

A red herring

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“Herrings” (arenques) you may know. There are 3 species of herring, and one is known as the “Atlantic Herring” and is fished in the waters around the UK.

Herrings are often “smoked” (ahumado) and smoked herring is a popular dish for breakfast for British mortals, and the herrings are served with eggs.

So, what is a red herring? During the smoking process, the colour of the herrings changes to red. These smoked herrings have a strong smell.

However, if something is a red herring, it can be something very different: it is something that is intended to be misleading (engañoso) and distracting.

Politicians sometimes say things to take attention away from important and difficult areas: the things that they say are designed to focus people’s attention away from something that the politicians do not want to discuss. Perhaps in Spanish it is a “pista falsa” o “algo que distrae”.

Some examples:

- That is a red herring (una cortina de humo).
- Mr. Sanchez, the Spanish Prime Minister, has criticised Mr. Feijoo, the Opposition Leader. This is a red herring (una pista falsa), designed to draw public attention from (...desviar la atención del problema de...) the serious problems in the Spanish economy.

So, why do the English use the phrase “red herring”? Here is the short history,

Many moons ago in Britain, if someone was trying to prolong a “fox hunt”, a dead

cat would be placed on the trail (rastros, pistas) of the fox, with the result that the dogs pursuing the fox (persiguiendo al zorro) would be distracted and confused because the smell of the dead cat was stronger than the scent (olor) of a fox. So, it took longer for the dogs to catch the fox and the sport lasted longer.

When no cat was available, a red herring (smoked herring) was used: its smell being much stronger than the smell of a fox.

Hence, the red herring distracts or takes attention away from something important.

So, have you deployed some red herrings in your life? Or spotted some red herrings from Mr. Sanchez?