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Language: Origin and Meaning

John Zerzan

Fairly recent anthropology (e.g. Sahlins, R.B. Lee) has virtually obliterated the long-dominant conception which defined prehistoric humanity in terms of scarcity and brutalization. As if the implications of this are already becoming widely understood, there seems to be a growing sense of that vast epoch as one of wholeness and grace. Our time on earth, characterized by the very opposite of those qualities, is in the deepest need of a reversal of the dialectic that stripped that wholeness from our life as a species.

Being alive in nature, before our abstraction from it, must have involved a perception and contact that we can scarcely comprehend from our levels of anguish and alienation. The communication with all of existence must have been an exquisite play of all the senses, reflecting the numberless, nameless varieties of pleasure and emotion once accessible within us.

To Levy-Bruhl, Durkheim and others, the cardinal and qualitative difference between the “primitive mind” and ours is the primitive’s lack of detachment in the moment of experience; “the savage mind totalizes,” as Levi-Strauss put it. Of course we have long been instructed that this original unity was destined to crumble, that

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alienation is the province of being human: consciousness depends on it.

In much the same sense that objectified time has been held to be essential to consciousness—Hegel called it “the necessary alienation”—so has language, and equally falsely. Language may be properly considered the fundamental ideology, perhaps as deep a separation from the natural world as self-existent time. And if timelessness resolves the split between spontaneity and consciousness, languagelessness may be equally necessary.

Adorno, in *Minima Moralia*, wrote: “To happiness the same applies as to truth: one does not have it, but is in it.” This could stand as an excellent description of humankind as we existed before the emergence of time and language, before the division and distancing that exhausted authenticity.

Language is the subject of this exploration, understood in its virulent sense. A fragment from Nietzsche introduces its central perspective: “words dilute and brutalize; words depersonalize; words make the uncommon common.”

Although language can still be described by scholars in such phrases as “the most significant and colossal work that the human spirit has evolved,” this characterization occurs now in a context of extremity in which we are forced to call the aggregate of the work of the “human spirit” into question. Similarly, if in Coward and Ellis’ estimation, the most “significant feature of twentieth-century intellectual development” has been the light shed by linguistics upon social reality, this focus hints at how fundamental our scrutiny must yet become in order to comprehend maimed modern life. It may sound positivist to assert that language must somehow embody all the “advances” of society, but in civilization it seems that all meaning is ultimately linguistic; the question of the meaning of language, considered in its totality, has become the unavoidable next step.

Earlier writers could define consciousness in a facile way as that which can be verbalized, or even argue that wordless thought is

impossible (despite the counter-examples of chessplaying or composing music). But in our present straits, we have to consider anew the meaning of the birth and character of language rather than assume it to be merely a neutral, if not benign, inevitable presence. The philosophers are now forced to recognize the question with intensified interest; Gadamer, for example: "Admittedly, the nature of language is one of the most mysterious questions that exists for man to ponder on."

Ideology, alienation's armored way of seeing, is a domination embedded in systematic false consciousness. It is easier still to begin to locate language in these terms if one takes up another definition common to both ideology and language: namely, that each is a system of distorted communication between two poles and predicated upon symbolization.

Like ideology, language creates false separations and objectifications through its symbolizing power. This falsification is made possible by concealing, and ultimately vitiating, the participation of the subject in the physical world. Modern languages, for example, employ the word "mind" to describe a thing dwelling independently in our bodies, as compared with the Sanskrit word, which means "working within," involving an active embrace of sensation, perception, and cognition. The logic of ideology, from active to passive, from unity to separation, is similarly reflected in the decay of the verb form in general. It is noteworthy that the much freer and sensuous hunter-gatherer cultures gave way to the Neolithic imposition of civilization, work and property at the same time that verbs declined to approximately half of all words of a language; in modern English, verbs account for less than 10% of words.

Though language, in its definitive features, seems to be complete from its inception, its progress is marked by a steadily debasing process. The carving up of nature, its reduction into concepts and equivalences, occurs along lines laid down by the patterns of language. And the more the machinery of language, again paralleling

ideology, subjects existence to itself, the more blind its role in reproducing a society of subjugation.

Navajo has been termed an “excessively literal” language, from the characteristic bias of our time for the more general and abstract. In a much earlier time, we are reminded, the direct and concrete held sway; there existed a “plethora of terms for the touched and seen.” (Mellersh 1960) Toynbee noted the “amazing wealth of inflexions” in early languages and the later tendency toward simplification of language through the abandonment of inflexions. Cassirer saw the “astounding variety of terms for a particular action” among American Indian tribes and understood that such terms bear to each other a relation of juxtaposition rather than of subordination. But it is worth repeating once more that while very early on a sumptuous prodigality of symbols obtained, it was a closure of symbols, of abstract conventions, even at that stage, which might be thought of as adolescent ideology.

Considered as the paradigm of ideology, language must also be recognized as the determinant organizer of cognition. As the pioneer linguist Sapir noted, humans are very much at the mercy of language concerning what constitutes “social reality.” Another seminal anthropological linguist, Whorf, took this further to propose that language determines one’s entire way of life, including one’s thinking and all other forms of mental activity. To use language is to limit oneself to the modes of perception already inherent in that language. The fact that language is only form and yet molds everything goes to the core of what ideology is.

It is reality revealed only ideologically, as a stratum separate from us. In this way language creates, and debases the world. “Human speech conceals far more than it confides; it blurs much more than it defines; it distances more than it connects,” was George Steiner’s conclusion.

More concretely, the essence of learning a language is learning a system, a model, that shapes and controls speaking. It is easier still to see ideology on this level, where due to the essential arbi-

Today “incredible” and “awesome” are applied to the most commonly trivial and boring, it is no accident that powerful and shocking words barely exist anymore. The deterioration of language mirrors a more general estrangement; it has become almost totally external to us. From Kafka to Pinter silence itself is a fitting voice of our times. “Few books are forgivable. Black on the canvas, silence on the screen, an empty white sheet of paper, are perhaps feasible,” as R.D. Laing put it so well. Meanwhile, the structuralists—Levi-Strauss, Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida—have been almost entirely occupied with the duplicity language in their endless exegetical burrowings into it. They have virtually renounced the project of extracting meaning from language.

I am writing (obviously) enclosed in language, aware that language reifies the resistance to reification. As T.S. Eliot’s Sweeney explains, “I’ve gotta use words when I talk to you.” One can imagine replacing the imprisonment of time with a brilliant present—only by imagining a world without division of labor, without that divorce from nature from which all ideology and authority accrue. We couldn’t live in this world without language and that is just how profoundly we must transform this world.

Words bespeak a sadness; they are used to soak up the emptiness of unbridled time. We have all had that desire to go further, deeper than words, the feeling of wanting only to be done with all the talk, knowing that being allowed to live coherently erases the need to formulate coherence.

There is a profound truth to the notion that “lovers need no words.” The point is that we must have a world of lovers, a world of the face-to-face, in which even names can be forgotten, a world which knows that enchantment is the opposite of ignorance. Only a politics that undoes language and time and is thus visionary to the point of voluptuousness has any meaning.

rariness of the phonological, syntactic, and semantic rules of each, every human language must be learned. The unnatural is imposed, as a necessary moment of reproducing an unnatural world.

Even in the most primitive languages, words rarely bear a recognizable similarity to what they denote; they are purely conventional. Of course this is part of the tendency to see reality symbolically, which Cioran referred to as the “sticky symbolic net” of language, an infinite regression which cuts us off from the world. The arbitrary, self-contained nature of language’s symbolic creates growing areas of false certainty where wonder, multiplicity and non-equivalence should prevail. Barthes’ depiction of language as “absolutely terrorist” is much to the point here; he saw that its systematic nature “in order to be complete needs only to be valid, and not to be true.” Language effects the original split between wisdom and method.

Along these lines, in terms of structure, it is evident that “freedom of speech” does not exist; grammar is the invisible “thought control” of our invisible prison. With language we have already accommodated ourselves to a world of unfreedom.

Reification, the tendency to take the conceptual as the perceived and to treat concepts as tangible, is as basic to language as it is to ideology. Language represents the mind’s reification of its experience, that is, an analysis into parts which, as concepts, can be manipulated as if they were objects. Horkheimer pointed out that ideology consists more in what people are like—their mental constrictedness, their complete dependence on associations provided for them—than in what they believe. In a statement that seems as pertinent to language as to ideology, he added that people experience everything only within the conventional framework of concepts.

It has been asserted that reification is necessary to mental functioning, that the formation of concepts which can themselves be mistaken for living properties and relationships does away with

the otherwise almost intolerable experience of relating one experience to another.

Cassirer said of this distancing from experience, “Physical reality seems to reduce in proportion as man’s symbolic activity advances.” Representation and uniformity begin with language, reminding us of Heidegger’s insistence that something extraordinarily important has been forgotten by civilization.

Civilization is often thought of not as a forgetting but as a remembering, wherein language enables accumulated knowledge to be transmitted forward, allowing us to profit from other’s experiences as though they were our own. Perhaps what is forgotten is simply that other’s experiences are *not* our own, that the civilizing process is thus a vicarious and inauthentic one. When language, for good reason, is held to be virtually coterminous with life, we are dealing with another way of saying that life has moved progressively farther from directly lived experience.

Language, like ideology, mediates the here and now, attacking direct, spontaneous connections. A descriptive example was provided by a mother objecting to the pressure to learn to read: “Once a child is literate, there is no turning back. Walk through an art museum. Watch the literate students read the title cards before viewing the paintings to be sure that they know what to see. Or watch them read the cards and ignore the paintings entirely...As the primers point out, reading opens doors. But once those doors are open, it is very difficult to see the world without looking through them.”

The process of transforming all direct experience into the supreme symbolic expression, language, monopolizes life. Like ideology, language conceals and justifies, compelling us to suspend our doubts about its claim to validity. It is at the root of civilization, the dynamic code of civilization’s alienated nature. As the paradigm of ideology, language stands behind all of the massive legitimation necessary to hold civilization together. It remains for us to clarify what forms of nascent domination

but creates an autonomous field from which every subject can be absent.

In the contemporary world, the avant-garde of art has, most noticeably, performed the gestures of refusal of the prison of language. Since Mallarme, a good deal of modernist poetry and prose has moved against the taken-for-grantedness of normal speech. To the question “Who is speaking?” Mallarme answered, “Language is speaking.” After this reply, and especially since the explosive period around World War I when Joyce, Stein and others attempted a new syntax as well as a new vocabulary, the restraints and distortions of language have been assaulted wholesale in literature. Russian futurists, Dada (e.g. Hugo Ball’s efforts in the 1920s to create “poetry without words”), Artaud, the Surrealists and lettristes were among the more exotic elements of a general resistance to language.

The Symbolist poets, and many who could be called their descendants, held that defiance of society also includes defiance of its language. But inadequacy in the former arena precluded success in the latter, bringing one to ask whether avant-garde strivings can be anything more than abstract, hermetic gestures. Language, which at any given moment embodies the ideology of a particular culture, must be ended in order to abolish both categories of estrangement; a project of some considerable dimensions, let us say. That literary texts (e.g. *Finnegan’s Wake*, the poetry of e.e. cummings) breaks the rules of language seems mainly to have the paradoxical effect of evoking the rules themselves. By permitting the free play of ideas about language, society treats these ideas as mere play.

The massive amount of lies—official, commercial and otherwise—is perhaps in itself sufficient to explain why Johnny Can’t Read or Write, why illiteracy is increasing in the metropole. In any case, it is not only that “the pressure on language has gotten very great,” according to Canetti, but that “unlearning” has come “to be a force in almost every field of thought,” in Robert Harbison’s estimation.

speech incorporates time and is thereby animated by it at every expression, division of labor conclusively destroyed an earlier reality. With Derrida, one can accurately refer to “language as the origin of history.” Language itself is a repression, and along its progress repression gathers—as ideology, as work—so as to generate historical time. Without language all of history would disappear.

Pre-history is pre-writing; writing of some sort is the signal that civilization has begun. “Once gets the impression,” Freud wrote in *The Future of an Illusion*, “that civilization is something which was imposed on a resisting majority by a minority which understood how to obtain possession of the means of power and coercion.” If the matter of time and language can seem problematic, writing as a stage of language makes its appearance contributing to subjugation in rather naked fashion. Freud could have been legitimately pointed to written language as the lever by which civilization was imposed and consolidated.

By about 10,000 B.C., extensive division of labor had produced the kind of social control reflected by cities and temples. The earliest writings are records of taxes, laws, terms of labor servitude. This objectified domination thus originated from the practical needs of political economy. An increased use of letters and tablets soon enabled those in charge to reach new heights of power and conquest, as exemplified in the new form of government commanded by Hammurabi of Babylon. As Levi-Strauss put it, writing “seems to favor rather the exploitation than the enlightenment of mankind..Writing, on this its first appearance in our midst, had allied itself with falsehood.”

Language at this juncture becomes the representation of representation, in hieroglyphic and ideographic writing and then in phonetic-alphabetic writing. The progress of symbolization, from the symbolizing of words, to that of syllables, and finally to letters in an alphabet, imposed an increasingly irresistible sense of order and control. And in the reification that writing permits, language is no longer tied to a speaking subject or community of discourse,

engendered this justification, made language necessary as a basic means of repression.

It should be clear, first of all, that the arbitrary and decisive association of a particular sound with a particular thing is hardly inevitable or accidental. Language is an invention for the reason that cognitive processes must precede their expression in language. To assert that humanity is only human because of language generally neglects the corollary that being human is the precondition of inventing language.

The question is how did words first come to be accepted as signs at all? How did the first symbol originate? Contemporary linguists find this “such a serious problem that one may despair of finding a way out of its difficulties.” Among the more than ten thousand works on the origin of language, even the most recent admit that the theoretical discrepancies are staggering. The question of when language began has also brought forth extremely diverse opinions. There is no cultural phenomenon that is more momentous, but no other development offers fewer facts as to its beginnings. Not surprisingly, Bernard Campell is far from alone in his judgment that “We simply do not know, and never will, how or when language began.”

Many of the theories that have been put forth as to the origin of language are trivial: they explain nothing about the qualitative, intentional changes introduced by language. The “ding-dong” theory maintains that there is somehow an innate connection between sound and meaning; the “pooh-pooh” theory holds that language at first consisted of ejaculations of surprise, fear, pleasure, pain, etc.; the “ta-ta” theory posits the imitation of bodily movements as the genesis of language, and so on among explanations that only beg the question. The hypothesis that the requirements of hunting made language necessary, on the other hand, is easily refuted; animals hunt together without language, and it is often necessary for humans to remain silent in order to hunt.

Somewhat closer to the mark, I believe, is the approach of contemporary linguist E.H. Sturtevant: since all intentions and emotions are involuntarily expressed by gesture, look, or sound, voluntary communication, such as language, must have been invented for the purpose of lying or deceiving. In a more circumspect vein, the philosopher Caws insisted that “truth...is a comparative late-comer on the linguistic scene, and it is certainly a mistake to suppose that language was invented for the purpose of telling it.”

But it is in the specific social context of our exploration, the terms and choices of concrete activities and relationships, that more understanding of the genesis of language must be sought. Olivia Vlahos judged that the “power of words” must have appeared very early; “Surely...not long after man had begun to fashion tools shaped to a special pattern.” The flaking or chipping of stone tools, during the million or two years of Paleolithic life, however, seems much more apt to have been shared by direct, intimate demonstration than by spoken directions.

Nevertheless, the proposition that language arose with the beginnings of technology—that is, in the sense of division of labor and its concomitants, such as a standardizing of things and events and the effective power of specialists over others—is at the heart of the matter, in my view. It would seem very difficult to disengage the division of labor—“the source of civilization,” in Durkheim’s phrase—from language at any stage, perhaps least of all the beginning. Division of labor necessitates a relatively complex control of group action; in effect it demands that the whole community be organized and directed. This happens through the breakdown of functions previously performed by everybody, into a progressively greater differentiation of tasks, and hence of roles and distinctions.

Whereas Vlahos felt that speech arose quite early, in relation to simple stone tools and their reproduction, Julian Jaynes has raised perhaps a more interesting question which is assumed in his contrary opinion that language showed up much later. He asks, how it is, if humanity had speech had for a couple of million years, that

The decisive mediations of mythology and religion are not, however, the only profound cultural developments underlying our modern estrangement. Also in the Upper Paleolithic era, as the species Neanderthal gave way to Cro-Magnon (and the brain actually shrank in size), art was born. In the celebrated cave paintings of roughly 30,000 years ago is found a wide assortment of abstract signs; the symbolism of late Paleolithic art slowly stiffens into the much more stylized forms of the Neolithic agriculturalists. During this period, which is either synonymous with the beginnings of language or registers its first real dominance, a mounting unrest surfaced. John Pfeiffer described this in terms of the erosion of the egalitarian hunter-gatherer traditions, as Cro-Magnon established its hegemony. Whereas there was “no trace of rank” until the Upper Paleolithic, the emerging division of labor and its immediate social consequences demanded a disciplining of those resisting the gradual approach of civilization. As a formalizing, indoctrinating device, the dramatic power of art fulfilled this need for cultural coherence and the continuity of authority. Language, myth, religion and art thus advanced as deeply “political” conditions of social life, by which the artificial media of symbolic forms replaced the directly-lived quality of life before division of labor. From this point on, humanity could no longer see reality face to face; the logic of domination drew a veil over play, freedom, affluence.

At the close of the Paleolithic Age, as a decreased proportion of verbs in the language reflected the decline of unique and freely chosen acts in consequence of division of labor, language still possessed no tenses. Although the creation of a symbolic world was the condition for the existence of time, no fixed differentiations had developed before hunter-gatherer life was displaced by Neolithic farming. But when every verb shows a tense, language is “demanding lip service to time even when time is furthest of our thoughts.” (Van Orman Quine 1960) From this point one can ask whether time exists apart from grammar. Once the structure of

instrumental control with regression in affective experience) are made equivocal by their false conclusion that “Men have always had to choose between their subjugation to nature or the subjugation of nature to the Self.”

“Nowhere is civilization so perfectly mirrored as in speech,” as Pei commented, and in some very significant ways language has not only reflected but determined shifts in human life. The deep, powerful break that was announced by the birth of language pre-figured and overshadowed the arrival of civilization and history, a mere 10,000 years ago. In the reach of language, “the whole of History stands unified and complete in the manner of a Natural Order,” says Barthes.

Mythology, which, as Cassirer noted, “is from its very beginning potential religion,” can be understood as a function of language, subject to its requirements like any ideological product. The nineteenth-century linguist Muller described mythology as a “disease of language” in just this sense; language deforms thought by its inability to describe things directly. “Mythology is inevitable, it is natural, it is an inherent necessity of language...(It is) the dark shadow which throws upon thought, and which can never disappear till language becomes entirely commensurate with thought, which it never will.”

It is little wonder, then, that the old dream of a *lingua Adamica*, a “real” language consisting not of conventional signs but expressing the direct, unmediated meaning of things, has been an integral part of humanity’s longing for a lost primeval state. As remarked upon above, the Tower of Babel is one of the enduring significations of this yearning to truly commune with each other and nature.

In that earlier (but long enduring) condition nature and society formed a coherent whole, interconnected by the closest bonds. The step from participation in the totality of nature to religion involved a detaching of forces and beings into outward, inverted existences. This separation took the form of deities, and the religious practitioner, the shaman, was the first specialist.

there was virtually no development of technology? Jaynes’s question implies a utilitarian value inhering in language, a supposed release of latent potentialities of a positive nature. But given the destructive dynamic of the division of labor, referred to above, it may be that while language and technology are indeed linked, they were both successfully resisted for thousands of generations.

At its origins language had to meet the requirements of a problem that existed outside language. In light of the congruence of language and ideology, it is also evident that as soon as a human spoke, he or she was separated. This rupture is the moment of dissolution of the original unity between humanity and nature; it coincides with the initiation of division of labor. Marx recognized that the rise of ideological consciousness was established by the division of labor; language was him the primary paradigm of “productive labor.” Every step in the advancement of civilization has meant added labor, however, and the fundamentally alien reality of productive labor/work is realized and advanced via language. Ideology receives its substance from division of labor, and, inseparably, its form from language.

Engels, valorizing labor even more explicitly than Marx, explained the origin of language from and with labor, the “mastery of nature.” He expressed the essential connection by the phrase, “first labor, after it and then with it speech.” To put it more critically, the artificial communication which is language was and is the voice of the artificial separation which is (division of) labor. (In the usual, repressive parlance, this is phrased positively, of course, in terms of the invaluable nature of language in organizing “individual responsibilities.”)

Language was elaborated for the suppression of feelings; as the code of civilization it expresses the sublimation of Eros, the repression of instinct, which is the core of civilization. Freud, in the one paragraph he devoted to the origin of language, connected original speech to sexual bonding as the instrumentality by which work was made acceptable as “an equivalence and substitute for sexual

activity.” This transference from a free sexuality to work is original sublimation, and Freud saw language constituted in the establishing of the link between mating calls and work processes.

The neo-Freudian Lacan carries this analysis further, asserting that the unconscious is formed by the primary repression of acquisition of language. For Lacan the unconscious is thus “structured like a language” and functions linguistically, not instinctively or symbolically in the traditional Freudian sense.

To look at the problem of origin on a figurative plane, it interesting to consider the myth of the Tower of Babel. The story of the confounding of language, like that other story in Genesis, the Fall from the grace of the Garden, is an attempt to come to terms with the origin of evil. The splintering of an “original language” into mutually unintelligible may best be understood as the emergence of symbolic language, the eclipse of an earlier state of more total and authentic communication. In numerous traditions of paradise, for example, animals can talk and humans can understand them.

I have argued elsewhere that the Fall can be understood as a fall into time. Likewise the failure of the Tower of Babel suggests, as Russell Fraser put it, “the isolation of man in historical time.” But the Fall also has a meaning in terms of the origin of language. Benjamin found it in the mediation which is language and the “origin of abstraction, too, as a faculty of language-mind.” “The fall is into language,” according to Norman O. Brown.

Another part of Genesis provides Biblical commentary on an essential of language, names, and on the notion that naming is an act of domination. I refer to the creation myth, which includes “and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.” This bears directly on the necessary linguistic component of the domination of nature: man became master of things only because he first named them, in the formulation of Dufrenne. As Spengler had it, “To name anything by a name is to win power over it.”

The beginning of humankind’s separation from and conquest of the world is thus located in the naming of the world. *Logos* itself as god is involved in the first naming, which represents the domination of the deity. The well-known passage is contained in the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Returning to the question of the origin of language in real terms, we also come back to the notion that the problem of language is the problem of civilization. The anthropologist Lizot noted that the hunter-gatherer mode exhibited that lack of technology and division of labor that Jaynes felt must have bespoken an absence of language; “(Primitive people’s) contempt for work and their disinterest in technological progress per se are beyond question.” Furthermore, “the bulk of recent studies,” in Lee’s words of 1981, shows the hunter-gatherers to have been “well nourished and to have (had) abundant leisure time.”

Early humanity was not deterred from language by the pressures of constant worries about survival; the time for reflection and linguistic development was available but this path was apparently refused for many thousands of years. Nor did the conclusive victory of agriculture, civilization’s cornerstone, take place (in the form of the Neolithic revolution) because of food shortages or population pressures. In fact, as Lewis Binford has concluded, “The question to be asked is not why agriculture and food-storage techniques were not developed everywhere, but why they were developed at all.”

The dominance of agriculture, including property ownership, law, cities, mathematics, surplus, permanent hierarchy and specialization, and writing, to mention a few of its elements, was no inevitable step in human “progress”; neither was language itself. The reality of pre-Neolithic life demonstrates the degradation or defeat involved in what has been generally seen as an enormous step forward, an admirable transcending of nature, etc.. In this light, many of the insights of Horkheimer and Adorno in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (such as the linking of progress in