

The etymology of the word “traffic light”

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Some languages are very creative with their term for those red/green thingies that control (or at least try to control) the flow of vehicular traffic.

Language	term
US English	traffic light
South African English	robot
Swedish	trafikljus (lit: traffic light)
German	Ampel
Mandarin Chinese	紅綠燈 hóng lǜ dēng (lit: red green light)

Swedish proves the least surprising in this respect (from a US English point of view), using the same term as US English. South African English is the funniest with their “robot”. (It makes sense in its own way: It’s a device that replaces a policeman directing traffic.) In my experience, South African English is full of cute little words like this. I imagine that Germans find Swiss German similarly quaint.

The German word “Ampel” has the most interesting history of the set. It originally entered the German language as “ampulla”, an urn filled with paraffin and used as a lamp (cognate to English “amphora”). You can easily imagine how this word gradually evolved into the term for a traffic signal.

The Mandarin Chinese term for traffic light is to me quite enlightening as well. The Taiwanese term for traffic light is “hòng lí dūn”, and I assumed it was just a made-up word unconnected with any other words. (In the same way that the English word “elephant” just is; it’s not built out of other English words like “ele” and “phant”.) Since the Taiwanese words for “red”, “green” and “light” are nothing like the Mandarin Chinese words, I was unable to make the connection. Now I see its etymology and it makes sense.

Unfortunately, I haven't been making the progress that I'd have liked on Mandarin. Even though my meager knowledge of Taiwanese should've given me a head start (since about 80% of Taiwanese words are to varying degrees cognate with Mandarin Chinese), it doesn't help with the grammar at all because I don't understand Taiwanese grammar consciously. The words just make sense and I don't know why.

Which is too bad because the grammatical structure of Mandarin Chinese is radically different from that of Germanic languages, with which I have had a long-time fascination.

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