

Loanwords: A Language Challenge

When Shakespeare had Polonius advise Laertes, "Neither a borrower nor a lender be," he was referring to money, not language. Borrowing and lending, however, are essential if a language is to be constantly updated. This is especially true in today's global markets and mass media where common interests and products reach all nations. Because this is true, loanwords exist. A loanword is a word adopted from another language that has become at least partly naturalized. If the spelling and pronunciation have changed or if the word has become exceedingly popular, we may forget that it is a loanword that started life in another language. Who remembers that sherbet is Turkish or that discotheque is French? Yet, realizing that many of our English words are borrowed is important because they give us insight into the world and make our language richer and more colorful than it would otherwise be.

That's one reason why Eliot Engles reminded us that our language contains the largest lexicon of any other language. Below are definitions of loanwords grouped by country of origin. As you look at each group, write the word you think is being described. Note the characteristics of that group, the sound of the words, the letter combinations, the subject matter. For homework, find several words from other nations that have become part of English via borrowing and we'll expand this Language Challenge.

French

- _____ 1. A chest of drawers usually with a mirror; also a government department
- _____ 2. An area of level land covered by coarse grass without trees
- _____ 3. A building for automobiles
- _____ 4. A soup made of fish, onions, milk
- _____ 5. Of little value, paltry, petty
- _____ 6. A termagant, shrew, vixenish woman, a hag
- _____ 7. A flourish of trumpets to announce something, a showy display
- _____ 8. Awkward, tactless

German

- _____ 1. A school for children younger than six
- _____ 2. Cabbage fermented in brine (we serve it with hotdogs or frankfurters)
- _____ 3. A sudden, overpowering attack usually accompanied by bombing
- _____ 4. Toasted biscuit or rusk often used for teething babies
- _____ 5. A sweet donut like cake cut into strips, twisted and fried
- _____ 6. Pre-prepared foods and the name of the place that sells them
- _____ 7. A strong desire to ramble or wander

Italian

- _____ 1. Masked, with concealed identity
- _____ 2. An amateur, one who follows an art as a pastime
- _____ 3. A platform enclosed by railing projecting from an outer wall, usually on a second floor or above
- _____ 4. A ludicrous and total failure
- _____ 5. A spectacular musical with elaborate setting and excellent singers
- _____ 6. A cave or retreat (poor artists often lived in them)
- _____ 7. Bizarre, horrible, distorted

Spanish

- _____ 1. A very large lizard similar to a crocodile with short, broad snout (you'll know this for sure)
- _____ 2. Enclosure for confining animals, esp horses
- _____ 3. Whirling funnel-shaped cloud of destructive wind
- _____ 4. Flat-topped hill with steeply sloping sides
- _____ 5. House made of unfired bricks
- _____ 6. Unexpected good fortune
- _____ 7. Open porch or courtyard

Japanese

- _____ 1. An industrial magnate, a big successful business boss
- _____ 2. Self-defense without weapons
- _____ 3. Singing and dancing girl
- _____ 4. Loose robe tied with an obi or special sash
- _____ 5. A legume or seed that yields oil, flour, meal; common Asian sauce

Dutch

- _____ 1. Salad made of chopped cabbage that we often have at picnics
- _____ 2. Small covered porch at a house door or the steps leading to the door
- _____ 3. Vehicle on runners for travelling over snow
- _____ 4. A small, thin, flat cake
- _____ 5. A foreman, manager often mentioned in movie credits

Irish

- _____ 1. Female spirit whose wailings foretell death
- _____ 2. In abundance, plentiful, an ____ amount
- _____ 3. Ruffian, hoodlum
- _____ 4. Small fairy, usually a tricky old man who may reveal hidden treasure

Scandinavian

- _____ 1. To glide on strips of wood bound to the feet
- _____ 2. Soft but crisp indented cake cooked on a special iron
- _____ 3. Meal of appetizers served buffet style

Arabic

- _____ 1. Imaginary evil being who robs graves and feeds of corpses
- _____ 2. Civilian dress when worn by a military officer
- _____ 3. Kind of hemp chewed or smoked for various reasons

Portuguese

- _____ 1. A large parrot with brilliant plumage

Russian

- _____ 1. Kind of whip for flogging criminals
- _____ 2. Wolfhound known for grace and swiftness (not greyhound)

Turkish

- _____ 1. Crowd, pack, swarm
- _____ 2. Empty foolish nonsensical talk

Australian

- _____ 1. Curved club that when thrown returns to sender
- _____ 2. Marsupial with small head and powerful hind legs

Hungarian

- _____ 1. A ragout or stew of beef or veal

Yiddish

- _____ 1. Meddler, one who gives gratuitous advice

Hindu

- _____ 1. A small one-story house often with a wide veranda or porch

South Pacific

- _____ 1. Forbidden by usage or social usage

What did you find?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.