



SHOULD I TRANSLATE?

Harmony ^{co}
Insights into Bilingualism

Please, don't.

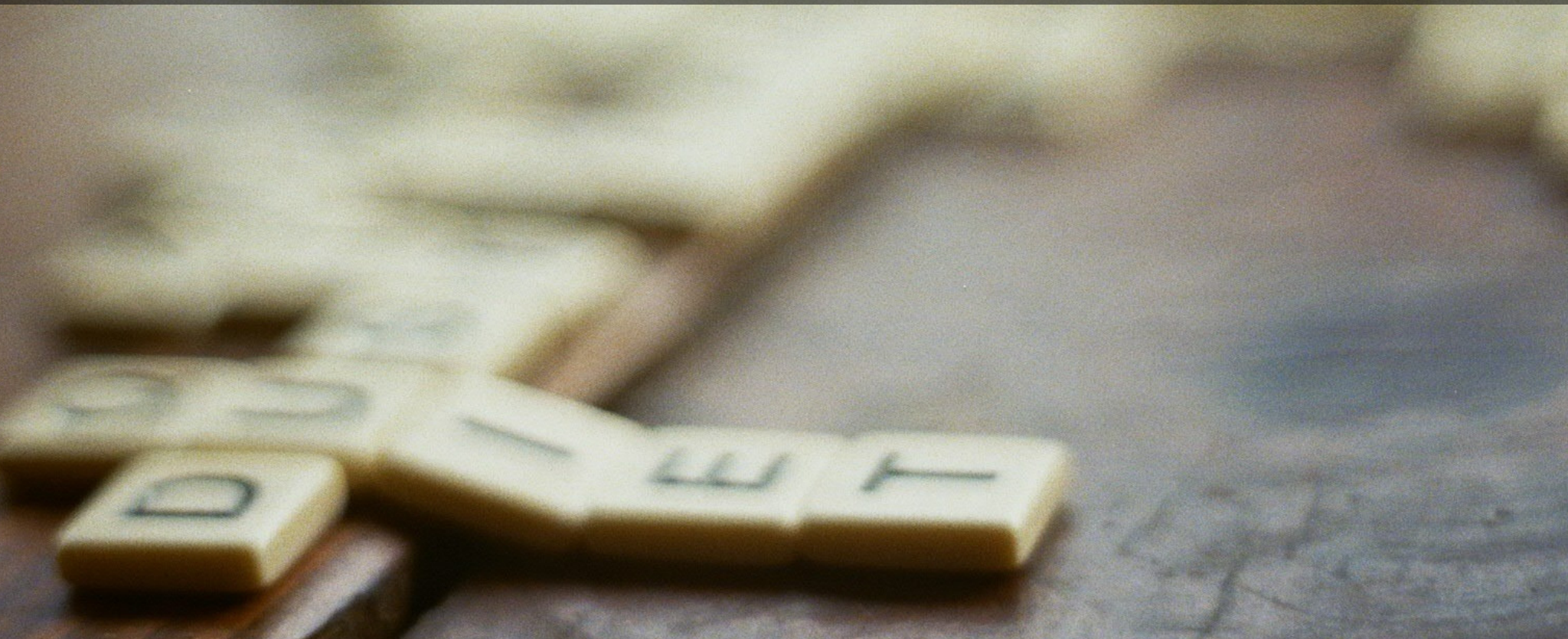
Never translate if you're seeking to learn a language. Only do so if you are learning to compare languages — which is a whole other game, right? —. Instead, reserve your energy for carving out meaning from what you hear and read, based — exclusively — on your context and your intervention. Let me help you understand what I mean here:



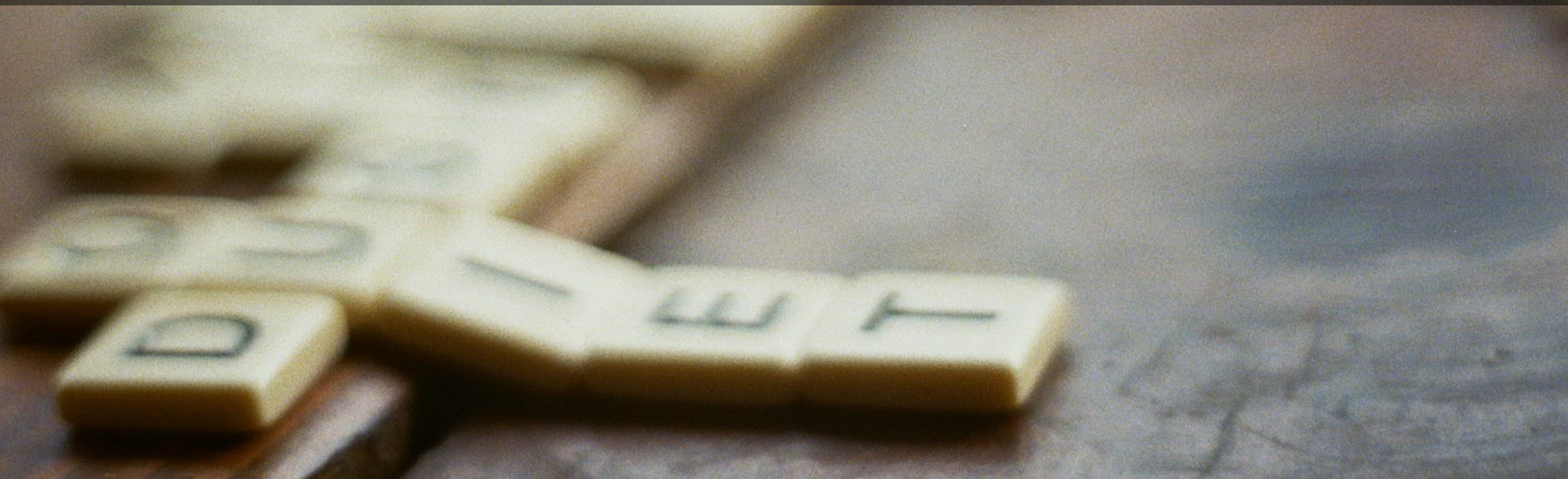
Looking around for clues



By "context" I imply everything you have right in front of you — literally —. Who are you talking to? (A friend? A stranger? Your boss?) Where are you exactly? (At a work? At the airport? In a restaurant?) Relax and let your intuition guide you, as context is your best friend in figuring out what is being said.



A simple sentence such as “John is crazy” can mean anything from “John is mentally impaired” to “John is funny and I love his sense of humour” depending on who you’re talking to, their tone of voice, facial expression and so on. Allow yourself to surf on context when trying to understand what people say, rather than focusing on words only. Most of the time words are not enough to convey meaning.



Acting independently





Some may think that “understanding” is a passive phenomenon and that all we have to do is just sit there, easily absorbing whatever comes our way. It is definitely not that simple. At least not at first. For most of us, bilinguals-in-formation, understanding our second language requires some blood-sweating, back-breaking effort. It requires action. That is, proactivity through wilful **intervention.**



And by "intervention" I mean anything that you can physically do to help yourself understand ****WHAT THE FUCK**** is being given to you. Sometimes, this getting out of the comfort zone can be really, really tough. But, we just have deal with it! For example, if you're face-to-face with someone, you can use your **body language** to request for repetition and further help.



So, instead of just standing there with a blank face, feeling sorry for yourself — panicking because you just can't understand what the guy at the airport says —, you can **do the following**: Open a wide smile, hold out one hand in front of you in a “woah-hold-your-horses-bro!” kind of way, while gently waving the other hand, up and down, slowly and smoothly at the pace you wish your partner were speaking.



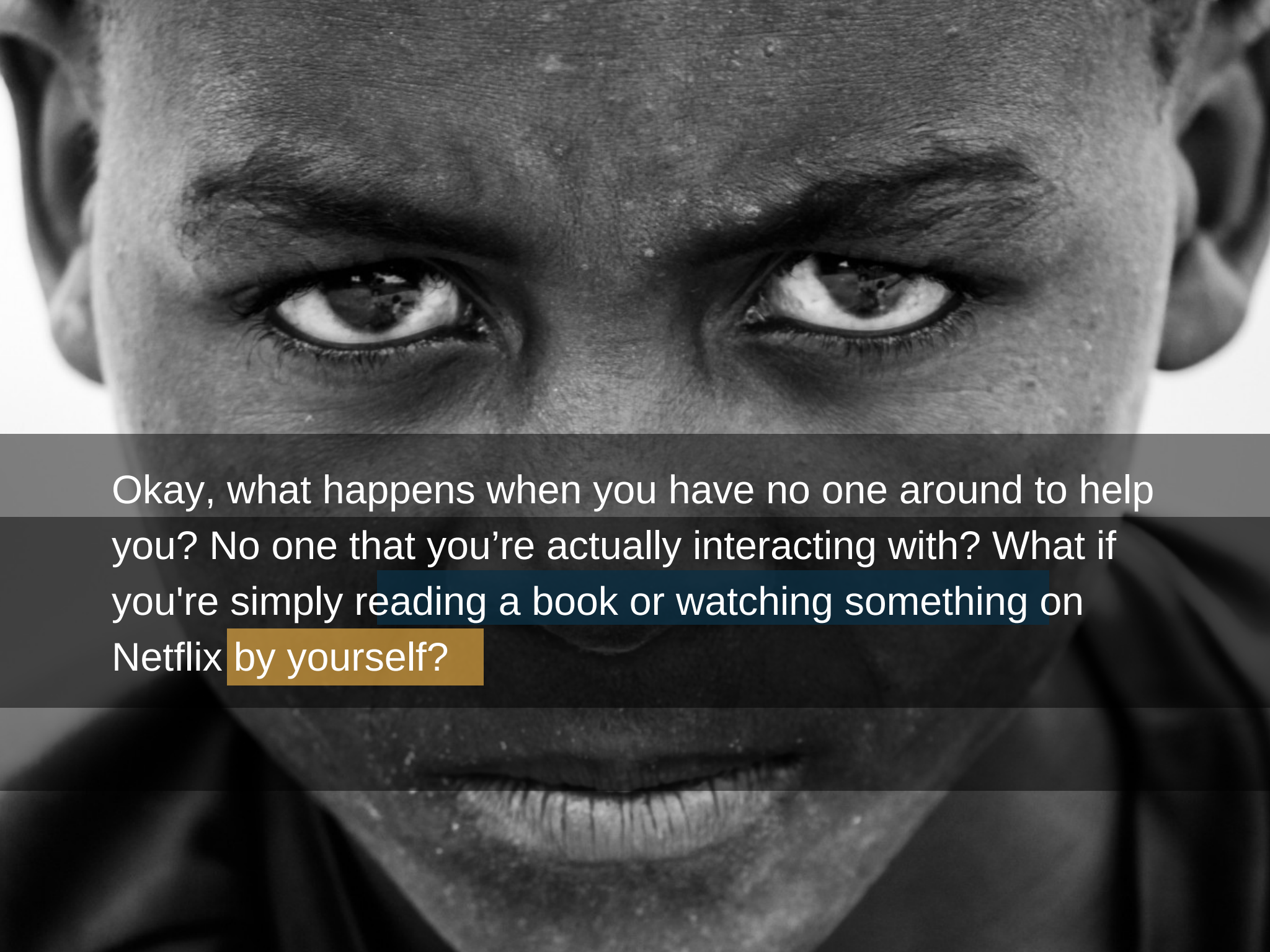
This is normally understood as a “sorry, I can’t follow what you’re saying, so it will help me a lot if could speak more slowly matching the tempo of my hand”. It’s pretty simple. Just keep calm and use your body to generate empathy towards you. People tend to forget how challenging becoming bilingual can be. Body language can help you communicate that challenge and find support in the person you’re talking to.




Remember that communication requires (at least) two, so get your partner involved in the game as well. They'll probably find it all very exciting and you'll learn a lot with them.




Pulling yourself up by your bootstraps



Okay, what happens when you have no one around to help you? No one that you're actually interacting with? What if you're simply reading a book or watching something on Netflix by yourself?

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a gold-colored smartphone. The person has long, dark hair and is wearing a red top. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a public space with other people and lights.

Well, in this case, Mr. Google (or any other search engine) becomes your best buddy. Whenever you come across something you don't understand a whole new world of possibilities opens up right in front of you. Again, all you have to do is to act out of your own will and **take responsibility** for it. In other words, you've got to pull yourself up by your bootstraps if you want to become bilingual, especially if you live in a country that doesn't speak your second language as a mother tongue. You've got to "make it rain", dear friend, and employ technology to help you with that.

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a gold-colored smartphone. The person has bright pink nail polish on their fingers. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a person with long brown hair and a red top. The lighting is warm and indoor.

For example, let's say that you've decided to bring your second language to life and started reading in English in your offtime as well. You choose an article on Facebook about puppies. You read it moderately well, having to stop every now and then to recall what the odd word means, yet you come across "paw", this peculiar word your are not acquainted with. You know what "ear" is, what "tail" is... you just have never encountered the word "paw" before. So, you take your first try.



First Try

You stop your reading for a moment, fetch your mobile phone (or your computer), open the Google app and type in the following two words, “paw” and “definition”. You enter the search. Google will normally give a definition alongside with the pronunciation of the word you’re looking up, right at the top of the page.





paw definition



All

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Tools

About 873,000 results (0.94 seconds)

paw

/pô/ 

noun

1. an animal's foot having claws and pads.

synonyms: [foot](#), [forepaw](#), hind paw

"dogs protect their paws from frostbite by pulling them up against their stomachs"

verb

1. (of an animal) feel or scrape with a paw or hoof.

"the horse rose on its strong haunches, its forelegs pawing the air"

If it doesn't, just look for another source down the list. Oxford and Cambridge dictionaries are perhaps your safest options. They've been around for a long time – they know their stuff –. Select one and have a read through the definition. Still not quite getting it? No panic. Try something else.



A high-contrast, black and white close-up portrait of a young person's face. The person has dark skin and is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. A solid blue horizontal band is superimposed across the middle of the face, partially obscuring the eyes and nose. The text "second Try" is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font across this blue band.

second Try

Go back to Google, and this time search for this sequence: “paw” and “image”. Pictures should come up on the screen. Some words are best understood visually, you see? Now, when the word you’re curious about is abstract in nature (such as “love”, “desire”, “intuition, etc.) this technique is not going to be very effective. Yet, don’t lose hope. You still have some other approaches you could try.



A high-contrast, black and white close-up photograph of a person's face. The person has dark skin and is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. A solid blue horizontal band is superimposed across the middle of the face, partially obscuring the eyes and nose. The text "Third Try" is centered within this blue band.

Third Try

Another strategy in understanding a new word is looking for its **synonyms** (different words with the same meaning, like “couch” and “sofa”). You’ll follow the same procedure on Google, but now type “paw” and “synonym” in the search bar. Look for the link of a page called “Thesaurus”. Click on it. Thesaurus works pretty much like a normal dictionary, except that, instead of a definition, it gathers, organizes and displays all the words which are [related in meaning] to the word you’re trying to understand.





It's a bit like interviewing the whole family before you met your partner, or like studying all the ingredients on the table to guess what the soup will taste like. By looking at synonyms, you'll get an idea of what the word means through **family resemblance** — looking at its relatives —. If you search for the word “happy” for example, you'll get all its siblings and cousins (glad, joyful, cheerful, etc.). They will be sorted by colour intensity.

happy


[see definition of happy](#)

show

all


adj in high spirits; satisfied

adj lucky

Relevance



A-Z

Complexity



Length



Synonyms for happy



Common



Informal


adj in high spirits; satisfied

cheerful

merry

blithe

gleeful

perky

contented

overjoyed

can't complain

gratified

playful

delighted

peaceful

captivated

intoxicated

sparkling

ecstatic

pleasant

chipper

jolly

sunny

elated

pleased

chirpy

laughing

tickled

glad

thrilled

content

light

tickled pink

joyful

upbeat

convivial

looking good

up

joyous

blessed

exultant

mirthful

walking on air

jubilant

blest

flying high

on cloud nine

lively

blissful

gay

peppy



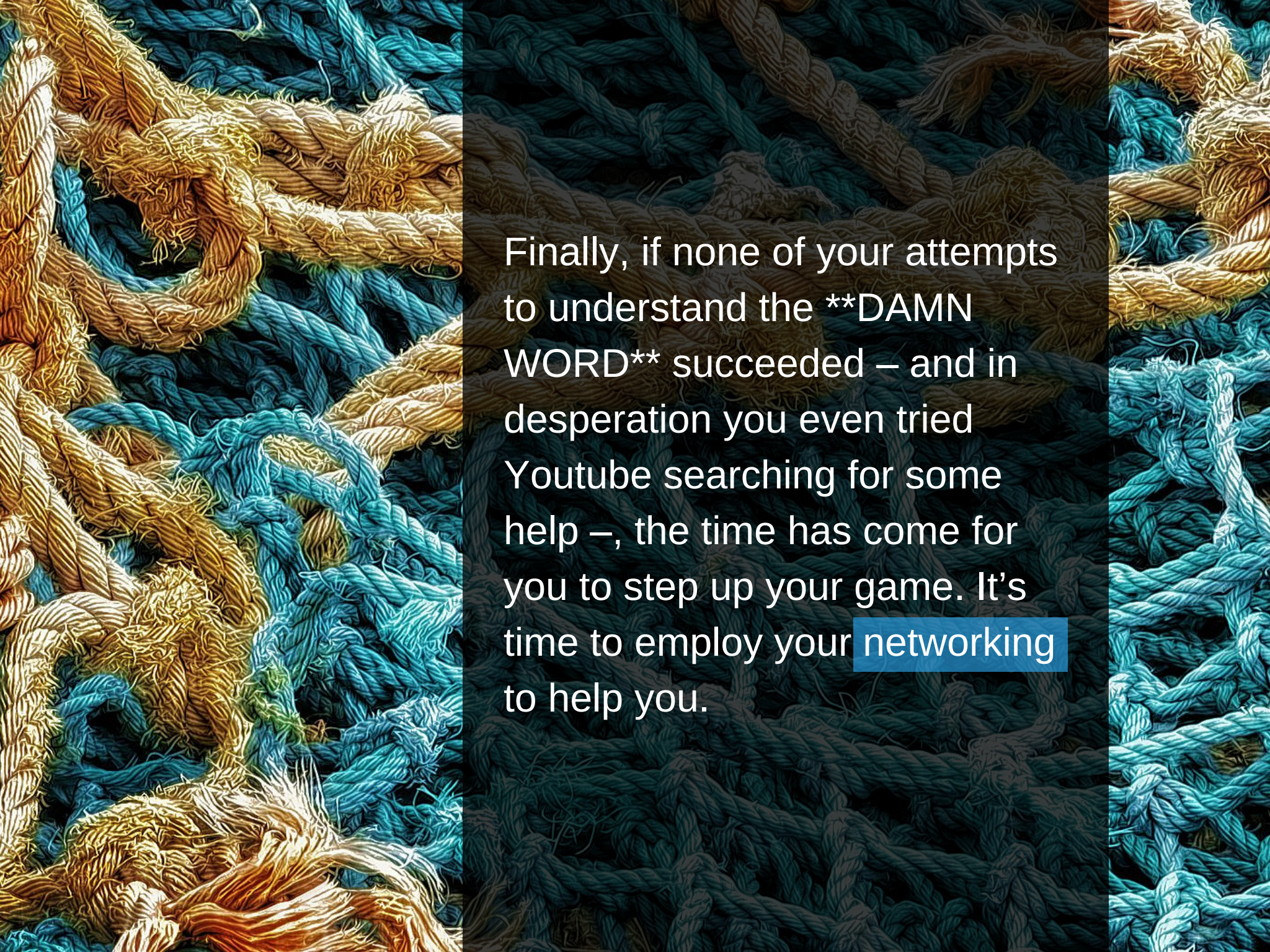
The darker words represent the **closer relatives**. Sometimes you'll even find identical twins in this area, like "couch" and "sofa" which mean virtually the same thing. The light-shaded relatives, on the other hand, are less reliable as indicators of meaning, but just like long-distance cousins they can be a lot of fun to know.



Take your time here. Have a feel of the whole family. You'll probably develop a feeling of what the word means and this might help with the dictionary definition you couldn't understand earlier. However, if you're still stuck — and that happens a lot to be honest — , chill out. You've still got **the ultimate trick** up your sleeve.



The Ultimate Try



Finally, if none of your attempts to understand the ****DAMN WORD**** succeeded – and in desperation you even tried Youtube searching for some help –, the time has come for you to step up your game. It's time to employ your **networking** to help you.

Ask yourself the following question: “Who do I know that could help me understand this word or phrase?”. Make a list of everyone that comes to mind. This is when a Second-Language Therapist (or a teacher) can come in handy to speed up the process. If you don’t have a professional helping you along the way, don’t worry. There’s always someone around to help you out. You just gotta find this person – I’ll write an article about that soon, I promise.

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Finding the right person to help you might require some time and planning, but it will certainly be worth the effort. Remember, being bilingual is about being part of a community of people who speak two languages. It feels like a brotherhood sometimes. Find someone you feel like sharing the journey with. Someone you know will be happy to help and who you deem to be a good role model. The right person will come, trust me. But, you've got to keep digging. **Keep mining your network.**



Abroad is a Place Within

You don't have to travel to be immersed in your second language. You don't need a teacher or a classroom to learn grammar. I know people who learned English as a second language just from playing video games.

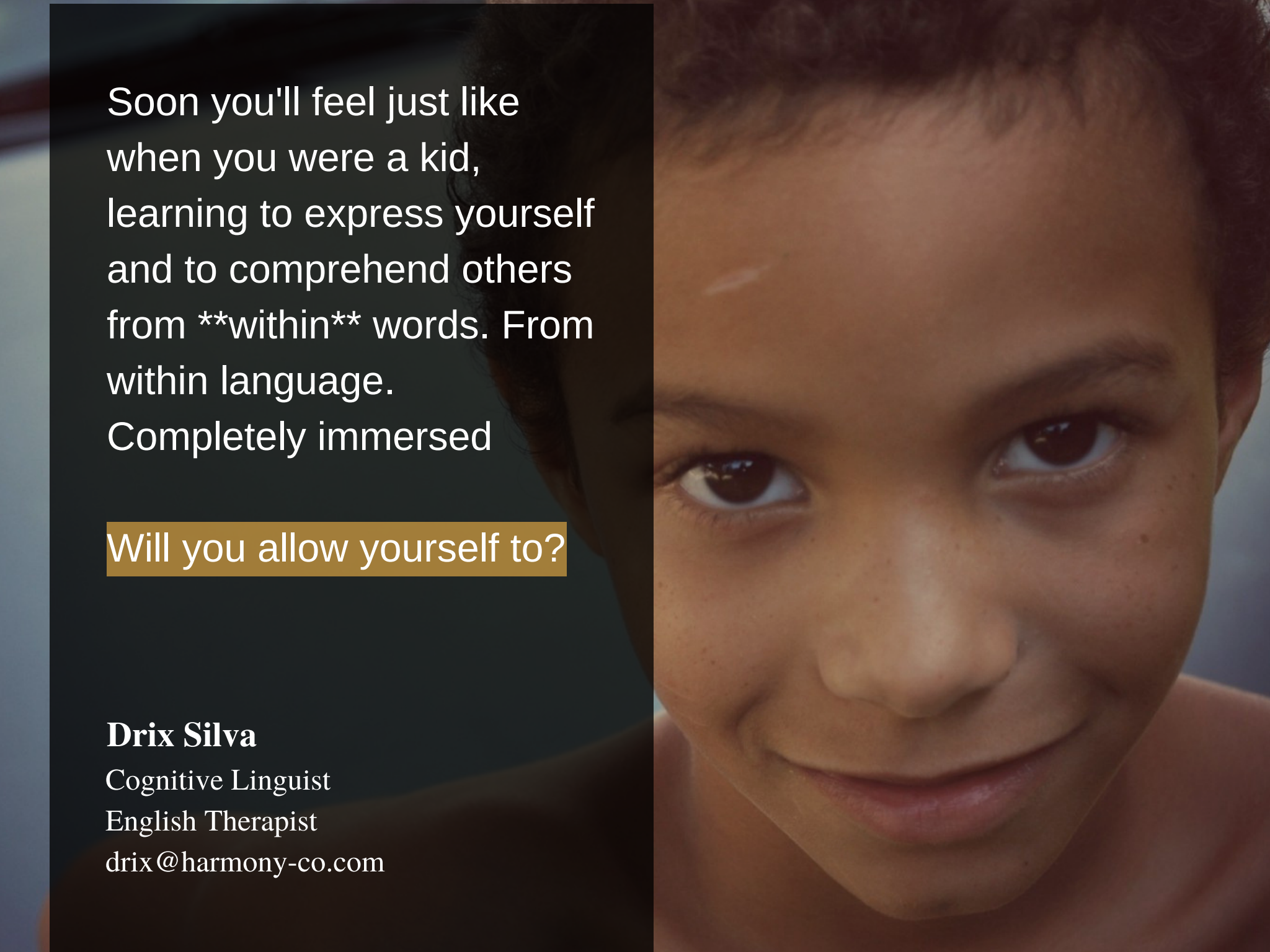
The key to bilingualism is your mindset, your attitude.



So, use your imagination. Be resourceful. Be determined to push through any barriers and to jump through any hoops that you may come across. Nobody said it was easy, did they? Nor did anybody say that learning a second language was probable. Much on the contrary, it is perhaps the most challenging thing you'll do in your whole life — after raising a child, of course —. But it is perfectly possible! And "possible" is enough for us.



Don't Translate. Relate.



Soon you'll feel just like
when you were a kid,
learning to express yourself
and to comprehend others
from ****within**** words. From
within language.
Completely immersed

Will you allow yourself to?

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