

Borrowing words offers plenty of food for thought

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If you go to the excellent coffee bar in Jarrold's book department in Norwich and ask for a latte, you'll get a cup of coffee. If you go to a coffee bar in Milan and ask for a latte you'll probably get a glass of milk. You certainly won't get a cup of coffee. The Italian word "latte" means milk. "Latte" as used by English speakers is an abbreviation of Italian "caffè latte", which means 'coffee (with) milk'. We can only abbreviate it to latte because we don't know, most of us, what 'latte' means.

This is a common type of occurrence when words are borrowed from one language to another. (Linguists talk about languages "borrowing" words from others, even though there's no intention of giving them back!)

French speakers have borrowed our word "foot". But it doesn't mean foot to them – they've got their own word for that, pied. For French-speaking people, "le foot" means football. The French language borrowed our word football – we invented the game after all – and then abbreviated it. We couldn't have done that because, obviously, to us foot already means something else.

Funny things happen when words are



■ Delicious spaghetti - a plural in Italian - meaning little strings.

Picture: TONY BUCKINGHAM

borrowed. The French word "living" means a living room. "Lifting" means a face lift. In German, a "Smoking" is a dinner jacket. In Swedish a "fitness" is a gym.

The strangest thing of all is when languages borrow words which don't actually exist. The German word for a mobile phone is "Handy". It's a non-English English word.

We do similar things. The French term for cul-de-sac is not cul de sac but "voie sans issue", or "impasse". (We have borrowed the word impasse from them, but we only use it metaphorically to refer to a situation where no progress is possible, not to a street where you have to

turn round and go back.) The Italian word "panini" means sandwiches (plural), but we use it to mean a particular type of sandwich – if we had known about Italian grammar we would have said panino instead.

Spaghetti is also plural in Italian – it means little strings. We ought to say, really, "these spaghetti are very tasty". Vermicelli means little worms.

The Greek word for moussaka is moussakáss, with the stress on the last syllable. The Greek word for taramasalata is taramosalata.

I could go on, except I'm now off to Jarrold's for a macchiato (that's Italian for "spotted").