

**University of Stuttgart**  
Language Center

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# **English Revisited:** A Christmas Edition

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EDITORIAL

Before the semester break we would like to send our Season's Greetings to all of you and wish you a happy, healthy and prosperous 2020!

With "Gherkins and Tinsel" and the seasonal quiz we would like to contribute a seasonal small talk topic and maybe make you, our reader, smile. We hope you will enjoy this newsletter in a new layout – for which we would like to thank Stuttgart University's Communications Department.

If you like this issue, please share it with colleagues and friends.

If you like what we are doing at the Language Centre, please promote our language offerings. They are open to all employees, scientists, researchers, teaching staff, and administrative employees, students of all faculties as well as guest students of the University of Stuttgart. You can also follow us on Instagram and Facebook.



With best wishes for a happy, healthy 2020

*Dr. Ines Böhner | Gretchen Chojnacki-Herbers*

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# About Gherkins and Tinsel

## A Non-Scientific Account on the Festivals

It is the time of the year when in the northern hemisphere the days become shorter, the nights longer, and colder weather makes us all long for warmth and a cosy, welcoming atmosphere. As the year is coming to its end, diverse celebrations invite us to reflect and become sociable. Reason enough to look at what is celebrated where.

### The end of the year? Which end of the year?

Note that “the end of the year” does not fall on the same date for all religions and cultures. Muslims celebrated New Year (which marks the start of the migration of the prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina to escape prosecution in 622 CE) on August 31st this year. Muslims are now in the year 1441. Jews celebrated Rosh HaSanah (the creation of Adam and Eve) on September 30th and entered the 5780th year. The Chinese and Vietnamese will celebrate New Year or Spring Festival (which introduces the new zodiac animal – the clever rat) at the end of January, on the 25th and 26th 2020. Though the most famous Hindu festivals in Europe is Holi (March 9th and 10th 2020), Hindus, who follow one of the oldest religions in the world with a plethora of gods and manifold celebrations, started the new year in the middle of Diwali (October 25th to 29th) this year. Having adopted the Georgian calendar, Christians and those in Christian-dominant areas celebrate New Year’s Eve on December 31st. As this is the most widely used system to measure time in years, the formerly used BC and AD (before Christ and anno Domini, i.e. after Christ) have been changed to BCE (before common era) and CE (common era) to accommodate non-Christian settings as well.

### So what is there to celebrate at the ‘end of the year’?

Writing about calendars, the time between October and January is packed with festivities and holidays. Here in Stuttgart there are a number of Christian holidays and festivals celebrated by children, students and all those enjoying a good time: All Souls, St. Martin,

Advent, Christmas, of course New Year’s Eve and Epiphany. Many of those Christian celebrations were neatly placed next to Celtic/Pagan traditions to market the new belief-system to Celtic, Germanic and Nordic tribes. What is more, quite a number of those deal with light and the hope of a new beginning. However, there is more to discover...

### What is on in October?

The first Christian holiday associated with light is All Souls – November 1st – when people would go to the graveyards to put candles and flowers on the graves of their departed nearest and dearest. The evening before Halloween (Samhain in the Celtic language) marks the end of the summer and harvest and the beginning of the winter season. On Samhain/Halloween the dead and the living world are said to overlap, and demons can roam the world – which is why people dress up as demons and put jack-o’-lanterns on their windowsills. Bonfires are lit that have their roots in Celtic tradition and people cook dinners to eat with family and friends in remembrance of the dead – some are even said to invite the dead and converse with them! Today Halloween is chiefly seen as another reason to dress up, celebrate and have fun, and children may go from house to house shouting “trick or treat” asking for sweets. Pranks, though blamed on the fairies, have always been part of this festival in the Anglophone world. Anyone who was stingy with giving or treats could be certain that things would go missing and show up somewhere else or be broken. The real party, however, happens in Mexico where the day is called Día de los Muertos and, as its working title says, includes the celebrations of the dead and some outlandishly imaginative death masks.

Around the same time of year and as mentioned before a number of Hindus, Jains, Sikhs and some Buddhists celebrate one of their most popular family festivals that sends Indians travelling across the subcontinent,



### GLOSSARY

CE / BCE

common era / before common era

plethora: many different

pranks: small tricks

stingy: cheap—does not like to spend money

outlandishly: bizarre looking

## GLOSSARY

*banter:*  
small jokes and witty  
small talk

Diwali: On the first day of this festival Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, is welcomed to the freshly cleaned homes. The second day commemorates Lord Krishna's and Kali's victory over the demon Narakasura, which symbolizes the victory of light over darkness, good over evil, and accordingly goes hand in hand with fireworks and loud noise. On the third day dyas (earthen oil lamps) are lit to worship Lakshmi respectively Kali (in Bengal, Odisha and Assam) and gifts and sweets are exchanged when families gather to welcome the New Year. This also marks the end of the fiscal year – and as the New Year has arrived, merchants open new accounts on the fourth day of Diwali and prayers are offered. On the fifth and final day the relationship between siblings is celebrated (Bahai Duj) when brothers



givers give their sisters presents and the sisters in turn pray for their brothers. The ritual and gods addressed during this festival may vary from region to region and would be

worth their own article.

In 2019 Jews celebrated Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Tora in October. Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) is the day of purification and with that the holiest of all Jewish holidays, when Jews abstain from food, drink, bodily pleasures and wearing leather, and pray for forgiveness to cleanse the soul. For those who wonder, "Why leather?": The custom refers back to when – according to the Tora and Bible – the Jews sinned by starting to worship a golden calf on their journey to the promised land. On Yom Kippur the migrants were forgiven for their sins and Moses received the commandments on Mount Sinai. Five days after Yom Kippur falls the Jewish Thanksgiving for the fall harvest, Sukkot, which commemorates the 40-year's journey from Egypt to Israel. Also here there is plenty of food, treats and joyful *banter* amongst family and friends. Immediately following the 7-days festivities of Sukkot, are Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Tora where there is more eating but also dancing and

music, which after a time of abstinence people enjoy again.

## Festivities in November

In comparison, St Martin (celebrated on the 11th of November alongside the beginning of the Carnival) is a more sombre affair. In Germany, children take pains to craft their own lanterns and proudly parade their creations next to the ready-made ones in the nightly St Martin's parades (often headed by a St Martin in costume and on horseback) while singing St Martin's songs. Sweets and treating are also a key element here, as the according to legend St Martin (a Roman soldier) shared his winter cloak with a beggar who addressed him from the side of the road. (Not that half a winter cloak would have kept either the soldier or the beggar warm – it's the gesture that counts.) Quite a number of the St Martin's parades end – if not in tears because a lantern has not lit up or burned down – around yet another bonfire with stockbrot (bread on a stick roasted over an open fire), roasted potatoes and chestnuts. Sunday roast then will be goose, red cabbage and dumplings indoors.

Nearly coinciding with St Martin, a number of Muslim communities around the world celebrated the birth of prophet Muhammad on the 10th of November this year. What is more, Sikhs celebrated the birthday of the first of ten gurus, Guru Nanak on November



12th this year.

The ubiquitous secular American holiday Thanksgiving is celebrated in the US when millions of people travel back to their nearest and dearest to gather around a turkey in November. The celebration really goes back to a military conquest (the Puritans settling in the new colonies), and now represents the white-washed remembrance of the roots of the United States with the landing of the pilgrims at Plymouth Rock. Many school children take

part in plays and decorative arts of both fall colours and abundance. Since Thanksgiving is one of the few non-religious celebrations, it is gratefully celebrated by most cultures in the United States. Though all gather around a turkey, the side dishes vary and can include pumpkin, dal (Indian) or tamalis (Mexican). (So far to the salad bowl?) Thanksgiving also marks the start to the end of the year's shopping spree: On Black Friday, the Friday after Thanksgiving, retail stores go in to the 'black' with their sales figures, as some Americans shop until they drop.

### Time Out or In for December

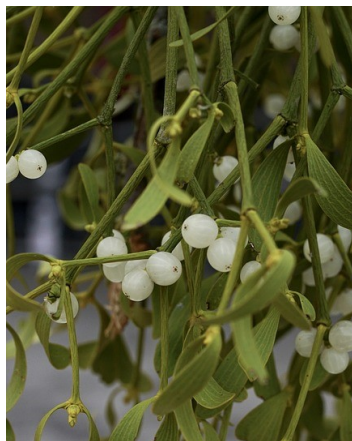
December then brings the holiday which is most visible in this part of the world: Christmas! In this holiday Christians initially celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ with prayers and church services, good food for all those involved and light. This religious holiday was also aligned to a Pagan tradition: that of Yule. Yule is on the day of the winter solstice, December 22nd this year. Yule traditions include wassailing (carolling), the Yule log and the decorated tree stem from the Norse peoples. In Scandinavia the St Lucia procession featuring girls dressed in white following the "Lucia Queen" (one head girl wearing whortleberry wreath with lighted candles on her head) heralds the Christmas season on December 13th.

Also Pagan, but an integral element of Christmas, is the mistletoe. Celtic in origin, it was widely known as symbol of fertility in other cultures too, such as with the Romans. Gift giving at the turn of turn of the year was and has been important both in the Celtic/Norse/Pagan and finally Christian traditions. After all, once the shepherds had paid Jesus their respects and worshipped him, the three holy kings came with gold, myrrh and frankincense. Because gift giving was associated with Yule, gifts were exchanged on New Year's Eve in many parts of Europe until the 18th century. The practice then gradually spread out to Christmas or Epiphany.

Over the past century gift giving became more and more important. Today Christmas sometimes feels more of a consumer festival than a religious holiday. To satisfy the in-

creasing demand for presents, the chief logistics manager (if there is one single one) must live in parallel universes Irish scientists argued on Youtube or at the speed of light

Another explanation for the miraculous and flawless appearance of gifts is that there is not one party organizing this but a team: Santa Claus (St Nicholas of Myra), the Kris Kringle (Christkind Germany), the erstwhile kindly Pagan witch Befana (Italy) and Grandfather Frost (Russia). In Germany and the Netherlands St Nick (there called Sinterklaas) leaves presents for children on December 6th, while his good humoured sidekick de zwarte Piet (Netherlands) or Knecht Ruprecht (Germany) question whether all this gift giving has a basis in good behaviour throughout the year. Along the Rhine, in the Palatinate, Saarland, Odenwald and parts of Baden Württemberg



but also amongst the Dutch communities in Pennsylvania the fur-clad crotchety Pagan Belsnickel might stand in for St Nick and Ruprecht. In the eastern parts of Austria one or more Krampuses with devilish horns replace him. On Christmas Eve then Santa or the Kris Kringle bring presents for the German-speaking children while the Dutch children will have to be happy with what was left on their doorstep on December

6th.

This is very far removed from the Christmas promoted by Coca Cola and the American film industry, but still is lived tradition. For sure, even if Coca Cola did not dye Santa's coat red, it made Santa clad in red and Rudolf the red-nosed reindeer an icon.

### There is more to discover

Books and movies mirror reality, and so we liked it immensely when in *Miracle on 34th Street* Susan, the child protagonist chirped, "Happy Hanukkah, Merry Christmas!", at everybody whom she met in the street. The Jewish Hanukkah lasts from December 22nd to 30th this year. Hanukkah celebrates the victory of a small army of Jews over Greek-Syrian colonizers and the wonder that one single cruse of olive oil kept the menorah burning for eight days. Like Christmas and Diwali, Hanukkah is a festival of light and hope.

## GLOSSARY

*spree:*  
long period of uninterrupted activity

*carolling:*  
going door to door and singing Christmas songs

*flawless:*  
without any mistakes

*erstwhile:*  
former

*chirps:*  
sound similar to a bird

*cruse:*  
earthenware pot

Click here for the videos





## GLOSSARY

*sibling:*  
brother/sister

*quranic*  
adjective to Qur'an  
written in the Qur'an

*to ward off evil:*  
to chase evil away

Now you may ask, what about the third Abrahamic sibling – Islam? Though Muslims venerate Jesus and the Virgin Mary, Christmas is usually not celebrated amongst Muslims like Christians would celebrate it. However, some may have a Christmas tree at home and exchange smaller gifts; this is very much a matter of personal choice. The main religious holiday for Muslims is Ramadan (commemorating Mohamed's first quranic revelation) which is observed by Muslims throughout the world with fasting, prayers, reflection, and charitable deeds in spring. At the end of Ramadan, Eid, the breaking of the fast, is celebrated by paying respect to elders by kissing their hands, gift giving in return and lots of splendid food.

### Last but not least

On December 31st the old year comes to an end in the Georgian calendar. Usually this is



celebrated with fireworks (in Britain and the US only in public places) sparkling wine/ champagne and again abundant food. Scotland makes an exception to the rule here because Hogmanay is celebrated loudly and boisterously with parades and celebrations for three days – so why doesn't that surprise us!?! Norsemen brought the celebration of the winter solstice to Scotland, where it became the main holiday of the year, as Christmas was not really celebrated by the Protestant Scots up until the 1950s. Next to cleaning your house and clearing your debts before the sound of the bells at midnight, you must remember that you should not cross arms before the beginning of the last verse of Robert Burns' "Auld Lang Syne".

If this was not enough, at the end of January the Asian communities welcome the new lunar year with massive fireworks to ward off evil spirits.

Though Christmas and Singles Day (in 2019 on November 11th) are the main shopping event holidays, the Asian Spring Festival celebrations are the most prominent in the year. Traditionally, special foods would be cooked

and a food sacrifice be given to the ancestors before the family began to eat. Though this custom is less observed today, red banners with blessings for the coming year are still hung up around the entrances of houses and flats. Jiaozi (Chinese maultaschen) are still served at midnight, when – as the name of the dish says – the old and the new year cross.

Looking for the smallest common denominator in all these festivals, it becomes evident that they all centre around the supply of food, around light, around social activities, and the warding off of evil. Thus it appears that people – regardless of their cultural background – cherish similar cultural values: a spirit of community, compassion and positive outlook (hope), enjoyment of life and "doing the right thing". This is the other meaning behind all these holidays: Respect those whom you encounter, live in peace with them, and do not (ab)use religion as marker between us versus them in order to discriminate negatively or to inflict harm.

Many of the described traditions blended cultural elements to create new identities. What was achieved forcefully by the Romans and Christians, comes in a quieter coat when looking at shared history with other cultural groups: When we wish you, "Einen guten Rutsch!", now, we would like to remind you that, not only this saying but a lot of the language we use on a daily basis, has roots in the language of Jews and Muslims – just as many English words have Indian and African origins.

Having written this, one question remains: What about gherkins and tinsel? Well, what the gherkin has to do with any of these holidays and where tinsel originated, you can find out in our [quiz](#).



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