

LANGUAGE:
The Cultural Tool

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Preface

People of the twenty-first century are developing new technologies that have already altered the foundations of learning, teaching, art, science, politics, government, business, music, and literature. The most interesting aspect of these exciting innovations is that they are all made possible by a single tool, human language, *instrumentum linguae*.

The idea that language is a tool has been around for a long while. Lev Vygotsky, the great Soviet psychologist, was one of the first to make this claim explicitly in modern times, though Aristotle framed language in these terms more than 2,300 years ago.

But no one has quite gotten around to weaving together the findings of modern linguistics, psychology, and anthropology to flesh out the meaning of the hypothesis that language is an artifact, a *cultural tool*. An instrument created by hominids to satisfy their social need for meaning and community. This is our ambitious project.

Some experts say language is an instinct, rather than the invention of a community of minds. Most, however, believe that instincts are simple, unlearned reflexes. An instinct is a baby's desire to suckle. But language is learned and complex, a work of function and form developed and honed by human cultures since the dawn of our species.

Introduction
THE GIFT OF PROMETHEUS

‘Then Prometheus, in his perplexity as to what preservation he could devise for man, stole from Hephaestus and Athena wisdom in the arts together with fire – since by no means without fire could it be acquired or helpfully used by any – and he handed it there and then as a gift to man.’

Plato’s Protagoras

The Greeks told a myth about one of mankind’s greatest tools, fire. The story’s hero was Prometheus, whose name means foreseer. Prometheus grew fond of the creatures that Zeus had asked him to help create, man and woman. He watched them with pity as they huddled cold and fearful of the dark, stumbling blindly after every setting of the sun. He knew the solution to their problem – fire. But Zeus did not want humans to have fire. Fire would give humans more power than Zeus intended. They might even rival the gods themselves. So Zeus forbade it.

Prometheus knew the risks of disobeying the king of the gods. Yet for pity and for love he smuggled a charcoal lit by Apollo’s fiery chariot out of Olympus in a fennel stalk. No matter how pure his motives, Prometheus paid a horrible price for his charity. Zeus condemned him to an eternity of pain chained to a rock in the Caucasus, where each day his liver was consumed by a large vulture, regenerating every night in order to fuel his pain on the morrow. Only when the mighty Hercules slew the vulture and broke the chains was Prometheus freed.

The myth of Prometheus, like all good myths, encapsulates cultural values and offers answers to keep a group of *Homo curious* satisfied until a better answer comes along. In this myth we can take away the belief

that fire originated once in the human story. We are given a glimpse of the problems that fire was meant to solve. And we are taught that the coming of fire was a momentous event in human history.

The Hebrews' myths also include a narrative about their gods coming to fear the growth of human power. But the Hebrew story differs dramatically from the Greeks'. The Hebrews' scriptures recognize that the power of language is greater than that of fire. The Hebrew god is not threatened by humans' control of fire, but rather by their ability to talk to one another. From this appreciation for the power of language emerges the Hebrew myth of the Tower of Babel – the tower that was raised to threaten the gates (Bab) of god (El). In this myth God is not worried about the physical technology of his creation, whether picks, axes, fire, or the like. He is instead infuriated by humans' ability to work together. This threatens his power. And their cooperation rests upon on their communication. So God scatters his people across the face of the earth. Or as the Bible puts it:

And the LORD said, 'Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them.' 'Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.' So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of the whole earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of the whole earth.

Genesis 11: 6–9 New American Standard Bible

Ironically, the Hebrew god was not a linguist. He did not seem to realize that diversity strengthens *Homo sapiens*, and diversity in language and culture strengthens us the most. According to the Bible, God created one man, Adam, and gave him the charge of learning about and naming the flora and fauna of creation. By spreading Adam's descendants around the globe God in effect created a thousand Adams, learning about and naming not just the Garden of Eden, but the entire world

– wherever the children of Prometheus have gone, they have taken fire and language to master and learn about their world. This means that no one of us speaks the ‘right’ language. We all speak the language(s) that helps us and these languages are formed to meet the needs of our culture and social situation.

The Hebrews were right about one thing, though. The uttering of the first noun or verb, as non-momentous as that sounds, was arguably of greater importance than the stealing of fire from the gods of Olympus. Nouns and verbs are the basis of human civilization. Without these and other words, we could not utter history and life-changing phrases like ‘I now pronounce you man and wife,’ ‘This must be the place,’ or ‘I name this ship the *Titanic*.’ If it were not for words, Founding Father Patrick Henry could never have uttered his famous sequence of two nouns, one pronoun, one disjunctive particle, and one verb, ‘Give me Liberty, or give me Death!’ With nouns and verbs society was founded. With nouns and verbs the growth of human knowledge began.

Naturally, therefore, a research question that captivates many modern thinkers is precisely the origin of nouns, verbs, sentences, stories, and other elements of human language. Did language and its parts come about suddenly or did they emerge gradually as cultural adaptations?

This book is about the development of this great linguistic tool of our brains and communities, the cognitive fire that illuminates the lonely space between us far more brightly than the light of flames ever could. Here we look at the story of mankind’s greatest tool, its purposes, and how it might have come to be.

Unlike physical fire, the cognitive fire of language did not exist before humans called it into being. And every individual and culture in the history of our race places its own mark upon this tool. It is an invention that envelops all humans. It unites. It divides. It warms our hearts. It chills our souls. It invigorates our bodies and steels young men for battle. It gives us the greatest pleasure of all – focused and ordered thoughts. We have become *Homo loquax*, as author Tom Wolfe calls us, or ‘speaking man.’ We are the masters of this raging cognitive fire.

Language’s contribution to our mastery of the world is one way in which it serves as a tool. It is our greatest display of cognitive technology. It is the basis for an arsenal that includes mathematics, science,

philosophy, art, and music. Language enables our brains to do things they could not do without it, like solving arithmetical problems, following recipes, and thinking about where our children are going after school.

No linguist, psychologist, anthropologist, or philosopher would disagree that language is useful. But there is enormous disagreement about where this tool came from. Some say that language was discovered by chance, like fire. Others believe that one brilliant *Homo sapiens* might have invented it 75,000 years or so ago, as the Cherokee chief Sequoya invented writing for his people. Still others claim that language is genetically encoded in the human mind, the fortuitous by-product of packing our skulls full of an unprecedented number of neurons.

Easily the most famous answer to this question, though, is that language is part of our genetic endowment and that, because of this, all human languages share an almost identical grammar –which includes sound systems and meanings. Under this view, the only significant differences between languages are their vocabularies. But this is not the only available explanation for the growth and presence of language in all humans. As I have said, I do not even think it is the best answer.

This is not a book about why one view of language is wrong and why another view is correct – although it does not shy away from stating its conclusions. Rather, this is a story about the joy of language, a joy that has filled my soul during more than thirty years of field research among indigenous societies of the Americas and life among my fellow *Homo loquaces*. From each of the nearly two dozen languages I have studied in the Amazon, Mexico, and the United States over the past decades, I have learned things about the nature of our species and our ability to communicate that I never would have learned by living a different life. I have learned about humans' relation to nature and about perspectives on living and speaking in a world delineated by the ancient cultures of the jungle. I have learned how words reach into my heart and change my life, from the poetry of e.e. cummings and the prose of William James to the fireside stories of the human family. Language gives humans their humanity.

But how did this marvelous artifact originate? How is it that all

humans possess it? Why are there so many similarities between languages if each one is a tool for a specific culture? And what does it mean, finally, to say that language is a tool? Is this just a way of speaking?

The last question answers them all.

Most humans are fascinated by language, by our species' ability to talk, to inform, to persuade, to insult, to lie, and to praise – that is, to express the range of our thoughts and feelings through symbols in the form of sounds, gestures, marks on paper, drum beats, and the myriad of other ways we have found to use our senses and brains for communication. It is only natural that we should be so fascinated by this communicative technology, for nothing has more to tell us about what it means to be human than the forms, sources, and uses to which we put language. It is the foundation of every human advance, from Cro-Magnon cave paintings to Thomas Edison's light bulb to Mark Zuckerberg's Facebook. Upon it rests the 'information age.'

All human abilities, including language, derive from two sources – genes and environment. The idea that language is exclusively a product of our culture or social environment is as simplistic, unhelpful, and wrong as the opposite idea that language grows like hair, shaped by our genome with no significant learning involved. Language, like human reasoning itself, emerges at the nexus of our biological endowment and our environmental existence. The relative proportions of nature and nurture necessary for the creation of the language device are agonizingly difficult to determine.

Yet it is the recipe for the alloy of language that has become the eye of an intellectual storm surrounding theories of human communication. Linguists, psychologists, anthropologists, biologists, and philosophers tend to divide into those who believe that human biology is endowed with a language-dedicated genetic program and those who believe instead that human biology and the nature of the world provide general mechanisms that allow us the flexibility to acquire a large array of general skills and abilities, of which language is but one.

The former often refer to a 'language instinct' or a 'universal grammar'

shared by all humans. The latter talk about learning languages as we learn many other skills, such as cooking, chess, and carpentry.

The argument that we possess a language instinct usually relies on two observations: the commonality of language – all humans speak languages; and the conformity of languages – all languages share highly specific features. For the alternative proposal, that language is invented and transmitted culturally, empirical support comes from the general wiring of human neurology, our capacity for learning, and from the knowledge that many properties of language are forged by forces outside the brain. This latter proposal takes seriously the idea that the function of language shapes its form. It recognizes the linguistic importance of the utilitarian forces radiating from the human necessity to communicate in order to survive.

The purpose of what follows is both to inform and to debate. Many of the matters I discuss are controversial. But this does not make them less worthy of consideration. One of my goals here is to give alternatives a fair hearing, even if I ultimately reject them to return to the safe harbor of majority opinion. However, I will need to make a case against one view in order to make a better case for another. This is standard scientific discourse. I believe that, so long as we are civil and our evidence is worthy, it is healthy to speak negatively of one matter and positively of others.

Language: The Cultural Tool explores one simple idea: that all human languages are tools. Tools to solve the twin problems of communication and social cohesion. Tools shaped by the distinctive pressures of their cultural niches – pressures that include cultural values and history and which in many cases account in many cases for the similarities and differences between languages.

First, though, we need to have a definition of both language and culture, in order to comprehend how they work together. Language is how we talk. Culture is how we live. Language includes grammar, stories, sounds, meaning, and signs. Culture is the set of values shared by a group and the relationship between these values, along with all the knowledge shared by a community of people, transmitted according to their traditions.

I have written this for the reader interested in the nature of human

language, the system that binds all of us together, the tool that allows us to communicate outputs of our minds to others. My discussion is directed at thinking about the broadest and most important issues. But there are times when it is necessary to confront the details. We need both a wide-angle lens and a microscope to view the composition and the context of language.

There are things that we need to know to come to an informed opinion about the nature of language – its use, its functions, and its forms. One such is its origin. So the discussion that follows begins on the African savannah. That can help us understand how language solves problems – and how it kept our early ancestors alive and thriving. These problems must be confronted. We need to know how language is used by different societies. We have to understand what human bodies and brains must be like to produce language. We must examine the relationship between language and culture in numerous communities. And we need to see where the evidence lies for the conflicting ideas that language the tool is either innate or an invention.

As we get further into the issues, it will become clear that there is no unambiguous evidence for language being innate and that the very concept of ‘innate’ is too ambiguous to aid us in our quest to understand language.

But if language is a tool that is invented rather than an attribute of our genome, then the intriguing issue of similarity among the world’s languages arises. Why do languages have so many features in common if these features are not part of the genome? And if we can answer this, an equally difficult question arises. How dissimilar can one language be from another?

The latter question can stir people’s emotions. Even among many scientists it is supposed that all languages are ‘equal’ in some way. Most linguists, for example, will say that human languages are equally complex or that one language is as versatile as the next. Really? Are languages homogeneous then? But these stock answers confuse the equality of languages with the equality of human biology – human bodies and brains. I believe in the latter, but not in the former. The idea that ‘all languages are created equal’ seems grounded less in research than in a sense of political correctness. At times one gets the impression

that if all languages do not share the same level of complexity or versatility throughout, then some languages must be inferior to others. People seem to worry that if we say a given language lacks grammatical devices that are found in other languages, then that this is tantamount to claiming that the speakers of one language are somehow inferior to the speakers of the other. But nothing could be further from the truth. I am not inferior to my son because he plays golf and therefore uses golf clubs, while I do not. I just don't need golf clubs. In much the same way, languages are tools that fit their cultural niche. From an evolutionary perspective, creatures use what they need and not what they don't. There is nothing politically incorrect in that.

At the same time, much of the emotion in the debate about relative language complexity is beside the point for the simple reason that we lack descriptions of too many of the world's languages to know what the 'standard' level of complexity is for human languages. In fact, no one has given or even proposed a coherent definition of 'linguistic complexity' that is accepted by all scientists, though there is research being conducted on this topic now in several parts of the world.

But for some, the boundaries of language are not to be discovered by empirical research but rather by mathematical analysis. It is not necessary to conduct field research to discover the axioms of set theory. If language were solely mathematically based, we would not need to conduct field work to discover its properties, rather we would need do nothing beyond the deep contemplation of our own native language. If one adheres to this omphaloskeptic conception and its implication that the properties of languages can be deduced from a general theory without the need for spadework, then the idea that language is a cultural artifact will make little sense. But the evidence points away from the idea that languages are derived from axioms. Growing evidence leads to the conclusion that the differences and similarities of the world's languages are outgrowths of neither mathematics nor genetics, though they have properties that are constrained by both.

This book is divided into four parts. In the first part, covering the material in chapters one through four, I examine the problems of communication and survival that confronted our evolutionary ancestors. I talk about the absence of specialization of human biology for language

and show how our skills at general reasoning and the formation of human communities and social interaction might have shaped the emergence of human language.

In the second part of the book, from chapters five through eight, attention is focused on the solutions that nature and environment provided to the communication problem. I review the evidence that there are many solutions, not merely one, to the communication problem worldwide, considering the differences between languages of the world, as well as their similarities. I also look at the biological, mental, and socio-cultural platforms that are needed for humans to be capable of using, learning, and understanding languages. I delve deeply into the forms and functions of language, from sound structure to sentence structure and beyond. And I consider the single candidate for an instinct for language – Aristotle’s proposed ‘social instinct.’

Part three of the book – chapters nine and ten – looks in considerable detail at how the often invisible hand of culture shapes the forms and meanings of human grammars and languages.

In the fourth and final part of the book, my focus is on the diversity of solutions to the language problem, the importance of cultural and linguistic diversity to the survival of our species, and how human grammars can lead to happiness.

Many researchers are working today to understand how language and culture mold one another. The specific part of this question that I want to answer is how it is that the values that we hold as members of human societies shape the ways we communicate. Culture does not do it all, of course. But neither does the mind. Our cultures, linguistic forms, and minds evolve together from birth to death and even beyond the lifespan of any individual – each language is a history of the symbiosis of grammar, mind, and culture. This is why it threatens us all to see so many languages in the world threatened. The diversity of languages and their features set the perimeters of the human experience.

Language takes us through our human world. It is the theme of myths, philosophy, literature and science. In the vast majority of the world’s literatures, both oral and written, humans have tried to explain the origin of their tools, abilities, and circumstances. In our early literary history, we used myths. Today we use science. Science is usually