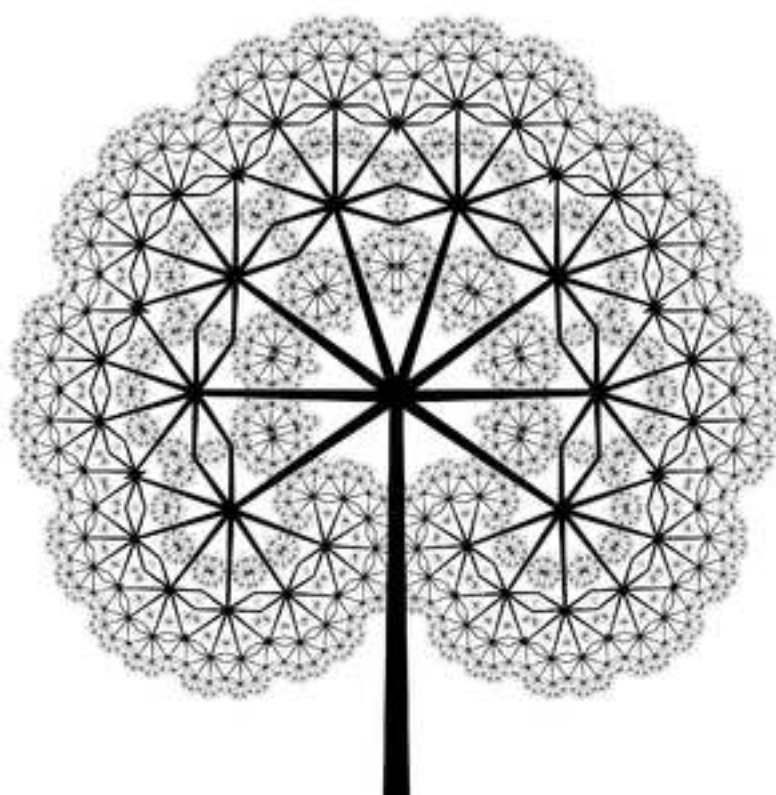


Language Teaches Itself



A Guide to Organic Language Learning

Tony Marsh Method

Chapters:

1. Biography
2. Fractal Geometry and Language Learning
3. Language is a bicycle.
4. Language is matrix.
5. Think *in*, not about
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Biography

My name is Tony Marsh. I teach Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, and English to the advanced level, and French, Italian, Mandarin and Polish to the intermediate or beginner level. I am a former Arabic Cryptologic Linguist for the US Air Force, and have personally trained FBI, Navy, Motorola, Panasonic, Hyatt Hotels, Four Seasons Hotels, an IL State Representative, and a World Cup soccer player.

I've developed a method for learning languages which I call the Tony Marsh Method. The cornerstone of my method is a system I call the Language Matrix. I have used this system to learn and/or teach over 15 languages. **The system allows anyone to instantly converse in any language, with no previous experience in the language.**

Using my Language Matrix, I “learned” Swedish for less than 5 minutes, and then held a conversation on Skype by typing in Swedish with a man from Sweden. After 5 or 10 minutes of non-stop conversation, he asked me how many years I have been studying Swedish. When I told him just a few minutes, I think I learned the Swedish word for “bullshit”.

After demonstrating to him how the system works, he asked to become a Spanish student, and it became a “shut up and take my money” situation.

I used my system to teach a one-month Arabic class to two FBI agents. At the end of the month their oral proficiency would be tested on a scale of 0 to 3. 3 is “complete professional proficiency”, and they started at 0 – not knowing a word of Arabic.

The agency asked that I get them to level 0.5 proficiency, but was assured that there would be no shame in falling short of that mark; afterall, it is *Arabic*, and how much can you really learn in a month, right?

Well, one got a 1, and the other got a 1.5 – half way to fluent in Arabic in one month. Typically that takes over one year to achieve.

I will explain my Language Matrix system in the coming chapters of this book. You'll be able to use my system to **achieve hyper-efficiency in language learning**. You'll run circles around your colleagues whose noses are in books, or glazed eyes glued to screens droning on about what kind of fruits “Juan” eats. You're riding your bicycle while they are just reading about bicycles.

But in order to understand how and why this system works – and for those interested in the philosophical and even theosophical implications of what language is – let's look at how this system came to be.

Fractal Geometry and Language Learning

After leaving the Air Force in 2009, I began teaching Spanish classes to adults at a Chicago language school. I began teaching in a conversational, communicative way, always trying to point out the patterns or templates of the language, so they could just fill in the blanks with the words they needed, and make educated guesses about how to say things – sort of teaching them to be their own teachers.

But I quickly became amazed at how unbelievably complicated many students were able to make the matter – and adding to that, was their reluctance to use the language in their lives. It seemed as if a language—in their minds—was something they had to memorize enough of, and when that task was complete, the job would be done. They didn't see that it is a process of using the language to communicate, and the process of communicating acts as water flowing over rocks, shaping their minds into the necessary form of conduits that the language needs to flow.

In 2010, I watched a TED Talk video of the revolutionary mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot about fractal geometry. The idea was that, unlike unlike in traditional geometry, it is mathematically very difficult to measure many of the shapes we find in nature, such as the perimeter of a tree in all its branches and leaves. The reason for this, is the the level of detail that one must measure – think every leaf, and every ridge on the end of every leaf. Basically, you need a smaller and smaller ruler the closer you look, in order to get between those ridges and accurately measure every turn.

The part of the talk that triggered in me an epiphany regarding language learning, was the theoretical question “How long is the coastline of Britain?” The idea there, just like measuring the outside edge of a tree, is that the closer you look at a coastline, the more appear details that you now have to measure (a 12 inch ruler yields a much higher measurement than a one-mile ruler).

Something about how I had always approached language became clear to me in that moment: **when you learn to say a sentence in a language, you aren't only learning to say that sentence, but also every sentence like it.** So the length of that sentence (however many words it has), leaves behind it a template that can be used to “populate” with other like words or phrases. Let's see an example:

Consider the sentence, “I have a question”. It's 4 words long. Measuring with a “word-long” ruler, it is 4 units. Measuring with a “syllable-long” ruler, it is 5 units, etc. But what it really is, is a template, or matrix, that can be used to create virtually infinite sentences, the same way that there is virtually infinite space between any two points, such as the length of the coastline of Britain.

Because I could also say, “I have an answer”. Or, “I have an idea”; or, “I have a sister”; or, “I have _____”; -- insert any noun.

I could also say, “Do you have a question?”; or, “She has a question”; or, “We have a question”; -- _____ a question.

So it's either: "I have _____", which could be populated by a virtually infinite set of possibilities, or: "_____ a question", which could also be populated by a virtually infinite set of possibilities.

The epiphany, and subsequent catchphrase was: **"Verbs are containers of vocabulary"**.

Looking further into the idea of fractal geometry, and "fractal" shapes in nature. I discovered that a common characteristic of these shapes was "iteration", or "self-similarity". To illustrate this characteristic, simply imagine a branch of a tree. The branch comes out straight, and then splits into two smaller branches. And then, both of those smaller branches splits into two smaller branches, and so forth. I immediately identified this self-similar, branches upon branches shape in what I was doing with verbs and vocabulary. Imagine a "branch" shape like this:

I have ... a question
...an answer
...an idea
...a sister

4 branches stemming from a single point. Now watch those four branches divide into more branches:

I have ... a question ...for you
 ...for him
 ...for her
... an answer ... for you
 ...for him
 ...for her
... an idea ... I want to try
 ... I need to say
 ... I want you to hear
... a sister ... in Chicago
 ... named Anna
 ... with a dog

Each of the 4 original branches sprung 3 new possibilities. And this process never stops.

I began teaching my classes by simply putting a verb on the whiteboard, and asking students to begin making sentences (true sentences!)

Me gusta ...
(I like ...)

Helado? (Ice cream). Café? (Coffee.) Ver películas? (Watching movies). Whatever they said, became a topic of conversation that we would begin to discuss. By adding the second person form of the verb as a question, we could have an authentic conversation:

Me gusta ...
(I like ...)

¿Te gusta ...?
(Do you like ...?)

From there, just fill in the blanks with vocabulary, and we can discuss those topics naturally. The only problem is that we would be talking about ice cream one second, and then coffee the next, and then movies the next – hardly a natural flow of conversation, even if it was grammatically “organic”

So if a verb is a single starting point from which vocabulary grows, or perhaps an actual “container” of vocabulary, like a circle labeled “I like ...” with containing all the things that you like, I found it necessary to draw a bigger circle around all of that, labeled “Topic”. That way we could contain the conversation within a single topic. Circles inside of circles inside of circles, by the way, is a classic “fractal” shape.

Using this system of concentric “containers” conversation continued to be organic, contextual, and beautifully “fractal” shaped. **Conversation grew with the same generativity we see in nature – in trees, rivers, and the human body – branches upon branches upon branches**, Verbs and Vocabulary, all contained by a single point: the Topic.

Language is a Bicycle

So it was 2010, and language classes were elegantly “fractal” shaped. But this didn’t stop students from complicating the issue. Language continued to be a mystifying series of random words and rules that students felt they needed to memorize enough of in order to complete the job. Students ask, “How long does it take to learn a language?”, as if there is a clear end point.

My response is this: **your “having learned” the language depends precisely on how well you can communicate on the topics on which you need to communicate**. No one can communicate on all topics, even in your first language – I, for example, become not so fluent in English when asked to talk about the stock market. In its most extreme form, you could think of it like this: if all you ever needed to say in a language was, “ticket please, thank you; ticket please, thank you”, then by being able to say “ticket please, thank you” you are fluent in that language. But what about everything else, you ask? Well, what about it? If you don’t need it, no one will ever know you don’t have it. What about global economy for me? It doesn’t matter, because I don’t talk about global economy. In the event that it becomes necessary for me to talk about global economy, then I will add that Topic, with its Verbs and Vocabulary.

The point is that **all that matters is how well you can communicate**, just like the only thing that matters in how well you can ride a bicycle is how well you can ride a bicycle – **not how much you “know” about it**.

Yet language students, and language teachers, continue to approach learning a language as if it were something to be “learned”, as opposed to simply *used*. Using a language is like riding a bicycle, and only time spent riding the bicycle counts as time

spent learning to ride the bicycle. No book, app, or computer program will do it for you. People read about language...buy books, do exercises, conjugate verbs, memorize vocabulary...why? Because it's safer. You don't fall down that way. You don't scrape your knees. But you also never learn.

Language is a Matrix

We've established that Topics call for Verbs (for example, the Topic "Coffee" calls for "I like, or I drink", and "Movies" calls for "I watch, or "I've seen"), and Verbs flow into Vocabulary (for example, "I like ... coffee.", "I've seen ... Titanic."). These are 3 out of the Four Main Components of any language, the fourth being: Useful Expressions. Using my "Instant Conversation" Matrix, a typical lesson might look like this:

Topic: Coffee

Verb

Vocabulary

Useful Expressions

I like

coffee

Me too!

Do you like ...?

coffee a lot

Simply using the "building blocks" on the screen, **you mix and match to create infinite conversation.**

I choose the Topic, and I choose the Verb. The students generate the Vocabulary and Useful Expressions. The coffee drinkers learn "coffee", and the tea drinkers learn "tea". The doctors learn "doctor", and the bakers learn "baker". That way, you are only learning what you need. Remember, if all you ever need to say is "ticket please, thank you", then just learn to say "ticket please, thank you". Then go out and do it. Your language has been optimized by frequency, according to your needs.

I have created a list of Topics, that is also optimized by frequency. Each Topic calls for a Verb, or several Verbs, that allow you to speak on that topic. My Topic list, optimized by frequency, is: Self, Home, Work, Language, Catching up, What did you do? What are you doing? What are you going to do?

The Verbs that I aim to call into play are a list of Core Verbs, also optimized by frequency. Those Verbs are: Be, Have, Go, Do, Like, Want, Be able to, and Try to.

Written in their Matrix form, the ideal configuration is as follows:

I am

Are you ...?

I have

Do you have ...?

I like

Do you like ...? to be

I want

Do you want ...? to have

I can to go
Can you ...?

I try to do
Do you try ...?

Notice that the last four “modal verbs” (like, want, be able to, and try to) mix and match with the other 4 infinites (be, have, go, and do).

Simplified further, your Topic list is: Self, Home, Work, Fun – a veritable microcosm of life. And your Verb list is: Be, Have, Go, Do – also a microcosm of life.

Language is a Matrix – a grid that is super-imposed upon your perception. When something happened in the past, it’s a Topic explained using a past tense Verb. When something goes up, goes down, goes left, goes right, it’s described using a Verb and a preposition.

The trick...listen: the trick to making this work; **the secret to learning language, is: learning to use this grid not only as a means of describing reality, but as a way of understanding reality – not just a tool you use to speak, but a tool that you use to *think*.**

Thinking *in*, not about

The secret to learning language is: learning to think in the language. Not for the sake of learning a language, but because the language tool actually helps you understand the world around you. This is the experience of a child.

Imagine for a second that you don’t speak any language at all – you’re learning your first language, as a child. You see some man, (dad?) hold his hand up and make a sound, “Hi.” A lady (mom?) says “Hi.” So what does “Hi” mean? Does it mean ‘Bonjour’? ‘Hola?’ ‘Ciao’? No, it doesn’t. Because those sounds equally meaningless at this point. Translating, is thinking *about* language, not *in* the language, which is something adult language learners tend to do. Instead, “Hi” is the sound people seem to make when they’re happy to see each other, and when they are not, the “Hi” sound is absent. So from that you learn that different sounds are made according to different situations, and according to perhaps the emotion present or absent in those situations, as well as according to a number of other criteria related to time and space (such as tense, preposition, adjective, etc.). The language becomes a means by which you learn to understand that which is going on around you. Later, in similar situations, you find yourself thinking according to these patterns, invoking the appropriate sounds.

Adults, who already understand the world around them (to a certain degree, and of course, in their first language[s]), find great difficulty in using a new language a means by which to understand. And why shouldn’t they? It’s the way they’ve always done it. So **they continue to think *about* the language, and not *in* the language.** Nonetheless, that shift –from simply learning new sounds, to actually relating those sounds intrinsically to their perception and using the patterns to make sense of the world—is the ultimate step in language learning; it’s a step that must be

taken. And you must begin taking it immediately when learning a language. But how could you possibly do that, when your scope of perception and native-language understanding is so broad, and your new language patterns so limited? I have a suggestion.

As we have already seen, you will always be speaking on a Topic, therefore, you will always be thinking within a Topic. For perspective, an example of thinking or speaking outside of a Topic could be mumbling in your sleep. And no matter the Topic, there is at least one Verb that will support that Topic, and the Verb will flow into Vocabulary and Useful Expressions.

So as a mental exercise – training yourself to use the new language to think—try this. **Choose a Topic**, for example “What’s going on on the street right now as I walk down it”, **and limit yourself to just one Verb** in the language you’re learning. For example, “I am”. Think of all the possible expressions you can create...but you are only allowed to use the Verb “I am” as your starting point. What will you say? “I am here.” “I am on the street.” “I am on my way to work”. And so on and so forth. Continue. Write these expressions into a notebook. Speak them to someone. Do this for as long as it takes until every possible “I am” expression is saturated. Continue until you can’t help but invoke an “I am” expression when applicable.

Once that habit has been formed, add just one more Verb, such as: “There is/are”, in order to describe all the things you see around you. Think of as many expressions as possible that begin with “There is/are” – “There are many people on the street today”, for example. Write these expressions into your journal, seeking help for the Vocabulary that you don’t know (a dictionary, translation app, or any native speaker will do). Once that habit has been formed, add a third Verb, then a fourth, then a fifth. With the addition of every new Verb, remember: you are only allowed to use the Verbs that you have.

Your world will become saturated with possible expressions. When writing, and speaking, you will draw from your bank of expression starting points (Verbs). And if you don’t have a Verb starting point for a particular expression, you won’t even think about it, or you will find another starting point that gets you to the same place. For example, if you want to say “Did you see her today?” but don’t have the Verb “Did you see ...?”, you might choose to say something like “Were you with her today?”.

Instead of thinking in your first language and trying to “dress” the thoughts in the clothes of the new language, scan your inventory of existing Verbs and Vocabulary in order to find something that you can say, not necessarily whatever it is you want to say. For perspective, **when someone asks me what I did last weekend, I am not thinking about what I did last weekend, but rather about something that I know how to say**...in extreme cases, even if it isn’t what I actually did last weekend. Let the available patterns of the new language dictate what you think. Let them “push” your thoughts out, as opposed to letting the patterns of your first language “pull” your thoughts to them.

Thinking Simply

If you ask me what I did last weekend, there might be so much I want to say about it – a colorful, exciting story full of twists and turns. It can be frustrating to have

to say simply... “I had a good weekend.” My response to this is: so be it. I often choose “fluency” in the language, over “resolution” in the language (resolution as in the resolution of a TV screen—high or low resolution). I sacrifice detail in favor of clear, fluid speech. In order to do this, you have to learn to think simply.

In fact, one of my favorite things about learning a new language is that forces me to think simply in order to communicate well, especially at the beginning. **By learning to think simply, I begin seeing life in a simpler, more clear, more essential way.**

But it can be very difficult to convince an adult language learner of this “pleasure”. Most adults will revert to their life-long established expressions and patterns of thinking, rendering their new language mostly useless. They don’t feel like they’re being authentic to themselves when they reduce their complex, nuanced thoughts to child-like expressions. My response: oh well. It is a necessary step in the process; you have to crawl before you can walk.

Once you are convinced that thinking and speaking simply is necessary, and even rewarding, you’ll be ready to begin training yourself to see things in their essence, and express them as such. Here is a training exercise I use:

The game is called “Brutally Simple”. There are two rules: 1. For every idea you correctly express in the new language, you get \$20. 2. For every mistake you make, you get an electric shock.

You must protect yourself, while maximizing gain, by leveraging every recourse you have available to you, such as speed (you don’t have to speak fast), and easily manageable chunks of expression (there’s nothing you necessarily have to say; in fact, sometimes saying nothing is the right move).

Again, choose a Topic, such as a movie plot, say, The Wizard of Oz. Now, instead of launching into some diatribe about cinematography and a set plagued by misfortune, say something like, “It is a story about a girl. The girl lives in Kansas. She lives with her family. One day there is a tornado (if you know how to say ‘tornado’; if not, maybe say ‘problem’). She goes to a magical (maybe ‘special’, or ‘different’) place. Etc.

The risk and reward of the game, and how you avoid and attain each (respectively), reflects the same risks and rewards of using language in every situation of your life: the risk is misunderstanding and potential embarrassment; the reward is new friends, enhanced enjoyment of music and travel, and so on. And the strategy you apply toward real life situations is the same as in the game: **leverage what you have, think simply, speak clearly and slowly.** Your language will improve because of it.

Listening Strategy

Language is a Matrix – you just mix and match building blocks. Language is a bicycle—something you must do in order to get better at doing. And language is a tool that you use to think –to understand as well as describe the world around you. But what happens when the people you’re speaking with aren’t necessarily following the rules of “Brutally Simple”? Or if they have an unfamiliar accent? Or if they just speak so dang fast? Here are my 3 steps to Listening Strategy:

Until now, the concepts that I have espoused relate only to “production” of the language – speaking and writing. Listening Strategy relates to “consumption” of language—listening and reading (listening will be focused on, since it is the harder one to accomplish). The first step when attempting to understand spoken language, is:

1. Establish context.

I often tell my students to watch TV in the new language, even if they hardly know a word. Why not? Get to know the sounds, see the people, etc. They then say, I tried for a few minutes and then stopped because I wasn’t understanding anything at all. To that I reply, “Are you sure you didn’t understand anything at all?” I continue, “Try this: turn on the TV again, but this time turn the volume down to mute and see what you understand.”

You see a melodramatic picture of a man and woman. The woman is crying. It looks like a soap opera, or “telenovela” in Spanish. He tries to take her hand. She pulls away and yells, then slaps him. He has lipstick on his neck. What do you think is happening? What would you guess that she and he are saying? That’s the context. Now turn the volume back up and proceed to step two:

2. Listen for keywords.

In the scene I described above, did you hear another woman’s name? Did you hear a number, such as what time it is, as in he is coming home late? Did she say “divorcio”? Since you already have the context, it should be pretty easy to fill in the blanks between the words that you understand that support your assumption. The trick, listen again: **the trick...is listening for the keywords. Only listening for the keywords.** First establish context, and then listen for only the words that you understand. If you waste time thinking about those 5 words you don’t understand, you will have missed a keyword or two that would have perfectly supported the guess you initially made given the context.

3. Get the main point.

This is self-explanatory. Get the main point and then craft your response (in a conversation) according to the principles of the previous chapters. You don’t need to understand every little point. You don’t need to ask for an explanation of every language point or vocabulary word – you’re not looking to learn anything new at this point (if you do, great; but it’s not the main point). You’re not a sworn court interpreter responsible for precisely rendering every nuanced detail. Just get the main point, and go.

As an experiment to illustrate the importance of context. Please carefully read the following passage, which will be in Arabic (the assumption being that you don’t know Arabic). You will first read the passage without context, and then a second time with context. Notice the difference context makes:

Wulidtu fi Appleton, Wisconsin. B3da dhalik intaqaltu wa usrati ila Richmond, Virginia. B3da dhalik raja3na ila Wisconsin bisabab 3mel abi. Fa thuma dhehebna ila Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, wa thuma Raleigh, North Carolina. 3ndama ita7adtu bil 3skariyya, dhehebtu ila Monterey, California, wa thuma Texas, wa thuma Georgia, wa alan eskoun fi Chicago, Illinois.

What did you get? Probably just a few keywords—the names of cities and states. But what about them? What was the context? Was I talking about places I’ve visited? Places I’m planning to visit? Places where I have friends? Students? Etc.

Now begin with step one of the Listening Strategy process: Establish context. By the way, the best way to establish context in a conversation is by you being the one to ask a question.

So let’s say you asked me, “Tony, have you lived in Chicago all your life?” And to that I respond by shaking my head no, and proceeding to recount my geographical biography in Arabic. Read again:

Wulidtu fi Appleton, Wisconsin. B3da dhalik intaqaltu wa usrati ila Richmond, Virginia. B3da dhalik raja3na ila Wisconsin bisabab 3mel abi. Fa thuma dhehebna ila Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, wa thuma Raleigh, North Carolina. 3ndama ita7adtu bil 3skariyya, dhehebtu ila Monterey, California, wa thuma Texas, wa thuma Georgia, wa alan eskoun fi Chicago, Illinois.

Now those step two keywords have a lot more meaning. You can basically fill in the blanks in your head: he moved from here to there, here to there.

Step three is a shoe-in: he has lived in all those places. Did you miss some details? Probably. Did you see that it was because of my dad’s job, and later because I joined the military? Probably not. But it’s ok. Because **Context + Keywords = Main Point**.

Now it’s your turn to respond. Perhaps a Useful Expression like, “Wow!”. Or another question on that Topic using a Verb like, “Where do you like most?” Now you’re back to production. When it comes to consumption, follow the 3 steps of Listening Strategy.

Side note: **at the beginning of the process of learning a language, the best thing for you is production, or output** – speaking and writing. By doing so, you lay down the foundation of the language, and begin training yourself to think in the language. At some point, there comes a tipping point when the best thing for you becomes input – listening and reading. To illustrate how this is so, imagine being a first-day learner of Japanese, or some language you no nothing of. At that point, turning on the TV or watching a movie in that language would serve you little – there would simply be too much that you don’t understand (read: every single word). The best way to begin learning that language would be to begin having simple conversations and writing using a few building blocks available to you – a Core Topic or two, a Core Verb or two, and some Vocabulary and Useful Expressions. **When you reach the tipping point at which input becomes the best thing for you, you will be like a snowball rolling down a hill, picking things up as it goes.** Consider the fact that if you wanted to improve your English (or other native language), you would probably

improve little simply by speaking – you would just be recycling what you have. The best way for the native speaker to improve is by input—reading and listening to skilled communicators. You will reach this point too as a learner of a new language.

Tips for practice, and description of my services:

Build a matrix. Learn your Core Topics, and Core Verbs. Use those containers to allow the personally relevant, high-frequency Vocabulary and Useful Expressions to grow. Practice writing. Practice speaking with people. And practice listening –in conversation, as well as on TV and in movies (put it on mute if you're having trouble).

Take a free Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, or English class with me personally on Skype at: [TonyMarshMethod](#)

Website: www.TonyMarshMethod.com

Youtube: www.youtube.com/TonyMarshMethod

Facebook: www.facebook.com/TonyMarshMethod

If you have any questions, email me directly at TonyMarshMethod@gmail.com

“When a person is speaking a language less than perfectly, it means that there is a deficiency either in the structure of the language (yang energy), or in the flowering of the language (yin energy).

My job is to use the tools of a language lesson -- conversation, explanation, visualization, matricization, etc. -- to "treat" the person's language system, the same way an acupuncturist uses needles to stimulate and balance yin and yang energy, or the way a shaman meditates or ingests something psychedelic in order to see into the soul of the person he's treating.”

-Tony Marsh