

Fat gene mystery unravelled by scientists

The mystery of how some people can eat and never put on weight while others struggle to shed a single ounce may have finally been solved by scientists.

Slight differences in a single gene may be responsible for suppressing the metabolism, making its carriers permanently sluggish and unable to burn calories as effectively.

In contrast, thinner people seem to use up energy more rapidly, expending it in excess heat.

Scientists have long suspected that genetic differences were responsible for weight gain and singled out the FTO gene as the main culprit.

People with a high-risk version of



the gene weigh on average three kilograms more than those with a low-risk version.

But they could not understand how it worked, theorising that it could influence appetite and food intake.

Now it appears the gene may control the rate of the metabolism. In experiments on mice those with the FTO gene entirely, were found to remain lean.

The scientists, led by Dr Ulrich Ruther, from the University of Düsseldorf in Germany, found the mice remained thin despite eating large amounts of food and being inactive.

The research, reported in the journal Nature, suggested the mice were burning up energy faster than animals with a functioning FTO gene.

It is thought the gene may limit the amount of energy given off in the form of heat.

Professor Stephen O'Rahilly, a metabolism expert from Cambridge University, said: "Genetic variation close to the FTO gene is definitely associated with obesity in humans, but, until now, it was not clear whether this genetic variation was likely to influence obesity by altering the expression or function of the FTO gene itself or some neighbouring gene."

"This work shows that if mice lack the FTO gene they are very lean because they spontaneously burn off enormous amounts of energy."

"This is a bit puzzling as several recent studies have suggested that the variant in the human FTO gene that increases the risk of obesity has effects on appetite and food intake but does not seem to have any effect on how quickly energy is burned off."

"So, this work provides a crucial piece of evidence supporting the notion that the FTO gene itself is likely to be involved in the effects of common human genetic variants on body fat."

The breakthrough could herald a raft of new treatments for obesity.

Dr Ruther added: "This finding will promote research into the development of drugs that modulate FTO activity. We strongly suspect that, in man, FTO might have more complex effects on both food intake and energy expenditure than has been so far suggested and that it is still not clear what the overall effect of inhibiting FTO in humans would be."

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by Jayatissa Perera

Notice that though our politicians are not that fluent in foreign languages they frequently enjoy foreign travel and in meeting VIPs of other countries. This reminds me of something said over 150 years ago by Ralph Waldo Emerson: "No man should travel until he has learned the language of the country he visits."

The key to a successful negotiation, whether it is political or business in nature, is to do the negotiation in the other person's language. But unless you can really cope in a language, it is always best to save it for social chat which perhaps is what happens.

While English is now accepted as the Lingua Franca, forcing people to speak it when they are not completely fluent in it can lead to serious misunderstandings.

Your readers may have heard of the German chancellor who was presented to the queen during a visit to London. He thought he knew enough after rapidly brushing-up his English to suit the occasion. When he was introduced to her he said: "Who are you?" Instead of: "How are you?" She replied: "I am the queen of England."

The best thing is for both sides to speak their own language. It is no shame at all to use an interpreter for an entirely cultural meeting of minds. The Chinese have always believed that Confucius was right when he said that

you should sell it in the other language but buy in your own. When CBK's government is said to have bought French railway engines unsuitable for our tracks, there must have been some misinterpretation at the negotiating table.

If you learn French or German or English at the respective institutions in Colombo they insist that you should learn the culture of those countries. If not, mistakes usually occur on formal occasions. For instance, if you are invited to make an after-dinner speech in England, you will be criticized if you

don't make use of a joke. In France, you will be criticized if you do. The French will say you are a clown. A famous linguist once said: "You make a witty remark in English at an international gathering and those people listening in English laugh, then the French and Italians laugh, and then there is a pause because the Dutch and Germans are

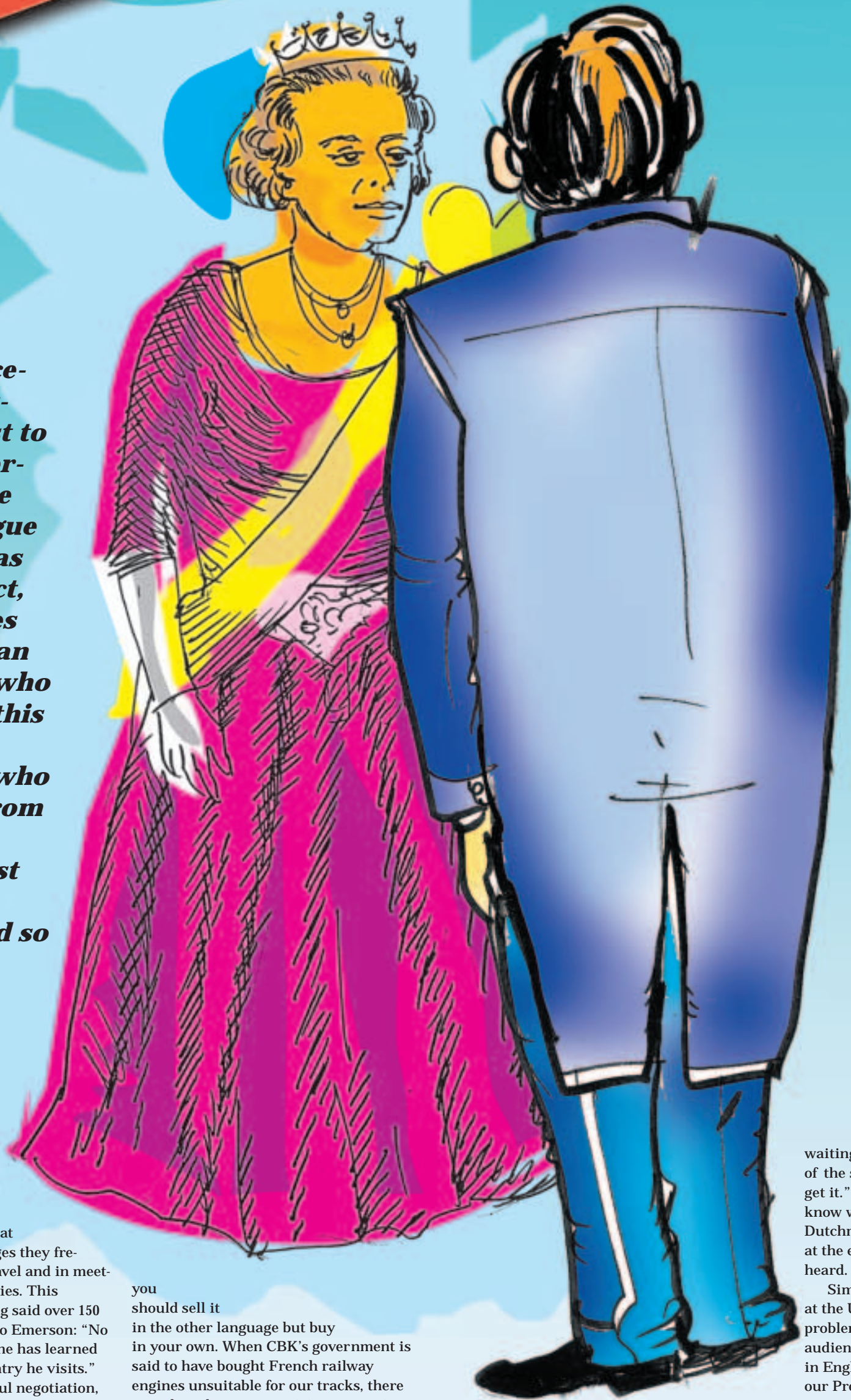
waiting for the verb at the end of the sentence before they get it." In fact one does not know what a German or a Dutchman says until the verb at the end of the sentence is heard.

Simultaneous interpreters at the UNO always face this problem when a part of the audience is enjoying the joke in English and French. When our President addresses the UNO in Sinhala; what problems arise is beyond my comprehension.

Sometimes a joke in another language may not suit the cultural sensitivities, of say, the Japanese. So the story goes of the Japanese interpreter who said: "The American gentleman has now started telling a joke. When he stops speaking, please laugh and clap loudly or I'll be in trouble!"

During face-to-face meetings it is best to have an interpreter whose mother-tongue is the same as yours. In fact, the UNO does not employ an interpreter who does not fit this description. The person who interprets from English to Russian must always be a Russian, and so on.

It is heartening that the popular international schools in Colombo teach foreign languages from Grade I because one day in the near future they alone will adorn our foreign service as national schools do not teach even spoken English.



Hilarities of foreign language interpretation

