

Seeing the Wood for the Trees

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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



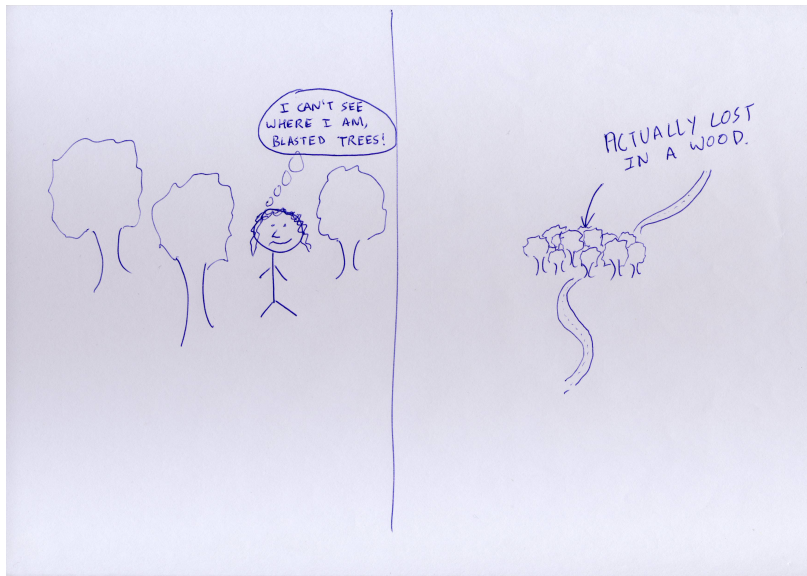
thing



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.
Patience is no deputye. ye see not your owne case.

I see, ye can not see the wood for trees.

Your lyps hang in your light, but this pooze mā sees

Howe he howe blindly ye stande in your owne light,

And that you rose on your right syde here right.

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 by this houre,

Whyle this fayre flowze flourisheth thus in myne ipe.

Yes, it might (quoth she, and here this reason why.

Snowe is white }
And lieth in the dyke } and currey man lets it lye.

Pepper is blacke }
And hath a good smache } And currey man doth it bye:

Mylke (quoth he) is white }
And lyeth not in the dyke } but all men knowe it good meate.

Ynke is all blacke }
And hath an ill smache } No man will it drynke nor eate.

Thy ryne (quoth he) is muche elder than myne,

But myne beyng newe, is trower than thyne.

Thou likenest now, for a bayne auntage,

White snow to fayre yowth, 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 milke snow whit smoth yowg skin, who chage wil

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 tast

O; a like in colour to deme

walk byn walke. Nay (qu

Saith that terme, How be

And best we laie a strawe h

O; els this geate wyll byed

If ye hale this wate, I wil

Here is god in thambry (qu

Here is the deuill in thozolo

Sens this (quoth I) rather

wrap it in the clothe, and t

Ye harpe on the string, tha

Your tongs on before you

Mark ye, how the bitterth in

And ye taunt me tye ouer th

Sens tye for tat (quoth I)

Set the hares head agayn

She is (quoth he) bent to f

To know, that the grey m

She chopth logyk. to put i

She hath one poynte of a c

But wyfe, the first poynte c

And holde ye fast, I tye you

In your own toune. Nay

And rather (quoth I) take

Hot off the press

The second parte of the co[n]futation of Tyndals answer in
whyche is also confuted the chyrche that Tyndale deuyseth. And
the chyrche also that frere Barns deuyseth.
Made by syr Thomas More knyght.

(1533

[illegible][illegible]

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...