

The 'unseethroughableness' of our English language

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I was once briefly taken ill with a condition caused by medication I was taking. The condition was called hyponatraemia. "Blimey," said alarmed English friends when I told them, "that sounds really serious – what on earth is it?"

Greek friends had a very different reaction, when I mentioned it to them. "Oh yes," they said calmly, "not enough salt."

Hyponatraemia is a condition where there's too little sodium in the blood. Greeks who have never heard this medical term have no trouble working out what it means.

The Greek word for blood is aema; natrio means sodium; ypo means under or sub- (sub-title in Greek is ypo-titlos); so for them the meaning of the word is totally transparent.

Talking of transparency, Undurchsichtigkeit is a long German word which is nevertheless totally transparent to German speakers.

Translating it bit by bit, the different parts of Un-durch-sicht-ig-keit are equivalent to English un-through-sight-y-hood, so unseethroughableness.

The normal English word for this is



■ Greek friends were quick to understand when our columnist suffered hyponatraemia – a lack of sodium (salt) in the blood.

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opacity, a word which is itself opaque: English-speaking children hearing this

originally Latin word for the first time cannot work out from its structure what it means, while a German child can do so easily with their version.

This aspect of English has been called "the lexical bar" by some educationists. English-speaking children are at a disadvantage because of the way English expanded its vocabulary over the last few centuries, not by creating new words from its own resources so they are easy to understand and learn, like many other languages, but by borrowing words from Greek and Latin.

We have the word omnivorous; Norwegian has altetende, "all-eating". English has ambidextrous; the German is beidhändig, "both-handed". We have incoherent; Dutch has onsamenhangend, "un-together-hanging".

Our usage of alien sources is a barrier which, it is argued, has kept an important area of English vocabulary out of the reach of large parts of the population, hence the feared elitist category of "long words".

But, as German shows, it's not length which is the problem, but unseethroughableness.

It's a problem which could have been avoided.

Unlike with many other languages, the English speaking men who carried out the important work of expanding our vocabulary in the 1600s and 1700s, introducing all sorts of new scientific, philosophical and cultural terms, looked to Latin and Greek for help because they thought their own vernacular language was inadequate and inferior:

They were wrong.