

# 'Untranslatable' words tell us more about English speakers than other cultures

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When the word "hygge" became popular outside Denmark a few years ago, it seemed the perfect way to express the feeling of wrapping yourself up in a crocheted blanket with a cosy jumper, a cup of tea and back-to-back episodes of [The Bridge](#). But is it really only the Danes, with their cold Scandinavian evenings, who could have come up with a word for such a specific concept? And is it only the Swedes who could have

needed the verb "[fika](#)" to describe chatting over a coffee?

The internet abounds with [words](#) that lack a single-word English equivalent. In order to be really lacking an English equivalent, it must be a single, indivisible unit of meaning, as phrases are infinitely productive and can be created on demand by combining different words. Take, for example, the claim by Adam Jacot de Boinod in [I Never Knew There Was A Word For It](#), that Malay has a word for the gap between the teeth that English lacks: "gigi rongak." Well, this appears to be a phrase, and it translates literally as the perfectly [cromulent](#) English phrase "tooth gap."

In fact, English even has a single-word technical term for a gap between the teeth: "diastema." Okay, that's actually a Greek word, but it's in use in English, so it's also an English word. Does that matter?

Where we get our words from tells us something about our history. Take, for instance, Quechua – the [language](#) spoken by people indigenous to the Andes and the South American highlands. The Quechuan word for "book" is "liwru," which comes from the Spanish word "libro," because Spanish colonisers introduced written forms of language to the people they conquered. In fact, English does now have a word for "hygge" – it's "hygge."

## **Cultures in language**

It is often said that Eskimos have 50 words for snow, but it's [a myth that has been comprehensively dismantled](#), probably first of all by Laura Martin in 1986. "Eskimo" is a somewhat meaningless term anyway, but the structure of the languages spoken by peoples such as the Inuit or Aleut in the Arctic Circle are very synthetic, meaning that each "word" may comprise many parts or "morphemes."

Entire phrases can be contained within words in these languages – a

single "word" may literally mean "fallen snow." For that reason, "having 50 words for snow" in these languages is about as remarkable as having 50 sentences to talk about snow in English.

And yet the myth and others like it snowball, because we are fascinated by the idea that language reveals something about our psyche — or perhaps even determines it. The economist Keith Chen has devoted some considerable effort to demonstrating that speakers of languages that grammatically encode the future and the present separately [behave more recklessly](#) with respect to their health and money. He argues that it shows that overt future tense marking makes a speaker more aware of the future as a separate time from the present and thus more distant, which has a corresponding effect on behaviour.

Many linguists have some reservations about his conclusions, but the main claim [hit the news](#) and people were intrigued by the idea.

## **False cultural judgements**

While [careful experimentation has shown](#) that having words for concepts makes them easier or faster to name, it is not true that lacking a concept means you cannot conceive of it, and vice versa. For instance, many languages have gender-neutral pronouns (the same word is used for he and she) but are spoken in cultures with very poor levels of gender equality.

This might seem obvious – it's Orwell's [Newspeak](#) (from *1984*) in action. In Orwell's dystopia, the word "free" was stripped of all meaning of individual freedoms and could be used only in the sense of a dog being free from lice, which in turn was supposed to remove the ability of the citizens of Oceania to conceive of such freedom. But it is not just science fiction. There is an important note of caution that linguists are always aware of: making claims about other cultures risks "exoticising"

them.

At worst, this results in racism. The Hopi people of Arizona, who are sometimes claimed to have no way to express time based on a misunderstanding of [Benjamin Lee Whorf's work](#) on their language, were assumed by some to be [incapable of following bus timetables](#) or arriving at work on schedule, a mistaken belief that led to obvious problems.

But even an apparently benign conclusion about how some Australian languages [encode space with compass directions](#) ("north") rather than ego-relative position ("my left-hand side") suggests English speakers often miss out on knowledge about language and cognition because they are busy measuring things against an arbitrary English-centric benchmark. Different language conventions are usually not exotic or unusual; it's just that English speakers come from a position of very great privilege because their language is the default. People who speak other languages are seen as different, as outsiders.

I'm not a total killjoy. I still delight in "untranslatable" words. It's something special to learn a word and along with it make concrete a nebulous but recognisable concept like *hygge*, or indeed its wonderfully chilling opposite, *uhygge*. I just suggest a position of healthy scepticism when you meet claims that a language has "no word for X" or "50 words for Y," or, as the internet recently got excited about, that "tag" stands for "touch and go" ([sorry folks, it doesn't](#)).

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