

Meaning of Tingo Assembly

I have always had an interest in unusual words – in our mastery of English we share a beautiful and complex language. In future assemblies I will suggest some interesting and unusual English words. But today I would like to explore the quirkiness of languages other than our own. Foreign words are a rich source of interest. For example, who would have thought that the Albanian language has no fewer than twenty-seven words for eyebrows and the same number for moustache, ranging from a **mustaqe madh** to a **mustaqe posht**.

There is a fascinating book called *The Meaning of Tingo* which gives a number of interesting words from other languages. What Tingo actually means we shall come to later, but I would like to share some of my favourites with you. Forgive my pronunciation, if any of these languages are familiar to you.

Nakhur, for example, is a Persian word (which may not even be known to most native speakers) meaning.... ‘a camel that won’t give milk until her nostrils have been tickled.’ Many described strange or unbelievable things. When and why, for example, would a man be described as a **marilopotes**, Ancient Greek for.... ‘a gulper of coaldust’?

And could Japanese samurai really have used the verb **tsuji-giri**, meaning.... ‘to try out a new sword on a passer-by’?

Others expressed concepts seem all too familiar. We have all met a **Zechpreller**, the German description of.... ‘someone who leaves without paying the bill’; spent too much time with an **ataoso**, Central American Spanish for....

‘one who sees problems with everything’; or worked with a **neko-neko**, Indonesian for.... ‘one who has a creative idea which only makes things worse’.

There are beautiful words to describe things for which we have no concise expression in English, like **serein**, the French for.... ‘the rain that falls from a cloudless sky after sunset’; or **wamadat**, Persian for.... ‘the intense heat of a sultry night’. There are words for all stages of life, from **Torschlusspanik**, German for.... ‘the fear of diminishing opportunities as one gets older’, to **mingmu**, Chinese for.... ‘to die without regret’.

Apparently, there are 6909 living languages – roughly one language for every million people on Earth. Europe, with a quarter of the world’s population, has only 234 languages spoken on a daily basis. Although English does well as the world’s business language - at least for the time being - it is only 3rd in the league table of native speakers.

328 million people speak English, only 1 million behind Spanish, but a long way from the 845 million Mandarin speakers. There are more Chinese people are learning English as a second language than native English speakers.

94% of languages are spoken by only 6% of the world’s population, which tells us that there are hundreds of languages with just a few thousand [or hundred] speakers. Some of them have words that describe strictly local concepts and sensations, such as the Hawaiian **kapau’u**, ‘to drive fish into the waiting net by striking the water with a leafy branch’; or **pukajaw**, Inuit for.... ‘firm snow that is easy to cut and provides a warm shelter’. But others reinforce the commonality of human experience. Haven’t we all felt **termangu-mangu**,

Indonesian for.... 'sad and not sure what to do' or **mukamuka**, the Japanese for.... 'so angry one feels like throwing up'?

Most reassuring is to find the thoughts that lie on the tip of an English tongue, here crystallised into vocabulary: from the Zambian **sekaseka** 'to laugh without reason', through the Czech **nedovtipa**.... 'one who finds it difficult to take a hint', to the Japanese **bakkushan**.... 'a woman who appears pretty when seen from behind but not from the front'.

The study of languages is a wonderful way to discover that other people are just like you in the way they see the world, but sometimes very unlike you in the way they express themselves. This humorous trawl through the words that others use for common and unusual experiences has – I hope – been enjoyable.

However, it is just a prelude to the more lasting and serious pleasure that the study of another language can afford us. Everyone should be able to speak at least one other language well.

It is important because, on a fundamental level, if you cannot speak another language, you will never understand your own. If you cannot reach out to another culture on their terms, you will always be a little more limited than someone who can. And finally, it is the only polite thing to do.

To approach the rest of the world with the smug assumption that they will have gone to the trouble of learning English and want to speak it with you is to ask for trouble. Former German Chancellor Brandt perhaps put it best, when he said, "If I am selling to you, I must speak English. But if you are selling to me, dann müssen Sie Deutsch sprechen."

We cannot all have the linguistic facility of Charles V of Spain, who commented, "I speak Spanish to God, Italian to women, French to men, and German to my horse." But we should aspire to it.

I hope the day ahead is kind to you – I especially hope that it offers you plenty of opportunities to enjoy the richness of our own language and to explore the complexities of others. And what was the meaning of **Tingo**? From the Pascuense language of Easter Island it means.... "to borrow objects from a friend's house, one by one, until there's nothing left".