This month our linguistic quest tackles expressions in different languages that contain demonyms, specifically names of peoples or nations, like *Chinese whispers* (‘inaccurately transmitted gossip’) in English, *parler français comme une vache espagnole* (‘to speak French very poorly’, literally ‘to speak French like a Spanish cow’) in French, or *chave inglesa* (‘adjustable spanner’, literally ‘English key’) in Portuguese. Such idioms may simply refer to the country of origin of an item or practice, but can equally reflect how nations see one another, and the stereotypes they create to depict their neighbours, their enemies or distant populations they know little about. Thus, analysing such a phrase and its history can reveal things about both the people it denominates, and the people that uses it. Some of the expressions we selected are remarkably telling in this respect, others embody the strong cultural and historical ties between countries. Discover their origin and use, as well as counterparts in other languages, which may disclose surprising associations or interesting coincidences. Learn how the Russian roulette emerged, why the English take a French leave while the French take an English leave, how the Japanese came to name a type of strike they do not carry out, which languages we cite when we get confused, how different nations go Dutch, and what a Swedish buffet actually is.

Nowadays, we use the term *Russian roulette* to name any act which, when repeated several times, is likely to have disastrous or very dangerous consequences. However, this is only a generalization of its first and more specific meaning, namely a ‘game of chance in which each player in turn spins the cylinder of a revolver loaded with only one cartridge and presses the trigger with the barrel against his own head’. Its use seems to be thriving in popular culture, in movies such as *The Deer Hunter*, game shows, or songs like Rihanna’s eponymous hit. Furthermore, the term is quite widespread among the world’s languages, including German (*Russisch Roulette*), French (*roulette russe*), Romanian (*ruletă rusească*), Czech (*ruská ruleta*), Hungarian (*orosz rulett*), Turkish (*Rus ruleti*), Greek (*Ρωσική ρουλέτα*), Japanese (*ロシアンルーレット*), Malay (*rolet Rusia*) and, naturally, Russian (*Ру́сская руле́тка*).

It is clear why this risky spinning game recalls the roulette, but did the Russians actually invent or play it? According to one version, it emerged in the 1800s, with Russian prisoners who were forced to play the game while guards were betting on their survival or death. Alternatively, it is said to have been played by officers of the Russian army to impress with their courage. However, evidence is scarce. Although this practice is said to have been widely known in 19th century Russia, there is only one written source evoking it in this period: an 1840 novella by Mikhail Lermontov, where one of the characters survives a version of Russian roulette. The actual term was first used in writing in 1937, by Georges Surdez, in a short story called “Russian Roulette”:

“Feldheim ... did you ever hear of Russian Roulette?” When I said I had not, he told me all about it. When he was with the Russian army in Rumania, around 1917, and things were cracking up, so that their officers felt that they were not only losing prestige, money, family, and country, but were being also dishonored before their colleagues of the Allied armies, some officer would suddenly pull out his revolver, anywhere, at the table, in a cafe, at a gathering of friends, remove a cartridge from the cylinder, spin the cylinder, snap it back in place, put it to his head, and pull the trigger. There were five chances to one that the hammer would set off a live cartridge and blow his brains all over the place. Sometimes it happened, sometimes not. When it did, there was nothing more to be said or done; when it didn’t, the fellow waited another day.”

Another example of the relationship between idioms and war leads us to the age-old conflict between the English and the French, which is also reflected in language, as shown by the English expression *to take a French leave*. It means ‘to take a leave of absence without permission or without announcing one’s departure’, including leaving a party without saying good-bye to the host. Nowadays, this is definitely improper conduct, but the intention behind it is not to disturb the party-giver. The expression emerged in the 18th century, when in France and sometimes, by imitation, in England, this behaviour is said to have been customary in receptions. Another version relates the origins of this
expression to the French and Indian wars in America: about 140 French soldiers captured by the British near Lake George in New York were ferried to an island in the lake. As they knew the area better than their guards, the French managed to quietly wade ashore at dawn, baffling the British.

Surprisingly, French strikes back with the expression *filer à l’anglaise* (to escape English stye), which has the same meaning: ‘leave without bidding farewell, without being noticed’. The origin of this idiom is uncertain: it may be a relatively recent linguistic revenge against the English and their expression, a distortion of the word *anguille* (‘eel’), or a consequence of the 16th century usage of *Anglais* to name a creditor, illustrating the way debtors avoided such characters. A similar pair in which English and French use each other’s demonym to express the same thing consists of *French letter* and *capote anglaise* (English hood), which are both euphemisms for ‘condom’.

Less surprisingly, European languages take sides in this conflict: English joins forces with Spanish (*despedirse a la francesa*), Portuguese (*sair à francesa*), German (*sich (auf) französisch empfehlen*) or Hungarian (*angolosan távozik*), Czech (*zmizet po anglicku*), Russian (*уйти по-английски*), or Italian (*andarsene all’inglese*). The Spanish and Portuguese usage has led researchers to speculate that the expression, which also denotes the act of leisurely absence from a military unit, originates in Napoleon’s campaign in the Iberian Peninsula, where the French fought against an Anglo-Portuguese and Spanish alliance.

Spanish also offers the next expression on our list. In Spain and several South American countries, *huelga a la japonesa* (Japanese-style strike) is a type of strike whereby employees devote more effort to their tasks than usual, increasing work performance in order to put pressure on their company by generating overproduction. This would cause prices to drop, and prevent owners of the industry from distributing their products on the market, leading to an economic crisis. On the other hand, not ceasing work means that employees keep receiving their wages, which does not happen in conventional strikes.

In fact, this kind of strike was not invented by the Japanese, nor is it frequent in the Land of the Rising Sun. The term was probably coined based on the well-known work culture of Japan, and the belief that the Japanese are more faithful to their companies than other nations. An equivalent expression has not yet entered the English language, but it is used in French (*grève à la japonaise*) and Romanian (*grevă japoneză*) with a slightly different meaning: strike during which discontent workers wear armbands as a symbol of their protest and sometimes display their demands, without ceasing work.

Interestingly, Polish uses another demonym to designate a similar kind of strike. *Strajk włoski* (literally translated as “Italian strike”), known as *work to rule* in English, means that workers follow each and every corporate policy and safety law, which can considerably reduce productivity. This happens because doing everything *à la lettre* slows down the working process, because so many rules come to hamper rather than help, and because, let us face it, corporate profit is often contingent on taking shortcuts and ignoring policies. In Italian, this phenomenon is called *sciopero bianco* (white strike).

If the above seems too intricate or impossible to understand, you could utter *It’s all Greek to me*. This English idiom usually refers to foreign, complex or imprecise expressions or diagrams, frequently containing jargon, dialectic, scientific data or symbols. It was used in English as early as Shakespeare’s 1599 play Julius Caesar, and may be a direct translation of a similar Latin phrase – *Graecum est; non legitur* (‘It is Greek, it cannot be read’) – used in the Middle Ages when knowledge of Greek was increasingly deteriorating among monk scribes who were copying manuscripts.

The English idiom refers to Greek as a foreign form of written and spoken communication. This archetypal unfamiliar, unintelligible mode of expression is rendered by similar formulations in most languages, which generally turn to a language that has an alphabet or writing system other than their own. Thus, languages that make reference to Greek include Norwegian (*Det er helt gresk for meg*), Swedish (*Det är rena grekiskan*), and Brazilian Portuguese (*Isso para mim é grego*). Spanish is the epitome of cryptic speech in German (*Das kommt mir Spanisch vor*), while other languages such as Czech, Serbian, and Slovene developed expressions which literally translate as ‘This is a Spanish village to me’. 
However, it appears that most languages, including Greek and Spanish, resort to Chinese in such expressions, as the most difficult or inscrutable language: 껆끄무어 (Arabic), Dat is Chinees voor mij (Dutch), See on mulle hiina keel (Estonian), C’est du chinois (French), יללְשׁה תְּנִיָּסְה (Hebrew) and To dla mnie chińszczyzna (Polish) are just a few examples. On the other hand, Mandarin Chinese refers to a distinct language: an unknown phonology system is expressed as ‘tongue of the birds’.

Inability to understand language is also at the origin of the word barbarian, which in ancient times described peoples or cultures not belonging to one of the great civilizations, specifically Greek and Roman. For ancient Greeks, βάρβαρος, which onomatopoetically evokes babbling, i.e. a person speaking a language other than Greek, was an antonym of ‘citizen’ and was used to designate foreigners in general. It was also used by Athenians to mock other Greek tribes and states, as well as fellow Athenians with a pejorative and politically loaded intent. By the same token, the Russian word for Germans, немецкий, is derived from Proto-Slavic něмъ (‘dumb’), which designated a person unable to speak plain language and, by extension, any foreigners who spoke unintelligibly. Many present-day Slavic languages, but also Romanian (neamţ), Hungarian (nemet) and Albanian (nemets), derive their names for Germans from this root. In a similar vein, double Dutch is used in English for language that is impossible to understand.

Speaking of Dutch, English provides several other expressions using this demonym, like Dutch courage, Dutch gold, Dutch uncle and in Dutch. Many have an offensive connotation, which may be connected to the rivalry between the English and the Dutch in the 17th century. Among such expressions, going Dutch (also called Dutch date or Dutch treat) indicates that each participant in a group activity, especially in restaurant meals, pays for themselves rather than any person paying for anyone else. It is unclear whether the idiom originated in the adoption of this practice from the Dutch, but may have to do with their stereotypic portrayal as tight-fisted. It was even suggested that the phrase is rooted in the concept of Dutch door, which is a door divided horizontally, so that the top half opens whereas the bottom half can remain shut.

Nowadays, going Dutch is commonplace in many areas, such as Western Europe where the custom of the man always paying the bill in courtship situations has largely fallen out of use. In southern European countries like Spain, Portugal or Greece, splitting expenses may be rather uncommon, and sometimes even rude, especially in larger groups, although urban and tourist areas have been going Dutch over the past decades. In the Middle East, the tradition of hospitality is paramount, so this practice is considered extremely rude, and one will only invite when one can afford to pay for everybody; gender and age are also relevant in determining who pays. In India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, it is traditionally considered taboo to ask somebody to pay for their meal: bills have to be paid by the elder in a group, the man in a couple, the local of the region, or the inviter unless there is a notable age difference. However, with the new generations going Dutch has been fully accepted in most urban areas. In North Korea and South Korea, it is usually the person of the highest social standing who pays the entire bill, while the younger generation compromises with the social system: friends often alternate when paying, or one pays for the food and the other for drinks.

Commonplace or not, it is often the case that one language treats the practice of paying for oneself in restaurants as the habit of another people. Spanish, for instance, calls it pagar a la catalana (‘to pay Catalán style’) because this is considered to be the rule among Catalans. Equivalent phrases refer to the Germans in Turkey (hesabı Alman usulü ödemek, ‘to pay the bill German style’), the English in Egypt (Englizy, ‘English style’), the Americans in Pakistan (‘American system’) and some Latin American countries (pagar a la americana). In Italy, the distinction is regional: pagare alla genovese (‘to pay like the Genoese’) means to pay for one’s own meal, while pagare alla romana (‘to pay like the Romans’) is to divide the bill equally. In some of these phrases, the people referred to is believed to be stingy: this is the case in Iraq, where Maslawiya recalls the people of Mosul, and in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, where Shamia is related to the inhabitants of Damascus. In El Salvador, an ancient city is evoked in a playful rhyming phrase: Ley de Esparta... Cada quien paga lo que se harta (‘Law of Sparta… each pays what he/she eats’).
Also in the field of gastronomy, consider the well-known buffet served on festive occasions or in restaurants, consisting of multiple cold and hot dishes displayed on a table from which one can choose as many as one wishes. It is called **buffet suédois** in French, **bufet suedez** in Romanian, **švédský stůl** in Czech, **szwedzki stół** in Polish, **Шведска маса** in Bulgarian, **rootsi laud** in Estonian, **švediškas stalas** in Lithuanian. They all translate as “Swedish buffet/table”, not surprisingly since this type of meal originates in Sweden. It became internationally known at the 1939 New York World’s Fair, when it was offered in a restaurant at the Swedish Pavilion.

The Swedish call it **smörgåsbord**, and the same term was adopted in English, without the diacritics, to such an extent that it acquired an extended meaning, that of a ‘wide range’ of anything. The word itself has an interesting morphology. It is made up of the words **smörgås** (‘open-faced sandwich’) and **bord** (‘table’). **Smörgås** in turn consists of the words **smör** (‘butter’) and **gås**, which means ‘goose’, but also came to designate small pieces of butter floating on the surface of churned cream, which reminded Swedish peasants of swimming geese. Since such pieces of butter were the right size to be spread on bread, **smörgås** was coined to refer to buttered bread.

The traditional Swedish **smorgasbord** always contains bread, butter, and cheese. It usually begins with cold dishes of fish (generally herring, salmon and eel), continues with the second course made up of other cold dishes, followed by hot dishes, and may include dessert. It originates in the small buffet presented on a side table to Swedish upper class in the 14th century, offering a variety of appetizers, served while standing, often a few hours before dinner. The most simple included bread, butter, cheese, herring and several types of liqueurs. It became popular in the 17th century, when the food moved to the main table, and hot dishes were added. Later, **smorgasbord** was served as hors d’oeuvre in hotels and railway stations, and it was only in 1912, on the occasion of the Olympic Games, that Stockholm restaurants began serving it as a main course.

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