



BLAME WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR

BY DAVID LOWE

If there are about six times more words in the English language than in French, then why do the English feel the need to use so many French words and phrases? Have the English no *amour propre*? For example, and there are examples “a gogo”, the English don’t really have an equivalent for “bon voyage”, which gives you an idea of the state of our railways. We often use the rather weak and pessimistic: “have a safe journey”. We also don’t have an equivalent for “bon appétit” – which gives you an idea of how bad our food is. Not even worth an “aperitif”, for which we don’t have a word either. *Savoir vivre* doesn’t translate; nor does *bon vivant* (we use the French expressions). And rather sadly, *douceur de vivre* is completely absent from the English language, something to do with the weather, I think. On a more positive note, we don’t have a word for *coup d’état*, leading me to conclude that the English are a rather stable, direct people (no word for *trompe l’œil* either), albeit rather boring and lacking a certain, how do you say... *joie de vivre*?

We never really bothered to translate *entente cordiale*, probably since we thought that it wouldn’t last. There are no “femmes fatales” in England – Margaret Thatcher was the closest we got. Sometimes there are “faux pas” and mixing of “genres”; “haute couture” may once have been mistaken for getting dressed on the top floor and “haute cuisine” for cooking in the Alps – difficult to do in a “pied-à-terre”, with no “vis-à-vis”. For some, “hors d’œuvres” is, of course, just outside Dover. This use of the French language doesn’t mean the English trust their neighbours across the Channel; *au contraire*, we are naturally suspicious of the over-emotive French who cannot distinguish between something as basic as loving and liking (the verb *aimer* being used for them both) – *je t’aime bien* means you like me less than *je t’aime*! But we, the English prefer not to make a fuss, we’re “blasé”; our attitude is *laissez-faire*, though we take *lèse majesté* – or rather lese-majesty – very seriously, which is quite natural given that *noblesse oblige*. After all, *Dieu et mon droit*.

It’s obvious that we don’t have a word for *chauvin* and have to use the French word to describe this peculiarly

Gallic quality. “Charlatan” sounds pretty French too. There is a rather more philosophical aspect to all this, and please remember that, just a stick and a piece of string are the difference between fishing and standing on the edge of a river looking like an idiot. So it is with philosophy. Are the English different from the French because they speak a different language or do the English and French speak a different language because they are simply different?

If the English don’t have the words for *oh là là!*, is it because the emotion linked with *oh là là!* doesn’t exist in the English people? Or is the fact that the expression *oh là là!* does not exist in the English language the reason why the English don’t feel the *oh là là!*-related emotion? And now for my “tour de force” or *coup de grâce*, if you like. I was leading you into a state of expectation – posing a very interesting question for which you await an answer, which I will not give, not because of some *sadisme* on my behalf; it is not for me to wreak my revenge for this *soi-disant* inadequacy of the English language, but just to help you understand, in exchange, two very useful English words that don’t exist in French – anti-climax and bullshit.

