Fruit for thought

Searching for beauty amongst the wrinkles of global English — or how to prune a plum.

Philip H. D. SMITH.
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I recently caught a train from an airport to a city centre, and while waiting for it to depart heard someone from the train company say out loud “Next door next door”. Did he mean take another train, go to another platform? No, he was asking people to move down the platform where there was plenty of room to board. The man was doing his best and “next door" was the nearest he came to it in English.

This reminded me of something that happened several years ago when I took a boat in Argentina, or perhaps it was Chile, all crystalline lakes and brooding mountains. I sat in the saloon near a window and drank in the overwhelming scenery. At a nearby table sat an impressively international group that had struck up a conversation about the things such groups discuss. At one point one of them held up a plum and said, how do you call this in English? They all looked puzzled until a girl said, “it's a prune”.

Should I have said something? I chose not to because I rather liked the idea of this disparate group subsequently going their own ways in the world bound by the harmless and unique link of calling a plum a prune. Would it ever really matter? Would they one day be corrected by a greengrocer, a snooty waiter or a literate lover?

But who knows?

Perhaps one of them would one day land a prune job in their chosen field. Or win a game of Cluedo by accusing Professor Prune, in the library with the candlestick. Would they in future hobnob with aristocrats with pruney accents? Would any future bafflement leave them prune confused?

Would they, when the time came, cook their children's tea using prune tomatoes to eke out 200 grams of festive mince? The usage would spread and new generations would begin to call a plum a prune.

And so in years to come it would become the standard word, and when a lone Irishman said, “I think it's called a plum” all around him would reply that the Heritage Anglophone Countries were very quaint and a good holiday destination, but it was now called a prune because that was what it said in the texts.

Remember that you read it here first.

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