

Foreign Words That Seem Like English But Aren't-- by Matthew Anderson

Before a special night out, a glamorous Parisienne might treat herself to "un brushing", at which her hair will be blow-dried and styled. In Moscow, would-be clubbers must first make it past "feyskontrol" (face control) to ensure that only the beautiful people come in. And those Berliners who just can't let the party end can carry on at "eine Afterhour" until well after the sun comes up.

These words seem odd to English ears. We recognize them, sort of, but we'd never use them ourselves - not in those ways, at least. They are borrowed from English but their meanings are new and different; linguists call them pseudo-anglicisms. Sometimes they are English words used to mean something else, other times they are combinations that native speakers find plain weird. Occasionally they've been made up to sound like English, but have nothing to do with the language of Shakespeare at all.

Foreign languages are full of pseudo-anglicisms. Hungarians call jeans "farmer pants", and the Japanese "ofisuredii" (office lady) describes a female desk worker. A comment on a blog or website is called a "tokbek" (talk back) in Hebrew. Skateboarding and frisbee are "Funsports" in German. An express train can be described as a "no-stop" (from the English non-stop).

These are all good fun, but for some people the creep of English words into foreign languages is serious business and a cause for concern. In France, the Academie Francaise is an important body in public life. It is the final arbiter of the language and a watchdog against its abuse. It issues warnings and edicts against anglicisms for which perfectly good French words exist, and lately its website has cautioned against "fan zone" and "listing", though it accepts "building" for skyscraper and "Browning" for handgun as legitimate French words of English origin.

The Association for the German Language campaigns against the use of English words in German, which Oliver Baer from the organization says are "needlessly flooding the language". Although he concedes that the total number of loanwords in German is actually relatively small, he remains perturbed. "One could say all right, they're negligible. But on the other hand, you find people who use anglicisms to the degree of 30 or 40 percent of their spoken words. Then it doesn't only sound silly, it's embarrassing and it's actually damaging." To stop their spread, the Association provides an online tool which provides more Germanic alternatives.

But does it matter if these so-called English words don't exist in English at all? Baer doesn't believe so. "I don't think most people actually realize which are pseudo-anglicisms and which are real anglicisms," he says. "But anybody who does know is particularly embarrassed." He gives the example of a vintage car, which most Germans call an "oldtimer". "It's awful!" he says. "People don't distinguish. They're not aware that "old timer" is a word you don't use in English in that context at all."

It's easy to giggle at foreigners and their funny, not quite English words, but how many of us native English speakers realize that our own language contains plenty of the same thing the other way around? If you ask for a "latte" in Italy, you'll get a glass of milk. Likewise, "panini" means bread rolls in Italian and its singular form is "panino". So the term "two paninis" doesn't make sense.

Americans call the main course of their meal the "entree", but in French l'entree means "the entrance", so it should probably describe the first course. And when we say something is "risque", it has a different meaning than the French word.

As English speakers we don't generally know where our words come from, and probably care even less. It's easy to be relaxed when yours is the language the rest of the world learns to get ahead. But the fact is that all of us are borrowing from each other, mixing and matching, repurposing for our needs and sometimes getting it a big wrong. That's just how language works.

Other pseudo-anglicisms:

grillparty - BBQ

beautyfarm - spa

autostop - hitchhike

zapper - remote control

relooker - a makeover

1-Do you know any pseudo-anglicisms?

2-Do people in your country worry about too many English or pseudo-English words creeping into the language?

3-Do you think your culture is being polluted by English language and English culture?

After the Norman French invasion of England in 1066, French words flowed freely into English. After the invasion, the educated and wealthy people spoke French not English. English was the language of the peasants. There was concern that the English language would be lost. So the shoe was definitely on the other foot in those days.