

Seeing the Wood for the Trees

David Malone

14 April 2010

Perfect Language Student?

Never much good at languages

- Learning Irish with this accent.
- Scared of those Faux Amis.

But Languages are related...

- One swallow does not a summer make.
- Eén zwaluw maakt nog geen zomer.

Even English is not Simple

If you think that, you've got another _____ coming!

think



thing



So, where's this going?



The Wood for the Trees — in my Head



Wrong type of wood!



Let out inner angry blogger

I presume that the phrase that is being alluded to is "Can't see the wood for the trees", and the implication is that reading The Economist will allow you to see the wood (ie., the log).

Unfortunately, this expression means "cannot see the big picture" and "the wood" actually refers to a small forest! This can be confirmed by checking a dictionary or by looking at the equivalent expressions in Dutch "Je kunt door de bomen het bos niet meer zien" (you can no longer see the forest through the trees), French "L'arbre qui cache la forêt" (the tree which hides the forest) or other languages.

That's not half of them either...

French

L'arbre qui cache la forêt.

German

Er sieht den Wald vor lauter Bäumen nicht.

Hungarian

Nem látja a fától az erdőt.

Dutch

Je kunt door de bomen het bos niet meer zien.

Hebrew

מרב עצים לא רואים את היער

Russian

ИЗ-ЗА ДЕРЕВЬЕВ ЛЕСА НЕ ВИДНО

Swedish

Kan inte se skogen för alla träden.

Norwegian (Bokmål)

Kan ikke se skogen for bare trær.

Norwegian (Nynorsk)

Kan ikkje sjå skogen for berre trær.

Danish

Kan ikke se skoven for bare træer.

Estonian

Ei näe puude taga metsa.

Serbian

НЕ ВИДИ СЕ ЛИШЋЕ ОД ШУМЕ

Spanish

Los árboles no dejan ver el bosque.

Finish

Ei nähdä metsää puilta.

Greek

Μπορεί να δει το δέντρο και όχι το δάσος

Chinese (Simplified, but see below)

见树不见林

Chinese (Traditional, but see below)

見樹不見林

Romanian

Nu văd copacul pădure.

Croatian

Ne mogu vidjeti drvo od šume.

Japanese (Also, see below)

木を見て森を見ず。

... but some are notable by their absence.

Polish, Italian, Portugese

The neighbours have it.

Chinese, Japanses

May be a recent import.

Turkish

May be adopting.

Irish

No sign.

They Replied

Referred me to Brewer's Concise Phrase and Fable.

Also dropped a clanger:

I wouldn't consider commenting on the origin of the phrase when translated into foreign languages, since the ad was designed only for the UK market.

I couldn't resist

Some time has passed since Dublin, where I saw these posters, was in was a part of the UK. The Irish language seems to have no equivalent expression. The expression came into use in the 1700s, possibly originating from the German poet Christoph Martin Weiland, ...



But I was wrong...

- The phrase is much older than Wieland.
- Heard of John Heywood (c. 1497 - c. 1580)?

John Heywood

The Proverbs of John Heywood (1546)
A dialogue of the effectual proverbs
in the English Tongue concerning marriage

Plentie is no deyntie. ye see not your owne ease.
I see, ye can not see the wood for trees.

The second part.

An olde saied sawe, itche and ease, can no man please.
 Patientie is no deputye. ye see not your owne case.

If see, ye can not see the wood for trees.
 Your lpps hang in your light, but this pooze mā sees
 Bothe howe blindly ye stande in your owne lpyght,
 And that you rose on your right syde here ryght.
 And might haue gon further, and haue faren wurs.
 I wote well I might (quoth he) for the purs,
 But ye be a baby of Belsabubs howze.

Content ye (quoth she) take the swete with the sowze.
 Fancy may boult byan, and make ye take it flowze.
 It will not be (quoth he) shulde I dy this houre,
 While this saye flowze flourissheth thus in myne ipe.
 Yes, it might (quoth she), and here this reason why.

Snowe is white	} and currey man lets it lye.
And licty in the dyke	
Pepper is blacke	} And currey man doth it bye:
And hath a good smache	
Mylke (quoth he) is white	} but all men know it good meate.
And licty not in the dyke	
ynke is all blacke	} No man will it drynke no; ease.
And hath an yll smache	

Thy ryme (quoth he) is muche elder than myne,
 But myne beying newer, is trower than thynne.
 Thou likenest now, for a bayne auantage,
 White snow to saye youth, black pepper to foule age
 whiche are placed out of place here by rood.
 Black ynke is as yll meate, as black pepper is good.
 And white mylke as good meate, as white snow is yll.
 But a milk snow whit smoth yōg skin, who chāge will

for

The second

for a pepper ynke blacke r
 Though chaunge be no rob
 Yet shall that chaunge rob
 for who this case sercheth,
 That as well agreeth thy c
 As a lyke to compare in tal
 D; a like in colour to deme
 walk byab walke. Nay (qu
 Saieyth that terme, How be
 And best we laie a strawe h
 D; els this geate wyll bred
 If ye hale this wate, I wil
 Here is god in thambry (qu
 Here is the deuill in thozolo
 Sens this (quoth I) rather
 wyap it in the clothe, and t
 Ye harpe on the streyng, tha
 Your tonge ton before you
 Mark ye, how the hitteth m
 And ye taunt me tyt ouer th
 Sens tyt for tat (quoth I)
 Set the hares head agaynt
 She is (quoth he) bent to f
 To know, that the grey m
 She chopth logyk. to put
 She hath one poynte of a c
 But wyfe, the first poynte c
 And holde ye fast, I ted you
 In your own touene. Nay
 And rather (quoth I) take

And there's more...

- Dictionary usually only gives definition.
- Could have been nonsense meaning?
- How could you investigate properly?

To finish

Languages: More friends than faux amis.

Can your favourite language see the wood for the trees?

I can't help but feel that I can't...