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.

Euro sceptics, however, re-appropriated 'Brexit', which some saw as a dynamic, rebellious and anti-establishment word; it even sounds like a rupture (*rotura*): *breaks it*. Euro sceptics re-named themselves *Brexiteers*, 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.