Spanning the globe: The Mets pitching coach Rick Patterson, left, speaks English, pitcher Kazuhisa Ishii, center, Japanese, and Jose Reyes's native tongue is Spanish.

Mets Fumble For the Word For Baseball In Esperanto

By LEE JENKINS

Late on the afternoon of May 22, the globalization of the Mets became more than a marketing campaign.

The pitching coach Rick Patterson was standing on the mound in the eighth inning of a game against the Yankees at Shea Stadium, trying to tell reliever Jaisung Koo whether to throw a fastball or a curve, inside or out. When it became apparent that Koo could not understand the difference, Patterson looked away for a moment.

He caught the different faces of baseball staring back at him: a Dominican shortstop, a Venezuelan second baseman, an Italian-American catcher, a Polish-American first baseman and an all-American third baseman, every one of whom had descended on the mound and surrounded their South Korean pitcher. Desperate for assistance, Patterson said to the infielders, "Don't any of you guys speak Korean?"

In the midst of a one-run game before a sellout crowd against their intracity rivals, the Mets' infield busted up laughing. "Sometimes it can be hard — simple things become very difficult," Patterson said).

"It was a 'Semilcol' episode," Patterson said. "But I loved looking at all those faces."

General Manager Omar Minaya promised in the off-season that the 2005 Mets would mirror New York's diverse population. He wanted local fans to look at their team and see a representation of their city. As the Mets start the second half of the season tonight against the Atlanta Braves at Shea Stadium, still hoping to stay in contention, the blending has been at times amusing, at times challenging, but mainly rewarding.

"We're halfway through the season and I say, 'The more the merrier,'" outfielder Cliff Floyd said. "You'd think we would clash sometimes because we are so different, but I believe our differences are our strengths. We can say anything to each other."

For instance, the Dominican pitcher Pedro Martinez regularly refers to Floyd as "papaya head," and Floyd for some reason does not take offense. Southern players tune into hunting and fishing shows on the clubhouse television and Latino teammates watch alongside. Koo plays Texas Hold'em with fellow relievers even though he only knows how to bluff. The Japanese second baseman Kazuo Matsui greets outfielder Mike Cameron with "What's up?" and Jay Horwitz, the vice president for media relations, with "shalom."

Other phrases, however, have not come so easily. Matsui did not properly convey the severity of recent injuries through his interpreter and has been out for the past month. Starting pitcher Kazuhisa Ishii continues to make the same mistakes with pitch selection, and his record is 2-8. Coaches are constantly trying to instruct their foreign players through interpreters, but often the message does not translate.

The Mets are in many ways the composite of a modern-day baseball team. They have as many victories as defeats. They are too young in some areas and too old in others. But they have become a model for the sport's new look. At Monday's All-Star home run derby, participants represented eight countries.

"You don't get this in other sports," starting pitcher Tom Glavine said. "Baseball is the ultimate melting pot. Sometimes it can be hard — simple things become very difficult. But for me, it's a great growing, learning experience."

Glavine's favorite games sometimes take place when the Mets are finished playing and his children are hanging out with Miguel Cairo's children. As Glavine watches them play together, he wonders how Cairo's children have learned English so much faster than his children have picked up Spanish. For Glavine, taking his sons into the clubhouse is like taking them to a multicultural classroom.
When Danny Graves arrived from Cincinnati this season, he joined a pitching staff that now has members from Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic and every major region of the United States — South, Northeast, Midwest and West Coast.

"I know baseball is getting more international, but I've never been part of anything like this before," said Graves, who was born in Vietnam and spent the past eight years with the Reds. "I noticed it right away."

The Dodgers set the precedent in the mid-1990's with their United Nations pitching staff that featured five starters from different countries. Guy Conti, then a member of the Dodgers' player development staff, finds himself in a similar position as the Mets' bullpen coach.

"It's just like what we had in L.A.," Conti said. "It's good for the game and it's good for the cities to have these cultures. When we have a problem, it seems to be with communication. That's the only obstacle. We have to remember to talk through the interpreters, not to the interpreters."

Peterson spent much of his offseason learning to work around the language barrier. The charts and game plans he uses in pitchers meetings now have colors and numbers more than words. When Peterson colors part of the plate red, any of his pitchers knows it is a desirable target. And when he mentions that a hitter has a low batting average on a certain pitch, no one needs clarification.

More complicated are the mound meetings during games, when the interpreter stays on the bench and Peterson must rely on his limited linguistics training.

"I have learned that communication is a contact sport," Peterson said. "It's not just words. It's how you look at someone. It's the gestures you make. You know, a smile is a smile in any language."

Even though Peterson can speak Spanish, the Mets have players from so many Latin American countries that the nuances and dialects are sometimes different. Thus, he starts every mound meeting with the Venezuelan pitcher Victor Zambrano by placing a hand on Zambrano's right shoulder. The subtext can be understood rather easily. Zambrano, whose main problem is his control, needs to calm down that right arm.

Most major leaguers can sympathize with their foreign-born teammates because they, too, have been in the minority before, playing in Caribbean and South American winter leagues. During batting practice, Carlos Beltran gives Matsui tips through his interpreter. In the Mets' bullpen, relief pitcher Heath Bell often sits near Koo's interpreter so that he can relay jokes and learn some Korean expletives. Whenever Koo sees what he believes to be a bad call and yells, "That's a strike!" in English, his teammates howl their approval.

"I love it," Bell said. "We've got guys from all over the world becoming brothers. I mean, if everyone were from here, how boring would that be?"

Accuse the Mets of being flawed, punchless and inconsistent, but not boring. For the past 13 years, they have chased the Braves in the National League East and never caught them. Starting tonight, they will try to overtake Atlanta in the wild-card race, against typically daunting odds. The Mets, after all, do not have much muscle in the middle of their batting order and could use some help in their bullpen.

But at least they have got someone who can speak Korean.