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## **Experiential cartography, and the significance of “untranslatable” words**

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### **Abstract**

Mainstream psychology can be regarded as largely Western-centric, with its concepts and priorities biased towards Western ways of thinking and understanding. Consequently, the field would benefit from greater cross-cultural awareness and engagement. To that end, this paper offers one means of engagement, the study of “untranslatable” words (i.e., terms without an exact equivalent in another language, in our case English). A key function of language is that it offers a “map” that allows us to understand and navigate the world. In that respect, such words point to cultural variation in the maps we use, and even to variation in the actual territory mapped. The paper concludes with suggestions for why and how psychology could benefit from engaging with such words.

Keywords: cross-cultural; linguistics; translation; cartography; lexicography.

Mainstream academic psychology tends to be strongly Western-centric, to the extent that it could even be viewed as a Western “ethnopsychology” (Wierzbicka, 1989). That is, like all systems of knowledge, the field is culturally-situated, influenced by the mainly Western contexts in which it has been formed and developed. For instance, much of its empirical work has involved scholars and participants described by Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010) as WEIRD, belonging to societies that are Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic. As a result, the concepts developed within the field are arguably biased towards Western ways of thinking and understanding the world, such as a North American tradition of “expressive individualism” (Izquierdo, 2005). And yet, Western psychology is often unaware of its situatedness – with its cultural bias constituting a “disguised ideology” – uncritically regarding itself as psychology *in toto* (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008). As such, the field would benefit from greater cross-cultural engagement, awareness, and understanding.

To that end, this paper offers one such means of engagement, namely the study of “untranslatable” words (i.e., those lacking an exact equivalent in another language, in our case English). The nature and significance of such words will be introduced over three sections. The first section highlights cross-cultural variation in the way people experience and understand the world, drawing in particular on linguistic differences. It also addresses the implications that such variation has for psychology. The second section then introduces a theoretical approach which helps us make sense of cross-cultural differences. Specifically, we will explore the “cartographic” properties of language, a key function of which is mapping our experiential world. Crucially, cultures vary in how they draw their maps, which influences how people in those cultures experience and understand life. The third section then addresses the significance of untranslatable words, arguing that these signify areas or aspects of the world that one’s culture has overlooked. As such, it will be proposed that psychology would benefit from engaging with such words. A case study of such engagement is presented

featuring the Pāli term *sati*, which is the basis (as a “loan translation”) for the concept of mindfulness. The paper concludes with suggestions for how academic engagement with untranslatable words could unfold going forwards.

### **The Challenge of Linguistic Relativity**

Psychology has inevitably been influenced by the cultural contexts in which it has been developed and practiced. In that respect, one might speak of multiple “ethnopsychologies” across the globe. These can be identified and analysed on varying levels of scale, from the transnational (e.g., “Western ethnopsychology”; Wierzbicka, 1989), to the national (e.g., “Nepali ethnopsychology”; Kohrt & Maharjan, 2009), to the subnational (e.g., “Ifaluk ethnopsychology”; Lutz, 1985). However, over recent decades, Western ethnopsychology, and more specifically American ethnopsychology, has come to dominate the field as a whole – i.e., academic psychology as an international endeavour – to the extent that it is often regarded uncritically as psychology *in toto* (Pickren, 2009). Kurt Danziger (1985, 2006), the historian of psychology, has provided an influential analysis of these power dynamics using the metaphor of centre and periphery. Prior to the Second World War, he suggests there were various centres of knowledge and practice, including Berlin, Cambridge, and Chicago, as well as peripheral locations where such knowledge/practice was reproduced. However, in the post-war period, the economic and military dominance of the United States meant that American psychology was exported globally, effectively becoming the sole centre, to the extent that the qualifying adjective “American” soon became erased as superfluous.

This has meant that concepts, ideologies, priorities, and methods associated with American psychology have come to dominate the international scene. One aspect of this dominance is that (American) English has become the default language for the field. Consider that most of the field’s literature and discourse (e.g., at conferences) is in English. This means most of its ideas and theories are structured around the contours of the English language. This

linguistic bias is an issue, since the knowledge developed within the field is therefore to an extent provincial and culturally-specific. Or, to be more precise, this linguistic bias is *one way* in which psychology as a whole – i.e., an international endeavour which is nevertheless driven by America as the sole centre – is culturally-specific (i.e., influenced by this American centre). Other factors include the ideological and economic traditions associated with the United States, from individualism to consumer capitalism (Becker & Marecek, 2008). But this linguistic bias certainly is a key issue. Its significance can be understood by considering the “linguistic relativity hypothesis.”

### **The Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis**

The idea that culture, via language, influences thought can be traced back centuries. It is common to track this line of thinking – now known as the linguistic relativity hypothesis (LRH) – at least as far as Herder (1772), who argued that differences in the mentalities of individual countries derived in large part from the nature of their language. Entering the modern era, these ideas found their most prominent articulation with the anthropologist Sapir (1929) and his student Whorf (1940), to the extent that the LHR is sometimes referred to as the “Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.” In line with the general tenets of the LHR, they argued that language plays a constitutive role in the way people experience and understand life. As Whorf (1956) put it, “We dissect nature along lines laid out by our native languages... The world is presented as a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized... largely by the linguistic systems in our minds” (pp.213-214).

Such linguistic “parsing” takes two main forms: grammatical structure and lexical content. According to Whorf, the most impactful relativity effects pertain to the former, an argument endorsed by many subsequent theorists (Lucy, 1996). That is, cultural differences in grammar are thought to exert a relatively powerful effect on cognition and experience, since grammar structures are arguably “deeper” and more foundational to the mind than are

lexical frameworks, which essentially fit within the structures provided by grammar. For instance, Whorf argued that the Hopi have a different experience of time – in contrast to Western cultures – due to particularities in their grammar, which he appraised as lacking a linear sense of past, present and future. By contrast, lexical variation may exert a relatively weaker effect, since such content is less foundational (Davies & Corbett, 1997). That said, lexical variation is still notable and impactful (e.g., from an epistemological perspective). For instance, Whorf observed that the Hopi have the same word for pilot, dragonfly, and airplane, whereas these are evidently differentiated in English. Functionally then, these are all the same category of entity for the Hopi, whereas English has broken down this broad category (i.e., of airborne objects) into more granular categories. This phenomenon of cultures differently parsing the world – for instance by differentially drawing categorical boundaries around things – is central to this paper, as elucidated further in the second main section below.

As one can imagine, the LHR has generated much debate over the decades, with a vast body of empirical research teasing apart its nuances. To give a prominent example, the phenomenon of colour perception has attracted considerable attention, dating back to the Cambridge expedition to the Torres Straits, in which scholars observed that colour-term inventories vary across languages (Rivers, 1901). According to Davies and Corbett (1997), scholarship up until the 1970s was dominated by a strongly relativist, and even determinist, perspective, in which colour perception was regarded as being heavily influenced by one's cultural conditioning. Thereafter came a surge of work taking a more universalist perspective, which held that lexical differences vis-à-vis colour are superficial, with considerable cross-cultural communality in colour perception (Franklin, Clifford, Williamson, & Davies, 2005). The debate continues apace, of course. But an important point to note is that cultures may not merely vary in how they parse the colour spectrum (e.g., segmenting this into more or fewer categories). Theorists such as Lucy (1997) – drawing on anthropological scholars like

Conklin (1955) – have argued for cross-cultural differences in what is meant by “colour” itself. In English, colour terms usually identify properties such as hue, saturation, and brightness. By contrast, colour terms in other languages may also pertain to properties like lustre, luminosity, and reflectance, and thus capture different dimensions altogether (such as succulence versus desiccation).

### **Language Shapes Experience**

The key message of the LHR – for this paper specifically, and for psychology generally – is therefore that language affects the way people experience the world. (The debates within the LHR literature then centre on how and to what *extent* it does.) Moreover, as the above discussion of colour indicates, language does not simply map a pre-existing phenomenon (i.e., segmenting the colour spectrum), thereby influencing people’s experience of it. More significantly, it is now well understood that language may actually help to constitute and create the very phenomena it signifies, such as influencing which stimuli are understood as pertaining to colour in the first place. The constitutive role of language in this respect – shaping and even forming what is taken to be reality itself – has long been recognised by theorists aligned with areas of psychological enquiry such as social constructionism and discursive psychology, like Gergen (1985) and Potter (1996). These discursive paradigms continue to generate fruitful lines of enquiry, such as analyses of the role language plays in constituting and defining the self, as explored in a recent special issue of *Theory & Psychology* for example (Bertau, 2014). This literature shows us that language can even disclose and create new realms of experience that might not be perceived or accessed by people who are unfamiliar with that particular language. For instance, various Eastern philosophies, and related branches of practice – from medicine to martial arts – have developed lexica pertaining to subtle forms of “energy” in and around the body, from the Chinese notion of *qi* (Jonas & Crawford, 2003) to the Sanskrit concept of *chakras* (Albanese,

1999). Whatever these energies “actual” ontological status, such energies may not necessarily be universally experienced or perceived. For many people outside the cultures that produced these terms, it would be as if the relevant phenomena did not exist.

Indeed, following this line of thinking to its conclusion, it’s been argued that culture – via language – may even shape people’s experience and understanding of ontology itself (Course, 2010). For instance, Western thinkers frequently endorse a dualist ontology, differentiating between an “inner” subjective world of qualia and an “outer” objective world of material objects (Chalmers, 1995). Thus, it is standard to speak of such binaries as mind-body, subjective-objective, interior-exterior, and so on, even if the dyadic nature of these interactions has always been a topic of philosophical debate. However, in other cultures, these binaries are not similarly assumed. For instance, many schools of Buddhism – such as the Yogācāra tradition – tend towards versions of idealism, in which all phenomena, both “internal” and “external,” are seen as arising within a “clearing” provided or accessed by consciousness (Arnold, 2008).

Thus, as one can see, the LHR challenges the preconceptions and assumptions of fields such as psychology, for instance regarding the nature of the self and its relationship with the world. Or more specifically, one might say it challenges Western ethnopsychology, which, despite being culturally-situated, tends to regard itself uncritically as psychology *in toto* (Danziger, 1985, 2006). But that challenge need not be regarded as a negative. One can argue that psychology would benefit from a thoroughgoing engagement with the implications of the LRH. Indeed, it already *has* benefitted in that way, with a wealth of scholarship exploring the significance of the LRH in intersecting paradims such as cross-cultural psychology (Berry, 2000), indigenous psychology (Kim, Yang, & Hwang, 2006), discursive psychology (Quigley, 2001), and social constructionism (Kramsch & Steffensen, 2008). In that respect, one fruitful line of enquiry – which has already been pursued to a limited extent



(e.g., Wierzbicka, 1997) – is the study of so-called untranslatable words. In lacking an exact equivalent in another language, they highlight constructs and categories which have been identified in one language but not in another. As such, they offer an accessible starting point for examining cross-cultural linguistic and conceptual differences, as demonstrated by scholars like Wierzbicka (for whom untranslatable terms constitute “key words” which enable us to understand their respective cultures). We shall address the nature and significance of such words in the third part of this paper below. First though, it will help to dwell further on the nature of language, and specifically the processes by which words are created. To that end, this paper draws upon a well-established idea, namely that language constitutes a “map” that allows us to conceptualise and navigate our world. In that sense, it might be suggested that language facilitates a process of “experiential cartography.”

### **Experiential Cartography**

The notion that language offers a “map” of existence, allowing people to chart and navigate their world, has a long pedigree. The metaphor was utilised, for example, by de Saussure, (1916), founder of structuralism (which recognises language as a system of signs), as well as influential theorists such as Peirce (1955) and Korzybski (1933). Harnessing this metaphor, this second section will elucidate some of the parallels between language and conventional cartography (i.e., geographical maps), and especially the drawing of boundaries. For doing so will allow us to further appreciate the import of the LRH for psychology, and in particular to acknowledge the significance of untranslatable words. First though, to clarify this suggestion that language can map the “world,” it will help to consider the relationship between language and the world it purports to map.

### **Language and the World**

A useful theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between language and the world is provided by Popper (1980). He identifies three worlds, each of which interpenetrates

and influences the others, thereby shaping this process of mapping. The first two worlds were already alluded to above: World 1 (W1) is the subjective “inner” terrain of qualia, while World 2 (W2) is the objective “outer” realm of material entities (including the physical bodies of human beings themselves). The ontological nature of these worlds, and the dynamics of their relationship, have been the focus of philosophical debate for millennia (Chalmers, 1995). In addition, though, Popper helpfully adds a third world (W3): the conceptual world of abstract thought and its products. Most relevantly, for our purposes here, this includes language. As Popper puts it, W3 is the “world of the products of the human mind, such as languages; tales and stories and religious myths; scientific conjectures or theories, and mathematical constructions; songs and symphonies; paintings and sculptures” (p.144). The ontological nature of W3 has been much debated, particularly in fields like mathematics, where the existential status of mathematical entities is a perennial discussion point (Shapiro, 2000). It is beyond the scope here to delve into such debates. Suffice it to say that while conceptual thought does “supervene” (i.e., depend) upon W1 and W2 – in that thought consists of a subjective mental experience (W1), and also resides in the physical architecture of the brain, and in externalising devices such as writing (W2) – Popper and other theorists argue that it is not reducible to these worlds.

This framework is useful in allowing us to appreciate how language sits in relation to the phenomena it maps. (I should add though that this schema is simply a useful heuristic and shorthand in this regard. The idea of “experiential cartography” presented in this paper does not require one to endorse Popper’s notion of three distinct worlds. If one prefers, rather than speak of W1, W2, and W3, one could simply refer respectively, in conventional terms, to subjectivity, the external world, and language.) Language – as a W3 phenomenon, to use Popper’s terminology – intersects with W1 and W2 in complex ways, at least three of which can be identified. First, in an ontological sense, W3 could be regarded as supervening upon

both W1 and W2, as noted above. Second, in a substantive and epistemological sense, much of W3 pertains to W1 and W2. That is, many of W3's products – from scientific theories to religious narratives – concern phenomena situated in W1 (subjective experiences) and W2 (objects and events in the external world). To put it another way, a large part of W3 consists in the mapping of W1 and W2, as well as W3 itself. That is, language can delineate territory in W1 (e.g., differentiating emotional states), W2 (e.g., identifying objects), and W3 (e.g., arranging ideas into comprehensible frameworks).

The third point of intersection is that W1 and W2 influence the structure and contents of W3, as elucidated by theorists such as Lakoff (2008). That said, he suggests this influence has only been recognised relatively recently. Before the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, theories of knowledge tended to be characterised by a stance of “objectivism.” This holds that “rational thought consists of the manipulation of abstract symbols and that these symbols get their meaning via correspondence with the world [i.e., W1 and W2], objectively construed” (p.6). However, recent decades have seen the emergence of a perspective Lakoff refers to as experiential realism, or experientialism. This recognises that “thought [i.e., W3] is embodied,” whereby our conceptual systems “grow out of bodily experience... directly grounded in perception, body movement, and experience of a physical and social character” (p.xiv). Thus, language is a *product* of all three worlds. Of course, it is primarily a product of W3, the world of conceptual thought. Indeed, one might view language as the exemplar W3 product, upon which most of its other products – from scientific theories to historical narratives – depend in a foundational way. However, Lakoff's point is that language is intricately shaped by processes in W1 (e.g., the dynamics of subjective experience) and W2 (e.g., our environment, and our experiences within it). To give one example, Johnson and Lakoff (2002) discuss how people tend to equate quantity with verticality – i.e., where “more” equals “up” – on the basis

of embodied experiences (such as filling a glass with liquid). So, in sum, language can map all three worlds, and is also a product of all three.

Moreover, language does not only *map* our worlds. It has other functions beyond this capacity for referential representation, and as such, other forms of relation with the worlds. For instance, language can have a rhetorical function, where it is not so much mapping the worlds as attempting to lead people into certain regions, such as trying to evoke a W1 experience in listeners (e.g., a specific emotion). Similarly, Austin (1962) highlighted the performative function of language, such as the act of pronouncing a couple husband and wife. That could also be viewed as language leading people into regions of experiential space, in that instance the state of being married. More importantly though, it also reflects one of the most powerful functions of language: to create or constitute new dimensions of experience (Searle, 2005). When the concept of marriage was created, it opened up new areas in all three worlds, including the subjective experience of being married (W1), events such as weddings (W2), and religious and legal frameworks pertaining to marriage (W3). We shall return to this issue of the creative/constitutive power of language below, when we consider the significance of untranslatable words. Before addressing the phenomenon of such words, though, we need to consider the *way* in which language maps our worlds. Arguably the central process here is the drawing of boundaries.

### **Drawing Boundaries**

As with conventional (geographical) cartography, language maps our worlds (1, 2, and 3) by imposing boundaries upon these, thereby parsing them into cognitively digestible elements. There are two related ways in which this parsing occurs, namely, grammatical structure and lexical content. First, grammatical structures offer a powerful way of organising and bringing order to the dynamic complexity of all three worlds. They do this by parsing the worlds according to considerations such as temporal dynamics and relationships between entities.

With the former, for instance, people can segment the stream of experience into past, present, and future, through grammatical tenses. Then with the latter, one can delineate relationships according to such factors as ownership (e.g., through possessives), causality (e.g., through assignments of subject and object), and spatial positioning (e.g., through prepositions) (Levinson, 1996). Then, in a related way – influenced by these grammatical structures – the worlds can also be parsed into lexemes of various sorts. This includes delineating objects (via nouns and pronouns), processes (verbs), qualities (adjectives and adverbs), relationships (prepositions and conjunctions), and communicative acts (interjections). Different languages may also feature other categories, such as classifiers, that are not used in English.

In considering this process of boundary construction, there are four particularly salient points to consider. These go to the heart of the LRH, and to the significance of untranslatable words. These are that boundaries are somewhat: (a) fuzzy; (b) fluid; (c) socially constructed; and (d) culturally-dependent. Let's briefly take these in turn. First, when we delineate regions of a world using a boundary, and label it linguistically (e.g., with a lexeme), these boundaries are not usually clean-cut, but are rather "fuzzy." For instance, in terms of affective states (W1), we become accustomed to demarcating a particular configuration of valence, intensity, duration, etc. as "ecstasy," and a somewhat related configuration as "contentment." However, it's not that a particular *point* within this inner world is identified as ecstasy or contentment. It's more that we draw boundaries around a localised *range* along each of these dimensions, and base the category label on the resulting *region* of our inner world. However, words can be defined and deployed in different ways by different people, and indeed by the same person at different times. As such, these regions are not usually precisely defined, with a clear and unambiguous demarcation. Rather, better to think of them as a "fuzzy set" (Zadeh, 1965, 2015) – where the "transition between membership and nonmembership is gradual rather than abrupt" (Dubois & Prade, 1980, p.1) – arising from all the overlapping yet varying definitions

that people ascribe to the word in question. That is, with a label like “ecstasy,” the question of where the boundaries of this state are – which experiences are deemed “members” of this category – is a matter of interpretation and debate. Wittgenstein’s (1953) notion of family resemblances makes a similar point.

Related to the fuzziness of categories and labels is their fluidity. This was one of the great insights of poststructuralism, which recognised the shifting, dynamic nature of language structures (in contrast to early structuralism, which regarded these structures as more fixed and stable). Thus, theorists such as Derrida (1982) argued that meaning is not unitary or fixed, but “slippery and elusive” as Rail (1998, p.xii) puts it, open to multiple interpretations that moreover can change across time and context. For instance, to return to the notion of ecstasy, this has been subject to interesting shifts in meaning over the centuries. The term originates in classical Greek, where *ékstasis* combined *ek*, meaning outside or beyond, and *stasis*, meaning stature or standing. It thus connoted a person “standing outside” themselves in some manner. This notion was deployed in various ways, from the relatively benign (e.g., being astonished or entranced) to the more troubling (e.g., insanity or spiritual “possession”) (Michaelsen, 1989). It was then “borrowed” by English in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, thus becoming a loanword, a phenomenon to which we shall return below. At first, it was mainly deployed in religious contexts to depict an exalted state – sometimes also referred to as rapture – that could arise from contemplation of the divine (McGinn, 1987). Then, over time, with the gradual secularisation of the West, these spiritual connotations were eroded, with the term now generally just denoting an intense experience of pleasure. Even so, there are differences in how the term is interpreted and used in context. In some modes of discourse, such as psychiatry, it can carry pejorative connotations of being problematic, potentially too intense, artificial, and/or socially inappropriate (Wilmot, 1985). Conversely, other people may merely use it to express strong happiness or satisfaction (e.g., being “ecstatic” about a promotion).

The key point here – using Peirce’s (1955) semiotic terminology – is that there is a relatively loose link between a given signifier (such as “ecstasy”) and the “object” it signifies (in this instance, a W1 region of affective experience). As such, at a cultural level, the region denoted by the label can shift over time – as per ecstasy – producing changes in what is signified by that lexeme.

Reflection on the fuzzy and changing nature of linguistic terms and categories leads to the third key point about linguistic boundaries: they are socially constructed. The way they are drawn is somewhat arbitrary, and subject to convention. This can be easy to appreciate when the boundaries are especially fuzzy, or not self-evident. For instance, it is not obvious how the W1 affective space signified by ecstasy differs from that denoted by near-synonyms like euphoria or bliss. However, one of the great insights of the social constructionist schools of thought is that even categories we usually take for granted as “natural” – e.g., separating people into men and women – are likewise socially created to an extent (Brickell, 2006). This point takes us back to Lakoff’s (2008) argument against “objectivism.” W3 concepts are not abstract symbols that exist in a perfect and fixed correspondence with phenomena in W1 and W2. Rather, they arise out of our embodied experience, influenced by processes in W1 and W2. Crucially, this experience is not simply an individual phenomenon, but a social one. W3 is a communal creation: forged and developed through negotiation, disputation, and agreement within cultural groups, and then built and maintained through practice and through living together and coping with the world.

This point brings us to the fourth point about boundary construction, and one that is central to this paper: language is a product of culture. And, given there are multiple cultures, this means there are many different linguistic “maps” across the globe, producing variation in how people experience and understand the world. This contention is of course at the heart of the LRH, as explored above. And it has implications for psychology, whose Western-centric

nature means that most of its ideas and theories have been structured around the contours of the English language. From the perspective of the LRH, this linguistic bias is an issue, as it means that the knowledge developed within the field is to an extent provincial and culturally-specific. Thus, psychology – indeed all fields – would benefit greatly from engaging with the implications of the LRH, as indeed it already has to an extent, as elucidated above with respect to colour perception for instance. One particularly interesting means of engagement is the study of untranslatable words, which offer an accessible starting point for exploring cross-cultural linguistic and conceptual differences.

### **Untranslatable Words**

There are many reasons for encouraging an engagement with untranslatable words. For a start, such terms provide a “window” onto other cultures’ experiences and understanding of life, as Wierzbicka’s (1997) analysis of various cultures’ “key words” has shown. These terms therefore offer a portal through which people from other cultures might look (if not actually “step”). Such words provide a glimpse – however partial or obscured – into ways of being, doing and thinking in that culture. This doesn’t mean that people outside the culture could actually “step into” it (i.e., fully experience and know what it means to be a member of that culture). To return to an example above, Eastern philosophies have developed lexica pertaining to subtle forms of “energy” in and around the body, from the Chinese notion of *qi* to the Sanskrit concept of *chakras*. Westerners who encounter such terms may not be able to fully acquire the “experiential familiarity” that people native to those languages may have, nor understand their functioning in the local “stream of life,” as Wierzbicka (1999, p.8) puts it. Yet, from a Western perspective, such terms provide at least some indication, however fragmented, of modes of experiences in those cultures. Of course, for researchers in those cultures – who may be developing their own ethnopsychologies (e.g., Yang, 1999) – such concepts may be comprehensible on their own terms. But from a Western perspective too,



there is also merit in engaging with such concepts, if only to appreciate how culturally-specific mainstream (i.e., Western) psychology currently is.

But what exactly are untranslatable words, and why are they so significant? Broadly speaking, they are words which lack an exact equivalent in one's own language. Such words have attracted much attention in recent years, within academia (e.g., Cassin, Apter, Lezra, & Wood, 2014) and popular culture (e.g., De Boinod, 2007). That said, the term itself can be problematic, and is disliked by some linguists (who prefer "unlexicalized"). On one hand, it could be argued that *no* word is truly translatable. Ever since de Saussure (1916), it's been generally accepted by structuralist and poststructuralist theorists that words are embedded within complex webs of meanings. Thus, even if languages have rough equivalents – *Liebe* as the German counterpart to love, for instance – translators have long argued that something is always lost in the act of translation (McClaren, 1998). Conversely others argue that nothing is ever genuinely *untranslatable*. That is, even if a word lacks an exact equivalent in our language, at least something of its meaning can often be conveyed in a few words or sentences (Pullum, 1989). However, it's generally that a word doesn't appear to have an "exact match" that renders it untranslatable in common parlance, and moreover makes it so intriguing to us here.

### **Semantic Gaps**

Specifically, the significance of untranslatable words is that they highlight "semantic gaps" in our language, i.e., "the lack of a convenient word to express what [one] wants to speak about" (Lehrer, 1974, p.105). Such gaps are also known by the Italian phrase "traduttore traditore"; literally meaning "translator, traitor," this is deployed in situations where a word or phrase in one language lacks a precise equivalent in another, rendering translation difficult (or even impossible). In such instances, it is common for a language to simply "borrow" the word as a "loanword." That said, not all instances of borrowing are due to untranslatability. Haspelmath

(2009) differentiates between “core” versus “cultural” borrowings. The former is when a loanword replicates a word that already exists in the recipient language. This may happen for sociolinguistic reasons, such as the cultural capital associated with using foreign words (Blank, 1999). Such borrowings are not of concern here. However, the second category of “cultural” borrowings is central. For these are “loanwords by necessity,” as Haspelmath puts it, whereby the recipient language lacks its own word for the referent in question.

This might occur, for instance, when a new invention, practice, or idea is introduced to a culture. Thus, in the absence of an appropriate native word – or a new word being coined – the loanword is taken up because it is cognitively and socially useful, allowing speakers to articulate ideas they had previously struggled to. As a result, it can *fill* a semantic gap. For instance, analysing loanword adoption across languages, Tadmor (2009) found that most borrowed words belong to categories susceptible to the introduction of novel ideas and practices, such as religion and belief (of which 41% of English words are loanwords), and clothing and grooming (39%). By contrast, aspects of life less susceptible to such innovation have far less borrowing, such as the body (14%), spatial relations (14%) and sense perception (11%). The point is that semantic gaps are less likely to arise in relation to phenomena which are common across cultures, such as bodily structures and processes. By contrast, phenomena that are more subject to creativity and innovation – such as belief systems – are more likely to have culturally specific elements; this, in turn, means that other cultures may have semantic gaps in relation to these elements, necessitating the borrowing of loanwords.

In terms of the cartographic metaphor above, a semantic gap denotes a region of experience that has not been circumscribed by a given language (in our case, English). This may be because it is an experience with which English speakers on the whole are unfamiliar, e.g., because they lacked opportunities to experience or notice the phenomenon in question. An example might be sensations of “subtle energies,” as discussed above, denoted by terms

like *qi* and *chakra*. Indeed, one might even say that, for most English-speakers – excepting those who have consciously appraised themselves of such phenomena – these experiences do not even effectively exist. This exemplifies the point above that language does not only map worlds (W1, 2, and 3), but may even create or constitute dimensions of these worlds (i.e., populating these worlds with new phenomena, such as engendering experiences of subtle energies in W1). (That said, this possibility needs to be further substantiated through research, and is raised somewhat speculatively here, notwithstanding existing scholarship on this theme, such as on colour perception, as outlined above.) In other cases, English-speakers may well be familiar with the region of experience in question, but English has carved this up differently to other languages, and has perhaps even configured the space itself differently. An example is the aforementioned issue of colour perception, where there may be cultural differences in the very notion of what constitutes colour (Lucy, 1997). A related instance of a semantic gap is when another language has mapped an experience with greater specificity and granularity than English. For example, linguists have remarked that the word “love” is “polysemous in the extreme” (Berscheid, 2010, p.6), spanning diverse feelings and relationships. By contrast, other languages have developed a more nuanced lexicon to depict types of love – with Greek being particularly prolific in this regard (Lee, 1977; Lomas, 2018a) – thereby generating words which are untranslatable (since “love” cannot capture their nuances and differences).

Such examples reinforce the contention, raised above, that untranslatable words have great relevance to psychology. By providing insights into the way other cultures understand and experience life, they can counter the Western-centricity of mainstream psychology, and open space for greater consideration of cultural difference and diversity. Indeed, to an extent, such cross-cultural engagement has already been underway for decades within pockets of psychology, even if scholars did not frame their work as being focused on untranslatable

words per se. For instance, researchers interested in cross-cultural differences in colour perception will have found themselves analysing colour-related terms that do not have an exact equivalent in English. Other examples include the burgeoning field of cross-cultural psychiatry, which includes analyses of disorders – and associated terminology – that appear specific to certain cultures (Kirmayer, 1991). A greater number of such endeavours would considerably enhance psychology. Depending on one's perspective, there would then either be a greater and deeper range of culturally-specific ethnopsychologies, if one were more inclined towards relativism – a process Adair (1999) calls the “indigenization of psychology” (p.403) – or a more comprehensive overarching psychology that was capable of accommodating cultural nuances, if one tended towards stances such as Berry, Poortinga, Segall, and Dasen's (2011) concept of “moderate universalism.”

### **Borrowing Untranslatable Words**

One of the most significant ways the field could engage with untranslatable words – and indeed already *has* done so – is by incorporating, adapting, or in some fashion “borrowing” these. (This generally means borrowing lexemes, rather than grammatical structures. While the latter may be more impactful from a LRH stance, they are less amenable to transporting into other cultural contexts.) From this perspective, untranslatable words are not only informative vis-à-vis the culture that created them. Additionally, they may have some wider, more universal relevance, whereby the phenomena they signify are to an extent accessible to people in other cultures.

That said, this process of borrowing can be problematic. When a word is borrowed, it may well not retain the meaning(s) it has in its original language. As discussed above, since de Saussure (1916) it's generally been accepted by structuralist and poststructuralist theorists that words are embedded within networks of other terms which help endow it with meaning. Thus, it is hard to understand a word in isolation, without knowing how it relates systemically

to other terms, or how it is deployed in context. As such, some scholars argue that unless a person is enmeshed within the culture that produced a word, they would be unable to understand or experience the phenomenon it refers to. For instance, Taylor (1985) argues that there is no way out of the “hermeneutic circle,” in which concepts can only be understood with reference to others in that language. As he put it, “We can often experience what it is like to be on the outside [of the circle] when we encounter the feeling, action, and experiential meaning language of another civilization. Here there is no translation, no way of explaining in other, more accessible concepts” (p.23-24). However, Wierzbicka (1999) contends that we can indeed approximate a feel for what untranslatable words refer to. It is true that people not emic to a culture may not appreciate the full nuanced richness of a term compared to people who are “inside” the culture. As she clarifies, “verbal explanations of such concepts cannot replace experiential familiarity with them and with their functioning in the local ‘stream of life’” (p.8). Yet “it is not true that no verbal explanations illuminating to outsiders are possible at all.” Even without understanding how a word is connected and used in its original language, something of its essence may yet be appreciated.

In terms of the viability of psychology engaging with untranslatable words, a useful case study is provided by the burgeoning interest in the concept and practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness is a calque, or “loan translation,” of the Pāli term *sati*, a central term within Buddhism (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Mindfulness is an interesting example, since it highlights the complexities, but also the benefits, of engaging with untranslatable words. Regarding the complexities, firstly, as per the notion of fluidity above, *sati* does not simply have one meaning, but a range of meanings which moreover have shifted across time and context. Its earliest forms of usage had connotations of remembrance and recollection (Gethin, 2011). It was then harnessed by the Buddha circa 500 BCE to depict a beneficial mental state involving present-moment awareness, as elucidated in the *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta*, the seminal

instructional text in the Pāli Canon on the cultivation of *sati* (Bodhi, 2011). Over the centuries, as Buddhism was transmitted to other linguacultures, various cognates and loan translations were developed. This occurred in English in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when Buddhist texts began to become more widely available. The term “mindfulness” was coined by T. W. Rhys Davids at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – after experimenting with other renderings – and has subsequently been embraced by clinicians and scholars who have sought to harness the practice of *sati* (e.g., as articulated in the Pāli Canon). Principal in this regard is Kabat-Zinn (1982), who created a pioneering Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction intervention in the late seventies, which was successful in treating chronic pain. This intervention – and subsequent adaptations, like Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, designed to prevent relapse to depression (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002) – has been highly efficacious in ameliorating mental health issues (Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004).

This is therefore a fruitful instance of psychology engaging with an untranslatable word. Here we have a mental state – operationalised by Kabat-Zinn (2003) as “the awareness that arises through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (p.145) – that had not previously been identified in English (hence the lack of an exact English equivalent, notwithstanding Rhys Davids’ decision to render it as “mindfulness”). This is not to claim that English speakers had hitherto been entirely unfamiliar with this state. After all, “trait” theories of mindfulness posit that all people may experience mental states that approximate to mindfulness, even if they are unaware of the concept per se (Brown, Weinstein, & Creswell, 2012). However, the state had not been explicitly identified in English, nor practices developed to help people cultivate it (as they had been in Buddhism). Now though, there are thousands of empirical psychology studies focusing on mindfulness, and the concept has become ubiquitous in Western culture more broadly (Van Gordon, Shonin, Griffiths, & Singh, 2015). Evidently, psychology has

found great value in engaging with *sati*, which has not only enriched its understanding of mental functioning, but also led to practical interventions of therapeutic value.

That said, critics have queried the extent to which the concept has been altered in the act of borrowing. For a start, some question its rendering as “mindfulness,” suggesting that this label is too cognitive and cerebral, and misses the affective qualities embedded in *sati*, like compassion (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006). Indeed, Eastern languages do not necessarily have a rigid distinction between thought and emotion (as there is in English). For instance, the Sanskrit term *citta* is often explained as signifying heart and mind together. As such, it has been argued that “heart-mindfulness” might be a better calque of *sati*. Besides the issue of its rendering, in its original Buddhist context, *sati* was embedded within a rich nexus of ideas and practices that together comprise the *dharma*, a complex term with connotations of truth, laws, and teachings, which is used to denote the Buddhist path as a whole (Stcherbatsky, 2003). In transplanting *sati* into another lexicon and cultural context, this network is not necessarily retained. (Readers interested in this point may appreciate Cassaniti’s (2015) analysis of Buddhism as understood and practised in a Thai community.) Recall the point that language does not simply map worlds, but can even create or constitute dimensions of these worlds (e.g., engendering new W1 experiences). In that spirit, one could argue that, in its original Buddhist context, the experience signified by *sati* was situated in a world-space that doesn’t even exist for contemporary English speakers, or at least one that is shaped and constellated differently to the world-space disclosed by English.

That said, as emphasised above, the Western adoption of *sati* has nevertheless led to important practical insights. Moreover, its operationalisation in psychology is arguably not discordant with its original meanings. For instance, Kabat-Zinn’s (2003) definition above does align, to an extent, with Buddhist descriptions of mindfulness. It still may be the case that, as Williams and Kabat-Zinn (2011) have noted, “the rush to define mindfulness within

Western psychology may wind up denaturing it in fundamental ways,” with “the potential for something priceless to be lost” (p.4). For instance, in its original Buddhist context, *sati* was imbued with an inherent moral sensibility – relating to it being embedded within the wider framework of the *dharma* – that is not necessarily retained in the term mindfulness, nor in contemporary conceptualisations and practices of it (Van Gordon, Shonin, Lomas, & Griffiths, 2016). However, even if mindfulness does not retain all the meanings *sati* had in its original Buddhist context, it can still be of value, as indicated above. Moreover, as *sati* becomes adopted and adapted by Westerners, it starts to develop its own associations of meaning. For instance, in Western psychology, mindfulness has become associated with cognitive models of attention (Chiesa, Calati, & Serretti, 2011) and affective models of relaxation (Tang et al., 2009). Moreover, these considerations of meaning-in-context do not undercut the value of engaging with constructs like *sati*. Rather, they *reinforce* the point that psychology still has much yet to learn from the culture from which *sati* was borrowed.

Thus, overall, mindfulness shows the potential, and the pitfalls, for psychology engaging with untranslatable words. One can dispute the extent to which the contemporary understanding of mindfulness aligns with *sati* as conceived in its original Buddhist context. Nevertheless, within its own parameters, Western psychology has been enriched by its engagement with *sati*, including in developing its nomological network, and augmenting its corpus of therapeutic interventions. Indeed, one could even argue that Westerners introduced to the concept and practice of mindfulness have had their worlds expanded. Possibly the term “mindfulness” allowed them to recognise a mental state with which they were already familiar, but hitherto lacked a label for. Or, possibly, the term introduced them to a new area of W1 experience they hadn’t previously encountered; in that sense, the term may have created or constituted a new dimension of their inner world. Either way, it is hard to argue that Western psychology’s engagement with *sati* has not been fruitful on many levels. As



such, this paper concludes by emphasising that the field should engage further with untranslatable words, and offers some suggestions for how this might unfold.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that academic psychology – which could largely be appraised as a Western ethnopsychology that regards itself as universal – would benefit from a greater degree of cross-cultural awareness and understanding. Doing so could be seen as either generating a greater range of culturally-specific ethnopsychologies (if one were inclined towards relativism), or a more comprehensive, overarching psychology that can nevertheless accommodate cultural nuances (if one were inclined towards universalism). More specifically, it has been argued that psychology would benefit – and indeed *has* benefitted – from exploring the implications of the LRH. And one way of doing so is through the study of untranslatable words. Reasons for encouraging this engagement are manifold. For a start, such words provide a “window” onto other cultures’ experiences and understanding of life. Then, beyond that is the intriguing possibility of Western psychology learning from and even “borrowing” these terms, as explored above in relation to *sati*. Such engagement could take numerous forms.

First, researchers could conduct exploratory enquiries into relevant terms. Something of that sort is seen with efforts by Lomas (2016) to create a lexicography of untranslatable words pertaining to wellbeing. That project began by searching through academic and grey literature (e.g., websites and blogs) for relevant words, a process which generated over 200 relevant terms. These were analysed using a variation of Grounded Theory, which allows theory to “emerge” inductively from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Subsequently, a website was created ([www.drtilomas.com/lexicography](http://www.drtilomas.com/lexicography)) to crowd-source suggestions from people worldwide. The resulting lexicography – which remains a work-in-progress – now includes nearly 1,000 terms, and has generated analyses of various domains of experience,

including spirituality (Lomas, 2018a), love (Lomas, 2018b), ambivalent emotions (Lomas, 2018c), and positive emotions (Lomas, 2017).

This kind of broad-brush review could be augmented by more detailed qualitative analyses of specific words and linguacultures. This could include in-depth interviews with bilingual speakers, aimed at identifying and exploring relevant words in the interviewee's native language(s). Interviews could discuss these words in depth, including their etymology, cultural significance, and use in context. Such analyses could be augmented by ethnographic and anthropological studies of particular cultures, which would provide insights into the larger contexts of meaning-making in which the untranslatable terms are situated. Of course, this need not mean Western academics "objectively" studying these contexts from a supposed position of outside expertise. Scholars and other informed individuals from these cultures could be invited to collaborate in these enquiries in a spirit of "co-production" (Maclean & Cullen, 2009).

In addition to such qualitative endeavours, quantitative analyses of constructs would be valuable, particularly using factor-analysis (e.g., to examine their internal structure). This type of exploration is exemplified by Scheibe, Freund, and Baltes (2007), who constructed a 28-item scale to assess the notion of *Sehnsucht*, an ostensibly untranslatable German term that is explained roughly as a predilection for longing. Their research – in German, and on a German population – suggested it comprised six dimensions: (a) utopian conceptions of an ideal path of life development; (b) a sense of life's incompleteness and imperfection; (c) a conjoint focus on the past, present, and future; (d) ambivalent, bittersweet emotions; (e) deep reflections on life; and (f) a mental world imbued with symbolic richness. It would be instructive to explore the extent to which non-German people share similar tendencies towards this state, perhaps by developing versions of the questionnaire in other languages (although, of course, translating scales introduces its own complexities). Comparable

analyses, including the development of other such scales, could be undertaken with other words. Such analyses could enable assessment of how such words sit in relation to existing psychological concepts.

Finally, there is the potential for applied forms of research, including the development of interventions to help people engage with untranslatable words (and the phenomena these signify). For instance, as noted above, *sati* is the basis for therapeutic programmes to help participants experience and develop mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Similar endeavours could be undertaken with other such words, although these efforts will of course be subject to the same challenges and complexities as discussed in relation to *sati*. Overall then, the field has much to learn and gain from engaging with untranslatable words, and more generally in developing a greater degree of cross-cultural sensitivity and appreciation.

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