



My Fulbright Year in Romania May 2006

Where is the global etiquette book that tells the poor foreigner what *not* to do? A book that tells you, for instance: do not offer a Chinese person a clock as a present, because the Chinese word for ‘clock’ is the same syllable but on a different tone as the word for ‘death’; do not give a Russian shoes as a present, because it implies you wish the person to leave (d_-i papucii!¹); and do not offer a Romanian an even number of flowers, because even numbers are for the dead, not the living. Such an etiquette book would be very helpful to further inform the foreigner that other items associated with death for Romanians are towels and candles. Thus, a housewarming present of a set of kitchen towels (a perfectly reasonable gift in the U.S.) would be unwelcome, along with, say, a scented candle as a hostess gift or even fancy soaps, since the latter imply that the hostess might actually be in need of such. For Romanians, towels, soaps, and candles make for inappropriate gifts. For Americans, these simple, usable objects are perfectly reasonable gifts.

Over these past ten months in Romania, I have discovered that what the guidebooks and orientations told me upon arriving has had little use in daily life. For instance, Fulbrighters coming to Romania today probably do not need to be told in their orientation program, as I was, to watch out for and not fall for the “passport control” scam that might be perpetrated upon them in the streets. Rather, what I should have been told was how to say, if confronted with such an obvious scam, the Romanian equivalent of: “Guys, this jig is up. You need to find a new line of work.” Even more useful would have been a quick review of the taxi scene. Within a week or two of my arrival in Bucharest, a taxi driver tried to convince me at the end of the ride that the meter ran in euros and not lei. Fortunately, I had enough Romania to say, “E o glum_?”² And it would have been good to learn by a method other than personal experience that one should read the door panel of the taxi before getting in, because the prices are posted, and they can vary widely. Rider beware! It’s not the driver’s fault if an unwary foreigner gets in a taxi plainly advertizing rates ten times the norm.³

But interactions with taxi drivers and possible street scammers are not where the interest of life is here. It is in ongoing relationships with students, fellow faculty and friends. It is in knowing how many and what kind of flowers to offer. It has been endlessly fascinating for me to discover – sometimes with chagrin – that what I would consider normal behavior could be interpreted as rude. I have become somewhat allergic to generalizations of the type: Americans are such-and-such, Romanians are such-and-such, because these statements usually say almost nothing worth

¹This well-known Romanian phrase means “Give him his (house)slippers!” with the implication that you’re throwing the bum out.

²“Is this a joke?”

³Good news. Since writing this essay in 2006, taxi prices have been regulated.



knowing. However, I have found that Americans are probably nosier than Romanians when they first meet someone. For us, it is normal, even polite, to ask the person you have just met a lot of personal questions (but only of a certain sort – not, for instance, how much money they make) that would be considered intrusive to a Romanian. I have heard it said that the U.S. is a so-called low context society, meaning that we cannot take much for granted about the background of a fellow citizen, so we ask all these questions. It could be that Romania is a high context society, meaning that asking a lot of personal questions of a person you have just met is unnecessary and, then, even impolite. I don't really know.

What I do know is that Romania is a tough place to try to learn to speak Romanian. Very tough. Not impossible but requiring a militant refusal on a daily basis to speak English, to establish myself in certain restaurants, shops and so forth where they will only speak Romanian to me, to avoid going places where English is spoken, which is practically everywhere, meaning that the “safest” place for me in my effort to learn Romanian is in my own home, reading the newspaper, doing my exercises, writing my compositions for my medita_iii⁴ and watching television with my remote, such that every time English comes on the tube (which is fairly often), I can zap it. In public, I open my mouth with Romanian words coming out ... and someone is sure to respond in English. My most effective counter to that is: “Îmi pare rău. Nu vorbesc engleză. Sunt franceză.”⁵ It always works, because no one can come back in French, and if they could, I've got it covered. Interestingly enough, my friends in the English Department at the University of Bucharest are the most interested to encourage me in my effort to speak Romanian, mostly likely because they are good teachers at heart, get a kick out of seeing me try, and are already secure in their English such that they don't need to practice it on me.

Here's an entry for the global etiquette book for all shopkeepers, waiters, and people on the street. When a foreigner is in your country speaking your language, do not respond in what you think is their native language (English), unless the foreigner, after an unsuccessful attempt or two, to communicate finally needs help. And do not give me any noise about it being “a sign of respect” to speak the other person's language. All you want is practice in English. And all you're doing is insulting the foreigner who is, after all, in Romania speaking Romanian.

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⁴Private lessons with a tutor.

⁵“I'm sorry. I don't speak English. I'm French.” This strategy ultimately backfired in a peculiar way. Toward the end of my year, I went into the stationary store I frequented to buy some supplies. An older woman heard me speak and said to the shopkeeper, in reference to me, “She's not Romanian.” The shopkeeper replied, “No, she's French.” My immediate thought was: “Dang, a mythic Frenchwoman is getting all the credit for my hard work to learn Romanian!” My second thought was: “Why did the woman talk to the shopkeeper and not to me? I'm standing two inches away.”