

Illustration Series on various Untranslatable Words in the World's Languages and their Etymology

Submitted by

Samadrita Ghosh

Supervised by

Asst Prof Sheetal M.Gokhale

Project report submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree of Bachelor of Design

8th Semester, 25th May 2020

Department of Design



Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati

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Declaration

I, Samadrita Ghosh, declare that in accordance to the IPR norms generally followed in academics, I have acknowledged appropriately all source of materials/ content including visuals/ designs/ copy write access from other authors/ sources/ references and used in this project as part of my academic reporting.

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Signature of the Student

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Date:

Certificate

This is to certify that Project Report entitled “**Illustration Series on various Untranslatable Words in the World’s Languages and their Etymology**” carried out by **Samadrita Ghosh**, Roll no:**1602050356**. is an authentic work carried out by her at IIT Guwahati under my guidance. The matter embodied in this work has not been submitted earlier for award of any degree to the best of my knowledge and belief.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

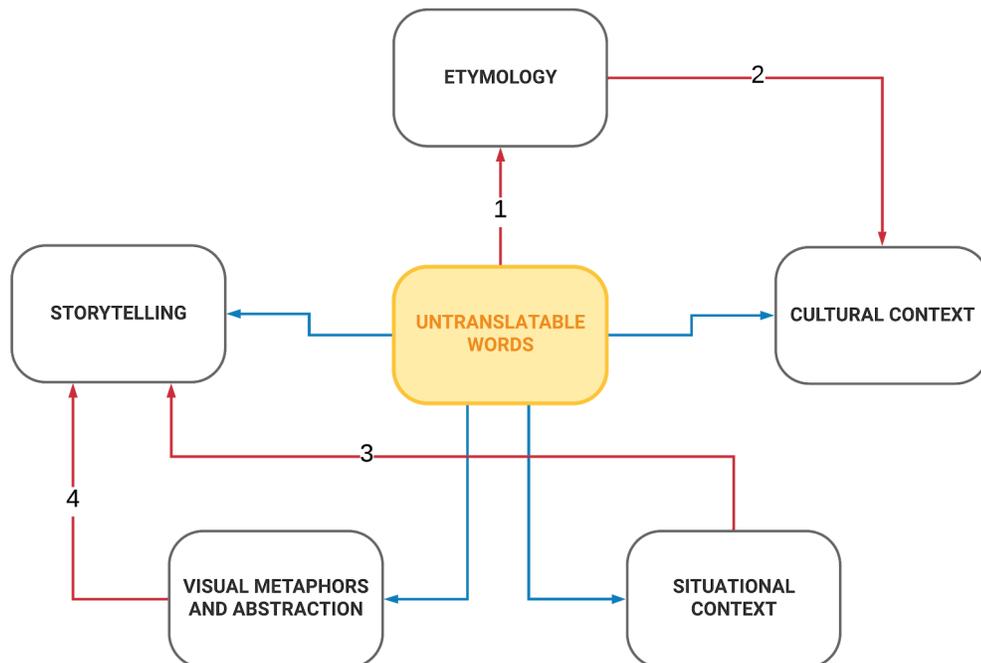
There are close to 6,500 spoken languages in the world, roughly 600 of which are widely known, practised or learned. Each language has a unique culture attached to it, which is invariably expressed in its words. A culture has to allot enough importance to an experience to have a unique word for it, thus making them “untranslatable”.

When one talks about untranslatable words, they can be classified into broadly two types of contexts:

i. Translatable contexts: Concepts and ideas that are easily understood across cultures and geographical locations. These are words that may not have a one-word translation, but can be satisfactorily explained in most languages. They usually pertain to simple human emotions, natural phenomena, universal social norms, etc.

ii. Untranslatable contexts: These contexts are more specific to a culture or location that may not even hold any meaning when placed outside of that constraint, becoming very difficult to explain in other languages. Such words usually have a large range of possible meanings that are commonly perceived under multiple headings, or they describe complex, subtle human tendencies, or they are rooted in a specific culture and its norms, which holds no relevance in other contexts.

1.2 Research Gap



After researching existing projects, it was observed that most of them stop at expressing the literal meaning of the words in question, without attempting to explain the construction, grammar or etymology of the word- information that is crucial to truly understanding the context and usage of the word, thus being culturally relevant.

Some relevant gaps noticed were:

- a. What historical language roots do the words originate from? How is each word composed?

- b. How is etymology relevant in the cultural context of the respective words?
- c. How can one employ the situational relevance of certain words in visual storytelling?
- d. How can abstract metaphors be used to tell a story about the word?

1.3 Aim

To visually express the essence of 15 selected words in the languages of the world which have no direct translation in other languages, while providing relevant etymological data about each.

1.4 Chosen Approach

The project will be approached from the perspective of storytelling using illustration and animation to effectively communicate the meanings of the selected words.

2. Existing Work and Inspiration

1. Lost in Translation: an Illustrated Compendium of Untranslatable Words from Around the World written by Ella Frances Sanders, USA

Published in 2014, the publisher describes the book as “An artistic collection of 52 drawings featuring unique, funny and poignant foreign words that have no direct translation into English.”

This illustrated book consists of 52 square traditionally hand drawn sketches, each pertaining to a respective untranslatable word. The illustrations are simple, for the most part “rough” in their aesthetic, and embody a childlike charm and sense of wonder. Some of these illustrations are displayed here-



2. Untranslatable Words created by Marija Tiurina, UK

This was a series of 14 illustrations released on May 12, 2015, as an online collectible card set on the website www.neonmob.com. These images were digitally made, with a moderate amount of detail and heavy stylisation. A cheeky, almost comical tone is present throughout the visualisation.

The artist has also attempted to create small narratives in each image, using characters or objects. Some of Tiurina's work-



3. Methodology

3.1 Primary Research and Word Inventory

Primary research was done using an internet survey as well as personal interaction. The sample space consisted of a group of 27 individuals who speak a wide range of languages, from an online language learning blog. Interaction with subject matter experts was done to access relevant research in the field of linguistics and etymology. Additional information was gathered from **Global Lingo's** article on untranslatable words written by **Mark Williams**. An inventory of 30 words was gathered from the research, as shown below. Out of those, 15 were selected for further development.



assorted word inventory

3.2 Gathering of Etymological Data

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines **etymology** as:

“the history of a linguistic form (such as a word) shown by tracing its development since its earliest recorded occurrence in the language where it is found, by tracing its transmission from one language to another, by analyzing it into its component parts, by identifying its cognates in other languages, or by tracing it and its cognates to a common ancestral form in an ancestral language”

Extensive primary as well as secondary research was done, through native speaker surveys, online dictionaries, language blogs, etc. to get to the roots of the selected words.

The results of the research culminated into the final list of 15 words, and the linguistic data associated with each of them-

1. Komorebi

/¹ko.mo.re.bi/

Japanese, Japan

noun.

The interplay of light caused by sunlight passing through the leaves, creating a pattern of light and shade.

Written forms:

木漏れ日 or こもれび (hiragana script)

Komorebi is a compound word consisting of the following kanji/symbols

- i. 木 (“ki”: tree, which had an ancient compound form “ko”)
- ii. 漏れ (“mo-re” : leaking, coming through, where the first character is the root kanji “漏 /mo”, leak/come through, and “れ/re” is added to make it the continuative form), and
- iii. 日 (“hi”: sun, day, which is compounded to “bi”).

2. Cafuné

/¹ka.fu.¹ne/

Portuguese, Brazil

noun.

The act of fondling someone’s hair or scalp.

The word possibly originates from **kifumate**, a word from the Kimbundu language of Angola.

3. Gumusservi

/¹y.¹myʃ.sɛr.¹vi/

Turkish, Turkey

noun.

The long reflecting pattern created by the moon shining on water.

Written forms:

Gümüşservi (Modern Turkish) or گوموش سلوی (Ottoman Turkish)

This word is made up of two words:

- i. **Gümüş** : Silver, and
- ii. **Servi** (or **selvi**) : cypress tree

It literally translates to “silver cypress”, relating to the long shining reflection cast by the moon on water.

4. Sobremesa

/so.βre^lme.sa/

Spanish, Spain

noun.

The time spent chatting at the table after a hearty meal, usually while dessert is being served.

The word is made up of two parts-

- i. **Sobre** (from Latin “**super**”): over, above
- ii. **mesa** (from Latin “**mensa**”): table

5. Obhimaan

/o.bʱi.^lman/

Bengali, West Bengal, India

noun.

A soft feeling of hurt pride. It is often experienced due to the actions of a loved one, or a humbling outcome of a situation that one is attached to (like not winning a prize one thinks one deserves).

Written form:

অভিমান

This word has a Sanskrit root word “**अभिमान**” (Abhimana), which remains unchanged in Bengali, meaning pride and a sense of self, which is a compound of-

- i. **Abhi-** (अभि- / অভি-): a prefix that can mean “towards; to, against; over; for, for the sake of; with regard to”
- ii. **Maan** (मान / মান): pride

6. Uitwaaien

/œy^tˌvaːi^ə(n)/

Dutch, the Netherlands

verb.

To take a refreshing walk outdoors in windy or breezy weather to clear one’s head.

This is a compound word, consisting of:

- i. **Uit**: out (which originates from Middle Dutch “**uut**”, “**ute**”, from Old Dutch “**ūt**”)
- ii. **Waaien**: to blow (associated with wind)

7. **Atvasara**

/atvasara/

Latvian, Latvia

noun.

The last days in a year when it feels warm like summer, before winter starts, usually around September and October.

The word has two parts:

- i. **At-** : A prefix (from Middle English **at-**, **et-**, **æst-**, from Old English **æt-**) meaning “at, near, toward, beyond, away”
- ii. **Vasara**: (from Proto-Balto-Slavic **wasr**, from Proto-Indo-European **wósr**.) meaning summer.

8. **Meraki**

/meˈrɑci/

Greek, Greece

noun.

The act of being intensely interested in something, especially an activity, so that one almost leaves a part of oneself in the work.

Written form:

μεράκι

Meraki is speculated to have originated from the Turkish word “**merak**”, meaning **passion**, **curiosity**, **wonder** or even **worry**, depending on which Arabic root word it comes from. The evolution from Ottoman root **مراق (maraq)** which means an **object of passion** or a **hobby**, results in the meaning of merak which means interest or passion.

However in Turkish, merak can also mean extreme **worry** or **melancholy**, due to a different Arabic root word **مَرَق** with a similar pronunciation that got clubbed together into the same word, merak, because Modern Turkish uses the Latin Script.

9. **Tretår**

/treːˌtɑːr/

Swedish, Sweden

noun.

A second refill of coffee after one has already taken one refill, more popularly known as a “threefill”.

The word is made up of two parts

i. **Tre**: three

ii. **Tår**: drop,

which literally translates to “three drops”, used mostly in the context of coffee.

10. Geborgenheit

/gəˈbɔrgn̩, ˌhaɪ̯t/

German, Germany

noun.

An undeniable feeling of coziness, snugness, safety, and contentment.

Geborgenheit is derived from **bergen**, which means to “store up” or “stash away” in German. **Geborgen** is bergen’s past participle and **heit** makes it a noun so literally, geborgenheit is the noun form of “to have saved.”

11. Lletraferit

/ləˈtrə.fəˈrit/ or /ləˈtra.feˈrit/

Catalan, Catalonia, Spain

adjective. masculine.

Someone who is so passionate about literature that it seems that they are in love with it.

The word is made up of two units:

i. **Lletra**: letter

ii. **Ferit**: smitten/hurt,

literally translating the word to “smitten by the letter” or “hurt by the letter”.

12. Mamihlapinatapai

/mə.mi.ˈɫa.pi.ˈna.tə.ˈpai/

Yaghan, Tierra del Fuego, Chile

noun.

The silent look shared by two people who want to initiate something, but neither of them do. It indicates a private moment shared by two people who both understand and are in agreement with something, but are unwilling to act on it, often used in context with professing love where both people want to do so, but neither initiates.

Interestingly, this word is listed in the Guinness Book of World Records as the "most succinct word".

The word is a derived form of the verb **ihlvpi** /iɫəpi/, meaning "to feel awkward" or "to be at a loss for what to do" and is constructed as:

Ma[m] (dual) + **ihlvpi** + **:n[a]** (stative) + **-at[a]** (causative) + **-a:pai** (reflexive/reciprocal).

Its literal meaning is therefore roughly "to make each other feel awkward".

13. Goyaa

/ˈgo.ja/

Urdu, Pakistan

adverb.

This word refers to the temporary suspension of disbelief employed in storytelling, loosely translating to a meaning similar to “as if” or “as though”.

Written form:

گویا

This word originates from Persian.

14. Hiraeth

/hiraɪ_θ/

Welsh, Wales

noun.

A feeling of wistfulness or longing for a place, time or person, that may or may not really exist.

The word originates from Proto-Brythonic **hira iθ**, from Proto-Celtic **sīr-axto-**, similar to Gaulish **siraxta**, meaning “longing”.

15. Toska

/ˈtō-skə/

Russian, Russia

noun.

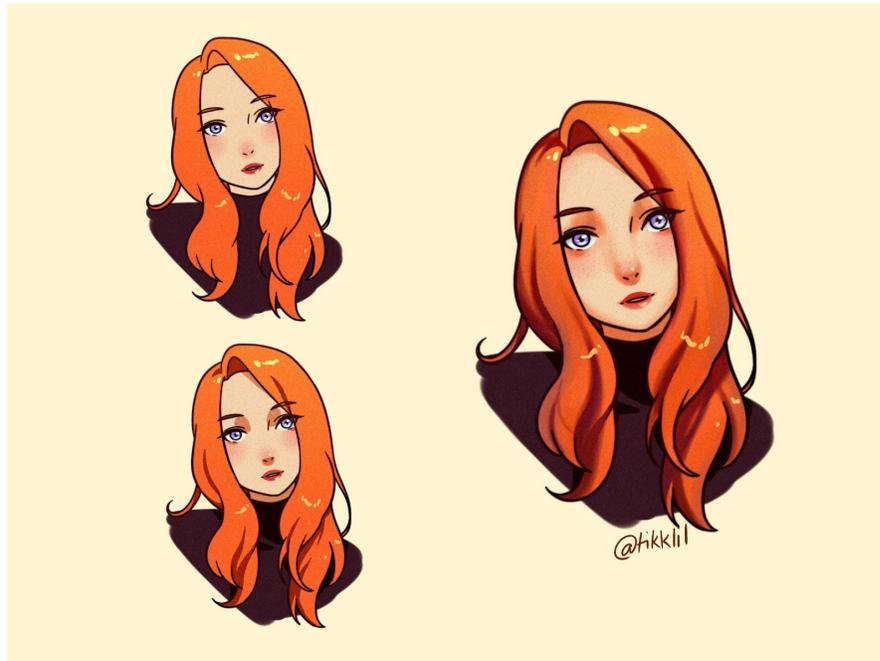
A feeling of emotional weariness, depression, boredom or melancholy. This word can be used to describe the entire spectrum of emotions encompassing these moods.

Written form: **тоска́**

The word possibly originates from Proto-Slavic **тъska**: tightness, grief.

3.3 Visual Exploration

While developing the visual language, an important thing to keep in mind was that it should be easily transferable across mediums (like illustration and animation) and different types of concepts (like simple and complex, or experiential vs situational), without losing the quality of aesthetics or detail.



character style



object style 1



@tikklil

object style 2



demo illustrations



demo thumbnails

3.4 Final Illustrations



Komorebi, Japanese: The interplay of light caused by sunlight passing through the leaves, creating a pattern of light and shade.



Cafune, Brazilian Portuguese: The act of fondling someone's hair or scalp.



Gumusservi, Turkish: The long reflecting pattern created by the moon shining on water.



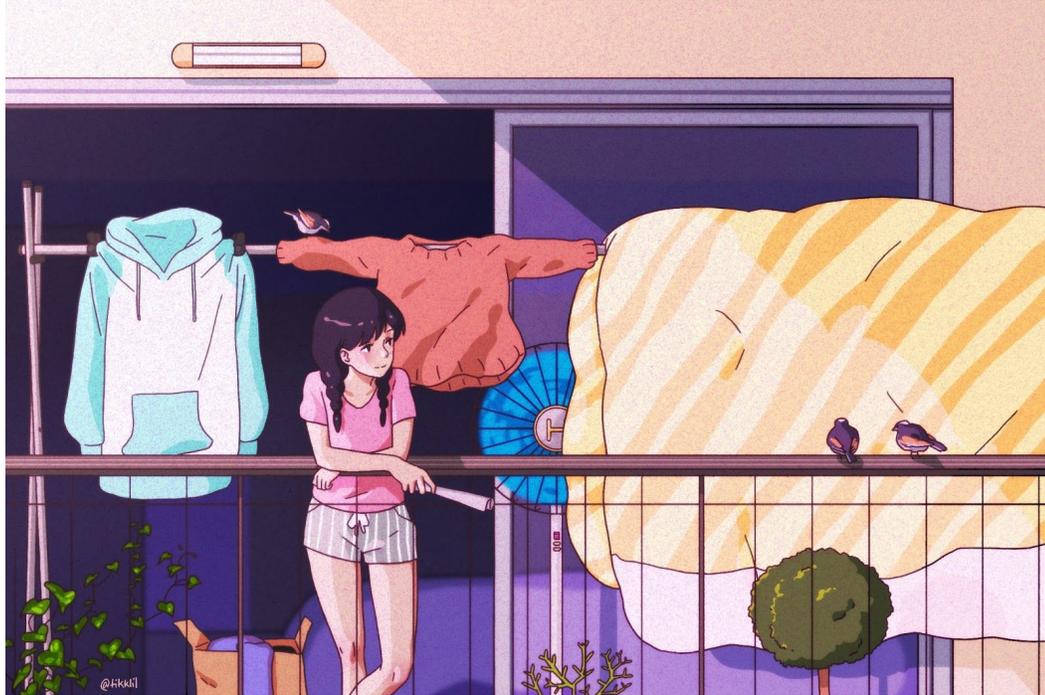
Sobremesa, Spanish: The time spent chatting at the table after a hearty meal, usually while dessert is being served.



Obhimaan, Bengali: A soft feeling of hurt pride. It is often experienced due to the actions of a loved one, or a humbling outcome of a situation that one is attached to.



Geborgenheit, German: An undeniable feeling of coziness, snugness, safety, and contentment.



Atvasara, Latvian: The last days in a year when it feels warm like summer, before winter starts.



Hiraeth, Welsh: A feeling of wistfulness or longing for a place, time or person, that may or may not really exist.



Meraki, Greek: The act of being intensely interested in something, especially an activity, so that one almost leaves a part of oneself in the work.



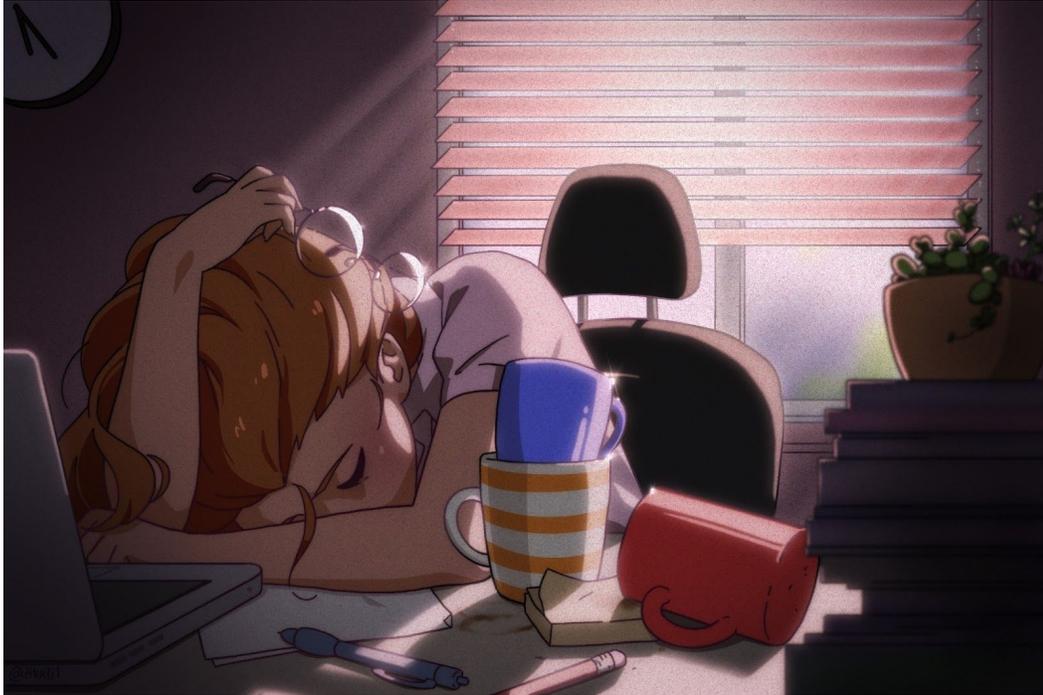
Goyaa, Urdu: The temporary suspension of disbelief employed in storytelling loosely translating to a meaning similar to “as if” or “as though”.



Uitwaaien, Dutch: To take a refreshing walk outdoors in windy or breezy weather to clear one's head.



Mamihlapinatapai, Yaghan: The silent look shared by two people who want to initiate something, but neither of them do.



Tretår, Swedish: A second refill of coffee after one has already taken one refill, more popularly known as a “threefill”.



Toska, Russian: A feeling of emotional weariness, depression, boredom or melancholy. This word can be used to describe the entire spectrum of emotions encompassing these moods.



Lletraferit, Catalan: Someone who is so passionate about literature that it seems that they are in love with it.

3.5 Presentation

Presentation is done in the form of postcards, framed pictures and catalogues.





07 | Atvasara
Latvian, Latvia
the last days in a
year when it feels
warm like summer,
before winter
starts, usually
around September
and October.



07 | Atvasara



4. Conclusion

It is believed that this project will bring together cultural explorations and visibility along with presenting it in the context with etymology and language structure, while being a visually pleasing experience. Storytelling also becomes an important element, so as to holistically portray the complete extent of what every word means. The future scope for exploration includes possibilities like integrating Alternate Reality with print to create an interesting experience.

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