




## White Paper

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# Untranslatable Words

Language is incredible. It can express emotion, no matter how specific the emotions and circumstances. It can even represent a clear description of something or someone in just a single word. Here are some examples of terms that cannot be translated into one word English, taken from countries all around the world. Click each word to hear how they are pronounced.

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## ***Hyppytyynytydytys* (Finnish) – bouncy cushion satisfaction**

To start off this list with a bang (or bounce), perhaps the most entertaining expression comes from Finland, Northern Europe: [hyppytyynytydytys](#). Firstly, this isn't the result of someone falling asleep on the keyboard. In actual fact, this Finnish word quite literally means, 'bouncy cushion satisfaction'. It describes the pleasure and satisfaction derived from sitting or bouncing on an especially springy pillow.

There are particular sounds which we naturally use to reflect feelings of comfort, humour, relief, stress, and so on, which can't always be expressed with words. However, in this case, many may agree that the utterance of *hyppytyynytydytys* truly fits the bill of flopping onto a big bouncy cushion.

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## ***Filotimo* (φιλότιμο) (Greek)** – love of honour

From the Greek language, the oldest Indo-European language spanning 34 centuries, it is almost a given that there would be a multitude of profound and creative words. Sayings have evolved over time, changes in rule, culture and time itself, can become completely untranslatable in other languages. *Filotimo* (φιλότιμο), for example, is almost impossible to translate into English as it describes an array of virtues, but can be summed up as 'love of honour'.

Although in early writings this word was sometimes used in a negative sense, by the beginning of the Christian era the word was firmly positive. In biblical uses, it was used to convey a desire to do a good thing, with emphasis on an honourable pursuit. In modern uses, *Filotimo* is considered to be the highest of all Greek virtues, representing standards for family and social living, with the core concept of respect and walking the right paths.

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## ***Elmosolyodni* (Hungarian)** – The act of starting to smile (in a really subtle way)

The word *elmosolyodni* comes from Hungary, located in Central Europe. Now, whereas 'mosoly' is the actual word for smile in Hungarian, *elmosolyodni* specifically describes the much more subtle smile which forms when something isn't especially funny, but you can't help smiling.

Certain words that would be particularly useful in our native dictionaries are those which depict very specific sensations or situations, for which there is no short way to summarize. The Hungarian word *elmosolyodni* is a perfect example of one of those specific moments – a moment which many of us has experienced but can't quite describe. An English equivalent might be 'smirk', but that has more contemptuous or smug connotations – the concept is difficult to sum up in English. Add this one to the lexicon!

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## ***Gluggaveður* (Icelandic)** – window weather

If you live in a country with extremely unpredictable weather, you may well be aware that you can't simply assume how warm it is just by looking out of the window. This particular concept is what the Icelandic word *gluggaveður* refers to: when the weather looks pleasant from your window, but actually it's a lot colder than it looks. The word *gluggaveður* literally means 'window weather'.

This idea can be described as being curled up indoors while enjoying the views outside the window. Of course, many of us will understand the occasional inclination of enjoying the snow, fog, or sometimes even clear blue skies from the comfort of the sofa – even heavy rain is often described as a form of comfort, but often only when seen and heard from the warmth of indoors.

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## ***Ikigai* (生きがい) (Japanese) - your life purpose / a reason for being**

*Ikigai* is a Japanese concept which is said to embody the idea of happiness in living. The term often translates as ‘your life purpose’, ‘a reason for being’ or getting up in the morning. With the country’s notorious work culture involving long office hours, overworking is hardly uncommon. The secret for coping with this lifestyle is therefore *ikigai*.

*Ikigai*, however, is not limited to the concept of having a direction or purpose in life; it can simply be something as small as a daily ritual one enjoys. We can also associate this term with the four following qualities: what you love, what you are good at, what the world needs, and what you can earn a living for.

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## ***Iktsuarpok* (Inuit) – the act of repeatedly going outside to check if someone is coming**

The Inuit languages are traditionally spoken across the North American Arctic, and one of the Inuit terms is perhaps another very relatable concept: *iktsuarpok*. This word expresses the feeling of anticipation (and sometimes frustration) of waiting for someone to arrive, which leads you to repeatedly check outside or wait at the window. Most of us have been there – waiting at home for a friend to arrive (or taxi in many cases) who is late, and so you keep glancing out of the window in anticipation.

Although this may appear too long a description to be summarized into one word, the Inuit language has done exactly this. *iktsuarpok* comes from the Inuit culture of the Eskimo-Aleut, with the word specifically originating from Eskimos exiting their igloos to look to see if anyone was coming, returning back inside, then repeating this over and over.

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## ***Tingo* (Pascuense or 'Easter Island')** **– to gradually steal all a neighbour's possessions by borrowing and not returning**

The Rapa nui word *tingo* is perhaps one of the most intriguing terms on the list. This fairly expansive concept from Pascuense, a language spoken on Chile's Easter Island, is about continuously borrowing items from a neighbour's house and not returning them, thereby gradually stealing everything from them one-by-one until there is nothing left. And this rather eccentric idea has been whittled down to one 5 letter word – *tingo*.

Interestingly, there is an additional word in the same language which depicts the slightly different idea of 'not returning borrowed items until the owner asks for them back' – this word is *hakamaru*.

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## ***Suilk* (Scottish Gaelic)** **– To swallow with a slobbering noise, to gulp, suck in**

This Scottish Gaelic word is now in fact used in English and even has conjugations, such as the act of '*suilking*', and someone who *suilks* is a '*suilker*'. The word depicts the idea of making an abnormal amount of noise while swallowing, gulping or sucking.

Now, for someone with misophonia – a condition in which individuals experience intense anger when alert to sounds made by others, such as chewing or lip smacking – this Gaelic word may particularly resonate. The pronunciation of this word is 'swilk'.

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## ***Gigil* (Tagalog)** **– an overpowering feeling that comes with seeing something unbearably cute**

The word *gigil* comes from the Tagalog language; native Tagalog speakers form the second largest linguistic and cultural group in the Philippines. As for the concept of this word – although this sensation may not affect everyone, many of us may experience that overwhelming feeling when, for instance, seeing a new-born baby, your friend's new puppy, or a video of a kitten snuggling with a bird. This very concept is expressed in Tagalog with the word *gigil*.

Summed up, this word basically depicts the overwhelming feeling that comes over you when you see something unbearably cute, which may incline us to reach out and touch, squeeze or pinch it. Many of us may recall being a child and your grandmother would be constantly pinching your cheeks – probably out of her feeling of *gigil*.

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## ***Mamihlapinatapei* (Yaghan – Southern Argentina) – A non-verbal exchange between two people, who both desire to initiate something but are hesitant to act on it**

It only feels right to start and finish on a particularly long untranslatable term. The word *mamihlapinatapai* stems from the language of the Yaghan (or Yamana) tribe of Tierra del Fuego, an archipelago split between Chile and Argentina at the southern tip of South America. The concept is said to be a meaningful but wordless exchange between two people, who both desire to initiate something but are hesitant to act on it.

Another interpretation of the word has been the following: a private but non-verbal exchange shared by two people, one where each knows that the other understands and agrees what is being expressed. The Guinness Book of World Records has listed *mamihlapinatapai* as the 'most succinct word', and it is considered an extremely difficult term to translate.

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## **Conclusion**

There were many incredible and beautiful untranslatable words to choose from, but the above were so captivating that they simply had to be shared. Language is constantly evolving in every language, and we as humans are making these changes according to trends, feelings and situations.

Unfortunately, no English words made the list (perhaps there are none out there that merit that position), but language borrowing has been another huge reason behind language evolution for centuries – so perhaps *hyppytyynytydytys* will one day make it into the English dictionary...

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