



WE 023: American English in my podcast

Dear all, I would like to invite you to listen to the newest episode of the World of English podcast, but here comes the little surprise. Well, you know me, I always try to present something to you of interest, something engaging. But this episode is truly unique because it has a different format. It is an interview and because of this very wonderful guest, because this guest is Ken Ramirez. So, yes the time has come, the time has come for the World of English podcast to present to you, to feature an interview. But I'm sure as you listen to the interview, as you listen to the speaker that I'm going to talk about in a second, you will understand why there is this format because the person that I met is truly amazing.

I had the pleasure of delivering simultaneous translation of Ken's conference in Prague. The conference covered the broad subject of animal training. The presenter is a wonderful person, he proves to be a wonderful person, full of life, joy and this true love for animals. All the people who are involved in the field of animal training, they would instantly know, they will instantly know, who I am talking about because the name Ken Ramirez opens many doors and all the people who deal with animal training they would know instantly who that is. But I would like to feature this trainer, this wonderful person to you, in case you don't know who I am talking about.

So, Ken Ramirez is this renowned trainer of animals. He has been working with all sorts of animals, big and small, domesticated and the wild ones, for over forty years. He has worked with guide dogs, with rescue dogs and his great passion is conservation training, which aims at protecting the natural environment and this is something that really blew my mind. Ken has been a pioneer in this field dealing with ground breaking conservation projects with such animals like chimpanzees, polar bears, elephants or butterflies, just to name a few. Can you imagine, do you imagine the training of butterflies, but he did it, he actually did it. He has performed remote training of chimpanzees, for instance, the aim of which was to teach them how to sound the alarm in the presence of poachers. He has also been



working on redirecting migration routes of wild elephants so as to save their lives. A great thing really, an unusual thing.

The interview that you are going to listen to is unique as it features a unique person. The person that is full of passion, full of knowledge, full of life, full of love. But another value of the meeting is also the very language. As you will notice, it is a different standard of the language because it is American English. However, this variety of the language is filtered through by the many places Ken has lived in and the number of people he has cooperated with.

I have to tell you that this experience, this pleasure of delivering simultaneous translation for Ken Ramirez was something I wasn't expecting actually because working with such a great speaker is a really, really unique experience. Ken develops his ideas in a very clear and thought-over way. He, as he was presenting his speeches, as he was talking to the audience, to the public, he was constantly looking at us, meaning us that is the translators and he was controlling all the things just to make our job so much easier. I have to say it, and that's another thing I wasn't expecting, is that I was physically tired, really 'cause there was a lot of energy that was involved translating on and on all the things that Ken was saying, but as I said, on the other hand, he was doing it in such a way that it was real pleasure. I said that he was controlling what he was talking about looking at us because there were two booths; I was alone, I was the only one in the booth translating into Polish but there was the other booth. There were two other translators, two other wonderful girls translating into Czech.

The interview was recorded just after the conference, after the two days of great involvement, great passion, great knowledge and Ken was flying off from Prague the next day first thing in the morning. I do hope you will like the 23rd episode, I hope that the passion that accompanied the whole meeting with Ken Ramirez is there for you to feel. Please enjoy.

Sylwia Krawczyk: Very lovely, so Ken first of all I'd like to thank you for a very, very lovely conference. It was a real pleasure to meet you, to listen to you, to listen to



all the things that you have prepared for us. And also, from my perspective, it was even more enriching because what I could hear and what I found out, this, this knowledge about animals, but also I could listen to this wonderful language of yours.

Ken Ramirez: Oh, thank you.

SK: And of course I'd like to ask you, that's my, that would be my very first question. Where are you originally based? Why your language is so wonderful to listen to?

KR: I don't know, I think my answer to that question is I have lived in many, many countries, so I speak four languages and I very quickly learned that when I travel, I have difficulty understanding people if they don't enunciate, if they don't speak clearly, if they don't use full sentences. And so, I think that experience helped me to be thoughtful particularly when I speak to an audience where I know that English is not their first language. And so I try not to, I try not to use slang words, I try to use full sentences, I try to speak clearly because then I realise that people can understand me better. So I think it's because of the fact that I lived in French Polynesia, I lived in Japan, I lived in Mexico, that I realized I needed to be slower in how I speak and I needed to be clearer in how I speak, so I appreciate you telling me that...

SK: Yeah, it works, it definitely does, yeah. That's a wonderful thing and also the way you produce a concept, the way you talk about them, it's so easy to understand. So right now I'm talking from the perspective of a student, right. So, I can acquire this wonderful knowledge from you and this is, this is a wonderful thing because here I would say we have this combination of both the knowledge and the language.

KR: Well, thank you. I think, I think one of the things that I have learned to do when I teach, and it doesn't matter what or where I teach. Trying to explain to people how training works and how an animal learns, I have found that telling stories that illustrate how and why it works, are very helpful. And so, because I



teach a lot, what I have learned is if I tell a story and I see people's faces are confused, I learn not to tell the story that way again. I keep figuring out how to explain things until I can look at my audience and see them nodding and understanding and so I think I use that as a reinforcer and so when I would speak and I repeat see people tilt their heads and look puzzled, I would think to myself *oh, this story isn't working, they don't understand me*. When I would change the words or say it in a different and I can see them light up and I can see them smile, I thought to myself *ah, this way of explaining it makes sense*. And so I think I was very aware of watching an audience and so I try really hard to learn and I don't always succeed but I try to learn when I don't succeed, then I try it different way next time until it works.

SK: Well, definitely I have to tell you that it worked this time because you got observe our faces and we were smiling and myself, as a translator, sometimes I laughed instead of just translating and saying the thing because I enjoyed so much what you said and this what people told me *Oh you were just laughing into the microphone*, but I simply enjoyed the thing you were doing. I'd like to ask you now another question because we know that you were this positive reinforcement trainer. Can you just briefly tell us how it has changed this approach, how it has changed the nature of studying as such and of course, of course here we talk about animals, but how can we apply that to people?

KR: You know it's interesting it applies the same thing, the same way with people. When I started learning about behaviour and learning the laws of learning, first it was seeing how it applied to a dog and then it was seeing how it applied to a tiger or lion or a dolphin. But then I began realising as I learned about the science of behaviour, I realised all of us learn that way, we all learn to, we are attracted to things that reinforce us, we avoid things that are aversive and that's how all animals learn, including us. And so I think for me as someone who has taught other people to train, as someone who teaches people, I really learned that just like my animals learn better if I can reinforce them, so do people and so rather than telling people they're wrong or telling people that something they're doing isn't correct;



that just frustrates them. But if I can show them how to do it correctly, if I can reinforce them when they do it well, then I see that they learn it faster. So I started applying those techniques to my staff, to my personal life and it made my life better. And so I really think, one of the ways that I think people can become better trainers is to start looking for ways to apply it in all walks of life: with your dog, with your spouse, with your children, with your boss. When I was really young, I had some really harsh bosses, but I learned that if I found things that reinforce them that they would treat me better and I could actually get more things from them and so I actually learned that early in my life and realised that I could affect their behaviour. You don't have to be in charge to change behaviour, you just have to understand how reinforcement works. So I think I love business books, for example, that talk about the power of being kind, instead of those business books that talk about the power of intimidation. And I'm beginning to see more and more in teaching, in business, in parenting, in coaching people are learning that positive reinforcement works, with everybody including us.

SK: That's right and I do hope, I believe that this is exactly what I do when I teach my own students and I just try to see, I observe their behaviour, their body language; it's exactly what you were talking about, and how they respond to what I do. But there is a very interesting thing you were talking about when you were talking about teaching, studying, becoming the trainer and there are your students, animals in this respect. How do you teach an animal, so in other words, I can ask how can we generally like teach this acceptance of making a mistake and how to prepare for the mistake?

KR: I do a lot of work with working dogs: law enforcement, guide dogs, search and rescue dogs, and in the real world these animals are going to make mistakes, they're not always going to succeed. And one of the things that you do is one of the ways that you can train them using positive reinforcement is teach them that you, their teacher, are always going to help them succeed. And if they fail, it doesn't mean that they've done something wrong. It just means it's an opportunity to look for another answer, it's an opportunity to try a different way. And so what I have



found is that once an animal or a person learns that making a mistake isn't gonna be punished, making a mistake isn't gonna get you in trouble, making a mistake isn't gonna be painful, but instead a mistake is information and with soon as that mistake happens, I'm gonna show you another way, I'm gonna guide you to another answer. Then what happens is the animal starts to relax around mistakes. The student, the person starts to relax around mistakes and they go *Oh, you're not gonna yell at me, you're not gonna tell me I'm wrong, you are not going to make me feel stupid. Instead you just gonna help, show me a different way to accomplish the same thing.* And when you do that often enough, the learner, whether it's an animal or a person, begins to trust you and they begin to recognise that under your guidance I'm gonna be safe and as soon as they feel safe and trust you, you can learn and teach many things.

SK: Yeah, that's a wonderful answer, wonderful thing that you're saying because in a way, this is how I understand you. You are this guide, right, the person who just guide them. That's a great thing. But there comes another question after this wonderful meeting and this wonderful conference. You have travelled the world, right. You are a people person, right. You have worked with many people, you have lived in many locations, as you have said. And you've seen different situations, you have met different people, worked with different people and how did that influence your teaching techniques, your training techniques? Because you have known different cultures, you've been in variety of situations.

KR: I think that's the biggest important thing that I took away from it, is working in different cultures, recognising that what's reinforcing in one culture may not be reinforcing in another, working with different religious beliefs, working with different languages has made me realised to be much more open-minded about what's acceptable or what's right because just because something makes sense in one culture, doesn't always make sense in another culture. And so I've come across many situations where I failed to realise that. And I learned a lesson that I need to approach each new student, each new group of people with an open mind, because I don't know what their background is going to be. I don't know if they're going to



be very familiar with positive reinforcement or not familiar with positive reinforcement. I don't know what culturally is considered acceptable. I'll give you an example.

SK: Yeah, that would be very lovely.

KR: Many years ago, I was asked to come and work with a zoo in South Africa. This was many years, this was before apartheid, and it was at a time when black South Africans lived a very different life and were very separated and isolated from white South Africans. And I was invited to this zoo to help teach them about animal care. And the majority of the keepers that worked with the animals were black South Africans. So I'm teaching them about animal welfare and good food and putting the animals' needs first and I was talking about all of these things that I felt were very important to providing good welfare for the animals just like I talked about that to this group this weekend. And I had an opportunity at lunch, my first day. I don't know exactly how it happened, but normally I was guided around the zoo by the managers that were white South Africans. But I was alone and I went and sat with the black South Africans who had been taking the class and we were eating lunch together and at one point, one of them looked around to make sure that none of his supervisors were here and then he said *Ken, we understand what you're trying to tell us, but you're asking us to treat our animals better than we are treated ourselves. How do we do that?*

SK: Quite a bomb, really. A bombshell.

KR: I didn't have an answer for him. And I remember I went back to my room that night and I cried, thinking *Oh, this is such a different world*. I can't expect these keepers, who are not given normal, human decency, human rights, to somehow expect them to understand that the way they treat their animals, that there was a reason that they should treat their animals better than they themselves got treated. And it was at that, that was one example of many in my life where I've realised my view of the world is not the same as everybody else's, my experiences are not the same as everybody else's. So I have to go into a teaching opportunity



and recognise, I need to wait to see what I hear back from them. My beliefs don't change, so I still teach the same thing, but I look now and watch people's faces and watch their reactions and if I see shock, horror, disgust in something I'm saying, I now know that it means their worldview or their experiences are different enough that maybe what I'm talking about isn't the right way to approach that and I start looking for a different way to approach the same material. But it took me running into situations like that several times before I recognised this is a very, this culture is very different. I did the same thing when I worked in a, I worked in a culture where their religious beliefs were such that their way of looking at animals was very different than mine. And I realised that because of their religious beliefs, I wasn't gonna change their view of animals. And so I needed to find a different reason for them to want to treat the animals this way or do this with the animals. So, often it's finding the right reinforcer, finding out a way to say *Ok, now that I understand your culture or your religion or your challenges, how can I help you train or treat your animals or do this thing in a way that will make sense, given your worldview?* It's not always easy, but at least it's maybe be thoughtful about who I'm teaching and how can I approach this in a way that will make sense to them and be logical to them and help the animals that I'm here to help, but also help them because part of what I'm doing is helping the people be better teachers, better trainers, better workers. So I need to find something that's gonna help them.

SK: So it seems that you're adjusting your methods, the way you adjust them when you work with animals, the same way you adjust them when you work with people.

KR: It's exactly the same thing. You're always looking at, looking at your learner and seeing are they leaning in and nodding their head, going to understand you or are you seeing that body language with they're crossing their arms and they're frowning and you're thinking *Hm, maybe I'm not making sense*. So, we look for that in our animals, so we change our lesson, we change our method, we find the right reinforcer. So sometimes it takes a little while to figure it out. And you stumble sometimes until you find the right answer. But that's what learning and teaching is



all about, is looking at your learner and figuring out how to adapt to that learner, so that you can help them learn what you're trying to teach.

SK: All right, so would you say that teaching people is rather more difficult than teaching animals? Would you compare that in any way?

KR: Yes, I think that the laws are the same, but I actually think our ability to communicate with language gets in the way. We read into things, we interpret things the wrong way if all that we needed to do is throw out the reinforcer, then we could probably accomplish a lot.

SK: That would be much simpler.

KR: I think it's sometimes because of our ability to communicate; it actually gets in our way and sometimes it gets us in trouble, because we read between the lines and a...but otherwise, teaching is teaching, but absolutely... There is a trainer in the United States, famous trainer named Bob Bailey and he always says *The animals are the easy part, it's the people that take extra work*. And although the laws of learning are the same, you know, trying to convince a person why it should be done in a different way, can sometimes be harder because we have all of these other belief systems that are a part of our learning history and so it becomes more difficult; the people part is often the hardest thing. Often when I'm called in to work with a client, it's not hard to teach their animal a new behaviour, it's getting the people that live with that animal or work with that animal to be consistent and approach it in the same way. So it's the people that are more difficult, sometimes.

SK: That's an interesting answer, actually. Ok, and there is one more thing that I would like to ask you about. Because you were talking about this working for conservation and I saw how much you are involved in it, how much it is close to your heart. I guess you can talk about it on and on, but there is this thing that really struck me, there is this thing that really got to me when you told me about the story that actually you were in risk. And I didn't even know, I didn't realise that it is such a risky business to work for conservation.



KR: Well, in certain areas, it is. Because in many cases here's a situation of different cultures, so we, I, for example, might feel like it's important to save the elephants because they're disappearing from our planet. However, poachers who kill those elephants for their tusks, that's the way they make their living, that's the way they feed their children. So, if I start changing, so that it's difficult for them to kill elephants...am I taking away food from their babies? Am I possibly impacting their lives? And so, suddenly, you have to ask yourself is this change worthwhile? How do we go about doing this in a way that is going to be fair. So, with this elephant project, there were twenty years of diplomacy and discussions with the poachers in an effort to try to get them to stop. It was made clear that it was illegal. They tried to pay the poachers money so that they could earn their living in another way and not poach. They tried a lot of different things that ultimately did not work. And finally, when they, none of those worked, they said, they asked us to move forward with this. I think I was foolish in not recognising the risks. Now that this is happen to me and I was, really looked at conservation work in Africa. Many of, one of the most dangerous jobs in the world is being an animal ranger in Africa. More rangers are killed every year by poachers, because the rangers are trying to protect the animals. But the poachers are trying to get the animals and so, often they will kill the rangers, so that they can get access to the animals. And so dozens of rangers die every year. And I ended up being with the rangers when they were attacked in an effort to kill us, to keep us from doing this project. And so I have to think about the fact that there's risks there, but I also have to realise that by trying to stop people from poaching and killing elephants that I am affecting their lives. And the only way I justify doing it is that it is illegal, they tried the diplomatic methods to try to stop it, but the reality is if they keep doing what they're doing, ten years from now they won't be able keep poaching because there will be no elephants left. So, ultimately, what they're doing is not sustainable even for themselves. Most of the best conservation efforts are more successful if you can find an alternative for the people that are killing animals, for whatever reason, and I've done some conservation projects where we had been successful at changing that motivation so that that doesn't happen anymore. We just haven't found that solution for elephant poaching yet. But we're still trying.



SK: Let me say it once again, it's been a wonderful weekend.

KR: Thank you.

SK: We would like to have you here, on the continent, more often.

KR: Well, I come to Europe a lot, but I don't come to the Czech Republic very often. So that was, it's time to be here.

SK: So, I'd like to, I'd like to thank you for being here with us, for sharing your knowledge and for being such a wonderful speaker.

KR: Oh, thank you very much. It was a pleasure to be here, it was a great, really nice group of people with lots of really interesting questions, so I think it was worthwhile to me because the people that came seem to have such a good interest in the topic, so it was fun.

SK: I know that tomorrow you're flying off, you're flying away, so all the best to you, please enjoy your projects it's been wonderful.

KR: Thank you. I appreciate it.

SK: Thank you so much.

KR: You're welcome.