



THE LIZARD KING

Language and the Old Brain

This article examines how language can not fully describe nor harness its objective truth. The construction of language is similar to the construction of reality and by examining phenomena upon which we can not place meaning, the article intends to illuminate the disparity between the self with the world-out-there. With the absence of semantic content, we are left to imprint the phenomena with whatever meaning we desire, thus effectively proving that each of us constructs our own identity and subjective reality based upon the discovery of and interpretation of the objective reality.

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In themselves, are not spoken words mere utterances and written words mere doodles until we are able to attach meaningful significance to them? Can words embody intrinsic meaning separate from any previous experience of them? Is the structure of our pre-constructed self capable of fabricating ideas about objects without previous experience of them and can these ideas lead us to the essence of the thing-as-is? If we define the concept of idea as a singular mental state that holds knowledge about subjective matter, and we define knowledge as the outcome of an experience, then it goes that we must experience in order to create ideas about the world-out-there. However, perhaps there is a greater knowledge that is not defined by our experience of it. Can we have knowledge of knowledge? Can we have an idea about ideas?

I can conceptualize the phrase, “the maiden rides her carousel of humility”. I have never seen the maiden in this state, nor have I ever seen a carousel of humility, but I can have an idea of it and I can place meaning upon it.

These ideas are born from a pre-existing state, which have sudden and irrevocable implications on our sense of reality. These ideas I speak of are the conceptual singularities of knowledge dissociated with any prior experience to the object they represent. When I see an apple, I have an idea of it in my mind based on past experience, I have knowledge of it. But when I experience something strange and unfamiliar I project upon it assumptions about its existence again based upon my past experiences. However, in the case of the latter, an idea embodied with knowledge can not be aroused. Likewise with architectural elements; form, color and texture are mere visual “shells” until we reach out cognitively to construct an image in our mind upon which we place meaning; the true character of any purposeful art will leave us devastated with empty meaning until we fill it from the reservoirs of our being. Whether this placement of meaning is learned or innate, or occurs internally or externally of our mind, has been highly debated - a futile debate as they battle over the same patch of ground. Each introduces our being to the endless possibilities of meaningful interaction with the environment.

Unfortunately, language can be deceptive, and its failure to communicate the inextricable essence of things, and of ourselves, only emphasizes the disparity between the physical and the mental. Here we must stress the difference between the recognition of the intrinsic meaning of an object and the psychophysical affect produced by it. Phenomenal spaces and form can affect us without our understanding of their symbolism or semantic content; neurologically, spaces can induce emotional reactions to color, texture and form on an unconscious or preconscious level, at the level prior to thought, language, and perception, in the place of imagination and reverie. On the other hand, conscious interpretation necessarily implies conscious awareness, and awareness is begotten by consciousness. Our semiotic understanding of the thing may occur unconsciously as a manifestation of the disassociated memories in our primitive brain. The old brain, sometimes referred to as the paleomammalian or reptilian brain may hold primeval memories genetically hardwired to our sense of a sacred self, or to discarded remnants of our former selves. What *a priori* knowledge of this sacred, then, do we share with others that can affect our behavior and sense of being-in-the-world? What ancient spark fused man’s bicameral mind¹ resonating and reverberating in our unconscious the quintessential memories of our primordial experiences? What were those first instinctive primal utterances of humanity, and more importantly, where did they come from? Was it recognition of himself, the raging world, or of a Being greater than he?

Antonin Artaud, the early 20th Century Surrealist writer, once compared words with the bark of a tree, and language as the expression of the inner soul. Beneath the heartwood, at the pith below the fleshy layers of our Being, the true essence and meaning of our words are born. Like sap, these words seep outwards through the arterial fibers to the outer layers to peel off into the world beyond.² This

metaphoric interpretation alludes to the being of matter as the heart of a tree. In architectural terms, what would the grain pattern of a plain slice or quarter sawn veneer of your Being look like? Would you panel your walls with it? It is also interesting to note that the Architectural Woodwork Institute states “the pith and bark... are excluded from finished lumber”.³ Sadly, the bark and core are discarded for want of a beautiful veneer. Indeed, even Gaston Bachelard imagines that “a word is a bud attempting to become a twig”.⁴ Wars raged for centuries before civilization was able to express its dominance upon the primitive barbarian intellect, and language, that first edifice of human consciousness, it seems, actually was built with sticks and stones.

Morphology is the study of the way words are formed from smaller units called morphemes. These morphemes are the building blocks and pillars of language. The lack of such morphemes inhibits our understanding of words, and thus of language as a whole. This absence of semantic understanding is what is called “asemia”. *Asemic poetry* is writing “having no semantic content”.⁵ Illegible, invented, or primal scripts (pictographs, doodles, children’s drawings, etc.) are all influences upon asemic writing. We see calligraphic strokes but recognize no meaning or context in which to interpret meaningful content.² Morphemes, repeated characters and strokes, may appear as feigned silhouettes of seemingly perceptible signs, but ultimately they lack intelligible textual and contextual consistency in asemic script and art. Discernment is impossible since no key or marker is available in which to ascertain meaning or to construct the lexicon. The images tend to have no fixed meaning from our past, except for that which we project upon them. Every viewer can arrive at a personal, absolutely correct interpretation.



Tom Kemp, Oxford England from Asemic Magazine, Vol. 2.

We see these objects differently than others do, as we see ourselves different *from* others. They are a blank slate upon which we write our personal histories. This sense of an individualized self is developed in early childhood between the age of six months and two years, during what Jean Piaget called the sensorimotor stage, as a matter of learning to distinguish oneself from others and the environment by means of visual, auditory, and other perceptual modes. During this stage of our development, primitive reflexes develop into more purposeful actions and the child begins to integrate sensory and motor experiences and learn about objects through play. We learn to make meanings through these interactions with our environment.⁶ Our bodily limits are explored, and we begin to distinguish inside from outside. This duality fosters a feeling of separateness between the subjective inner world and the objective outer environment. The tension can be perceived as a contradiction but ultimately is an illusion. The interaction of subject and object occurs spontaneously, and in the time it takes to become aware of it, we are already one, as there is no time that we are not fully embedded in the world, except perhaps during unconsciousness or sleep.

We must differentiate between the various states and stages of self-development progressing from pre-birth through birth and adolescence to adulthood. The analysis of these growth patterns are

beyond the scope of this essay⁷, however, it will be useful to compare the construction of an initial identity as a child progressing through the various stages of development, and the achievement and maintenance of knowledge as an adult. Obviously an infant's acquisition of a self does not require previous phenomenal and relational experience and has very few historical precedents upon which to base its existence other than genetic and evolutionary endowments. Utterly, each new experience is a new building block, an experiential morpheme so to say, upon which acquisition of knowledge will be achieved and maintained. It should be pointed out that visual acuity is not fully developed early in this sensorimotor stage. Spatial learning and the limitations of the bodily self is initially developed by haptic and vestibular exploration of the environment. We touch to see and to feel our way through the environment, and the reverberations of sound in space contribute to our sense of balance and position in the world. We remain preoccupied with these sensations until the other senses are refined and develop enough to contribute to our assimilation. As Goethe said, "The hands want to see, the eyes want to caress".⁸

As an adult, these concepts are more or less fully developed, attributable to the worn pathways of neuronal processes streaming endlessly over the years. Recognition of abstract thoughts and influences from our past signify our reliance on these memories as our basis for reason and decision making. An infant develops through exploration and mental construction of their environment, whereas an adult's reality is fixed and perpetuated through the illusion of separateness. Such is the paradox of the shadow. That which initially drives our desire and need for relationship eventually fragments our sense of connectedness with the universe as we develop the boundaries between our self and others. It is ironic that as each of us develops an internal dialogue and a development of a separate self distinguished from others, we seek to assimilate ourselves back into, and to be accepted by, society. This separateness results in a dark gulf of emptiness and loneliness. The unique version of reality we originally acquire from birth homogenizes into tepid acceptance of others as representative simulacra and ultimately mirrors of ourselves. The language we use to communicate our existence echoes in the canyons of self-delusion.

END

End Notes

1. Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, 1976.
2. Antonin Artaud, *Fragments of a Journal in Hell*, Artaud Anthology, translated by Jack Hirschman, City Lights Publishers, 2nd Edition, 2001, p.45. "It should not be imagined that the soul has nothing to do with this bark of words peeling off. Life is there, alongside the mind, and the human being is inside the circle this mind turns on, and joined to it by a multitude of fibers... "When the soul lacks a language or language a mind, and the rupture ploughs a vast furrow of despair and blood in the sensory field, this is the greatest pain..."
3. AWI Quality Standards Illustrated, 8th Edition, p. 14. It's also interesting to note that the Architectural Woodwork Institute states that "the pith and bark... are excluded from finished lumber". Sadly, the bark and core are discarded for want of a beautiful veneer.
4. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, 1994, p. xv
5. "Asemic writing." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 24 Sep 2007, 12:40 UTC. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 27 Sep 2007. Asemic writing is an open [semantic](#) form of [writing](#). The word *asemic* means "having no semantic content".
<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Asemic_writing&oldid=160000762>.
6. "Theory of cognitive development." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 28 Feb 2008, 00:21 UTC. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 28 Feb 2008
<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Theory_of_cognitive_development&oldid=194543179>.
7. "Constructivism (learning theory)." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 30 Sep 2007, 18:28 UTC. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 2 Oct 2007
<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Constructivism_%28learning_theory%29&oldid=161361766>.
8. Quoted by Juhani Pallasmaa, Helinski University of Technology, keynote presentation "Touching the World – architecture, hapacity and the emancipation of the eye", and endnoted

“As quoted in *Not Architecture But Evidence That It Exists*. Laretta Vinciarelli: Watercolors, Brooke Hodge, editor. Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 1998, p. 130.”

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