

# Introduction

**I**t is 1939 and two Finnish foot soldiers are pinned down in a battle during the war between Finland and Russia.

“We’re outnumbered,” one soldier says. “There must be over forty of them, and only two of us.”

“Dear God, it’ll take us all day to bury them!” exclaims the other.

Finnish people tell this story, along with a variety of others, to illustrate the national characteristic known as *sisu*. *Sisu*, says Professor Kate Remlinger, linguist at Grand Valley State University, is an untranslatable word, meaning something like a dogged and proud refusal to lie down and be beaten. “The way people talk is a reflection of their worldview, their history, and their upbringing,” she says, observing that the idea of *sisu* is so important to the Finns that, three generations after emigrating to the United



States of America, it continues to infuse local Michigan dialect and culture.

In the 1940s, Benjamin Lee Whorf introduced the theory that language proceeds from and shapes our cultural life in *Language, Thought, and Reality*. Whorf’s research into the speech and culture of the Hopi Indians, whose language, like Chinese, has no concept of tenses, started a wave of enquiry into the relationship between language and culture. Academics refer to this area of study as “sociolinguistics.” What emerges is not only the universal phenomenon that certain languages have “no word for X” – such as the widely held notion that the Inuit peoples have no word for “snow,” and the more significant fact that the Algonquin people have no word for “time” – but also, conversely, that languages, indeed whole cultures, have words, terms, and ideas that are simply untranslatable.

Of course we borrow words like mad when it suits us, when we have no equivalent in our own tongue. Modern languages are like archaeological digs once we begin to explore where many of our words in daily use come from. Brian Whitaker, the Middle Eastern correspondent of the British newspaper, *The Guardian*, once provided a list of some eighty common English words and asked which one was the odd man out:

admiral, alchemy, alcohol, alcove, algebra, algorithm, alkali, almanac, amalgam, aniline, apricot, arsenal, arsenic, artichoke, assassin, aubergine, azure, borax, cable, calibre, camphor, candy, cannabis, carafe, carat, caraway, checkmate, cipher, coffee, cotton, crimson, crocus, cumin, damask, elixir, gauze, gazelle, ghoul, giraffe, guitar, gypsum, hashish, hazard, jar, jasmine, lacquer, lemon, lilac, lime, lute, magazine, marzipan, massage, mattress, muslin, myrrh, nadir, orange, safari, saffron, samizdat, sash, sequin, serif, sesame, shackle, sherbet, shrub, sofa, spinach, sugar, sultana, syrup, talc, tamarind, tambourine, tariff, tarragon, zenith, zero.





The answer, of course, is *samizdat*, an untranslatable Russian word meaning “underground dissident writing.” The rest are all Arabic words that, during the seven centuries of Islamic occupation of Spain, Portugal, and parts of southern France, were equally untranslatable. Western mathematicians, for instance, had no idea of the concept of “zero” until Arab terminology gave it to them, along with *algebra* and *algorithm*. Arab astrologers taught us *zenith* and *nadir*, while *massage*, *sherbet*, *hashish*, and *sofa* introduced us to a sensuality of which God-fearing crusaders had never even dreamed.

But back to *samizdat* and our own times. When, in 1986, the then Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev announced the new policy of *perestroika* – the age of *glasnost* began and the age of *samizdat* ended. How else is one supposed to say this without several paragraphs of commentary on Russian cultural history? Of course we may agree on, “When the Soviet government introduced its program of economic and social reforms and relaxed its grip on freedom of speech, the period of underground dissident writing came to an end.” But does that language indicate the true flavor of the years of struggle toward democracy in Communist Russia? In those years, *samizdat* became a cultural phenomenon, representing rebellion and creativity, laced with danger and heroism. *Glasnost*, the idea of openness, was an almost unimaginable change when it came on the scene and, together with *perestroika*, was the harbinger of the end of Communism, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and repercussions that we are still living through today. All three terms have now entered English as concepts for which we had, and still have, no equivalent translation.

It is easy to imagine how confusion arises and even marvel how more doesn’t, especially in politics, when trying to cross an untranslatable gap. When Jiang Zemin, the Chinese president at that time, visited the United States of America in 1997, he caused a lot of fuss by suggesting that the idea of “democracy” originated 2,000 years ago with Chinese philosophers. Liberal American

commentators thought this absurd. But as Elvin Geng, a graduate in Asian Studies, points out:

The word *minzhu* first appeared in a classic work called *Shuji* where it referred to a benevolent “ruler of the people,” that is, a leader whose legitimacy rests on the people’s welfare. Those who ruled by force and oppression, in contrast, were not given this title.

In the late nineteenth century, *minzhu* was the word used to translate “democracy” – in Chinese, the one term can mean “rule of the people” as well as “ruler of the people.”

Both uses of *minzhu* share the sense that the government ought to operate to meet the needs of the people. This criterion may be fulfilled by an enlightened dictator or a Leninist regime as well as by a U.S.-style constitutional democracy.

From words that mean something quite different, to words that don’t exist. No word for “snow” in the Inuktitut language of the Alaskan region? The truth is there are too many words, shades of meaning that a generic word cannot quantify. Just as in English we have snowstorm, flurry, drift, bank, flake, and fall.

Perhaps more of a concern is that the Japanese language apparently has no word for “water.” Or more precisely, *mizu*, the word for water, actually means “cold water” as opposed to *oyu*, “hot water.” It’s possible that, for the Japanese, hot and cold water must be so different that they cannot be grouped under the same word. You might just as well say, as Alice’s Mad Hatter argued, that there is no resemblance between hot coffee and cold coffee. Come to think of it, maybe the Japanese are on to something.

We suppose that most experiences are common and translatable between different cultures, but this simply isn’t so.





Take a closer look at the word “dreaming.” What are we to make of the fact that languages such as Spanish and Italian have the same noun for “sleep” as for “dream,” while others, like French and English, differentiate between the two? Do some nations sleep differently from others? What we mean by “dreaming” is plainly not the same as what the speakers of Aranda, an indigenous language of central Australia, mean when they say *aljerre*. For Indigenous Australians, dreaming is a vital way of holding the created world together. British author Bruce Chatwin writes, “Aboriginal myths tell of the legendary totemic beings who wandered across the country in the Dreamtime . . . singing the world into existence.” If a tribe’s Keeper of the Dreaming fails to carry out his or her “dreaming” task, walking the songlines that put the world together, the Earth as we know it will come to an end.

We would have the same difficulty trying to get an Irishman to say “yes” or “no.” If you have ever wondered why those Irish plays are full of replies such as “It is,” “I do,” and “I am not,” it is because the Irish tongue simply does not have the words “yes” and “no.” Does it? It does not. Do you think this is strange? I do. Are you perplexed? Indeed I am.

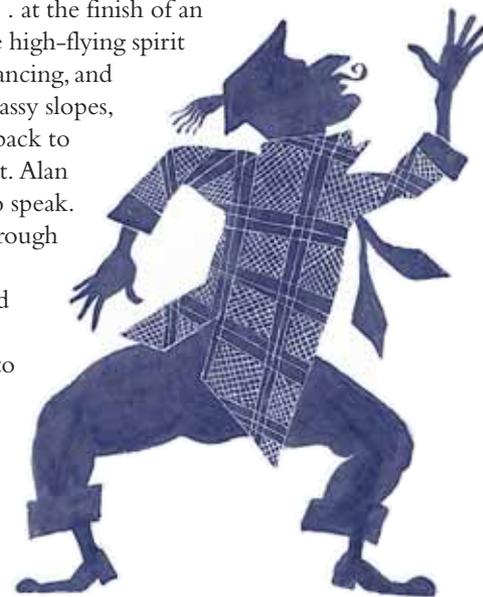
When we get into information technology, of course, the entire world bows to English – “Internet,” “Web,” “surf,” “click” – transmogrified into local forms such as *surfer* (French) and *surfear* (Spanish), *cliquer* and *cliquear*. An earlier generation had the same problem with “telephone.” When the Arabic language, for instance, had to choose between the pure and poetic *al-hatijf*, a classical word meaning, literally, “the invisible caller” or the more blatant borrowing *al-talafoon*, the latter naturally went on to become the everyday word.

With unbridgeable gaps at such a basic level, how much more untranslatable are higher insights or realizations attained only through a lifetime’s discipline and practice? Experiences on this level are no longer commonplace and most of us can only guess at their meaning. An example is *e-ma-ho*, an untranslatable Tibetan word expressing the sense of wonder and awe that arises

when one truly comes to know reality. Oriental philosophy and spirituality are full of such terms, creating a huge problem for the translators of Eastern texts. Alan Watts, the great exponent of Taoism in the West, spent a lifetime trying to get across the concepts of the Tao and, in writing his last book, tried for one last time to break through the barrier of untranslatability by literally renouncing the attempt to explain Taoism intellectually. His friend and collaborator Al Chung-Liang Huang remembers:

During our last semester . . . at the finish of an afternoon session when the high-flying spirit had set everyone smiling, dancing, and rolling up and down the grassy slopes, Alan and I started to walk back to the lodge, feeling exuberant. Alan turned to me and started to speak. I noticed a sudden breakthrough in his expression, a look of lightness and glow appeared all around him. Alan had discovered a different way to tell me of his feelings: “Yah . . . Ha . . . Ho . . . Ha! Ho . . . La Cha Om Ha . . . Deg deg te te . . . Ta de de ta te ta . . . Ha te te Ha hom . . . Te Te Te. . .”

We gibbered and danced all the way up the hill. Everyone around understood what we were saying. Alan knew, too, that he had never – not in all his books – said it any better than that.



If only it were as easy to get across the idea behind the English word “cool.” Cool is universally just cool, man.

