

MARCH 2011

◆ WHY DID THE OXYMORON CROSS THE ROAD?! ◆



Merriam Webster defines **Oxymorons** – from the Greek *ὀξύμωρον*, or "sharp dull" – the first known use of which was in 1657, as "combinations of contradictory or incongruous words" which are often used to show off the cleverness of the writer or speaker, in English as well as other languages, of course.

Besides some well-known ones, such as freezer burn, baby grand, deafening silence, sun shower, act naturally and our favorite: **free gift**



and ironic ones, such as Long Island Expressway, wedded bliss, vegetarian meatloaf, player piano, small crowd, old news and friendly fire ... we 'feel numb' when we hear: went missing

vaguely aware
steel wool
set free
plastic glasses
sight unseen
awfully pretty
as well as
pretty awful.

Of course, oxymorons exist all over the world, too! Some favorites:

In German, *offenes Geheimnis* is 'open secret'

In Russian, *ужасно красиво* is 'terribly beautiful'

In Italian and in the art world, *chiaroscuro* is *literally* 'bright dark' and is used to describe the technique of using light and shade in painting

In French, *impitoyable tendresse* is a 'ruthless tenderness'

In Spanish, a *momento eterno* is an excruciating wait!



Oxymorons are sometimes considered mean or pejorative ('Irish cuisine' or 'military intelligence') and some surely inadvertent. Many are food-related: 'white chocolate,' 'buffalo wings,' 'dry ice,' 'Scottish Danish,' 'sour candy.' Two favorite double oxymorons are 'bittersweet chocolate flourless cake' and 'fresh-frozen jumbo shrimp' -- and isn't it fun that sweetbread is a variety of meat, but sweetmeat is a variety of sweets?!

Shakespeare strung a host of them together in Romeo and Juliet, when Romeo declares:

"O heavy lightness! Serious vanity!
Mis-shapen chaos of well-seeming forms!
Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health!"

◆ THIS MONTH'S HIGHLIGHT ◆

Last week, we helped out by providing Japanese translation services to an internationally-renowned orchestra by translating their message to viewers dedicating a performance to the Japanese people affected by recent disasters as well as to a major television news broadcasting company covering the tsunami.

◆ FEATURE ◆ Lingua Quiz!

- In 13th century BC Northern India, most people spoke **Vedic**, an earlier form of which famous Indian literary language?
 - Tamil
 - Hindi
 - Sanskrit
 - Punjabi
- Switzerland is famous for its many languages, not just chocolates, cheeses & clocks! Place these in order of highest number of speakers:
 - French
 - German
 - Italian
 - English
 - Romansh
- Everybody wants to direct! Mix and match these languages and how they're written:

(a) French	(1)	Starting horizontally in one direction, then turning at end of line to reverse direction
(b) Egyptian hieroglyphs	(2)	top-to-bottom and left-to-right
(c) Hebrew	(3)	horizontally, right to left
(d) Arabic	(4)	horizontally, left to right
(e) Mongolian	(5)	boustrophedon method
(f) Modern Greek	(6)	dextroverse

ANSWERS:

3. (a) = (4); (b) = (1); (c) = (3); (d) = (3); (e) = (2); (f) = (4)

2. (b) 64%; (a) 20%; (c) 6.5%; (e) > 0.5%;

1. (c) Sanskrit is to India what Latin was to western Europe, the language of important literature and religious scriptures, but also the language used by intellectuals and the ancestor of others spoken in India, such as Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati, Sindhi, Punjabi, etc.