

Sheryl Howe

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Subject: Week 2

When I get home, I will be sleeping a lot. My brain is tired from figuring out things.

There's work, of course. Lots of thinking involved in work. Like today, we looked at wiring, which I already knew was a mess, but I thought perhaps someone else would be in charge of figuring out how to fix (no such luck). There should be stiff penalties for people who don't label things. I now have a plan for tomorrow when workers will be here to begin pulling cable that needs to be replaced. Meanwhile, my work list, while shrinking at a faster pace than it grows, is still kinda long.

And then there's the brainpower it takes to interpret what people are saying to me --- not that I'm being critical of people's English ability considering that I have zero Amharic ability --- but it takes much thinking to figure out what people are trying to say. For instance, the wiring: yesterday the guy who purchases things bought cable and connectors and jacks and things. Today, the office manager person asked me to check that everything was there and correct. I saw cable I asked for and jacks I asked for and some cable I didn't ask for and no connectors. So the guy says (I think) that the cable I didn't ask for is phone cable. I'm trying to explain (a) no, it isn't phone cable and (b) I didn't ask for phone cable. and also (c) what about the connectors. After a LONG time of trying to communicate and involving two more people, it turns out that the connectors were not in the pile of stuff, but they had been purchased and the cable that isn't phone cable works for phone cable and somebody else decided that we would need it after I'd seen the list of things to purchase...

Yesterday, I bought chicken at the grocery store. Apparently there are two kinds of chicken: "local" and "farm". Two grocery store people were trying very hard to get me to choose whether I wanted "local" or "farm". That was about six tries before I got that there were two kinds and I'm not sure if the two kinds are "local" and "farm" or something else. And they were telling me the price difference too, but no clue what that was. So I pick a "farm" chicken and the guy weighs it and it sounded for all the world like he said it would be 240-some birr (\$30 for a pretty small chicken). Everything else is super cheap so I figure I'll wait until he gives me the little slip of paper (there's this whole system when you buy produce and meat and dairy products --- all of these things generally require someone else to pick out what you want (which stinks for picking vegetables because I don't know that they're picking the ones I would pick...) so someone else gets whatever it is for you and ties it up very securely in a plastic bag (like they don't want you getting into whatever it is ever) and then writes the price on this little tiny slip of paper that you must not lose so that you can give it to the cashier when you check out... one time, there wasn't anyone at the dairy place so I just picked up a yoghurt I wanted. Some grocery store person waved like it was okay, but the cashier was not at all pleased that I arrived to checkout with yoghurt and no little tiny scrap of paper...)

Alright, so when he gives me the paper for the chicken, it says 24.95 birr (about \$3). Next I ask for cheese. I have no idea how much cheese I need to order since I don't know how much a kilo of cheese is (I've solved this problem with produce, I just get a 1/2 kilo --- which generally makes the person say "one and a half kilo" and then I say "no, one half only, one half kilo" and then they're still convinced I'm saying one and a half kilos. But after a couple items, they're on to me). Getting cheese is just slightly less complicated than getting chicken (also there were two kinds of cheese, no idea what I got, just picked one of the two). The guy tells me a price and it sounds like one hundred something birr. So I now figure out that I'm not hearing right and it's whatever I think he's saying with the decimal place moved over a spot (100 birr: 10 birr). More brainpower.

For my last meat/dairy purchase, I wanted yoghurt, which cracked me up the most. I asked for Mango first. He picks out a mango yoghurt. Then I asked for another mango. He picks out some mixed fruit deal. I figure that's fine. Then I asked for pineapple. He picks a pineapple. And then I ask for another pineapple. He has me repeat what I said. I repeat, pointing at the first pineapple he already got for me and he says, with this expression of amazement like he can't believe I'm asking for this, "two pineapple?". Like this is the craziest thing he's heard so far. The whole 10 minute ordeal getting chicken and cheese, this doesn't faze him, but asking for TWO pineapple yoghurts. Madness.

Meanwhile I learned, according to this British guy who's here teaching a workshop on discourse analysis, being

an American, I'm not expected to arrive anywhere until 5 minutes after I say I'll arrive. Swiss are five minutes early. Brits are on time and Americans, five minutes late. The things one learns...

So my brain is tired, but I've got the jetlag thing working for me plus I can be 5 minutes late everywhere.

This is the thing that strikes me everytime I'm anywhere outside the US: living takes so much time. At lunch I wanted to heat up leftovers. We don't have a microwave. We do have an electric stove, which is nice, but it's got its own little personality. There's a dial with numbers and one would assume that the higher the number, the hotter the oven. Not so. The middle of the dial is the hottest (about 3) and it gets colder either direction you go... sometimes. I put the dial on 2. Apparently "2" is equivalent to off because it heats up not at all. So then I put it on four. This is the temperature I want (350), put the leftovers in and then think perhaps I ought to turn the temperature down. So I move the knob down in the direction of "3", forgetting that 3 is the hottest and if I want it cooler than four I should move it up toward the 5. This is a lot of brain power just heating up lunch. Our stove has one electric burner as well. The other three are gas --- the electric one heats up some but I'm doubtful anything would actually cook on it. We've experimented with its knob, because it's not on right (to turn it off, you put the knob on "5"). Plus, if it's anything like the oven, high might be any of the available numbers, including "off"... but we can't make it heat up so we just use the gas burners, which are more expensive... but actually cook food.

We also don't have paper towels or any equivalent paper product or rags other than the dish towels so my chicken from yesterday leaked a little and I'm trying to figure out what one would use to clean this up... and, for unknown reasons, when I came home for lunch, about seven tiles in the kitchen were removed from the wall and put on the counter. We have limited counter space and the tiles are in the spot where the dish drainer normally goes. Not thinking, I washed dishes and put them in the dish drainer, which is in another spot with the drain part of the dish drainer pointed to drain onto the floor. Water on the floor; chicken issue in the refrigerator and I'm really curious about why the tiles got removed. It's a wonder I accomplish any work when I take an hour and a half to heat up lunch and grocery shopping, while an adventure, requires all of my attention AND there's flies to kill...

Sheryl