



# Brexit in Wonderland



Brexit is back in the news, so we're taking the opportunity to explain what connects the process to pirates, sexiness and Alice in Wonderland.



## Brexit's magical adventures



On Alice's magical adventures, a talking egg tells her that his words are like **portmanteaus** (that is, suitcases) with 'two meanings packed up into one word'. Since then, in English we have spoken of **portmanteau words**, with **Brexit** (**Britain + exit**) being the most famous recent example.



Colourful equivalents of portmanteaus in Spanish include **matasuegras** and **pagafantas**. Spanish has also adopted recent English portmanteaus from the world of technology, like **bit** (binary + digit), **modem** (modulator + demodulator) and **Skype** (sky + peer-to-peer).



But these kinds of combinations are as old as language itself. Useful examples from past centuries include **dumbfound** (*dejar sin palabras*), which comes from **dumb** plus **confound**, and **smog** (*smoke plus fog*). Studies show that knowing the origins of portmanteaus helps learners remember them.



The portmanteau **Brexit** didn't exist until May 2012, when it was invented by pro-European activist Peter Wilding. In the end, **Brexit** beat less attractive rivals like **Brixit** and **UKExit**. Wilding said at first that **Brexit** was a 'sad word'; others used it to denigrate the idea of leaving Europe.



Eurosceptics, however, re-appropriated 'Brexit', which some saw as a dynamic, rebellious and anti-establishment word; it even sounds like a rupture (*rotura*): **breaks it**. Eurosceptics re-named themselves **Brexiters**, a name evocative of **buccaneers**: intrepid, adventurous and picaresque pirates.



Indeed, Wilding came to realise that one problem for pro-Europeans was that **remain** does not sound as '**sexy**' as **Brexit**. We'll never know if history would have been different if remain campaigners had sexier rhetoric, but the idea obliges us to reflect on the **magical, poetical power of words**.



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