



MZUNGU IN KAMPALA with Bryan McInnis

When English is not quite the same language

Hey mzungu, that does not mean what you think it does.” I have heard some version of that sentence many times since moving to Uganda.

Now, to be clear, I am fully aware that English is one of Uganda’s national languages. But I am also American, which means two things tend to be true at the same time: I only speak one language, and even that one can be...complicated.

I speak American English, which explains why, when my wife and I watch British television shows like *The Crown*, *Ted Lasso* or *Slow Horses*, we keep the subtitles turned on. For many Americans, British English might as well be a distant linguistic cousin.

So perhaps it should not surprise me that several months into life in Uganda, I am still regularly confused by English phrases I hear almost every day.

Here are a few that have humbled me. **“It’s fine” or “It’s okay”:** This phrase usually appears when I offer something, a meal, a day off, or some other small gesture of hospitality.

My American brain initially interprets the response as mild reluctance. Something like: “If you insist.”

But over time I have realised it often carries a very different meaning. It can be a gracious way of saying, “This is generous. Thank you.” The tone is modest, but the appreciation is genuine.

“Extend small”: I have heard this phrase most often from security guards who also function as parking attendants and, occasionally, traffic philosophers.

At first I assumed the phrase might involve a handshake. Instead, it is a polite instruction: move the car forward a little so it is not blocking the road.

It turns out that Kampala’s informal

parking guidance system is both efficient and linguistically creative.

“Short call” and “long call”: This particular lesson arrived in a moment of mild embarrassment. I once arrived late to a meeting and apologised by explaining that I had been “on a long call with my boss.” What I believed I had said was that work had delayed me. What the room likely heard was something rather more personal. In local usage, a “short call” and a “long call” refer to quick and extended visits to the bathroom. It was an educational moment.

“It is cold”: We first encountered this phrase years ago while adopting our daughter in Uganda. Temperatures were hovering around 30 degrees, yet several older women insisted she needed a hat. To someone from Minnesota, where winter temperatures can plunge far below freezing, this felt puzzling.

But in Uganda, “cold” often means simply cooler than usual. Climate, it turns out, shapes language as much as culture does.

“I am paining”: After a friend recently gave birth, my wife asked how she was feeling. “I am paining,” she replied.

For a moment, my American grammar instincts stalled. In my mind, “pain” is a noun. Here it was functioning as a verb. But the meaning was immediately clear; she had just delivered a baby and was, understandably, in pain.

English, I have learned, is doing some impressive work here. Living in Uganda has been a reminder that language is never static. It adapts, stretches and reshapes itself across cultures. Words remain familiar, but their meanings often shift in subtle ways.

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