

## My girlfriend,

**Tatjana, is in Ljubljana. I am in Dallas. This, in the parlance of our relationship, is not "equal."**



She's big on equality. Or so she says. Maybe this is a holdover from her ex-Yugoslavian communist philosophies, maybe this is a utopian scale she dreams of standing on. Most likely, this is just a recurring in-joke that has fixed itself upon so many of our tongue-in-cheek dialogues.

Irrespective, my free market upbringing frequently finds fault with equality. Even at the fundamental levels, she and I will never be equals. For instance, because I'm male, I will (according to the law of averages) earn a higher income than her, possess greater muscle mass, and I will die 5.5 years before her. This is not equal.

She is fluent in Slovene, English and Russian, and a strong amateur in German and Italian. I know English. She thinks this is the greatest cut toward our inequality. One conversation we had went along these lines: "This is so unequal that you know English, and I must speak to you in your language, even though we are in my country. This English makes you too high." "Well, either we speak English or I say nothing." "But then you will always be better than me." Even without exploring all the crevices of Wittgenstein's assertion that the size of one's language is the size of one's universe, she has a very solid point.

Whenever I would tell Ljubljanans I lived in Rakova Jelša, I regularly got this sarcastic comeback: "Your neighbors speak very good Slovene, don't they?" And although it's funny to see a linguistic nation of 2 million taking pop shots at their former national brothers, my answer was always "How the fuck would I know?" Apparently, the Albanians or Serbs mangling their tongues into Slovene could receive much more condescension than the Aussies or Brits who just ran their mouths off in English.

Which isn't to say, I was above censure. It's just that when Slovenians cursed me out or gave me the third degree about not using their language, they did so in English. English can make you high, and yet simultaneously it brings everyone to a common level; like the students of French, Latin and Greek before it, English-speakers belong to a clique. But unlike those languages, English is not for specialists, diplomats, priests or scientists. English entitles its speaker to the security that in any given airport on the planet, someone will be talking with you.

Economists believe that scarcity increases a commodity's value. Globally dominant languages seem to debunk this theory.

This equality/inequality paradox was rattling around in my head as I went to the bank this week. At the Dallas branch of my New York bank, there was a curious set of ads focusing on their retirement savings program. One depicted a professorial black man above the caption: "Your retirement may cost you \$1,407,000." Then, the equivalent Spanish ad depicted an elderly Mexican man and translated as "Your retirement may cost you \$880,000." (I know some Spanish, too.)

A quick sidebar: Spanish in Texas is English in Slovenia. At some point, you're going to be called to task to use it, so you might as well know it.

And as I looked at those two radically different figures, my mind inflated a gigantic thought balloon, broadcasting "Wait. What?!" I asked my teller (a Hispanic co-ed) about the discrepancy. She said "Sir, we don't handle the advertisement...what were those numbers again?!" My point exactly.

So, where did that other \$500,000 go? Is the life of an English speaker really worth that much more than a Spanish speaker? Are there really actuarial jugglers who pit these kinds of hypotheticals against each other to arrive at such numbers?

I eventually convinced myself that the off 500 grand went into the cost of retiring in the United States—as opposed to Mexico. And I'm a tad ashamed I didn't come up with this distinction earlier, considering that my on-off year in Slovenia was basically a working retirement.

I used to ghost Abanka, trying to squeeze out the best exchange rate from whatever dollars I was converting. An economist friend of mine postulated that if I worked a month of freelance copywriting in the US, I could live for 10 months in Slovenia. All things being equal, that's a pretty picture from any angle.

The problem is that freelance work isn't parceled out to people who want to work just one month, and then leave the country. At least, not at my level. Conversely, any copywriting I did in Slovenia would severely undercut my day-rate. I would work a Slovenian week for what I would make in a Manhattan day. Plus, I can't write in Slovene. And, this is not equal.

But, what is? And more importantly, who is? James Blunt has a hit album, a full head of hair and a history of combat duty. All signs point to that pop phenom being my superior. On the other hand, I'm not internationally recognized as a ballad-singing douche bag.

My girlfriend may be from a tiny hiccup of a village in a tiny country called Slovenia. She can harbor tiny resentments about this and use them to jokingly diminish her self-worth. But, the joke's on her. All this fuss about inequality only brings us closer together. I've discovered my new motto is "Adjacency over equality." ■