Table Talk

SO I HAVE been making a list of words. If I give you a few can you figure out the governing principle? Here's three: Rhythm, Zone, Police. No? Cemetery, Story, Planet. Okay. It's "Greek words in English."

How much are these worth? Are they worth the three hundred and fifty billion Euros that is Greece's debt? That is one argument made today in IMF-land by some nationalists who shout: "We gave Europe their language! They owe us!"

Quotes from unknown poets, inspired by the 1821 War of Liberation against the Turks, are back in popularity. Key phrases are yellowed in and circulated over the blogosphere—old soldier to a wealthy man: "My blood gave you your crown…"

In fact, of that massive debt, doubtless an onerous burden (all Latin in that phrase, since the Romans one-upped the Greeks for terms used in finance), a hundred billion is actually financial borrowings of Greeks from Greeks—think pension funds that bought Greek bonds (now worth nearly zilch, a very non-Greek word). So let's reduce that burden of debt a wee bit, since it is not owed to the foreigners but to the Greeks themselves. This Greek-to-Greek debt surely cancels out the linguistic borrowing element.

Tally now stands reduced.

Is there a word-for-word price? What about Greek origin words that are extremely common in English, like "butter" or "zoo?" Does price vary according to frequency of use?

There are words and there are words.

Some have a deeper importance and provide greater meaning to us all, words like philosophy and plot and theater. Can you imagine Marx without the dialectic? Literary critics without synchronicity and antithesis? The medical profession without pediatricians and podiatrists, endocrinologists and gynecologists? Shrinks without therapy?

Is there a money-back guarantee if the word doesn't work for us? What if it gets us into trouble? I recall a very long discussion about philanthropy with my friend Henry Roncali when I was fifteen that lasted for weeks and ended up with my giving away twenty dollars to a homeless man on Yonge Street. Do I get a refund? I recall being accused of being an egoist by a girlfriend—the beginning of the end. My written reply was rather Latinate, however. "You are not at all magnanimous, you are officious…"

What about extremely rare words like hypogynous or apotheosis? A zero price? Who keeps the lexic meter running? Who are the protagonists in this endeavor?

But hold on there. Do English speakers not owe the Italians some sort of linguistic fee? Do we not owe the Germans for the achtungs and verbotens in all those Captain America comic books? And what would we really do without Yiddish, you putz? Mugwump and moose, papoose and moccasin? And the Irish, also buckling under the hard boot of the IMF—with their brogues and their leprechauns…

The Nordics, relatively debt-free, have a say in the debt buyback scheme as well. I would say Wednesday is worth much to me. Squat in the middle of the week, it's when I have time to think, pause, and write. I think we owe the Vikings about twenty-five billion for that. Although Thursday is a close second, come to think of it, predisposing me to the upcoming weekend as it does.

And the French did their part in bolstering up the English language. They gave us petty and pettiness, art nouveau and la vie francaise and joie de vivre and vin blanc and le jogging, though I think Italian Prime Minister Monti should tax the French every time they try to monopolize the dictionary of love. (Oh, but the Ancients, they pretty much own the House of Eros, no?)

One psycho-linguistic explanation that I was given to explain Merkel's stance towards Greece runs as follows: in German the word "debt" (Schuld) also means "guilt." Thus, indebted Greeks are automatically guilty Greeks.

I could go on. So could you. At the end of the day I think we would all find that the debt of one language to another is pretty much squared away.

Or maybe not.

Maybe when all is said and done, and the linguistic DNA deciphered, the West still owes Greece about fifty billion for use of its language.

But can't this be balanced out by going the other way around? Do not the Greeks owe a drachma or two for use of their words?

Take ouzo, Henry Miller's drink of choice. One urban myth (Latin and Greek in that term) claims it derives from an accident: the grappa-like liquid mixed with anise was sent regularly abroad. On the crates were written the words: *Per l' uso di…* For the use of….

There is also another list: Greek words invented by non-Greeks in English. I don't know how to price that one. Example: Utopia (for No-Place) was in fact invented by Thomas More, a man well-steeped in the classics. Do the Greeks now owe the Right Honorable Lord Chancellor's descendants some serious payback?

Another such oddity is the word *Disaster*—a bad alignment of the stars—from "dis" (negation) and "aster" (star). This word exists in neither ancient or modern Greek, though it is solidly Greek.

"Don't dis me" might be worth quite a lot, if the meter runs on degrees of cool. Don't dis me is what the Greeks are saying right now. Because when it comes down to it, even more than getting rid of that despicable debt, even more than claiming that the world cannot abandon the place where it all began (albeit before any of us were alive), today's Athenians want back one thing: respect.

We are all, American-Greek mongrels like me and pure-bloods of Turkish-Vlach-Ancient origin, grasping for straws, right now, to create the new narrative. Will it be "indebted country wags its hand at the rascally foreigners and absconds"? Will it be "indebted country works hard, shoulders its past and stands tall"?

I prefer the latter. My one-line narrative goes like this: first comes the epic heroism, then the democratic dialogue, and finally we arrive where we must—therapeutic catharsis.

—Nick Papandreou

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ONE SATURDAY in February 2006, I decided to go on a drive in search of cheap *mikan*. I'd stayed in to recover from a cold the night before and spent the morning cleaning my apartment and hanging my laundry from the curtain brackets. Outside the weather was remarkable. After a gray, blustery January during which we had several meters of snow, the sky was bright blue and clear, and the sun was strong enough to dry the roads. It was still too cold to hang clothes outside, and icy walls of snow padded the sides of the highways, but after spending over a week exclusively in my town—the small town of Nishiaizu, Fukushima Prefecture, where I was teaching English at elementary and junior high school—I was getting a little stir crazy, and cheap citrus fruit seemed to be a good excuse to get out of the house.

I got into my small white 1992 Daihatsu Mira and aimed it west on National Highway 49, which runs east to west across Japan from Iwaki to Niigata City. At that point I'd driven most of the eastern portion of the highway; Nishiaizu is on the western edge of Fukushima (which put me in the mountainous center of the main island of Japan), and all of the teachers in the program gathered in the larger cities to my east on the weekends. I'd never gone west, though, and on my way out of town, I felt the thrill of venturing into lands unknown.

In the distance, I could see snow-covered peaks. The white rice fields of the Aizu Valley receded behind me, and the Mira climbed the gradual slope toward the border, which was much closer than I expected. I was in Niigata Prefecture ten minutes later, and after twenty I had stopped at the first grocery store—a chain we didn't have in Fukushima—to compare the prices of *mikan* and appraise the scotch selection. The purpose of my drive had actually been to scratch an itch, not to price-check fruit, but when I saw that foreign grocery store, I had to stop and find out.

Mikan are known as satsuma in English, and although their easy-to-peel skin and tart flavor may initially suggest otherwise, they are in fact the hot chocolate of Japan. They ripen in the southern prefectures during the winter, and Japanese associate the fruit strongly with *kotatsu*, a table with a heating element underneath and a thick quilt sandwiched between the tabletop and the frame. Japanese keep warm in the winter by tucking themselves under *kotatsu* and eating *mikan* by the half-dozen. Where an American might imagine logs crackling on a fire, a frosty winter scene outside, and a mug of thick, bittersweet hot chocolate, a Japanese imagines sitting under a *kotatsu* and pyramids of *mikan* within easy reach.

In 2006, a bag of eight medium-sized *mikan* could be had for 400 yen ($4 at the time), give or take 40 to 50 yen depending on the quality. I continued west, stopping at the different grocery stores I encountered, finding roughly the same prices, except at one commercial grocery store which had bags for 280 yen. I bought several. I arrived at Niigata City a few hours later, walked around the shopping district, bought two CDs, and then drove home in the darkness of the winter evening.

In the dark I couldn't see the scenery around me, and I'd ignored most of it on the way there, too. I missed the 1400-year-old "Shogun Cedar," a mammoth tree twenty meters around with four main trunks that shoot up like fingers from an upturned palm. I missed the Mushroom Park, a small forest that offers visitors a chance to pick their own and eat mushroom soup, mushroom curry, and barbecued mushrooms at a restaurant. I couldn't have missed the red truss bridge that 49 crosses just outside of Tsugawa; I drove right over it, but I'm not sure that it registered completely.

Highway 49 runs over the picturesque bridge and then along a narrow piece of land next to the Agano River. Tree-covered mountains spring up on either side of the river, and driving at eighty kilometers per hour creates the sensation that you are jet-skiing your way along the river, down the mountains, to the Sea of Japan coast. Then the highway disappears straight into a mountain and reappears on the other side, revealing a quaint ski and hot springs resort town called Mikawa tucked into the mountains before the descent to Niigata City.

I saw all of this, of course, at least the parts that were along 49, but after I went into that first supermarket, *mikan* became the driving force behind my day trip. I walked through rural supermarkets and shopping malls, looking to save tens, maybe hundreds, of yen. And when I got to Niigata City, I bought 5000 yen worth of CDs and went home in the dark.

—Daniel Morales

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TO LEAVE Russia, my grandfather swam across a river at night. He was a hod carrier in London, a lumberjack in Canada. He won bets breaking belts with his chest. "Let the bull eat the grass, I'll eat the bull!" was his motto. It referred to a hatred of vegetables. In Brooklyn, he ran a candy store, read law behind the counter, became an attorney, then a judge. He took a long walk in the sun and fell, spent his last twenty years staring at a tank of fish. It's from then I remember him, an immobile, rabbinic figure.

"Gramps," I asked at some family gathering. I was maybe five. "Gramps, are things going to get better…or

worse?"

"Worse," he seemed to breathe, although the conventional wisdom was he could not speak.

My mother was there when he died. She had come to keep Pearl, his daughter, company on the nurse's night off.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Well, it was very sad, of course. I was asleep on the couch. Pearl came in and said, 'I think Poppa's gone.' We went up to his room. He had been… failing for a long time. So we held a mirror to his mouth and—"

"You really did that? You held a mirror to his mouth?"

"—then we called Doctor Marcus. He was a smug son of a bitch. He said, 'There's nothing I can do for him now, my child. I'll be by in the morning.' So we went into the kitchen, I made coffee, and Pearl said— I'll never forget this. You know about Pearl, don't you?"

"Know what?"

"When Pearl was a young bride, she couldn't have been married more than a year, it was the influenza epidemic of 1919. Her husband David was sick. Pearl was all alone and had to get a doctor. But David didn't want her to go. He was delirious. He kept saying, 'Don't leave me. Don't leave me.' She said that he would be fine, that she would be right back. Well, he died, alone, while she was gone. And Pearl never forgave herself for leaving that room. She moved back in with her father. When he had his stroke, she took care of him. For years. There were men, one in particular, who wanted to marry her, but it would have meant leaving Samuel and she couldn't do that. So while we were sitting there, waiting for it to get light, Pearl said to me, 'At least this time I was here.'"

Snow swirled outside. We were upstate, hundreds of miles from the scenes she had just described. My father, perversely, had retired not to Florida or Arizona but the foothills of the Adirondacks, to a house wedged into a steep slope, halfway up a mountain. Cancer, he thought, would not find him there.

"But what about after?" I asked. "Didn't Pearl have some good times, after?"

"Your father found her an apartment. And she learned to drive. She visited us, remember?"

I tried. But what flashed out from the past seemed nonsensical, made important only by virtue of its persistence, not because of any inherent meaning.

"She was a lot of fun. Full of energy. Of course the whole time she was taking those pills her pharmacist friend got her."

"What pills?"

"Pep pills."

"You mean speed?"

"Amphetamines. In those days nobody knew the damage they did. She called us from the hospital. Doctor Marcus had put her in for observation. Your father went to see her. She said, 'I had a heart attack, didn't I?' Doctor Marcus laughed. He said, 'So, Pearlie, when did you graduate from medical school?'"

"And she died in the hospital?"

"That night."

We paused for a moment as flakes ticked against the window, an insect invasion, a million ice-white locusts.

"Pearl was a real looker," my mother went on. "Once, she went to buy a dress and the saleswoman said, 'You must have been beautiful. I can see the traces.'"

—Thomas Rayfiel