

*Adam Jacot  
de Boinod*

**I NEVER  
KNEW THERE  
WAS A WORD  
FOR IT**

*'Very Funny'*  
*Independent on Sunday*



*'Absolutely delicious ... At last  
we know those Eskimo words for  
snow and how the Dutch render  
the sound of Rice Krispies'*

**STEPHEN FRY**



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## I NEVER KNEW THERE WAS A WORD FOR IT

Adam Jacot de Boinod, hunter of perfect and obscure bon mots, is a true linguistic **bowerbird** (a person who collects an astonishing array of – sometimes useless – objects). He trawled the languages of the world for exotic specimens in his bestselling books *The Wonder of Whiffing*, *The Meaning of Tingo* and hit follow-up *Toujours Tingo*.

In memory of my father

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# I Never Knew There Was a Word For It

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ADAM JACOT DE BOINOD

*With illustrations by Sandra Howgate*



PENGUIN BOOKS

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Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group (USA), Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3  
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia  
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand  
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

[www.penguin.com](http://www.penguin.com)

*The Meaning of Tingo* first published in Penguin Books 2005

*Toujours Tingo* first published in Penguin Books 2007

*The Wonder of Whiffing* first published in Particular Books 2009

Published under this title with a new Introduction in Penguin Books 2010

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-14-196353-2

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## Introduction

My name is Adam Jacot de Boinod and I'm hopelessly addicted to strange words. I've spent the last six years compulsively hunting down unusual vocabulary and now have written three books collecting my very best and most unusual discoveries.

All three are included in this volume, which I've called *I Never Knew There Was a Word For It*, because I didn't. My vocabulary is now ten times richer than it was six years ago, as I hope yours will soon be too ... Let me tell you a little about each book:

### The Meaning of Tingo

My interest in unusual words was triggered when one day, working as a researcher for the BBC programme *QI*, I picked up a weighty Albanian dictionary to discover that they have no less than twenty-seven words for eyebrow and the same number for different types of moustache, ranging from a **mustaqe madh**, or bushy, to a **mustaqe posht**, one which droops down at both ends.

My curiosity rapidly became a passion. I was soon unable to go near a bookshop or library without sniffing out the often dusty shelf where the foreign language dictionaries were kept. I started to collect my favourites: **nakhur**, for example, a Persian word meaning 'a camel that gives no milk until her nostrils are tickled'; Many described strange or unbelievable things. How, when and where, for example, would a man be described as a **marilopotes**, the Ancient Greek for 'a gulper of coaldust'? And could the Japanese samurai really have used the verb **tsuji-giri**, meaning 'to try out a new sword on a passerby'? Others expressed concepts that seemed all too familiar. We have all met a **Zechpreller**, 'someone who leaves without paying the bill'; worked with a **neko-neko**, the Indonesian for 'one who has a creative idea which only makes things worse'; or spent too much time with an **ataoso**, the Central American Spanish for 'one who sees problems with everything'. It was fascinating to find thoughts that lie on the tip of an English tongue, crystallized 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 **bakku-shan**, ‘a woman who only appears pretty when seen from behind’.

In the end my passion became an obsession. I combed over two million words in countless dictionaries. I trawled the internet, phoned embassies, and tracked down foreign language speakers who could confirm my findings. I discovered that in Afrikaans, frogs go **kwaak-kwaak**, in Korea owls go **buung-buung**, while in Denmark Rice Crispies go **Knisper! Knasper! Knupser!** And that in Easter Island **tingo** means to borrow things from a friend’s house one by one until there’s nothing left.

Luckily for my sanity, Penguin then signed me up to write the book that was to become *The Meaning of Tingo*, which meant I had an editor to help me decide which of the thousands of great words should make it into the final book but, goodness, it was hard to leave some out. The book came out in 2005 and was an instant hit. It has since been published in eleven different languages and Tingo-omania spread all round the globe.

## Toujours Tingo

I was delighted when the book’s fans demanded a sequel as I felt like I was only just getting started. This time I found such delights as **okuri-okami**, the Japanese word for ‘a man who feigns thoughtfulness by offering to see a girl home only to molest her once he gets in the door’ (literally, ‘a see-you-home wolf’); **kaelling**, the Danish for ‘a woman who stands on the steps of her house yelling obscenities at her kids’; and **belochnik**, the Russian for ‘a thief specializing in stealing linen off clothes lines’ (an activity that was supposedly very lucrative in the early 1980s). And how could I have missed the German **Kiebitz**, ‘an onlooker at a card game who interferes with unwanted advice’ or the Portuguese **pesamenteiro**, ‘one who habitually joins groups of mourners at the home of a deceased person, ostensibly to offer condolences but in reality to partake of the refreshments which he expects will be served’?

In this book I ventured into over two hundred new languages. The Ndebele of Southern Africa have the word **dii-koyna**, meaning ‘to destroy one’s own property in anger’, an impulse surely felt by most of us at some time or another, if not acted upon. From the Bakweri language of Cameroon we have **wo-mba**, a charming word to describe ‘the smiling in sleep by children’; and from the Buli language of Ghana the verb **pelinti**, ‘to move very hot food around inside one’s mouth in order to avoid too close a contact’. And doubtless

there are many among us who have found ourselves disturbed by a **butika roka**

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(Gilbertese, Oceania) ‘a brother-in-law coming round too often’.

Once again, of course, many of the more unusual words relate closely to the local specifics of their cultures. Most of us are unlikely to need the verb **sendula**, (from the Mambwe of Zambia) meaning ‘to find accidentally a dead animal in the forest’, which carries with it the secondary meaning ‘and be excited at the thought that a lion or leopard might still be around’. But even if we never have the call to use these expressions, it’s surely enriching to know that in Finnish, **poronkusema** is ‘the distance equal to how far a reindeer can travel without urinating’; while **manantsona**, from the Malagasy of Madagascar, is ‘to smell or sniff before entering a house, as a dog does’. We may not share the same climate, but we can all too easily imagine the use of words like **hanyauku**, (Rukwangali, Namibia) ‘to walk on tiptoe on warm sand’, **barbarian-on** (Ik, Nilo-Saharan) ‘to sit in a group of people warming up in the morning sun’, or **dynke** (Norwegian), ‘the act of dunking somebody’s face in snow’.

Half as long again as *The Meaning of Tingo*, this second bite into the substantial cherry of world languages allowed me to venture in depth into all sorts of new areas. There are more examples of ‘false friends’, from the Czech word **host**, which confusingly means ‘guest’, to the Estonian **sober**, a perhaps unlikely word for ‘a male friend’. There are the intriguing meanings of the names of cities and countries, Palindromes and even national anthems, as well as a series of worldwide idioms, which join the words in confirming that the challenges, joys and disappointments of human existence are all too similar around the world. English’s admonitory ‘Don’t count your chickens’, for example, is echoed in most languages, becoming, in Danish: **man skal ikke sælge skindet, før bjørnen er skudt** ‘one should not sell the fur before the bear has been shot’; in Turkish, **dereyi görmeden paçalari sivama**, ‘don’t roll up your trouser-legs before you see the stream’ and in the Ndonga language of Namibia **ino manga ondjupa ongombe inaayi vala**, ‘don’t hang the churning calabash before the cow has calved’.

## The Wonder Of Whiffling

While I was working on the previous two books, scouring libraries and second-hand bookshops, riffling through reference books from around the world to find words with unusual and delightful meanings, I kept coming across splendid English dictionaries too. No

just the mighty twenty-volume *Oxford English Dictionary*, but collections covering dialect, slang and subsidiary areas, such as Jamaican or Newfoundland English. Sneaking the occasional glance away from my main task I realized there was a wealth of little-known or forgotten words in our language, from its origins in Anglo-Saxon, through Old and Middle English and Tudor–Stuart, then on to the rural dialects collected so lovingly by Victorian lexicographers, the argot of nineteenth-century criminals, slang from the two world wars, right up to our contemporary world and the jargon that has grown up around such activities as darts, birding and working in an office. Offered the chance, it seemed only right to gather the best examples together and complete my trilogy: bringing, as it were, the original idea home.

Some of our English words mean much the same as they've always meant. Others have changed beyond recognition, such as **racket**, which originally meant the palm of the hand; **grape**, a hook for gathering fruit; or **muddle**, to wallow in mud. Then there are those words that have fallen out of use, but would undoubtedly make handy additions to any vocabulary today. Don't most of us know a **blatteroon** (1645), a person who will not stop talking, not to mention a shot-clog (1599), a drinking companion only tolerated because he pays for the drinks. And if one day we feel **mumpish** (1721), sullenly angry, shouldn't we seek the company of a **grinagog** (1565), one who is always grinning?

The dialects of Britain provide a wealth of coinages. In the Midlands, for example, we find a jaisy, a polite and effeminate man, and in Yorkshire a **stridewallops**, a tall and awkward woman. If you tuck too much into the clotted cream in Cornwall you might end up **ploffy**, plump; in Shropshire, hold back on the beer or you might develop **joblocks**, fleshy, hanging cheeks; and down in Wiltshire hands that have been left too long in the washtub are **quobbled**. The Geordies have the evocative word **dottle** for the tobacco left in the pipe after smoking, and in Lincolnshire **charmings** are paper and rag chewed into small pieces by mice. In Suffolk to **nuddle** is to walk alone with the head held low; and in Hampshire to **vuddle** is to spoil a child by injudicious petting. And don't we all know someone who's **crambazzled** (Yorkshire), prematurely aged through drink and a dissolute life?

Like English itself, my research hasn't stopped at the shores of the Channel. How about a **call-dog** (Jamaican English), a fish too small for human consumption or a **twack** (Newfoundland English) a shopper who looks at goods, inquires about prices but buys

nothing. Slang from elsewhere offers us everything from a **waterboy** (US police), a boxer who can be bribed or coerced into losing, to a **shubie** (Australian), someone who buys surfing gear and clothing but doesn't actually surf. In Canada, a **cougar** describes an older woman on the prowl for a younger man, while in the US a **quirkyalone** is someone who doesn't fall in love easily, but waits for the right person to come along.

Returning to the mainstream, it's good to know that there are such sound English words as **rumblegumption**, meaning common sense, or **ugsomeness**, loathing. **Snirtle** is to laugh in a quiet, suppressed or restrained manner, while to **snoach** is to speak through the nose. If you are **clipsome**, you are eminently embraceable; when **clumpst**, your hands are stiff with cold. To **boondoggle** is to carry out valueless work in order to convey the impression that one is busy, while to **limbeck** is to rack the brain in an effort to have a new idea.

As for **whiffling**, well, that turned out to be a word with a host of meanings. In eighteenth-century Oxford and Cambridge, a whiffler was one who examined candidates for degrees, while elsewhere a whiffler was an officer who cleared the way for a procession, as well as being the name for the man with the whip in Morris dancing. The word also means to blow or scatter with gusts of air, to move or think erratically, as well as applying to geese descending rapidly from a height once the decision to land has been made. In the underworld slang of Victorian times, a whiffler was one who cried out in pain, while in the cosier world of P.G. Wodehouse, whiffled was what you were when you'd had one too many of Jeeves's special cocktails.

As a self-confessed **bowerbird** (one who collects an astonishing array of sometimes useless objects), I've greatly enjoyed putting together all three collections. I sincerely hope that you enjoy reading them, and that they save you both from **mulligrubs**, depression of spirits, and **onomatomania**, vexation in having difficulty finding the right word.

In compiling all three books I've done my level best to check the accuracy of all the words included, but any comments or even favourite examples of words of your own are welcomed at the book's two websites: for foreign languages

[www.themeaningoftingo.com](http://www.themeaningoftingo.com) – and for English [www.thewonderofwhiffling.com](http://www.thewonderofwhiffling.com)

(There were some very helpful responses to my previous books, for which I remain grateful.)

Adam Jacot de Boind

## *Acknowledgements*

I am deeply grateful to the following people for their advice and help on all three books: Giles Andreae, Martin Bowden, Joss Buckley, Candida Clark, Anna Coverdale, Nick Emley, Natasha Fairweather, William Hartston, Beatrix Jacot de Boinod, Nigel Kempner, Nick and Galia Kullmann, Kate Lawson, Alf Lawrie, John Lloyd, Sarah McDougall, Yaron Meshoulam, Tony Morris, David Prest and David Shariatmadari.

In particular I must thank my agent, Peter Straus, my illustrator Sandra Howgate, my editor at Penguin, Georgina Laycock; and Mark McCrum for his invaluable work on the text.

## *Meeting and Greeting*

ai jiao de maque bu zhang rou (*Chinese*)  
*sparrows that love to chirp won't put on weight*

¡Hola!

The first and most essential word in all languages is surely 'hello', the word that enables one human being to converse with another:

**aa** (Diola, Senegal)

**beeta** (Soninke, Mali, Senegal and Ivory Coast)

**bok** (Croatian)

**boozhoo** (Ojibwe, USA and Canada)

**daw-daw** (Jutlandish, Denmark)

**ella** (Awabakal, Australia)

**i ay** (Huaorani, Ecuador)

**khaumykhghyz** (Bashkir, Russia)

**nark** (Phorhépecha, Mexico)

**rozhbash** (Kurdi, Iraq and Iran)

**samba** (Lega, Congo)

**wali-wali** (Limbe, Sierra Leone)

**xawaxan** (Toltichi Yokuts, California, USA)

**yoga** (Ateso, Uganda)

**yoyo** (Kwakiutl, Canada)

But it may not even be a word. In the Gilbert Islands of the Pacific, **arou pairi** describes the process of rubbing noses in greeting. For the Japanese, bowing is an important part of the



process and a sign of respect: **ojigi** is the act of bowing; **eshaku** describes a slight bow (of about 15 degrees); **keirei**, a full bow (of about 45 degrees); while **saikeirei** is a very low, worshipful type of bow that involves the nose nearly touching the hands. When one meets someone extremely important, one might even consider **pekopeko**, bowing one's head repeatedly in a fawning or grovelling manner.



### Just say the word

Sometimes a single word works hard. In Sri Lanka, for example, the Sinhala word **ayubowan** means not only 'good morning', but also 'good afternoon', 'good evening', 'good night' and 'goodbye'.

### Expectant

The frustration of waiting for someone to turn up is beautifully encapsulated in the Inuit word **iktsuarpok**, meaning 'to go outside often to see if someone is coming'. As for the frustration of the caller, there's always the Russian **dozvonit'sya** which doesn't simply mean to ring a doorbell, but to ring it until one gets an answer (it's also used for getting through on the telephone).

### Hey you!

Once the first encounter is out of the way the correct form of address is important. Most of us know the difference between the intimate French **tu** and the more impersonal (and polite) **vous**. A similar distinction exists in Arabic between **anta** ('you' singular) and **antum** ('you' plural) – addressing an important person with **anta** (**anti** is the feminine version) rather than **antum** would be considered impolite.

In Vietnam there are no fewer than eighteen words for ‘you’, the use of which depends on whom you are addressing, whether a child or a senior citizen, whether formally or informally. And in the Western Australian Aboriginal language of Jiwali there are four words for ‘we’: **ngali** means ‘we two including you’; **ngaliju** means ‘we two excluding you’; **nganthurru** means ‘we all including you’; and **nganthurraju** means ‘we all excluding you’.

## Cripes!

Exclamations are generally used to express a sudden reaction: to something frightening, incredible, spectacular, shocking or wonderful. Best not attempted by the visitor, they are better heard from the mouth of the native speaker than read off the page:

**aaberdi** (Algerian) a cry used when learning fearful news

**aawwaah** (Dardja, Algeria) a shout of doubt or hesitation

**aãx** (Karuk, North America) how disgusting!

**aduh** (Malay) ouch or wow!

**aduhai** (Indonesian) an expression of admiration

**alaih** (Ulwa, Nicaragua) gosh! goodness! help!

**alalau** (Quechuan, Peru) brrr! (of cold)

**amit-amit** (Indonesian) forgive me!

**ammazza** (Italian) it’s a killer! wow!

**asshe** (Hausa, Nigeria) a cry of grief at distressing news

**bambule** (Italian) cheers! (preceding the lighting of a joint)

**cq** (Albanian) a negative exclamation of mild disappointment

**hoppla** (German) whoops!

**naa** (Japanese) that’s great!

**nabocklish** (Irish Gaelic) don’t meddle with it!

**oho** (Hausa, Nigeria) I don’t care

**oop** (Ancient Greek) a cry to make rowers stop pulling

**sa** (Afrikaans) catch him!

**savul** (Turkish) get out of the way!

**schwupp** (German) quick as a flash

**shahbash** (Anglo-Indian) well done! (or well bowled!, as said in cricket by a wicket-keeper)

to the bowler)

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**tao** (Chinese) that's the way it goes

**taetae tiria** (Cook Islands Maori) throw it away, it's dirty!

**uf** (Danish) ugh! yuk!

**usch då** (Swedish) oh, you poor thing!

**y-eazziik** (Dardja, Algeria) an expression used exclusively by women to criticize another person's action

**zut** (French) dash it!

## Chinwag

The niceties of what in English is baldly known as 'conversation' are well caught in other languages:

**ho'oponopono** (Hawaiian) solving a problem by talking it out

**samir** (Persian) one who converses at night by moonlight

**begadang** (Indonesian) to stay up all night talking

**glossalgos** (Ancient Greek) talking till one's tongue aches

## Breakdown in communication

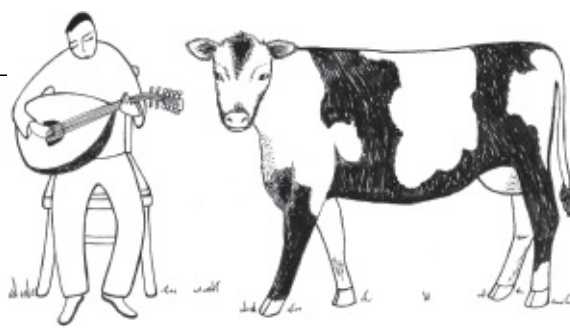
Whether the person you are talking to suffers from **latah** (Indonesian), the uncontrollable habit of saying embarrassing things, or from **chenyin** (Chinese), hesitating and muttering to oneself, conversation may not always be quite as we'd like it:

**catra patra** (Turkish) the speaking of a language incorrectly and brokenly

**nyelonong** (Indonesian) to interrupt without apology

**akkisuitok** (Inuit) never to answer

**dui niu tanqin** (Chinese) to talk over someone's head or address the wrong audience (literally, to play the lute to a cow)



**'a'ama** (Hawaiian) someone who speaks rapidly, hiding their meaning from one person whilst communicating it to another

**dakat'** (Russian) to keep saying yes

**dialogue de sourds** (French) a discussion in which neither party listens to the other (literally, dialogue of the deaf)

**mokita** (Kiriwana, Papua New Guinea) the truth that all know but no one talks about

### Tittle-tattle

**Gossip** – perhaps more accurately encapsulated in the Cook Island Maori word **'o'onitua**, 'to speak evil of someone in their absence' – is a pretty universal curse. But it's not always unjustified. In Rapa Nui (Easter Island) **anga-anga** denotes the thought, perhaps groundless, that one is being gossiped about, but it also carries the sense that this may have arisen from one's own feeling of guilt. A more gentle form of gossip is to be found in Jamaica, where the patois word **labrish** means not only gossip and jokes, but also songs and nostalgic memories of school.

### *False friends*

Those who learn languages other than their own will sometimes come across words which look or sound the same as English, but mean very different things. Though a possible source of confusion, these false friends (as linguists call them) are much more likely to provide humour – as any Englishwoman who says 'bless' to her new Icelandic boyfriend will soon discover:

**hubbi** (Arabic) friendly

**kill** (Arabic) good friend

**bless** (Icelandic) goodbye

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**no** (Andean Sabela) correct

**aye** (Amharic, Ethiopia) no

**fart** (Turkish) talking nonsense

**machete** (Aukan, Suriname) how

### The unspeakable ...

Cursing and swearing are practised worldwide, and they generally involve using the local version of a small set of words describing an even smaller set of taboos that surround God, the family, sex and the more unpleasant bodily functions. Occasionally, apparently inoffensive words acquire a darker overtone, such as the Chinese **wang bah dahn**, which literally means a turtle egg but is used as an insult for politicians. And offensive phrases can often be beguilingly inventive:

**zolst farliren aleh tseyner achitz eynm, un dos zol dir vey ton** (Yiddish) may you lose  
all your teeth but one and may that one ache

**así te tragues un pavo y todas las plumas se conviertan en cuchillas de afeitar**  
(Spanish) may all your turkey's feathers turn into razor blades

### ... the unmentionable

Taboo subjects, relating to local threats or fears, are often quirky in the extreme. Albanians, for example, never use the word for 'wolf'. They say instead **mbyllizogojen**, a contraction of a sentence meaning 'may God close his mouth'. Another Albanian taboo-contraction is the word for fairy, **shtozovalle**, which means may 'God increase their round-dances'. Similarly, in the Sami language of Northern Scandinavia and the Yakuts language of Russia, the original name for bear is replaced by a word meaning 'our lord' or 'good father'. In Russian itself, for similar reasons, a bear is called a **medved**' or 'honey-eater'.

### ... and the unutterable

In Masai the name of a dead child, woman or warrior is not spoken again and, if their name is also a word used every day, then it is no longer used by the bereaved family. The

Sakalavas of Madagascar do not tell their own name or that of their village to strangers to prevent any mischievous use. The Todas of Southern India dislike uttering their own name and, if asked, will get someone else to say it.

### Shocking soundalikes

The French invented the word **ordinateur**, supposedly in order to avoid using the first two syllables of the word computer (**con** is slang for vagina and **pute** for whore). Creek Indians in America avoid their native words for earth (**fakki**) and meat (**apiswa**) because of their resemblance to rude English words.

In Japan, four (**shi**) and nine (**ku**) are unlucky numbers, because the words sound the same as those for 'death' and 'pain or worry' respectively. As a result, some hospitals don't have the numbers 4, 9, 14, 19, or 42 for any of their rooms. Forty-two (**shi-ni**) means to die, 420 (**shi-ni-rei**) means a dead spirit and 24 (**ni-shi**) is double death. Nor do some hospitals use the number 43 (**shi-zan**), especially in the maternity ward, as it means stillbirth.

### Fare well

Many expressions for goodbye offer the hope that the other person will travel or fare well. But it is not always said. **Yerdengh-nga** is a Wagiman word from Australia, meaning 'to clear off without telling anyone where you are going'. Similarly, in Indonesia, **minggat** means 'to leave home for good without saying goodbye'.

#### *On reflection*

### Snobs and chauffeurs

Words don't necessarily keep the same meaning. Simple descriptive words such as 'rain' or 'water' are clear and necessary enough to be unlikely to change. Other more complex words have often come on quite a journey since they were first coined:

**al-kuhul** (Arabic) originally, powder to darken the eyelids; then taken up by alchemists to refer to any fine powder; then applied in chemistry to any refined liquid obtained by distillation or purification, especially to alcohol of wine, which then was shortened

to alcohol

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**chauffer** (French) to heat; then meant the driver of an early steam-powered car; subsequently growing to chauffeur

**hashhashin** (Arabic) one who smokes or chews hashish; came to mean assassin

**manu operare** (Latin) to work by hand; then narrowed to the act of cultivating; then to the dressing that was added to the soil, manure

**prestige** (French) conjuror's trick; the sense of illusion gave way to that of glamour which was then interpreted more narrowly as social standing or wealth

**sine nobilitate** (Latin) without nobility; originally referred to any member of the lower classes; then to somebody who despised their own class and aspired to membership of a higher one; thus snob

**theriacle** (Greek) an antidote against a poisonous bite; came to mean the practice of giving medicine in sugar syrup to disguise its taste; thus treacle

### An Arabian goodbye

In Syrian Arabic, goodbye is generally a three-part sequence: a) **bxatrak**, by your leave; b) **ma'assalama**, with peace; c) **'allaysallmak**, God keep you. If a) is said first, then b) is the reply and then c) may be used. If b) is said first, then c) is obligatory.

## *From Top to Toe*

chi non ha cervello abbia gambe (*Italian*)  
*he who has not got a good brain ought to have good legs*

Use your onion ...

English-speakers are not the only ones to use food metaphors –bean, loaf, noodle, etc. – to describe the head. The Spanish **cebolla** means both ‘head’ and ‘onion’, while the Portuguese expression



**cabeça d’alho xoxo** literally means ‘he has a head of rotten garlic’ (in other words, ‘he is crazy’). Moving from vegetables to fruit, the French for ‘to rack your brains’ is **se presser le citron** – ‘to squeeze the lemon’.

... or use your nut

In Hawaii, a different item of food takes centre stage. The word **puniu** means ‘the skull of a man which resembles a coconut’. Hawaiian has also given the world the verb **pana po’o**, ‘to scratch your head in order to help you remember something you’ve forgotten’.

Pulling faces

The Arabic **sabaha bi-wajhi** means to begin the day by seeing someone’s face. Depending on



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