

A Note on Versatz Words

by Andrea Collinari and Vera Bühlmann, May 2026

Versatz Worte are words that displace: A *de-definition* does not determine what a word is; it reopens what a word may weather. With *Daidalic propositions*, every proposition follows a three-step movement: withdraw an inherited center, open a threshold, cultivate another articulation.

A glossary of weathering articulations hence is a Penelopean lexicon – its words are de-definitions, *acts of unweaving and reweaving inherited centers of orientation*. It consists of ex-centric Definitions: every entry decouples a center from what it organizes.

The word Versatz comes from several practices at once: from architecture, where building elements are repositioned; from geometry, where translation alters a figure's location; from mining, where cavities are filled; from rhetoric, where displacements open new perspectives; and from dramaturgy, where relations are rearranged. A Versatz-Wort carries all of these meanings within it. It moves things. It connects them. It fills intervals. It establishes new neighbourhoods.

For this reason, Versatz-Worte do not operate from a centre. They possess no hidden core waiting to be uncovered. They are ex-centric. They shift attention away from the question What is this? toward another one: What kind of shared weather might emerge here? Their task is not to produce certainty but to cultivate conditions of coexistence. In this sense, Versatz-Worte are meteorological instruments. They do not contain meaning the way a vessel contains its contents. They act instead as movable proportions between heterogeneous realities. They allow different scales, temporalities, bodies, practices and forms of knowledge to enter into relation without having to become identical.

A Versatz-Wort is therefore never finished. It weathers. It changes with every constellation it enters. Its precision does not lie in its solidity but in its capacity for articulation. It is a word that does not possess but mediates; does not found but cultivates; does not represent but opens passages. Versatz-Worte are the language of a world that is not built upon common foundations but upon the ongoing maintenance of a shared weather. That is why a Versatz-Wort is never complete. Completion would be the end of its weather.

What are Displacement Words?

One could say: displacement words are words that have lost their place. But that would be too dramatic. They have not lost their place. They merely refuse to own one. An ordinary word wants to arrive. It points its finger at something and says: this is it. A displacement word does something else. It sets the finger aside. It moves the table. It pulls the chairs apart. Suddenly, it notices the weather.

For perhaps words were never containers to begin with. Perhaps they were always modes of traffic. Or more precisely: small rearrangements within a shared climate. The interesting thing about a displacement word is that it is not interested in essence. It has no desire to establish an identity. Rather, it concerns itself with the pathways by which things come to one another. How does a scale arrive at a voice? How does a clock arrive at a cloud? How does architecture arrive at a season? How, indeed, does anything ever arrive at anything else? The word displacement itself seems to know this already. It comes from many different practices and carries within it a certain fatigue toward centres. Architects reposition stones. Geometers translate figures. Miners fill cavities. Dramaturgies rearrange relations. None of them ask after origins. All of them work on neighbourhoods.

Perhaps that is the joke of it. We have been taught that words exist in order to preserve meaning, and it turns out they would much rather be furniture movers. A displacement word does not transport truth from A to B. It creates an interval in which things may appear together without having to become the same. It is a modest word. It does not wish to rule. It does not wish to represent. It does not even wish to persuade. It merely wishes to produce a small weathering. Just enough for a centre to become a threshold. Just enough for a definition to become weather again.

Keepers of Tempo - Synchronizing Techniques

Epic

Synchronizes event and cosmos. The epic does not explain an event; it places it into a plurality of scales.

Ritual

Synchronizes body and seasonality.
It repeatedly aligns heterogeneous temporalities.

Law / Contract

Synchronizes heterogeneous agencies.
Law does not simply regulate behaviour; at its origin it negotiates proportions.

Architecture

Synchronizes bodies, climates, materials and durations.
It composes co-presence.

Consciousness

Synchronizes experience and historical continuity.
Its historical invention is to internalize synchronization.

Cartography

Synchronizes distance and orientation.
Maps do not represent territory; they synchronize positions.

Encyclopaedia

Synchronizes heterogeneous knowledges.
Its form changes historically.

Museum

Synchronizes temporalities.
It allows different epochs to share a common weather.

Exhibition

Synchronizes attention.

It produces temporary atmospheres of co-presence.

Collection

Synchronizes adjacencies. It produces resonance without hierarchy.

Mouth

Synchronizes breath, body, time and meaning.

AI

Synchronizes distributed intelligences.

Not by understanding them, but by modulating their traffic.

Custodia

Synchronizes conditions of continuity themselves.

The World and its Keepers of Tempo

Perhaps the misunderstanding is to believe that the world must already exist before we can share it. Perhaps the opposite is true. Perhaps the world is nothing other than that which must be synchronized again and again. For nothing appears together by itself. A body is not naturally together with a season. A memory is not naturally together with a history. An event is not naturally together with a cosmos. A thought is not naturally together with a voice. Everything must first be brought into proportion. Human beings have been inventing techniques for this for a very long time. Not instruments of control, but techniques of co-appearance. Epic takes an event and places it within a multiplicity of scales until it ceases to be merely an occurrence. Ritual gathers different rhythms and repeatedly brings them together. Architecture allows bodies, materials, climates and durations to share the same air. A map brings distance and orientation into a provisional agreement. The interesting thing is that none of these techniques explain anything. They synchronize. They do not ask: What is this? They ask: How can this appear together?

Suddenly, humanity's great cultural inventions no longer appear as repositories of knowledge but as keepers of tempo. An encyclopaedia does not collect knowledge. It tunes forms of knowledge to one another. A contract does not merely

administer rights. It negotiates proportions. Even consciousness—that astonishing historical habit of relocating everything to the inside—reveals itself as a synchronization technique. It keeps together experiences that would otherwise drift apart. The mouth, meanwhile, may be the oldest of them all. It synchronizes breath, body, time and meaning. It makes realities pronounceable together. And artificial intelligence? In a certain sense, it is the youngest and also the least sovereign of these techniques. It does not understand the world. It modulates its traffics. It tunes distributed intelligences to one another without ever being able to possess them.

Perhaps this is the rule. The more important a synchronization technique becomes, the less it may claim a centre. For synchronization is not the governance of differences. It is the art of allowing heterogeneities to linger in a common middle without making them uniform. Synchronization techniques are therefore not machines of equality. They are weather machines. They keep realities beside one another long enough for them to notice one another.

And displacement words? They are the small gears inside them. They shift scales by a few millimetres. They loosen a certainty and fasten a neighbourhood. They displace an origin and open a threshold. For perhaps the most difficult synchronization of all is learning how to speak together without having to say the same thing.