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Dreaming in English

By MICHAEL ERARD

In her recent book “[Dreaming in Chinese](#),” Deborah Fallows describes coming across a pile of frozen hams on a Beijing street, seemingly forgotten. She has been living there with her husband and spending a lot of time getting daily doses of Chinese life and language. Being tempted briefly to pilfer a ham “was like one of those moments when you realize you are dreaming in a foreign language: I realized that I was thinking like a *laobaixing*,” Fallows writes, using the rough Chinese equivalent of Joe Six-Pack. “But finally, I crept away, with the words ‘possibly dirty, very likely gone-bad prosciutto’ nagging me.”

The pork episode marks the book’s first use of the concept of dreaming in Chinese, which comes from the popular notion that you’ve reached a linguistic milestone when you start dreaming in a foreign language. This has some basis in fact: in the 1980s, the Canadian psychologist Joseph De Koninck observed that students of French who spoke French in their dreams earlier made faster progress than other students. And many people report dreaming in a foreign language after they’ve spent time studying one.

For Fallows, as for others who experience it, dreamtime fluency is a metaphor for becoming an insider, someone for whom the language isn’t foreign and whose own nativeness is neither feat nor achievement; it just is, as natural as breathing. Another recent book, “[Dreaming in Hindi](#),” by Katherine Russell Rich, offers a similar narrative about the linguistic route to finding the familiar in the foreign. And Fallows and Rich aren’t the only writers mining this topic. So far, there’s been no word that A. J. Jacobs or Ted Conover is tackling French or Russian, but the novelist Rosecrans Baldwin is writing a book about his adventures living, working and talking in France. And back in November, The Wall Street Journal published an [article about Ellen Jovin](#), a New Yorker who is studying 13 languages over two years in the hopes of writing a book about it. On her blog, Jovin recalls dreaming that she was teaching an unspecified foreign language to a young girl. “As I instructed her in some language point, it became apparent that she didn’t know what a noun or a verb was. I turned around and glared at her parents. ‘You didn’t tell me she didn’t know any grammar,’ I said. ‘I can’t do this. It’s not possible.’ ”

Reading about all this multilingual dreaming, I asked myself, Why isn’t anyone dreaming in

English? Perhaps, I thought, people naïvely assume they dream in their native language, when in fact something else happens — perhaps it's in recalling a dream that any language in it is identified. I myself can remember dreamtime speaking in Spanish and Mandarin, two languages I've studied, as well as dreamtime writing and yelling in English, my native language. But I don't recall ever waking up and thinking, Wow, I was really fluent in English last night. To answer this question, I dug around in the research and found one 1993 study, carried out by the dream researcher David Foulkes and colleagues, into how bilingual people dream. Before the subjects (half of them native German speakers who spoke English very well, half of them native English speakers who spoke German very well) went to sleep in the lab, researchers asked what they were thinking about, if there was speaking or thinking in a language going on and, if so, what language it was. Then, after the subjects had gone through a REM cycle, they were woken up and asked if they had dreamed, if there had been language in the dream and, if so, what language it was. The results, like dreams themselves, are hard to interpret (the clearest finding was that you could influence the language in the dream with the language spoken in the pre-sleep interview), but all the dreamers reported dreaming in both their languages.

Another study looked at 24 people with REM sleep behavior disorder, a condition that causes people to enact their dreams, walking, talking and sometimes acting violently without waking up. Most of the subjects talked fluently in their native languages, using the same tone of voice as they would when awake, even gesturing. “When the dreamers speak with one or several persons, they leave an appropriate silence as if listening to a response from their fictive talker,” the researchers wrote. “This means that the dreamers speak only those words which, in the dream, they experience as their own.”

One of the researchers, Isabelle Arnulf, a neurologist in the sleep disorder center at the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, told me that her patients mostly use their native language during sleep-talking, though some use a learned language. One exception was a retired Spanish carpenter who'd lived in France for 60 years and sleep-talked mostly in French. Only once did he use Spanish, to count out time (*uno, dos, tres*) in a dance.

So it seems that plenty of American writers must be dreaming in English, even if they're not writing about it — which isn't to say you can't find plenty of books about other explorations on the far reaches of their native tongue. In “[Reading the OED](#)” (an aspirational activity if ever there was one), Ammon Shea uses a homelier metaphor to describe his language-learning. Words he discovers in the Oxford English Dictionary satisfy what he describes as “an itch somewhere in the back of my brain.” They seem to be words he once knew but forgot, or they remind him of situations or things for which he was always niggled by a sense that he just couldn't put his finger on the appropriate word. But “Itching in English” wouldn't be a very

good title.

The fact is, anyone writing about dreaming in English probably wouldn't be writing in English. Many potential authors of a memoir called "Dreaming in English" surely exist among the billions of people who will be learning our global lingua franca over the coming decades, but the memoir would appear in Hungarian or Mandarin or Igbo.

But then there's the possibility that "dreaming in X" applies to every language on the planet *except* English. If such dreams embody fantasies about linguistic and cultural insiderness, then maybe global English cannot have an inside, because the language, already everywhere and everyone's, is what they speak where the world is flat — indeed, it's that flatness of English and its world that Fallows, Rich, Baldwin and the rest are trying to escape. By the 1980s, "English had developed a supranational momentum that gave it a life independent of its British, and more especially its American, roots," Robert McCrum writes in "Globish," his book about the future of English. "Already multinational in expression, English was becoming a global phenomenon with a fierce, inner multinational dynamic, an emerging lingua franca described by the anthropologist Benedict Anderson as 'a kind of global-hegemonic post-clerical Latin.' " So maybe you're more likely to find a book titled "Dreaming in Manglish" (a Malay-English hybrid) or "Dreaming in Englasian" (English vocabulary in Chinese and Hindi syntax, as termed by the novelist Nury Vittachi).

As for aspirational memoirs by relative newcomers to America, they tend to leave aside the "dreaming" for something simpler: see "How I Learned English" (2007), an anthology of essays by accomplished Latinos, or a lovely poem of the same title, by Gregory Djanikian, about an immigrant kid playing baseball with his new pals, "my notions of baseball and America / Growing fuzzier each time I whiffed." Perhaps some non-native speaker aiming to join the global techno-elite will still write a book called "Dreaming in English." But "Eating English" would be better — in order to pretend that in ingesting the powerful force of English, it's not you who's been eaten.

Michael Erard is the author of "Um . . . : Slips, Stumbles, and Verbal Blunders, and What They Mean." He is writing a book about hyperpolyglots and other talented language learners.