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Lost in the translation

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THE INTERVIEW

The Meaning of Tingo

By Adam Jacot de Boinod

Penguin, 192pp, \$29.95

In scouring the world for the most intriguing words, Adam Jacot de Boinod has found his calling, writes **CATHERINE KEENAN**.

Anyone who has spent the best part of 18 months reading foreign dictionaries has got to be a little odd, and Adam Jacot de Boinod certainly sounds unusual. He started reading Latin at seven, with a torch under his bedcovers, went on to study classics at Cambridge, opened an art gallery, and some time later became a researcher on the BBC quiz show, QI, hosted by Stephen Fry.

"I've done lots of other things as well. I've had a very self-styled career, if that's the right word," he says smoothly, down the phone from London late one evening. "But I've finally found my vocation, as such."

And what a strange vocation it is. Jacot de Boinod (pronounced "jacko de bwano"), 45, is the author of the peculiar and wonderful book, *The Meaning of Tingo*, which is shaping up to be this year's essential stocking filler. It's brilliant in its simplicity, being nothing more than a collection of odd and interesting words from around the world, such as *gorrero* (Spanish, Central America) meaning a person who always allows others to pay, or *pu'ukaula* (Hawaiian) meaning to set up one's wife as a stake in gambling, or *koro* (Japanese) the hysterical belief that one's penis is shrinking into one's body.

Chapters also contain short lists of "false friends", foreign words that sound like English words but mean something very different. Thus we learn that *santa* in Arabic means wart, *arse* in Turkish means violin bow, and *purr* in Scottish Gaelic means to headbutt.

He has included translations of what we might - naively - assume to be universal sounds or reactions. "We all talk about cows going 'moo', but with regard to frogs, for example - this is quite fun - in Afrikaans they go 'kwaak-kwaak'. In the Mundurucu language of Brazil, they go 'korekorekore'. And, of course, in the Argentinian version of Spanish, they go 'berp'."

The idea for the book came when Jacot de Boinod was working for QI. His brief as a researcher was to hunt down recondite and "quite interesting" facts (hence the name of the show), and he stumbled upon an Albanian-English dictionary which revealed that the Albanians had 27 words for moustache and a further 27 for eyebrows.

Delighted, he began to wonder about other unusual or untranslatable words. So he got a deal to write a book about them, quit QI and scoured London for translation dictionaries. Some he bought at second-hand bookshops, some he borrowed from libraries or friends. Some, like one on Cook Island Maori, were so special he ordered them new. He now owns between 150 and 180 of them and estimates he read about 280, including dictionaries of Old Icelandic, Dardja (from Algeria) and Chorti (from Guatemala).

It was a mammoth task that involved reading dictionaries all day, most days, for a year and a half, and writing down any entries he found bizarre or culturally informative. "It does sound like a strange pursuit, to want to wade through hundreds and hundreds of foreign language dictionaries, I do accept that," he says. But he got quite good at it after a while. "You can do it in a way that you know what to look for. I come from a Swiss watch-making family, so luckily I was born with a very precise mind, so I'm able to

digest this stuff. But it wreaked havoc on my eyesight, I must admit."

He wanted his book to include all the major languages. "I had to have Russian. I had to have some Chinese. I had to have some Hindi." He also wanted to include languages from all parts of the world and is particularly proud that in a section on children's names, he has masopakyindi, from the Nyakyusa language in Tanzania, that means "eyes like hard porridge."

One of the fascinating things about reading the book is finding words that make you think: "Of course! Why don't we have a word for that?" Who hasn't had occasion to use the German word scheissenbedauern, literally "shit regret", meaning the disappointment one feels when something turns out not nearly as badly as one hoped?

Perhaps the more common reaction, however, is wonder at the unfamiliar worlds conjured by the words. "I think it was Salman Rushdie or someone who said that a culture can very much be defined by its untranslatable words," Jacot de Boinod says. He is a fervent believer that "you can very often find out more about a culture from its language than a cheap guide book," and the book is littered with examples that suggest he is right.

Some of these are fairly straightforward: one can instantly make assumptions about a culture in which March is known as avunniit, the time when premature baby seals are born, just as the life of everyday Hawaiians opens up when you discover they have 65 words for fishing nets, and 108 for sweet potato. "There's a lovely Arabic word, gurfa, which means the amount of water scooped up in one hand. Now to me it suggests obviously, perhaps, poverty, but certainly a very arid, desert-like culture."

Some words, however, are so specific it is almost impossible to imagine a situation in which they might be needed. When, for instance, do Persian-speakers use nakhur, meaning a camel that will not give milk until her nostrils are tickled?

Oddly enough, Jacot de Boinod doesn't speak any foreign languages himself, though he reads Latin and ancient Greek. But reading the dictionaries "wasn't just a passion, it was obsessive", and he plans to keep on doing it, and bringing out more books about them. He has, after all, examined only 280 languages. By his estimate, there are 6,520 left to explore.

And the meaning of tingo? It's a Pascuense word, from Easter Island, meaning to borrow things from a friend's house, one by one, until there's nothing left.

SAY WHAT?

Zechpreller (German) Someone who leaves without paying the bill.

Grilagem (Brazilian Portuguese) The old practice of putting a cricket in a box of newly faked documents, until the moving insect's excrement makes the papers look old and genuine.

Koshatnik (Russian) A dealer in stolen cats.

Senzuri (Japanese) Male masturbation. Literally "a hundred rubs".

Shiko shiko manzuri (Japanese) Female masturbation. Literally "ten thousand rubs".

Bakku-shan (Japanese) A girl who appears pretty when seen from behind but not from the front.

Bottom-bottom wata wata (African Creole) Submarine.

Jeruhuk (Malay) The act of stumbling into a hole that is concealed by long grass.

Karelu (Tulu, India) The mark left on the skin by wearing anything tight.

O ka la nokonoko (Hawaiian) A day spent in nervous anticipation of a coughing spell.

Backpfeifengesicht (German) A face that cries out for a fist in it.

Olfrygt (Viking Danish) The fear of a lack of ale.

Ariga-meiwaku (Japanese) An act someone does for you that you didn't want them to do and tried to prevent them doing, but they went ahead anyway, determined to do you a favour, and then things went wrong and caused you a lot of trouble, yet in the end social conventions required you to express gratitude.

From the book and www.themeaningoftingo.com, where readers are invited to share words or quibble.

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