One day while I was working as a researcher for the BBC quiz program “QI,” I picked up a weighty Albanian dictionary and discovered that the Albanians have no fewer than 27 words for eyebrows and the same number for mustache, ranging from *mustaqe madh*, or brushy, to *mustaqe posht*, or drooping at both ends. Soon I was unable to go near a secondhand bookshop or library without seeking out the shelves where the foreign-language dictionaries were kept. I would scour books in friends’ houses with a similar need to pan for gold.

My curiosity became a passion, even an obsession. In time I combed through more than two million words in hundreds of dictionaries. I trawled the Internet, phoned embassies and tracked down foreign-language speakers who could confirm my findings. Who knew, for example, that Persian has a word for “a camel that won’t give milk until her nostrils have been tickled” (*nakhur*)? Or that the Inuits have a verb for “to exchange wives for a few days only” (*areodjarekput*)? Why does Pascuense, spoken on Easter Island, offer *tingo*, which means “to borrow things from a friend’s house, one by one, until there’s nothing left”?

The English language has a long-established and voracious tendency to naturalize foreign words: *ad hoc*, *feng shui*, *croissant*, *kindergarten*. We’ve been borrowing them from other cultures for centuries. But there are so many we’ve missed.

Our body-conscious culture might have some use for the Hawaiian *awawa*, for the gap between each finger or toe; the Afrikaans *waal*, for the area behind the knee, or the Ulwa (Nicaragua) *alang*, for the fold of skin under the chin. Surely we could use the Tulu (India) *karelu*, for the mark left on the skin by wearing anything tight. And how could we have passed up the German *Kummerspeck*, for the excess weight one gains from emotion-related overeating? (It translates literally as “grief bacon.”)

*Gras bilong fes*, from the Papua New Guinea Tok Pisin, is more poetic than “beard”; it means “grass belonging to the face.” And how about the German *Backpfeifengesicht*, or “face that cries out for a fist in it”?

In Wagiman (Australia), there’s an infinitive—*murr-ma*—for “to walk along in the water searching for something with your feet.” The Dutch have *uitwaaien*, for “to walk in windy weather for fun,” but then Central American Spanish speakers may win a prize for articulating forms of motion with *achaplinarse*—“to hesitate and then run away in the manner of Charlie Chaplin.”

In Russian, they don’t speak of crying over spilled milk; they say *kusat sebe lokti*, which means “to bite one’s elbows.” That may be better than breaking your heart in Japanese, because *harawata o tatsu* translates literally as “to sever one’s intestines.” To be hopelessly in love in Colombian Spanish is to be “swallowed like a postman’s sock” (*tragado como media de cartero*). That happy state may lead to dancing closely, which in Central American Spanish is *pulir hebillas* (“to polish belt buckles”).

Malaysians recognize *kontal-kontil*, or “the swinging of long earrings or the swishing of a dress as one walks.” Fuegian, in Chile, has a word for “that shared look of longing where both parties know the score yet neither is willing to make the first move” (*mamihlapinatapei*). But Italian has *biodegradabile*, for one “who falls in love easily and often.”

Persian has *mahj*, for “looking beautiful after a disease”—which, deftly used, might well flatter (*vaseliner* in French, for “to apply Vaseline”) some recovered patients. But you’d have to lay it on pretty thick for a *nedovtipa*, who in Czech is “someone who finds it difficult to take a hint.”

On Easter Island, it may take two to *tingo*, but it takes only one to *hakamaru*, which means “to keep borrowed objects until the owner has to ask for them back.” Of course, words once borrowed are seldom returned. But nobody is going *harawata o tatsu* over that.

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*Vocuabulary/Using the Dictionary*

1. What are meanings of the active verbs *scour*, *combed*, and *trawled* (paras. 1, 2)? How are they related?

2. What is the meaning of *feng shui* (para. 3)? Where does this phrase originate?

3. The phrase “two to *tingo*” (para. 10) is a variation on a colloquial English expression. What is the original English phrase? What does it mean?

*Responding to Words in Context*

1. Jacot de Boinod states that English tends “to naturalize” words from other languages (para. 3) What is the meaning of *naturalize*?

2. The Inuits are an aboriginal tribe who inhabit remote areas of Greenland and the Canadian Arctic. What does their usage of the verb *areodjarekput* (para. 2) imply about their culture?

3. What is the meaning of “crying over spilled milk” (para. 7)? How is it related to the Russian expression that means “to bite one’s elbows” (para. 7)?

4. Why does the writer believe that the phrase *gras bilong fes* (para. 5) might be preferable to *beard*?

*Discussing Main Point and Meaning*

1. Jacot de Boinod explains that his interest in word meanings evolved from *curiosity* to *passion* and finally to *obsession* (para. 2). How do these terms differ? What do the words suggest about the writer’s changing attitudes regarding definitions?

2. How does the writer justify his developing fascination with unusual word meanings?

3. Consider the meaning of the verb *tingo* (para. 2), a term used by the Pascuense. How does this usage of this word expand or alter the American conception of friendship?

4. In Colombian Sapnish, the condition of being hopelessly in love is defined as feeling “swallowed like a postman’s sock” (para. 7). What attitude toward love does this simile imply?

*Examining Sentences, Paragraphs, and Organization*

1. At the end of paragraph 1, Jacot de Boinod explains that while visiting friends’ houses he would “scour” books to search for new or unusual word meanings as if panning for “gold.” What does this introductory language imply about the nature of the writer’s quest? According to Jacot de Boinod, what initial discovery prompted this search?

2. In paragraph 4, the writer provides several words that might be relevant to Americans’ “ body-conscious culture.” Identify the first four examples that he cites. This paragraph ends with a reference to the German word *Kummerspeck*. How is this word related to the other examples in the same paragraph?

3. According to Jacot de Boinod, what is the central idea that logically connects the three colorful examples provided in paragraph 6?

4. What strategy does the writer employ to conclude the essay? How does the word *hakamaru* expand our understanding of Easter Island culture? How does this definition relate to the larger meaning of the essay?

*Thinking Critically*

1. Jacot de Boinod appears to appreciate the unique, humorous, and often figurative (nonliteral) meanings of some of the words that he describes. For example, in referring to the Colombian Spanish and Central American Spanish attitudes toward love, he employs a richly imagistic expression. Specifically, he explains that love “may lead to dancing closely,” a state that in Central America may be referred to as *pulir hebillas* (para. 7). How does the writer define this phrase? What figurative associations are evoked by this definition?

2. Several words cited by Jacot de Boinod expand our perception of life and human nature. Consider, for example, the meanings of the Wagiman (Australia) infinitive *murr-ma* and the Dutch term *uitwaaien* (para. 6). What definitions does the essay provide for these terms? In what manner do the meanings enhance our perception of human behavior?

3. Many of the words defined by Jacot de Boinod imply something unique regarding the specific culture in which the terms originate. What do the terms *tingo* (para. 2) and *hakamuru* (para. 10) suggest about the cultural practices of Easter Island?

4. Some of the words selected by Jacot de Boinod are highly evocative; that is, they prompt vivid images that help to enhance our understanding. Consider the specific examples from Malaysia, Chile, and Italy cited in paragraph 8. Does the Malaysian word *kontal-kontil* have an equivalent word in English? What sensory image comes to mind when you reflect on the definition? What about the word *mamihlapinatapei* (from Chile) and *biodegradabile* (from Italian)? What concrete images do these words suggest? What do these words contribute to our understanding of human nature?