LIFE HACKS FOR A LITTLE ALIEN

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riverrun

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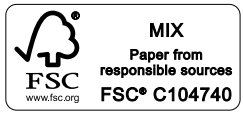
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Prologue

You are sitting on the living room floor, spooning strawberry yoghurt onto the carpet. On the carpet, an insect crawls. Your mum asks what you're doing even though it's obvious what you're doing – you're spooning strawberry yoghurt onto the carpet where an insect crawls.

'What are you doing?' your mum asks. Her question is rhetorical but you don't know the meaning of rhetorical, let alone how to identify something rhetorical.

'I'm dying a spider,' you say.

You're three years old, and these are your first words. Your mum doesn't react. She doesn't look pleased or surprised. Instead, she gets up from the sofa and leaves the room, thinking about a book she has borrowed from the library – a book titled *So Your Child Is a Psychopath*. She is worried. Did you know you've worried your mum? Your first-ever sentence was a catastrophe. Did you know it was a catastrophe?

Let me explain. Firstly, that's not a spider; the tiny creature on the carpet is a beetle. Not all tiny creatures are spiders. Calling a

beetle 'spider' is a silly mistake. However, I can probably let this go. After all, this kind of thing is common in the early stages of language acquisition. Children might call every insect 'spider', every female 'mum', and every spherical fruit 'orange'. This phenomenon is called overextending.* Overextending is just one of the reasons children are funny. And by funny, I mean strange and a little bit dim.

I don't know if I can forgive your verb choice, though. 'Dying' is an intransitive verb that cannot be followed by a direct object such as 'spider'. The verb you're looking for is 'kill'. You were supposed to say, 'I'm killing a spider that is actually a beetle.'

But is 'killing' even the right word here? This beetle won't necessarily be killed by the yoghurt globs. It will be maimed for sure, but killed? It might have been more apt to say: 'I am trying to kill this spider that is actually a beetle, but maybe I'll just maim it instead.'

That said, I imagine your mum isn't that worried about you overextending the odd noun or messing up the odd verb. I imagine she's just worried you are a psychopath. Like many parents, she places undue weight on her child's first words. She considers them a Very Significant Event. Your cousin's first word was 'moon'. This pleased your auntie. She thought it was a very significant event. She thought it meant he would become a well-paid astrophysicist.†

But now your mum is flicking through *So Your Child Is a Psychopath* and all she imagines for you is a short career as a vandal followed

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* Under-extending happens too. Sometimes kids think the only orange in the world is the one they have just eaten and are baffled when there is more fruit by the same name.

† Your cousin's first word was not a very significant event. He won't be an astrophysicist or an astro-anything. He's not so bright, that kid.

by a long stretch behind bars. Don't worry too much. Parents are funny. And by funny, I mean strange and a little bit dim.

As it happens, I'm not dim. I'm a linguist,* and as a very smart linguist, I can say your mum is right to be worried. There is something wrong with you. I know this for certain. Something is wrong with you. Something is wrong with you right now as you sit on the carpet still holding the yoghurt pot. The yoghurt pot is empty and the beetle is still. You are contemplating the beetle, which is still. Stop contemplating the beetle. The beetle is so still, it is unlikely it will ever move again.

Look at me. I know you understand. Your vocabulary is enormous, or to be precise, your passive vocabulary is enormous and your active vocabulary is shite. I know having something wrong with you sounds scary, but don't worry. At least, not for the time being.

Hey, stop crying. Would it help if I told you a story? I have a really great one up my sleeve. It's all about you – everything you see and everything you do.

Sound good? Climb up here, Little Alien. Sit next to me. I will tell you about life on this planet. I will tell you how it goes.

Further reading:

So Your Child Is a Psychopath

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* Linguists are language experts. They are people who know a lot about language. They are not necessarily people who know how to speak a lot of languages, or even people who know a lot about linguine, which is a type of pasta.

Part One

I

It goes like this. You won't be normal. Aliens can't be normal. You'll be normal enough, though. And by this, I mean you'll have just enough normal to seem normal without actually being normal.

Let me explain. Like normal human children, you'll disregard every grammatical irregularity that comes your way. You'll say things like 'I goed to school with my mum', 'I eated the orange', and 'Colouring in is funner than skipping'.

If I were a prescriptivist, I would lambast you for these flagrant over-regularisations.* But as it happens, I am not a prescriptivist, I am a descriptivist.† And as a descriptivist, I applaud you. 'Goed' is more logical than 'went'. 'Eated' is more logical than 'ate'. 'Funner' is more logical than 'more fun' and it's a funner expression to boot.

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* Prescriptivists are people who think there are right and wrong ways to use language. They wince at aspirated aitches and moan about unsightly neologisms. They can be a bit annoying.

† Descriptivists are people who study how language is actually used. They embrace the unrelenting sea of language change as neither a sign of progress nor a sign of decay. They can also be a bit annoying.

These assertions would chime with the internal grammars of many small humans. You're blending in. Well done.

But you're still wrong. 'Goed' and 'eated' and 'funner' aren't words. You won't find them in reputable dictionaries or even disreputable dictionaries. They're wrong. You're wrong. You're wrong all the time and you can't help it.

Let me explain. On your first day of school, you look cute in your tiny stripy tie. You go into the classroom, looking cute, holding your dad's hand – something that's also cute. When he lets go of your hand, you cling on to his elbow. When he shakes his elbow free, you wrap your entire body around his legs. When he wriggles you off him, he disappears out the door and you panic.

You are panicked. You don't know what to do. There are other children. The other children are busy. The other children are doing seemingly random activities. You wonder if you should join in with the seemingly random activities, but you don't know which activity to choose. Do you Play-Doh or colour in? Do you sandpit or clay? Do you Jenga or glockenspiel?

All these questions – or the absence of any answers to these questions – make your throat feel weird and your eyes well up. You're upset. This is what happens when you're upset. You don't know that yet, though. Your little body is still a mystery to you.

The teacher comes over, but only at a leisurely speed. For a human, she is not in very good condition. She is old and creaks when she walks. Slowly, she eases herself down to your level until her head is at your height. She asks if you're OK.

'Are you OK?' she asks.

You don't know if you're OK because you don't know what

'OK' means in this context. You don't currently have any unmet physiological needs. You don't need to eat or sleep or drink or pee. Does that mean you're OK?

'Do you want to play with Henry?' the teacher asks.

You wipe your nose on your sleeve. 'Henry' is just another word you do not understand.

'Let's go find Henry.'

The teacher prods you gently in the direction of outside. When you get outside, she prods you in the direction of the sandpit. When you get to the edge of the sandpit, she prods you until you step into the sandpit.

'Here's Henry,' the teacher says.

In the sandpit, there are three boys. One has red hair, one has brown hair, and one is blond. One of these boys must be Henry, but the teacher doesn't tell you which one. The three boys stare at you. You wonder if you have a Cheerio stuck on your forehead. You ate Cheerios that morning and it wouldn't be the first time one of them got stuck on your forehead, it would be the second. You rub your forehead. There is no Cheerio.

The teacher tells you she's going to leave you with Henry now.

'I'm going to leave you with Henry now,' the teacher says. 'Don't throw anything. If sand gets into anyone's eye, they'll have to go to hospital. Cheerio.'

When the teacher is gone, you stand with your arms at your sides while you sway, wondering if 'Henry' is the collective noun for a group of feral children.

At some point, the boy with red hair speaks.

'Why is she just standing there?' he asks.

Ten minutes later, you are covered in sand, standing in the creaky teacher's office. Your teacher is looking at you through her glasses. The glasses have a magnifying quality. They make her look like one of those animals with massive eyes.*

The teacher is talking to you about being nice. She is saying things like 'It's nice to be nice' and 'We don't attack each other with sand in this classroom'. You do not dignify these banalities with a nod, let alone a verbal response. In the end, the teacher tells you she is going to call your dad. She tells you this twice, and twice you do not care.

'I'm going to call your dad,' she says. 'I'm going to call your dad right now.' When your dad answers the phone, the teacher changes her tone. What was once a nasal drone is now a breathy singsong that makes her sound manically chipper, as if she's determined to have a really good time despite life being despicable. 'Your daughter is not saying anything . . . We didn't know she was . . . We really need to know . . . We need to know if children don't . . . No, she's not speaking at all . . . She's also just attacked several other children . . . Sand . . .'

You're pissed off when your dad arrives. You know this because you feel like frowning. You look at your dad, frowning. Your dad looks at you but he's not frowning. He doesn't say anything. He just starts walking you home. While he is walking you home, you want to ask him what on earth he was thinking, sending you to a school where they don't even teach you how to read. But then he asks you if you want pizza for tea.

'Do you want pizza for tea?' he asks.

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* Bushbabies.

You nod. Even though you eated pizza yesterday, another pizza can't hurt.

'What do you say?'

In most families, when an adult asks a child what do you say, it means 'Don't be a little shit, say please' or 'Say thank you, you little shit'. In your family, however, it just means you are required to speak.

'Yes,' you say.

'What do you say?'

'Yes, please.'

Further reading:

Is Homeschooling Right for Your Child?
An Introduction to Literacy for Illiterate Kids
Bushbabies: Why the Massive Eyes?