Rolling the “RRRR”

Stephen Jay Gould’s text is very interesting and full of pleasant “interactive consonants.” Though it seems important to add Frantz Fanon’s “R- assimilationist” so to speak, to the discussion. Fanon actually devoted part of his book “Black Skin, White Mask” (1952) to the importance of language and pronunciation. A doctor and trained psychoanalyst, Fanon discovered an obsession of pronouncing the letter “R” by the people from the French speaking Antilles (Martinique and Guadeloupe). To differentiate themselves from other black people in Paris during the 1950’s and 60’s, these so-called “assimiléé,” went out of their way to pronounce the rolled “R,” producing an exaggerated sound effect. The general French black population had a tendency to skip and not pronounce the consonant.

Fanon cites an example where a costumer in a Parisian coffee-shop asked loudly for a beer, consciously rolling each “R” at the appropriate moment. The result was much more than he had hoped for, and sounded like, “GARRRRÇON ! UN VÈ DE BIÈ.” The proper phrase should have been, “GARÇON ! UN VERRE DE BIÈRE.” By putting too much pressure on the first “R” in Garçon (Waiter), the man was unable to keep the two other ones, in Verre (Glass) and Bière (Beer).

This example can be reinterpreted through S.J. Gould’s approach. Here one might say that “Verre = Vert” (the color Green) and Bière = Bierre (in this case coffin, like the shape of the Rigaud perfume bottle). Finally, “Eau de Voilette,” the piece of cloth used by widows to cover their face can be read also as “Eau de Violette” (color for the funeral).

As an additional grammatical point, the gender for the word CORDE is feminine, not masculine. In French we say “une corde,” and in accordance with S’ ACCORDE (liaison) it becomes SA CORDE (Her Rope).

I loved the whole text. Best regards,

Marc Latamie