

When we can't make sense of the world, we turn to language

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In the early days of the pandemic, a Facebook acquaintance posted a quote from the book *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life*, by Kathleen Morris: “The Greek root of the word *crisis* is ‘to sift,’ as in, to shake out the excesses and leave only what’s important. That’s what crises do. They shake things up until we are forced to hold on to only what matters most. The rest falls away.”

“Holding this [quote] close to my heart tonight,” my acquaintance wrote.

The next day, a clothing brand I follow on Instagram posted an image of crumpled paper with this quote in typewriter font: “...the word *emerge* exists within *emergency* for a reason.” The caption read: “The Latin root *emergere*, meaning bring to light, birthed both *emerge*, as in rise above, and *emergency*, as in disaster.”

The same week, a linguistics colleague launched a new Instagram account, Lexical Healing. “To help the quarantine blues, feel the tender caress of historical linguistics,” she wrote. Her first post was the etymology of “alarm”: “An awareness or warning of danger...from Italian *alle arme* meaning ‘to arms!’ ” The next day, “pandemonium”: “Wild disorder or chaos ... From Greek *pan* – ‘all’ – and Latin *daemonium*, ‘evil spirit.’”

Etymology, the study of the origin or history of words, is itself derived from the Greek *etumologia*, from *étumon*, “true sense,” and *logia*, “the study of.” When there is chaos (from the Greek *khaos*: “vast chasm, void”), words fill the hollowness of the unknown and provide an anchor. The common ground of language comforts and offers meaning, literal and metaphorical, to an otherwise ineffable and ever-changing situation.

When we are all in search of purpose and resolve, as we all so acutely are right now, breaking down a word to its core is like getting to the root of the problem (pardon both the pun and the idiom). There is no room for misinterpretation when only the foundation remains. The origin of a word, often dating back centuries, is both the smallest fraction and something much bigger than any of us. And here lies its solace.

Etymology is not the only branch of linguistics having a moment. Language learning apps such as Duolingo, Busuu, Babbel and other language-tutoring platforms have seen an increase in downloads since the beginning of March. (Duolingo says downloads are up 108 per cent globally since early March, and competitor Drops also reported a rise in users worldwide.)

As someone who believes multilingualism can save the world (no, really), I hope the rise of language learning is a response to our physical separation and yearning for connection to faraway places, people and new cultures – though it’s just as likely because people have more time in quarantine and need a distraction.

For some families, the lockdown means parents can finally introduce, or strengthen, a minority language at home. In addition to baking, crafting and entertaining her 3½-year-old daughter and infant son in a tiny London flat, Winnie Quach has spent the past two months teaching her daughter Mandarin. Ms. Quach grew up in Australia speaking the Chinese dialect Teochew, as well as Cantonese and Mandarin, but was socialized in English. Her partner, also from Australia, spoke Vietnamese at home. The couple speaks English to each other and to their children. Normally, between jobs, preschool, activities and a baby, there’s no time for language lessons.

That’s all changed. “I’ve increased the [Mandarin] vocab since being home, as she now has more time during the day with me,” Ms. Quach says. “She’s learned fruits, body parts, hello, goodbye, and she will sometimes ask when things come up.” On one recent night, her daughter attempted to delay bedtime by saying goodnight half a dozen times from her bedroom. Suddenly, Ms. Quach heard her say goodnight in Mandarin. “She remembered it from something we talked about the day before. I was so proud,” she says. Since screen time has increased for Ms. Quach’s family (as it has for most), she has also introduced *Peppa Pig* episodes in Mandarin. In our home, my children are watching a lot more movies in Polish. The current ubiquitous (but also unwarranted, according to experts) screen-time guilt is somehow lightened when *Despicable Me 3* is in my mother

tongue.

But even for families who regularly speak a minority language at home, this time in quarantine could give a boost to use of the mother tongue. Studies show children from bilingual homes lose productive skills in their non-English language during elementary school – sometimes as early as preschool. It comes down to exposure and volume of input: If a child speaks English all day at school, the mother tongue will likely suffer.

When schools closed, some media questioned how parents who don't speak the majority language could support children at home with online learning. What if, instead of worrying about majority-language learning now, we consider how those same parents could, even inadvertently, help their children strengthen their use of the family's mother tongue? Immigrant teenagers, whose dominant language sometimes differs from that of their parents, reported having fewer conversations with and weaker connections to their parents than peers who share a dominant language, according to a 2000 study. This time at home is an opportunity for parents and children to connect in a mother tongue.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the importance of multilingualism in the context of medical information. In March, the United Nations Development Programme and the World Health Organization ran a campaign on Chinese social media where hundreds of thousands of participants shared best health practices in more than 50 languages and dialects. The purpose of the campaign, "Spread the Word, Not the Virus," was to ensure everyone had access to vital information about COVID-19.

In partnership with the British Red Cross, the Doctors of the World website offers COVID-19 information in 46 languages, and the Government of Canada has online glossaries in both English and French that are updated regularly. The Merriam-Webster dictionary online not only has its own guide to coronavirus-related words, but its Twitter account is semantic salvation at its finest – "a thread here of beautiful, obscure and often quite useless words," as its pinned tweet reads.

The pandemic has also changed our everyday vocabulary. Terms many of us had never heard before – flattening the curve, self-isolation, physical distancing – are now used regularly. My three-year-old daughter recently started calling hand sanitizer "coronavirus." It makes for an awkward situation if anyone overhears her asking to have "coronavirus" sprayed on her hands. (The sound of a toddler's voice travels much farther than two metres, by the way.) From Latin *sanitas*, meaning "health, soundness of body"

and “sanity, soundness of mind,” hand sanitizer is a first line of defence for the body against sickness. But for the mind, turn to language. It won’t let you down.

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