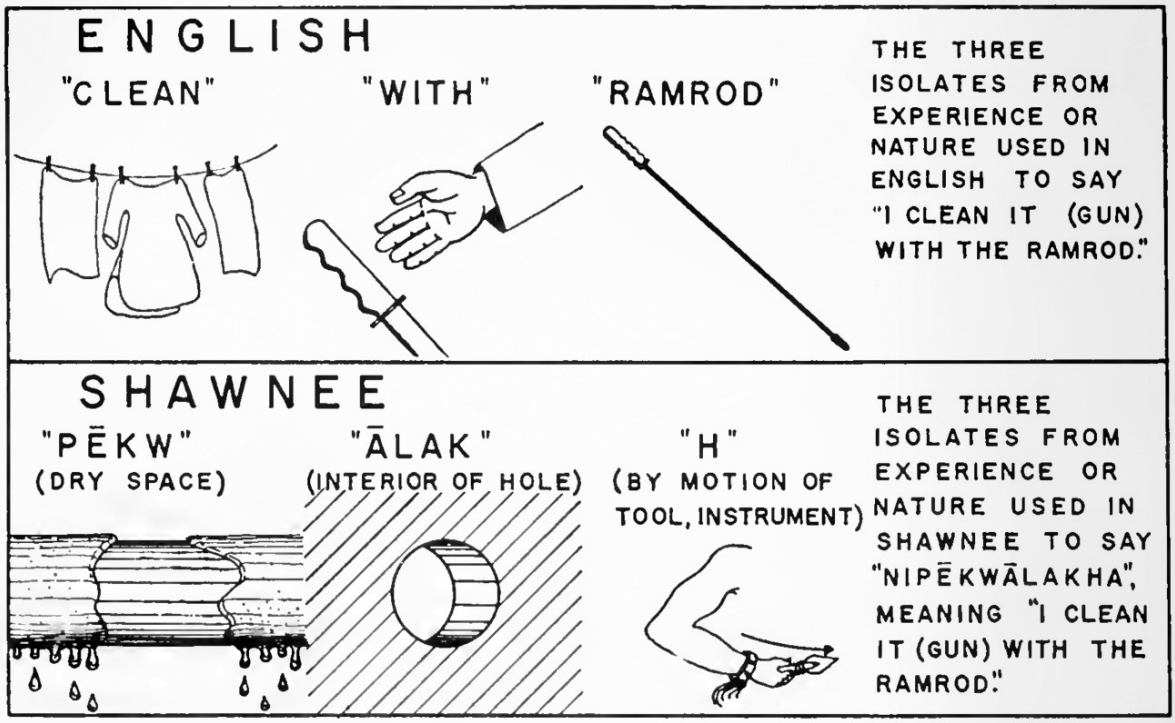

Figure 9. Languages dissect nature differently. The different isolates of meaning (thoughts) used by English and Shawnee in reporting the same experience, that of cleaning a gun by running the ramrod through it. The pronouns 'I' and 'it' are not shown by symbols, as they have the same meaning in each language. In Shawnee ni- equals 'I'; -a equals 'it.'

Cover: Benjamin Lee Whorf's illustration of the difference between the English and Shawnee gestalt construction of cleaning a gun with a ramrod from the article "Science and Linguistics," originally published in the *MIT Technology Review*, 1940.

I.

Láadan is a constructed language, like Elvish or Klingon, that includes words like **ashon**, "love for one who is not related by blood but is heart-kin," and **radíidin**, a "non-holiday, a time allegedly a holiday but actually so much a burden because of work and preparations that it is a dreaded occasion; especially when there are too many guests and none of them help." It was spoken by rebel women in the science fiction series *Native Tongue*, written in the '80s by linguist and novelist Suzette Haden Elgin. *Native Tongue* is set in a future dystopia where women have no rights and live as the property of men; they use Láadan to speak in secret, nursing a desire for future freedom. But Láadan was both a fiction and, Elgin hoped, a real-world experiment—she wanted to see what women might learn to say with a language of their own.

Elgin made the grammar and syntax rules of Láadan freely available, hoping that women would take them up and build the language out. "If women had a language adequate to express their perceptions," she later wrote, "it might reflect a quite different reality than that perceived by men." Her experiment only needed female subjects to volunteer their time and ingenuity.

II.

In mathematics, the process of translation is exquisitely precise, a body moved from one point in space to another, "such that every point of the body moves in the same direction and over the same distance, without any rotation, reflection, or change in size." This is, perhaps, some translator's dream, to ferry meaning directly across the open space between languages.

But lexicons do not align. Cultures are disparate mediums. The work of the translator is akin to lifting a brilliant piece of patterned cloth from some sandy shore and moving it into an ocean, where it cannot help but transform into something similar but different to itself, while becoming saturated with the weight of water *en route* to some other, distant shore. Just a few meters beneath the surface of the sea, even the visible light spectrum is different—the reds and yellows that speed through air are unable to penetrate, quickly giving way to blue in a bounty one would be hard-pressed to find on dry land.

Translating the experience of the perceiving human animal into language has always presented a particular challenge, a dredging up from incalculable depths. A transformation. The process requires flexible lexicons, but sometimes the words simply are not there. English lacks language for

the myriad experiences of "love," and yet love(s) proliferate beyond the bounds of dictionaries.

III.

In the early '80s Elgin had become aware, while reading *Women and Men Speaking* by Cheris Kramarae, "of the feminist hypothesis that existing human languages are inadequate to express the perceptions of women." This hypothesis intrigued her, she writes, because if true, it led to an inescapable paradox: "the only mechanism available to women for discussing the problem is the very same language(s) alleged to be inadequate for the purpose." She began wondering about the limitations of West Germanic languages, like English, which developed out of the region of the North Sea.

Elgin became convinced not only that women's experiences were not reflected in the lexicons of languages like English, but that the process of creating new words in these languages was essentially "male." On June 28, 1982, she began constructing a new feminist language, with new rules, which became Láadan.

Undergirding the experiment of making Láadan freely available to real-world women was an idea Elgin hoped to test, known to linguists as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. This theory, first articulated by Edward Sapir in 1929 and expanded in the 1930s by his student Benjamin Whorf, states that language determines thought (and not the other way around). The strong form of this hypothesis asserts that your native tongue contains the entire universe that you can perceive and think and dream. If your language has no word for something—a color, a concept—your mind cannot wrap itself around that thing.

Benjamin Lee Whorf was a chemical engineer who worked at an insurance company, specializing in fire prevention. Around the edges of his day job averting conflagrations, he studied anthropology and linguistics at Yale University (and briefly in Mexico), publishing papers in professional journals and eventually filling in for Sapir, his mentor at Yale, as a lecturer in anthropology. He saw the gulf between cultures as essentially unbridgeable, and his vision of language as an island on which its native speakers are trapped was uncompromising. "We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do," he wrote, "largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language." The shape of this agreement, held and codified, seems to have arisen in some previous time, signed and stamped into obligation by those that came before. "We cannot talk at all except

by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees," wrote Whorf. His carefully gridded island admitted no ferries or wharfs — not a single pier to greet an incoming boat, not a single barque to carry one out to sea. And there was, it seems, zero danger of a fire breaking out that might burn those internal agreements to ash.

According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, if your language only has words for black and white, your mind will always think the world in grayscale, even if other people using other tongues are able to think a world in technicolor.

IV.

In *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson writes,

A friend says he thinks of gender as a color. Gender does share with color a certain ontological indeterminacy: it isn't quite right to say that an object *is* a color, nor that the object *has* a color. Context also changes it: *all cats are gray*, etc. Nor is color *voluntary*, precisely. But none of these formulations means that the object in question is *colorless*.

It is as if, by choosing words to express this fluid and contextualized experience of gender, Nelson both communicates it to others and reifies it to herself. As her writing demonstrates, we can sometimes play with the language we have to build new boats and set our sights on aspirational shores.

Nelson composed these thoughts about gender fluidity at the same time as she was experiencing the sea-change of pregnancy and the imminence of motherhood. Like love or gender, the experience of pregnancy can seem impossible to translate. Few human experiences are so myriad — so dependent on context — and so difficult to move from the body into language.

During this same period her partner, the non-binary artist Harry Dodge, was seeking out top surgery to move an uneasy body toward a more indeterminate and undetermined gender, the words for which Nelson struggles to produce on the page. What kind of body can be called "male" or "female"? What other kinds of bodies or genders (or mothers) might be obscured by lack of more fluid language? Her love for Dodge, which flows from "feral" to fierce to something more integral and sustained, saturates the text. From this, new life emerges.

V.

The first Láadan dictionary was a tiny thing, a labor of love compiled and illustrated by the artist Karen Jollie soon after the *Native Tongue* novels first appeared. In 1985, Elgin and editor Diane Martin produced the more expansive *A First Grammar and Dictionary of Láadan* which includes a pronunciation guide, grammar lessons, and helpful appendices including "psalms/songs" such as "The Lord's Prayer" translated—and thus transformed—into Láadan, as well as a list of eleven "love nouns." These nouns name experiences not easily spoken in English, particularly platonic loves and loves associated with childbearing.

Áayáa: mysterious love, not yet known to be welcome or unwelcome.
Ab: love for one liked but not respected.
Ad: love for one respected but not liked.
Sham: love for the child of one's body, presupposing neither liking nor respect nor their absence.

One wonders how Nelson's queer experience of dawning motherhood might be translated into Láadan, which favors a more essentialist version of female experience, informed by the politics of Second Wave Feminism. At the time, thinkers like Joanna Russ, author of *The Female Man* and *What Are We Fighting For?: Sex, Race, Class, and the Future of Feminism* were struggling with what it meant to forge an identity as a woman in a culture that fears and hates women. This required asking: *What does it mean to be a woman?*

The retrograde binary of "female" and "male" to which Elgin adhered no longer serves, and while the context has shifted, for many the question still stands. For those of us who, like Nelson, are negotiating the contemporary sphere of radical hopes for a liberated future, a related question also arises: *What does it mean to be a mother?*

In Samoa and across the Pacific Islands there is a word for a third gender, *fa'afafine*: those assigned male at birth who explicitly embody both male and female traits. "A little bit boy, a little bit girl," you may be told, by way of explanation. But *fa'afafine* does not necessarily mean "gay" or "queer". It means *fa'afafine,* which has to do, in part, with male bodies performing traditionally female roles. Some would argue this offers no challenge to existing hierarchies, which helps explain its wide acceptance. Others would disagree. Because this third gender emerges from a specific cultural context, it is difficult, though perhaps not impossible, to translate *fa'afafine* into the languages of the North Sea.

VI.

Some words, such as the Portuguese *saudade*, are considered "untranslatable." A word first attributed to Portuguese sailors far from home, *saudade* is somewhat failingly translated into English as "nostalgia," "melancholy," or "longing." But the particular feeling it describes for native speakers in Portugal or Brazil or Cape Verde is hard to pin to English. *Saudade* speaks of melancholy, yes, and longing for what has been lost, but also perhaps what never was—what you now believe will never be. It gestures toward an exquisite co-mingling of pleasure and pain. As Portuguese writer Manuel de Melo writes, *saudade* is "a pleasure you suffer, an ailment you enjoy."

In Argentina's Tierra del Fuego, Yaghan speakers can express a different sort of longing that looks not to the past but to the future. *Mamihlapinatapai* describes a look shared between two people each wishing the other would initiate what both desire, but neither is willing to begin. *The Guinness Book of World Records* describes *mamihlapinatapai* as "the most challenging word for any lexicographer to define briefly." And yet, its resistance to brevity does not make the moment it describes incomprehensible.

Indeed, some "untranslatable" words seem to leap languages with remarkable ease. The German *Schadenfreude*, defined by Merriam-Webster as "enjoyment obtained from the troubles of others," describes a feeling apparently so recognizable that it has jumped lexicons and become embedded as-is, in English. The German roots of the word suggest "damage-delight", or "harm-joy." Perhaps now, lexically empowered, English-speakers are more apt to recognize such feelings when they arise.

Hena: sibling by birth.
Héena: sibling of the heart.
Lewidan: to be pregnant for the first time.

And yet, the question remains: does *saudade,* or *mamihlapinatapai,* or *Schadenfreude*, (or **lewidan**), feel the same even to those who share a native tongue?

VII.

In the early '80s, a small group of fans dedicated to Elgin's novels and novel language began adding words to a growing lexicon that increasingly captured longings for a shared vision of essentialist female liberation:

Anahelilith: feminist angel.
Lol: belonging, sisterhood.
Óolewil: menstrual blood, literally: moon-river.

In fact, the more radical idea that Elgin hoped to test with the experiment of Láadan was whether a change in language could lead to sweeping social change. Could language be the flashpoint for a liberated future?

The idea was sparked when she read a reimagining of Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem in Douglas Hofstadter's *Gödel, Escher, Bach*. Hofstadter proposes that for every record player, there are records it can't play because to do so would lead, indirectly, to its self-destruction. "And it struck me that if you squared this," Elgin writes, "you would get a hypothesis that for every language there were perceptions it would not express because they would lead to its indirect self-destruction. Furthermore, if you cubed it, you would get a hypothesis that for every culture there were *languages* it could not use because they would lead to its indirect self-destruction. This made me wonder: what would happen to American culture if women did have and did use a language that expressed their perceptions? Would it self-destruct?"

VIII.

Another "untranslatable" word less often borrowed from the Germans is *Sehnsucht*. This noun is sometimes reformulated, like *saudade,* as "longing" or "yearning," but it refers to the specific longing one feels for something unfinished. Not melancholy yearning for that which never was and never will be, but that which has not been, yet.

This feeling might also be called desire.

Desire saturates the text of *Sehnsucht*, written in 1826 by the German poet and playwright Friedrich von Schiller. One English translation begins: "Ah! From this valley's grounds / that cold mists are pressing, / if I could only find a way out, / ah, how lucky I would feel! / Over there I glimpse pretty hills / ever young and ever green!" The poem's speaker hears tinkling music and sees (or imagines?) "golden fruit beckoning between dark leaves." One does not have to look hard to see more fleshy parallels.

But the poem also expresses yearning for a way out of a place where the speaker feels himself trapped. There is some other place. A better place. Sweet breezes bring the perfume scent of basalm. He yearns to cross the raging river that separates him from this golden land, but wonders whether such a crossing is even possible. "You must believe,

you must dare it, / for the Gods make no pledges. / Only a miracle can carry you / into that fair world of wonder."

Though the objects of desire may vary, *Sehnsucht* is, perhaps, a longing for utopia.

IX.

People whose work it was to maintain state power had intuited safety in sameness of thought and worried about the disruptive potential of language long before Sapir or Whorf or Elgin. "Through sameness of language is produced sameness in sentiment and thought. Barbarous dialects should be blotted out and the English language substituted," stated the U.S. Federal Commission on Indian Affairs, in 1868.

A century later, the strong form of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis rose to linguistic prominence in egalitarian reaction to early anthropological attempts to rank "peoples" as "primitive" or "sophisticated." It posited linguistic relativity, rather than essential difference. By the early 1980s, however, the strong form of the theory fell out of favor when researchers showed that the evidence Whorf had relied on was dubious, at best. For example, he claimed that the Hopi, a Native American tribe rooted in northeastern Arizona, had "no words, grammatical forms, construction or expressions that refer directly to what we call 'time'," which meant the Hopi had "no general notion or intuition of time as a smooth flowing continuum in which everything in the universe proceeds at equal rate, out of a future, through the present, into a past." Whorf never actually met anyone from the Hopi tribe, and scholars later agreed that the Hopi conception of time was not, in fact, so very different from our own.

Translation itself provided another stumbling block. If every language encoded a distinct reality, as Whorf insisted, how could any novel, or quote, or air conditioner instruction manual ever be translated from one language to another? Such translations happen every day. Boats arrive bearing written cargo, which is read and shared and passed on to further shores. Even Elgin, like most linguists in the '80s, was not convinced by the strong form of the theory — that language determines thought — but she wondered if a weaker form — that language impacts perception in significant ways — might be true, and if so, what power it might hold both over and for us all.

Some linguists argue that time is represented in the Hopi language as a distinction between non-future and future. Others argue this might be better understood as a distinction between *realis* and *irrealis* moods, what is real and what is not real, yet.

X.

There is some experimental evidence to support a weak form of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. If your language has words for blue and green, for example, you discern them as distinct. But if, like many languages, yours suggests these are different shades of a single color, the edge disappears. You see similarity—colors bleed. When researchers asked subjects to identify swatches of color, those with separate words for blue and green responded faster than those whose language suggests a spectrum.

In fact, where language offers difference, we become quite adept at seeing it. "The colors that our language routinely obliges us to treat as distinct," write cultural anthropologists James Spradley and David McCurdy in *Conformity and Conflict,* "can refine our purely visual sensitivity to certain color differences in reality, so that our brains are trained to exaggerate the distance between shades of color if these have different names in our language."

To make difference visible is, in a sense, what Láadan was attempting in service of female liberation. But Nelson's more contemporary thinking about language and gender offers further apprehensions of difference within and perhaps beyond the female experience that Elgin's experiment did not address. One is left wondering: what sort of language, then, might better enable us to see a spectrum of difference?

This question is not entirely theoretical. Researchers have shown that the sort of cognitive training revealed in the green/blue experiment has real-world consequences. Consider cardinal and geocentric directions. If you are a native speaker of Guugu Yimithirr, you use cardinal directions to describe where objects are in space. A man walking left to right across a television screen might be said to be heading northward, depending on the orientation of the screen. A cup may be said to be placed just south of a plate (rather than above and to the left). In Guugu Yimithirr, and in languages from Polynesia to Namibia to Mexico, there are no words for "in front of" or "behind," "to the left" or "to the right." These require an egocentric geography based on one's own body in relation to the world.

Researchers found that if you speak a language that uses cardinal directions, you are far less likely to get lost. In rain or shine, indoors or out, even if you are in a darkened house and have just been blindfolded and spun into dizziness that leaves you staggering (which, yes, they tried), you can always point toward the four corners of the compass. The feeling of direction and your ability to act on it is unshakeable. It is also unconscious. An adult speaker of Guugu Yimithirr can no more

tell you how she knows where north is than you can explain how you know right from left.

What does it feel like to move through a world in which the self is displaced from any notion of a center? What else might you think, or do, differently?

XI.

Láadan is a language that privileges subjective judgement, which was one of its greatest strengths and greatest weaknesses. Suffixes affixed to the first word in each sentence signal whether what follows is uttered neutrally (Ø), in anger (-d), in pain (-th), in love (-li), in celebration (-lan), in jest (-da), in fear (-ya), in narrative (-de), or in teaching (-de). Elgin designed Láadan this way — so a speaker could make unambiguous statements that include how one feels about what one is saying — to counter what she saw as linguistic limitations on women that invite misinterpretation. She was reaching for a clarity of expression not previously available to women.

English, she wrote, requires too many repetitions of "I know I said that, but I meant this" and one senses that she had many such conversations, herself. But whether those conversations are a universal feature of female experience is another matter.

Móna: compassion for foolish reasons.
Múna: compassion for bad reasons.
Radena: unfriendliness for good reasons.

Elgin did not question her perception, shared by many Second Wave Feminists, of an unbridgeable divide between male and female. Láadan and its subjectivities thus remain deeply rooted in their author's particular longings — the ways in which they expressed her vision of utopia. And while other people may have shared her vision, then, the utopian longings of a feminism four decades old are not shared by most radical feminists today. And yet, perhaps today's utopias — in which the political and personal are inextricable — would be unimaginable without those birthed by those who came before.

XII.

Elgin's experiment was not, in the end, a success. She settled on a duration of ten years with Láadan loose in the world, with a goal for the language to reach a vocabulary of 1,000 words — enough for daily conversation and a bit of informal writing. This goal was met not long after the first *Native Tongue* novel was published, and in fall of 1982 the

journal *Women and Language News* even published a Nativity story in Láadan written from Mary's point of view. But Láadan never truly tested the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, or the more radical theory of cultural self-destruction, for the simple reason that the language is spoken by almost no one. As Elgin writes of the first tiny Láadan dictionary, "it hasn't been available for decades."

By contrast, Klingon, the constructed language spoken by a fictional and alien Worf on the TV series *Star Trek*, has been taken up by devotees who gather at conferences, some wearing elaborate makeup, others not, clustering at folding tables and the far ends of beer-sour bars. Hundreds can speak or write a little. Dozens converse fluently. Most are men. Klingon is a complex and sophisticated language designed to reflect an imagined culture that is violent, crude, and honor-bound. Writing in *Slate*, linguist Arika Okrent characterized this culture as "a sort of Viking-Spartan-samurai motorcycle gang."

As Elgin rather wryly later reported,

Whether results would have been different if I'd given the experiment 20 years instead of 10, or if *Star Trek* had decided to present episodes about a war between a Láadan-speaking population and the Klingons, or any of a multitude of other modifications in conditions, is impossible to say … experiments have to have limits or they have no scientific value. Meanwhile, the Klingon language thrives — from which you are free to draw your own conclusions.

Which is not to say that today Elgin's experiment should be disavowed, or that we can't take steps toward a vision of greenery and balsam breezes. Maybe it matters that we try, and fail, because each attempt moves us closer to something else — regardless of whether we arrive at anyone's longed-for shore.

Perhaps it matters, too, that we yearn for an impossible shore. *Sehnsucht*, some psychologists argue, is crucial to human development because yearning for the unattainable is what gives life direction. Perhaps the desire that urges us to try for the fruited forests of the opposite shore may be more potent and productive than any arrival precisely because it reveals new horizons for which to yearn.

Widazhad: to be pregnant late in term and eager for the end.
Zhaláad: the act of relinquishing a cherished/comforting familiar illusion or frame of perception.

XIII.

Of the end of pregnancy Nelson writes, "The task of the cervix is to stay closed, to make an impenetrable wall protecting the fetus, for approximately 40 weeks of a pregnancy. After that, by means of labor, the wall must somehow become an opening. This happens through dilation, which is not a shattering, but an extreme thinning …" She translates her experiences as: "But to let the baby out, you have to be willing to go to pieces." For some women this may resonate, deeply. The shattering. The pieces. For other women, not so much. The experience of a shattered self in birth is, like most other things about pregnancy and motherhood, one among many. These experiences can seem unfathomable to others, even other pregnant people, though they are often accompanied by the desire to communicate them clearly, which may be another sort of impossible longing.

And then. The other side of the birth process both is and is not an arrival. "'Waw waw waw,' said another voice," writes Ursula K. Le Guin of the moment just after a character gives birth in her most powerful novel of love and politics, *The Dispossessed*. One is and is not the same. Perhaps "mother" does not mean to disavow the former self, even as desires shift and new desires, previously unimaginable, come into view along a new horizon.

Perhaps the most urgent question is one we will never be done asking: for what utopia are we to pine? What so many of us yearn for is to speak the language of our future liberated selves. And while visions of what "we" experience and "we" desire will not always align, exploring those visions for clues to future liberation can suggest shared loci for something like hope.

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