

The Meaning of Tingo

by Chris Rose

I recently found a book by the writer Adam Jacot de Boinod called *The Meaning Of Tingo*. As a native speaker of English, I was a bit confused. I had never heard of this word “tingo”, and was curious about the title of the book.

As I soon found out, even if you are not a native speaker, then going to your dictionary and looking up the word “tingo” will not help. In fact, you probably won’t find the word “tingo” there at all, and not least because of the fact that “tingo” is not an English word. “Tingo”, it seems, is one of very many words which cannot be translated into English – or at least one of those words which are very difficult to try and translate into English, or even into your own native language.

The book *The Meaning of Tingo* is a kind of dictionary, but perhaps a dictionary you will not find useful in the same way that your usual dictionary is. *The Meaning of Tingo* is a list of words from languages all over the world which have very specific, not to say very unusual, meanings.

English is a language that has always been omnivorous, taking words from other languages to enrich its own vocabulary. English has taken the words *pyjamas* from Hindi to describe the loose clothes you may wear when you go to bed, *croissant* from French to describe a particular kind of sweet bread roll, or *catastrophe* from Greek to describe a particularly bad event, or *angst* from German to describe a particular mixture of fear and anger. And these are just a few of the many examples of words that English has made its own.

However, it is interesting to look at words that even a greedy language such as English has not (at least yet) made its own.

Japanese, for example, may have given us *manga* to describe a particular style of comic book, but the English have not yet adopted the useful expression *katahara itai* - laughing so much that your stomach hurts. The Japanese, it seems, have many such useful words – another one for example, is *bakku-shan* - a girl who appears pretty from behind but not from the front. Have you ever wanted to say that in merely one word? Now you can.

As well as Japanese, it seems that German is also a useful language. German often makes “compound words” – one or more words joined together to make a new word. *Putzfixx*, for example, is a mania for cleaning while *Backpfeifengesicht* apparently describes the kind of face that people want to hit.

Jacot de Boinod’s book is not only amusing, but, he claims, shows that way in which a language is inextricably linked to the culture in which it is spoken. Is it really true, then, that in Germany there are a lot of people who have faces which other people want to punch? Or that Japan has more than its share of *bakku-shan*? The reader may not at first be convinced by this, but when you read that Hawaiians have 108 words for sweet potato, 65 for fishing nets and 47 for banana (simply because in Hawaii there are indeed 108 different kinds of sweet potato, 65 fishing nets and 47 different types of banana), it makes more sense. Albanians are famous for their moustaches – and indeed the Albanian language contains 27 different words for “moustache”- *madh*, for example, is a bushy moustache, *posht* is a moustache hanging down at the ends while a *fshe* is a long moustache with short hairs. People from Holland and Belgium appear to be more fun-loving. Dutch has a word *uitwaaien* - “walking in windy weather for fun”, while people in the Netherlands apparently often go to *plimpplampplettere*. What are they doing? Just think about the sound – they are skimming stones on water.

More evidence of this link between language and culture can be seen in the words which different languages have for jobs which exist only in their cultures. Some of these jobs are pretty unusual: a *koshatnik* in Russian is a dealer in stolen cats, while Spanish speakers in central America often have to work with an *aviador* - a government employee who only shows up on payday.

So, what exactly does “tingo” mean then? Well, to find that out, you’ll just have to find the book. No, not really! It’s from the Pascuense language of Easter Island, meaning “to borrow objects from a friend’s house, one by one, until there’s nothing left”.

POSTSCRIPT

Some reviewers of the book have said that it contains a number of mistakes. For example, the etymology, or explanation of where words come from. They have also said that many definitions lack explanation, which suggests that his research is really quite superficial. Perhaps most importantly, one reviewer noted that de Boinod writes that the word “papa” is used to mean “father” in 70% of all languages in the world. This seems interesting, but then the reviewer points out that seeing as there are more than 6 000 languages in the world (a fact which de Boinod includes), this means that he must have looked at around 4,200 languages – when he says that he looked at only 270 dictionaries!

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