I have been called cabbage as a term of endearment. I have also, at times, rolled my eyes, raised my eyebrows, and cried aloud, “What the cabbage do you want?”

Italian was my first language, English my second, and French my third. The child of an expatriate family, I was raised in Rome, New York, and Paris, always moving away from a country just as the strangeness of its idioms began to fade. And so the child whose French babysitter regularly called her “ma petite chouette”—my little cabbage—moved to a country where “che cavolo”—that cabbage!—was a mild epithet. I grew up hearing three different languages, none ever becoming entirely familiar. I think this is why I love writing. Words are a medium I have never taken for granted.

Many words have meanings so unique that it is a wonder anything is translated at all. When words defy translation, it is often because they reflect ideas and history singular to the culture to which they belong. Where else but France could exist the concept of le mépris, a form of contempt marked by existential disdain for all humanity? What could be more Gallic than being bien élevé—a term that literally means “well brought up” but suggests a far greater command of the intricacies of French life and of the unwritten rules of being French? The country’s motto—liberté, égalité, fraternité—may be cognate to three English words of similar meaning, but the nuances are impossible to translate.

Likewise, only in Italy can one have the amica or amico dell’cuore—“friend of the heart”—a platonic relationship between two people that is far more intense than an ordinary friendship. This ideal friend would be sympatica: a word that sublimates all the English adjectives of “nice” and “kind” and “warm” into a single ideal of the Italian spirit. To the amica dell’cuore one would say “ti voglio bene”—“I love you”—a phrase just as significant as “ti amo,” but without the connotation of romance.

Untranslatable expressions are not limited to modern languages. In Hebrew, the concepts of mishpat and saddiq are terms that combine notions of institutional justice and duty with private morality. The Greek logos—literally “word”—often refers to the rational spirit, the intellect that characterized the philosophers of Athens. Latin contains the antonyms furor and ratio—madness and reason, signifying the values of a society that feared
feminine emotionalism as much as it prized the stoic deliberation of a soldier.

Unraveling such complexities requires study and patience. Living where a language is spoken not only provides an opportunity to gain grammatical fluency, but also to attain an intuitive understanding of the subtexts present in every conversation. To know a language is not merely to speak it or to hear it, to read it or to write it, but to experience it. The appropriate Hebrew term for this would be “yada,” the knowledge by which one “knows” God or “knows” good and evil, or even the action by which Adam “knows” Eve; it is more than cerebral approximation.

Language is Culture
To examine language is to illuminate the culture from which it comes. Here in the U.S., the fiercest insults for a boy are those that attack his masculinity. In Italy, by contrast, the worst thing possible is to insult his mother. Our single word for serious affection, “love” (compare with Latin or Greek, which distinguishes between friendship, filial, romantic, erotic, and familial), reflects the relative difficulty Americans have in talking about or understanding emotions. In this country, “love” can be part of the elusive romantic commitment “I love you,” or the stuff of a greeting card. The ambiguity of the phrase mirrors the ambiguity that we, as a society that values manliness and strength, have in allowing ourselves to be emotional.

That is not to say that our language reveals only our society’s flaws. Our notions of freedom and patriotism are unique ideals, representing to us an amalgam of our heritage: pioneers at the frontier, ranchers kicking up dust in the sunset, flags, and Founding Fathers. In my time living in the United Kingdom, I have never quite been able to explain to my English friends exactly what we mean by “patriotism.” The meaning is suggested in its etymology: patria, the land of one’s fathers. It is not only his country that an American patriot loves, but his ancestors, from the Founding Fathers to civil rights leaders, across the whole span of United States history.

Growing up with three languages, I have been privy to three sets of values, of ideals. I understand the meanings of words, and I have come to understand so much about the cultures that produce them. Learning a language gives you more than the ability to request a pizza or ice cream, or to ask for directions to the nearest monument. It is an opportunity to become intimate with history, far more complex a cultural expression than the Mona Lisa or Notre Dame.

The Foreigner’s Perspective
I am fascinated by writers who learn English as a tertiary language. Vladimir Nabokov’s Pale Fire is a veritable compendium of puns and linguistic flourishes, his understanding of the language so cerebral that he is able to exercise conscious control over every word, even when the weight of his wordplay threatens to sink his work into nonsense. He writes with such acute consciousness of the language that he doesn’t take any of its words, or subtlety of any meanings, for granted. Similarly, I find that my foreignness leads me to a consciousness of the singularity of each word, and with it a similar desire to parse and perfect each phrase.

It may be a cliché to call words powerful, but after a lifetime of moving from country to country, from language to language, I have come to appreciate the truth of it: Language is not simply about the ability to express ideas or sentiments. The sentences and paragraphs into which words are strung are only part of the power of language. Rather, much of language’s power lies in the words themselves. When properly understood, the history of a single word—its etymology, its context, and its place in a culture—can express more about the country from which it came than whole pages about the history of that country in translation.

Tara Isabella Burton is a student at the University of Oxford after Paris, and Rome. She has previously been published in The Orphan Leaf Review, Amoskeag, The Apprentice Writer, The Copperfield Review, 8x8, and Scholastic’s The Best Teen Writing of 2006 and 2008.