Off mic with Phil Smith: Work life imbalance

My children are able to list my faults without pausing for breath. High on the list come my poor jokes.

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With the unflinching eyes of youth, my children are able to list my faults without pausing for breath. High on the list come my poor jokes. I know, it’s hard to believe that my rib-crackers don’t find universal favour, but at least I can still use ageing material on colleagues. Next time we’re working together buy me a drink and I’ll run through a couple of the old routines, it’s good for me to keep my hand in. And I get thirsty.

I also fall down in parenting terms when I can’t answer simple questions like “what’s for dinner” after a week in Luxembourg, or “what have you done with my football shirt” when calling from a different time zone. Our children do suffer, the poor wee mites.

Another serious shortcoming is my inability to remember who is singing which song on the radio. I do try, honest. But it just doesn’t stick any more, which is a shock to someone like me who in his youth was an avid reader of New Musical Express and who remembers the days when groups plugged in their electric guitars. Au revoir street cred.

Where was I?

Ah yes. The priceless treasures. Some of the tricks of our trade come in useful when keeping the blighters in check. The little darlings still haven’t understood that we can listen and talk at the same time, so while ever-loving-spouse and I are discussing whether we’ve run out of breakfast cereal or whose turn it is to worm the cat, we can also follow young Jasper’s plans to invite round everyone in the school for a party next weekend when we’re away learning how to paraglide in Wales. The children are completely unnerved when they discover we know their plans.

Do we bring other work routines or skills home with us?

I once tried convincing my better half that we should only talk in half hour slots, as I’d planned to use her allotted 30 minutes to match up all my socks. It didn’t work though. She rejected the idea, and managed to tell me why in under thirty minutes.

Not all my borrowings from the world of interpreting have been as successful.

Innate mawkishness has more than once caused me to bring home a CD of music that had been tearfully explained to me as expressing the yearning of a mountain people who eke out their existence in some inhospitable terrain. I ask at home for respectful hush as I play it, only to be confronted with the reality of its sheer dreadfulness. And it had sounded so good in Ponchoperdido. But then which of us has not proudly uncorked a bottle of herbal brandy, only to realise once we get
it home that it tastes like fermenting compost? Come clean, we’ve all done it. My particular triumph was a heady brew of apricots and stinging nettles. You’re welcome to a refreshing swig next time you’re at our house.

Another thing we tend to do amongst ourselves but which doesn’t work at home, is mixing languages. Clearly you can get away with it with colleagues, but back home it isn’t such a good idea to start telling a joke and realise halfway through that the punch line only works in German.

We all know that the languages we have learned contain some phrases or sayings which are neater, pithier or simply funnier than those in our own language. With interpreters you can let rip. With non-interpreters they just think you’re showing off. So take care with those wise maxims used by the Cockaleeky tribe of the Western Isles.

I’ve been working up to this but now it’s confession time. I finish other people’s sentences for them. Not an attractive habit, is it? I know it’s partly their fault for dawdling around, but they still don’t like it. I put this all down to my having been schooled in the art of anticipation. We don’t always know where a speaker is heading but as we’re trained to read the signs we can usually make a pretty fair guess. I was always taught to speak in complete sentences in the booth – not at all easy when you’re a beginner but something I’ve recently got the hang of. So combine an acute sense of anticipation with an aversion to unfinished sentences, and you get this compulsion to go around tidying up sloppy speech. At least that’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.

A recent exchange with a colleague illustrates the point:

She: Stop finishing my sentences, I’ve told…
Me: Well you were dithering.
She: No, it was a work in progress.

One of the children brought the subject up a couple of weeks ago because his friends had told him to stop finishing their sentences for them. “It’s because your dad does it,” they’d said. I was so proud, passing on these traditions to the next generation.

What about the rest of you? What have you brought home from the exhilarating and stylish world of conference interpreting that’s subsequently come crashing to earth?

You may well feel better if you come clean using the Comment facility. And don’t worry. This website is only read by people who are AIIC officers (it’s part of the job description) or insomniacs. Your secret will be safe with me.

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Phil Smith is a UK-based freelance currently recovering from some dandelion and oak bark schnapps to the sound of Bavarian throat warbling.

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