

*Paul West is the first-person narrator, a 27-year-old Englishman, single and unattached, who is recruited by a French entrepreneur and given a one-year contract in Paris to plan and organise a chain of tea rooms which his employer wants to open in the French capital.*

As we were all chums together now, I decided to throw in my little idea. Nothing controversial.

"I thought we could decide on a working name for the project," I suggested. "Just something temporary, you know, to give us an identity as a team. Something like Tea Time."

"Oh." It was Bernard, jerking himself upright. "No, we av nem. Ma Tea Eez Reesh."

I frowned, the others laughed. I turned to Jean-Marie for help. He was looking elsewhere.

"My Tea Is Rich? As a brand name for the tea rooms? It's not really a name," I ventured. "It doesn't really *mean* anything."

"Uh." Bernard was crap at English but clearly very good at monosyllables. "Ma Tea Eez Reesh eez funny nem. Eaties Ingleesh oomoor."

"English humour? But we don't say that."

"Oh." Bernard turned to Jean-Marie for support.

"Of course it should be my *tailor*," Jean-Marie explained.

"Your tailor?" I felt as if I was in the middle of a surrealist film. In a minute Salvador Dali was going to fly in through the window with a baguette sticking out of his trousers.

"My tailor is rich," Jean-Marie said.

"Is he?" Here comes Salvador, I thought, but all I could see out the window was the Eiffel Tower as usual.

"My tailor is rich is a typical English expression."

"It's not."

"But French people think it is. It was in the old language books."

"OK, OK, I think I'm with you," I said. The others were peering at me as if I was about to get the joke at last and laugh. [...] "I get you now." I put on a eureka smile. Everyone nodded. Misunderstanding cleared up. Problem solved. "But it's still an awful name." I mean, I had to tell them for their own good. For the good of the project.

"Oh!"

"You absolutely want Tea Time?" Jean-Marie was not looking keen. "This is a bit flat."

"No, not absolutely. Just as a provisional name. I suggest we get a market survey done before deciding on the definitive brand, but meanwhile let's choose a simple working title. If you don't like Tea Time, how about Tea For Two?"

"Oh no." This was Stéphanie. "Dis is flat also. We want fonny nem. Like Bar-narr say, Ingleesh oomoor."

"And, er, if we coll eet Tease Café?" Marc said.

"Tease Café?" I was lost again.

"Yuh. Tea, apostrof, s, café," Marc explained. Stéphanie nodded. Good idea.

"Tea's Café? But that's not English either."

"Yes," Stéphanie retorted. "You av many nems with apostrof. Arry's Bar. Liberty's Statue."

"Brooklyn's Bridge," Marc said.

"Trafalgar's Square," Bernard added.

"No..."

"Roll's Royce," Bernard said, on a roll.

"No!" Where did they get this crap?

"In France this is considered very English." Jean-Marie was playing interpreter again. "There is an American café on the Champs-Élysées called Sandwich's Café."

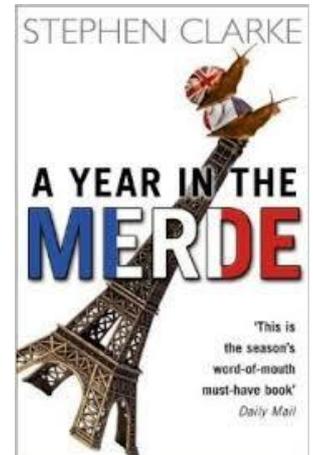
"Yes." Stéphanie confirmed this with a prod of her finger on the table.

"OK, but it's not English," I had to insist. "It's like when you call a campsite 'un camping' or a car park 'un parking'. You may think it's English, but it's not."

"Oh." Stéphanie appealed to Jean-Marie the referee. An attack on the French language? Yellow card, surely?

"Each country adapts the culture of the other country," Jean-Marie said. [...] "OK, very constructive," Jean-Marie said. "This is a real Anglo-style meeting. Taking decisions." [...]

Didn't seem very constructive to me. But then it was my first ever French meeting. I had a lot to learn.



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