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CULTURAL CONCEPTS BEYOND ENGLISH: TRANSLATION, WORLDVIEW, AND THE LIMITS OF EXPLANATION

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Abstract

This article examines cultural concepts from different languages that are difficult to explain in English. The study is based on an informal corpus of online comments in which speakers shared words, expressions, and cultural practices that they considered hard to translate. The article does not treat these comments as dictionary definitions, but as examples of folk metalinguistic awareness: ordinary speakers reflecting on the relationship between language, culture, and meaning. After excluding offensive, vulgar, purely humorous, and politically charged examples, the article focuses on concepts such as saudade, hiraeth, sobremesa, hygge, lagom, sisu, tarof, ubuntu, kapwa, firgun, apapacho, gezelligheid, and meraki. The analysis shows that these concepts are difficult to explain in English not because English is poor or limited, but because languages divide emotional, social, ethical, and everyday experience in different ways. The difficulty lies not only in vocabulary, but also in cultural practice, shared assumptions, and social context.

Keywords: Cultural concepts, untranslatability, language and culture, lexical semantics, worldview, intercultural communication.

Introduction

Every language contains words that seem easy to translate at first but become difficult when their full cultural meaning is considered. English may offer approximate equivalents, but approximation is not the same as full semantic correspondence. A word can carry emotional associations, social rules, historical

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memory, etiquette, humour, ritual, or moral expectations that are not present in its nearest English equivalent.

This issue is often described through the idea of "untranslatable words." However, the term "untranslatable" should be used carefully. Most concepts can be explained in English through paraphrase, examples, or cultural commentary. What is usually impossible is not translation itself, but one-word equivalence. As Jakobson (1959) argues, translation is not simply the replacement of one word by another; it often requires interpretation within and across linguistic systems. In this sense, a cultural concept may be explainable but not replaceable.

Wierzbicka (1997) argues that some words function as cultural "key words" because they express values, habits, and assumptions central to a speech community. Similarly, Goddard and Wierzbicka (2014) show that lexical meanings are shaped by cultural experience and cannot always be reduced to dictionary synonyms. This article follows that approach: it examines selected concepts not as exotic curiosities, but as evidence that language reflects culturally specific ways of feeling, behaving, and evaluating the world.

Methodology

The material for this article comes from a collection of online comments in which users shared words or expressions from different languages that they believed were difficult to explain in English. Since the material is informal and user-generated, it is not used as authoritative linguistic evidence. Instead, it is treated as an exploratory dataset showing how speakers themselves perceive cultural and semantic difference.

The selection followed four criteria. First, the concept had to express more than a simple lexical gap. Second, it had to be culturally meaningful rather than merely funny, vulgar, or offensive. Third, it had to be explainable through social, emotional, or cultural context. Fourth, preference was given to concepts that appeared either repeatedly or with a clear explanation from speakers.

Examples involving insults, sexual vulgarity, political hostility, ethnic stereotypes, or intentionally absurd claims were excluded. Purely grammatical features were also excluded unless they clearly reflected a broader cultural logic.

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Emotional Concepts: Longing, Tenderness, and Shared Feeling

One of the strongest groups in the data consists of emotional concepts. Portuguese saudade is a well-known example. It is often translated as "longing," "nostalgia," or "missing someone," but these English words do not fully capture its emotional range. Saudade can refer to absence, memory, desire, melancholy, and attachment at the same time. It is not only a private emotion but also a cultural symbol in Lusophone contexts. The important point is that saudade does not simply name sadness. It names sadness shaped by love, memory, and distance.

Welsh hiraeth is similar but not identical. It is often explained as homesickness, but this is too narrow. Hiraeth can involve longing for a home, a past, a place, a person, or even something that may never have fully existed. English "nostalgia" is close, but hiraeth often has a deeper sense of loss and belonging. It suggests that identity can remain attached to an absent place or time.

Vietnamese thương is another emotionally dense concept. It may be translated as "love," "care," "cherish," or "feel compassion for," but none of these words covers the full meaning. In many contexts, thương combines affection, tenderness, concern, protectiveness, and emotional vulnerability. It is not simply romantic love. It can describe the way a parent feels toward a child, the way one cares for someone who suffers, or the way affection becomes connected with responsibility.

Hebrew firgun offers a different emotional pattern. It refers to sincere happiness for another person's success, often expressed through praise, encouragement, support, or public recognition. English can describe this as "being happy for someone," but firgun gives the attitude a compact social form. It names a positive emotional response that is not competitive or jealous.

These examples show that emotional vocabulary is culturally structured. Languages do not merely label universal feelings. They highlight certain emotional combinations and make them socially recognizable.

Social Rituals and Everyday Practices

Some concepts are difficult to translate because they refer not only to a feeling but to a cultural practice. Spanish sobremesa is a clear example. Literally, it means something like "over the table," but culturally it refers to the time spent talking after a meal, often while plates remain on the table and the meal slowly turns into conversation. English can describe this situation, but it lacks a single ordinary

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word for it. Sobremesa matters because it treats post-meal conversation not as accidental delay but as a valued part of social life.

Danish hygge, Dutch gezelligheid, and German Gemütlichkeit form a related group. They are often translated as "coziness," but this is too weak. Hygge is not just warm blankets or candles. It is a social atmosphere of comfort, equality, safety, and simple shared pleasure. Gezelligheid can describe a pleasant gathering, a welcoming room, or the feeling of being happily together. Gemütlichkeit similarly refers to comfort, warmth, ease, and relaxed sociability. English "cozy" usually describes a physical atmosphere, while these words often include emotional and social harmony.

Dutch uitwaaien is another example of a practice-based concept. It refers to going outside, often into the wind, to clear one's mind and feel refreshed. English can say "take a walk to clear your head," but uitwaaien encodes a specific relationship between weather, movement, and mental renewal.

Mexican Spanish apapacho also belongs here. It is often explained as a warm hug, comforting touch, or affectionate act of care. It is not just physical contact. It implies emotional shelter, tenderness, and reassurance. The common cultural explanation "to hug with the soul" may be poetic rather than literal, but it captures the emotional force of the word.

These concepts are difficult to translate because they are embedded in practices. Their meanings are learned not only through definitions but through repeated participation in everyday life.

Ethical and Relational Concepts

Another important category includes concepts that express moral or social relationships. Ubuntu, found in several Southern African philosophical traditions, is often summarized as "I am because we are." This formula is not a literal translation, but it points to the central idea: personhood is shaped through relationships, community, and mutual responsibility. English has words such as "humanity," "community," and "solidarity," but ubuntu combines these into a broader ethical worldview.

Filipino kapwa is similar in its relational depth. In Filipino psychology, kapwa is commonly understood as shared identity or the recognition of the self in others. It is not simply "others" or "fellow people." It suggests that the boundary between

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self and other is morally significant and socially connected. To treat someone as kapwa is to recognize a shared human identity.

Persian tarof, or ta'arof, shows how politeness can be culturally organized in ways that are hard to explain through English norms. It involves ritualized offering, refusing, insisting, and accepting. A host may offer something several times; a guest may refuse several times, even if the offer is desired. To an outsider, this may look indirect or confusing. Within the cultural system, however, it manages respect, humility, hospitality, and social distance.

Thai เกรงใจ, often romanized as kreng jai, expresses reluctance to impose on others, mixed with consideration, respect, and awareness of social burden. English "considerate" is close but incomplete. Kreng jai includes the internal hesitation one feels before asking for help, interrupting someone, or creating inconvenience.

Greek filotimo is another moral concept with no simple English equivalent. Literally connected with "love of honour," it refers to a person's sense of dignity, duty, generosity, gratitude, and moral responsibility. It is not just honour in the external sense of reputation. It is also an internal ethical impulse to do what is right.

These words show that cultural concepts often encode social expectations. They tell speakers not only what something means, but how one should behave.

Balance, Endurance, and Craft

Some concepts describe culturally valued attitudes toward life. Swedish lagom is commonly translated as "just enough," "not too much and not too little," or "just right." But lagom is more than moderation. It reflects a broader cultural preference for balance, appropriateness, and avoidance of excess. In English, "moderate" may sound restrained or even boring. Lagom has a more positive sense: enoughness as social and personal balance.

Finnish sisu is often translated as "grit," "determination," or "resilience." These are close, but sisu carries a specifically Finnish cultural association with endurance under pressure. It suggests the inner strength to continue when conditions are difficult and ordinary motivation is no longer enough.

Greek meraki refers to putting soul, care, creativity, and personal devotion into one's work. It is often used for cooking, art, craft, or any activity done with love

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and serious attention. English phrases such as "with passion" or "with heart" are possible, but meraki gives this attitude a compact cultural form.

These concepts are not merely descriptive. They are evaluative. They show what a culture admires: balance, endurance, care, restraint, or devotion.

Discussion

Why English Equivalents Are Not Enough

The difficulty of translating these concepts comes from several sources.

First, many of them are semantically dense. Saudade, hiraeth, thương, and firgun combine emotional elements that English usually separates. A translator must choose which part to foreground and which part to lose.

Second, many concepts are practice-based. Sobremesa, uitwaaien, tarof, hygge, and apapacho are understood through cultural routines. Without knowing the practice, the word remains incomplete.

Third, some concepts are moral frameworks rather than simple words. Ubuntu, kapwa, filotimo, and kreng jai express assumptions about selfhood, obligation, dignity, and social responsibility. Translating them as "community," "honour," or "politeness" flattens their meaning.

Fourth, some concepts are culturally valued attitudes. Lagom, sisu, and meraki are not neutral descriptions. They name qualities that speakers may admire, teach, or identify with.

This does not mean that English cannot explain them. English can explain anything through paraphrase, examples, and cultural context. The problem is that English often lacks a single ordinary word that activates the same network of associations. Therefore, the real issue is not absolute untranslatability, but loss of cultural density.

Conclusion

Cultural concepts that are difficult to explain in English reveal the close relationship between language, culture, and worldview. Words such as saudade, hiraeth, sobremesa, hygge, lagom, sisu, tarof, ubuntu, kapwa, firgun, apapacho, gezelligheid, and meraki are not just lexical curiosities. They are small cultural archives. Each word stores a way of feeling, behaving, relating, or judging that has become important enough to be named.

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The study also shows why online discussions about "untranslatable words" are useful but need academic caution. Speakers often give vivid and valuable explanations, but not every online example is reliable or appropriate for research. A researcher must filter, compare, contextualize, and avoid exoticizing other cultures.

The best conclusion is not that some words are impossible to translate. Rather, they require thick translation: explanation that includes language, situation, emotion, and cultural practice. In this sense, difficult cultural concepts remind us that translation is not only linguistic transfer. It is also cultural interpretation.

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