

# The equivalent of “It’s all Greek to me” in 30 other languages

English speakers say, “It’s all Greek to me,” when they find something hard to understand. Shakespeare used the phrase in “Julius Caesar” (“Those that understood him smiled at one another and shook their heads; but for mine own part, it was Greek to me”). It’s also common in Spanish, where some people think it gave rise to the word “gringo” (from “hablar en griego,” to speak in Greek, or to speak unintelligibly).

The phrase actually comes from a Medieval Latin proverb, “Graecum est; non potest legi,” meaning “It is Greek; it cannot be read.” From there, the phrase filtered into many European languages. Today, English, Spanish, Polish, Norwegian and Swedish all use Greek as a metaphor for incomprehensibility. griego,” to speak in Greek, or to speak unintelligibly).

Mark Liberman, a professor linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania, started wondering what the equivalent was in different languages. Drawing on a variety of sources, including Wikipedia, Omniglot and user comments, he created the graph below,, which shows the language that other languages use to describe things that are hard or impossible to understand.

He found that to the Greeks, the equivalent turns out to be Chinese; the same is true of Lithuanians, Latvians, Hungarians, Russians, Finns and French. The Italians use Arabic, and Persians Japanese. The exception is the Chinese; when something is incomprehensible to them, they call it a product of heaven.

