

Darrel Young

¡BEAKSBAHPORERUBEAH!

My coming to terms with Colombian culture began in earnest at Tibaitatá, the Rockefeller Foundation Experimental Farm just outside Bogotá, where my Peace Corps group underwent in-country training. People were engaging, with a certain style and grace. Facilities were basic but adequate; fresh boot-prints on the commode seat did give me pause from time to time but not enough to keep me from going about my business. Food was bland, but the big barrier was Spanish.

When we arrived in Colombia, I knew a lot of grammar rules and vocabulary lists, but if someone said "Adiós" to me, I panicked! I had no real conversational ability, principally because I had developed no ear for the language. What I used to do at Tibaitatá then was listen to the radio at bedtime, hoping to gain some understanding of Spanish somehow. This was, in the main, a relatively futile exercise, but I was drawn in some strange way, to those intriguing but perplexing sounds coming at me out of the Colombian night. So I continued to listen, and as I did, there was one set of sounds that perplexed me particularly.

Every night at about the same time, the same announcer, in between songs, would let loose a machine-gun-like burst of Spanish which I couldn't understand or even come close to repeating, punctuated by a group of extremely well-enunciated nonsense syllables, or so they seemed, always with much dramatic flair and smooth modulation. To my ear, it sounded something like this: rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat-tat...BEAKS! Bah pore RUBE! Ahhh... Then more of the same: rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat-tat-tat...BEAKS! Bah pore RUBE! Ahhh... BEAKSBAHPORERUBEAH was repeated, with great emphasis, over and over again, with that last AH sliding down to a much lower pitch.

BEAKSBAHPORERUBEAH, I couldn't not think about it! It didn't sound like any Spanish I knew, but I knew I knew so little. I checked my new Velázquez dictionary, with various variations in spelling, no help whatsoever! I asked some of the better Spanish speakers in our group, but their responses never got much beyond "Beaks bahpah what?"

As our time at Tibaitatá drew to an end, I continued to hear the phrase, same time, same channel, but never made sense of it. Eventually, I got on with my Peace Corps life, went to my site and had more pressing matters on my mind. I guess, at some level, I had written BEAKSBAHPORERUBEAH off as one of those inscrutable mysteries that only add to the allure of the beautiful Spanish language.

But then, some six months later, I'm in Bogotá for some sort of conference or get-together, and first night back, right out of my hotel radio, BEAKS! Bah Pore RUBE! Ahhh... catches me by surprise and reinserts itself back into my consciousness! Now however, I know more Spanish terms; my ear is more attuned. No more rat-a-tat for

me; I begin to catch words which previously had flown right by me.

The perplexing BEAKSBAHPORERUBEAH? Pieces of the puzzle come together, first one ... and another ... and then ... suddenly, after months of not knowing I know! It's a creative Colombian announcer's inspired interpretation of a VICKS VAPOR RUB commercial! Ahhh....

Mystery over, but not my fascination with Spanish. It continues its hold on me, even to this day.