



Labels make a hamburger out of our expressions



Laurie Bauer

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

WHERE do danish pastries come from, and why is dutch courage called that?

Our language is full of expressions which associate particular things or events with particular people or places, and most of it is misleading. While some of it shows appreciation of other peoples and cultures, much of it started out being insulting and pejorative (though we may not always recognise that today).

Take the example of "danish pastries". Clearly, these are much admired, and copied – even though what you get in most other countries bears disappointingly little resemblance to the delicious pastries you get in Denmark. But the Danes themselves do not call these "danish pastries", they call them "Wienerbrød", literally "Viennese bread". In other words, danish pastries are part of what the French today call "Viennoiserie", Viennese things.

The longstanding enmity between France and England in earlier centuries led to much bitter name-calling, and to many things viewed as undesirable being attributed to both sides. The most interesting examples are those where the French blame the English and the English blame the French for the same phenomenon. For example, the French expression meaning "to take french leave" is "filer à l'anglaise" (make off like the English do) and what the English call a "french letter", the French call a "capote anglaise" (Eng-

lish hood). Clearly both cannot be accurate descriptions of the origin of the object.

If the French get into linguistic trouble in English, pity the poor Dutch. Phrases such as "dutch courage" and "dutch uncle" have less to do with anything the Dutch did than they have to do with the English desire to run the Dutch down. We might expect the same to be true of "dutch elm disease", but although that problem did not originate in the Netherlands, it does get its name from a connection with the Netherlands: the disease was isolated and described there. German measles gains its name in the same way French beans do not come from France. French fries are often supposed to be Belgian in origin and french toast was known in imperial Rome, before there was anywhere called France. So if we care about such things at all, we simply have to know that turkish delight is Turkish and that a turkish bath is not. Labels can be deceptive.

ANOTHER place where labels might seem deceptive also arises in the names we give things. If olive oil comes from olives, and avocado oil comes from avocados, where does baby oil come from? If there is beef in a beefburger and cheese in a cheeseburger, what is there in a kiwiburger? If a vegetarian eats vegetables, what does a humanitarian



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eat? The problem with such questions is that they set up unwarranted expectations. The relationships that can hold between the elements in names are often more variable than such patterns suggest.

For example, if you were to go down to the Wellington railway station early in the morning and ask for the "Auckland bus", you would probably mean the bus going to Auckland, but if you were to go down there in the evening and ask someone if the "Auckland bus" was in yet, you would mean the bus coming from Auckland. And if we say that "Auckland buses" are owned by Stagecoach, we do not care whether they are going to or coming from Auckland; rather, they operate within the boundaries of Auckland. Similarly, a smoker may be a person who smokes, but it can also be (or used to be) a smoking section in a train; a diner

might be a person or, especially in the United States, a particular kind of food outlet. The final -er does not necessarily indicate a person.

If, instead of co-ordinating baby oil with olive oil, we had asked if motor oil is for motors and bath oil is for baths, what is baby oil for, there would have been no joke, no feeling of dislocation, no point, because the labels would all have used parallel interpretations of the relationship.

Incidentally, a hamburger did not originally contain ham. Rather it had its origin in Hamburg, just as a frankfurter originates in Frankfurt. English speakers misinterpreted the first syllable.

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