trying it. One reason being that, as a kid I developed a bit of a phobia of water. These days I would call it developed my self-awareness, rather than a fear. But yeah, at the time, the experience was something that put me off really being bothered about water sports.

Basically, I was at a fun swim with a mate. We were climbing on the big massive inflatable and all that stuff. I was trying to climb on to it, but the kid in front of me slipped and kicked me smack bang in the face. I black out momentarily and fall under the water. This kid by the way, he probably had no idea what was going on. So, it's ok we can let him off for not checking to see if I was ok. Hell, I don't even know if it was a boy. Anyway, a bit dazed and confused I came to the surface. I was a bit freaked out, so I got out and then decided I wanted to go home; much to my friend's dismay. But, like a lot of things, it was just a bit of a psychological wake up call. I was about, let's say 10. At the time, I didn't really know what had happened. But basically, I didn't feel safe. No one saw me, and in my little head, worst case scenario was I could have drowned. Bit dramatic perhaps, but that's the reality of it. You'll be pleased to know; I have been swimming a bunch of times since that day. Yay me! But in general, I never swim that much. Given the choice, I've always been fairly content on land. But I totally should, swimming is awesome.

CHRIS, WHAT ON EARTH HAS THIS GOT TO DO WITH LEARNING LANGUAGE?!?!? Well...for a lot of us,



unless we've had a fantastic teacher, or bilingual family member or friend perhaps, we are going to have to teach ourselves how to learn and use language; especially a foreign one. Ultimately, that's what we are going to have to do even after we've been 'taught how to use language', anyway. Give yourself some time to process that.

Let me try and elaborate. Amongst other things, I failed to become a driving instructor; I never qualified, but I did all the training. One of the main things that I took away from my training however, was that you basically come to accept the fact that once you've taught someone up to a standard, it's then up to them, and well within their rights for them to drive however they want to. Everyone is going to develop their own style. Obviously, that said, when it comes to driving, I'm a pretty big fan of the concept of the Highway Code; pretty good idea that.

But the point is the same goes for language. Everyone is going to develop their own style. The key word here being develop.

So, in an attempt to try and bring this all together. On the day that I got kicked in the face. I could 'swim'. I had been taught well enough to 'swim on my own'. I wasn't in an S is for...Sink or Swim Situation. I was most definitely in an S is for...Swim Situation. I had been 'swimming' a bunch of times. But then BLAM, I got kicked in the face!!! And I didn't have the tools to be able to cope with it; as in shoulder the moment and get back in the pool. So, the question really is, had I actually been taught how to swim?

Like, have you actually been taught how to learn and how to use language? Have any of us for that matter? Or is it just something that we continually learn?

We've all had moments I'm sure when we've said or written something, someone has called us out on it, or we know that 'technically' we were incorrect in our use of language. Then we might get angry,

frustrated or embarrassed and then shy away from doing what we were actually doing. Or something to that effect.

I learnt a lot of lessons about the English language the 'hard way'. I was born in Wolverhampton and grew up in Exmouth, then I studied in Kingston in Surrey. It's fair to say that I have a pretty crazy and unique way of speaking sometimes. My intuitive understanding of communication, accents, dialects and colloquialisms has been as much a necessity of survival as it has been out of genuine interest. I don't always know from a scholastic point of view what I'm talking about. But I do know, that I don't need to know. In part, I definitely had to learn how to communicate using the old S is for...Sink or swim method. Which is why I feel like I'm entitled to say I am somewhat of a self-professed expert on it. Because, I haven't just grown up in one place and then go on to study it, mate. I've lived it. I'm talking from experience. And I can tell you, yes, yes, yes, language and people's use of it is absolutely 10 million percent bonkers. So, my advice is, if you are trying to learn how to use language I can almost guarantee that you will benefit from understanding a school of thought that says it is about surfing both the waves of prescriptivism and descriptivism. Psssst, I've just made that up by the way.

You will fail. You will mess up. You will say the wrong thing, at the wrong time. You will be speechless. You will put your foot in it. You will mix your words. You will slurr your speech. You will bite your tongue – figuratively and literally. You will be at a loss for words. You will sound like an idiot. You will pronounce things wrong. And so on, and so on and so on.

BUT...S is for....SO WHAT!?

Because...you will get 'better' at it; whatever that means. Just get back on the proverbial language surfboard, get back in the pool and keep on swimming and surfing those waves.

S is for...Sticks and stones will break my bones, ahem, and yeah words can't hurt too, but so what. I'd rather get hit with some words than get kicked in the face whilst I'm trying to go bloody swimming!!!

