

What Words Remember

Endolinguistic codes told from scratch

Alejandro Toledo Martínez

A text to be read straight through. You need no linguistics, no history, no philosophy: you need to speak, which you have done since childhood. There are no exercises here and no instructions; there is a story — the story of an order hidden inside words — and a way of seeing it. If, at the end, the reader looks at their own language with a touch of strangeness, the way one looks at a lifelong acquaintance about whom a secret has just come out, the text will have done its work.

A word sets out on a journey

Some five or six thousand years ago, somewhere on the steppes that Europe and Asia now share, a woman carried her child, and someone named that gesture with a word.

The language it was said in had no writing. No tablet survives, no carved stone, no parchment; not even the language's name survives — scholars call it Proto-Indo-European for want of anything better, which is a way of saying *the grandmother of most of our languages*. Everything those people said travelled through the air, from one mouth to one ear, and the air keeps no archives.

And yet that word is still alive.

In India it became *bharati*: he carries. In Germany, *Geburt*: birth — what was carried in the womb until it arrived. In England it split into several words the reader may have used this very day: *bear*, to carry and to endure; *birth*; *burden*, the load someone carries. Five thousand years, three continents, hundreds of generations who never met one another, and the word is still in circulation — disguised, divided, unrecognizable at a glance.

Here is the question that holds this whole text up. If nothing was ever written down, if the word travelled mouth to mouth, changing shape at every stage, how can anyone seriously claim — not as poetry but as knowledge — that *birth* and *bharati* are the same word? For such a claim to stand, something must have survived the journey. Something harder than fashion, more stubborn than the centuries, able to cross entire empires without asking permission.

That something exists. Seeing it takes no special talent: it takes knowing where to look.

Bone and flesh

Take four words that mean the same thing in four languages:

padre	father	Vater	pater
Spanish	English	German	Latin

They sound different, they are spelled differently. Now strip out the vowels, the way one brushes the soil off a fossil:

p·d·r f·th·r v·t·r p·t·r

Something comes to light. The four words, so different in their clothes, reduce to nearly the same thing: three consonants, always in the same order. And the differences that remain have a family look about them: *p*, *f* and *v* are all made with the lips — in fact German writes *Vater* but says *fater*, so the spelling was lying to us and the mouth was not. The *d*, the *t* and the English *th* are all made with the tongue at the teeth. And the final *r* is the final *r* in all four.

What we have just dug up is the word's skeleton: the part that does not rot.

For a word, like a body, has flesh and bone. The vowels are the flesh: soft, changeable, sensitive to the weather. They shift from one country to another, one neighbourhood to another, one decade to the next, and nobody is alarmed. The consonants are the bone. They change too — nothing in a language is eternal — but they change slowly and, this is the decisive part, they change *by rules*: where Latin had *p*, the Germanic languages put *f*, and they did it not in one word but in hundreds, all at once, more than two thousand years ago. The bone is not immortal; it is *predictable*. And what is predictable can be tracked.

We all know this, by the way, without knowing that we know it. When we text in a hurry — *pls*, *thx*, *msg* — we sacrifice the vowels and keep the consonants, never the other way round, because we sense that the message survives without its flesh but not without its bone. Whole civilizations turned that instinct into a system: Hebrew and Arabic have been written for millennia by noting down, essentially, the bones.

A country of seven regions

Let us now take one more step inward — literally inward, because the next discovery happens in the reader's own mouth.

The mouth is a small country with few regions. Say slowly *p*, then *b*, then *f*, then *v*: four different sounds, one single place — the lips. Say *t*, *d*: the tongue touches the teeth. Say *k*, *g*, the breathy *h* of *hat*: the sound happens at the back, near the throat. There are the whistlers — *s* and its kin — and the two consonants that flow without obstacle, *l* and *r*, running through the mouth like water. And there remain the two that hum: *m*, with the lips closed, and *n*, with the tongue up.

Seven regions. Seven families of sounds, and every consonant of every human language lives in one of them — because every mouth in the world has the same lips, the same teeth, the same back.

This is the text's first technical idea, and also its most liberating one: a letter is a costume; the family is the person. The *p* of *padre* and the *f* of *father* are different costumes of the same family — the family of the lips — and that is why the kinship between the two words is invisible to whoever compares letters and obvious to whoever compares families. Endolinguistics, the discipline this text is about, calls these seven families *classes*, and names them with symbols of their own instead of letters. The reason runs deeper than it looks: letters belong to particular languages — the *ñ* is Spanish, the *th* is English — but the families belong to every mouth. What belongs to everyone deserves a name that belongs to no one.

It is worth saying now, before the temptation grows, what a family of sounds is *not*: it is not a meaning. The family of the lips does not mean "father", or "force", or anything at all. It is true that each family has something like a character — hum three *m*'s with your mouth closed and you will feel an inwardness, a closing; say *pa!* and you will feel something going out — and that character is real; the discipline studies it with care. But a character is not a dictionary. Whoever turns the sensations of sounds into the meanings of words has left this discipline and entered something else, usually numerology. We will return to this danger, because it is the great one.

The code

Now we can assemble the object this whole text is named after.

To look at a word endolinguistically is to see it in two moves: first the skeleton — vowels out —, then the families — each consonant reduced to its region of the mouth. What remains is a very short sequence: two or three families, in an order. That, exactly that, is an endolinguistic code.

Terra — Latin for earth: a tooth consonant, then a flowing one. *Father*: lips, teeth, flowing. *Mother*: the lip-hummer, teeth, flowing. Three words, three codes. The code is what the four versions of *father* shared without knowing it; it is the fossil that five thousand years of travel could not destroy.

And there is a detail that looks minor and is the soul of the matter: order matters. Teeth-then-flowing is not the same as flowing-then-teeth, just as 21 is not 12 though it uses the same digits. Consider this symmetry: on one side, *terrain*, *territory*, *terrace* — words of ground, of settling, of stillness. On the other, the same pair of families reversed: *rotate*, *rotor*, *rotation* — words of turning, of going round, of movement. The same two notes; played in one order they sound like rest, played in the other they sound like motion. The discipline calls this *inversion*, and no theory is needed to feel it: read the two lists aloud, one after the other.

Now — if the reader is thinking “so teeth-and-flowing *means* earth”, this is the moment to brake. That thought, so natural, is the wrong door. What a code does is stranger, more discreet and — once understood — more beautiful than meaning. That is where we go next.

The compass

A dictionary tells you what a word means. A code tells you nothing of the kind — not out of modesty but by nature: a code orients. It points to a zone — *the words that carry me tend to live around here* — without dictating what the zone contains. It is the difference between a treasure map and a compass: the map promises the chest; the compass only swears to the north, and what lies to the north the terrain will tell.

And who is the terrain, where words are concerned? Use. The real sentences words live in; what people actually do with them. The code says *where to look*; use says *what is there*. That division of labour is the most important rule in the whole discipline, and whoever inverts it — deciding first what a code “means” and then forcing the words to obey — is no longer observing the language: they are dictating to it.

There is an elegant proof that the code does not mean, and history itself supplies it. There is a code that appears in the Latin *calidus* — hot — and also in the English *cold*. A contradiction? Only if we expected it to mean. If we understand that it orients, the apparent contradiction turns into information: the code marked an axis — temperature — and each language walked that axis to a different end. A compass that marks the north–south axis is not refuted because one traveller goes north and another goes south; it is confirmed.

There, then, is a code’s first function, stated in full: not a meaning but a pointer to fields — an arrow toward regions of sense that each language, each era, and at bottom each speaker walks in its own way.

The thread

The second function is the one that solves the mystery this text opened with.

How do we know that *birth* and *bharati* are the same word? Historians of language proved it with a

meticulous comparative method, a century and a half of fine work that ranks among science's great quiet feats. But ask what it was they were able to track — what survived the journey so that there was anything left to compare — and the answer is exactly what this text has been building: not the vowels, which were lost early; not the letters, which did not yet exist; what survived was the skeleton of families, in its order. Lips, then flowing. In *bear*, in *birth*, in *burden*, in *Geburt*, in *bharati*: under every disguise, the same bone.

The code, then, is the thread that does not break: what lets us follow a word through the labyrinth of the centuries when everything else — sound, shape, spelling, empire — has changed. Endolinguistics did not draw the labyrinth; historical linguistics did, and this text owes it that bow. What the code contributes is the lantern: a way of seeing, at a single glance, what remains.

And this thread carries a practical gift, worth telling even in passing. Sister languages — English and Spanish are sisters, by long roads — inherited thousands of words from the same chest, and the code survives in nearly all of them. Whoever learns to see it stops learning foreign vocabulary word by word, like someone hauling stones, and begins to *recognize* it: knowing that where English has *f*, Latin and its daughters tend to have *p*, the pairs *father/padre*, *foot/pie*, *fish/pez*, *full/pleno* stop being four facts and become four glimpses of a single rule. One does not memorize the other language: one meets it again. A whole method of teaching has been built on that experience, but it is matter for another text; here, the glint is enough.

The mirage

Every powerful faculty has its shadow, and the shadow of this game of spotting kinships has a name of its own: apophenia — the human tendency to see connections where there are none. It is the same inclination that finds faces in clouds and messages in licence plates. It is not other people's disease: it is the price of having a mind that hunts for patterns — that is, of having a mind.

And here one must be very honest: apophenia is not the opposite of what this text teaches. It is its engine without brakes. The same capacity that connects *father* with *padre* — a hit: they are documented kin — connects the Spanish *embarazada* with *embarrassed*, which resemble each other enormously and share no blood at all: *embarazada* means pregnant, and more than one traveller who trusted the resemblance has starred in a famous mistake. The slip is funny precisely because the mental mechanism that produced it is identical to the one that produces the hits.

What, then, separates the find from the mirage? Not the operation, which is the same — binding what lay loose — but the referee. In this game the referee is history: the kinship of *father* and *padre* is not an impression but a fact, documented link by link; that of *embarazada* and *embarrassed* does not exist, and an etymological dictionary will say so within a minute. The whole discipline can be summed up in that double gesture: see the connection *and* ask history whether it is real. Seeing without asking is delirium with a method; asking without seeing is not playing.

There remains a middle territory, and to pass over it in silence would be dishonest. There are readings that history does not guarantee and that are not delirium either: senses one *builds* and sustains, declaring them as what they are. The discipline itself keeps a beloved example, in Spanish: *casa* (house), *caer* (to fall), *caso* (case), *causa* (cause) share a skeleton, and a thread can be read among them — the house as the place where one finally *falls* to rest; the case as what falls before us; the cause as that by which things fall one way and not another. Is this a historical fact? No, and nobody presents it as one. It is an interpretation: a built sense, worth whatever its power to illuminate is worth, and distinguished from the mirage by one thing only — the honesty of the gesture. The mirage says "this *means* that" where there is nothing; the interpretation says "this *can be read* like this" and answers for its reading. Between fact and delirium there is a third register, that of the declared reading, and a good part of the life of sense — in poetry, in dreams, in what a people says without knowing it says it — happens exactly there.

What remains

The final question is left — the one the attentive reader has been incubating for several pages now.

If the code of that word from the steppes is still legible after five thousand years — if it outlived every empire that ever pronounced it — then do codes... exist? Are they *in* languages, the way words are?

The answer of endolinguistics is finer than a yes and more interesting than a no, and it can be said with an astronomer's image. Celestial coordinates — the lines with which astronomy grids the sky — do not exist in the sky. No ship will ever cross one. They are an instrument, an invention of ours; and yet without them we could not follow the movement of a single star. The coordinates are not the stars. But the stars — those are there.

So it is with codes. The code is an instrument: it is not in the words, it is in our way of looking at them, which is why it is written with symbols that belong to no language. But something — something that is not the code — is indeed there. Something real travelled five thousand years inside the words for *carrying*; something was conserved while everything else was being lost. It is not a word, because the words all changed. It is not a meaning, because the meanings scattered and drifted. It is not a sound, because even the sounds rotated. It is a structural continuity: a form that persists beneath the forms. The code does not create it and is not it; the code detects it, as the telescope detects the star without being the star.

And what, at bottom, is that thing that remains? Here this text reaches its limit and says so without blushing: we do not know yet.

What we do have is a direction. The search does not advance blind: it is oriented by a philosophical investigation of our own — *qualic metaphysics*, a philosophy of quality: of what things have before we can count or measure them — which suspects that what travels inside words belongs to that order: to the order of qualities that are felt, not of quantities that are added. Note the symmetry, because it is beautiful: philosophy does with our question exactly what the code does with words — it does not dictate the answer; it points to where one should look.

And the question stays open, which is its way of staying alive — for a science without an open question is not a science but a catechism. The reader who has come this far already knows how to use a gaze that detects something which has no name yet. That is no small thing: nearly everything we later came to know began that way.

The woman of the steppe is lost forever; her voice, her language, even the name of her people. But what her word carried inside — the bone beneath the flesh, the form beneath the forms — is still travelling. It passed through *bharati* and through *Geburt*, it is passing right now through *birth* in some hospital, and it will pass through mouths not yet born. Every time we say that someone *bears* something — a load, a child, a name —, something immensely old crosses our mouth without asking leave.

Words remember. This text only wanted to show where they keep the memory.

A closing note

Endolinguistics was not born with this text. The discipline was founded by Christiane S. Meulemans and Jose Ángel Elias. The author of these pages came later: he inherited it, ordered it, and added some pieces of his own — among them, the seven families of sounds we have played with here. The house, however, is larger than this text lets on: it has precise rules, careful definitions, and questions still under discussion. These pages are only the door.

And one debt remains to be named, the largest. Nothing told here would stand without historical linguistics: the science that has spent more than a century and a half reconstructing, link by link, the

journey of words. It drew the map. Endolinguistics teaches a way of walking it.

To the reader left wanting more, a single suggestion, which requires buying nothing and enrolling nowhere: tonight, choose any word of your own. Strip its vowels. Look at the bone. And ask where it comes from — how far it must have travelled to arrive, precisely today, precisely at you.