

The Diversity of Love Journal

Love Words Across Languages and Cultures

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Why do people use so many love words? What is the meaning behind all these love words? Love is so diverse in its variety of meanings and connotations, such as *attraction* and *attachment*, *passion* and *compassion*, *intimacy* and *commitment*, that a variety of words and expressions have emerged across times, societies, languages, and cultural contexts.

How People in Different Cultures Say “Love” and “I love you”

Some of the most widely known love words are French amour, Spanish amor, Italian amore, English love, German Liebe, and Russian любовь (lyubov'). The least known are probably Sanskrit sringara (śṛṅgāra), Indonesian asmara, Chinese ài (爱), Japanese koi (恋) or ai (愛), Arabic hubb (حُب), Persian and Arabic ishq (ešq or eshgh), as well as several other languages of Muslim countries with some variations in the spelling. Each language has a variety of love words for different kinds of love (see [Karandashev, 2017, 2019](#)).

With increasing intercultural communication (see for review, [Karandashev, 2017](#)), people sometimes wonder how to say “I love you”

in a language other than their own. The verbal and nonverbal expressions of love are diverse: the German *Ich liebe Dich* German, the Dutch *Ik hou van jou*, the Swedish *Jag älskar dig*, the Norwegian *Jeg elsker deg*, the Finnish *Mina rakastan sinua*, the French *Je t'aime*, the Spanish *Te quiero/Te amo*, the Italian *Ti amo*, the Farsi *Dooset daram/ Ashegetam*, the Turkish *Seni Seviyorum*, the Georgian *Mikvarhar*, the Ukrainian *Ya tebe kohayu*, the Russian *Ya tebya liubliu*, the Czech *Miluji te*, the Yiddish *Ikh hob dikh*, the Cantonese Chinese *Ngo oi nei* (vary in Mandarin and other Chinese languages), the Hindi *Hum tumhe pyar karte hae*, the Tamil *Naan unnai kathalikiraen*, the Tagalog *Mahal kita*, the Creole *Mi aime jou*, the Swahili (Bantu language) *Nakupenda or Begg naa la*.

Gender Specificity of Love Words

The grammatical gender of nouns can play a role in the forms of related words. There are no grammatical genders in such languages as English, Finnish, Estonian, Georgian, Armenian, Hungarian, Persian, Bengali, and Tamil. Nouns do not have a feminine or masculine gender, unless they refer to biological sex (e.g., girl, boy, man, woman, Mr., Ms.). Different from this, gendered languages, such as Arabic, Spanish, French, German, Russian, and Hindi, have the grammatical gender of a noun (e.g., masculine, feminine, neuter).

In Spanish, for instance, many masculine nouns (with some exceptions) end in the letter “o”—Latino, el niño (son), el tío (uncle), el dormitorio (bedroom), and feminine nouns end in the letter “a”—Latina, la hija (the daughter), la profesora (the teacher), la mesa (table). Not only people and animals, but also things, feelings, places, and ideas have a gender in a grammatical sense. Gendering words is conventional and can vary across languages. For example, the Spanish word *la mesa* (table) is

feminine, whereas the German *der Tisch* (table) is masculine. These “gendered” nouns determine the forms of other related words. The forms of determiners, pronouns, adjectives, and verbs depend on the grammatical gender of the nouns they refer to.

Consequently, the ways people say “I love you” vary when they are addressed to a man or a woman. For example, in Arabic, one says “Ana uhibbuk” to a man and “Ana baħibbik” to a woman. In Hebrew, one says *Ani ohev et otha* to a man and *Ani ohev otah* to a woman. In Thai, *Chan rak khun* is addressed to a man, while *Phom rak khun* is addressed to a woman.

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References

Karandashev, V. (2017). *Romantic love in cultural contexts*. Springer.

Karandashev, V. (2019). *Cross-cultural perspectives on the experience and expression of love*. Springer.

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