Name That Noise

Around the world, millions of people wake up every day to the cock-a-doodle-doo of a rooster at daybreak. Right? Wrong! Maybe people in America wake up to cock-a-doodle-doo, but people in France wake up to cocorico and for people in Japan it’s ko-ke-kok-ko-o! And what about those city folk who wake up to an alarm clock? In New York, they would no doubt hear a tick-tock leading up to a riiiiiiiiiiing! In Rio de Janeiro, though, the clock’s quiet tique-taque would be followed by a loud trriiiimmm to wake up any sleepers in the room.

Languages around the world are crazy! How can we hear the same exact noise as someone else, yet sound it out so differently? In a traffic jam in Los Angeles, the cars might beep or honk, but in Sweden they would tūt. Something that hit the floor with a splat in Boise would hit the floor in Berlin with a flatsch. In the Wild West, you might hear the bang-bang of a gunshot at the O.K. Corral. But what would a French cowboy hear? Pan-pan.

Whether it’s the peep of a chick, the pop of a firecracker, or your mom saying “Shush!” as you toot on a party noisemaker, you can pretty much count on those sounds being heard differently elsewhere in the world. But, perhaps all that really matters is that we are willing to listen to what all the people who hear the chick, the firecracker, and the mom in their own way have to say. Shhh! Let’s listen.