SILLY LINGUISTICS

Falling in love

with linguistics

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Cover and content page photo by Karolina Kaboompics
This week's page numbers are in German!

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IN MEMORIAM: RANKO BUGARSKI, A LINGUIST (1933 – 2024)

BY NEDA STEFANOVIĆ

*D*o you believe in love at first sight?

The concept of such love could sound superficial to some, and romantic to others. It could be argued that it isn't necessarily a type of love, but an indication of the possibility of it, a spark of intuition or recognition. I have to admit: I do believe in it, in a former sense. I also have to admit: it didn't happen to me with linguistics.

Or maybe it did! I just didn't understand that my fascination with interesting phenomena in language was exactly what it was. I thought the love of lingustics would be giving judgmental looks to those who would write „phenomenons" in a previous sentence.

I remember it clearly, the logic of my previous self. As I was preparing for the Faculty of Philology, as well as my friend, we discussed our reasons, strong sides, and weaknesses. I said that I was planning on studying philology purely because of my love for the literature and its analysis, as well as writing. And when she said that she liked the linguistic part of it, that she even liked it better than literature – I remember thinking: *You enjoy what exactly, finding grammatical mistakes in a text and remembering millions of arbitrary rules and categories to put words into? What's there to like?* If only someone had told me back then that I would be working on my PhD solely focused on language, and that I'll leave my interest in literature in the field of my artistic expression, away from my interest in science and research – I would've been immensely disappointed. But I hope younger me would understand eventually.

Me and my friend start our preparations for our entrance exam with a big book full of grammar rules that was also in our high school curriculum. But, in the literature list that the university prescribed, there was another book that we haven't heard about before, with an equally boring title: *Introduction to general linguistics*, by Ranko Bugarski.

As I started reading it, I did notice that it was written in a strangely natural way, with intuitive explanations for every rule or typology offered, and, more importantly, with explanations why that rule or typology is useful, important, and even interesting. I was reading it before sleep as if it were belles lettres, and I was learning more than ever! But I assumed that it was a strange exception in the field of theory of language, so I didn't get my hopes up. Previous toxic experiences with other approaches didn't leave me too trusting.

I was lucky to come across professors who led me to think that maybe linguistics isn't what I thought it was. But the initial spark of interest that made me pay attention to what they were saying and made me curious about their ways of approaching language was Ranko Bugarski's book.

I remembered all of this after I've recently heard about Professor Bugarski passing away. I can't say that I read many of his books in the meantime, or that I've thought of him very often. But, in the middle of the different news articles informing us about the loss of our renowned linguist, I've read a few sentences by Miljenko Jergović, a writer, who said that Ranko Bugarski made him feel safe

in language. And that really resonated with me.

Ranko Bugarski's approach was focused on never making us feel inadequate when it comes to language in general, particularly when it comes to our maternal tongue. He talked about linguistics in an intuitive way because he understood the things he was talking about, and he made us interested in the questions that he touched upon because he was genuinely interested in them.

As I learned recently, he had intriguing stances on different topics: he was a proponent of the thesis about the common polycentric language with multiple variants spoken in Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia (in an alphabetical order), he wrote about linguistics being a science about humans above it being a science about languages, he advocated for organic development of language and he fought against prejudices. He wrote many articles, lectures and books that I hope I'll get to read: *Language and identity*, *Faces of language: sociolinguistic topics*, *Linguistics about a man, Do you speak common?*, *Language from peace to war*, *Linguistic memoirs*, etc.

Now when I think about it, I can't really remember much about what was in the *Introduction to General Linguistics*, and I'm pretty sure I wouldn't find it as amusing and amazing as I did when I first got my hands on it. But then again, another quote comes to mind: „People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but they will never forget how you made them feel."

MY JOURNEY LEARNING GERMAN

By Steve the vagabond

I discovered the online language community in late 2014 and realised that I really liked talking about language. I discovered translation work which gave me a different experience of languages. Up until then I had only seen complicated things written in my mother tongue but now I was seeing complicated stuff in German which gave me a very different perspective.

Growing up I was very sick. I always had a cold, or some other ailment. During those years I went to the hospital many times. The physical world was not a place I enjoyed. I retreated to the world of stories and ideas. I loved reading books and imagining those new places. I also loved video games, movies and TV shows. I was drawn into those new spaces. I loved explore the possibilities of life.

In high school I focused really hard on my work and got really into computers. I liked working with hard problems and using my mind to tackle and overcome problems. I went straight from high school to university and started a Bachelor's Degree in Computer Science. I wanted to use computers to help solve problems. Technology can be an amazing tool for helping with all sorts of issues.

While all this work in technology was going on, I had quietly started a new path, something that at the time didn't seem big at all. My dad speaks German natively. He speaks to his brother, aunt and extended family in German. But he never taught me.

It didn't really bother at the time. I was more interested in technology than languages. But I have always had an interest in languages but I had never really pursued it fully before joining the language community in 2014. At University there were many courses that I had to take, but they also gave you the opportunity to pick a course. So, with my German heritage in the back of my mind, I decided to do German I.

My student advisor was a bit perplexed, but since it was not technically against the rules, he allowed it. I just had to take this piece of paper to the other side of campus, get it signed and bring it back to the Computer Science department.

My German didn't immediately take off, but it was the start of something. I started going to the German bookshop about 20 minutes away from my house and buying comics and magazines in German. I didn't understand everything. Actually, I didn't understand much at all. But I just kept at it. Every now and then I would pick up my "Asterix in Belgien" and start reading. Sometimes I would just look at the words and try to get a feeling for them. Like, what did the words look like and what did they sound like. I wanted to know what the language of my ancestors was like.

Other times I would look up every word on a page to try and understand what I was reading. I tried lots of different things. It was just a hobby and I approached it in the way I felt like approaching it that day. I only did one year of German at University but I never stopped learning German. About 4 years after that I went on holiday to Germany and stayed with family. My German was about half way there at that point. I could talk about the essentials and also muddle my way through a more complicated explanation if I needed to. On and off through the years I just kept at it.

It was only when I joined the language community in 2014 that I really started seeing my experience with German in a whole new way. I had learned another language. I had done it without ever looking up how to do it. I just did it however I wanted and it eventually worked out.

When it came to Computer Science, I was endlessly reading about how this and that worked and talking to people about it, but not German. With German, it was a solo activity. I just looked up words, and engaged in the language. Reading all the things people were posting I realised that a lot of people were doing with language what I did with Computer Science. They were analysing things, breaking them down, discussing tips and wondering about how best to do this and that.

I realise in hindsight that the reason I burned out in programming is because I pushed myself too hard. I wanted to conquer the world. I wanted to be the very best. I wanted to work at the best companies and working at the cutting edge. But no one ever gets to the front of the line when they are just starting out. You have to build up to that. If you push yourself too hard, you will burn out, sooner or later.

My brain was tired and worn out and I had left programming behind. I decided to start a new path and this time do it differently. Languages are complex, and full of structures, just like programming. They are both about communication, if you think about it. With languages you are speaking to people, but with programming you are communicating with a computer.

I think my programming has come in handy with languages, but this new way of doing things I think has turned out to be more important. The irony with German is that I succeeded when I wasn't trying. I never set out to get fluent. I just wanted to see what I could learn. I didn't say to myself, "I must become fluent in 4 years". I didn't even say, "I must learn 10 words today".

I just had fun with it. If I felt like getting more immersed in it, I did. If I felt like I just wanted to listen to it, even if I didn't understand everything, I did.

Languages are amazing. I want to learn them all. I want to become fluent in all the languages that I know little bits of. But now I have finally come to the point where I am ok with not being 100% at things. I am taking my time. I will learn what I can learn today and tomorrow I will do the same.

Languages are so cool that we all want to get to perfect today. I have finally realised that perfect doesn't really exist. There is only "I know a little" and "I know a little more". Certainly you could eventually get to the much vaunted and sought after place of "fluent". But that is not a thing I think you should be holding in your minds at all times.

Remember your love of languages but don't let it be a weight on your neck. Do what you can today. The problem with pushing yourself too hard is that you can become so tired you end up sometimes not doing anything and could even burn out.

I have been teaching myself Swedish and there are times when I am busy and I get tired and I just don't do anything with it that day. And frankly, unless you are a super hero who never gets tired, or a savant who can learn a language in a week, it's ok to not be perfect. If you have any ideas about where you should be or how hard you should work, you might want to let them go.

Languages should be fun. They are amazing. It's tons of fun learning about other languages and cultures. But if you want to get the most out of them, ironically, you should let go and get rid of your schedule and todo list and reminders. Tap into why you want to do this. Rediscover what got you into this in the first place.

I set out to get good at programming and computers and I did that. I worked hard and I got results. But at the same time this other thing was growing and I never set any goals for it. If you are ok with setting yourself goals, and you like reminders, and you feel that works for you, then you need to follow your gut feel. But what I have learned over the years, is that sometimes not having a map of where you are going can actually lead you to exactly where you wanted to go.

Does speaking one tonal language help you learn the tones of another?

By Qiy

It goes without saying that the ease of learning a new language can depend on the languages you know already - For example, Russian speakers have an easier time with Spanish rolled-R compared to English speakers, but English speakers have an easier time with Spanish writing compared to Russian speakers due to similarities in alphabet. And in your own life, you might know (or be!) the Spanish speaker who breezed through verb conjugations in French class while your non-Romance-language-speaking classmates struggled.

As a Mandarin speaker, I thought my 4-tone language would serve as an advantage in learning the 6-tones∗ of Cantonese. Also, Cantonese and Mandarin are related, so I thought I'd have a leg up over other learners (although they are not mutually intelligible∗∗).

Well, it turns out that already speaking a tonal language did not make Cantonese tones easier – and there's science to back that up.

The Tea: Studies suggest that knowing a tonal language doesn't necessarily help you learn the tones of a new tonal language.

In other words, when telling apart Cantonese tones, evidence suggests a monolingual Mandarin speaker isn't having more luck than a monolingual English, German, or French speaker – and even after extensive training. Sounds unbelievable, right?

But first thing's first: What's a tone language? *(You can skip this part if you know already.)*

A language is tonal, or a tone language, if pitch changes lexical meaning and not just mood or social use. In English, if I say *"Cake?"* in a rising tone, that does mean something different than *"Cake!"* – but the fact that we're talking about a spongey dessert doesn't change. Therefore, English is not a tone language. In the case of Mandarin, tones are *as statistically important as vowels* (Surendran & Levow, 2004), so saying "ma" (high tone) and "ma" (falling tone) in Mandarin is like saying "mat" and "met" in English: they are *totally* different words despite a discrete acoustic difference.
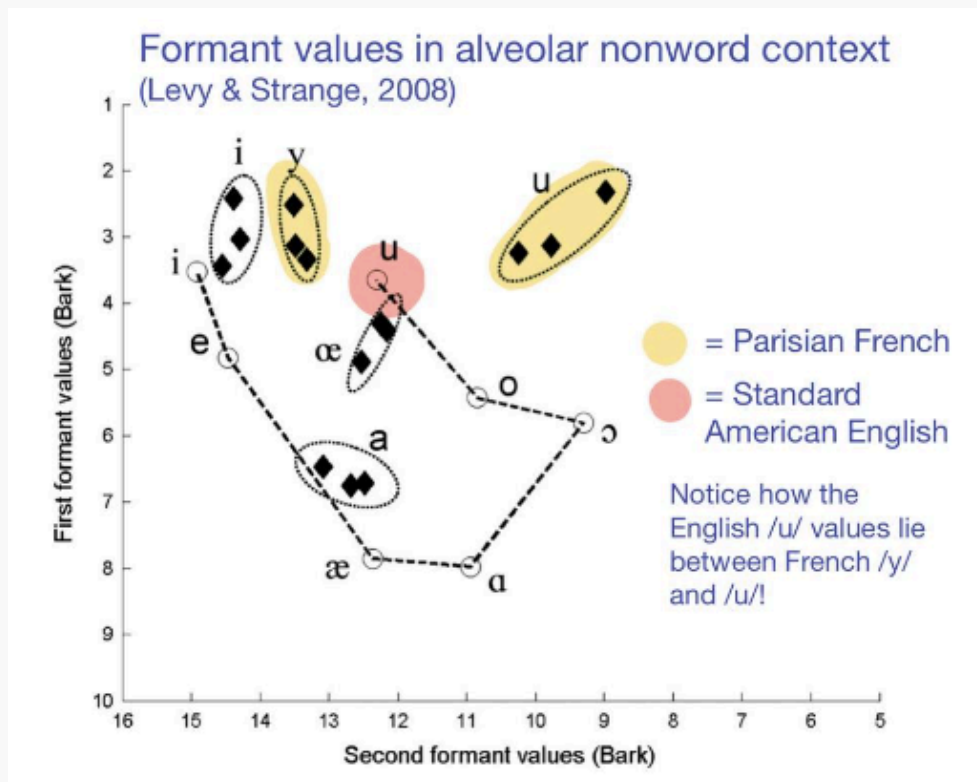
Here's another one:
1. Chou (high tone) 瘳 = heal
2. Chou (rising tone) 愁 = anxious, worry
3. Chou (falling-rising tone) 丑 = ugly
4. Chou (falling tone) 臭 = stinky

Additionally, tonal languages are not rare or exotic, accounting for over 60% of all spoken languages spoken by over 50% of the world's population (Yip, 2002). Languages smaller than Tlingit (50 speakers, mainly in Northwestern Canada and Alaska) and as large as Mandarin Chinese (over a billion speakers) are tonal.

What do the psycholinguistic studies say on tone language speakers learning new tone languages?

Learning tone is like learning other features in a language: if a similar or same contrast exists in your native language, you generally struggle less with it. For example, English speakers generally don't struggle with /r/ versus /l/ across other languages, but they struggle with contrasts like the three-way Korean consonant distinction (plain vs. tense vs. aspirated consonants) (Shin, 2001).

Another one where native American English speakers struggle is with the vowel in the French word "tu" /y/ vs. the vowel in "tout" /u/ - and studies show that even speakers who've studied French for years struggle (Levy 2008; Levy & Strange, 2009). Take a look at the acoustics to see what I mean:

Formant values in alveolar nonword context (Levy & Strange, 2008)

= Parisian French

= Standard American English

Notice how the English /u/ values lie between French /y/ and /u/!

To read this graph, think of the x-axis as a measure of how advanced the tongue is, while the y-axis is how high the tongue is. You can see that the Standard American English /u/ as in "tulip" lies between Parisian French /u/ as in "tout" and /y/ as in "tu"! So, it's not just that /y/ doesn't exist in English that gives speakers trouble - they're also so acoustically similar to /u/ that they fit into the same "/u/-shaped box" for English speakers! The term for this is **perceptual assimilation**, the idea that non-native contrasts can get "assimilated" into one sound for non-native speakers.

Now, let's apply the concept of perceptual assimilation to Cantonese tones. Here is a chart of the average values of the six tones (Hong Kong dialect), graphed as pitch over time:


Average Hong Kong Cantonese tone frequencies
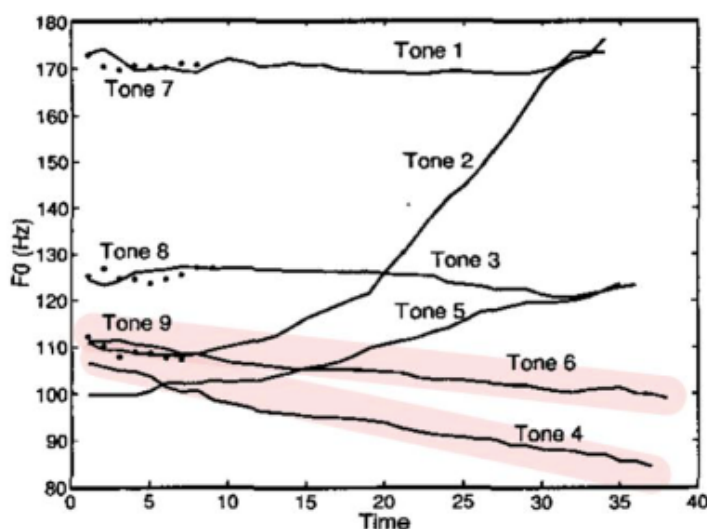
T4 and T6 are similar to non native speakers and can get misidentified

Notice that T4 and T6 start at similar places and go a little down, while T3 starts at a slightly higher position stays neutral. You can see why these three can be particularly challenging to distinguish from one another and get "assimilated".

Now let's put them side-by-side with Mandarin tones:

Average Standard Mandarin tone frequencies (Peng et al., 2004)

Average Hong Kong Cantonese tone frequencies

T2 and T3 are similar to non native speakers and can get misidentified

T4 and T6 are similar to non native speakers and can get misidentified
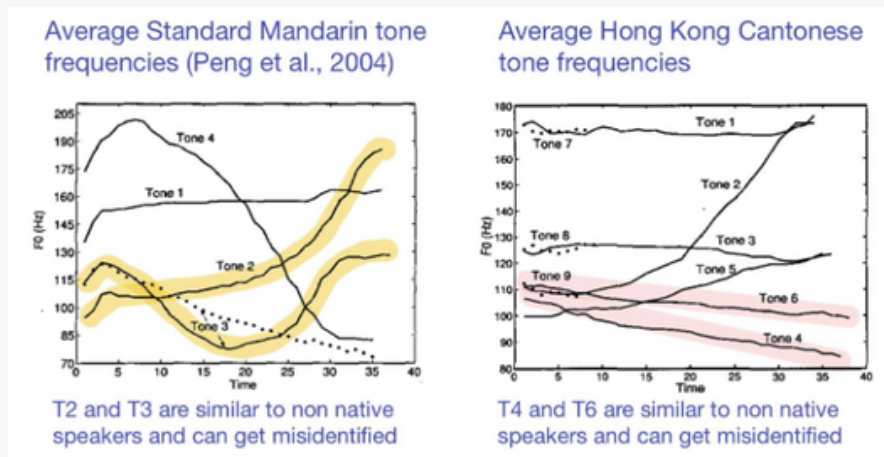
What should instantly jump out at you is that T1 and T2 in Mandarin are like Cantonese, but Mandarin T3 and T4 don't quite match up to anything in Cantonese. So as a Mandarin speaker, I'm mixing up a lot of the lower tones (T4, T6) because 1) those contrasts doesn't exist in the Mandarin tone inventory, and 2) they are all so alike to my non-native ears that I'm putting them into the same box. But on the other hand, you can see how Cantonese speakers can have the same struggles when learning Mandarin tones, as none of their tones quite resemble Mandarin T3 and T4.

Now that you can see the rationale, let's look at the evidence.

In a 2008 study, Francis et al. recruited 9 native Mandarin Chinese, 10 native English, and 12 native Cantonese speakers for a series of tone discrimination and identification tasks. After the pre-test, they were given 10 hours' worth of training sessions spread throughout several weeks. After the series of training sessions, they were then given a post-test to assess learning of Cantonese tones:
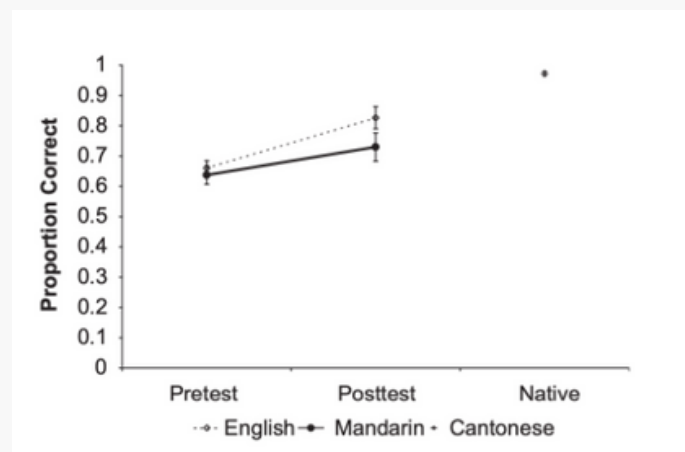
As you can see, English- and Mandarin-speaking participants scored 66% and 64% accuracy respectively in the pre-test, and 83% and 73% respectively in the post-test. Meanwhile, native Cantonese speakers (unsurprisingly) scored 97%. Statistical analyses revealed that *English- and Mandarin-speakers performed similarly in the pre-test and post-test, but that the patterns of errors were significantly different*. Surprisingly, T1, T2, and T3 gave neither group much trouble in the pre-test; however, T4, T5, and T6 were frequently misidentified, and only Mandarin speakers did not perform better on T5 even after training. This is probably due to assimilation of this tone to Mandarin T2, which also takes on a rising pattern. Additionally, authors speculated that Mandarin tone differentiation hinges more heavily on direction of the tone compared to the starting frequency. In Cantonese, there are two rising, one falling, and three flat tones – meanwhile, Mandarin has only one of each: flat, rising, falling-rising, and falling.

Meanwhile, Yen-Chen Hao's 2012 study involved an opposite condition: 9 Cantonese-speaking and 10 English-speaking college students had to identify, imitate, and read out Mandarin tones, and both groups performed similarly throughout the tasks – although in this study, participants from both groups had some Mandarin-learning experience (*M* = 2.68 years, *SD* = 1.91). Again, Cantonese- and English-speaking groups performed similarly but had different patterns of errors. Namely, the Cantonese group struggled more with Mandarin T1 vs. T4. Hao's study also had an interesting follow-up experiment: Cantonese speakers had to identify a Cantonese syllable most perceptually similar to each presented Mandarin syllable. Interestingly, both Mandarin T4 and T1 were frequently mapped with Cantonese T1 (81% and 66% of the time respectively), which may explain why they had more errors in differentiating these two tones compared to English speakers in the first experiment.

All in all, it seems like speaking Mandarin can be a *hindrance* to learning Cantonese tones, and vice versa.

But for what it's worth, tonal language speakers *do* process pitch differently than non-tone language speakers, but that's a conversation for a different day.

If you're interested in reading about it, peek at these papers on how tone language speakers may have an advantage in discriminating and imitating musical pitch and how tone language speakers and musicians may be better at talker identification tasks.

All in all, the tone system of any language is as unique as any of its other aspects, so you cannot create principles of acquisition that can apply across all tonal

languages. Cantonese tones may intersect with Mandarin tones to a degree, but that creates just as much confusion as benefit.

Ultimately, languages you know already definitely help you learn another one - just not in all the ways you anticipate.

The big lesson here is that supposedly helpful features end up not as helpful as you thought. But you shouldn't feel too bummed out that your native language is messing with your brain and preventing your brain from picking up a new one! Unexpected and delightful commonalities between your target language and familiar language are also discovered along the way in the journey of language-learning.

Although Mandarin didn't help me with Cantonese tones as much as I hoped, the parallels between the two languages in writing system, vocabulary, and grammar have been undeniably helpful - and often in unexpected ways.

-qiy <3

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Yes, I know there are more than 4 tones in Mandarin and more than 6 tones in Cantonese – but for simplicity's sake, I will go with the values and dialects used by the studies I cite, which are 4 (ignoring the neutral tone) in Standardized Mandarin and 6 in Hong Kong Cantonese.

Obligatory note on Cantonese vs. Mandarin: Cantonese and Mandarin are part of different subfamilies. Although they're part of the larger Sinitic (Chinese) language family, saying they're "dialects" of Chinese is like saying Dutch and English are "dialects of Germanic" - or that French and Italian are "dialects of Romance." Some native speakers will insist on Chinese languages being dialects, but from a classification standpoint and when applying the mutual intelligibility rule, my personal stance is that it makes more sense to call them separate languages.

***I'm not referring to Best's Perpetual Assimilation Model (PAM)**, as that's a whole other can of worms. It's definitely worth reading up on, though!

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Nynorsk

A LINGUISTIC EXPRESSION OF NORWAY'S DEEP ROOTS

By Christian Vinther

In Norway, the land of a thousand fjords, language flows through the landscape like rivers, divided into two main streams: *Bokmål* and *Nynorsk*. These two written forms, both regulated by *Språkrådet* (Language Council), reflect the rich history and cultural breadth of the country. *Bokmål* (book-language), rooted in the Danish written language, is used by around 85% of the population, particularly in urban areas in the east and south. *Nynorsk* (New Norwegian), born from the diversity of Norwegian dialects, finds its strongest voice in mountain valleys and Western Norway. Although both forms are fully understood by all Norwegians, each carries a distinct tone and a connection to the nation's soul.

Aasen's Linguistic Project

At the heart of *Nynorsk* stands Ivar Aasen, the linguist and poet who, in the 19th century, traveled through Norway's rural communities to gather dialects and create a written language rooted in the Norwegian folk spirit. His aim was to free Norway from Bokmål's Danish influence and revive the language as it had been spoken before the Danish union. *Nynorsk*, initially called *Landsmål*, was born as a rediscovery of Norway's linguistic heritage, reconnecting the nation with its own voice.

Nynorsk and Bokmål: Two Linguistic Worlds

Although *Bokmål* and *Nynorsk* share a common history, they emerge from two distinct linguistic breaths. *Bokmål* carries a lightness and formal elegance, while *Nynorsk* has an earthbound immediacy that feels closer to the rhythms of nature and the people. This difference is reflected beautifully in their choice of words: in *Bokmål*, one says "boken" (the book) and "hjertet" (the heart), while *Nynorsk* opts for the softer and more grounded "boka" and "hjarta." These differences are not merely ornamental but speak to how *Nynorsk* keeps the language close to the lived experiences of rural Norway.

The contrast extends to even the simplest pronouns: "Jeg" ("I") in *Bokmål* is "eg" in *Nynorsk*. For "we" both languages offer "vi," though *Nynorsk* also holds the more intimate "me." Even in negation, where *Bokmål* says "ikke," *Nynorsk* echoes with the softer "ikkje."

In Olav H. Hauge's poem *"Det er den draumen"* ("It's the dream"), the *Nynorsk* word "draumen" (dream) carries a weight and resonance that connect the language to the direct expression of dialects. In *Bokmål*, one would say "drømmen," which feels more formal and distanced, as if the language itself steps away from the everyday spoken word. These linguistic nuances not only define the two forms of Norwegian but also mirror the landscapes from which they arise—the formalized, urban tones of *Bokmål* and the grounded, nature-bound soul of *Nynorsk*.

Nynorsk's Role Today

While *Bokmål* continues to dominate in the media and public life, *Nynorsk* retains its strength in many of Norway's rural districts, particularly in Western Norway. Around 10-15% of the population uses *Nynorsk* as their primary written language. In schools, students are taught both *Bokmål* and *Nynorsk*, ensuring that *Nynorsk* remains a central part of Norway's linguistic heritage. Although it plays a smaller role in everyday life, *Nynorsk* continues to be an important part of the country's cultural landscape and literary tradition.

Literarily, *Nynorsk* has found its place through authors such as Olav H. Hauge and Jon Fosse, who have used the language to create works of profound linguistic depth that have contributed to elevating the language as a central part of the Norwegian literary
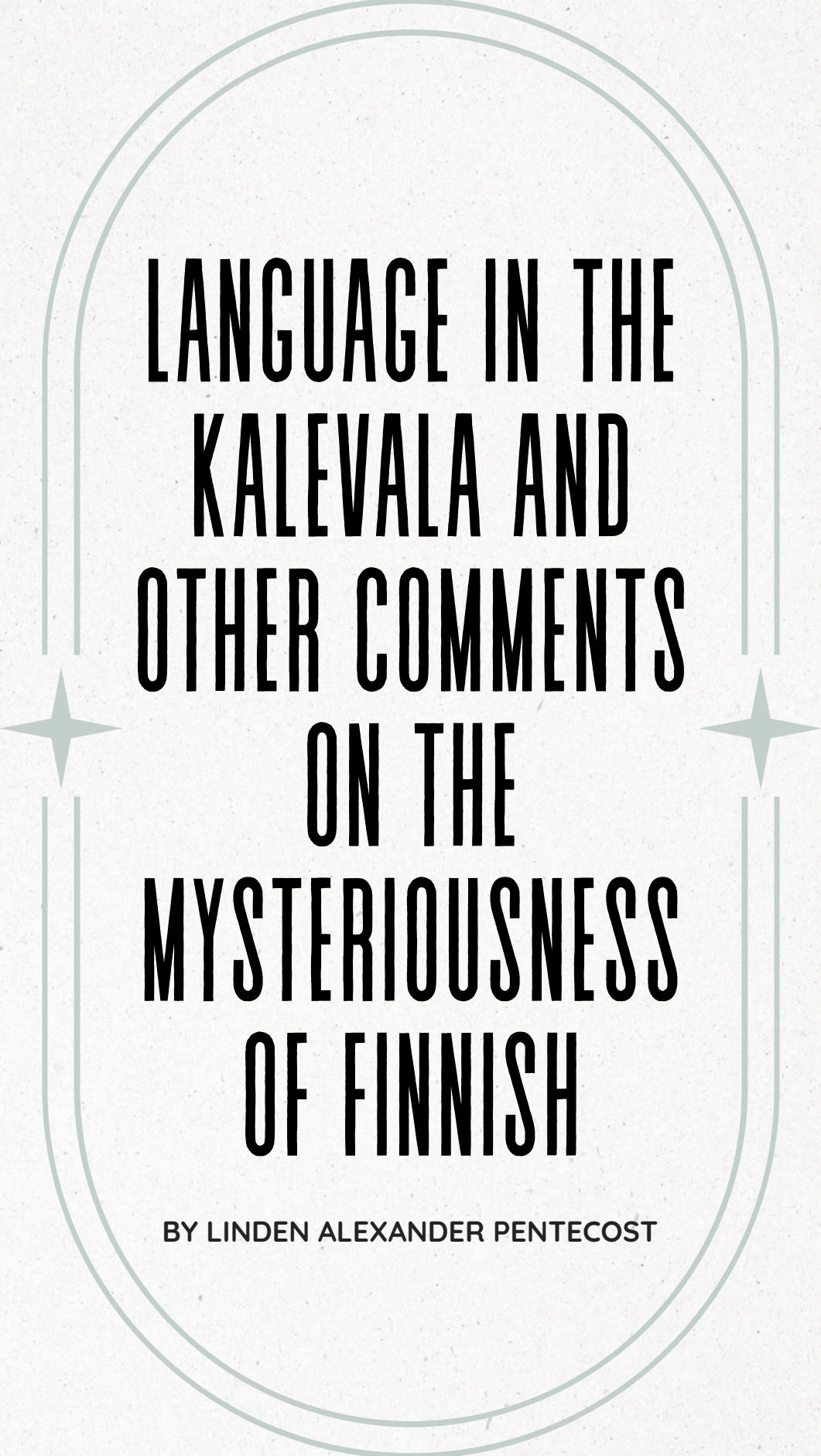
tradition, where it continues to live on as a vibrant force.

Challenges for Nynorsk

Despite the significant cultural value of *Nynorsk*, it faces great challenges in the modern world. Globalization, along with the overwhelming influence of both *Bokmål* and English in the media and technology, has made it harder for *Nynorsk* to maintain its position as an everyday language. Many young people choose *Bokmål* due to its practical application in a digital world.

Despite this, *Nynorsk* stands firm as a symbol of linguistic diversity and cultural autonomy. Closely tied to the Norwegian dialects and traditions, the language remains a vital part of Norway's national identity, even though it often stands in the shadow of *Bokmål*.
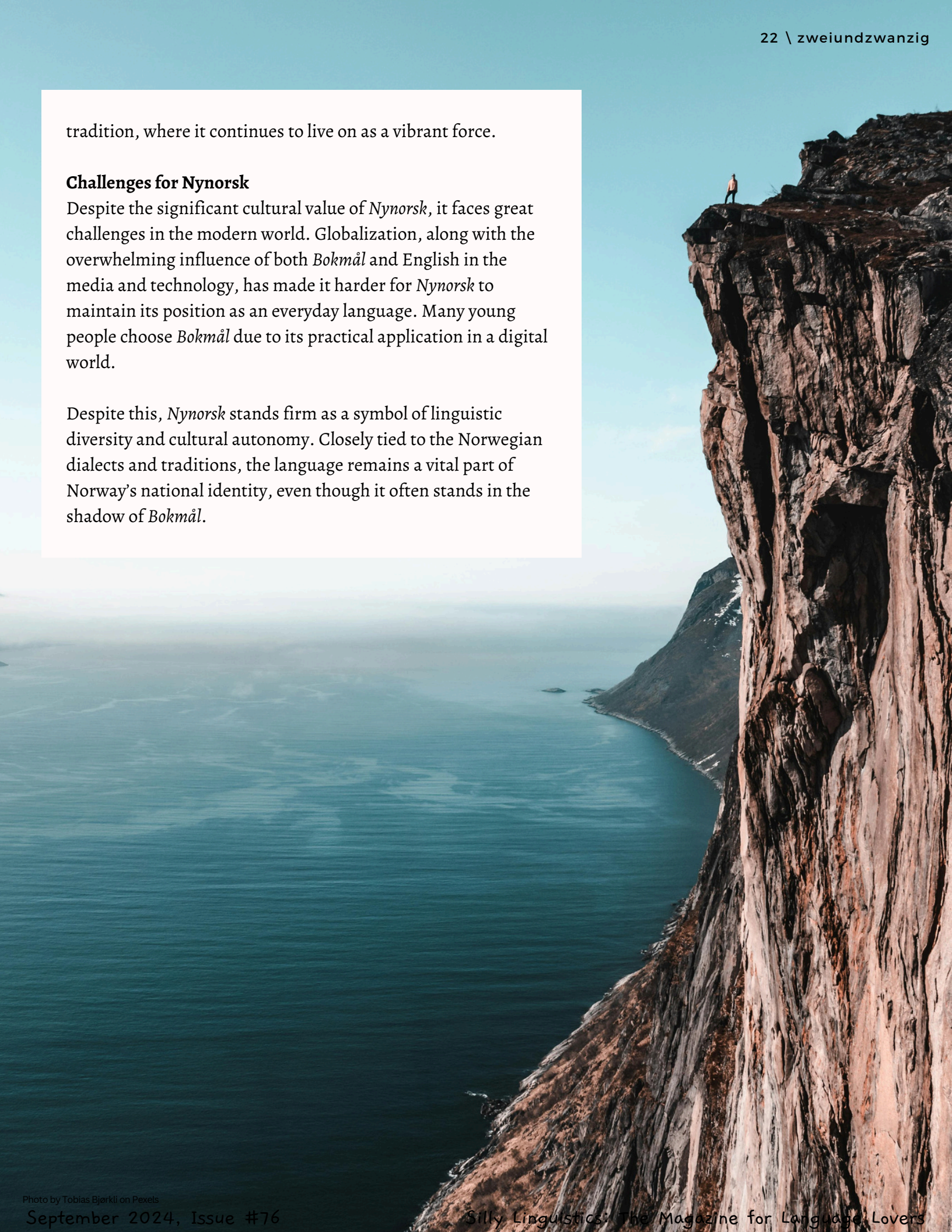
LANGUAGE IN THE KALEVALA AND OTHER COMMENTS ON THE MYSTERIOUSNESS OF FINNISH

BY LINDEN ALEXANDER PENTECOST

(includes "Turso" lady art, a photo of a potential pyramid in Finland, and a different photo of the author at the Temple of Lemminkäinen)
Part three, and the final part of: "The mystical nature of Finnish & of language in Finland" –

Article contains the sections: Väinämöinen and sacred language in the Kalevala; Väinämöinen as a learner of ancient language, & Cthulhonic words and powers, Väinämöinen and the copper ship; and the Kalevala meter; End note and references; article includes a piece of "Turso" lady art, a photo of a potential pyramid and another photo of the author at the Temple of Lemminkäinen (different from the photo in Part one of this series).

If you have not read parts one and two of this series of articles, I will briefly summarise. Essentially, in parts one and two, I have been discussing the Finnish language, with a particular focus on ideas about, or aspects to the Finnish language, that are in a sense unusual or even mysterious; including its appearance in mythology and in fiction. Western and Northern European mythology about "Finns" describes them as being magical ancestors, with powerful, unusual magic abilities involving their use of language, often associated with the ocean, and with a magic associated with the ocean. Several words in unrelated languages do, in my opinion, bare a resemblance to words in Finnish. But it is clear that much of this, including the "Finns" as mythological ancestors, is not about Finnish people today as such. I wrote this article in the UK

<u>Väinämöinen and sacred language in the Kalevala</u>

Elias Lönnrot collected traditional Finnish sung, magical poems, known as **runot**, and compiled these into a single coherent narrative to express the mythological creation story of Finland. The resulting "poem", which is rather long, is known as the **Kalevala.** The Finns themselves have no mythology stating that they themselves, in the ancient past, travelled the oceans and had magical abilities for instance (mythology about the mythological ancestral Finns being such is found elsewhere, as mentioned in detail in Part two). But, similar ancestors absolutely do appear in the mythology of Finland, although they are not described as being Finnish people, but rather as the divine ancestors in the Finnish creation stories, including those compiled in the **Kalevala**. We have, absolutely the same themes in Finnish mythology, of divine ancestors, connected to the sea, who had a magical ability to use language. In Finnish mythology itself however, these traits are not associated with, arguably, a large group of ancestors per-se, but rather with a specific group of divine beings who appear in the folk religion of Finland. Perhaps the most well known for this is **Väinämöinen**, who appears prominently in the **Kalevala.**

The exact etymology of **Väinämöinen** is unknown, but I think the first element, **Väinä** could in some way be connected to Finnish **vene –** "boat", the word which I mention in parts one and two as looking similar to Quechua *wampu* – "boat". Interestingly, the Andean deity *Viracocha* does, arguably, have many similar traits to **Väinämöinen**. At the end of the Kalevala, **Väinämöinen** sails across the sea to one day return (see further on in this article), and according to the Kalevala, can also transform into some kind of pike. *Viracocha* in Andean religions *walks* across the sea to the west, after his appearance in Peru. The curious similarity between these, and the idea of Jesus walking on water, is noteworthy. I am not saying that Jesus is **Väinämöinen** and *Viracocha*, no. But, the similarities regarding divine ancestors who moved in magical ships, or, who could walk, on water, is certainly interesting. According to what I understand from Wiktionary, this initial root in **Väinämöinen** seems also related to Estonian *väin* – "strait", and to Livonian *vēna* – "port".

Thus we are seeing a possible connection between the symbolic ideas of a "boat" and the "movement of water? I have also found in my research the same instance of this potential root word meaning both "boat" and "flow" or "river" in western South America, e.g. Quechua *wampu* - "boat", compared with Mashco Piro *weni* - "river, stream, brook" (1). It is also curious that in the Kalevala, **Väinämöinen** is born as a full grown adult from **Ilmatar** in the ocean (possibly after she makes love to the Cthulhonic deity **Iku Turso** (see further in this article)). In the traditions of the Andes, somewhat similarly, *Viracocha* is connected to the sacred island of *Titiqaqa Wat'a* in Lake Titicaca.

Regardless of the origins of Finnish's mysteriousness, the **Kalevala** certainly well depicts the close relationships that, in Finnish folk religion, were perceived to exist between language, singing and the divine; much of which is also rather similar to what J. R. R.

Tolkien describes in the Silmarillion with regard to the relationship between language, singing and the creation of Middle Earth; perhaps not surprisingly. J. R. R. Tolkien does go into much more blatant implications with this though in certain respects, especially given that in the story of the Silmarillion: language, sound and music, are all connected, and helped to create the universe. This is not explicitly stated in the Kalevala to my knowledge, but the same idea is certainly implied in the Kalevala, and also for example, in the Bible, for example, the part in Genesis: *"And God said, let there be light, and there was light".*

<u>Väinämöinen as a learner of ancient language, & Cthulhonic words and powers</u>

It is important to emphasise that whilst **Väinämöinen** carries the archetype of a god or creator, in the Kalevala, **Väinämöinen** must also learn magic songs and words which he did not know. This is hinted at throughout the Kalevala. In some cases it seems that **Väinämöinen** is learning these magical songs and phrases from beings much older than he, including where **Väinämöinen** essentially tries to find out certain hidden, ancient magical words from a Wizard-like giant being called **Vipunen**, who seems to be in a curious state of having partially transformed into a "cthulhonic undead" being, and thus into being a part of nature. **Väinämöinen** is missing three words from a magical **runo** and so tries to find out these words from **Vipunen**. It could be argued then, that **Väinämöinen** is not only singing, and teaching the use of magical language, but is also in part learning, sometimes forgotten words, from ancestral beings and gods older than he. This would certainly seem to imply the existence in Finnish mythology of an *older* language spoken by ancient gods, which in some way gave rise to Finnish. If we assume that Väinämöinen himself was thought to have spoken a form of Finnish, then his use of magic songs and sacred words, may imply that much of this older language continues to exist in Finnish; but that knowledge of the older language is only partially complete through Finnish.

It is implied that **Vipunen** was buried before **Väinämöinen** spoke with him, and so **Vipunen** is in some ways what we might refer to as a "zombie", a being who had technically died, but remained in a sense "living" through some other supernatural means. When we look at the "Finns" in terms of mythological, divine ancestors, this same idea pops up, I have noticed. It is also noteworthy that many of the ancestral beings in the Kalevala are not associated so much with Finland as a whole, but with the Arctic, and perhaps arguably with the Kven people. It is also noteworthy that it is nearby Arctic areas of Norway that are commonly associated with the *drauger* in Northern Norwegian or *Haalogolandisk* folk religion. The *drauger* are undead zombie beings, also found in Iceland, where legends of "Finns" are also present. There seems to be an indication that the mythological "Finns" and the Finnish mythological ancestors before **Väinämöinen** possessed what some might term an "unnatural" form of magic that allowed the dead to be reanimated in some way, even if that also meant a kind of physical transformation, as implied with regard to **Vipunen**.

There is a line by H.P. Lovecraft in his story *The Nameless City*, which goes: *"that is not dead which can eternal lie, and with strange aeons even death may die"* that is perhaps appropriate here for describing the kind of thing I am describing. There is a semi-fictional story, although based on real folklore, titled: *Finn Blood* by Jonas Lie (included in *A book of Sea Legend*s edited by Michael Brown,(a different story from which is quoted in Part two of this series)), in which there is a reference to what are essentially Finnish zombie kings living under the sea. Also in terms of Cthulhonic and Lovecraftian themes, the Finnish deity **Iku Turso** is about as *lovecraftian* as a god can get.

Iku Turso is a many-tentacled and many-horned sea god, who may actually be the father of **Väinämöinen** from what I understand (see earlier in this article), again indicating that an "older group of gods" existed prior to the currently identified primarily mythological history of Finland. We also can see that the name **Iku Turso** does not *quite* make sense in Finnish, but may be from an earlier language. **Iku** is related to the word **ikä** - "age" and **iki** "eternally", and **Turso** is related to **tursas** - "octopus". A connection can be seen with Old Norse *þurs* - a kind of giant, but I doubt very much that the origin language of these words is Norse. Although owing to that these "ancient gods" seem particularly connected to the Arctic Ocean, it makes sense that some of these beings possessing a similar kind of magic, like *þurs* and *drauger,* are found in Norse mythology too. In Finnish the northern realm is called **Pohjola**, which confusingly to me, is the "north pole" but also "under" the earth, according to Finnish cosmology. Note that this section continues on the next page, following on from the art description and art below on this current page.

*Photo below: the "turso" art (in reference to **Iku Turso**): an artistic depiction of a woman having being alive, albeit physically transformed into a Cthulhonic, in this case whilst alive. The art attempts to demonstrate the themes of physical transformation implied in some of the ancient traditions of Northern Europe. The Finnish included in the art, which says:, **minä osaan suomea, mutta puhun ikivanhojen jumalien kieltä myös** means "I speak Finnish, but I speak the language of the ancient gods too". I am cautious however to imply that this kind of spiritual transformation might have had positive or beautiful traits however. We have to ask, is this spiritually correct in any sense? Possibly not, we simply do not know, and I emphasise extreme caution when making any conclusions about, or writing about, these ancient beliefs. Nevertheless, personally I do find some strange beauty in these themes, and do not believe they are evil.*
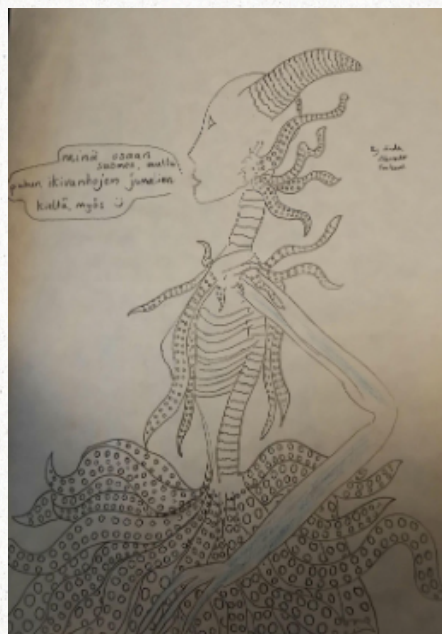
The idea that the body itself can retain a form of life, a part of the spirit, after death, is not universal. My Hopi friend Daryn Melvin has told me that in his people's beliefs, to mummify a person actually slows down the process of transformation after death. Yet, these ancient pre-Finnish beliefs found in Finnish and Norse mythology, seem indicative that this idea *was* to some degree found in the ancient northern World. It is, of course, found in Egyptian traditions too, and, perhaps not coincidentally, in some of the indigenous beliefs of the Andes. I have also found a couple of potential word similarities between Finnish and Ancient Egyptian, although these are not nearly as pronounced as the potential similarities between Finnish and Quechua, and Kallawaya (a sacred, secretive language used by the ancient priests of Lake Titicaca in Peru).

Last year I tired out my arse in Tenerife looking for Guanche Pyramids. Whilst unconfirmed, I have recently come across references to potential ancient pyramids in Finland, which would further imply similarities between the ancient languages and beliefs of Finland, the Andes and also Egypt. One of these potential pyramids I managed to visit recently (in September 2024), and it is located near **Oitti** not far from **Riihimäki** in Southern Finland. I came across various references to this pyramid on the Facebook group **Suomen Salattu Historia** - "Finland's hidden history", and I think that a person named Arhi may have originally discovered it, but I am unsure. See the photo below below and description above photo:

*Photo below: potential pyramid site located close to **Oitti** in Southern Finland. Do I personally believe that this is a pyramid? To be honest, I will take a lot more convincing. But the site is interesting, and has a strange feel, and I think it could indeed be some kind of ancient **pyhä paikka** or "sacred place". The photo below shows what are potentially two of the "steps" of the pyramid, which can just about be seen as two separate levels or steps in the structure of boulders on the outside of this hill. Note that this site is very dangerous underfoot due to loose rocks and sticking out branches from forestry work. If this is indeed an ancient site, we could be talking about something that far predates the last Ice Age. The Ice Age certainly does complicate the search for ancient history in Finland, leading to the belief in mainstream academia that there were simply no humans at all in Finland before the Ice Age. But, as the photo below demonstrates, it is entirely possible that such sites are simply so degraded from the Ice Age(s) making it very difficult to identify them. A note paragraph concerning the word **runo** is found below the photo of the art, before the article continues on the following page with a new section.*

Note that the word "rune" in the context of the Kalevala refers to the individual part of the Kalevala. This is due to that this is called **runo** in Finnish, a word, which, possibly does have some relationship to the word "rune", in the Germanic sense, and to Irish *rún* – secret, for example. An interconnected meaning could be seen in how *rún* means "secret" in Irish, whilst in Germanic cultures "rune" referred to a magical letter, but also to the idea associated with it; and in Finnish it refers to these sacred, ancient sections of poetry, where there is also a clear connected meaning to language and something divine or secret inherent within it.

<u>Väinämöinen and the copper ship, and the Kalevala meter</u>

One of my favourite examples in the Kalevala regarding **Väinämöinen** and sacred language, is the following from the **viideskymmenes runo** "(the) fiftieth rune" of the Kalevala by Elias Lönnrot (but from actual ancient **runot**):

Siitä suuttui Väinämöinen;
jopa suuttui ja häpesi;
itse läksi astumahan;
rannalle merelliselle;
tuossa loihe laulamahan;
lauloi kerran viimeisensä:
lauloi vaskisen venehen
kuparisen umpipurren.

My own translation is below (and checked by two native speakers). I did need a dictionary to check some of these poetic words, especially as some of the language in the Kalevala is rather poetic, and does not necessarily represent everyday spoken Finnish. The standard English translations of the Kalevala carry the *story* in easier English language, but do not fully convey the precise meaning of the language in the poetic Finnish **runot**, which is what I have attempted to do in my literal translation, which is below:

from there became angry Väinämöinen
he became angry even, and became ashamed
alone he left to embark/step
towards the marine/ocean shore
there he made (his/the) singing
sung a time, his last
sung (brought into being) a boat of bronze/copper
an enclosed vessel/boat of copper

It is implied here that **Väinämöinen** *sings,* i.e. uses *language* to bring this boat into existence, an example of a strongly indicative notion that in Finnish mythology, language

was believed to be intimately connected to reality and creation itself. The primary fascinating feature here of course is that **Väinämöinen** literally "sings" the ship into existence, i.e. he uses sound and language to create or at least transform physical matter. As far fetched as it might seem, modern physics does indeed demonstrate that *sound* and therefore potentially language, or singing, can rearrange and transform matter in the material universe. (See also my comments below on how the song **kuulin äänen** seems to *alter* my consciousness).

The Kalevala, and generally other traditional *rune* poems in the Finno-Baltic languages, traditionally and likely from ancient times, used the *trochaic tetrameter.* This means that a single line in the Kalevala contains four metras, which are equivalent to 8 syllables in the Kalevala. Thus we can break up the first line in the section of the Kalevala quoted in this article, as: ***sii-tä suut-tui-Väi-nä-möi-nen*** and the second line as: ***jo-pa-suut-tui-ja-hä-pe-si***. The last two lines can be syllabically represented as: ***lau-loi-ker-ran-vii-mei-sen-sä*** and ***ku-pa-ri-sen-um-pi-pur-ren***. You will notice that the Kalevala also contains many examples of alliteration, for example ***lauloi vaskisen venehen***, where the **v** is alliterated. Perhaps due to that words in Finnish tend to end with a relatively small number of syllables, including across the different noun cases, "rhyming" is less common in Finnish perhaps than in some other languages, and alliteration is often used to more effect. Note that the word **kuparisen** - "of copper" is the genitive of **kuparinen** - "copper" (adjective), from the relatively recent Finnish word **kupari**. The word **vaskisen** is similarly formed from **vaskinen** - "copper/bronze" (adjective), formed from the much more ancient word in Finnish: **vaski** - "copper" or "bronze". In the **Kalevala** synonyms are often used in this way to give poetic and spiritual meaning to the story.

In Finnish traditions there are other particular forms of singing, which also rely upon poetic metras closely associated with the Finnish language's prosodic structure. These other poetic metras are not a subject I feel knowledgeable about to be able to fully describe here. I do know that Finland has a form of overtone singing, called **kurkkulaulu**. Many Finnish folk songs were in addition traditionally sung by multiple people at once. One incredibly beautiful example, in my opinion, is the folk song **kuulin äänen**, "I heard the voice". This song contains some lines of eight syllables, like the Kalevala, yet the exact prosodic patterns in other parts of this song are harder for me to explain. I do not know enough about the linguistics of poetry to say whether or not this song contains the *trochaic tetrameter* as well, but certainly the four syllabled lines are found in the song, and particularly in the latter half of the song. You may notice, if listening to **kuulin äänen**, that the eight-syllable structure comes into form *as* the volume, intensity, and if you will, power of this song increases towards the end. For me personally, this form of moving the song towards an eight-syllable structure, along with the multiple voices, produces an almost trance-like effect. I can actually feel something in my mind and body being almost "elevated" by the effects of this type of singing. This was, no doubt, in part the purpose of these forms of singing.

Note that the original language in which many of these **runot**/runes were sung as collected by Lönnrot was actually White Sea Karelian, **Vienankarjala**, and not Finnish, which adds to the complexity of understanding the language. White Sea Karelian is the Karelian dialect closest to Finnish, and is also spoken in some of the northern, Arctic areas, pivotal to the Kalevala. The name for this language in Finnish includes the root **Viena-**, this is completely unrelated to "Vienna" in Austria, but it is curious to note that Ior Bock referred to the Finnish language as the *Van* language. Curious? Perhaps.

Photo above: the author, myself, meditating upon the giant megaliths that form the entrance to the Lemminkäinen Temple near Gumbostrand in Southern Finland (July 2024). Lemminkäinen is also an important figure in the Kalevala. If this site and its cave really is a temple, then perhaps one day, the right words may reveal it.

End note and references

I hope that this series of articles was interesting to read. I can offer no exact conclusions about these unusual, albeit fascinating topics that pertain to the Finnish language, and nor is it my intent to. All I can hope is that I have inspired interest in an arguably low-key, but absolutely fascinating range of topics connected to the mysticalness of Finnish; and I hope that for my readers that it has been an interesting journey, and that I may have inspired some wonder and curiosity about this wonderful language, and this wonderful, beautiful ancient land.

The only numbered reference, (1) is for the word *weni* included in the text on the first page of this article, and is one of several words included to demonstrate similar words in Finnic and in South America meaning "boat" and "movement of water". The word, as already mentioned, means "river, stream, brook" and is from the Mashco Piro language in Peru.

Source (1) is referenced below:
Mary Ritchie Key. 2023. Mashco Piro dictionary.
In: Key, Mary Ritchie & Comrie, Bernard (eds.)
The Intercontinental Dictionary Series.
Leipzig: Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology.
(Available online at http://ids.clld.org/contributions/264, Accessed on 2024-09-14.)

Apart from this, I required few references for writing this article, as it is based primarily on my own research. Some references are made in the text, but since I have not quoted from any of those other than the Kalevala, I will only briefly refer to them again here. They include the story *Finn Blood* by Jonas Lie, in: *A Book of Sea Legends*, edited by Michael Brown. I also quoted a brief line from H. P. Lovecraft's *The Nameless City.*

The Kalevala is of course also quoted from in this article, this having been written by Elias Lönnrot, but which was compiled from original, authentically ancient Finnish **runot**.

THE CONCEALED ORIGINS OF THREE ENGLISH PLANT NAMES – INCLUDING 'CARNATION' AND 'OLEANDER'

BY **FRANCESCO PERONO CACCIAFOCO**

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*T*he names of plants, or phytonyms (from Ancient Greek *phytón*, 'plant', and *ónoma*, 'name', 'noun'), are a very significant part of the lexicon of a language. They represent not only a relevant 'specialised vocabulary', but, when investigated through the analysis of the linguistic procedures implemented by speakers to generate them, tell us a lot about the mindset and culture of a population. The etymological reconstructions of phytonyms often hold surprises and challenges for the linguists who study them and, once completed, enable them to understand the perspectives of a group of individuals and to document their perception of the world.

The English language has a very rich botanical lexicon, and English plant names often tell us fascinating stories. Their origins are etymologically captivating or conceptually startling. Let's briefly comment on three of them, which are linguistically unique.

Carnation

The name of the "carnation" (*Dianthus caryophyllus*), a perennial flowering plant from Southern Europe, represents an unsolved etymological puzzle of the English lexicon. Attested since the first half of the 16th century, its origins are quite obscure. Some interpretations postulate that the word can be a sort of misspelling of "coronation", from the use in the ancient world to intertwine crowns and garlands with carnations during ceremonies and rituals or because the petals of the flower form a shape which reminds that of a crown. This reconstruction sounds quite arbitrary and is based on relatively far-fetched analogical reasonings. An alternative name of the "carnation" is "clove pink", and people who believe that the original or prevailing colour of the flower was 'pink' (specifically 'bright pinkish-purple') postulate that the word is connected with Middle French *carnation* (equal to Italian *carnagione*, from Vernacular Latin *carnātio*, through its accusative singular *carnātionem*), indicating, since the 15th century, 'the colour of the skin and flesh of an individual', namely their 'complexion'. A Christian interpretation goes even beyond this and connects the phytonym directly with the Latin word *incarnātĭo*, 'incarnation', indicating God becoming human ('in flesh') as Jesus. These explanations work, in a way, if we consider them exclusively linked to the 'pinkness' of the "carnation" – but many other colours, like white, yellow, and red, exist for the flower (although some of them were eventually generated by selective breeding). In the time of the possible naming process, carnations were valued for their beauty and sweet scent and extensively cultivated in Normandy. The connection of the English name with (Middle) French, therefore, can be somehow supported by elements of material culture. Despite these hypotheses can provide us with some clues on the origins of the word "carnation", its etymology cannot be confirmed and remains an enigma of the English vocabulary.

Pink Carnation,
watercolour (1620s or 1630s) by Balthasar van der Ast (1593/94-1657),
Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL, US
(Public Domain - Creative Commons CC0 License)

Oleander

"Oleander" is the name of an evergreen flowering shrub (*Nerium oleander*), also known as "rosebay", which is as beautiful as it is poisonous. The origins of the denomination of this potentially deadly plant are obscure and their possible explanations circularly revolve around other phytonyms. While "oleander" is attested in English from <u>the end of the first half of the 16th century</u>, the name appears already in Vernacular Latin in the late 14th century as *oleaster*, a variant of Medieval Latin *oleander*, which is another phytonym of uncertain etymology. The element *olea-* can be connected with Latin *ŏlĕa*, 'olive', 'olive tree' – because of a typological resemblance (especially inherent in the leaves) –, which would have been merged with a Late Latin form *lorandrum* (or *arodandrum*), possibly derived from Latin <u>*rhŏdŏdéndrŏn*</u> (from the Ancient Greek name of the majestic woody plant, *rhodódendron*, literally "rose tree", from *rhódon*, 'rose', and *déndron*, 'tree' – despite its gorgeous flowers are, naturally, not roses). *Lorandrum* would have been influenced, in its morphology, by Latin <u>*laurĕa*</u>, the name of the "laurel" ("bay laurel", "bay tree"), because of the shape of the leaves of the two plants, which are quite similar. The ideal connections, at the cognitive level, with the rhododendron and the laurel are confirmed by the name of the oleander in French, *laurier rose* (literally: "laurel rose"). The etymology of "oleander" is an uphill path for the linguists who try to reconstruct it. The phytonym looks connected with the names of other plants in a sort of 'onomastic circle' which underlines the complexity and intricacies of the intellective processes involved in the seemingly simple act of naming.


Oleander Flowers,
watercolour (1870s or 1890s) by Johann Heinrich Müller (1825-1894),
(Public Domain - Creative Commons CC0 License)

Rubens Peale with a Geranium,
oil on canvas (1801) by Rembrandt Peale (1778-1860),
National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, US
(Public Domain - Creative Commons CC0 License)

Geranium / Cranesbill

<u>"Geranium"</u> is the name of the genus of hundreds of flowering plants commonly known as "geraniums" and "cranesbills". The term is attested from the first half of the 16th century. Despite the plant is well-known for its brightly white, pink, red, and purple flowers, its name doesn't derive from that feature. "Geranium" comes, indeed, <u>from Botanical Latin *geranium*</u>, adapted from the Ancient Greek phytonym *geránion*, a diminutive (*-ion* is the diminutive suffix) of *géranos*, 'crane' (cognate, among others, of Old English *cran* and Latin *grūs*). The name is in fact 'analogical' and derives from the similarity between the shape of the seed pods of a geranium and the head and bill of a crane. The part of the pistil where the ovules reside, called "ovary", figuratively resembles the 'head', while the elongated stigma represents the 'beak' of the bird. It is no coincidence, therefore, that a native popular name of the plant, in English, is *crane's-bill* or *cranesbill*. While the etymology of "geranium" is not obscure in itself, its complex cognitive aspects and its naming process based on figurative analogy make the related reconstruction and explanation a very interesting example of the sometimes uncommon strategies implemented by the human beings to give names to the 'items' of their world.
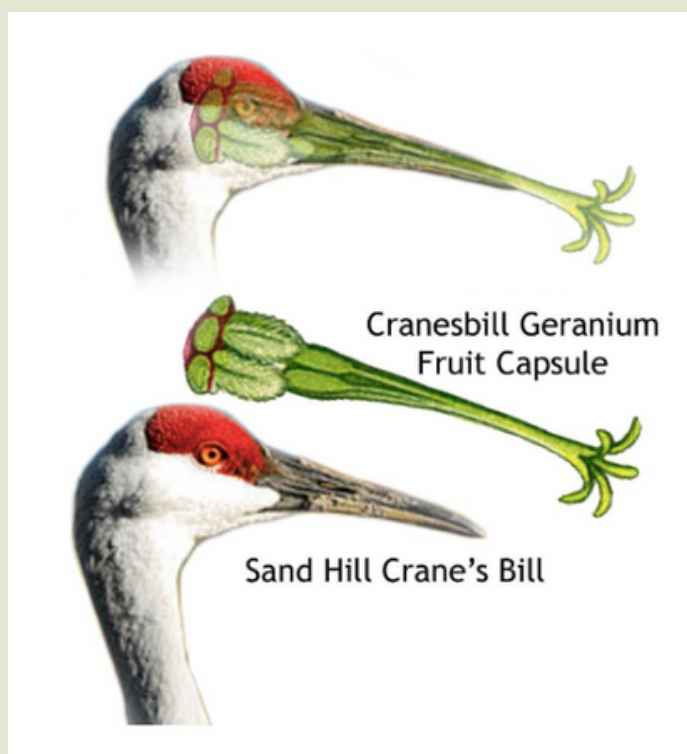
Graphical comparison between a geranium's seed pod and the head and bill of a crane
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