

The 'untranslatable' emotions you never knew you had

Have you ever felt a little **mbuki-mvuki** – the irresistible urge to “shuck off your clothes as you dance”? Perhaps a little **kilig** – the jittery fluttering feeling as you talk to someone you fancy? How about **uitwaaien** – which encapsulates the revitalising effects of taking a walk in the wind?

These words – taken from Bantu, Tagalog, and Dutch – have no direct English equivalent, but they represent very precise emotional experiences that are neglected in our language. And if Tim Lomas at the University of East London has his way, they might soon become much more familiar.

Lomas's [Positive Lexicography Project](#) aims to capture the many flavours of good feelings (some of which are distinctly bittersweet) found across the world, in the hope that we might start to incorporate them all into our daily lives. We have already borrowed many emotion words from other languages, after all – think “frisson”, from French, or “schadenfreude”, from German – but there are many more that have not yet wormed their way into our vocabulary. Lomas has found hundreds of these "untranslatable" experiences so far – and he's only just begun.

Learning these words, he hopes, will offer us all a richer and more nuanced understanding of ourselves. “They offer a very different way of seeing the world.”



Gigil is a Tagalog word that describes the irresistible urge to pinch or squeeze someone because they are loved or cherished (Credit: Alamy)

Lomas says he was first inspired after hearing a talk on the Finnish concept of **sisu**, which is a sort of “extraordinary determination in the face of adversity”. According to Finnish speakers, the English ideas of “grit”, “perseverance” or “resilience” do not come close to describing the inner strength encapsulated in their native term. It was "untranslatable" in the sense that there was no direct or easy equivalent encoded within the English vocabulary that could capture that deep resonance.

Intrigued, he began to hunt for further examples, scouring the academic literature and asking every foreign acquaintance for their own suggestions. The first results of this project were published in the [Journal of Positive Psychology](#) last year.

Many of the terms referred to highly specific positive feelings, which often depend on very particular circumstances:

- **Desbundar** (Portuguese) – to shed one’s inhibitions in having fun

- **Tarab** (Arabic) – a musically induced state of ecstasy or enchantment
- **Shinrin-yoku** (Japanese) – the relaxation gained from bathing in the forest, figuratively or literally
- **Gigil** (Tagalog) – the irresistible urge to pinch or squeeze someone because they are loved or cherished
- **Yuan bei** (Chinese) – a sense of complete and perfect accomplishment
- **Iktsuarpok** (Inuit) – the anticipation one feels when waiting for someone, whereby one keeps going outside to check if they have arrived

But others represented more complex and bittersweet experiences, which could be crucial to our growth and overall flourishing.

- **Natsukashii** (Japanese) – a nostalgic longing for the past, with happiness for the fond memory, yet sadness that it is no longer
- **Wabi-sabi** (Japanese) – a “dark, desolate sublimity” centred on transience and imperfection in beauty
- **Saudade** (Portuguese) – a melancholic longing or nostalgia for a person, place or thing that is far away either spatially or in time – a vague, dreaming wistfulness for phenomena that may not even exist
- **Sehnsucht** (German) – “life-longings”, an intense desire for alternative states and realisations of life, even if they are unattainable

In addition to these emotions, Lomas’s lexicography also charted the personal characteristics and behaviours that might determine our long-term well-being and the ways we interact with other people.

- **Dadirri** (Australian aboriginal) term – a deep, spiritual act of reflective and respectful listening
- **Pihentagyú** (Hungarian) – literally meaning “with a relaxed brain”, it describes quick-witted people who can come up with sophisticated jokes or solutions
- **Desenrascanço** (Portuguese) – to artfully disentangle oneself from a

troublesome situation

- **Sukha** (Sanskrit) – genuine lasting happiness independent of circumstances
- **Orenda** (Huron) – the power of the human will to change the world in the face of powerful forces such as fate

You can view many more examples on [his website](#), where there is also the opportunity to submit your own. Lomas readily admits that many of the descriptions he has offered so far are only an approximation of the term's true meaning. "The whole project is a work in progress, and I'm continually aiming to refine the definitions of the words in the list," he says. "I definitely welcome people's feedback and suggestions in that regard."



Portuguese fado singers like Cristina Branco channel the intense longing of "saudade" (Credit: Getty Images)

In the future, Lomas hopes that other psychologists may begin to explore the causes and consequences of these experiences – to extend our understanding of emotion beyond the English concepts that have dominated research so far.

But studying these terms will not just be of scientific interest; Lomas suspects that familiarising ourselves with the words might actually change the way we feel ourselves, by drawing our attention to fleeting sensations we had long ignored.

Welcome to The Human Planet

Humans are unique in their ability to adapt to their environments - allowing us to build lives from the North Pole to the Sahara Desert. This article is the second part of [The Human Planet](#), a new series in which BBC Future uses cutting-edge science to explore our extraordinary diversity. To read more, see the first article in the series: "[How East and West think in fundamentally different ways](#)".

“In our stream of consciousness – that wash of different sensations feelings and emotions – there’s so much to process that a lot passes us by,” Lomas says. “The feelings we have learned to recognise and label are the ones we notice – but there’s a lot more that we may not be aware of. And so I think if we are given these new words, they can

help us articulate whole areas of experience we’ve only dimly noticed.”

As evidence, Lomas points to the work of Lisa Feldman Barrett at Northeastern University, who has shown that our abilities to identify and label our emotions can have far-reaching effects.

Her research was inspired by the observation that certain people use different emotion words interchangeably, while others are highly precise in their descriptions. “Some people use words like anxious, afraid, angry, disgusted to refer to a general affective state of feeling bad,” she explains. “For them, they are synonyms, whereas for other people they are distinctive feelings with distinctive actions associated with them.”

This is called “emotion granularity” and she usually measures this by asking the participants to rate their feelings on each day over the period of a few weeks, before she calculates the variation and nuances within their reports: whether the same old terms always coincide, for instance.



Wabi-sabi is a Japanese term that describes our appreciation of transient and imperfect beauty - such as the fleeting splendour of cherry blossom (Credit: Getty Images)

Importantly, she has found that this then determines how well we cope with life. If you are better able to pin down whether you are feeling *despair* or *anxiety*, for instance, you might be better able to decide how to remedy those feelings: whether to talk to a friend, or watch a funny film. Or being able to identify your *hope* in the face of disappointment might help you to look for new solutions to your problem.

In this way, emotion vocabulary is a bit like a directory, allowing you to call up a greater number of strategies to cope with life. Sure enough, people who score highly on emotion granularity are better able to [recover more quickly from stress](#) and [are less likely to drink alcohol](#) as a way of recovering from bad news. It can even improve your academic success. Marc Brackett at Yale University has found that teaching 10 and 11-year-old children a richer emotional vocabulary [improved their end-of-year grades, and promoted better behaviour in the classroom](#). “The more granular our experience of emotion is, the more capable we are to make

sense of our inner lives,” he says.

Both Brackett and Barrett agree that Lomas’s “positive lexicography” could be a good prompt to start identifying the subtler contours of our emotional landscape. “I think it is useful – you can think of the words and the concepts they are associated with as tools for living,” says Barrett. They might even inspire us to try new experiences, or appreciate old ones in a new light.

It’s a direction of research that Lomas would like to explore in the future. In the meantime, Lomas is still continuing to build his lexicography – which has grown to nearly a thousand terms. Of all the words he has found so far, Lomas says that he most often finds himself pondering Japanese concepts such as **wabi-sabi** (that “dark, desolate sublimity” involving transience and imperfection). “It speaks to this idea of finding beauty in phenomena that are aged and imperfect,” he says. “If we saw the world through those eyes, it could be a different way of engaging in life.”

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