

How Now, Brown Cow?
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Adapted for podcast (see How_now.mp3)

As an English trainer, I am sometimes faced with the challenge of getting my Austrian learners to pronounce things correctly. One of my clients, Peter – a business professional and eager beaver – couldn't pronounce the word "juice" quite the way it should sound. Instead, it sounded like *chews*.

So I decided to take a few minutes and help him. "Look, Peter. It's *juice*. *Chews* is like chewing food, or it could be a candy, like Fruit Chews."

"*Ja, ja*, That's what I said. Like fruit *chews*."

I started to nod in agreement, but then my eyes met his and with that instinct I've developed with over 12 years of teaching, I realized we were not on the same page. "I'm sorry, Peter, but *you* mean fruit *juice*!"

"That's what I said."

I could see that he was trying to figure out whether I was messing with him. But I was not kidding around about juice. With exaggerated patience, I went through the differences again. "OK, here we go. orange juice is something you drink. He *chews* orange *chews* means he's eating orange candy."

I saw that infamous light bulb go over my client's head. "Aaaaahh! I get it! So, what you're saying is I should say....jjjjchchc....*Shoes!*"

"OK, Peter. Lemme explain."

"Lemme?"

"Forget about that for a moment. Focus."

He straightened himself up in his chair.

"*Shoes* are what people wear on their feet. *Juice* is the goal here. *Dz, dz, dz, dz...*" I sighed at the doe-in-the-headlights look. "Let's try a little exercise."

Peter's mouth performed all sorts of circus-like contortions, but he still couldn't quite get it. Being Type A he wouldn't let this very amusing episode (for me) just stay put. No, he wanted to work at this until it was absolutely perfect. (I decided to save correcting his pronunciation of architect – the *ch* said like choo-choo – for another day.)

Then I remembered Dr. Seuss. Inspiration and improvisation are very handy in our line of business. "Try repeating this Peter." And I wrote the next half-hour's lesson on the board: *I drink orange juice only when I wear my orange shoes and eat orange chews*.

This time it was Peter who had to keep from laughing. But he tried it after I repeated it again. "I drink orange chews when I wear my orange chews and eat orange chews."

He was mirroring my shaking head, quite downcast and disheartened. I squeezed his shoulder. "Again."

PART 2

As he attempted a second time, I was whisked away to the days my father tried to teach me to sing. I was maybe twelve, or maybe fourteen. It doesn't matter. What matters is that there seemed to be a particular shortage of church choir members and my father suddenly decided to search for a hidden talent in me.

"Chrystyna!" he called to me in that tone which I had come to recognize only with age. It was the sound of trouble. It was the sound of my father, who also happens to be a very bad liar. When he tries to bluff something, he scratches his head, tugs at his ear and grins like a lunatic, all the while thinking

he can trick us into something we don't want to be involved in. I moaned from my teenage fashion magazine.

We had just given up on my guitar playing, so I was wondering if this was going to be another debate about how wonderfully adept and long my fingers were, and that music wasn't really that difficult to read.

I reacted to his news with teen-aged exasperation. "But I don't want to sing!" I stomped my foot for extra measure.

My daddy smiled sweetly, completely ignoring me. "OK, let's start with *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*."

I rolled my eyes.

He keyed up the little electronic keyboard he used to pound out the Sunday choir arrangements. He started the metronome; that same annoying metronome he'd used during my fret exercises. Then he took out the harmonica and blew into it. It sounded like the whistle of a train which had run off the tracks and was blowing its last breath. "One. Two. Three. Twink...Chrystyna! That's your key!"

I glared at him. "Oh, yeah. Sorry. I wasn't paying attention."

He went through the whole procedure again, slowing down the metronome for his musically-challenged daughter. I heard the train whistle again and, just before he could get to the keyboard, I started, "Twinkle, twinkle little star...!"

I was just getting into the song – somewhere around "Up above the world so high," – when my father suddenly leapt from the keyboard and grabbed me by the shoulders. "Up! That's it! Up! Shoulders back! OK, now breathe from your diaphragm."

"Diaphragm?" I asked. And I was honestly confused. "I thought we breathe with our lungs!"

"We do! We do. But the song should come from your diaphragm." He posed me like a mannequin doll.

I couldn't help it. He was provoking me. "The song should come from my diaphragm? But I thought it comes from my voice box," I added, pointing to my throat for clarification.

He nodded sagely and with exaggerated patience. "It does, it does. But it should all begin with your diaphragm."

"Aaaaaah!" I said, in order to placate him. What the hell is a diaphragm, I thought.

That's when he jabbed me underneath the ribcage. "Here! OK, now begin."

I started again after he wheezed into the harmonica. This time I was not as confident because I couldn't tell if I was breathing with my voicebox, or singing at the top of my lungs, or whether my diaphragm was cooperating with any of it. As my confidence deflated, so did my voice.

My father looked at me with some measure of sympathy. "Look, you're mumbling now. Perhaps we should try some exercises."

The dreaded word: EXERCISES! Dad was Type A (one way I'd learned to recognize this in my students years later). And when it came to musical notes, scales and exercises, he was a tyrant. It drove me mad. Which is why I'd quit playing guitar in the first place.

"Begin like this," my father said, opening his mouth into a perfect "O" shape. There was no way for me to prepare for what came next as he slowly and deliberately began: "Hooooooooow noooooooooow broooooooooown coooooooooow."

I couldn't even laugh. Each word was stretched out along with his lips. At "brown" I saw his mouth move somewhere beneath his chin, then at "cow" they moved to either sides of his cheeks. He grinned at me after he was done and I met him with a dubious look.

"Now, it's your turn." My statuesque pose was guided to stand before the full-length mirror and the Choir Master pushed my lips together into a bird beak with his thumb and index finger. He looked at my image and shook his head, painstakingly sculpting a new circle, like a fish's mouth. "OK, now try it!"

I looked at him sideways into the mirror, afraid to ruin that beautiful "O" he'd made with my lips. My father nodded some encouragement and started, "Hoooooowwww noooooowww.."

"...oooow bwwwwooooooowwwwn oooooowwww."

Father moved to stand in front of me, scrutinizing and analyzing what he had just observed. Then he scratched his head, tugged at his ears and gave me a lunatic's smile. "That was pretty good. But you need to pronounce the *br* and the *c*, too. Belt it out from your diaphragm. You know, straight from the heart! Pretend that you are the cow in question. *Feel* the cow. *Be* the cow."

I forgot my lips for a moment. "From the heart or from the diaphragm, dad? Which one do you want me to use?"

But he was mystified, ignoring me for the moment he needed to put my lips back into place. "Both!"

I gave it another shot. And another. And another. And for three weeks, I stood in front of that mirror with the metronome ticking and pronouncing, "HOOOOOOOOWWWW NOOOOOOOOOWWW BROOOOOOWWWN COOOOOOWWWW!"

And I still never learned how to read music. I didn't sing with the choir, either, because to my rescue came three old ladies who, though they couldn't sing a tune to save their lives, *could* read music.

PART 3

Now, there I was with Peter, his mouth forming beautiful muscular attempts to pronounce "juice."

I slumped in my seat across from him, relaxing. He followed suit.

"You want to give it another shot, do you?" I asked.

He nodded. So I recited the scene of someone drinking orange juice while wearing orange shoes and eating orange chews.

It was a beautiful moment when I heard Peter start: "I *wear* orange shoes when I *drink* orange dz...dz...dz..juice while *eating* orange shoes!"

"Oh, well," I shrugged. "At least it comes from the diaphragm!"