



Kal Aur Aaj

Learning the Lingo!

By: Asha Deshpande

As I continue to travel down memory lane of twenty-five years in Tampa Bay, my mind keeps going back to the milestones that marked the way. I have written about cultural events and how strangers turned into friends. I have commented on travel and communication. As I pause by the milestone of communication, a smile creases my face. Transatlantic communication was something that required the help of mechanical tools, like telephones and telegrams. It needed no new learning skills. But how about communicating with our newly acquired American neighbors? That sure required quite a bit of learning. I am not talking about

the accent. I am talking about the language itself. Most of the Indians who had immigrated to the US were pretty fluent in English but the American lingo was a whole different story!

Kal (Yesterday) : It was not uncommon in those days to hear the comment , “You speak very good English” . “Yes”, most of us would politely reply, “ India was ruled by the British for a while. They left us with the gift of their language.” This would pave the way for further conversation.

One of the first things I learnt was the definition of a dwelling. In India, it was, and still is, common to say, “Come to my house”, meaning, “Come home”. I had casually invited some one in such a way. When I started to give her directions, she said, “ But, that is an apartment complex. I thought you said you lived in a house?” Apartment (Flat), Condominium (Ownership flat) or house, they all meant, “Home” to us. Now I was beginning to understand the difference.

It was in the office of this apartment complex that I learnt to decipher the double negatives of the American language. Being bored at home, and looking for something to do, I had offered to volunteer in the office. One morning, the manager left me alone for a while. “Stay here” she said, “Don’t do nothing till I get back”. I looked around. I didn’t really know anything, but I didn’t want to do nothing. So, I did some filing. I straightened her desk. I had obviously done something wrong, because she came in, took a look and said “Why did you do that? Didn’t I say don’t do nothing?” How could I have known that what she meant was “Don’t do anything!”

Sometimes we would have small baby-sitting camps in the office area. I was asked to participate in their “Show and Tell” activity. One of the children had brought in a cute stuffed cat. Eager to show off my knowledge of Mother Goose rhymes, I took the stuffed cat. Standing in the center of the circle, I said, “This is a Pussy cat.” I recited the rhyme,

Pussy cat, Pussy cat where have you been?

I’ve been to London to visit the Queen.

Pussy cat, Pussy cat, what did you there?

I frightened a little mouse, under her chair!

I barely got to that line, when one of the women came rushing in. She snatched the cat from my hands. “This is a Kitty cat” she said and glared at me. I had no idea why she was so angry, but at that moment, I’ll bet I was more frightened than the poor mouse under the queen’s chair! To this day I am glad that she was not around when I asked a child for a rubber. “Eraser” someone shouted, and the word rubber was instantly erased from my classroom vocabulary.

Once we had an out of town visitor, who apparently did not have his own transportation.

”How did you get into town?” someone asked. “I rode the dog”, he replied. I visualized various versions of the scene. None of them fit. Smiling at my puzzled expression, a friend said, “He took the GreyHound bus”.

Aur aaj ... (And today) : I think nothing of saying I don’t know nothing. When my car is being serviced, I ask my neighbor for a *ride*, not a *lift*. When I am in a multi storied building, I take the *elevator*, not the *lift*. I also have my floors right. Never again will I spend a quarter of an hour looking for a friend’s apartment. She *said* she was on the first floor. How was I supposed to know, that first floor in America was the same as ground floor in India!

Gradually, I learnt the lingo. I may not know all the rules, but I know that what I thought was Football in India, is Soccer in America, and Football in America is a whole different ball game.

Mainstream American lingo has become a natural part of my lingo. As I said, I think nothing of it. But when I visit the homeland and speak it, I drive them bananas !

As life in America moved on, the natural events of life began to unfold. But that is another story for another time...

