

Letter from Cairo: 2  
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## How Many Americans Does It Take to Change a Light Bulb?

John Stuckey

I changed a light bulb yesterday. Or, rather, I had the thing changed. I told an Egyptian friend I had a couple of bulbs burnt out and was assuming I could pick some up at one of the larger new supermarkets. He looked at me with barely concealed pity for my ignorance. No, he said. They don't carry light bulbs in a market. Later, in e-mail, he would spell it "light pulp," which is an image I find quite intriguing. Where's Einstein when you need him? Might light pulp be what glows inside the glass, I wonder? Or what you get when you drop the thing and step on it? It calls to mind a glowing orange, radiating through the peel. But I digress. Turns out you have to buy a light bulb in a specialty store. (When we moved to Michigan in 1969 one of the services Detroit Edison provided was a burned-out-bulb replacement service. You took your bad bulbs to one of their offices, and they gave you brand-new, one-for-one replacements. The Good Ol' Days.) Oops. Even my digressions have digressions. Just have the doorman send the messenger/cleaning boy (the apartment building comes equipped with both) to get new ones for you, my friend advised.

That was easy enough for HIM to say. He speaks the same language as the doormen and cleaning boys. Me, I have so little Arabic that I have to be careful talking to my driver. If I mention that something came from the Oasis at Siwa, he might just make a U-turn and head there! The combination of no shared language and the desire to please can be a dangerous one. (Man, I can really pile up these digressions when I don't discipline myself.) Anyway, I took the burned-out pulp with me when I headed out shopping and showed it to the doorman and cleaning boy, who stared at it dumbly. ("Dumbly" as in "struck dumb." "Speechlessly," not "stupidly." It will be clear who was the ignorant one in this conversation.) It turns out that the Arabic I know, which earns high praise from my driver when I read license plates aloud, is not all that useful for communicating complex messages like, "Need new light bulb." A later digression, in this or another message, might report the unfortunate fact that most of the Arab-speaking countries, having given us Arabic numerals, which we in the rest of the world continue to use and rely on, themselves now use different symbols for the numbers, with only the 1 and the 9 shared in both systems. My math-teacher daughter informed me that these are more accurately referred to as Hindu-Arabic numerals, since the earliest roots came from the Indian subcontinent. Compounding this conundrum is the fact that while we call the numerals in use in the West "Arabic," they understandably use that term here for the numerals in use in, well, Arabic! Many people here seem to call our numerals "English."

I guess the numeric digression will be in this message. In learning to count in Arabic an American has therefore to learn not only a new word for each number, as one does studying any new language, but also a new symbol. That doesn't sound complicated in principle, but while we share the "1" and "9" symbols, two of the other numerals are misleading cognates:

the symbol for "5" is "o," and what looks very much like my "7" means six here. What looks like a backwards "3" is a four, and finally, the symbol for "0" looks like our decimal point. (Like Europeans, people here use a comma where Americans would use a decimal point.)

Thus, I hasten to point out, my reading license plates is not a trivial exercise for my 65-year-old brain, which has to perform multiple calculations as it steps through a virtual minefield of translation traps: "o7.9" OK, that one looks like zero, so it's a five, and the word for five is "khamsa." OK, that one looks like a seven but it's a six ("setta," ignoring the fact that that word is similar to the one most Latin languages use for seven!). Next is a dot, so zero ("cifr"). And there's a 9. Wait. I can't remember whether there's anything special about what looks like a nine. No, I don't think so. It's just a nine. I hope. So, "tesaa." Or is it the deceptively similar name "setta"? (No native speaker, of course, is EVER confused by the fact that the words for nine and six contain very similar sounds with the consonants switched. To them, "setta" and "tesaa," are unique. Then again, they would never confuse the words for "spoon" and "knife," whereas a language student, learning both words on the same day, often does so. But me, I always have to do one additional calculation to make sure I have chosen the right one. So "o7.9" = 5609. No problem!

It's always a relief to see an upside-down V, the teepee shape, because that doesn't mean anything in my native system and can come through clean as the 8 it is: "tamania" in Arabic, and my favorite number since I was eight in the third grade in Mrs. Rogers' class at Lincoln School in Pittsburg, Kansas, when I first remember being asked what my favorite number was and chose it. Well, it SHOULD be a relief, but "seven" (saba") is a right-side-UP V, and I do have to make sure each time that I am not forgetting which end is, literally, up before I give my final answer. I am not making this stuff up.

Now where was I? I think I pointed with the light bulb to the light fixture on the lobby ceiling and shook my head, then looked tearfully at the bulb. Marcel Marceau would have had such an easier time here than I do! The metaphorical light bulb goes on in the doorman's eyes. He seems to understand. He takes the bulb and gives it to the cleaning boy, barking Arabic instructions. The cleaning boy starts to leave. I stop him. "Talehta," I say. ("Three." My license-plate-reading exercise is paying off!) "Talehta?" the doorman asks, puzzled. I don't know whether he is merely asking for confirmation or whether "talehta" doesn't mean what I thought it did, at least the way I pronounce it. Or, heck, whether the stupid foreigner wants a three-watt bulb, instead of the 60-watt bulb this old one is. (The foreigner is proud that he knows that he has a 60-watt bulb because hidden in the useless and here Arabic verbiage they print on light bulbs (memo to self: write to GE about this) he detected a seven followed by a decimal point, thus "6" and "0.") "Talehta," I repeat, but lacking confidence in even this primitive linguistic accomplishment I follow it up by showing three fingers, then pointing to the bulb. All is well. The cleaning boy runs off (he actually runs, as in an emergency) to buy bulbs with the money the doorman has given him. I try, but justifiably without much hope, to find out how much money. After a few minutes, I give up. I also have to abandon the doorman's several questions, accompanied by graphic but not truly clarifying gestures. I think he's asking me whether I want the bulbs taken upstairs, or maybe installed, but how can I explain where they go, and besides, I am on my way out. He shakes his head and mutters something that contains the Arabic word

for Arabic, and I can understand his frustration, hoping it is distinguishable from contempt. I end the conversation the way I so often do, with a smile and a shrug of my shoulders, and I walk with my tote bag down the street.

Later, when I return with my groceries, the cleaning boy excitedly retrieves the three boxed bulbs from behind the doorman's desk. He will not, of course, give them to me, although I do eventually manage to evoke the number "khamsa" from him when I wave a wad of banknotes in his face, and I give him five pounds, or almost a dollar. Not a bad bargain. He insists on carrying them upstairs in the elevator with me. He follows me into the apartment, and I know he will not leave until I allow him to install them. Both my age and my apparent incompetence in even the smallest tasks persuade people that I need every possible assistance. Truth be told, I have only two bulbs out: one in the ceiling fixture of the foyer and one in my desk lamp. I asked for three because I correctly anticipated that this would be a difficult negotiation and decided to get a spare to save myself an early repetition of this dialog. Momma didn't raise no fool. I fetch my little three-step step-ladder, and he installs the new bulb, which is now brightening my life and my foyer. I offer him four pounds, hoping I neither insult him nor seem stupidly careless with money. (Knowing when and how much to tip is a subtle skill not well taught to newcomers.) To my relief he accepts with non-condescending grace.

Earlier, I had thought that this cleaning boy spoke some English. We were riding together in the small elevator one afternoon, and he greeted me with a smiling, "Hello." "Hello," I responded. He continued to grin at me, apparently expecting more. "How are you?" I asked. "How are you?" he replied, repeating my question with the identical intonation. "Fine, thank you." "Fine, thank you." That dialog has now become our standard elevator conversation. It provides me a fleeting but satisfying moment of linguistic equality.

My typical day offers several such encounters that take that much work and sow much confusion. I leave behind me a trail of bewildered Egyptians scratching their heads and wondering how America ever achieves anything.

How many Americans does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, if he can secure the assistance of three Egyptians.

*John Stuckey, who retired as Director of University Computing at Washington and Lee University after similar positions at Northeastern and Carnegie-Mellon, has taken an interim position in Egypt as Chief Technology Officer at the American University in Cairo. He is an associate editor of Ubiquity and agreed to write us from time to time.*