

Found in translation

By Lee Gjertsen Malone, MUSE Magazine, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.12.17

Word Count **663**

Level **MAX**



Languages can be very different -- just look at all the ways you can say "hello"! Image by: Newsela staff.

Some people collect coins. Other people collect stuffed animals, or books or spoons from around the world. But psychologist Tim Lomas, a lecturer at the University of East London, collects words.

Specifically, he collects words about feelings and relationships that exist in only one language on Earth and can't be directly translated into any other.

This unique venture is called the Positive Lexicography Project. (Lexicography is the formal term for creating a dictionary.) It's an online database that offers a window into the way different cultures use words to explain themselves and their experiences.

In it you can find words like *voorpret*, which is a Dutch word for the feeling of pleasure you get looking forward to an exciting event like a party, or *shemomechama*, which is Georgian for eating past the point of being full because you're enjoying the food so much. There are English words that can't be translated into other languages (like *chrysalism*, the tranquil feeling of being inside during a thunderstorm) and hundreds more in dozens of languages ranging from French to Farsi to Tagalog.

The list is growing each day, because Lomas actively seeks out help in finding and translating new words from around the world. The words he collects usually relate to positive concepts like hope, love and happiness. "I'm a researcher in positive psychology, a branch of psychology concerned with well-being," Lomas says, explaining the project's focus. "Also, because to look for all kinds of words — without limiting my scope — would be way too ambitious (at least at first)!"

The project began when Lomas attended a

Coup de foudre

Part of speech: Noun

Language: French

Literally, it means a "lightning bolt." It is used to describe an intense and sudden love at first sight.



conference and listened to a talk by Finnish researcher Emilia Lahti about the Finnish concept of *sisu*, or extraordinary determination in the face of adversity. The idea of words with no direct translation into other languages intrigued the psychologist. "I thought it would be interesting to systematically look for these words."

As Lomas explains on his blog, "I've always been so curious about these kinds of words, and about the role of language in shaping experience more generally. I often wonder, for instance, if a word capturing a certain phenomenon has only been coined in one particular culture, does that mean that only people in that culture experience that phenomenon? Can it really be true that only German people have feelings of *schadenfreude*, that sense of glee at another person's misfortune?"

His suspicion, however, is that people definitely do have feelings that they don't have words for. It's just that without specific words, the feelings become more difficult to express. He's also observed that many languages — including English — borrow words from other languages to express sentiments they don't have a word for themselves (like, for example, *schadenfreude*).

Lomas started the project by combing through websites, blogs, books and academic papers and began his list with 216 words. But he knew there are a lot more out there. Which is why he created his own website to allow people to suggest more

Passeggiata

Part of speech: Noun

Language: Italian

To take a "passeggiata" means that you are taking a relaxing stroll.



entries, and to help come up with better definitions for the words he's already found. Hundreds of suggestions have poured in.

Does he have a favorite? He says, "I particularly love the Japanese aesthetic concepts, such as *wabi-sabi*," which means "imperfect and aged beauty."

Lomas believes that knowing words to express positive concepts can help people better understand their own emotions. "I figured that these words would provide a unique and vibrant window into the world's cultures, revealing diversity in the way people in different places experience and understand life."

Quiz

1 Read the paragraph below.

The list is growing each day, because Lomas actively seeks out help in finding and translating new words from around the world. The words he collects usually relate to positive concepts like hope, love and happiness. "I'm a researcher in positive psychology, a branch of psychology concerned with well-being," Lomas says, explaining the project's focus. "Also, because to look for all kinds of words — without limiting my scope — would be way too ambitious (at least at first)!"

Which of the following is the MOST accurate explanation of this paragraph?

- (A) Lomas believes that using words that are not positive will make his list of words too long.
- (B) Lomas wants to use only positive words because he wants to make people feel happier.
- (C) Lomas thinks that using words that are not positive will cause problems with translations.
- (D) Lomas tries to focus on positive words because that is the area of psychology he studies.

2 Which sentence from the article supports the idea that people do have feelings they cannot explain with words from their own language?

- (A) "I've always been so curious about these kinds of words, and about the role of language in shaping experience more generally."
- (B) He's also observed that many languages — including English — borrow words from other languages to express sentiments they don't have a word for themselves (like, for example, "schadenfreude").
- (C) Which is why he created his own website to allow people to suggest more entries, and to help come up with better definitions for the words he's already found.
- (D) "I figured that these words would provide a unique and vibrant window into the world's cultures, revealing diversity in the way people in different places experience and understand life."

3 Which detail from the article would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?

- (A) Some people collect coins. Other people collect stuffed animals, or books or spoons from around the world.
- (B) It's an online database that offers a window into the way different cultures use words to explain themselves and their experiences.
- (C) Lomas started the project by combing through websites, blogs, books and academic papers and began his list with 216 words.
- (D) He says, "I particularly love the Japanese aesthetic concepts, such as 'wabi-sabi,'" which means "imperfect and aged beauty."

Which two of the following sentences from the article include central ideas of the article?

1. *Specifically, he collects words about feelings and relationships that exist in only one language on Earth and can't be directly translated into any other.*
2. *This unique venture is called the Positive Lexicography Project. (Lexicography is the formal term for creating a dictionary.)*
3. *The project began when Lomas attended a conference and listened to a talk by Finnish researcher Emilia Lahti about the Finnish concept of "sisu," or extraordinary determination in the face of adversity.*
4. *Lomas believes that knowing words to express positive concepts can help people better understand their own emotions.*

- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 2 and 3
- (C) 1 and 4
- (D) 3 and 4