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# Cultural Categorization of Definitions of Hospitality Words: A Matter of Definitions

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## Abstract

Hospitality research is marred by a tendency to use the nouns hospitality and hospitableness as entirely synonymous and perfectly interchangeable. This has led to confusion and misunderstandings when reading the literature and resulted in an atomistic body of literature lacking a unifying conceptual approach. Using different methods, including etymological methods, numerous studies have attempted to define hospitality concepts. This study takes a novel approach to understanding and defining hospitality vocabulary: cultural categorization of the definitions of six hospitality words across three languages (English, German, Danish). The findings show that there is not correspondence between the cultural categorizations of dictionary definitions across languages. A reason for the confusion among hospitality researchers may be that the words have different cultural meanings in different languages. The paper presents definitions and cultural categorizations of six hospitality words. It is suggested that the concept of hosting can nuance hospitality research.

**Key words:** *Hospitableness, Hosting, Language use, Behavior, Values*

**Track** *Global/Societal Track*

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## Introduction

There exists a considerable body of research on the topic of hospitality, but, as pointed out by Brotherton, it is “characterized by considerable repetition, circularity of argument, fundamental misunderstandings and misuse of basic terminology and concepts” (Brotherton, 2017). This is reflected in “the ubiquitous tendency for commentators to use the adjective hospitable and the nouns hospitableness and hospitality as entirely synonymous and perfectly interchangeable” (ibid.). As pointed out by Brotherton, the outcome is often confusion when reading the literature, and, a more worrisome outcome from a scientific point of view, “The result has been the development of a rather atomistic body of literature lacking a unifying and solid conceptual anchor that could be used to provide a more universally accepted definition of hospitality and help circumscribe the field in a more logical and defensible manner” (ibid).

The misunderstandings and misuse that Brotherton writes about are likely to have different causes. One cause can be disagreement on academic definitions, with the use of a plethora of definitions of hospitality as a consequence. Another cause may be that definitions of hospitality and other often used words in hospitality research are not the same across different languages, and/or that the pragmatic (everyday) use of these “hospitality words” is not the same across different languages. Academic definitions, although supposedly having the same meaning across languages, do not necessarily reflect cultural nuances that are embedded in words and language use.

Numerous studies have attempted to define “hospitality” using different methods. Several of these studies have had a focus on the etymology of the word hospitality (O’Gorman, 2010), as a way to understand the meaning of hospitality. In early hospitality research, there was often references to the linguistic roots of the English word host (Brotherton & Wood, 2000, p. 135), as is also often the case in 21<sup>st</sup> century research (cf. O’Gorman, 2010). While the etymology of key hospitality words is well-known, it appears that a 21<sup>st</sup> century comparison of definitions and cultural meanings of definitions of hospitality words across languages has not been carried out.

Culture is notoriously difficult to define (Condon & LaBrack, 2015). In 2006, Baldwin et al. concluded that at that time there were over 300 academic definitions of culture (Baldwin et al., 2006). Some academics have argued that it is not only difficult to define culture but that it is almost impossible (Edelstein et al., 1989). However, some agreement does exist on what culture is: It is what has been created by human beings (Moore & Lewis, 1952); thus it is not nature. In lieu of a definition, it can be described what culture is about: values, behavior, material elements, and language (Vejlgaard, 2017). These four components are considered cultural categories in this study.

The aim of this paper is to bring to light cultural similarities and differences between dictionary definitions of hospitality words across different languages.

### **Method and Data-gathering**

Academic definitions of hospitality words are not necessarily based in actual language use, and the cultural “roots” of academic definitions are likely obscure. Therefore, this paper will analyze definitions of hospitality words based on their dictionary definitions and deduce which cultural category that a definition reflects.

It has been pointed out that “Dictionary definitions of terms are, by their very nature, generic in character and thus tend towards the vague. However, there is merit in reflecting upon at least some of these since it permits an appreciation of the parameters of nuance [...] placed on definitions of hospitality” (Brotherton & Wood, 2000, p. 135).

Definitions in academic research and in dictionaries differ: In academic research, there is typically one definition of the word: the definition is restrictive. Authoritative dictionaries aim to present all or many meanings of a word, often giving multiple definitions, exhausting all the ways a word can be understood: the definitions are expansive. Authoritative dictionaries can open up to the nuances of words. However, although this study has an expansive approach, it will not quote all dictionary definitions of the words included in the study; only definitions that are relevant to hospitality research will be included.

Based on these considerations, this paper will use dictionaries as source material. Dictionaries represent document data, as do other types of books and also, for instance, charts, newspapers, institutional reports, survey data, and various public records (Bowen, 2009). However, a dictionary is not just a dictionary; dictionaries have different qualities and different structures and content. In this study, the dictionaries that will be used must have comprehensive definitions. To be authoritative in this study, the dictionaries must be published in book form in a dictionary format or, if in a digital format, the website content must be published by a dictionary brand or by an official government body.

The hospitality words to be included in the semantic analysis will be English words, as English is the lingua franca of international hospitality research. Six English hospitality words have been selected to be categorized. These six words represent five frequently words in English-language hospitality studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: “Host” and “guest” are obvious candidates. Three other words, “hospitality”, “hospitableness”, and “hospitable”, were highlighted by Brotherton (2017) as the cause of confusion and misrepresentation. A sixth word, hosting, is less frequently used than the other five words. However, it appears to be linked to hospitableness: In his research, Blain has called hospitableness “the psychology of hosting” (Blain, 2012, p. 30), indicating that hosting is a different phenomenon than hospitableness. Therefore, hosting is found to be a relevant word to include in the study.

The dictionaries used as sources are: English: Merriam-Webster (online) (American-English), American Heritage Dictionary (AHD) (online) (American-English). German: Duden (print) (German), Langenscheidts (print) (German). Danish: online dictionary of the Danish Language Authority, a government body. American-English dictionaries were chosen over British-English dictionaries because American-English appears to be the most commonly used language in international hospitality studies. Various dictionaries were used for translation from English into German and Danish.

In the findings section, words that are in German and Danish will be translated into English. The literal meaning of the definitions will also be translated into English as will the definition of the German and Danish words.

## Findings

The six English hospitality words and their definitions in English can be seen in Table 1. Words that indicate or reflect a cultural category will be underlined; the meaning of the underlined words determine the cultural categorization. Sources are in ( ). Numbers in [ ] refer to the cultural categorization in the last column in all tables.

**Table 1.** Six English hospitality words and the dictionary definitions.

Word/ Word type/ Etymology	Definition according English-American dictionaries	Cultural category or sub-category
<b>Host</b> (noun) from Latin: <i>hospes, hospit</i> (meaning stranger) (MW1).	1. A person that <u>receives</u> or <u>entertains</u> guests socially, commercially, or officially [1] (MW1). 2. A person who <u>manages</u> an inn or hotel [2] (AHD1). 3. One that <u>furnishes</u> facilities and resources for a function or event [2] (AHD1).	1: BEHAVIOR 2: PROFESSION <i>Profession is understood as an occupation, a behavioral subcategory.</i>
<b>Hospitality</b> (noun)	1. Cordial and generous <u>reception</u> of [2] or <u>disposition</u> toward guests [1] (AHD2). 2. An instance of cordial and generous <u>treatment</u> of guests [2] (AHD2). 3. The <u>activity</u> or business of providing services to guests in hotels, restaurants, bars, etc. (usually used before another noun)[2] (MW2).	1: PERSONALITY 2: BEHAVIOR <i>Personality is a psychological category.</i>
<b>Hospitable</b> (adjective)	1. <u>Disposed</u> to treat guests with warmth and generosity [1] (AHD3). 2. Indicative of <u>cordiality</u> toward guests [2] (AHD3).	1: PERSONALITY 2: VALUE
<b>Hospitableness</b> (noun)	n/a	Same as for hospitable.
<b>Hosting</b> (gerund or transitive verb)	n/a	
<b>Guest</b> (noun) From Middle English <i>gest</i> , from Old Norse <i>gestr</i> (MW3).	1. One who is a <u>recipient</u> of hospitality at the home or table of another [1]. 2. One who <u>pays</u> for meals or accommodations at a restaurant or hotel [1] (MW3).	1, 2: BEHAVIOR/ROLE <i>Role is understood as a behavioral subcategory.</i>

Table 2 lists the six English hospitality words and gives the German translation of the six words. It also gives a literal translation of the German words into English and an English translation of the German definition of the German word.

**Table 2.** German Hospitality Vocabulary.

English word/ Word type	German Translation	Literal translation of German base word	Dictionary definition (translated from German)	Cultural category or sub-category
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<b>Host</b> (noun)	1. Gastgeber (LHE). 2. Gastwirt (LHE).	1. Guest giver. 2. Guest host (host of the guest).	1. Someone who <u>invites</u> guests; historically: host at an inn; inn keeper [1]. 2. <u>Host</u> at hotels and restaurants [2].	1: BEHAVIOR 2: PROFESSION
<b>Hospitality</b> (noun)	1. Hospitalität (D). 2. Gastfreundschaft (LHE). 3. Gastlichkeit (LHE).	1. Hospitality. 2. Guest friendship. 3. Guest-attentiveness.	1. Friendly <u>reception</u> of guests, especially at lodging/shelters and similar places [1]. 2a. Friendly <u>reception</u> of guests, especially at lodging/shelters and similar places [1]. 2b. Friendly <u>behavior</u> towards guests [1]. 3. <u>Making</u> guests feel comfortable [1].	1: BEHAVIOR
<b>Hospitable</b> (adjective)	1. Gastfreundlich (LHE). 2. Gastlich (LHE).	1. Guest friendly. 2. Guest-attentive.	1. Being <u>friendly</u> to guests[1]. 2. The <u>behavior</u> that make a guest feel comfortable[2].	1: VALUE 2: BEHAVIOR
<b>Hospitable-ness</b> (noun)	1. Gastlichkeit (LHE).	1. Guest-attentiveness.	1. <u>Making</u> guests feel comfortable [1]. 1. Derived from “gastlich” [2].	1: VALUE (2: BEHAVIOR)
<b>Hosting</b> (gerund or transitive verb)	n/a			
<b>Guest</b>	1. Gast (LHE).	1. Guest.	1. A person who <u>is invited</u> for socializing and/or temporary accommodation[1].	1: BEHAVIOR/ROLE

Table 3 lists the six English hospitality words and gives the Danish translation of the six words. It also gives a literal translation of the Danish words into English and an English translation of the Danish definition of the Danish word.

**Table 3.** Six English hospitality words and the Danish translation and definition.

English word/ Word type	Danish Translation	Literal translation of Danish base word	Dictionary definition (translated from Danish)	Cultural category or sub-category
<b>host</b> (noun)	1. vært (SDK1). 2. gæstgiver (SDK2).	1. host. 2. guest giver.	1. Person who <u>offers</u> invited guests something to eat or drink or take care of their needs in other ways[1]. 2. <u>Innkeeper</u> [2].	1: BEHAVIOR 2: PROFESSION
<b>Hospitality</b> (noun)	1. gæstfrihed (SDK3). 2. gæstgiveri (SDK4).	2. guest freedom. 1. guest giving.	1. Hospitable <u>attitude</u> [1] or <u>treatment</u> [2]. 2. <u>Place</u> that offers travelers food, drink and sleeping accommodation [3].	1: VALUE 2: BEHAVIOR 3: PLACE <i>Place is a physical element.</i>
<b>Hospitable</b>	1. gæstfri (SDK3).	1. guest free.	1a. Someone who likes to receive guests and strangers, and who are <u>welcoming</u> and <u>generous</u> to them[1]. 1b. Accommodating and inviting to visitors [2].	1: VALUE 2: BEHAVIOR

<b>Hospitable-ness</b>	1. gæstfrihed (SDK3).	1. guest freedom.	1. Hospitable <u>attitude</u> [1] or <u>treatment</u> [2].	1: VALUE <i>In social psychology, value and attitude are closely related (Vaughan &amp; Hogg, 1998, p. 95).</i> 2: BEHAVIOR
<b>Hosting</b>	1. værtskab (SDK5).	1. host-ship.	1. The <u>act</u> of being host[1].	1: BEHAVIOR
<b>Guest</b> (noun)	1. gæst (SDK6).	1. guest.	1. Person who <u>visits</u> another person's home, for instance, to participate in a party or other occasion, unannounced or by invitation [1]. 2. <u>Customer</u> in a restaurant or hotel or travel agency etc.[2].	1: BEHAVIOR 2: ROLE

### Analysis

Table 4 is a summation of the categorization of the words into psychological and cultural categories, as these categories were determined in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

**Table 4.** *Summation of categorizations in Tables 1, 2 and 3.*

<b>Language</b>	<b>ENGLISH</b>	<b>GERMAN</b>	<b>DANISH</b>
<b>Word</b>	<b>Cultural Category</b>	<b>Cultural Category</b>	<b>Cultural Category</b>
Host	BEHAVIOR PROFESSION	BEHAVIOR PROFESSION	BEHAVIOR PROFESSION
Hospitality	PERSONALITY BEHAVIOR	BEHAVIOR	VALUE BEHAVIOR PLACE
Hospitableness	PERSONALITY VALUE	VALUE BEHAVIOR	VALUE BEHAVIOR
Hosting	n/a	n/a	BEHAVIOR
Guest	BEHAVIOR ROLE	BEHAVIOR ROLE	BEHAVIOR ROLE

As per Table 4, *host* and *guest* are understood in the same way across all the three languages: Both are about behavior; behavior can be a role, which is a specific type of behavior, namely a relatively standardized social position (Jary & Jary, 2004, p. 524). Guest is a role a person can have. The behavior that describes host also reflect that of a role. This means that host can be a profession (an occupation) and a role that a person can have, regardless of job title.

With respect to hospitality, there are different ways of understanding this word, not only across the three languages, but in English and Danish also within the language. In English, *hospitality* can be understood in two different ways: as an aspect of personality or as behavior. In Danish, the two Danish equivalents of *hospitality* can be understood in three different ways: as a value, behavior, or a place. The German equivalent is solely about behavior. Thus, the one cultural category that is the same across all three languages is behavior.

Hospitableness can be understood in two different ways in all three languages; however, the categories are not the same categories across the three languages. In English, *hospitableness* is about personality and a value. In

German and in Danish, the two categories are value and behavior. The one category that is the same across all three languages is value.

Two English-American dictionaries do not give a definition of *hosting*, which is not unusual for gerunds and transitive verbs. (Hosting can both be a verb and a gerund (a verb that is a noun)). However, in hospitality research, it may be relevant to have a definition of this word.

In Danish, the word *værtskab* gives some variation to the Danish hospitality vocabulary. This word may be a key to an academic definition of hosting. If one takes the Danish dictionary definition of the word *værtskab* (four words: “Det at være vært” (SDK5), and puts this sentence into Google Translate, the translation is “hosting” (Google Translate). If one translates *værtskab* into German, the German word is *Gastgeber-rolle* (Unnerup-Madsen, 2002), which literally means “host role” in English. These two Danish and German words can help in defining hosting as a concept in English hospitality vocabulary:

*Værtskab* ends in what corresponds to the English suffix *-ship*. In English, words that end in *-ship* can have different meanings, for instance: 1. State or condition: friendship, internship. 2. Profession: professorship, chancellorship, clerkship. 3. Skill: horsemanship, penmanship. 4. One entitled to a (specified) rank or title: Lordship (Merriam-Webster, 2020a; AHD, 2020). If one were to take the literal meaning of the Danish word *værtskab* and translate it into English, it would be “host-ship”, which would fall into the profession or skill category. However, hosting does not end in *-ship*, but in *-ing*. In English, words that end in *-ing* means “action or process” (Merriam-Webster, 2020b). An example of *-ing* as action is running; an example of *-ing* as a process is meeting. If viewed as a profession or skill, hosting is likely about action, about doing something. Host has been categorized as a role, and, thus, hosting is about having a role, carrying out a role, functioning in a role, performing a role, exercising the role of ... . In order to disassociate the word role from a theatrical subtext yet highlight the active nature of the behavior, hosting is defined as “exercising the role of host”.

### Summation: A Mini-dictionary

Across the three languages, hospitality is understood and defined as the treatment of guests. This is in accordance with academic research (King, 1995; Hemmington, 2007; Brotherton, 2017). Across the three languages, hospitableness is understood as a value. This is in accordance with academic research (Tefler, 2017). However, research has shown that hospitableness may also be a trait (Blain, 2012; Blain & Lashley, 2014; Tasci & Semrad, 2015).

Based on the definitions and cultural categorizations in Tables 1, 2, 3, 4, and the academic research referenced above, the six hospitality words are defined and categorized in Table 5. Host in the present hospitality context is about a profession; however, outside of the hospitality industry host can be a role that is not associated with the provision of food and drink and sleeping accommodation. In 1979, one Disney World host explained his job as follows: “Our job, every minute, is to help the Guest enjoy the park” (Pope, 1979). This understanding of the role of host is not reflected in the definition of the word host in Table 5. In the leisure industry, the job of host can be about delivering entertainment, not necessarily combined with delivering food and drink.

**Table 5.** Definitions and cultural categorization of six hospitality words.

Words	Definition	Cultural category
<b>Host</b> (noun)	Someone who serves food and drink to guests and/or provides a bed to sleep in for guests.	Profession
<b>Hospitality</b> (noun)	Treatment of guests.	Behavior.
<b>Hospitable</b> (adjective)	Disposed to treat guests with warmth and generosity.	Trait or value
<b>Hospitableness</b> (noun)	A disposition to treat guests with warmth and generosity.	Trait or value
<b>Hosting</b> (gerund)	Exercising the role of host.	Behavior

<b>Guest</b> (noun)	Someone for whom a host serves food and drink and/or provides a bed to sleep in.	Role
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### Concluding Comment

Adding cultural categorization to the definitions of hospitality vocabulary can be viewed as a step in reducing the misunderstandings and confusion that Brotherton (2017) described. By applying cultural categorization to the definitions of hospitality words, it becomes clear that the words hospitality and hospitable/hospitableness are not synonymous and cannot be used interchangeably.

Cultural categorization of definitions may not only give overall insights about hospitality words. An outcome of this study, is also an academic definition of the word hosting and the suggestion that by adding hosting to the hospitality vocabulary, research can be more precise. With a more precise vocabulary, the risk of misunderstandings and confusion is further reduced.

Both hospitality and hosting are about host behavior. However, whereas hospitality is about the treatment of guests in a broad and general way, hosting is about how the host's treatment of guests is "carried out" at a personal level. When doing research on hosting, that is, on the exercising of the role of host, the focus is likely to be on hosts' behavior and communication towards guests. In future research, it is also relevant to examine what the difference between the delivering a service and exercising the role of host is, if, indeed, there is a difference.

### Sources (Tables 1, 2, 3)

#### Table 1

MW1 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/host>  
 AHD1 <https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=host>  
 AHD2 <https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=hospitality>  
 MW2 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hospitality>  
 AHD3 <https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=hospitable>  
 MW3 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/guest>  
 Retrieved November 14, 2019

#### Table 2

LHE *Langenscheidts Handwörterbuch English* (1991). Teil 1: English-Deutsch. Berlin: Langenscheidt.  
 D Duden (1999). *Duden: Das grosse Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*. Band 3. Mannheim: Dudenverlag.

#### Table 3

SDK1 <https://sproget.dk/lookup?SearchableText=v%C3%A6rt>  
 SDK2 <https://sproget.dk/lookup?SearchableText=g%C3%A6stgiver>  
 SDK3 <https://sproget.dk/lookup?SearchableText=g%C3%A6stfri>  
 SDK4 <https://sproget.dk/lookup?SearchableText=g%C3%A6stgiveri>  
 SDK5 <https://sproget.dk/lookup?SearchableText=v%C3%A6rtskab>  
 SDK6 <https://sproget.dk/lookup?SearchableText=g%C3%A6st>  
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