



Breaking the Starbucks Code, One Cup at a Time

By Ewandro Magalhães

I am an unusual Brazilian, for I hate coffee. Well, I do not particularly hate it, but for the most part I do not remember it exists. Until a friend buys me some, that is. I will then sit and sip it slowly enough to get me through a conversation without embarrassing my host. Half of my cup will be cream, anyway. And sugar. Lots of it (these days, the yellow stuff, actually). Yes, I like my coffee sweet.

For most Brazilians, myself included, coffee is an important part of civilized life. To be offered some is a welcome sign of appreciation, the opportunity for a well-deserved break, an invitation to chitchat, or a chance to close a deal. So, I never push the cup away, although I hate it. Then again, it is just coffee. Hot water put through some roasted ground beans. The options on how to have it done vary from strong to mild and from sweet to black. Period. There is not much else to it. Most Brazilians (and I bet even Colombians) would agree there *should not* be much more to it. Unless, of course, you are in America.

America is a different ball game. And the ball game is called Starbucks.

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I used to go there a lot, usually to accompany my wife, who suffers from a severe case of coffee addiction. I have learned that depriving her of coffee is not the safest thing to do, and so I usually settle for some decaf. But I never get it right. Have not at least, so far. Not once.

Starbucks is as much a pleasant gourmet experience as it is an unpleasant language nightmare. Even for the coffee-savvy. Their communication strategy seems designed purposefully to mix you up. At Starbucks one is left to wonder how coffee can possibly be present in so many varieties and proceed from allegedly so many different sites. There is, for example, the Brazil Ipanema Bourbon, which is unheard of in Brazil—or in Ipanema, for that matter. You can also have the Joya del Día or the Uborá

blend, and then Sumatra, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and a list of countries as long as the United Nations roster.

Once you have decided where you would like your taste buds to travel, you find yourself under pressure to nod or shake your head through a series of further yes-or-no questions: Strong roast? Venti or tall? Grande, maybe? Whipped cream? For here or to go? Not getting half of these queries, and too embarrassed to keep an angry line waiting through a tedious menu repetition, I rake my mind for quick ways out of that conundrum. I have tried many different strategies and abandoned just as many. Checking the giant menu board hanging from the ceiling does not work, trust me. Their signage, which should help you order quickly and comfortably, does the exact opposite. Starbucks uses a language of ➡

its own. Here *tall* means small, and *grande*—which is *large* in Spanish—means medium. The only option left as the probable opposite of small is *venti*, which is Italian for *twenty*. Now, why *twenty*? Why not *mille* (“*thousand*,” if we are sticking with Italian) or *fifty*? And what is with *tall*? What about *short*, or its Spanish equivalent: *corto*?

At the end of about 15 seconds of awkward silence, I choose to simply try my luck as the questions are repeated, and I alternate between yes, no, and random pointing, all the way through “next customer, please.” I then sit in resignation, waiting to see what the heck I have ordered this time, knowing full well that I still have one challenge ahead: recognizing my order when the barista shouts it at the far end of the counter, always badly butchering my name: “A grande pumpkin latte mocha frappuccino to go for Mr. Magorrailles.” Well, I guess that would be me!

Coffee in hand, I let my mind wander as I try to regain my balance. There must be a secret code here somewhere, and the Robert Langdon in me is determined to break it. The initial evidence is telling. It is not unusual for ciphers to combine different languages following a logic known only to code breakers. As in every code, the idea is to reveal some covert intention or plan, while on the surface keeping the explicit message totally inconspicuous. Perhaps the letters in “Ipanema” reveal a secret plot if one shuffles them correctly. Perhaps those pleasure-inspiring tourist destinations are geographic coordinates in disguise. I mean, why else would they be there? Do I really care what coffee tastes like in Sumatra?

Then again, given that the underlying premise shared by any language code is the effort to *not* make sense—at least not explicitly—you would

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expect a business like Starbucks to rely on something else in order to keep pouring the ridiculous amount of coffee it does on a typical day at its many shops throughout the world. Yet the code, cryptic or subliminal as it may be, seems to be working well for the company. It keeps customers on their toes, guessing in endless trial and error and coming back for more until they have tasted the entire menu. How else could they tell a *frappuccino* from a *cappuccino*, a *chai* from a *chai latte*? Despite similarities in spelling, some of those drinks taste and feel totally different. I had to order them separately, several days apart, to learn the difference the hard way. (I hate coffee, remember?)

So far I have gotten my decaf right only once. Then again, not quite. After much rehearsal I managed to put on a confident look and spit out the words in neat sequence: “A tall, plain decaf, no whipped cream, for here, please.” To make my plan completely foolproof—and to protect my privacy in case of another fiasco—I adopted the most conspicuous alias, one anyone could relate to and spell correctly on my coffee cup: Daniel. The young lady behind the counter was speechless, except for one last question that she insisted on asking—some unintelligible offer, which I charmingly declined.

Coffee was eventually served as it should be. Only the cup was inconveniently filled to the brim, forcing me to pour a third of it back into the trash container to accommodate some Half

& Half. I ended up burning my hands and messing up big time. “Not a problem. Not a problem,” said one of the employees as she rushed to my aid, quickly adding, “Next time she asks if you want room for cream, you’d better say yes.”

Starbucks has done little to change my feeling about coffee. There is little hope it ever will, no matter how often I come back. Looking around for a hidden code did teach me a thing or two, though. Language choices are more arbitrary than one would think. Starbucks is probably unaware of the ordering anxiety their system inspires. Until they have put themselves in their customers’ shoes they will never know. Come to think of it, maybe they do not need to. Knowing you will keep trying their menu items at your own expense is a justification as good as any other. Something else I learned is that most of us—with the exception of my wife—do not really care that much about coffee anyway.

The Starbucks code remains a mystery, but stubborn code breakers believe it is just one cup away and keep reaching for that refill. Now, if you are still wondering what I really think about coffee after so many trips to Starbucks, review the preceding paragraph. The answer is shouting at you, encoded in acrostic encryption. Do you see it? Here is a tip: focus on capital letters. By now it should not surprise you.

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