Language in the news

Monitor language trends and endangered languages, refresh your knowledge of how English developed, and get a glimpse of interpreters who participated in historical events.

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Tracking words and languages

“The Global Language Monitor (GLM) documents, analyzes and tracks trends in language the world over, with a particular emphasis upon Global English.” Check out its count of living languages – currently 6,912 – and detailed information on them. Its link to “Numbers from 1 to 10 in 5000 languages” opens up to a beautiful color-coded language map and much more than info on numbers.

A different kind of map

Color Code takes a different approach and tries to convert words into a map. They explain that: “The artwork is an interactive map of more than 33,000 words. Each word has been assigned a color based on the average color of images found by a search engine. The words are then grouped by meaning. The resulting patterns form an atlas of our lexicon.”

A trip to HEL

You can’t get there from here? No, don’t think so! Since we’re talking about language maps, word images and such, some of you might want to take this direct route to the History of the English Language website.

Search for an answer

I was introduced to answers.com during one of those free-flowing conversations over wine. The question was “What is the origin of the word cheroot?” I took the high road to my unabridged dictionary; my friend took the low road to the Internet - and he got there before I did. It might be a bit pre-packaged for some tastes, but it combines various bits of information quite nicely. Besides tracing cheroot to Tamil, it gives us translations into 14 languages.
Take Our Word For It is a monthly magazine dedicated to the origins of English words. It spotlights certain words in each issue, has a question and answer column, and even accepts challenges to past pronouncements.

French Etymology@Globe-Gate offers myriad links to general and very specific etymological resources for the French language. It is attached to Une histoire de la langue française @ Globe-Gate.

“If you recognise the parts, you'll understand the whole: learn the Greek and Latin roots, the prefixes and affixes.” If your breaking-down has broken down, a look at A Little Etymology on about.com should fix it. It also offers many interesting links on ancient history.

Wondering about Chinese characters and radicals? Go to zhongwen.com. “EVERY CHARACTER on this site is "CLICKABLE". Click to see its definition, etymology, and relation to other characters. Click on "+" to hear it, see it drawn, and see its entry in other dictionaries.” The Chinese character FAQ link will bring the beginner up to speed.

Veterans in the middle of things

Every once in a while the press picks up on the life-long work of a colleague, showing that the “invisible” person in the middle might not be so invisible after all. That is certainly the case with Gamal Helal. “Over the past 15 years, in one Middle East crisis after another, Gamal Helal has served as the mouth of three presidents, five defense secretaries and six secretaries of state -- as well as assorted vice presidents and national security advisers,” begins a recent Washington Post article on his services to the top ranks of the US government.

Akira Itami served as head translator at the post-war Tokyo Trials and later became the model for the main character in a novel. “He was born in America, raised in Japan, and felt like a misfit in both societies,” reports this Japan Times article on Itami’s difficult but not forgotten life.

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