

Western European Languages

Europe is a continent now dedicated to the very principle of “living together” – a plain and easily translatable notion, one would have thought. But in reality this simple idea wends its way through many different meanings, connotations, and associations across the continent.

The various takes on the idea of “living together” across European languages throw into relief the difficulties of translating an idea that may have hugely diverse implications in different cultures. In Britain, for example, where an Englishman’s house is his castle and it is possible to live for years without knowing your neighbors, the phrase “living together” refers without ambiguity to the domestic arrangement of unmarried couples. But how do we translate that particular meaning in Spain, a country where unmarried couples represent a relatively new phenomenon in post-Franco society?

In Spain, the word *convivencia* alludes to “living together with others,” the quality of a society where citizens get along by practicing tolerance and mutual respect. In this sense, it comes close to meaning a “civic culture,” a notion that Britons would struggle to come to terms with.

Perhaps the English term “cohabit” might help to shed some light on the problem? Perhaps not. Cross to France and *cohabitation* has a very specific political use, meaning a coalition in government between normally irreconcilable parties who are making an effort to exercise power together. As for personal cohabitation, French gives us the nice old expression *être marié de la main gauche*, but in their abstractly precise way they also have the modern provisions of the *loi du concubinage* for unmarried

couples “living together.” It goes without saying that if you called a woman a “concubine” in Britain, it would not be very well received.

Germany throws its hat in the ring with the word *zusammenleben*. Differing from the much warmer Spanish *convivencia*, the *zusammenleben* idea of “living together” is a more pragmatic notion of “getting along” in your family or in the community. Again, like the Spanish, it has nothing to do with actually living with someone, which is expressed most soulfully and emotionally by *Lebensgefährte* or *Lebensgefährtin*, “the one who travels life’s road with you.” However, times being what



they are, and relationships more transient, a commonly heard term nowadays is *Lebensabschnittsgefährte* – “a bit of life companion.” Only German, with its processional word joining, could come up with such a creation!

These days in Holland *samenwonen*, “living together,” is a neutral term in every sense, but only a generation ago unmarried couples were said to *hokken*, literally, “live in a pigpen together.”





And what of *verzuijing*, a much used word in the Dutch idea of living together? This literally means “compartmentalization” but refers to the highly complex system in Dutch society that allows every minority shade of opinion to be represented and create its own space. This right to one’s own space is exercised in all aspects of society: political parties, schools, and so on, creating a patchwork system that for the outsider, or incomer, is very hard to understand.

Moving south to explore the Italian view of “living together,” we find that the concept of “partnership” is impossible to express in Italian without much circumlocution. Robert Ardrey, a popular writer on anthropology, once described how Italian society worked through the mechanism of *nodi*, which literally means “knots.” *Nodi* are the ties that connect you, and traditionally this means blood ties. In practical terms, if you want to get something done in Italy, like having a new telephone connection installed, it helps if you know someone who knows someone who has an uncle or a cousin in the telephone company. Then you go along with your intermediary and meet the uncle or the cousin in order to explain your problem. After this, your new phone line (for which you have been waiting at least six months) is installed within the week. Ardrey argues that the idea of the common good is practically unknown in Italy, and that Italian society is made up of individuals whose moral values belong first and foremost to families.

In a nice illustration of this *familismo*, the importance of families, David Bond, writing in *English Learning and Languages Review*, describes playing a game with an international group of friends, all living and working in a foreign country at the time. The idea was for each member of the group to think up one word that for them summed up their faraway homeland.

My Italian friend, Saverio, had no doubts. His word, pronounced with dramatic emphasis and not the slightest hesitation, was *tavola*. The thought of an Englishman, or even an Englishwoman, far from

home, murmuring “table” to him or herself in a tone of wistful longing in the small wee hours of the morning was totally ludicrous. Yet I knew exactly what Saverio meant . . . Table has implications for an Italian, and in Italian, that it does not have for the English or in English. It speaks of aspects of family life and of good fellowship, of mealtimes both as rituals and as celebrations, of a whole world of food-preparation and kitchen conversation and of all sorts of other things that only an Italian could justly describe. The word for Saverio conjured up a whole universe.

And what was the word that for Bond himself summed up his homeland? His spontaneous choice was the word “privacy,” an almost diametrically opposed notion of “living together.” Back to the castle.



French

For many, learning French is plagued by the awareness that however something is expressed in English, inevitably it will come out quite the opposite in French. So the English “taking French leave” results predictably in the Gallic tongue as *filer à l’anglaise*. “Walking up and down” emerges as *marcher de bas en haut*. And so on.

French, as we will see, is an international language spoken in Belgium, Switzerland, and Canada, quite apart from a host of African and Caribbean countries where it also feeds into Creole and pidgin varieties. Once the universal tongue of refined society and diplomacy, French is also full of richly vulgar and untranslatable slang that can stop foreigners in their tracks. What are we to make of *Il a le cul bordé de nouilles*, literally, “His backside is fringed with noodles”? Would you imagine for a moment that this describes someone who is incredibly lucky? Here are some other Gallicisms that defy translation.

chichi [shee shee] (adjective)

English has borrowed this sweet-sounding word as a qualified adjective – we always say, “It’s *a bit chichi*” – suggesting something that is “fussily decorated,” rather “twée” in style, and reminiscent of the camp world of *La Cage aux Folles*. It’s a perfect word for describing someone’s interior *décor* that has been arrived at with great effort but with no taste. In the original French, however, *chichi* is a noun meaning more or less “a fuss,” and *chercher des chichis* means “to look for unnecessary complications in something.”

horripiler [orr-ee-pee-lay] (verb)

Untranslatable only in its wonderful brevity, this ghostly sounding word derived straight from the Latin *horrere pilus* means “to make your hair stand on end.”

rire jaune [reer johne] (idiom)

Literally, “to laugh yellowly,” this expression is full of nuances that are hard to translate. As in other cultures, yellow is not a positive color in French, but *un jaune* doesn’t mean “a coward” as in English, but rather “a traitor.” Yellow is the color of Judas. To *rire jaune* is therefore to give a laugh that betrays your true feelings – a forced or insincere laugh. It betrays you in trying to betray the other.

esprit de l’escalier [es-pree de less-kal-iy] (idiom)

A witty remark that occurs to you too late, literally on the way down the stairs. *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* defines *esprit de l’escalier* as, “An untranslatable phrase, the meaning of which is that one only thinks on one’s way downstairs of the smart retort one might have made in the drawing room.”

une quine-mine [oohn keen-meen] (noun)

This is a mocking gesture made by placing your thumb on one cheek and flapping the open hand. Not to be practiced by innocents abroad, for fear of the consequences.

sans-culottes [sonh ku-lott] (idiom)

Literally, “without breeches,” this is the name given to a political movement that played a significant role in the French Revolution and in later social reform movements. In my youthful reading of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, I was always puzzled as to why sections of the French public walked around with no breeches on. So to explain, the term refers



to a disparate social group made up of artisans, shopkeepers, and lower middle-class republicans who were united only in their hatred of the rich. The name came from the fact that the better-off members refused to wear breeches, which were associated with the aristocracy, and instead went about in trousers, the traditional dress of the working man.

la pedze [lah pedz] (adjective)

Coming from the Swiss patois word for “resin” or “glue,” this descriptive word refers to someone who stays too long in one place, or to someone who cannot drag themselves from the table after a meal, and especially to a guest who long overstays his welcome. “*C’est la pedze!*”

terroir [terr-wah] (noun)

One cannot speak of untranslatable French culture without a nod to viticulture, itself a profoundly mysterious business, full of nuances and shades. *Terroir*, Christina Waters tells us, is “what informs the bouquet and flavor notes of wines . . . a heady confluence of elements that taken together inform the final product. The term indicates that mixture of soil, climate, temperature, geographical location (e.g. longitude, latitude, altitude), possibly even lunar cycle which express themselves in the finished product. Here culture and agriculture meet in the sensory signature of a glass of wine.” It could not be said more simply.

demi-monde [de-mee monhd] (noun)

A half world, hidden from the mainstream and usually kept secret. It can describe a group of people on the political or legal margins of society, and is particularly used to describe prostitutes and kept women. The Japanese term for this is “the floating world,” as described by Kazuo Ishiguro in his novel of the same name.

avoir la molle [a-vwah lah moll] (idiom)

“To have the molle” is a Swiss idiom that refers to a kind of heavy lethargy that residents along Lake Geneva (*Lac*

Léman) regularly suffer from. It invades them with a listless unwillingness to do any work. Whether the complaint is purely climatic or has something to do with the “day after” feeling that follows a feast day is kept deliberately ambiguous. In local language *une patte-molle*, meaning “a soft foot” is someone with no energy or character – certainly not the common image of the Swiss!

bête noire [bett nwahr] (noun)

This vivid expression, literally meaning “black beast,” is used all around the world to indicate something or someone that is especially detestable. It can also mean a scapegoat and has a certain frankness and boldness, calling a spade a spade.

enfant terrible [onh-fonh terr-ee-bler] (noun)

This sounds as if it should mean a “dreadful child” but the phrase nowadays has little or nothing to do with children. It means someone who extravagantly defies convention, usually arising out of a cultural group or movement where the person has a provocative role. Jean Cocteau’s 1929 novel *Les Enfants Terribles* describes an adolescent boy confined to a bedroom on account of a head injury, playing out a world of surrealist fantasies with his sister as they become more and more obsessed with each other. Twenty years later, casting convention to the winds, Jean-Pierre Melville’s groundbreaking film of the book is thought to have set the tone for the radical student movements of the Sixties. Both Cocteau and Melville were clearly *enfants terribles*.

intellectuel [anh-tell-ect-u-ell] (noun)

Linguists have a term for words known as “false friends.” These are words that seem to translate with no problem and then turn out to have quite different associations in another culture. Graham Dunstan Martin points out the untranslatability of the seemingly transparent *intellectuel*. To the French, this word embodies admiration. In British and American culture, anything that smacks of being “clever” is

regarded with suspicion. Equally, he says, “there’s no French word for ‘clever’ with just that note of contempt . . . and a sense of not having one’s feet on ordinary solid ground . . . Clever, yes, but not solid or reliable, is the implication.”

jolie-laide [*jol-ee-layd*] (idiom)

Only the French would have such a way to describe beauty. A wonderful slang expression, it literally means “pretty and ugly” but describes the type of feminine beauty that is human, and not manufactured by plastic surgeons. It’s a kind of fascinating quirkiness implying charisma, a face you want to keep looking at, even if you can’t decide whether it is beautiful or not.

froufrou [*froo-froo*] (adjective)

A rustling, especially that of a woman’s skirt, one of the nicest onomatopoeic words around. This lovely word evokes the whole *risqué* world of *thés dansants*, *soirées intimes*, and that institution of the discreet venue, the *chambre séparée*. There is no way to imagine these delights other than in French.



pièce de résistance [*pee-ess de ray-ziss-tonss*] (idiom)

This idiom literally means “a piece of stamina,” and it originally referred to the main course of a dinner – the test

of your stomach’s stamina. In both languages, it now describes an outstanding accomplishment or the final part of something, whether a work of art, a project, or a meal.

métro-boulot-dodo [*me-tro boo-lo doh-doh*] (idiom)

A star among phrases for an untranslatable succinctness that sums up a pointless existence (subway, work, sleep). The full line of the original poem titled *Couleurs d’usine* by Pierre Béarn is even more eloquent:

Métro boulot bistrots mégots dodo zéro
“Subway work bars fags sleep nothing”

laissez-faire [*lay-say fahr*] (adjective)

This term, with its roots in nineteenth-century trade and politics, has come to suggest any liberal attitude bordering on permissiveness. “He’s a bit *laissez-faire* with his children,” one might say of a parent who allows a free rein. While the original sense expressed not much more than a kind of noninterventionism, maybe nowadays there is more than a hint of disapproval in the term, a suggestion of indifference.

glauque [*glohke*] (noun)

The French language has a bountiful supply of color words, including many literary terms where the true meaning is more or less lost. Among my favorites is the atmospherically nasty *glauque*, a word that used to mean “sea-green” but has acquired a kind of unhealthy troubling quality. Jean Cocteau is reputed to have said of the Russian ballet master Diaghilev that he had “*un regard glauque, un regard d’huitre*,” that is, “the eye of an oyster.” I think that says it all.

sang-froid [*sonh-frwah*] (noun)

The English expression “in cold blood” does not come close to the French meaning of *sang-froid*, which is an ability to maintain one’s cool. Most often used to describe someone able to perform under great pressure or in great danger, it refers to cold-blooded animals that can stay motionless for long periods of time.

German

Here is a language with more than its fair share of untranslatable terms. In areas such as philosophy and psychology, German culture has often led the way, giving us ideas from *Gestalt* to *Weltanschauung*. German philosophical literature is full of powerful and pithy sentences, such as German dramatist, Gottold Lessing's famous dictum, "*Niemand muss müssen*," literally "No-one must 'must.'" German poetry, too, is among the most intense and untranslatable in the world. In short, it seems that German thought and language is an amazing mixture of technical precision and soulful ineffability, which sparks off a rich creativity in concepts.

But there is at least one basic and practical reason for German's neologistic tendencies – its limitless capacity for creating new terms by joining a whole lot of old words together. Words of this compound type can be richly expressive, and here are some other untranslatable products of the imaginative German mind.

doppelgänger [dop-ple-geng-er] (noun)

Literally a "double goer," the *Doppelgänger* of legend was one's ghostly shadow-self. This spooky creature lurked at your rear, cast no reflection, and only you could see it. The English got hold of the word in the mid-nineteenth century and set about bastardizing it. Nowadays, it's more or less synonymous with "lookalike."

torschlusspanik [toor-shloos-pahn-ik] (noun)

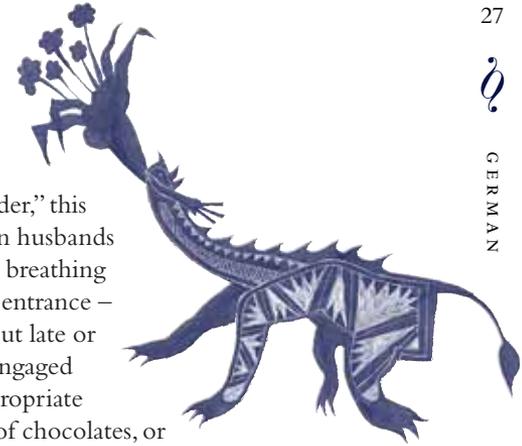
This word is literally translated as "door-shutting panic" and it captures the anxiety sometimes felt by unmarried females when they see the shelf and themselves on it. Once upon a time, the sensation could grip one as young as twenty-one, but with today's career-focused women deciding to delay childbirth, *Torschlusspanik* now refers more commonly to the race against the biological clock.

drachenfutter

[drack-uhn-foot-er]

(noun)

Meaning "dragon fodder," this is the offering German husbands make to their wives – breathing raging fire at the cave entrance – when they've stayed out late or they have otherwise engaged in some kind of inappropriate behavior. A nice box of chocolates, or some flowers, perhaps to mask the beer fumes.



schadenfreude [shar-den-froi-da] (noun)

A compound word consisting of *Schaden* meaning "damage" and *Freude* meaning "joy." This is a dirty, cackle-rousing kind of happiness derived from someone else's misfortune. We're all disgustingly guilty of enjoying this emotion at some time or other.

zeitgeist [zeyt-geyst] (noun)

The "spirit of the time" is much easier to define in retrospect. Fashion designers do their best to capture it in decor; newspaper columnists attempt to sum it up; politicians strive to capitalize on it. In reality, only seriously hip celebrities manage the ultimate – to surf the *Zeitgeist*.

korinthenkacker [core-in-ten-cuck-er] (noun)

A "raisin pooper" – that is, someone so taken up with life's trivial detail that they spend all day crapping raisins. You can spot these types a mile off – it's that irritating pen pusher or filing fanatic whose favorite job is tidying up the stationery cupboard.

gemüt [gem-ooht] (noun)

Many visitors to Germany have come across the proudly claimed adjective *gemütlich*, often translated as "cozy," "snug,"

and “comfortable.” Although, to judge from their tourist brochures, the Viennese would like to make the term all their own, *Gemütlichkeit* remains a widely familiar German concept. Harder, if not impossible, to translate, is the root word *Gemüt* with its elusive variety of meanings around the notions of soul, mind, heart, feeling, disposition, nature, and turn of mind. There are a number of good phrases such as *Er hat kein Gemüt* – “he has no feelings,” or “he is heartless”; *das deutsche Gemüt* – “the German mentality”; and *ein schlichtes Gemüt* – “a simple soul.” From the same elusive root we get *gemütskrank* – “mentally or emotionally disturbed”; *Gemütsruhe* – “peace of mind”; and *gemütsvoll* – “full of feeling, emotional, warmhearted, sentimental.” To discover its roots, let’s hark back to the impoverished period directly after the Napoleonic wars, when simple pleasures were especially valued in Germany. Imagine a man of later years in a comfortable armchair, accessorized by pipe, slippers, and a warm fire – that’s the heart of *gemütlich*.

geisterfahrer [guy-ste-fah-rer] (noun)

A compound term again, literally “ghost-driver,” meaning a driver who mysteriously appears on the wrong side of the road. While admiring the inventiveness of the word, we may wonder why this phenomenon seems so common on German roads and autobahns?

schnapszahl [shnapp-tzahl] (noun)

This is a number that has some striking pattern, whether a date or any combination of figures with an unexpected symmetry. An example would be someone’s birthdate being 04-04-44, a palindromic date such as 03-11-30, or a price tag on a garment of 19.91 Euros. No suggestion of luck seems intended.

bildungsroman [bill-dungs-roh-mahn] (noun)

This compound word derives from *Bildung*, “education,” and *Roman*, “novel.” It describes a typically German type of novel, such as Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, which explores a

character’s inner development in all its aspects: moral, spiritual, intellectual, and psychological.

politologie [poll-ee-toll-ogh-ee-er] (noun)

The study of politics, literally, “politology,” a term that ought to exist in English, but doesn’t. Instead we have the oddly termed “political science,” which suggests either that science can be politicized, or that politics can be scientific. Either proposition is rather worrying.

nesthocker [nest-hok-er] (noun)

This word was originally a biological sciences word used when observing the behavior of birds leaving the nest to fly. More recently, it has come to refer to a person who stays at home, rather than moving out and finding their own feet – the thirty-eight-year-old who is still living at home with Mom and Dad.



weltschmerz [velt-shmairtz] (noun)

This is a compound word consisting of *Welt*, meaning “world,” and *Schmerz*, meaning “pain.” Just as your head can hurt (*Kopfschmerzen*), or you can suffer from a stomachache, (*Magenschmerzen*), so the world can hurt too. In its mildest form, this is “world-weariness.” At the other extreme, it’s an existential pain that leaves you reeling with a damaging, head-clutching despair.

Italian

To Italians, the best-known poem of modern times was written by Giuseppe Ungaretti in 1917 – perhaps best known because it is the easiest for schoolchildren to remember, as it is only seven syllables long. It is called *Mattino* (Morning):

M'illumino d'immenso

It means, literally, “I am illumined by the immense.” And what does this completely untranslatable work of literature tell us? Absolutely nothing, except to illustrate vividly that what is lost in translation *is* the poetry. As illustrated in the following sample of words, the Italians are certainly expressive and poetic in their untranslatables.



ristretto [ree-strett-oh] (noun)

Italy is the country of coffee, and *il ristretto* is the coffee of choice for any self-respecting coffee snob. Stronger than a traditional espresso, a *ristretto* is a double mix of the first, strong half of a traditional espresso pour. It's also the technical term for that tiny little china cup of thick black coffee, set on the counter with a glass of water, that Italians drink standing at the bar, especially on their way to work. The atmosphere is more silent than at any other time of day, because this absurdly small shot of coffee is the Italian starter motor. Following it, the frantic energetic Italy that we know and love bursts into daily life. If you are in Italy just ask for *un caffè* to participate in this ritual.

castrato [kass-trah-toh] (noun)

The language of music remains eternally Italian and every musical score tells us so, with its marginal terms of expression and performance. This word, literally, “a eunuch,” no longer refers to a physical condition but rather to the quality of a singing voice that for centuries was an integral part of the highest musical tradition in Italy and beyond. Castration allowed the pure sound of a boy's voice to be preserved into adulthood. *Castrati* were still used in the Sistine Chapel choirs in Rome up until 1880 when Pope Leo XIII banned the practice.

attaccabottoni [at-tac-ca-bot-own-ee] (noun)

This is a bore who “buttonholes” you and tells you long tales of woe. You long to escape from an *attaccabottoni*, but somehow it's always difficult to get away.

magari [mag-ah-ree] (noun)

A rich and positive word with multiple uses and sprinkled everywhere in conversation. It is strongly evocative of the ebullient Italian spirit, meaning anything from “even if” to “Rather!” or “You bet!” It has a wonderfully affirmative value, even when expressing no more than a fervent wish such as *Magari fosse vero!* – “If only it were true!”

casomai [kaz-oh-mye] (adverb)

An elusive Italian adverb or conjunction meaning anything from “should it be that,” “perhaps,” or “if” to “just in case” or “in the eventuality.” The Italian director Alessandro D'Alatri used the word as a title for his 2002 film about the uncertainties facing a young couple beginning married life.

mettere in piazza [meh-tear-er een pee-aht-zah] (idiom)

Literally, “to put it out in the town square,” this phrase summons a vivid picture of a couple colorfully and loudly airing their most intimate and private secrets in the most public place possible. Such an action captures both the fiery Italian spirit and setting, and the idea collides forcefully with keeping arguments behind closed doors.

Dutch

The Netherlands is home to the usual clichés – windmills, dikes, butter, bicycles, tulips, overboiled vegetables – but, among all these, an eminently practical and sensible people unfairly known elsewhere in Europe as “cheeseheads” because of their high consumption of dairy products. The Dutch language itself is home to a hundred skating expressions that may or may not be metaphors for life, such as *Hij heeft een scheve schaats gereden* “He’s been skating on one side,” and lots of plainspoken sayings, like *De molen gaat niet om met wind die voorbij is* – “The windmill doesn’t care for the wind that’s gone past.” The following examples show only too clearly that the Dutch have a very particular and often unpronounceable way of going about things.

uitwaaien [oot-vay-en] (verb)

A most useful and attractive verb meaning “to walk in the wind for fun.” It conjures up a charming image of eighteenth-century Dutch landscape paintings.



de doofpot [der doof-pott] (noun)

Literally, “the extinguisher,” this is a common Dutch response to any type of scandal that urges everyone to look the other way so that the whole thing is forgotten and dies without a trace. The British demonstrate a similar instinct in their saying “let sleeping dogs lie,” but in the Netherlands, *de doofpot* could come across as more of a national consensus policy.

uitbuiken [oot-book-en] (verb)

Another “enjoyment” verb like *uitwaaien*, but this time based on the word for stomach, *buik*, meaning “to take your time at dinner, relaxing between courses.” A nicely untranslatable extension of this meaning was recently created in a newspaper headline just before Christmas, wishing everyone *Spiritueel Uitbuiken* – literally “spiritual expansiveness of stomach.” It summed up that real Christmas feeling, or *gezelligheid*, of being together in a feeling of peace and unity between people. With a full stomach, of course.

krentenkakker [kren-ten-kak-er] (noun)

Just so we don’t mix up our Dutch with our German, this is the same word as the German *Korinthenkacker* (“raisin crapper”), but in Holland it means someone who doesn’t like spending money. I’m afraid the equivalent to the German *Korinthenkacker* is expressed somewhat more graphically in Dutch as *mierenneuker* – “ant f--ker.”

gezellig [chayz-ell-ich] (adjective)

This word is reportedly found a dozen times a day on Dutch lips. In its essence perhaps it just means anything “typically Dutch,” which by extension means anything good, from “having a fun time” to “cozy” to “homely.” Eating *oliebollen*, which are fried dough balls with raisins, on New Year’s Eve is apparently very *gezellig*. Beyond that it is hard to get a Dutch person to be more precise!

onderbuik [on-der-book] (noun)

This word literally translates as the “underbelly” and from this sense we also get *de onderbuik van de samenleving* – “the lowest” or even “criminal classes of society.” But it seems only Dutch people get *onderbuikgevoelens*, which evokes these connotations to translate as “underbelly feelings.” This word is mainly used to express politically incorrect or socially unacceptable sentiments. Dutch politicians have sometimes been accused of appealing to *onderbuikgevoelens* on the issue of immigration, for instance.

Spanish

Looking at modern Spanish, we still find the huge influence of the Arabic language, dating from the centuries of Islamic occupation. We also have to take into account the regional dialects and languages of Gallego, Catalan, Basque, not to mention *caló* (gypsy), while the enormous variety of Latin American local terms from Chile to Mexico is a study in itself. How do we translate the simple word *chango* when the *Dictionary of the Real Academia* tells us that it has some eight different meanings, from “elegant man” to “shopping trolley,” depending on where you are in the continent?

San Francisco radio journalist Rose del Castillo Guilbault, reveals that sometimes translation and the adoption of words results in an unhappy corruption of meaning. She describes the meaning of “macho” for herself, coming from a Mexican background, in contrast with the image of this word in American culture.

“What is macho?” That depends on which side of the border you come from. Although it’s not unusual for words and expressions to lose their subtlety in translation, the negative connotations of “macho” in the United States are troublesome to Hispanics. “*Es muy macho*,” the women in my family [in Mexico] nod approvingly, describing a man they respect. But in the United States, when women say, “He’s so macho,” it’s with disdain. The Hispanic *macho* is manly, responsible, hardworking, a man in charge, a patriarch. A man who expresses strength through silence. What the Yiddish language would call a *mensch*. The American “macho” is a



chauvinist, a brute, uncouth, selfish, loud, abrasive, capable of inflicting pain, and sexually promiscuous. Quintessential “macho” models in America are Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Charles Bronson. In their movies, they exude toughness, independence, masculinity. But a closer look reveals their “machismo” is really violence masquerading as courage, sullenness disguised as silence, and irresponsibility camouflaged as independence. If the Hispanic ideal of *macho* were translated to American screen roles, they might be Jimmy Stewart, Sean Connery, and Laurence Olivier.

Spanish has also given us the untranslatable world of Latin American dance – not just “dancing” as we know it, but dance where everything hangs out in the abandonment to rhythm and music. *Flamenco* is forever *flamenco*, but the recent popularity of *salsa*, *samba*, *rumba*, *mambo*, *cha-cha*, and *marengue* illustrates the intensity of our search for the antidote to Freudian inhibitions. Who needs analysis if you can salsa the night away without falling over? Most of these dances have no equivalent in other tongues, and some, like the intense *tango*, are more than mere dances, but cultural zones in their own right, infused with their own narratives, vocabulary, mood, color, and following.

Here are a few terms that capture something of the untranslatable vitality, variety, and wonder of Spanish culture.

duende [dwen-day] (adjective)

This wonderful word captures an entire world of passion, energy, and artistic excellence and describes a climactic show of spirit in a performance or work of art. *Duende* originally meant “imp” or “goblin” and came to mean anything magical. It now has a depth and complexity of meaning that crosses artistic borders, from flamenco dancing to bullfighting. The Spanish poet García Lorca wrote an eloquent essay on *duende* that explores the complex and inspirational flavor of its sense, and I know no better introduction.

aquejarre [ak-ell-arr-ay] (noun)

A Spanish borrowing from Basque, a tongue that is itself a linguistic puzzle, bearing absolutely no relation to other European languages. The original Basque word *akelarre* means “the meadow of the male goat,” and the word refers to a nighttime gathering of a coven of witches, in a suitably rustic area, to invoke the presence of the devil, who normally participates as a male goat. Well, he would, wouldn't he!

cutre [koo-tray] (adjective)

This expressive adjective describes anything that is not to your taste, everything from a bar, a street, a hotel, clothing, to furniture. However, the word expresses not just bad taste or over-the-top taste (the Spanish also use the word *kitsch*) but anything foreign to your own liking or standards. “Tacky” might be the closest English slang gets to this word, but even this misses the disdain with which a Spanish girl might say of her boyfriend, ¡*Qué regalo más cutre me dió!*

chungo [tchun-goh] (adjective)

From the gypsy word for “ugly” and meaning generally “pretty bad.” No translation can get across this word's almost comic sense of disaster. Here's a Spanish joke that illustrates the difference between *bueno*, *malo*, and *chungo* (“good,” “bad,” and “chungo”) through a number of life situations:

Bueno: Your wife is pregnant.

Malo: It's triplets.

Chungo: You had a vasectomy two years ago.

Bueno: Your wife hardly speaks.

Malo: She wants a divorce.

Chungo: She's a lawyer.

paseo [pass-ay-oh] (noun)

The time of evening when the heat of the sun is diminishing and the *siesta* is over is the moment of the *paseo*. It is the time when the Spanish dress themselves and their children up to the nines and go out to walk around the main square, or up

and down the shade of avenues. It's a time of meeting and looking, seeing and being seen. Late on summer nights, after the *cena*, the same gentle ambling takes place until well after midnight, with small children often, by that time, dozing on their parent's shoulders.

gilipollas [chee-lee-poll-yass] (adjective)

This is another word of gypsy origin, that at its root means “innocent” in the sense of “born yesterday.” It has become a rich-sounding insult for anyone behaving stupidly and irresponsibly, from bad drivers to thoughtless youth in the streets. ¡*Qué gilipollas!*

mañana [mann-yah-nah] (noun)

We translate this common word into English as “tomorrow,” the day that follows today, but there is a strong possibility that in most parts of the Spanish-speaking world, *mañana* refers to some other indefinite and untranslatable time concept related to the future. It compares well with the Arabic word *bukra*.

pícaro [pee-ka-roh] (noun, adjective)

This word has wide and colorful associations. Students of Spanish literature come across *la picaresca* as a style of novel, a kind of episodic storywriting usually involving criminals drifting through society, well-illustrated by Cervantes's *Don Quijote*. The typical *pícaro* is one who lives off his wits in order to survive. *La picaresca* summons up a whole tapestry of human life at its most inventive, ingenious, and resilient. *Pícaro* can mean smart, astute, clever, cunning, mischievous, naughty, shameless, wicked, saucy, impudent, lustful, roguish, dishonorable, bold, daring, racy, brazen, or cheeky. It practically sums up the human condition!



Portuguese

The Portuguese people are renowned for their warmth and friendliness, so it would be unkind to repeat the impression that speaking Portuguese is just like speaking Spanish but with your mouth full of toffee. But when did any of us last have to speak Portuguese? Like the Greeks, the Portuguese have had to learn other languages to communicate with the outside world, beyond their old colonies, of course. However, a friend of mine who for sheer love studied the language for years was finally vindicated when we were once lost in Beirut and the only person around to tell us the way turned out to be a Portuguese speaker without a word of English.

The Portuguese, among the greatest sailors and explorers of the sixteenth century, left magnificent traces of their culture all over the world, from the depths of the South American rainforest, to the islands and coasts of the China Sea. From Manaus to Macao, their colonial style was one of elegance and grandeur. And regardless of what you may think of the global importance of Portuguese culture, it must be said that it takes a certain self-confidence to build an opera house halfway up the Amazon!

saudade [sow-dah-day] (noun)

A kind of intense nostalgia that only Portuguese people are supposed to understand. In Katherine Vaz's definition, which she uses to explain the title of her novel *Saudade*, it is a "yearning so intense for those who are missing, or for vanished times or places, that absence is the most profound presence in one's life. A state of being, rather than merely a sentiment." In his 1912 book on Portugal, literary specialist and translator A. F. G. Bell writes:

The famous *saudade* of the Portuguese is a vague and constant desire for something that does not and probably cannot exist, for something other than the

present, a turning towards the past or towards the future; not an active discontent or poignant sadness but an indolent dreaming wistfulness.

fado [fah-doh] (noun)

Portuguese song is full of *saudade*, and none more so than the tradition known as *fado* – a culture not just of song but of a deep and sad romanticism that wells up from the soul. The songwriter and poet Nick Cave has commented that we all experience the Portuguese feeling of *saudade*. He sees this intense yearning as the breeding ground for the *fado* love song tradition.



se virar [say vee-rah] (verb)

From Brazilian Portuguese, this literally means "to empty" but is used to describe when you try to do something but you don't have enough knowledge to complete the task.

fora do pinico, mijar [foh-rah doh pin-ee-coh, mee-jahr] (idiom)

Brazilian Portuguese is colorful in its *gíria* or slang. The late Carlos Lacerda, a journalist and former governor, noted that, "Brazil is the only country in the world where practically every word is a cussword – even mother." Literally meaning "to pee outside the pisspot," in English this means "to miss the target," or "to say the wrong thing."