

# Lois Meyer (Americas) - The Translation of Untranslatable Words

Another caution is relevant to this complex translation effort, one which the anthropologist Malinowski described almost seventy-five years ago in his accounts of extensive field work in the Trobriand Islands of Oceania. He cautioned ethnographers about "the translation of untranslatable words": "In brief, every language has words which are not translatable, because they fit into its culture and into that only; into the physical setting, the institutions, the material apparatus and the manners and values of a people."

While we might wish to believe that such untranslatable words are "but freaks or peculiarities," Malinowski assures us this is not the case; words such as numerals, parts of the body, prepositions, "words as ordinary as bread and butter," will never be used in exactly the same linguistic contexts with exactly the same meanings in any two languages on earth, no matter how closely related those languages may be. True translation of words or texts across any two languages depends upon "a unification of cultural contexts," claims Malinowski. For real understanding to occur across languages, this unification process is always a "difficult, laborious and delicate" one, even when two cultures have much in common. But when two cultures differ profoundly, "when the beliefs, scientific views, social organization, morality and materials outfit are completely different, most of the words in one language cannot be even remotely paralleled in another."

It remains to be seen whether our English translation, supported by an abundance of explanatory footnotes, succeed in "unifying the cultural contexts" of an array of Latin American settings with those cultural settings familiar to English-speaking readers. Humbled by Malinowski's warnings, we nevertheless hope that this is the case, at least to some degree. But there are two Spanish word/concepts used repeatedly throughout the Latin American commentaries that we found impossible to translate fully into English: *comunalidad* and *interculturalidad*.

We acknowledge their status as "untranslatable words" by leaving them in Spanish, marked by italics, throughout our book.

The term *comunalidad* has already been employed several times in this chapter, defined in shorthand as the principle and practices of communal life and the source of indigenous identity and resistance. The term itself comes from the Oaxacan indigenous context and is described in considerable detail in this volume by two of its foremost expositors, Jaime Martínez Luna and Benjamín Maldonado. Several commentators from Central and South America appear to misinterpret *comunalidad* as referring to the more limited meaning of "community" (*comunidad*). At least two other terms which seem, at least superficially, to convey the deeper meaning of *comunalidad* have surfaced in these commentaries: *minga* from Ecuador and *ayllu* from the Aymaras in Bolivia. However without extensive fieldwork or at least some expert corroboration, we will not rush to the assumption that these words have the "same meaning" within their respective indigenous contexts. We are even less willing to risk the English translation of "communitarianism" or any of its derivatives, each of which is burdened with sociopolitical history and meanings in U.S. and other Western context. For all these reasons, we have left the term *comunalidad* (and the other terms italicized in this paragraph) untranslated, allowing each author to provide the meaning appropriate to their text and context.

The term/concept *interculturalidad*, which also appears frequently across the commentaries, we have deemed equally "untranslatable," but for somewhat different reasons. To our knowledge, a term such as "interculturalism" or "interculturality" has no meaning in English; indeed, we would be forced to invent both the term and its meaning, which provides no solution in the translation task. The familiar English term "multiculturalism" is entirely inadequate as a translation for *interculturalidad*. Multiculturalism has its cognate in Spanish, *multiculturalidad*, but the contextual meanings of this term in Latin America imply a status-quo, non-critical "appreciation of other cultures" approach to diversity; in contrast, the term *interculturalidad* has evolved precisely to recognize and challenge the disparities of power and status between cultural groups in society. Despite its more political,

critical intentions, several of our commentators (for example, Marcela Tovar Gómez and Grimaldo Rengifo Vásquez) suggest that the term *interculturalidad* in the official rhetoric of Latin America has been so co-opted and gutted of meaning that it now functions as a tool or a mask of continued patronization and cultural subordination. To avoid facing Western readers with a long list of "untranslated" Spanish words embedded in English texts, in some cases we have created an "English translated form" of derivative terms (such as "intercultural education" and "intercultural teachers"), though it would be difficult to explain an author's meaning of these terms in an English cultural context. However, we consistently leave the base terms *interculturalidad* and *comunalidad*, in their original Spanish to mark these words and cultural concepts as "untranslatable."

A third term, *cosmovisión*, is perhaps equally untranslatable. However, here we have taken another tack; we rejected "world view," the translation provided in several Spanish-English dictionaries, in favor of creating our own literal, Anglicized translation, "*cosmovisión*," implying a philosophical or spiritual perspective that attempts to account for or include a way of understanding the entire cosmos and humanity's place in it. We feel this suggests the possibility of envisioning multiple worlds, not just one, and approximates both the expansiveness and the unity conveyed by *cosmovisión* in indigenous thought.

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