

UNITED WISDOM

Untranslatable words: what is lost with the context

World and Consciousness

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Epigraph

> *“I render sense for sense and not word for word.”*

Jerome, Letter 57, §5. Short excerpt from the English translation credited to W. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis, and W. G. Martley. His qualification concerning Scripture is discussed in section IV.

What this article is about

We open a translation and encounter a word that promises access to another person's experience. A note warns that no exact equivalent exists. This can mean several things: a short label is missing, familiar associations differ, conventions of address are unknown, or sound is lost. Calling all of them untranslatability can turn curiosity into the belief that another way of life is inaccessible. This article proposes asking what needs to survive in this particular passage and which form of transmission helps. We compare selected arguments by Locke, Jerome, and Schleiermacher, alongside two historical texts about language, while keeping their purposes distinct. Translation is treated as work with a particular loss and reader. It may require explanation, rereading, and acknowledgment of something still not conveyed. These steps give translators no authority to speak for every user of a language or declare their version final.

I. What does untranslatable mean?

Imagine a letter in which one familiar word describes an evening after a long absence: home is recognizable and loved ones are present, yet the former life has changed. The translation offers sadness. It conveys part of the mood but leaves return, belonging, and the passage of time outside the label. If an editor calls the original untranslatable, ask whether nothing can be conveyed or whether the distinctions cannot fit into one equally short word. In the second case, description already does some work. This invented example represents no actual language's vocabulary or national psychology. It turns mystery into a question about a specific passage.

Several losses can be distinguished. A lexical loss concerns a missing compact equivalent; a situational loss concerns circumstances participants already knew. A change in address alters relationships: respectful, friendly, and confrontational expressions do different work. A formal loss concerns rhythm, repetition, sound, and arrangement. These are working questions, not

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an exhaustive scientific classification. One word may combine several tasks. Evaluating a translation therefore starts by identifying the priority: what should the reader understand, hear, or do here? Without that question, two conscientious versions may look contradictory even when they preserve different aspects of the same message. Their choices need to become visible before judgment.

The word impossible needs a scale. One unsuccessful version does not establish that every future explanation will fail. Conversely, a long account cannot necessarily replace a brief phrase in a poem or conversation. A translation may communicate events while distributing attention and expectation differently. We can find it useful and incomplete at once. Readers need not choose between unchecked admiration and a demand for perfect identity. They can request the specific loss, consider its proposed repair, and keep questions open where comparison has not occurred. This makes translation discussable rather than a test of whether someone belongs among those supposedly entitled to understand.

II. A compact name and an established practice

In Essay Concerning Human Understanding III.V.7–10, Locke connects names for combinations of ideas with communication. Section 8 considers words lacking exact equivalents; section 10 allows descriptions of events in a Roman triumph even without their unifying name. This is philosophical reasoning, not a modern survey of languages. Its useful distinction here is between compact naming and possible description. His historical comparisons do not provide a present assessment of languages' capacities. We need only the bounded question: which elements does a particular name hold together? A description can begin to identify them without claiming to reproduce every feature of the original expression.

Consider an invented institutional term: clearance combines a completed check, a record in a register, and permission for a specified activity. A familiar word in another organization might indicate only an invitation. Choosing it without explanation could grant permission too early. Lexical resemblance conceals procedural difference. Conditions can restore that difference: who checks, where the result is recorded, and how long authorization lasts. The translation grows longer while preserving the practice. This editorial example describes no actual clearance system and provides no legal advice. It illustrates why some vocabulary needs relationships and expected actions translated alongside the label that compresses them for its customary users.

This does not mean every term reduces without remainder to instructions. In a story, an institutional word may also express fear, belonging, or irony. We can separate what has been clarified from what requires further reading. We understand the procedure but have not heard the narrator's voice; or we recognize the mood without understanding authority. That distinction keeps the work honest and identifies different repairs: an inaccurate rule needs

something different from lost irony. The broad claim that things are different there replaces neither check. Context helps when its details explain the relationship between this word and action, rather than simply giving an impression of cultural depth.

III. Context consists of relationships

Context is often offered as a universal remedy without identifying what needs adding. Readers may receive an endless historical account while the sentence remains obscure. Ask instead which missing relationship changes its interpretation. It might be a previous remark, the speakers' positions, the occasion, or usage in nearby chapters. Choose the addition according to the difficulty. Identifying the person being praised may require little; establishing whether praise is sarcastic may require more. Commentary should follow the question rather than display learning. Readers should be able to see why a detail is supplied and how it bears on the passage they are trying to understand.

Augustine's account of learning speech in Confessions Book I connects words with bodily movements, pointing, and surrounding events. This is religious autobiography addressed to God, not an experiment in developmental psychology. Our comparison concerns the represented scene: words acquire meaning through relationships with actions. Applied to translation, it invites a question about circumstances available to participants but unavailable to us. That application belongs to this article. It establishes no universal learning mechanism and requires no agreement with Augustine's entire theology. The historical passage helps formulate a question whose answer must then be checked in the actual passage being translated, using appropriate evidence for that passage.

Commentary can also add more than evidence supports. Suppose an editor explains an ancient greeting through a custom without identifying why that custom applies here. Readers receive a vivid scene the text does not establish. Distinguish documented detail, plausible reconstruction, and contemporary analogy. They can assist in different ways but need labels. Be especially cautious about speaking for a whole culture: a familiar usage establishes no single meaning for every period, genre, and person. Good context increases opportunities for checking. Attractive unsupported context can make an error more convincing. Asking where an explanation comes from is therefore as necessary as asking how a word was translated.

IV. Meaning and form in Jerome's defense

In Letter 57, Jerome defends translation choices in a particular dispute. Section 5 describes rendering sense rather than replacing words in sequence, with a qualification for Scripture, where word order itself matters to him. He also discusses preserving expressiveness. Those qualifications prevent the epigraph from becoming unconditional permission to rewrite any text. The letter presents a historical participant's position, not a neutral universal rule. Claims about his own version remain part of his defense; this article does not compare that translation with the Greek original. We use the choice he articulates between corresponding individual units and conveying the meaning of an utterance.

That choice requires specifying meaning. Replace a respectful greeting with a friendly one and the invitation may survive while the relationship changes. Divide a complex sentence into short ones and the argument may become accessible while the effort of holding several qualifications together disappears. Neither choice is justified simply by invoking meaning. Translators should show what they preserved, why form changed, and which consequences they acknowledge. Readers can then evaluate an exchange. A teaching explanation may expand a compression that a literary phrase should retain. Purpose helps choose, but does not cancel responsibility for an added assertion or missing distinction. The tradeoff remains open to inspection.

Commentary has limits worth respecting. A note can explain that an address was respectful without making readers experience the distance its first audience heard. One annotation cannot promise restoration of the whole effect. Yet incompleteness does not make it useless: it may prevent misunderstanding and identify a remainder. Explained relationships and reproduced sound differ particularly clearly in brief remarks. Sometimes two versions are appropriate, one clearer and another closer to the original's construction. Presenting their choices honestly helps more than declaring a single word that silently restores everything. Readers become participants in evaluation and retain the right to leave their preference undecided while learning more about the passage.

V. How far does the reader move?

Schleiermacher distinguishes moving the reader toward the writer from moving the writer toward the reader. In the passage on these directions in Waltraud Bartscht's English translation, different aims and consistency of method accompany this distinction. The earlier passage discusses paraphrase and imitation critically. We use these selected positions rather than presenting a complete account of his theory. For today's reader, the distinction asks about the price of convenience: how far does a version preserve an encounter with unfamiliar speech, and how far does it reshape that speech around familiar expectations? Fluency alone cannot answer the question or demonstrate that every important relationship has survived.

Imagine two versions of a fictional conversation. One retains an unfamiliar arrangement of address and supplies a short note, asking readers to accept a slower pace. Another rearranges the dialogue into a familiar form and communicates distance differently. Both have understandable aims. Trouble begins when the second is presented as an unchanged transparent window or the first is called automatically faithful because it is difficult. Strangeness may trace the original or reflect awkwardness. Convenience may be thoughtful mediation or conceal a missing distinction. Evaluation needs corresponding passages and reasons for choices. Readers' feelings alone do not demonstrate accuracy, although they matter in deciding which version they enjoy.

Read the translator's introduction as part of the book's construction. Which audience is assumed? Which terms remain untranslated? Where are explanations added, and how is intervention marked? Answers do not guarantee quality but reveal the method. Even without the source language, readers can notice a note offering alternatives while the main text presents only one. They can ask whether this is deliberate. Purpose also matters when comparing editions: an introduction to a work and a version for studying terminology may demand different kinds of effort. Before turning that difference into competition, establish the access each version promises and where it fulfills that promise in identifiable passages.

VI. A foreign word in a familiar alphabet

Retaining a term in transliteration makes a translation boundary visible. A familiar alphabet does not transport conventions of use. Readers may pronounce a term confidently without knowing whether it denotes a quality, an action, a relationship, or a disputed question. A borrowing may also acquire a convenient new life that is then attributed to its source. Borrowing itself is not an error. The error is presenting current usage as the original text's unchanged voice without checking. A short note can identify the term's function here and distinguish nearby meanings not being considered. Familiar pronunciation should begin inquiry rather than serve as evidence that it has ended.

Chapter 1 of the Tao Teh King in James Legge's historical translation distinguishes the name that can be named from an unchanging name within a particular philosophical and religious horizon. It is no translation manual. Its limited connection here asks whether a convenient label is being mistaken for completed knowledge. That is this article's question, not a universal linguistic theory extracted from the chapter. Legge's translation remains mediation too; the Chinese text was not collated. Retaining dao therefore does not establish that everyone discussing it understands one identical object in one identical way. The original term marks a question rather than automatically resolving disagreement over it.

A useful note on a borrowing can be short. It might name its function in the sentence, show the nearest contrast, and flag an alternative translation. Sometimes that is enough. Elsewhere a history of usage is needed, but cannot be guessed from sound. We can keep a term open and return after another episode. Deferral differs from surrender: the unresolved question and potentially helpful passages are known. It also differs from worshipping mystery: a term acquires no authority to justify any conclusion. A foreign form invites clarification when accompanied by a path for checking; without that path, it may merely conceal that explanation is missing.

VII. Experience and the right to explain

Words about feelings are especially tempting candidates for untranslatability. They promise a new name for a familiar state and an encounter with experience previously thought inaccessible. Readers may recognize themselves for different reasons: a precise distinction, an attractive image, or a situation resembling their lives. Recognition can have personal value without establishing lexical accuracy or a shared psychology of a language's users. A reader may say that a description fits. Claiming that the original term always means this requires different grounds. Separating those steps preserves enjoyment while avoiding the invention of someone else's biography from a response to a translated passage or a memorable description.

When someone chooses a word for their own state, the task changes. We need not correct their expression to satisfy a translation scheme. If appropriate and welcome, we can ask what matters: loneliness, waiting, loss, or something else. These possibilities are invitations, not tests. A person can reject all of them, prefer silence, or describe circumstances differently. Failure to find a brief equivalent does not invalidate their message. A listener's responsibility concerns available clarification and respect for the answer. Historical translation arguments establish no professional psychological procedure. This is an ethical proposal for everyday conversation, with no promise of changing how the other person feels or determining their condition.

The opposite danger is assigning someone an experience because of their family's language. A term becomes a cultural passport specifying what they should feel. Knowledge of a text grants no such authority. A tradition contains different voices; a person may use several languages and dispute customary descriptions. Return the interpretation to them: have I understood the relationship you mean? Their reply settles no complete history of the term, but clarifies this conversation. Respect for personal usage and examination of a source serve different purposes. Both can be sustained without requiring an individual to represent a whole people or explain its history to everyone present in the room.

VIII. When an error has consequences

In a poem, lost rhythm can change an impression; in instructions, a missing condition can change action. Consider purpose before choosing an equivalent. An invented message permitting continuation after confirmation cannot preserve only encouragement while dropping the need to wait. Equally, an image need not become a list of conditions if no instruction depends on it. Errors carry different costs in different situations. This article provides no professional standard for law, medicine, or engineering. It draws an editorial distinction: where does translation convey experience, and where does it state permission, obligation, a deadline, or a sequence? Conditions in the latter case require attention of their own.

For a consequential decision, another attractive machine translation is insufficient. Preserve the original passage, adjacent sentences, edition information, and the specific unresolved question. A qualified checker can assess that task more readily than a request to convey a word's entire cultural meaning. An unfamiliar language can limit personal evaluation; name that limit. Two differing versions alone do not establish which is right: both may repeat an error or serve different purposes. A system's confidence score does not replace textual grounds. A working record should enable someone else to see how the choice arose and which part still needs verification before it is used to support action.

An intermediate step may be possible while accuracy remains uncertain. Personal reading can continue with a question marked. Action depending on a disputed condition may need suitable clarification before the translation is used. This is no instruction to postpone life over every word: consequences matter. If an error is found, correction should reach places that used the earlier version. Sometimes a note suffices; sometimes instructions or a previous recipient's understanding need updating. Preserving change history identifies what was read before. Revisability matters more than an impression of infallibility. A good translation permits a precise correction without forcing readers to reject an entire book because one passage required another look.

IX. A comparison others can repeat

Start with one passage rather than editions' reputations. Choose an expression and record visible differences: who acts, degree of certainty, address, image, or condition. Check whether the difference persists in the nearby paragraph. One version may clarify immediately and another later; isolated words conceal that arrangement. Even without the source language, a record identifies the question. It does not authorize declaring a winner, but prepares consultation or further reading. Comparison becomes repeatable when another reader can open the same passages and understand the doubt without relying only on an overall impression. This modest record can be more useful than an ambitious verdict unsupported by accessible evidence.

Then check where differences come from. Are these direct translations of one original, revisions of an earlier version, or translations of different source editions? Publication details and introductions sometimes tell us. Missing information should remain missing rather than be replaced by a plausible history. Similar versions do not establish independence, nor do different versions establish originality. Separate pages actually read from bibliographic information merely found. This matters in citation: linking an available book does not mean checking the whole work. Identifying the fragment and edition used gives later checking a basis and avoids passing an invented reading history to the next person who relies on the record.

End by recording a remaining question as well as a preference. One version may better convey distance between speakers; another may state the condition more clearly; the original rhythm remains unchecked. This says more than a ranking without demanding impossible expertise from a beginner. It can reveal that versions complement one another. Further reading may change the preference, a reasonable response to new information. Discussion then concerns the passage and purpose of transmission. Taste matters but does not replace the source. We can prefer a fluent version while knowing which distinction to check in a harder one, keeping both reasons visible and available for reconsideration after another chapter.

X. A remainder that can be worked with

After clarification, an explanation may still fail to replace the word. This remainder is not necessarily an error. It might concern sound, familiarity, connections with other texts, or biographical recognition. Distinguish these rather than assigning them a mystical status in advance. If sound was not checked, say so. If the function is understood but brevity cannot be reproduced, name that cost. Incompleteness becomes describable. Recognition does not remove it, but stops it authorizing any claim whatsoever. Readers acquire limited, real knowledge of what has been conveyed and where work remains. That knowledge is more useful than an assurance of complete access whose grounds cannot be inspected.

Translation can create access too. An explanation may reveal a relationship habitual readers leave unstated; comparing versions may disclose disagreement within a tradition. These are possibilities of particular readings, not a promise that translation improves originals. Distinguish addition from transmission and conjecture from established meaning. Both activities can coexist with clear labels. Readers then learn about a text and the route by which they encountered it. Accessibility need not pretend that mediation is absent. Visible decisions can help people use a translation more freely and ask precise questions without already knowing an entire language. The intermediary's presence can become part of understanding rather than an obstacle concealed behind claims of transparency.

Untranslatable is most useful as the beginning of inquiry into a specified loss. A short equivalent may fail to retain every relationship without turning a culture into a sealed room. Work proceeds through small distinctions: where context helps, where another version helps, where specialist support is needed, and where uncertainty should remain. Historical authors offer different approaches; no secret single doctrine is necessary. Today's reader can retain a clear question and room for revision. We can approach another expression without declaring the encounter complete. Respect lies in the precision of that approach and in allowing another person, or further reading, to change how confident we are in the interpretation we currently hold.

What this means in practice

For a small voluntary exercise, choose an expression in something you are already reading. Save its sentence, the adjoining paragraph, edition title, and translator. Identify the difficulty: a compact equivalent, relationships, a rule of action, an image, or form. You need not investigate every category. If the word simply appeals and raises no important current question, leave it alone. The record organizes reading; effects on memory or psychological state are not established here. Personal recognition can have a separate line so that it retains its value without being presented as verification of historical meaning or evidence about all users of the original language.

If another version is available, compare the whole passage. Form one question that would change understanding: is the address respectful, does a condition survive, who acts? See whether an introduction or note answers and record where the answer comes from. Without grounds, mark it not established. You can offer a descriptive alternative labelled explanation rather than quotation. Do not require a familiar native speaker to represent every period and genre; a reply about personal usage retains that scope. Consequential professional action requires appropriate checking, rather than turning a home reading exercise into an expert determination merely because several attractive alternatives have been collected and discussed.

Finally, record what survived and what remains unchecked. The event may now be clear, the speakers' closeness disputed, and the original sound unexamined. Retain the earlier version beside the new one so further reading can change the conclusion. If comparison becomes a demand for perfect understanding and stops helping, you may stop, return later, or never return. The purpose is to make a particular choice visible and discussable. It creates no obligation to achieve identical experiences and grants no authority to correct someone else's self-description for the sake of an attractive theory about the language they happen to use or the culture associated with it.

Key quotation

> *“the name which is as it were the knot that ties them fast together”*

John Locke, An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding, III.V.10. Short excerpt; them refers to components of a complex idea, not peoples or the entirety of human experience.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Shared question	Distinct grounds and limit
Locke III.V.8–10 — Jerome, Letter 57.5	What if a compact equivalent is missing?	Locke considers ideas held together by a name; Jerome defends conveying sense. Possible description is not preserved style.
Jerome 57.5 — Schleiermacher, two directions	Why change form?	A polemical defense and two translation directions have different purposes; neither licenses silently adding assertions.
Locke III.V.7–10 — Schleiermacher, paraphrase and two directions	What do a name and explanation retain?	Compact combination and an encounter between writer and reader differ; clear description does not prove identical impressions.
Augustine, Confessions I, speech learning — Locke III.V.7	How does a word relate to action?	An autobiographical scene and a philosophy of naming frame context differently; no single experimental explanation follows.
Tao Teh King 1 — Locke III.V.10	Does naming complete understanding?	A Daoist limit on naming and a name fixing a complex idea differ; borrowing does not remove that difference.
Augustine, speech learning — Jerome 57.5	What needs conveying beyond word sequence?	A shared scene and expressiveness are comparable as questions; religious texts establish no modern teaching method.

Primary sources

1. John Locke, An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding, III.V.7–10. Selected numbered paragraphs read in the historical English text; no complete-book reading claimed.

2. Jerome, Letter 57, §§2,5–6. English translation credited to W. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis, and W. G. Martley, revised for New Advent. Translation circumstances and defense read; no Latin or Greek collation.

3. Friedrich Schleiermacher, On the Different Methods of Translating. Waltraud Bartscht translation; selected passages from Paraphrase seeks to the two translation directions. No full-work reading or German collation.

4. Augustine, Confessions, Book I. Historical E. B. Pusey translation; speech-learning paragraphs read, not the whole book or experimental evidence.

5. Tao Teh King, chapter 1. Historical James Legge translation; chapter 1 read. No Chinese collation; the chapter supplies no translation theory.

Tags

translation, untranslatability, language, context, meaning, concepts, words, reading, commentary, transliteration, borrowing, translators, Locke, Jerome, Schleiermacher, Augustine, Daoism, Tao-Teh-King, primary-sources, philosophy-of-language, comparative-reading, cultural-differences, translation-history, form-and-meaning, style, address, textual-checking, self-description, editorial-responsibility, United-Wisdom

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