Language Separates Us From Nature

Contributed by Chuck Burr
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Editor's note: This is a valuable exploration into our species' deep past, with great meaning for our present and future.

Imagine experiencing nature and the whole of life without words. Just as you paint, swim, feel, hike, or ski without words. Look around your room and just perceive it. Now look around the room again and try to name things as you see them.

Your mind can perceive instantly while it has to work hard to think of words and look.
Living animals are virtual perfect mirrors of our surroundings. Words separate us from nature. We are capable of acquiring language, but we are not designed to experience the world through language.

Wordlessness allows us to experience life in its full exquisiteness -- lovers need no words. As soon as we speak, we begin the separation. Development of symbolic language is the moment of rupture of the original unity of humanity and nature.

The Fall in Genesis is the fall into language and time, Adam created language when he ate from the God’s own tree of knowledge. Man became master of things by naming them, “and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.” The beginning of humanity’s separation from the world is located at the naming of the world. We are told in the Gospel of John that God did the first naming, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The myth of the Tower of Babel is also an attempt to come to terms with the separation of humanity from the Garden of Eden -- nature. The splintering of an “original language” may best be understood as the emergence of symbolic language.

Creation of symbolic language was a precondition of the creation of time. Before symbolic language, Paleolithic language did not have tenses. Before the agricultural revolution, there was no past, present, or future -- there was just now.

For almost all of human existence we have experienced life in most of its wholeness and grace -- for 97 percent of our history. There was a vast epoch for three or four million of years that humanity lived well-nourished lives with abundant leisure time. Read Stone Age Economics by Marshal Sahlins. The question is not, “why agriculture and language were not developed sooner, but why were they developed at all?”

This revolution in communication occurred 10,000 years ago with the invention of symbolic language. New technology caused an expansion in language. Neolithic man did not search a farm supply catalog for tools, Neolithic man invented a wedge that could be pulled through the ground to till the soil and then called the invention a “plow.” As with our internet today, technology creates new words -- you are reading a “blog”.

The division of labor also began during the agricultural revolution. Specialization further manifests new words. Each new specialty needs additional vocabulary. Farmers, chemists, lawyers, warehousemen, sportscasters, truckers all seem to use their own subset of our language. Each specialization and its ensuing language takes us further from our original unity with nature.

You could almost call it the “language revolution” instead of the “agricultural revolution”. Modern Neolithic language moved

humanity from “active” to “passive” -- from “unity with nature” to “separation”. Neolithic farmers imposed work -- division of labor, property, and civilization on Paleolithic hunter-gatherers.

This decay of sensual active hunter-gatherer language is reflected in the decline of the verb. Verbs comprised approximately half of all Paleolithic hunter-gatherer words. In modern English, verbs account for less than 10 percent of words.

The Navajo language has far more words for touching, sensing, and seeing life. Navajo has an amazing wealth of verb inflections to change the tense, mood, person, number, case, and gender of a verb. Hunter-gatherer languages have far fewer nouns and almost no numbers. Numbers were frequently limited to one, two, or many.

Where I live, almost every peak is named in modern English. Before European settlers however, only one peak was named, Shandoka. In Ute the language Shandoka means “weather maker”. It was named only because it is high enough and in the right location that it literally makes its own weather; clouds frequently form around Shandoka before a storm.

Numbers further alienate humanity from nature by reducing irreplaceable variant “things” to numbers. No one has ever seen identical snowflakes, leaves, clouds, or animals, but numbers assume they are all the same. An entire forest ecosystem, home to millions of living organisms, is reduced to board feet and dollars. Dead inanimate money has been substituted for living animate nature. Numbers are the ultimate tool to diminish all value of life and externalize all costs such as pollutants and social injustices.

Uncivilized Native Americans wondered why early Europeans destroyed nature with detachment; Native Americans felt a repugnance to intellectual effort and especially arithmetic. All that can come from scientific analysis of the world and our artificial economy is numbers. Today’s industrial capitalism sits at the very pinnacle of concentration on abstract measurement -- see the Financial Crisis essay. Language and especially mathematics has allowed civilized humanity to take everything with detachment and leave nothing. Daniel Quinn calls us Takers and native cultures Leavers.

Numbers are probably older than words. In Sumer the first mathematical computations appeared, between 3500 and 3000 B.C., in the form of inventories, deeds of sale, contracts, unit prices, units purchased, interest payments, etc. The Code of Ur-Nammu did not appear until 2050 B.C. and the more famous Code of Hammurabi appeared not until 1760 B.C.

Language substitutes the perceptual order of real life experience with empty concepts. Humanity resisted civilization and all of its injustices for a very long time. British archeologist Clive Gamble noted that recent studies have revealed the existence, some 300,000 years ago, of mental ability equivalent to modern man. 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.”

Our government has to enact programs such as “No Child Left Behind” to keep us reading. Reading equals laws and laws along with private property and locking up the food forcing people to work within the system equals control.

Every day, the global communication revolution moves us further away from nature. We have sacrificed a deep intimate experience with nature, a household level of knowledge of plants and animals, and a rich hunter-gatherer language. We have gained something with no intrinsic value -- information and data experienced in isolation.

Where we have arrived today demands a deep evaluation and reconsideration. John Zerzan wrote, “We couldn’t live in this world without language and that is just how profoundly we must transform this world.” Once we realize how poor we are in our detachment from nature -- the Garden of Eden, we may well yearn for a way back to a deep, whole, connected, wordless experience of life.

Personal note: as an experiment we are considering dividing our permaculture farm in into halves: word and a wordless.

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Editor's observation: Mr. Burr's essay is profound and worth pursuing into our lives. My belief is that the power of English may rest on the combined force of two aggressive cultures: Roman and Viking. The original English prior to 1066 was not only Germanic but Nordic, due to prior invasions by Viking predecessors into lands to their south. Then the Normans (North Men) who a generation before had been Viking invaders came to England and brought the Roman(ce) language of French. The exactitude of the language combined with elements of English's blunt clarity to give additional nuances for objects and verbs. Both languages were plenty rich without each other; with the combination, a most powerful language was created which dominates the world today. Fortunately, with such a huge vocabulary and the remaining ability to speak from the heart, English is able to capture beautifully many an artistic impluse and subconscious insight, and not just facilitate domination and commercial, scientific communication. - Jan Lundberg

Further reading and references:

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amazon.com

"Financial Crisis—Call for a Steady-State Economy" by Chuck Burr, Sept. 21, 2008:

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