

Lost in translation: culture-related words

There are more than 7,000 languages in the world. It is a matter of fact that some words found in one language cannot be translated into other languages using one word simply because language is strictly related to culture and identity.



All that the recipient has noticed in the text of foreign culture but can't understand, that seems strange, unclear, erroneous to him and requires interpretation, serves as a signal of existence of national-specific elements of culture in the text, specifically, gaps.

Sorokyn & Markovina, 1998



■ WARM UP

1 Match the untranslatable word with its language (a-f) and its definition (1-6).



1

WALDEINSAMKEIT:



2

CULACCINO:



3

MĂNGATA:



4

PORONKUSEMA:



5

VIRAHA:



6

HÁZISÁRKÁNY:

- a Italian
- b Swedish
- c Hindi
- d German
- e Finnish
- f Hungarian

- 1 the realisation of love through separation
- 2 the feeling of being alone in the woods
- 3 an irritable wife – literally translated means 'indoor-dragon'
- 4 the roadlike reflection of the moon on the water
- 5 the mark left on a table by a wet container, eg. a glass
- 6 10 km (the distance a reindeer can comfortably travel before needing to urinate)

■ READ THE TEXT

Different language, different concept

Each language perceives the reality in its own way. Lack of words is related to lack of things and events in certain languages and cultures. Different nations cannot think with the same concepts. A certain nationally-hued element may be included in the concept but is not always able to change it. For normal communication it is necessary to know the national culture, everyday life, customs of the nation speaking the given language. For example, the word 'горько!' (bitter) makes a Russian think of a wedding ('Now a kiss!') but other nations think of the direct meaning of this word. Such associations may be caused by emotional-evaluative connotations of one word in case of lack of such word in another language.

These cultural-related words are called 'realia' and seem to be very difficult to translate into other languages because they have a strong bond with the culture they represent. It is possible to divide realia into three different categories:

- **POLITICAL AND SOCIAL REALIA** describe the way a specific country is organised and governed. When we hear words such as *county* we immediately think about Great Britain because there are no counties in Italy. Words like *promenade*, *souk* or *bidonville* have a strong bond with the countries and cultures they come from because they depict unique experiences that is possible to have only in some specific countries. 'Souk' is not simply a market. It's the mixture of smells, colours and sounds that it brings with it. Political realia also describe the way the army is divided. There are some military corps that can't be found out of a specific country: *marines*, *alpini* are just two examples.
- **GEOGRAPHICAL REALIA** describe specific geographical features of some locations and are generally untranslatable. The original word is adopted by every language because it carries more than one meaning. *Tsunami* (Japanese) is the most well-known example but also *mistral* can be a good example. The word comes from French because this is a typical cold wind of the Rhone Valley. In some cases, geographical realia are used to give a name to animals or trees typical of a limited area in the world (*kiwi*, *sequoia*, *koala*).
- **ETHNOGRAPHICAL REALIA** depict typical aspects of everyday life, work, art, money and culture. This means words for food such as *paprika*, *pandoro* and others, but also words describing typical clothes like *kimono*.

■ LET'S WORK ON IT

2 Answer the questions.

1 What is realia?

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2 Why is realia considered almost untranslatable?

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3 List, explain and give some examples of the three main categories of realia.

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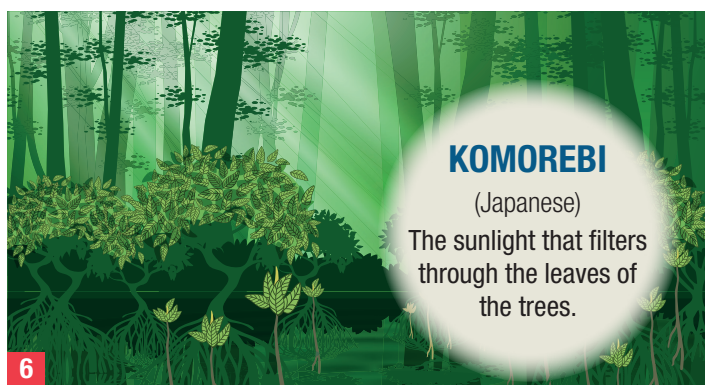
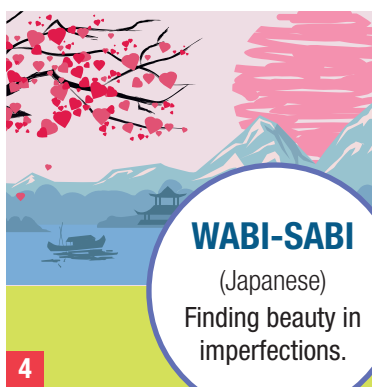
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■ BEYOND THE WORDS

- 4 Play with your language. Find untranslatable words (realia) from your own language related to the following categories.

FOOD	SOCIAL LIFE	POLITICS	OTHER...

- 5 Work in small groups. Look at the realia presented below and choose the one that you think should be introduced in your language. At the end of the time set for the task, you must come to an agreement and be able to support your opinion.



- 6 Once every group has chosen the realia in exercise 5, hold a class debate to elect the best one to be introduced in your language. Every group must justify their choice and support it with examples and you must reach an agreement as a class.