

# A New Language

The first day Mohamed went to a delicatessen in his new neighborhood, he realized that he really wasn't in Tunisia anymore. He looked up at the menu board, which had nothing but sandwiches on it, and wondered how he was going to figure out what all of these weird names meant. Mohamed decided that he would just get dessert instead and asked the woman at the counter for ice cream in a cup. She smiled broadly and disappeared behind the big glass display case to fill his order.

While Mohamed waited, he looked at the baked goods in the case. There were sixteen kinds of bagels and a few different types of cookies that Mohamed didn't recognize, but there were no pastries and definitely nothing from home. Mohamed had been so excited when his parents told him they were immigrating to the United States, but now, his bravery and excitement felt a little misplaced.

The woman came back to the counter with a tall paper cup. It contained a long straw and some kind of frothy drink. Mohamed, completely mystified, took the cup and thanked her, mulling over the possibility that he had used the wrong word.

"It's the soda you ordered," she said, "an ice cream drink in a cup."

He smiled at the woman again, pointed at one of the bagels, and said, "That one, too, please," which seemed to work better.

Mohamed took the bagel and his mystery soda to a table and sat down to eat. Why was it that English had been so easy for him in his classes in Tunisia, but when it came down to actually speaking, he couldn't even get what he wanted to eat? Later, he might find it hilarious that his English was so hard to decipher that he got a soda instead of the ice cream he wanted. Right now, it just felt depressing that his English was, he thought, pathetic. One mistake seemed to put everything Mohamed wanted or knew about himself far out of reach.

Mohamed bit into his bagel and tried to pull a chunk of it off with his teeth. How did people eat these things, anyway? Mohamed wondered if an American emigrating to Tunisia would feel the same way—wondering what to eat, how to ask for it, and even how to eat it—and if they would find that their academic French was not at all the same thing as French in real life. Even the food would make them feel out of place, he smiled to himself, thinking about how hot the peppers were in some of his favorite dishes, and how his mother had to tone down the heat in their food every time they had visitors from the college where both his parents worked.

Just then, Mohamed noticed that a girl at a table near the window was giving him a rather quizzical look. Hoping that facial expressions were a little more universal than his English was proving to be, he smiled at the girl. She stood up and came over to Mohamed's table. "Aren't you Professor Ben Ammar's son?" she asked, her voice tinged with an accent he couldn't quite place.

“Yes!” he said, thrilled to be able to talk to someone who, at the least, would know his mother, but at the same time, hoping she didn’t hear what he ordered and notice that he most certainly didn’t get what he asked for.

“I’m Luisa. Welcome to our fair city!” the girl said. “Hey, don’t feel bad about your English—you’ll get better at it once you’ve lived here for a while. I’m from Spain, and the first time I tried to order a salad here, I ended up with a plate of pig’s feet. At least you got a soda out of the deal!” Mohamed breathed a sigh of relief that he wasn’t the only one struggling to communicate, and his new city began to feel just a little more like he could call it home.

**Questions**

1. Why does Mohamed get a soda?
2. How does Mohamed feel about his meal?
3. How is Luisa important to the story?
4. Why does Mohamed suddenly feel depressed, and what makes him feel better?

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**Vocabulary List**

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. delicatessen
2. misplaced
3. mystified
4. mulling
5. hilarious
6. decipher
7. pathetic
8. quizzical

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**Context Clues**

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

1) "The first day Mohamed went to a **delicatessen** in his new neighborhood"

- a. sandwich shop or food store    b. library    c. gymnasium    d. school or academy

2) "Mohamed had been so excited when his parents told him they were immigrating to the United States, but now, his bravery and excitement felt a little **misplaced**."

- a. excessive; over the top    b. unusual; odd    c. late or tardy    d. foolish; misguided

3) "Mohamed, completely **mystified**, took the cup"

- a. starving; hungry    b. bewildered; confused    c. satisfied or content    d. thrilled; happy

4) "**mulling** over the possibility that he had used the wrong word"

- a. chuckling or laughing    b. considering; pondering    c. scowling; frowning    d. bubbling

5) "Later, he might find it **hilarious** that his English was so hard to decipher that he got a soda instead of the ice cream"

- a. horrible; awful    b. sad or tragic    c. very funny; humorous    d. understandable

6) "Later, he might find it hilarious that his English was so hard to **decipher** that he got a soda instead of the ice cream"

- a. remember    b. swallow; eat    c. repeat or duplicate    d. understand; decode

7) "it just felt depressing that his English was, he thought, **pathetic**"

- a. pitiful or miserable    b. highly accented    c. poetic; lyrical    d. unique or unusual

8) "a girl at a table near the window was giving him a rather **quizzical** look"

- a. sickening    b. uneasy or nervous    c. inquiring; questioning    d. friendly