

Translating the Untranslatable: Making Meaning of Idiomatic Expressions Across Languages

Sanam Shahmiri

Sanam Shahmiri interviewed seven people who spoke languages other than English to learn about how they translated untranslatable expressions. Through her interview findings, she demonstrates how translanguaging is closely tied to writing research identity and uses CHAT to look at this activity system's influence on antecedent knowledge, uptake, and transfer.

Ever wondered if there was a word out there for when sunlight filters in through the leaves of trees? How about that sad feeling of nostalgia for a person, place, or thing that is far away from you? Or even that feeling of being alone in the woods and connected with nature? There's a word for that, but it's not in English. The first one is "komorebi," and it's Japanese. The second one is "saudade," and it's Portuguese. The third one is "waldensamkeit," and it's German. These are just some words in foreign languages that don't have direct English equivalents.

Chances are, if you've been on BuzzFeed, the *Huffington Post*, or Facebook recently, you've noticed a trend in articles with titles like: "Eleven Untranslatable Words from Other Cultures" or "Thirty-eight Wonderful Foreign Words We Could Use in English" or "Twenty-three Fascinating Words with No Direct English Translations" (actual article titles). These kinds of articles have risen in popularity in the past couple years and are commonly accompanied by artwork and Instagram-like photos. What these articles reflect is a new trend of acceptance toward diverse cultures or multiculturalism on a global scale. Scholars call these efforts by several interchangeable names: translanguaging or transcultural writing or simply "translanguaging."

According to Penn State professor and linguist Suresh Canagarajah, “translingualism” refers to how languages influence and are always in contact with each other creating new meanings (41). Translingualism also deals with how humans compose across different language systems. It’s not as simple as saying that people can switch between languages when they write. In order to understand this concept, as Canagarajah explains, we need to see “the production, circulation, and reception of texts that are always mobile; that draw from diverse languages” and how they involve communication between different communities (41). So, translingualism encompasses the ways our language backgrounds influence *how we write* and also *the way we think about and approach new writing situations*. It brings together many other aspects of writing and the learning processes such as tacit or antecedent knowledge, uptake, and transfer. It can even be seen as an activity system. But, wait. What do these technical terms even mean?

Antecedent knowledge is knowledge we already have that we bring to new learning situations; often this knowledge is tacit, meaning that we are not aware we even have it unless it is brought out in some way. **Uptake** refers to the way we take up knowledge and skills, in other words, the way we learn. **Transfer** refers to how we take what we’ve learned and apply it to other situations. **Activity systems** are a lens through which we can look at literate activities, such as translingualism (and the use of expressions) that emphasizes how they are based on concrete interactions between people, can be improvised, but are also shaped by history and culture, and therefore change over time (Prior, et al. 18). Now that we’ve gotten these definitions out of the way, we can focus more closely on my main research question: How is translingualism closely tied to writing research identity, especially for those who speak, write, and conduct research in more than one language? When I mention “writing research identity,” I mean our reflection of our own writing abilities when faced with different writing situations. For those who are fluent in more than one language, they may feel that their identity is closely tied to their language knowledge or their cultural background. This can have effects on how these people approach unfamiliar writing situations and lead to differing interpretations of expressions.

One of the most interesting aspects of translingualism is how it shows that language is socially constructed. Every person is informed by a perspective and cultural background that is unique to themselves, whether it is foreign or within the US, which can be noticeable in the way that person writes or speaks. Issues of power and privilege are connected to this notion as certain words, expressions, and even languages themselves can become privileged or dominant over others. As one can see, our language practices, whether spoken or written, are complex. In order to understand translingualism, it

can be helpful to use the aspects of CHAT (cultural-historical activity theory) and theories of activity systems as lenses.

According to Joyce Walker, CHAT helps us to think about and study “how people act and communicate in the world—specifically through the productions of all kinds of texts” (71–72). The elements of CHAT (such as production, reception, and socialization) help us look at what goes into textual production and give us a method to analyze texts, whether written or spoken. Activity systems are a part of CHAT and, to paraphrase an expert on the topic, David R. Russell, refers to cooperative interactions aimed at achieving a goal. Through these lenses, we can look at the psychological and social processes of achieving that goal through the interactions between people and the tools they use to achieve that goal; in this case the tool we are focusing on is language. These are the tools I used to begin my research on untranslatable expressions.

What can I say? I’m a lover of languages and a lover of words. I also love learning about other cultures and the experiences of those who speak more than one language. I hope that I, too, will someday speak more than one fluently. To begin this research on untranslatable expressions, I asked my classmates and family members about their language experiences. Many of my classmates speak more than one language, are the children of immigrants, or are international students. The purpose for my investigation was to gain insight into cultures that we may think are different from our own and to find connections such as expressions that cross cultures. In order to do this, I interviewed several classmates who speak different foreign languages. In the chart below, I have listed the people I interviewed with the languages they speak. I did this to show the range of languages spoken in my sample but also to serve as an easy reference.

Person Interviewed	Language Background
Amish Trivedi	Gujarati
Su Yin Khor	Chinese and Swedish
Agathe Lancrenon	French
Karlie Rodriguez	Puerto Rican Spanish
Cristina Sánchez-Martín	Castilian Spanish
Mom	Farsi
Dad	Farsi

By incorporating a diverse range of language backgrounds, I hope that my findings will be more valid and reliable. I am also interested in seeing how my findings fit in with a CHAT analysis, to see how the way we learn to make meaning of expressions can be analyzed through the specific CHAT aspects of production, reception, and socialization.

Production

Expressions are produced over time and are influenced by politics, history, and culture. It is difficult to trace the etymologies, or origins, of expressions, perhaps because they haven't been documented throughout history or because they often evolve out of everyday conversation. In thinking of production, it is important to think about how texts are created and molded by people and other factors. This is something I found through most of my interviews. There are many ways that untranslatable expressions are formed and understood.

One of the major influences of the use of and understanding of these expressions across interviews came from interactions with family members. For example, when I interviewed one of my classmates, Amish, he explained how he had wanted to use a Gujarati expression as an epigraph in his book, so he asked his family members to help him write it in the original script. In telling the story, he explained how his father used to say the expression “jagyah tarathi savar” to him when he was a teenager and would wake up late. In Gujarati, this expression means “It's morning whenever you get up” or “Your day starts whenever you get up.” To him, it meant “whenever you come into knowing something is the dawn.”

jagyah tarathi savar

In order to get this expression translated for his book, Amish had to use the tools and resources at his disposal, in this case his family members who could speak and write in Gujarati. First, he tried teaching himself from a children's penmanship book. Then, he asked his parents over the phone, who directed him to ask his uncle. He e-mailed his parents and then his uncle texted the script back in Gujarati. The process to get this quote translated in the original Gujarati involved many different kinds of texts, such as e-mail, phone conversations, and actual text messages. In this case the activity system was his family. Amish's conversations with his family members were necessary for his uptake.

Some other important aspects that go into the production of expressions that are difficult to translate are the interplay between culture, morality, politeness, and how through language this can influence a person's actions. For example, when my classmate Karlie described her untranslatable expression, “veruenza a hajena,” the most fascinating part was her description of how one comes to know the meaning of this phrase through physical and emotional social interactions.

According to Karlie, this expression refers to how “if you're in a room and someone says something embarrassing, it's the feeling you get of being embarrassed or ashamed for that person, even though you are not the one who's doing that thing.” Whether from near or afar, those people who feel “veruenza a hajena” will even “get up and leave the room or cover their

veruenza a hajena

eyes,” she said. Through these physical practices or actions, the emotion is conveyed, communicated, and understood between the people involved in the situation. In this example, cultural understanding is key, yet it seems that this phenomenon could easily be found in other cultures, though those cultures might not have a specific term for it. According to Karlie, this is a “cultural phenomenon” that she’s only heard of in Puerto Rico, but I could easily see this happening in many other cultures, especially those that emphasize collectivism as a value.

To understand these kinds of expressions, it’s helpful to imagine what kind of similar expressions or words exist for these situations in the languages we speak. Imagine if you were embarrassed for something someone said; would you not cover your eyes as well, even possibly involuntarily? It seems that in this scenario, the physical gesture naturally results from the emotional reaction of a person. Feelings of empathy and embarrassment are common across many cultures, so this expression may have translanguagual equivalents after all, maybe not linguistically, but psychologically.

Reception

Reception is the CHAT aspect that deals with the ways that texts are taken up and used by others (Walker 75). In the case of expressions that are untranslatable, this becomes really important. For the second part of my interviews, I asked my participants about expressions in English that were confusing to them when they first heard them. I found that there are so many expressions in English that seem natural to me but that continue to be confusing for the people I interviewed. It was really funny to hear some of these examples and the ways that these people went about understanding them.

When I interviewed my classmate Su Yin, who speaks Chinese and Swedish, she revealed that she was confused by the English phrase “that’s right up your alley.” She said that when she first heard it a few years ago, she was confused as to whether it was “a bad thing or a good thing” and reflected that “there’s no context for me that would help me explain it.” Imagine if you heard this expression for the first time and didn’t know what it meant. Would you take it literally? Would you assume that it has a sexual connotation based on the word choice? That’s what Su Yin thought it was about. She also had a problem with the expression “You don’t know shit.” She reflects on how the meaning of the word “shit” varies across contexts. Sometimes “shit” has a negative connotation, is used as a verb, is used as a noun, or is used to mean “anything” in slang, not to mention all the other possible meanings of the word.

that’s right up your alley!

You don’t know shit!

Considering this new information and reflecting on how I've heard these expressions growing up in the United States, I am now more aware that how we understand language is extremely complex. It wasn't until I started asking these questions that I was faced with my own assumptions about the meanings of expressions and how we often take them for granted. I also found it funny that I never even questioned their meanings, origins, or why we even say these things. I never thought hearing these words and expressions would be weird for someone or difficult to understand, but this confusion happens all the time, especially for those who grew up speaking another language.

But what about words in other languages that don't have English equivalents? Words like these can be difficult to explain or convey meaning for when the cultural background is not there. My friend Agathe explains this with the French word "assumer." She says it's a word that many Americans that she's known who have studied French said "they wish they had in English." She describes how it doesn't quite mean the same thing as "I assume." To her, "it's more than that. Like when you do something stupid or say something stupid" a person uses this word to convey that "I own it, I'm OK with it" and it's not as natural in English. She also points out that "assumer" has become a popular word among young people in France, especially teenagers who are trying to show that they're "original but don't want to be at the same time." So, the use of expressions and some of these untranslatable words are related to generations, personality, timing or one's situation in life, as well as having meaning personally and within a larger social context, which leads into our last lens of analysis through CHAT: socialization.

assumer

Socialization

In CHAT, **socialization** is comprised of "the interactions of people and institutions as they produce, distribute, and use texts" (Walker 76). When applied to expressions, this aspect of CHAT is the most crucial, even more so when those expressions are not easily translatable across languages. When we use expressions, I think most of us assume that others know or are familiar with them; we assume rapport. It makes sense that we come to know over time what expressions are appropriate for what kinds of situations and with what people. When writing or communicating with other people, it helps to know where they're coming from, what kinds of knowledge they are bringing to the situation, and if they will understand cultural references in order to get our messages across. So, what happens when there's a misunderstanding or gap in communication?

Coming from a different linguistic or cultural background affects our understandings of and uptake of new expressions, not to mention their

connotations. If a person does not know the meaning of an expression, it could lead to some awkward and funny moments, but also confusion or feelings of being an outsider.

When I interviewed my dad, he listed several expressions he learned in the workplace that, to him, were unusual. Even now, he admits that some of these expressions or words are “weird” for him to use. For example, his boss will sometimes say “you just have to suck it up” when dealing with a problem with a client at work. To my dad, who comes from a conservative Iranian background, the word “suck” used in a workplace is inappropriate. “It’s not a word I would feel comfortable using,” he said, especially when talking to an authority figure like one’s boss. But, even so, he understands the meaning of the phrase as “it’s the cost of doing business.” This scenario reflects a difference in formality between cultures and taboo subjects, and even connotations that are also biased by gender and patriarchy. In this situation, we see how my dad’s socialization in a more conservative culture has affected his uptake and use of certain words and expressions that are used commonly in English. This also reflects the impact of generation and politics on language use and one’s willingness to use certain words. The influence of the workplace as an institution also has an effect on what kinds of phrases or words are used, though in this case there is a lack of formality between coworkers as opposed to the expected formal language use.

You just have to suck it up!

For Cristina, who came from Spain, the phrase “hanging out” was troublesome. It led her to a series of questions when she first heard it, such as “What do you mean? What are we going to do? What does it entail?” Where she comes from, “hanging out means I’m going to meet someone to do something in particular and that’s the deal, so we need to have a plan in mind.” Apparently, in Spain, people don’t just hang out for no reason. There has to be an occasion or a plan. She says, “that concept is hard to understand because we just don’t do that.”

hanging out

In Cristina’s case, the expression “hanging out” has no meaning because, as a cultural phenomenon in Spain, from her particular experience, Spanish people just don’t do that. In this case language, or lack thereof, reflects reality; the absence of this activity is reflected through the lack of a phrase for it in the language. The role of expectations, or planning, involved in the social interaction is de-emphasized in the phrase “hanging out,” which may reveal something about American culture, maybe as more spontaneous or “go with the flow.”

When I interviewed my mom, she came up with a whole list of American English expressions that baffled her. Some of them she still does not use though she’s been living here for about thirty years now. My mom would try to make sense of these expressions by logically trying to figure them out,

It's raining cats and dogs

and only to find out that they just don't make logical sense. One of these expressions is "it's raining cats and dogs." It was humorous to hear my mom's thought process as she tried to make sense of this. She said, "Cats and dogs, they can fight, but what does it have to do with rain? Is it their noises? Is it their fighting? I still don't know, but I know that when it is raining so hard, they say 'cats and dogs,' but maybe I refer it to the loudness, because the water has nothing to do with cats and dogs, you know?" Another expression she found confusing was "cute as a button." She really doesn't get it, "What is cute about buttons?" I don't either, Mom. (Who comes up with these phrases? Are they just trying to confuse people?)

Conclusion

In terms of textual productions and literate practices, it is important to be aware of expressions like these that have no equivalents in other languages. When writing in different genres, it is important to consider the audience by asking questions like: Would a group of people be ostracized by the use of certain word choices, expressions, or phrases? What about expressions or phrases that have no literal meaning? Would it be difficult for people who are not familiar with the cultural context to understand the use of this expression? When we write or speak it is helpful to consider how our choices affect those we socially interact with. Our choice of words, written or spoken, can exclude people. Of course, this depends on the situation or context in which the act of communication is taking place and the knowledges different people bring with them to these interactions.

Don't look a gift horse in the mouth!

In this article, I've presented two ways this can happen: words and phrases in other languages that have no English equivalents, and then words and phrases in English that have no equivalents in other languages. However, there are exceptions to these rules. For example, one expression that manages to cross cultural and linguistic boundaries that you may have heard is "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth." Though I personally have never heard this expression in conversation myself, it did come up in my interview with Karlie who speaks Puerto Rican Spanish and with my parents who speak Farsi, and after doing some research, I found that it is a common English expression too.

Karlie translated this expression from Puerto Rican Spanish as "you don't look at the teeth of a horse that's been gifted to you," which means, "you're not supposed to re-gift. You're supposed to just like the gifts you get." This is used in her culture to teach children to be grateful for what they have. This has the same meaning in Farsi as well, though the wording is slightly different. Again we see the influence of culture, morality, and generations on the socialization of this expression in particular.

Across each interview, I found that language is definitely tied to memory. It is difficult to come up with expressions on the spot whether they have direct equivalents in another language or not. Though the people I interviewed were aware these expressions exist, many of them found it difficult to pull them out of their tacit, antecedent knowledge, even when I had prepared them with questions beforehand.

Also, when dealing with this topic, it is important to consider the history of cultures and how language is passed down through family and generations. Our uptake of expressions happens from childhood and almost instantaneously becomes tacit; it is difficult to even articulate the meanings of expressions or translate them to someone who is not from the expression's linguistic or cultural background. Many expressions are nonsensical, and though their etymologies may lead us to a better understanding of them, most of our learning of expressions comes through socialization and not formal training, so it is hard to get at the meaning without using resources like dictionaries, unless we simply grew up in that culture or speaking that language.

Expressions are learned through exposure and immersion into cultures. They are learned through lived experiences and social interactions whether they are written, spoken, or physically acted out. Often expressions are used to teach moral lessons or politeness. Other times they're used to express a feeling more simply or establish rapport between people. Whatever the intention, expressions give insights into cultures that we may think are different from our own and often show us that we're not as different as we may have thought.

When coming across expressions that are unfamiliar or untranslatable, it can be useful to adopt a writing research identity to make uptake easier. An open mind and flexible attitude not only will allow us to accept linguistic and cultural differences but can facilitate our own learning of new vocabulary or ways to express ourselves.

In a world that is becoming increasingly global through the rise of technologies like the Internet and social media, it is important to consider ourselves in relation to the activity systems surrounding us. Looking at the political, historical, and cultural factors that influence our understanding of the world, we can use that knowledge to broaden our perspectives so that we can be more well-rounded and understanding of those who are different from us. We can use that knowledge to help communicate our message more effectively in various genres. Using CHAT as a tool for investigation, we can also gain insight into translanguaging and realize some of the challenges that come about when trying to translate between foreign languages, such as with idiomatic expressions. Otherwise, we might just be treading water . . .

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Sanam Shahmiri is a PhD student in creative writing with a focus in women and gender studies. Her academic interests include poetry, postcolonialism, and cultural studies. In her spare time, she enjoys going to the movies, travelling, and hiking.

