

The game of the name

Andrew Milner

In the English-speaking countries of the global North, we often assume that terms like ‘philanthropy’, ‘donor’ and ‘grant’ are universally understood. Of course, they aren’t. The terms often resist easy translation. Even where a similar or roughly comparable word exists, it often has specific local connotations; sometimes, the nearest alternative can reflect a different ethos and vastly different practices. For this issue of *Alliance*, we asked a number of people involved in philanthropy around the world what if anything people in their region understand by some of the terms we bandy about so readily. Their remarks suggest that imposing an alien terminology and alien ideas on indigenous practice might mean that the virtues of the latter are obscured to the detriment of local development.

Germany – no easy-to-use umbrella term

‘There is a whole set of terms trying – more or less successfully – to translate the English terms *philanthropy* and *giving* into the German language,’ says Aletta von Meibom of Active Philanthropy. What we (the readers of and contributors to *Alliance*) mean by philanthropy, however, is, she says, ‘often described by the German phrase *gemeinnütziges Engagement*, which gets quite close to the meaning of the English term and translates literally into ‘engagement/ activities benefiting the general public’. The shade of meaning can be a little different, however, since *Engagement* has the connotation of activity (giving time or offering expertise) – though it can, says von Meibom, refer only to giving money. ‘On balance,’ she feels, ‘the German term focuses a little more on support through activity and a little less on financial support compared to the English term.’ (Interesting to note that *Engagement* is not a German word.)

German also has the word *Philanthropie* but, says von Meibom, its connotation is very different. Some

Germans ‘might know it comes from Greek and means love for mankind – but extremely rarely will they relate the term to modern philanthropy or *gemeinnütziges Engagement*’. This is the direct opposite of the situation in the US where, says Betsy Brill of Strategic Philanthropy, ‘the word “philanthropy” is not widely used, being something limited to those who work in the field. It has come to have an almost professional connotation.’

Von Meibom concludes with the suggestion that ‘the lack of a common, easy-to-use umbrella term for *philanthropy* and/ or *giving* maybe casts light on the rather diffuse landscape of German philanthropy’.

In Portuguese, too, there are at least six ways to express the donation of resources, says Marcos Kisil of IDIS. ‘Five are simple words: *filantropia* (philanthropy), *caridade* (charity), *solidariedade* (solidarity), *generosidade* (generosity) and *esmola* (alm); and one is more an expression of a concept: *investimento social privado* (private social investment).’

Russia – deliberate misuse of terms

Russia has its own legacy of terms understood in a particular way – in this case, through manipulation rather than evolution. ‘I would not exaggerate,’ says Olga Alexeeva of CAF Global Trustees, ‘if I say that almost 60 per cent of public distrust towards charities and NGOs comes as a result of misuse of terminology and language stereotypes.’

She offers the example of the generally used term for charity – *blagotvoritelnost*. The direct translation is ‘creating good’, and it is ‘mostly understood as direct action, as help from person to person’ rather than as giving to a charitable organization. ‘Charities themselves, meanwhile, especially charitable foundations, suffer from distrust and public suspicion precisely because of their name.’ The term got into bad odour, she explains, because in the 1990s a number of charitable foundations ‘got involved in criminal activities or tax avoidance or were accused in misuse of funds’. Emerging private,

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family or community foundations are apt to be tarred with the same brush and struggle to ‘prove that they are different from a general image of a “foundation” as a money-laundering machine’. Other words and abbreviations like NGO or NPO are ‘understood only by those working in them’.

Perhaps the most sinister example is the case of the word ‘volunteer’. Russian, says Alexeeva, now has two words for volunteer – the original *dobrovolets* and the much later coinage *volonter*. In the Soviet era, *dobrovolets* became very strongly associated with what was more or less forced labour, the so-called ‘volunteering’ of ‘millions of people in the potato fields and in the defence industry’. This association is still so strong that, to avoid it, the present third sector has had recourse to the English word, lightly Russianized as *volonter*.

China and India – philanthropy as direct assistance

Chinese has three words that are used to convey the ideas of philanthropy and giving, says Yvonne Li of Advantage Ventures: *shanxin*, whose literal English translation is “kind heart”; *gongyi*, which is a reflection of the pro bono (for the public good) concept; and *cishan*, literally meaning “compassionate benevolent”. Compassionate, she explains, is represented by the first character of the word, while the second represents benevolent ‘but basically refers to charity/philanthropy’.

It is noticeable that in the case of both Russia and China, the commonly used terms imply more traditional giving – offering direct, pecuniary help to the needy – and convey nothing of the idea of providing support to an organization

addressing this or that more generalized social ill. As Yvonne Li remarks, the Chinese terms have ‘no reference to social investment. There is no widely used term for social entrepreneurship or social investment so we have had to make it up.’

Similarly, ‘the closest Hindi word for philanthropy’, says Sanjay Agarwal of AccountAid India, ‘is *paropkar*, which literally translates to “doing a favour unto others/helping others – normally without any expectation of a return favour”’. He goes on: ‘the practices associated with this (also known as *poort*, literally an act of

pious liberality) are fairly traditional, and involve doing things like setting up water stations, digging ponds, running kitchens, schools, hospitals, orphanages. This concept has failed to evolve with the changing times, and is now becoming somewhat redundant with the state having taken over many of these functions.’

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Aletta von Meibom

A bad press for charity

Where the words in the English ‘giving’ vocabulary meet with immediate recognition, there is usually a distinction between what Olga Alexeeva terms ‘help from person to person’ and the much-touted (in the sector at least) idea of strategic philanthropy, with the latter generally getting a more favourable press. Charity is a particular casualty, largely because of its implications of patronage and its palliative, rather than curative, effect. In the US, says Betsy Brill, ‘the word “charity” is negatively viewed by those who would tend to use “philanthropy”’, while in Brazil, says Marcos Kisil of IDIS, ‘the fact that charity has been used to fulfil some basic human needs as shelter, food or clothes does not change the *status quo* of the individual in need’. Summing up these usages, Aletta von Meibom says that the German ‘*Wohltätigkeit* literally translates into something like *doing welfare*. The term is very traditional and slightly outdated and evokes images of giving poor people warm clothes or a few euros to buy some food. It has no strategic or impact-focused connotation but is more to do with direct help and personal empathy.’

The case of the word donation – growing up with different parents

So ‘philanthropy’, where it is not a complete stranger, has a different personality in different cultures. Nor is the case of donor or donation any more straightforward. For Russians, says Olga Alexeeva, ‘it is only connected to those who give blood, not money’ – though this is now changing. Again, the word ‘donation’ (*pozhtertvovanie*) is also ‘linked in public view to direct action, to helping person to person as its roots come from the religiously loaded word *zhertva* – sacrifice’.

There is a similar religious overtone in the comparable Hindi word. Although the English word donation and the Hindi/Sanskrit word *daan* are from the same stock, their subsequent career has been different. ‘If we contrast the western understanding of “donation” with the Indian understanding,’ says Sanjay Agarwal, ‘it is different chiefly in the sense of lowered involvement or expectation of return. The reason for this appears to lie in the underlying theoretical purpose of Indian giving, which is to detach oneself from the material world, in preparation for the end of one’s life. Remaining

involved with the impact of the giving would create the risk of getting attached to the benefit that the donee receives.'

Clearly, this is not the sort of understanding of giving that would commend itself to a venture philanthropist. In Indian tradition, says Sanjay, this attitude is taken to the extent that 'once a donation has been made ritually, the donor is not expected to have any ownership at all. If the person for whom it was intended cannot be traced, the donor is required to drop the item in water!'

Nor is there a straightforward transition of the idea of giving between German and English. To convey the English idea, says Aletta von Meibom, 'one has to scrape together a whole bunch of German terms'. By doing this, she says, you get something close to, but not exactly like, the English idea. A mixture of the verbs *schchenken* (to make a present), *spenden* (to donate or to make a donation), *stiften* (to endow) and *geben* (to give)' produces a rough comparison, though none of them would convey the idea of strategic giving or social investment. *Schenken*, for instance, 'evokes associations of birthday and Christmas', while *stiften* is 'giving to a foundation to enable this foundation to do charitable work'.

Philanthropy 'a non-starter'

So if the English-language idea cannot be exported without modification, shouldn't we look for an indigenous alternative, for which a meaning won't have to be manufactured or imposed? This is exactly what the Building Community Philanthropy project in Southern Africa did.¹ According to Susan Wilkinson-Maposa, the term philanthropy was a 'non-starter'. 'It could not be translated and did not resonate.' Instead of trying to find 'local translations for the professionalized language of philanthropy, we started with the local vernacular. So instead of looking for local connotations of sector language, we looked for what local language can tell the sector about philanthropic conventions and meaning.' What they came up with, she says, was the word 'help'. 'It implies a transaction, but not business. It was easily translated into 11 vernacular languages. Furthermore, research findings illustrate that it holds a widely shared

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Susan Wilkinson-Maposa

meaning – the giving and/or receiving of something to satisfy or alleviate a need, problem, difficulty, sense of deprivation or lack of something, be it a tangible good/assets or ability.'

A reciprocal process

Clearly this is something very different both from the old-fashioned ideas of 'alms-giving' and from the modern practice of so-called 'strategic' philanthropy. There is a strong emphasis on reciprocity, reflected, says Wilkinson-Maposa, in such sayings as 'the Oshiwambo phrase "Give so that you can be given to also" (*Mupa ekupe yoo*) and the Ndebele saying "help the one that helps you" (*khotha oyikhothayo*)'.

This is not 'giving something back' from a position of relative comfort; it is assistance given with the expectation that the giver, too, will need help at some stage – what the authors of the study term 'horizontal philanthropy'. As Wilkinson-Maposa puts it, 'help is seen as a form of savings and sound investment. In the context of poverty, help which is reciprocal is in fact a strategy and way to invest in one's tomorrow.'

As she also points out, their approach 'not only improved communication, but provided deeper insight into the concepts and their meaning relevant to indigenous philanthropy'. As well as terms for very specific forms of assistance – condolence money in both Ndebele (*zibuthe*) and Shona (*chema*), and loaning cattle to those who don't have them (*ukusisa* in Ndebele and *kuronzera* in Shona) – the research found subtle shades of meaning among terms that cover the general territory of help or giving. She cites a study undertaken in Namibia which suggests that it is clearly understood by both parties whether the help being asked for or offered is on a reciprocal or unilateral basis, either because of the relationship between them or the frequency of the help or, more explicitly, because of the terms used to asked for it.

The Building Community Philanthropy project also uncovered terms that refer to forms of labour pooling and voluntary work. Again, the emphasis is on mutual help: the pooling of resources to perform a task that would be beyond the means of an individual or family, either for a general purpose or with the expectation of a 'return' when the volunteers find themselves in a similar position, a notion familiar in rural communities throughout the world. The idea of giving as a form of patronage is completely absent.

An echo of this emphasis on mutual support is reported by Marcos Kisil. In Brazil, he says, the term *solidariedade* 'represents the fellowship of responsibilities and

¹ The Building Community Philanthropy project (2003–05) was carried out in four southern African countries (Namibia, Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe). It was funded by the Ford Foundation and implemented by the Centre for Leadership and Public Values, University of Cape Town, South Africa.

interests among members of a group. For example, it is utilized for groups that belong to the same church that provide support to each other when a need is perceived. The same applies to some profession that establishes a brotherhood or fraternity to help each other. It represents a kind of social corporativism.'

Do new names lead to new practice?

The same or similar words can therefore evoke different shades of meaning in different parts of the world. But if a concept is reframed and given a different name, does that affect the way it is approached? Marcos Kisil believes that it does, citing the coinage of the term 'private social investment' in Brazil. This usage dates, he says, from the early 1990s; it is a response to what he calls the 'stigma' associated with the word philanthropy (because of its links with traditional notions of charity). 'It represents,' he says, 'a departure from the idea of giving to the idea of investing. It represents a compromise with the results and impacts of giving. It represents a compromise to change the *status quo* of someone in need, or of a cause that should be promoted and considered by the overall society... It requires a level of strategic planning, management and evaluation.' And? 'The term was well-accepted and gained an important level of consensus among donors in Brazil throughout the [intervening] years.'

Betsy Brill feels that 'there are so many new terms associated with philanthropy – 'social justice philanthropy, philanthrocapitalism, venture philanthropy, etc, that at times the terms seem to be more of a branding effort', though she acknowledges that at the root of this quest for ways to clothe new ideas so that they won't seem exactly like the old ones is 'the ongoing desire to make philanthropy more meaningful, more connected between donor and recipient'.

'If we accept "social work" and "rural development" as new terms connected with the concept of philanthropy and giving,' says Sanjay Agarwal, 'then yes, these are leading to a redefining of how charity is practised in India. There is a strong progressive undercurrent

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among social workers, which tends to inform their approach and work in significant ways, ranging from their personal values, to the way they empathize with the disadvantaged.'

On the other hand, as Olga Alexeeva remarks, it is sometimes the case that we just need to remember the meaning of words rather than invent new ones. 'Before the 1917 revolution,' she says, 'the Russian word *mir* had three meanings: world, peace and community.' As part of their drive towards unification, 'the Bolsheviks pretty much destroyed local communities in Russia and the word lost its original third meaning. Today, we have to go to great lengths to describe what "community" (community organization, community foundation, etc) means,' whereas, she says, 'what we need to do is just to remember that *mir* is world, peace and community in one. Isn't that what we want to achieve in the end: better world, peace and thriving local communities?'

Out of Africa...

In rural southern Africa, as we have seen, the practices remain firmly traditional, but they might have something new to teach us. While words can be imported and can successfully encapsulate a meaning not found in an indigenous word (think of the German *Engagement*; think of philanthropy itself), the imposition of alien terms and an alien tradition can obscure a very important indigenous tradition. If we ignore it, we not only neglect the opportunity offered to build on it, with potentially important consequences for the development of the communities in question (how much more effective might local resource mobilization be, if it drew on existing practices?), we also offer a snub to the experience on which it is based.

Clearly, we have only scratched the surface of a subject on which much could be written. Nor would it be safe to venture any very firm hypothesis on the basis of such a whistle-stop tour. It is worth noting, however – what seems obvious but what we readily overlook – that the words used to describe what we think of as philanthropy in different parts of the world are the product of very different cultural traditions, belief systems and historical experiences. Moreover, the limited vocabulary we have – and which we have often imposed, appropriately or not, on others – is often inadequate to describe a great variety of forms of help, mutual or not. So the next time we native English speakers get up to speak or sit down to write, we might bear in mind that what we're saying is not necessarily what the audience is hearing... @

Comment Some further thoughts on language Steven Burkeman



My own interest in this area began as a result of listening to one of the authors, Susan Wilkinson-Maposa, speak about her research in Cape Town in 2005. I find it fascinating that she could find no satisfactory word for philanthropy in all the languages of southern Africa, and was thrown back on ‘help’. As she implies, it is possible, if not likely, that this reflects societies in which mutuality rather than benevolence from on high is the norm.

In the southern African context, the concept of *ubuntu* – which isn’t mentioned in the article – appears to have no single-word equivalent elsewhere. Its relevance is apparent from this explanation from Desmond Tutu: ‘One of the sayings in our country is *ubuntu* – the essence of being human. *Ubuntu* speaks particularly about the fact that you can’t exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can’t be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality – *ubuntu* – you are known for your generosity.’ Thus explained, *ubuntu* seems close to the literal meaning of ‘philanthropy’. (Incidentally, I think its true meaning is ‘the love of what it is to be human’, which is slightly but perhaps significantly different from ‘the love of mankind’, as indicated in the article.)

As the article makes clear, it could only scratch the surface. The role of religion in shaping the language in use in different cultures also needs to be explored. For example, Islamic societies have their own concept for what we call charity or philanthropy. *Zakat* is defined by Wikipedia as ‘one of the Five Pillars of Islam . . . the giving of a small percentage of one’s possessions (surplus wealth) to charity generally to

poor and needy Muslim individuals . . . It is the duty of an Islamic community not just to collect *zakat* but to distribute it fairly as well.’

Interesting, too, that the Hebrew word is ‘*tzedekah*’, which, while meaning ‘charity’, can also be translated as ‘justice’. (Maimonides’ hierarchy of charitable giving has much to say to contemporary givers: giving anonymously is rated above giving publicly, and giving so as to create independence is rated much more highly than the alternative.)

In the West at least, the language in contemporary operational use is principally dictated by large wealthy institutions, or wealthy individuals, whose principal activity is giving money away. Many of the words mentioned in the article seem designed to conceal this basic act (though ‘grant-making’ comes close). Why is the need to conceal it apparently so pervasive?

I suspect that this is about guilt – about the fact that if you have money to give away, you have more than the person/project that needs it and to which you’re giving it. We – the ‘givers’ – choose words with which we feel comfortable and which don’t expose us to too much truth about the injustice and inequity that has allowed us to acquire such wealth in the first place, or about the marginal effects of our gifts when compared with the kind of redistribution that would be needed to correct that injustice, and which, at some level, our giving may help to fend off.

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INDIA’S FIRST ONLINE FUNDRAISING EVENT A SUCCESS

India’s first online fundraising event, the India Giving Challenge 2009, took place from 1 September to 11 October, raising Rs91lac (approx US\$195,000). GiveIndia, which organized the event, provided a matching pool of Rs56lac (\$119,000) to the NGOs and companies that raised the most through their fundraising pages, set up on the GiveIndia website.

One of the winners was the Sveccha Foundation, which sets up schools for street/slum kids.



The response to the event was very positive, with 100 NGOs and 14 companies competing for a share of the large matching pool. Apart from the large final prizes, smaller daily prizes were also given. In the end,

more than 5,000 donors helped 33 NGOs win different prizes.

‘The internet medium is a great way for people to raise funds,’ says Dhaval Udani of GiveIndia. ‘It is very cost effective and enables fundraisers to reach out to a large number of people in a very short time.’

The event raised nearly twice as much as was expected. GiveIndia plans to use what they have learnt from this event to enable NGOs and companies to raise even more for their causes through India Giving Challenge 2010.