



Laurie Bauer

Emeritus professor of linguistics at Victoria University of Wellington

There are some widespread myths about words and pronunciations. Even if they are not historically correct, they have a life of their own, and are interesting in their own right.

Sirloin. The story: An English king (which king varies according to the version of the tale you hear – Henry VIII, James I, Charles II: but the use of the word predates Charles, and it's all fiction anyway) was so delighted when served this cut of beef, that he drew out his sword and knighted it on the spot.

The spelling with SIR at the beginning seems to reflect this story, because we would otherwise expect SUR, since the word comes from the ancestor of modern French *surlonge*, “the upper part of the loin”, derived from the same Latin form as our *lumbar*, though not usually used of beef in French.

Hocus pocus. The story: During the Reformation, the Protestants made fun of the Catholic mass, and in particular did not like the notion of transubstantiation. The words of the Latin Mass *Hoc est enim*



Arise Sir Loin: A juicy tale, but it's not how the cut of beef got its name.

STUFF

Too good to be true

Language Matters

corpus meum “for this is my body” were garbled as hocus pocus.

This version of the story is repeated in Hilary Mantel’s celebrated novel *Wolf Hall*. However, Mantel sets the origins of the word about a century earlier than the first written attestation of it found by the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

While such a long delay is possible, it

seems unlikely that such a good joke should have been avoided in print for so long.

Furthermore, for the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first usage – and assumed origin – is as the name of a juggler (we might today call him a stage magician), who used mock Latin in performing his tricks; *hocus pocus* is only subsequently used to mislead the audience or suggest mysterious powers. The word *hoax* seems to have the same origin. The story does

not seem to arise until the 18th century.

The Spanish ‘lisp’. The story: In modern Castilian Spanish, the letters C (before I or E) and Z are pronounced rather like the English TH in *thin*. *Plaza*, for example, is pronounced *platha*.

The story is that there was once a Spanish king (not named, this is fiction, remember!) who had a lisp, and therefore couldn’t say the [s] sound. His courtiers, not wanting him to be seen as odd, adopted the “lisp” themselves, and so it passed into Spanish. There are varieties of Spanish (eg in Latin America) which do not have this sound.

Again, this is a nice story, often repeated in classes for people learning Spanish, even if it is a story of very different kind from the two above. It cannot be true. First of all, there is only one Spanish king known to have had a lisp, Pedro, and he lived 200 years before the sound became normal in Castile.

Second, modern Castilian has not only this th-sound, but also an [s] sound. It would be a strange person who produced a lisp for an [s] sound when it was written C or Z but no lisp for the same sound when it was written S. For instance, why would anyone lisp in *ciento* “a hundred” but not lisp for *siento* “I feel”?

Third, as we can trace the [s] sound and the th-sound back to differences in Vulgar Latin, there is no need to invent kings.

A good story is a good story, but we should not always assume that a good story is a true story.

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Give Samoa’s flag respect it deserves

Views from around the world. These opinions are not necessarily shared by *Stuff* newspapers.

The condemnation of protesters in New Zealand by a New Zealand minister for waving Samoan flags during recent anti-vaccine mandate protests has led to a flurry of comments on social media. New Zealand’s Minister for Pacific Peoples, Aupito William Sio, questioned the use of the Samoan flag which he said identifies Samoa to the world as a sovereign nation.

Aupito, who has Samoan heritage, said the protesters can “go on your own” without “misusing” Samoa’s national flag “like a bait” to attract others.

Our flag is not just a piece of cloth woven yesterday, it has history going back six decades, to

Viewpoint

1962, when the country gained independence from New Zealand. So Aupito is correct, the flag reaffirms Samoa’s sovereignty and is meant to unify.

The irony of the actions of the protesters waving Samoan flags is that most citizens support vaccination, with 89.5 per cent of the eligible population in Samoa fully vaccinated.

Some readers said they are exercising their freedom of expression. Now that proposition is acknowledged but the flag you carry is not yours alone, and represents a distinct group with history and cultural ideals going back over 3000 years. Through your actions give the flag the respect it deserves.