

UT

# The Untranslatable

Words that exist in only one language and the elegant art of participle clauses

B2

Reading

Grammar

40 min

## ★ Lesson Objectives

- ★ Read an article about untranslatable words from around the world
- ★ Learn vocabulary related to language, culture and communication
- ★ Use participle clauses to combine sentences elegantly
- ★ Form present, past and perfect participle clauses
- ★ Discuss the relationship between language and thought
- ★ Write about cultural concepts using participle clauses

## 1 Before You Read

- ▶ Is there a word in your language that cannot be translated into English?
- ▶ Does the language you speak affect the way you think and see the world?
- ▶ Have you found concepts in a foreign language that don't exist in yours?

## 2 Reading: The Words We Cannot Share

*There are feelings every human has experienced — but that only some languages have bothered to name. What happens to an emotion that has no word?*

Sitting in a Lisbon cafe, linguist Dr. Yara Mendes opens a notebook filled with words from 42 languages. Each describes a concept that exists in only one language. "Having spent fifteen years collecting these words, I believe every language reveals something unique about its speakers."

Japanese komorebi, meaning dappled sunlight through leaves. Danish hygge, used to describe cosy contentment — sitting by a fire, wrapped in a blanket, drinking hot chocolate. Exported worldwide, hygge became a phenomenon, but divorced from its context, it loses meaning.

German Schadenfreude, describing pleasure derived from others' misfortune. Portuguese saudade, a deep melancholy longing considered impossible to translate adequately. "Having grown up in Lisbon, I feel saudade personally. It is sadness mixed with love, softened by memory, carrying a strange sweetness."

Finnish talkoot: neighbours coming together to help, expecting nothing except reciprocated favour. Rooted in rural tradition, it has survived, proving solidarity still matters. Indonesian jayus: a joke so unfunny you can't help laughing. Scottish Gaelic cianalas: homesickness so profound it feels physical.

Fascinated by these gaps, researchers ask: does no word mean no feeling? Cognitive scientists say no. But having a word makes an emotion easier to identify and validate. Named, an emotion becomes real. Left unnamed, it can feel invisible.

Closing her notebook, Dr. Mendes says: "Every untranslatable word is a window into another way of being human. The more languages you learn, the more windows you open."

### 3 Vocabulary

Word	Definition	Example
<b>linguist</b>	studies/speaks many languages	<i>Spoke seven languages.</i>
<b>specific</b>	clearly defined	<i>A very specific feeling.</i>
<b>unique</b>	one of a kind	<i>Every language is unique.</i>
<b>dappled</b>	spots of light and shadow	<i>Dappled sunlight.</i>
<b>intimate</b>	closely personal	<i>An intimate connection.</i>
<b>contentment</b>	peaceful happiness	<i>Deep contentment.</i>
<b>phenomenon</b>	remarkable event/trend	<i>A global phenomenon.</i>
<b>capture</b>	express accurately	<i>Captures a complex emotion.</i>
<b>precise</b>	very accurate	<i>Surprisingly precise.</i>
<b>melancholy</b>	deep, thoughtful sadness	<i>Melancholy beauty.</i>
<b>adequately</b>	satisfactorily	<i>Cannot translate adequately.</i>
<b>communal</b>	shared by a group	<i>A communal effort.</i>
<b>reciprocated</b>	given equally in return	<i>Expected to be reciprocated.</i>
<b>solidarity</b>	mutual support in a group	<i>Great solidarity.</i>
<b>profound</b>	very deep or intense	<i>A profound sense of loss.</i>
<b>cognitive</b>	relating to mental processes	<i>Cognitive scientists.</i>

Collocations: mother tongue • lost in translation • cultural identity • foreign concept • language barrier • native speaker • express a feeling • word for word

## 4 Grammar: Participle Clauses

### ■ In the Text, You Saw...

- Present (-ing): "Sitting in a cafe, Dr. Mendes opens her notebook."
- Past (-ed): "A notebook filled with words from 42 languages."
- Perfect (having+pp): "Having spent fifteen years collecting words, she believes..."
- Result (-ing): "...has survived, proving that solidarity still matters."

Participle clauses replace relative or adverbial clauses, making sentences shorter and more elegant. The subject must be the same in both clauses.

Type	Form	Replaces	Example
<b>Present</b>	-ing	while/because + clause	Walking home, I saw a fox.
<b>Past</b>	-ed / irregular pp	which was done	The letter, written in French, arrived.
<b>Perfect</b>	having + pp	after/because + past perf.	Having finished, we left.
<b>Negative</b>	not + -ing	because + not	Not knowing the answer, she was silent.

### PARTICIPLE CLAUSES CAN EXPRESS:

- Time: "Arriving at the station, I realised I had forgotten my ticket."
- Reason: "Feeling tired, she went to bed early."
- Result: "The rain continued, causing severe flooding."
- Condition: "Used correctly, this tool saves hours of work."

### ★ Same Subject Rule

- ✓ "Walking home, I saw a fox." (I was walking + I saw)
- ✗ "Walking home, the rain started." (I walked, rain started — different subjects!)

### ▲ Common Mistakes

- ✗ "Walked to work, I listened to music." → ✓ "Walking..." (-ing for active)
- ✗ "Having eat dinner..." → ✓ "Having eaten..." (past participle)
- ✗ "Sitting on the bus, my phone rang." → ✓ "...I heard my phone ring." (same subject)

## 5 Game: Combine with a Participle

1. She sat by the window. + She watched the rain.  
→ Sitting by the window, she watched the rain. (-ing)
2. The book was written in the 19th century. + It is still popular.  
→ Written in the 19th century, the book is still popular. (-ed)
3. He had finished homework. + He went out to play.

- Having finished homework, he went out to play. (having+pp)
4. She did not know the answer. + She remained silent.  
→ Not knowing the answer, she remained silent. (not+-ing)
5. The city was founded in 1200. + It has a rich history.  
→ Founded in 1200, the city has a rich history. (-ed)
6. I was walking through the park. + I noticed a bird.  
→ Walking through the park, I noticed a bird. (-ing)
7. The word was borrowed from Arabic. + It entered English.  
→ Borrowed from Arabic, the word entered English. (-ed)
8. She had lived abroad for 10 years. + She understood differences.  
→ Having lived abroad, she understood differences. (having+pp)
9. He felt exhausted. + He fell asleep immediately.  
→ Feeling exhausted, he fell asleep immediately. (-ing)
10. The email was sent to the wrong address. + It never reached the client.  
→ Sent to the wrong address, the email never reached the client. (-ed)

## 6 Comprehension Quiz

1. What does Japanese 'komorebi' describe?  
Answer: Dappled sunlight filtering through leaves
2. Why does hygge lose meaning when exported?  
Answer: It is divorced from its original context
3. What is Finnish 'talkoot'?  
Answer: A communal effort to help neighbours
4. What does Dr. Mendes say about untranslatable words?  
Answer: Each is a window into another way of being human
5. '\_\_\_ home, I saw a fox.' Correct participle?  
Answer: Walking (-ing, active)
6. 'The letter, \_\_\_ in French, arrived.' Form?  
Answer: written (-ed, passive)
7. '\_\_\_ dinner, we went for a walk.' (earlier action)  
Answer: Having eaten (having + pp)
8. Participle clauses must follow what rule?  
Answer: Same subject in both clauses

## 7 Fill in the Blanks

**Words: Having grown up • Shocked • Looking • reviewed • Having read • Not knowing • created • Feeling**

1. \_\_\_ in a small town, she knew everyone. (perfect)
2. \_\_\_ by the news, he sat down in shock. (past)
3. \_\_\_ through the window, I saw snow. (present)
4. The report, \_\_\_ by three experts, was published. (past)
5. \_\_\_ the instructions, she began assembling. (perfect)
6. \_\_\_ what to say, he simply smiled. (negative)
7. The painting, \_\_\_ in 1890, sold for millions. (past)
8. \_\_\_ tired after the flight, they went to bed. (present)

● **Answers:** 1. Having grown up • 2. Shocked • 3. Looking • 4. reviewed • 5. Having read • 6. Not knowing • 7. created • 8. Feeling

## 8 Speaking & Writing

### ◆ Discussion Questions

1. Is there a word from your language the world should adopt?
2. Does having a word make an emotion easier to feel?
3. Which foreign word from the article interests you most?
4. Growing up with your language, what is the most beautiful word you know?
5. Are languages dying out? Why does this matter?

### ◆ Example Dialogue

A: Having lived in Japan for two years, I can tell you komorebi is more than a word.

B: Really? What do you mean?

A: Walking through a forest, you notice light differently.

B: Not speaking Japanese, I would never have known that word.

A: Translated into English, it loses its magic.

B: Having heard that, I want to learn Japanese even more!

### ◆ Writing Task

Write 80–120 words about a concept from your culture that is difficult to translate:

- What is the word? What does it mean?
- Why is it difficult to translate?
- Give a situation where you would use it.

Use at least 3 participle clauses (present, past, or perfect).

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## Review Checklist

### I can now...

- ✓ understand an article about untranslatable words
- ✓ use vocabulary related to language, culture and communication
- ✓ form present participle clauses (-ing) for time, reason, result
- ✓ form past participle clauses (-ed) for passive descriptions
- ✓ form perfect participle clauses (having + pp) for earlier actions
- ✓ discuss language and culture and write using participle clauses



## Congratulations!

You have completed Lesson 15: The Untranslatable.