English rarely returns words it swallows whole

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WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

ENGLISH is an omnivorous language. It swallows words whole, wherever it finds them. And since people have started worrying about spelling, it usually swallows them with the original spelling too.

These words are technically called "loan words" and are said to be "borrowed" from other languages, though they are rarely returned, and if they are returned, they do not go back in the original condition.

For instance, English borrowed the word "realise" from French, with the sense "make real", as in "They realised their plans to go to Thailand". In English it gained a new meaning, "to become aware of", as in "I've just realised I left the oven on". That meaning has now been re-exported back to French.

Basically, every time you come in contact with another culture, you discover certain objects for which there is a name in that culture but not in yours.

This may be because different plants and animals occur naturally in the area of that culture than occur in the area of your culture (like "tui"), it may be because there are certain cultural roles and practices that pertain to that culture but not to yours (like "tohunga"), it may even be because that culture has a term which encapsulates neatly something that it is difficult to say in your language (like "savoir-faire").

You come into contact with other cultures when they invade you, when you invade them, or when there is a long period of close relations, cooperation and collaboration. So English got a lot of Scandinavian words when Britain was invaded by the Vikings, and a lot of French words when England was invaded by the Normans.

When the Vikings invaded, they mixed in with the ordinary English people in the villages, and a lot of ordinary words were borrowed into English: get, take, sister, husband, they, them, skipper.

When the Normans invaded, the French-speaking aristocracy was socially separate from everyday people, and much of the French vocabulary was associated with the concerns of the aristocracy: the law, the church, administration, estate management. Words such as crime, mercy, parliament, priest, venison and virgin are French words from this period.

When Britain later became the colonising and trading power, it not only left English words round the world, but adopted words from all continents: words like anaconda, chipmunk, chocolate, coffee, ginger, pangolin, tank, tea, tobacco, tomato.

IT APPEARS that English-speakers had difficulty in seeing the similarity between the meetings they held and the meetings that other cultures held, because we borrowed words like colloquium, hui, powwow, rendezvous; the same is true of festivities, where we have words such as ceilidh, corroboree, hooley, potlatch.

So we have zero from Arabic, Schadenfreude from German, kangaroo from Guugu Yimidhirr, barbecue from Haitian, geyser from Icelandic, piano from Italian, kiwi from Maori, molasses from Portuguese, mammoth from Russian, orange from Spanish, ombudsman from Swedish, yoghurt from Turkish, and so on, ad libitum (which is Latin).

And what could be more natural than to use the word from the place where the idea or thing is found?

But there are languages which resist this route, and prefer to make up their own words.

One is Icelandic, which for hundreds of years has held out against the flood of Latin, Greek, French and English coming from Europe, and has invented its own words. So geography is landafri ("country learning") and telephone is simi (originally "cord").

At one stage German resisted words like telephone, preferring the rather more transparent (and Germanic) fernsprecher, "distant talker".

Fernsehen, "distant seeing", is still the normal German word for television, which is itself a Greek-Latin hybrid meaning "distant seeing".

For several decades, the French Academie has been trying, largely in vain, to get French people to give up their habit of borrowing English words for fashionable items and to create French words instead.

And in recent years there has been a great thrust to develop native Maori words for many aspects of modern life, in order to avoid an over-reliance on borrowing from English.

In all of these cases, the motivating factor is a pride in one's own language and a justified belief that it can do its job without outside help.

With English, we do not lay claim to the same kind of pride; instead we take a pride in the fact that English takes some of its flexibility from assimilating words from outside.

Until we acquired Maori mana, we only had English standing, French prestige and Greek kudos, and all are subtly different.

We find richness in our foreign words.