My Dull Journal

[Greg Morrow](#)'s LiveJournal:

11/10/08
9:03 pm

Concerning a Particular Foreign Name

A propos the title of the previous post:

The title of the Nero Wolfe novel *The Black Mountain* tells you where it takes place, because if you translate "Montenegro" to English, it is "black mountain". But "Montenegro" is itself Italian, and of course the Montenegrins name their own country in their own language, and that is "Crna Gora".

Which is, of course, "black mountain".*

"Montenegro" (in Italian) is what's known as a "calque", meaning a term that's been adopted into a new language by translating its parts, rather than by adopting it by adapting it to the new language's phonetic structure. Calques are pretty rare; we don't order "little donkeys" in the Tex-Mex cantina, we order burritos.

But in English, "Montenegro" isn't a calque. We did the common thing and just adopted the name of the country we heard most. And as it happens, England and America did a lot more talking *about* the region, with other European powers, than we did talking *to* the people from the region, so we ended up adopting a name that had the virtue of having Latinate roots that made it recognizable alongside much of the rest of our lexicon.

So look at the journey that the Crna Gorans made to reach our language. That sort of thing happens all the time. English derives just its third person personal pronouns from about three dialects of Anglo-Saxon plus Danish. Or compare the [many names of Germany](#). *Cougar* is a English version of a French version of a Portuguese version of a South American Indian word, and that's just *one* of the words that can name *Puma concolor*. Words have stories, and there aren't a lot of rules involved.

*Those of you who remember your Mussgorsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, or at least your *Fantasia*, will recognize the "crna" part from Tchernabog, the name of the god in "Night on Bald Mountain"; his name is literally "Black God".

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6:45 pm

Bond in Crna Gora