

Language – Pluses and Minuses

2024

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Language is not innate; it has to be learned, and it is crucial to human survival. We humans have the innate capacity/proclivity for learning language, but it must be activated and filled before maturity if it is to be realized. Any language will do; but to be maximally communicable, that language must provide the basis for thought, be directly and immediately shareable, and be capable of being written down in a version that correlates with its behaviorally shareable version. Verbally based languages are the only ones that meet all these criteria. Sign language meets the first two but not the third requirement, and sign language monopolizes the use of the arms and hands. Communication based on gesture, touch and imitation are much less developed and capable.

Visual/imagaic thought is significant, but it lacks the very important ability to be shared in some form in the direct manner provided by speech for the words in verbal thought. And speech supports immediate and collective review and planning. The past tense arises to support better review, and the future tense literally emerges to support more detailed planning. Verbal language committed to phonetic writing allows for speech to be durable over time and for report and planning to be made much more formal and rigorous – legal documents and scientific accounts. Complex human society depends on these written tools.

Interestingly, intuitive based “thought” is often imagaic and holistic in nature and not be easily communicated while intellectual based thought is linear and parsed and readily communicated in standard verbal/mathematical vehicles. Both of these modes of thought are important, but verbal language based intellectual thought has a substantial communication advantage.

Human evolution and species dominance would never have reached their current states without language in both its spoken and written forms. Future genetic engineering is likely to make the lengthy language acquisition and skilled use development process much more efficient – to the point of being innate. With agreement on a single language base, such engineering could promote needed global social unification. Another potential genetic modification: telepathically shared language based thought to replace speech?

There is much more potential language development to come, if modern humans can cooperate enough to address their many current challenges and keep from competitively blowing themselves back to the stone age.

Any reservations about this marvel of language? Oh Yes!

Our verbal language is a necessary and effective communication tool. The problem is that we adopt it when we are very young with the grand encouragement of surrounding adults and without the slightest question as to whether it accurately portrays reality. Verbal language is a linear sequence of separate sounds themselves accumulated into word units that are further fit together into sentences. These sentences announce how separate parts of reality [nouns] relate to one another [verbs]. The carving up of reality into separate units – things and actions – forces desperate phenomena into common “bags.” For example, all kind of different things can be “leaves.” Meaning depends on the context of other surrounding carved up “bags.”

Language is a very useful extrapolation from reality. It does not accurately capture reality by any means.

Verbal language rests on the assumptions 1) that separation/independence among things and actions is a fundamental feature of reality, 2) that it can capture in differentiated sound sequences – words – what these separate things and actions are, and 3) that it can describe how these things and actions are related. On close examination, none of these assumptions is accurate.

1) The assumption of the separation/independence of things and actions corresponds to the objective, intellectual, material perspective on reality. Indeed, language can be said to be the primary support for this perspective. But there are other perspectives – even ones currently being seriously explored in our physical sciences. One of these is the view that all of reality is so fundamentally connected and integrated by immaterial energy that it is unified as one “entity.” There are no separate “parts” or “actions.” The cosmic whole just vibrates with all “parts” participating in every vibration everywhere – however minimally. It is only our extraordinarily limited human perception – especially our vision – that suggests to us that more dense things are separate from one another in much less dense air.

2) Language is an artificial construct imposed on reality. The problem: we never recognize this imposition and instead assume that language accurately captures reality. The result is that our thought process and subsequent worldviews are captured by our own invention. And in large measure it is accurate to one perspective on reality – the objective, material, intellectual perspective which holds that you are separate and independent from the other “things” of reality and interact with those things as you choose or must. In this view, you have free will within the bounds of certain socially required restraints. This is the dominant view of the competitive everyday perspective of biological survival. And language supports it as exclusively correct.

But standard language does not reveal the alternative subjective, spiritual, intuitive perspective on reality in which all “things” are experienced as unified as one totally connected and integrated phenomenon. Our visual mode of perception is more in tune with this perspective in which carving things up and separating them proves impossible – it’s one continuous “picture” in an infinitely connected picture through micro to macro scales. This is the alternative view of the cooperative, art and ritual perspective of social and ecological belonging. Many expressive behaviors support this perspective with special art and ritual forms of language [employing metaphor to make connections across standard categories] participating in this support.

So, the problem is that the standard everyday language of separation and imposition dominates – especially in modern secular material culture. And in this context, the limitations of that use of language are not recognized. Humans need access to both perspectives to balance their understanding of themselves and their reality and to behave responsibly. And the totally uncritical and almost exclusive use of the everyday standard language of separation promotes a false, incomplete view of reality and an excessively aggressive and exploitative approach to one another and the supporting system of natural resources.

We cannot avoid the separation perspective that the everyday material use of language supports, but we can be aware of both its inherent limitations and its complement in behaviors that evoke an alternative unification perspective – some being in the artistic use of language itself.