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# AI Practitioner

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### Akkie Okma

Presently living in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Akkie experiences a fast-growing economy in which start-ups play their part. She is contributing to their progress by offering training and mentoring in the development of business plans, pitching their businesses to investors and building supporting networks.  
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# Shifting Wor(l)ds

## Poetic Encounters with Untranslatable Words

All stories are unique and telling. What would happen if AI practitioners started to incorporate questions about language and untranslatable words – those words borrowed from another language, impossible to translate precisely – into their daily practice. Would they also experience a new awareness and does it lead them to a better understanding of people of different cultures?

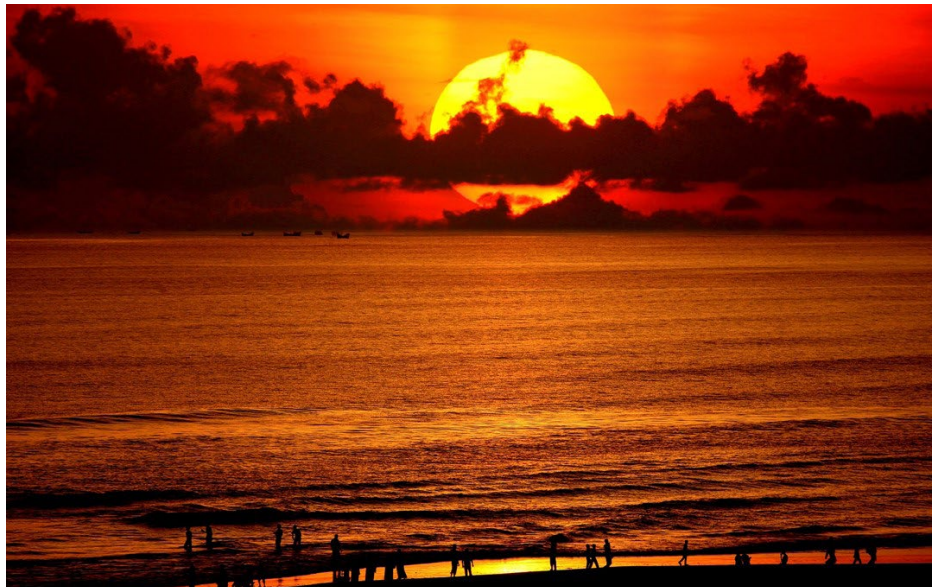


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*Clouds come floating into my life, no longer to carry rain or usher storm, but to add color to my sunset sky.*

Rabindranath Tagore, *Stray Birds*

The members of the European Network of Appreciative Inquiry practitioners have been gathering virtually on a monthly basis for online learning sessions. Recently, Yvonne Bonner and I hosted such a session on the topic of language. We don't consider ourselves linguistic experts, although

*Language plays a crucial role in achieving change.*

we do understand the importance of language, the words the speaker chooses to use, the tone and the pauses.

Words have an impact on us. Words can create hope, like Dr Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" or, more recently, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's use of the phrase "Wir schaffen das" – "We get the job done" – during the 2015 European migrant crisis to assert that Germany could manage to absorb large numbers of immigrants.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an approach for positive change in individuals, groups and organisations. Language plays a crucial role in achieving change. By asking questions about best practices and strengths, and by telling stories about what is working well, we learn what gives energy and what generates new possibilities for the future.

### Half full or half empty?

Appreciative Inquiry is based on five principles. I will talk about two of them, the constructionist and the poetic. The constructionist principle is based on the idea that we create stories with the words we use to describe our world, and that becomes our reality. The poetic principle underlines the idea that we find what we focus on in the language we use. For instance, we can say a glass is half full or half empty: two different points of view for the same reality. As in poetry, many interpretations are possible. In shifting words, we can shift our focus and create a different world view.

While preparing for our session, Yvonne and I discovered some so-called "untranslatable" words: *joie de vivre* in French, *ubuntu* in Zulu and Xhosa languages and *ikigai* in Japanese. While we may not speak the language, these words can have a resonance in our own. They have developed in one language and been adopted in other. Untranslatable words can be described, but it is almost impossible to find an equivalent word in another language.

*Untranslatable words can be described, but it is almost impossible to find an equivalent word in another language.*

The meaning of *joie de vivre* is to express a cheerful enjoyment of life. *Ubuntu* and *ikigai* are more challenging. Their meanings are not immediately clear. *Ubuntu* originates from South African languages. It is usually translated as "I am because you are". Former archbishop Desmond Tutu describes a person with *ubuntu* as "open and available to others, affirming of others ... has a proper self-assurance". The *ubuntu* a person possesses comes from being part of a greater whole.

*Yvonne and I feel that somehow these untranslatable words give an extra dimension to AI.*

The Japanese word *ikigai* refers to the reason to get up in the morning. It originates from ancient Eastern philosophy. *Ikigai* has the potential to change your life and make you feel happier, because it challenges you to think about what motivates you.

### Untranslatable words: An extra AI dimension?

Yvonne and I feel that somehow these untranslatable words give an extra dimension to AI. These words can bring new layers into the stories. Untranslatable words shine a new light on cultures and peoples, as in the examples just given. The words were created in a specific place, culture or country because there were unique circumstances that needed a word to describe them.

We shared these thoughts with the European AI Network practitioners and then asked them to share their own experiences regarding the use of language. Our appreciative inquiry was:

*Could you share with us the best language story you have experienced?*

Each person's story highlighted the richness of the theme, as well as its universality. Participants shared stories about untranslatable words: Tony came up with the untranslatable word *vasbyt* (Afrikaans for persistently holding on). Cora mentioned the word *begeisterung* (German for accent, emphasis, alacrity, vivacity). In the past our network has often been referred to as the "*Begeisterung Network*". It is a way to describe the energy Appreciative Inquiry generates.

### Sharing language in a workshop in a war zone

John shared his experiences as a facilitator in what is now Croatia during the Balkan war. Despite the tension of having consistent cultural and language differences, he succeeded in running a workshop where no issues arose between the countries present. He realized how important language was to enhance active listening and build meaning.

To learn a new language is fascinating, especially if you have teachers passionate about their job. Gertraud, for example, was lucky to have a professor who spoke eight languages fluently and knew the basics of many others. He knew what countries the words had originated in and how they had spread globally thanks to migration. She added that to learn business English from her articulate professor was a joy. He made historical events come alive and demonstrated that languages live and evolve.



*The Dutch landscape and culture emerges from and has been shaped by these untranslatable words.*

Joep described how Dutch culture has been modelled by its struggle with water. Words such as *kwel* (water that is coming through the dykes at a deep(er) level); *dijkgraaf* (the chair of a water board); *waterschap* (water board); *wipwatermolen* (a special kind of windmill that pumps water out of the *polder*). It was interesting to discover how the Dutch landscape and culture emerges from and has been shaped by these untranslatable words.

### Poetry in Bangladesh

My story is about Bangladesh, the country where I currently live. The Bangladeshis are very proud of their language. They have a rich history in literature; many writers and poets are renowned. Amongst them is Rabindranath Tagore. Bangladeshis know his work by heart and audiences are still in awe when his poems are recited. I find the love and pride of Bangladeshis in their Bangla language unparalleled. Tagore was the first poet from Asia to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, in 1913. Because of an encounter with the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, Tagore became known in the West. Yeats fell instantly in love with Tagore's work and wrote a lyrical introduction for the collection of poems called *Gitanjali*.

Photo: Khursid Alam



*By sharing our best stories about language, we were able to discover the impact language has on our daily life.*

### Conclusion

We had chosen a universal topic for our session. By sharing our best stories about language, we were able to discover the impact language has on our daily life. The stories created a new awareness. Anyone may have an interesting story on language. Whether it is about a favourite poem, on an effort to learn a new language or on active listening to avoid a misunderstanding. The question on the

*What happens if every practitioner starts to incorporate questions about language and untranslatable words into their daily practice?*

best language story brings a broader perspective and enriches our understanding about languages and peoples.

I would be curious to learn what happens if every practitioner starts to incorporate questions about language and untranslatable words into their daily practice. Might they also experience a new awareness and would it lead them to a better understanding of people of different cultures?

All stories are unique and telling. Or to end with words of Tagore: “they add color to our life”.

Photo: Khursid Alam



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