Frothly

FR-E-2025-22

ESSAY

The Value of a Private Language

Why communities need codes of their own.

Gideon Ravenor

Glossia · Aug 2025

SUMMARY

Encryption is usually discussed as a technical property: a matter of keys, algorithms and threat models. This essay makes a different case.

Communities under pressure have always developed private languages of their own. Secure messaging is the modern form of a very old practice, and the right to it is older than any technology that provides it.

THE ARGUMENT IN BRIEF

01 Private languages are as old as communities. Traders, workers, families and persecuted groups have always kept codes of their own.

02 They protect more than secrets. Private languages protect dignity, safety and the ability to speak freely among one's own.

03 A private language with a back door is not private. Any key that exists for one party will eventually be used by others.

04 Glossia is built on that principle: we hold no keys, keep as little metadata as possible and design for the hardest conditions first.

01

An old practice

Long before anyone encrypted a message, people kept languages of their own. Traveling traders developed cants that let them talk business in a crowded market. Workers in dangerous trades built jargons that outsiders could not follow. Persecuted communities kept private vocabularies that let them recognize one another and speak without fear. Families still do it, in the private words and nicknames that mean nothing to anyone outside the house.

These languages were rarely about hiding wrongdoing. They were about being able to speak freely in rooms that were not safe, and about belonging to a group that could understand you when nobody else did.

02

What private languages protect

It is tempting to think of privacy as the protection of secrets. But most of what people say in private is not secret. It is ordinary: complaints, jokes, worries, plans, affection. What a private language protects is the ability to say those ordinary things without performing them for an audience.

- *Dignity.* The freedom to be unguarded, uncertain or wrong without being recorded.
- *Safety.* For people at risk, the difference between a private conversation and a public one can be the difference between safety and harm.
- *Belonging.* Shared codes bind groups together. A language that only your community understands is a statement that your community exists.

03

Where our name comes from

Glossia takes its name from a private cant devised, long before Frothly existed, by a small group of colleagues who needed to speak openly in places full of strangers. The man who invented it is now our president. He built it from fragments of other languages, private references and jokes, and it worked for the oldest of reasons: it belonged to the people who used it, and to nobody else.

When we began designing a messaging protocol in 2009, we wanted it to carry the same principle. The protocol is mathematics rather than vocabulary, but the idea is unchanged.

04

Answering the objections

"If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear." Nobody believes this about their own life. Everyone closes the door of the bathroom, lowers their voice in a hospital corridor and keeps some letters in a drawer. Privacy is not an admission of guilt; it is a condition of ordinary life.

"Investigators need a way in." We understand why the request is made, and we take it seriously. But a private language with a door that opens for one listener is not private. Keys leak, policies change and access built for one purpose is reliably used for others. The only private language that stays private is one that nobody outside the conversation can read.

> **A language with a listener built in is not a private language. It is a public one with good manners.**
>
> Gideon Ravenor

05

What we promise

Glossia is built around a few commitments that follow from this argument. We hold no keys to anyone's messages. We keep as little information about who talks to whom as the protocol allows. We design first for the worst conditions, slow networks and seized devices, because the people who most need a private language are rarely the ones with the best connections. And we publish everything, so that anyone can check that we have kept our word.

References

Aemos, U. (2010). Cants, codes and the archive of secrecy. *Journal of Linguistic History*, 42, 211–239.

Eisenhorn, G. (2003). *Glossia: A Working Grammar.* Privately circulated.

Fischig, G. (2012). Policing and the right to privacy. *Law and Order Quarterly*, 30(1), 5–22.

Ravenor, G. (2016). Notes toward a private language. Frothly Working Paper FR-WP-2016-03.

About the authors

Gideon Ravenor leads Glossia, Frothly's secure communication program, from our Chiba office.

HOW TO CITE

Gideon Ravenor (2025). *The Value of a Private Language* Why communities need codes of their own. Frothly Essay FR-E-2025-22. San Francisco: Frothly. https://frothly.org/research/#private-language

Frothly

FR-E-2025-22

Frothly is an independent, not-for-profit research institute studying the systems that increasingly think, remember and decide on our behalf.

We hold no shares, sell no products and accept no funding that comes with conditions on our findings. Everything we publish is free to read.

San Francisco · Vancouver · Newark · Zürich · Chiba

This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International.