

The Desk

How a word without title enters a field — a speculative essay on the archive, the clerk, and what language does not record

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Declared register. This is a speculative essay, and it says so in its first line because the discipline requires it. What is claimed as measured comes with its figure; what is offered as conjecture is named as conjecture; and §13 collects the falsifiers, which are what give it the right to exist. v2 corrects v1. The first version put vacancy at the centre — “for a resonance to take, a slot must be free”. That is false, and §4 says why: the drawer is never empty and it takes another card all the same. Vacancy does not disappear: it is demoted to residue (§10).

1. For the reader arriving without context

This essay leans on a discipline that is not famous and on a vocabulary that is not current. What follows is the minimum needed to read it without having read anything else. Those who know the ground can skip to §2.

The discipline

Endolinguistics was founded by C. S. Meulemans and J. Á. Elias Fernández y Cuevas (*Introducción a la endolingüística Decaglotá*, 1993). The discipline is theirs, as are its four levels of language and the distinction between exolanguage and endolanguage. What the author of this essay has added is a different matter and should not be confused with it: the inventory of OAS classes, the qualic mathematics, the falsifiability protocol and the bonding formalism. To systematise is not to found, and the difference matters here because almost everything that follows rests on the former.

And one clarification that heads off the commonest misunderstanding: endolinguistics does not compete with historical linguistics — it presupposes it. The IPA, etymology, sound laws and attested usage are its inputs, read through another ontology. When this essay says “resonance”, it denies nothing that comparative linguistics established: it asks about something else that happens on top.

The skeleton and the classes

From one language to another vowels open, close and diphthongise: they are the mobile element. The consonant skeleton persists far longer — it is what survives drift and what stays standing when everything else changes. *Padre, father, Vater, pater, père* do not resemble one another by chance: they descend from the same word, and what keeps them recognisable is that frame.

On that frame, endolinguistics works not with consonants but with classes. There are seven, anchored in the articulatory region, written with Greek symbols so that no one confuses them with the letters of any language:

class	symbol	region	realisations
P	Φ	labial	p b f v w
T	Θ	dental-alveolar	t d θ ð
K	X	velar / guttural	k g x h q
S	Σ	sibilant	s z ʃ ʒ
L	Λ	liquid	l r ɹ ʎ ɾ
M	M	labial nasal	m
N	Ξ	non-labial nasal	n ŋ ɲ

They are called OAS — *Originating Affective Sound* — and this is where the theory is most often misread, so it is best put negatively: a class is not a sound, is not a phoneme, and has no meaning. It is an orientation; the concrete sound realises it. And they are psychic, not phonological: they name the sensation a sound produces, not the sound.

The code

An endolinguistic code is a bounded, ordered combination of two or three classes. German *Teil* is Θ·Λ; Spanish *río* is Λ. Three things must be held on to, and all three are constraints:

- Order counts. Θ·Λ and Λ·Θ have the same classes and are not the same object.
- Two or three only. A form showing four or more distinct classes is not a longer code: it is a word with affixes, and must be taken apart first.
- And above all: a code means nothing. It does not denote. The most it does — and it is a great deal — is orient a field of semantic possibility. Writing "X·Θ = bounded matter" is a category error.

Hence the method's working rule, worth keeping in view because the essay reformulates it at the end: the code says where to look; use says what is seen.

The co-derivative and the field

A co-derivative is a cognate in which the code remains observable. It is not a narrower cognate: it is a different object, belonging to a different discipline. The cognate is the unit of historical linguistics — demonstrated descent; the co-derivative is the unit of endolinguistics — code still legible. And the working unit is not the isolated word but the co-derivative network: *break/broke/broken/breach* count as one piece of evidence, not four.

A qualic field is what makes several distinct realisations feel like "the same thing" to a speaker, even when they are not synonyms and do not translate one another. It is a reconstructed object — not observed, but inferred from what is observable — and it is synchronic: not an ancestor, but what the realisations have in common *now*. Three things it is not, each corresponding to a common error: it is not the referent (two words may point at the same thing and belong to different fields), it is not the gloss (a field's name is a label, not its definition), and it is not the code.

And a word this essay coins: title

In what follows, title — by analogy with title of ownership — names a word's documented credential of descent: its established right to belong to a family. To have title is to have an etymology backing it; to lack it is for the resemblance not to come from history.

It is not a term of the discipline: it is a coinage of this essay, declared as such because it does a great deal of work in what follows. Its usefulness will be clear in §4: the archive this text describes has no box for title, and there lies the whole matter.

2. A question that was badly put

For much of its history this discipline has spent its energy on one question: is this resonance true? Are *casa* and *Haus* related? *Hervir* and *brew*? *Islandia* and *isla*? And it has built an admirable apparatus to answer it — sound laws, protoforms, loan controls, unicity distances, permutation nulls.

The apparatus works. The trouble is that it answers a question about title of ownership, and once the resonance has already happened, title explains almost nothing about what came next.

Take the best-documented case. English *island* comes from *īegland*, "land in water", kin to *aqua*. It has nothing to do with *isle*, from Latin *insula*. In the sixteenth century some scribes linked them by resemblance and put an *s* into *island* that had never belonged to it. Etymologically it is nonsense. And yet:

the language kept it.

Four hundred years on, the *s* is still there. The verdict of title — "false" — is correct and useless: it does not explain why that falsehood won while others of the same kind get corrected and vanish. The very operation a teacher corrects in a student today was, in another century, the one that rewrote the word for good.

The productive question is not whether a resonance is true, but what makes it take.

3. The field was never made of cognates

The answer begins by undoing an assumption the discipline had been carrying without stating it.

Its unit of observation is the co-derivative network: words that, descending from a common source, preserve the code across different languages. It is an excellent unit — genealogy guarantees it, and so resemblance inside a network is a fact and not an impression. From there it slid, without anyone deciding it, into treating the field as though it were made of those words.

It is not. The co-derivative network is how we find a field, not what it is made of.

The proof is in the corpus and it has the standing of a rule: the region belongs to the field, not to the lexeme. When a language replaces the form that occupied a region, the region is not lost: it changes tenants. The promise lives in English *give my word*, in Spanish *dar mi palabra* and in French *parole* — "word, formal promise": three unrelated etymological networks, one region. Spanish is the limit case: it lost the inherited word — *verbo* left the centre and returned as a learned term — and did not lose the promise. It gave it to *palabra*, which came from somewhere else entirely.

If regions migrate to whoever occupies the centre, then the criterion of membership is occupancy, not descent. Genealogy is a fact about the past; the field is a fact about the present. And use, which is what establishes the field, has no memory of title.

4. The desk

There is a way of seeing the system that makes almost all of the preceding conceptual machinery unnecessary.

Picture a very old desk with hundreds of drawers. Each drawer is a binary or ternary code. Inside, hundreds of cards: the words that share that code. Some have been there since who knows when. Now and then new cards arrive and, instead of staying on the desktop, a clerk puts them where he thinks they should go — even if they come from other languages or other desks. If they sound similar, he files them in the drawer where he finds the closest resemblance.

Three things follow, and the first answers §2's question better than any thesis about holes.

First: the index is the code, and provenance is not a field of the index. The clerk does not ask for papers. That is why an unrelated word ends up among co-derivatives — not "as if by magic", but by construction of the filing system. The archive cannot tell where a card came from because it never recorded it.

Second, and this is the one that bites: once filed, the drawer does not record how the card arrived. The one that has been there since Proto-Indo-European and the one the clerk filed yesterday sit in the same place, indistinguishable to the system. So the verdict of apophenia judges precisely the datum the archive does not keep — the title of §1, for which there is no box here.

Third: the drawers are never empty, and they take another card anyway. This is what corrects v1 of this essay. No free slot is needed. Room is not scarce; what is at stake is not the space but the filing.

And a measurement from the project itself changes meaning in this light. The *unicity distance* found that a two-class code is carried by some 513 words, and treated this as a defect — the code identifies nothing. But a drawer with 513 cards is not a broken instrument: it is a well-used drawer. Unicity distance does not measure how poor the instrument is. It measures the size of the drawers.

5. Who gives the clerk his orders

If the clerk filed by sound alone, the desk would be a heap of drawers holding five hundred cards with nothing in common — and it is not. Somebody tells him where things go.

First, the obvious: use and the community. But that is not enough, because it does not account for urgency — for why a card *has* to go into one particular drawer.

What also gives orders, and this is what the essay wants to maintain, is unconscious psychic structure. Some cards are filed where the psyche needs them: to displace something that cannot be said in its own place, or to metaphorize — to put one in the place of another and let the first slide beneath. The resemblance of sound is not the motive: it is the vehicle. The materiality of the signifier is what makes the substitution possible; the reason for the substitution lies elsewhere.

And here historical linguistics already has the attested case, though it does not call it this: taboo. The forbidden word cannot be said, so a neighbour — often a neighbour in sound — takes its place, and the bear comes to be called "the brown one". It is documented across whole families. It is, exactly, a card filed where it is needed because its own drawer has been sealed.

The consequence, which inverts v1's causality

The first version said: vacancy → entry. With the psyche inside, the order runs the other way:

need → substitution → the displaced one moves → a vacancy appears

Vacancy is not the cause: it is the residue. And this explains what v1 could not — why some resonances take and others do not. The ones that take are the ones that do work.

6. Rewriting the card

The clerk has a second faculty, and it unifies two phenomena nobody had put together: he can rewrite the card so that it fits.

If the desk has no drawer for TH, Θεόδωρος is filed as Фёдор. Nobody calls this an error: it is called phonological adaptation, and it is what every language does with every loan.

Now look again at the *s* of *island*. Some scribes took a card and rewrote it so it would fit the *isle* drawer.

Θεόδωρος → Фёдор and *iland* → *island* are the same operation. Rewriting what comes in so that it fits a drawer that already exists.

One we call adaptation and regard as normal; the other we call false etymology and regard as error. The difference is in us, not in the language. And it has an immediate methodological consequence: the nativisation of loanwords is not a confound to be controlled for in the study of resonance. It is the phenomenon, seen in its tame form.

7. Who audits the clerk

One authority is still missing, because the desk does not accept everything. *Islandia* filed under *isla* gets corrected; *island* filed under *isle* stayed. Somebody reviews the clerk's work and sometimes hands the card back.

That authority is transmission: repeated use, a community that adopts or does not adopt. The clerk proposes; the community disposes. And since most proposals do not survive, most resonances do not take — which is the fact to be explained, not its opposite.

Hence three authorities and three tribunals, none of which substitutes for another:

authority	what it decides
the code	where it can pass — which drawers are within reach of that form
the psyche	why it passes — what needs to be said, displaced or metaphorized
the community	whether it stays — transmission, the only thing that makes an accident historical

This restates the method's old rule — *the code says where to look, use says what is seen* — with one more term in the middle.

8. Four fates of a resonance

Taking is not one thing, and mixing its forms is the sure way to measure none of them. They are detected in different places:

The form is remade. *Island* gets its -s-; *asparagus* becomes *sparrowgrass*; *a nadder* becomes *an adder*. It leaves a trace in the attested form, and it can be dated.

Use shifts. The form does not change; it begins to appear in the frames of the neighbouring field. Only visible in usage corpora, which is why it has scarcely been seen.

It is read, and nothing more. A student hears *hervir* and it sounds like *bir*. Nothing in the language moved; something in a psyche linked. It is private, and elicitation is the only route.

And a fourth, which fits none of them: the code appears with no resonator. Latin *bellus* comes from **duenelos*, diminutive of *duenos* "good"; the B-L was not in the root and arises through syncope and assimilation. No neighbouring card drew it in. This is the case the essay does not explain, and it is left in plain sight for that reason.

9. Why "it's apophenia" is the wrong answer

With the desk in place this can be said precisely.

Apophenia is a verdict about title, and title is exactly the field the archive does not keep (§4). It is true, it is checkable, and it does not touch the question.

And there is evidence that makes it uncomfortable to hold: folk etymology. *Écrevisse* becomes *crayfish*; *asparagus*, *sparrowgrass*; *a nadder*, *an adder*. Each was, in its moment, exactly what we would today call apophenia — and each stopped being so the moment a group made it its own and rewrote the word. Shared, functional apophenia becomes historical fact.

So the verdict moves: one does not ask whether the link had a right, but whether it took — and taking is detected by effects, never by testimony. It is the cell the project had already named, functional but not legible: what a group does with its language without knowing that it does it.

10. Vacancy, demoted — and the door that makes it

v1 put vacancy at the centre. Here it drops to special case and residue, but it does not leave, because there are entries that do occupy a slot that fell free: *verbo* leaves the centre and *palabra* takes it.

And as residue it has a mechanism. An element stops being there in three ways, which the model used to write identically: concealment — it is there, but the instrument does not show it: a defect of ours, not an event in the language; destructuring — it stops being a class and passes into the qualic layer: Latin *rīvus* becomes *rio*, and the *w*, set face to face with the vowel, dissolves into it; and disappearance — it is gone: **hrainiz* gives *rein*, the *h* lost without transit.

And there is a stretch where these transits happen preferentially: between the high vowels and the consonants, $u \rightarrow w \rightarrow v \rightarrow b$, $i \rightarrow j \rightarrow \text{ } \rightarrow g$, which is not a list of sounds but one and the same step at different degrees of saturation. Read upward, a step saturates until it becomes a region and enters the code; read downward, a region desaturates and leaves. The threshold is not a class of segments: it is the door of the code.

It is not proven — the instrument that would decide it does not exist, and a measurement made at the wrong scale came out against it. It is stated because it gives vacancy a physical mechanism: fields do not empty by decree; they empty because their forms erode, and erosion has preferred routes.

11. The fuel

Here what the material supports ends and speculation begins, and the line is better crossed out loud. If what governs the archive is need — and not scarcity of space — then everything that produces need is an engine of language. And almost none of it is phonetic.

A young generation decides to speak differently, not from communicative necessity but to mark difference, and difference is the point. Contact brings cards from another desk. Prestige makes a form be abandoned out of shame. A taboo seals a drawer and forces filing in the one next to it. A war, a migration, a contempt, a longing. A morphology is forgotten and another appears where there was none.

None of these causes is phonetic, and all of them do the same thing: they give the clerk work. And the clerk files with what is at hand, which is almost always what sounds alike.

Seen this way, language does not change in spite of its accidents: it changes through them. And the human mind — individual when it reads, collective when it repeats — keeps reorganising the archive until, after enough generations, hardly a card is where it started and the desk is still standing.

12. What this essay does not claim

- It does not claim that every resonance takes. On the contrary: most are corrected, and that asymmetry is the phenomenon.
- It does not claim that apophenia does not exist or that the guards are superfluous. It claims that they judge title, and that title does not decide membership.
- It does not claim the clerk files by sound alone. §5 maintains the opposite, and the project's own doctrine already said it: orientation is a function of code, context and case, never of code alone.
- It does not claim the threshold door is proven. It is proposed, and its measurement is pending.
- It does not explain the supervened code (*bellus*), which enters with no resonator.

13. Falsifiers

F1 · The clerk. If words entering a language — loans, and the 1,788 the corpus marks as displacing others — do not land in already-populated drawers more than chance predicts, there is no clerk: there is phonotactics. (*And phonotactics must be defeated first: the discriminating version is whether, among the possible adaptations, the one chosen is the one that leaves the card among semantic neighbours.*)

F2 · The asymmetry. If the resonances that took and those that were corrected cannot be separated by any observable variable, then taking is stochastic. That would be a finding, and it would be the end of this essay.

F3 · The door. If fields that lost material through lenition show no more foreign entries than fields whose forms remain whole, §10 collapses.

F4 · The drawer. If two networks sharing a code but differing in context — *hervir/brew* against *beer/Bier*, both B-R — behave as a single population, then the drawer is the code and nothing else. If they behave as two, the desk has an index the clerk cannot see, and finding out what it is becomes the next question.

14. What remains

The discipline was born asking about title and built a remarkable apparatus to answer it. This essay proposes that the next question is another: not where a word comes from, but who filed it there, and why it stayed.

And a consequence that changes the tone of the whole programme: if this is going in the right direction, then the errors of a language are not the noise of the process: they are the process. The *s* of *island* is not a scar on the history of English. It is a specimen, preserved and dated, of the operation that makes languages — and it is exactly the same operation by which Θεόδωρος is said Фёдор.