Why Some Languages Have Words That English Will Never Have
**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-i283eRwd4 **
Transcript: https://dontveter.com/ec/wordsenglishwillneverhave.pdf

In 2016, a team of researchers analyzed 2500 languages looking for emotional concepts.

They found that the average language shares about only 28% of its emotional vocabulary with any other language.

Which means roughly 70% about what one culture feels precisely enough to name another culture experiences as a blur.

A feeling without a word, something real but invisible. And once you see a few examples, you can't unsee it.

Saudade, the Portuguese word for a longing so deep it became the heartbeat of a whole culture.

Mono no aware, the Japanese phrase for the ache of impermanence, the feeling that things are beautiful because they end.

Hygge, the Danish word for a warmth and a togetherness so specific that cozy doesn't come close.

Every single one of these is a feeling you've had. None of them exist in English.

And the deeper question, the one this video is actually about, is what it means that they don't.

Welcome to the Airlearn Language Show. And before we go any further, if this video makes you want to experience what it actually feels like to move through a language and suddenly see things your own language never showed you, check out Airlearn.

It teaches language in context, the way you actually use it, not as vocabulary lists. Links in the description. Let's get into it.

The first reason some languages have words English doesn't is the simplest. Languages develop precision where their speakers need it most.

Scottish Gaelic has dozens of words for different types of rain, not just rain.

The particular drizzle that soaks you slowly. The sideways rain that defeats umbrellas The almost mist that you only notice once you're wet.

If you live in the Scottish Highlands, this is not pedantic. This is necessary weather information.

Arabic has somewhere around 6,000 words related to camels. A camel that walks in a certain way, a camel at a specific age, a camel with a particular temperament.

To a bedouin trader in the desert, a camel is not a camel. It's a category. Your life might depend on knowing the difference.

And here's where it gets interesting for English. English is a language that emerged from a relatively temperate island.

Its people did not depend on reading fine distinctions in snow or sand or rain.

So, English, for all its enormous vocabulary, never developed that kind of granular precision for those things.

But here's the other side of it. English has dozens of words for business failure. Bankrupt, and solvent, in receivership, liquidated, wound up.

English has extraordinary, precise vocabulary for legal distinction, financial instruments, and commercial states. Because English-speaking cultures built economies where those distinctions mattered enormously.

Every language is a record of what its speakers had to pay attention to.

Which brings us back to saudade. Portugal was a seafaring empire. For centuries, the Portuguese watched their sailors leave from the harbor, fathers, sons, husbands, knowing that many of them would never come back.

That particular ache, that longing for the gone that is somehow still present, became woven into the national identity, into the music, into the soul of the culture.

The word didn't create the feeling, but it recognized it, named it, and made it something the entire culture could share.

English never needed that word, because English-speaking cultures never built their identity around that specific grief.

The second reason goes deeper. Some words aren't just missing from English. They're pointing to emotional or philosophical territory that English-speaking cultures never mapped.

Take the German word schadenfreude. Pleasure at someone else's misfortune.

You watch a pompous person slip on ice. Something flickers. Not pure cruelty, but a small sharp satisfaction.

English has no single word for this. And notice what happens when you name it. It stops being something you're ashamed of and becomes something recognizably human.

The word doesn't create the feeling. It gives people permission to acknowledge it.

Or take the Czech word litost which the writer Milan Kundra described as a state of torment created by the sudden sight of your own misery, not sadness in general.

That specific humiliating moment when you catch a clear glimpse of how small or limited or stuck you are.

English can describe it in a sentence. But Czech gave it a word.

And that means Czech speakers can reach for it instantly, precisely in the middle of the feeling itself.

Or wabi-sabi in Japanese. The beauty found in imperfection and impermanence.

An old cracked tea bowl is more beautiful than a perfect new one. The asymmetry is the point. The wear is the point.

This isn't just an aesthetic preference. It's an entire philosophical relationship with time, with objects, with the acceptance of decay.

English has no single word for this because English-speaking aesthetic culture broadly has not built itself around this idea.

The concept exists. Philosophers have written about it, but the culture never compressed it into a single word that everyone carries.

Here's what's important about this. A word isn't just a label. It's a lens.

When a culture creates a word for a specific feeling or concept, it's saying this is real. This is worth naming. This deserves to exist in your consciousness.

The word tells you what to pay attention to. And this is where science gets genuinely strange. There's a theory in linguistics called Sapir Wharf hypothesis.

The idea that the language you speak doesn't just describe your experience of the world. It shapes it.

In its strong form, it's controversial. But in its weaker form, that language influences perception. The evidence is becoming hard to ignore.

Here's one of the clearest examples. Russian has two separate words for light blue and dark blue. Goluboy and then siniy the way English has a separate words for pink and red.

They're not shades. They're different colors.

And studies have shown that Russian speakers can distinguish between shades of blue faster than English speakers.

They see the boundary between those two words as a more definite perceptual line because their language drew it there.

Same effect in the other domains. The Piraha language of the Amazon has no words for numbers beyond a few and many.

Piraha speakers show significantly different performance on precise quantity tasks than speakers with languages full of number systems.

The language didn't just fail to describe numbers. It changed how numbers were perceived.

For emotions, the effect may be even more powerful. Research suggests that having a word for an emotional state increases your ability to identify that state accurately when you're in it.

You feel things more precisely when you have precise language for them. The vocabulary isn't just naming your feelings, it’s sharpening them.

Which means if your language has a word for sud, you notice sud more. You experience it with more clarity and distinctness than someone who has only had the blunt instrument of sadness or longing to reach for.

The Portuguese speaker and the English speaker may be at the same harbor watching the same ship disappear, but they're not having exactly the same emotional experience because one of them has a word and one doesn't.

Here's what makes English interesting in all of this. English has spent thousands of years doing something no other major language has done quite so aggressively. Stealing.

English absorbed Latin through the church, French through the Norman conquest, Greek through science, German through philosophy, Norse through Viking settlement.

And when modern English speakers encounter a word in another language that fills a genuine gap, it takes that too.

Schradenfreude is now in an English dictionary. Hygge had a cultural movement so large it spawned a hundred books and lifestyle brands.

Kindergarten is German. The concept didn't exist in English so English just took the word.

Zeitgeist, Angst, wanderlust, all German, deja vu, French, safari, Swahili, karaoke, Japanese.

English absorbed words when it needs them.

That's one of the reasons it became a global language. It's unusually open to foreign vocabulary.

But here's what's fascinating. There are still words it cannot absorb. And they reveal something important.

Saudade in English just becomes longing. And every Portuguese speaker will tell you that's not even close.

The word can't survive transplantation because it carries too much cultural weight.

Saudade isn't just a feeling. It's a Portuguese feeling shaped by centuries of specific history woven into a specific music called fado embedded in a specific national identity.

Strip it out of that context and you don't have saudade anymore. You have a pale copy of it.

Some concepts are too culturally specific to be borrowed. The word is not just pointing at a feeling. It's the culture's name for itself.

Here's what all of this adds up to. Every language is a map of what its speakers found worth naming.

English is a vast map, but it has blank spaces. Spaces where other cultures noticed something, named it, and built it into how they see the world.

You've felt saudade you felt mono no aware. You felt schadenfreude. You just had no words.

So, you had no way to hold on to the feeling precisely. The experience was real. The map was just missing that territory.

Learning another language doesn't give you new words for the same things. It fills in the blanks. It shows you part of your own experience you never had language for.

That's what Airlearn is actually for. 30 plus languages. Links in the description. See you in the next one.