

# Linguistic License In Hong Kong

BY JACK MOORE



**W**hen you live as a Canadian expat in Hong Kong, you learn to forgive the city for most of its little linguistic idiosyncrasies.

You no longer bother to notice, for instance, how many beauty salon signs say "beauty saloon." (Today's special — A shot of red-eye, a pint of San Mig, and a pixie cut for only \$325.) And when you see arrow-shaped signs indicating the direction for "pedestrians," you no longer wonder whether you are required to walk or have wheels.

Eventually, you even lose that queasy feeling created by the ominous-yet-ubiquitous Hong Kong signs that say: "WHEN THERE'S A FIRE, DO NOT USE THE LIFT." (Not IF there is a fire, you understand, but when there is a fire...as there surely will be.)

## Supermarket standards

**B**ut, for some misleading signs this city simply cannot be forgiven — such as the one across the street from my apartment, which says: "Supermarket."

No, sorry. You can't fool me — I'm from Vancouver. That establishment is not a supermarket.

In fact, it just barely qualifies as a grocery store — as do almost all the other "supermarkets" in the territory.

(I refer here to Hong Kong's two major chains of "supermarkets," one of which seems to have its name spelled incorrectly, and the other of which has "Park" in its name, even though it seldom offers customers any place to put their cars — should they be courageous or crazy enough to drive in this city.)

**I** don't think modern supermarkets were invented in Canada (although that's entirely possible), but certainly my homeland is plentifully endowed with these vast and bountiful temples of consumerism — and I feel I can speak for most expat Canadians in Hong Kong when I say I greatly miss them.

Furthermore, I feel sorry for the generations of Hong Kongers who have grown up believing that a "supermarket" is a 1,500 square-foot emporium containing 1,299 square feet of merchandise, where customers use shopping cars as offensive weapons, the staff is often actively hostile, and the stress level is roughly the same as on the MTR at Admiralty, at 6:15 on a Friday night, or in downtown Sarajevo at high noon.

## The real thing

No, no, good friends — those are not real supermarkets.

Real supermarkets are wonderful. Real supermarkets have aisles as wide as Nathan Road, soothing Barry Manilow music on their sound systems, and employees who will cheerfully show you where to find the celery.

Real supermarkets have bakeries right in the store, and many places to park outside. Real supermarkets have huge cheese selections, and they stock Clamato juice so you can make Bloody Caesars (which Hong Kong bartenders can't do).

**R** In a real supermarket, wandering throughout the store at a dazed and leisurely pace behind your shopping cart, you are aware that in its own way this place is the apex of twentieth-century Western commercial culture — a big, bright, spacious, and skillfully-designed modern milieu in which the entire efforts of many of the world's largest industries have been transformed into a bewildering array of wares, in a carefully-contrived presentation assembled exclusively for your benefit.

In a real supermarket, these goods are not restricted to groceries and household essentials. In a real supermarket you can buy a paperback novel or a Parcheesi board or a tube of glue or a tire iron. A real supermarket stocks about 65 different kinds of laundry soap, fresh pineapple, cold remedies, and a leash for your dog. You could live your entire life in a real supermarket and never want for anything.

More important, in a real Western supermarket — no matter what kind of non-entity you might be anywhere else — you suddenly metamorphosize into the most important person in the entire scenario.

## Supermarket VIP

**O**nce you enter a real Western supermarket, you're The Consumer — the crucially-important individual on whose behalf all the agriculture, manufacturing, packaging, R&D, transport, wholesaling, administration, marketing, and retailing represented in that vast store has been assembled and put in motion.

From grain fields and farms and orchards and ranches and factories, by way of freight trains and container ships and long-haul trucks, through the efforts of hundreds of administrative and service staff members, propelled by the impetus of gigantic and sustained marketing campaigns, a real supermarket will present you — The Consumer — with a wealth of merchandise designed to overload the imagination.

In a real supermarket, employees are primarily paid to make sure that you — The Consumer — are utterly delighted with everything around you, and thus prepared to happily part with currency in exchange for retail goods.

In a real supermarket, in anything seriously calling itself a supermarket anywhere between Nanaimo and St. John's, The Consumer, no matter who he or she is, is elevated to VIP status — or at least is treated that way, which amounts to the same thing. In Hong Kong.....ah well, as is the case with so much in Hong Kong, things are different.

**N**ow, you'll have to forgive — I must go shopping. Last time I checked, the "supermarket" across the street still had about half of the groceries I need to buy — and the cashiers were due to come back from their tea break any minute. ♦

*Jack Moore is a Canadian freelance writer living in Hong Kong.*

