

Re: meaning of tingo

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- *From:* benlizross <benlizro@xxxxxxxxxx>
 - *Date:* Wed, 10 May 2006 09:03:18 +1200
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retrosorter wrote:

I just finished browsing through a book entitled "The Meaning of Tingo and other extraordinary words from around the world" by Adam Jacot de Boinod and was immediately struck by some errors he has committed. For example, he states "The French invented the word *ordinateur* supposedly in order to avoid using the first two syllables of the word *computer* (*con* is slang for *vagina* and *pute* for *whore*)." This claim is utter rubbish. He also defines the Yiddish/Hebrew "*tsuris*" as "grief and trouble from a child," but the term is definitely not restricted or even primarily related to children as in the word "*nakhes*."

My lack of fluency in many other languages precludes me from making judgements on other claims and I was wondering if anyone can cite other examples that show that the author's scholarship is wanting.

This book came up a few days ago in connection with the 'Albanian words for eyebrows'. I agree he's hardly a scholar, but I think the kind of serious tone you're using would be inappropriate. The book is just finger food and doesn't pretend to be much more. The author does invite corrections (and additions) via his web site (www.themeaningoftingo.com), but how seriously he would take you I don't know.

Just to take your two examples: I'm not sure how you could establish that the "*con/pute*" story was "utter rubbish". *Con* and *pute* do exist, and people do sometimes avoid words because of undesirable homophony. What you could do, though, is point out that this is part of a much larger pattern of creating French alternatives to avoid borrowing from English.

With "*tsuris*" you have an example of something he does a lot -- adding specificity to the definition which is not really there. Another example is Hawaiian '*a'ama*, which he says means "someone who speaks rapidly, hiding their meaning from one person whilst communicating it to another". Now if I look in Pukui & Elbert (the standard dictionary), I don't find any such meaning. '*A'ama* is just a reduplicated form of '*ama*,

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which means something like "talkative". Now Adam Jacot de Boinod (the author) may have some independent source of information on Hawaiian, but unfortunately there's no list of references, so...

Another Hawaiian example makes a different point: ho'oponopono "solving a problem by talking it out". Now this is a causative from ponopono "neat, tidy, in order, etc.", so the verb has meanings like "sort out, tidy up, arrange, regulate..." BUT ALSO "Mental cleansing, the old Hawaiian method of clearing the mind of a sick person by family discussion, examination, and prayer". Now this may be what AJdB was trying to get across with his bland paraphrase "solving a problem by talking it out", but (and this is not the only case) it seems to me the real meaning is actually more interesting than what he gives.

I had the same feeling with his citation of Russian dozvonit'sa "ring (a doorbell or telephone) until somebody answers", which is not analyzed at all, thus missing the generality of the use of the prefix do- to mean 'do something until a result or completion is achieved'.

Cook Islands Maori 'o'onitua "to speak evil of someone in their absence" — 'is a pretty universal curse', he comments. But he doesn't mention the formation of this word (which is given explicitly in the dictionary he got it from), from 'o'oni "bite" and tua "back", so that it's either a calque on English "backbite" or an example of a very specific world-wide idiom.

These are just from the first few pages. I could go on. But I don't think I will.

Ross Clark

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