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IT'S LANGUAGE, STUPID!



UNRAVELLING THE DNA OF THE MIND

MICHAEL CRIBB

IT'S LANGUAGE, STUPID!

Ever thought there might be something missing from our understanding of the universe? Ever thought there may be some extra dimension curled up, hidden away right in front of us? What if language was that dimension, a fifth dimension in the fabric of the universe which unfurls itself whenever we think, speak or write? We all have access to this hidden world, or you wouldn't be here reading this. Don't pretend that you don't! To use language is to broadcast our minds and expose our conscious thoughts. We orchestrate our societies in language – history, science, law, politics, and public discourse would not endure without language. The world would not exist without language! Come on a journey across, through and down this dimension to unravel the DNA of the mind. Along the way we'll talk with AI, sneak a peek at infinity, and dabble in Quantum Mechanics. But it will be language which takes centre stage and language which ultimately reveals what it means to be human.

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Unravelling the DNA of the mind

by Michael Cribb

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for Dad and Soonab

Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind – because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not.

The world does not speak. Only we do.

Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*

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- LP** Linguistic Paradox
- 1PP** First-person perspective
- 3PP** Third-person perspective
- | Piping character used to show linguistic relation

Acknowledgments

I salute all those linguistic minds that I have had the pleasure of meeting over the time of writing this book including the minds of my family, friends and colleagues. Your language stands in solidarity and coherence with mine. And to all those minds I met in the many books, articles and websites I read, I thank you for your mindful thoughts. Not one word went unappreciated. And finally I thank Peder B. Helland for his 'Soothing Relaxation' musical composition on YouTube which calmed me through innumerable hours of writing.

Preface

A scene in *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien has three trolls bickering and quarrelling all night until the light of the dawn comes up and turns them into stone – Gandalf, the wise wizard, had unknowingly kept them arguing till the morning light appeared:

For just at that moment the light came over the hill, and there was a mighty twitter in the branches. William never spoke for he stood turned to stone as he stooped; and Bert and Tom were stuck like rocks as they looked at him. ... ‘Excellent!’ said Gandalf, as he stepped from behind a tree, and helped Bilbo to climb down out of a thorn-bush. Then Bilbo understood. It was the wizard’s voice that had kept the trolls bickering and quarrelling, until the light came and made an end of them.

(*The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien ^[1])

Sometimes it feels as if we humans, like the trolls, have been ‘bickering and quarrelling’ all night. We chatter constantly amongst family and friends, with neighbours, strangers, as a society. We banter endlessly down the pub, on the bus, at work, in our homes, and now in cyberspace. We bicker and argue over big and small things such as how the country should be run or what to eat tonight. Sometimes this talk seems beneficial to us: like how we should pay for our health service or what kind of education we should give our children? At other times it seems completely pointless: like what colour is a dress on the internet or whether a game is better on the PlayStation or Xbox.

Language is around us, between us and within us as we discuss our dreams and ambitions with our friends and mull over

our thoughts and ideas in the privacy of our own minds. But do we ever get anywhere with language? Does it actually solve any of the problems and issues that we as a society have? Maybe we just talk too much? Perhaps one day we will wake up to find that we have been frozen, like the hapless trolls in *The Hobbit*, destined never to speak again, by some unknown wizard who has turned our tongues to stone?

At the heart of this book is the idea of *language*. That stuff which pours out of our mouths when we speak and runs straight back into our ears. Those words which teem out of our hands when we write only to flow back in through the eyes when we read. And those sentences that swim around in our heads and minds as we go about our waking day: thinking, organising, planning and dreaming what to do with ourselves. Language is so pervasive in our lives that it is difficult to think of a moment when we don't actually use or need it. There is rarely a minute in the day when we are not listening or responding to a particular conversation, either in private or public, or reading some news item or mulling over an idea in our own mind. Language is the vehicle for our history, our politics, our education and much more. Our identities as people are established through language and it shapes our relationships with our fellow human beings – our families, friends and strangers. In fact language is so central to our existence and the notion of who we are, we could say that we *are* language.

What would we do without language? If we had no language, what would society look like? First, you wouldn't be here reading this book because I couldn't have written it. I wouldn't be sitting at my desk typing these words; there would be no universities, no schools and no education. Our history would consist of memories of recent events and a few photographs of the past, assuming we had invented cameras, and our dreams would be... well we probably wouldn't have dreams. There would be no legal system and we'd all probably be sitting round a camp fire in small clans grunting and gesturing with each other. In short, we'd be

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just another tree in the forest, unable to get above the canopy and see the forest as a whole. Language gets us above the canopy. Language gives us the cognitive capacity to see the world for what it is and gives us a glimpse of our past and the future.

This book is also about the *mind*, the human mind. Philosophers have for centuries argued over what constitutes the mind. Is the mind separate from the body? How can I be sure that anyone else has a mind like mine? What is the nature of consciousness? These questions have been posed and debated endlessly but we still do not have firm answers to any of them. In this book, I make the bold proposal that *language* is the DNA of the mind and the mind is just that. In other words, when we talk of what constitutes the mind, I suggest it is language that constitutes the mind. The words and grammar that form language are the building blocks on which the human mind is built. Nothing else is sufficient nor necessary to be classified as a (human) mind.

One way I can test you, the reader, to see whether you have a mind like mine is to ask how you got to this point in the book, the dot just to the right? >> • << Have you been reading the language that is printed on the page or screen? If you have, then please raise your right hand now. If you are not sure whether you should raise your right hand or not, then just raise your right hand. Don't worry, you still pass the test.

If you did raise your right hand, or you were unsure whether to, it shows that you have been following my thoughts and ideas that are written on the page. You may not have been following them right from the start of the book, and you may not agree with them or completely understand everything I have written, but you have followed enough to get to the point in the book above and to understand the request to raise your right hand. Being unsure of whether to raise your hand or not demonstrates that you understood the request.

I'm sure you will agree then, without doubt, that there has just been, and is continuing to be as you read now, a *meeting of minds* and that this meeting has come about because of language, specifically, the language that is printed on the pages of this book. I could show the pages to, say, a dog but I doubt that they would raise their paw when they reached the dot in the last paragraph. Some clever dogs can raise their paws of course, but not because of anything that is written in this book. In short, I cannot meet the mind of a dog, or any other animal, through language. I can however meet you.

This meeting of minds between me, the writer, and you, the reader, which continues now, (you can put your hand down by the way!) can only come about because of language. If I tried to write this book solely through pictures, say, you would not have raised your hand when I asked you to. If I had written a musical score in the opening pages of this book, you might be humming a cheerful tune at the moment, but I don't think you would have raised your hand. It is only language that can get you to the point two paragraphs ago and it is only language which can make you raise your right hand or be unsure whether to raise it.

Language is the mind and the mind is language. *We are language!* That is what I hope to convince you of as you surf the sentences and paragraphs of this book. If you care to get off your board for a while and sample the water, I think you'll find who you were looking for.

Structure of book

The book is divided into three broad parts: language, mind and experience. In part A, I lay out the unique nature of language before claiming that language is the mind in part B. Part C is really where this book started many years ago as I explore how language is used and experienced in society and the imagination.

Part A consists of 4 chapters and is concerned with language. In chapter 1, I argue that language needs to be considered within

Preface

its own dimension separate to the physical world. It creates its own structures and events that are not part of the space-time continuum that we are familiar with. Language is qualitatively different to matter and stuff. It is also qualitatively different to, say, the colour red or the sound of a tree falling in a forest. Language truly is in a world of its *own*! As such we need to think of language as the fifth dimension over and above the four dimension of space and time. In chapters 2 and 3, I outline the two special properties of language that give it this uniqueness: reference and grammar. Reference is the ability of language to seemingly point to certain entities in the physical world. Grammar is the ability of language to predicate ideas about those entities. Reference in essence gives us a 'leg up' to get us above the tree canopy so we can see parts of the forest for what they are. Grammar then gives us the vision to see the forest as a whole and into the distance. However, I argue in these two chapters that all is not what it seems. Crucial to my argument is the idea that language does not represent the physical world as we traditionally assume it does but in fact represents itself. It creates its own world, structures and realities and leaves the physical world indeterminate. Chapter 4 is a short chapter but the most important one in this book. It introduces the *Linguistic Paradox* which is the heart of every misconception we have with language and the world. The paradox is in operation at all times although we pretend to lift it now and again to peek into the physical world.

Part B of this book is concerned with the mind and consciousness. I have already said that language is the DNA of the mind and chapter 5 attempts to explicate this idea. I show how only linguistic thoughts can be considered true thoughts. All other non-linguistic thinking is really just non-conscious brain activity. Even viewing a painting or listening to a musical instrument are just brain activities which we can never be conscious of unless we token them as linguistic thought. Chapter 6 looks at the closely related notion of consciousness which I

take to be a special state of the mind that focuses inwards on a particular subject. This chapter also considers what questions are; we can learn a lot I believe about ourselves and our *raison d'être* from this aspect of language. Chapter 7 considers whether there are other minds. How can I be sure that you, the reader, have a mind like mine? It also looks at artificial intelligence and what might happen to our minds after we die.

Part C takes the notion of language as the DNA of the mind and explores how we experience it in society and our own imagination. In chapter 8, I look at some searching episodes from social discourse and examine the language at the heart of these in order to better understand why these controversies arose. In chapter 9, I look at the field of science and ask if language is an appropriate medium for investigating the physical world? Does science need to get a new language? In chapter 10, I bring together a number of thought experiments and consider some final questions which have consequences for our existence and our ontological status as human beings.

Part A

LANGUAGE

IT'S LANGUAGE, STUPID!

1. Introduction

A thought experiment

To begin, I'd like to start with a thought experiment for you to consider. Imagine that you are sitting in a hotel room. You are two weeks into a visit to a city somewhere in the world. It doesn't matter where this city is. You have spent the whole two weeks exploring the city: north, south, east and west. There is nowhere on the map that you haven't visited yet. You have even been up the towers and down the mines in your efforts to explore this city. In short we can say that you have explored the city in all three dimensions.

In your hand you hold a device. I won't say what this device is at the moment but you can probably guess. As you open up this device and scan it with your eyes, suddenly, a secret passage, a fifth dimension, opens up in front of you. You move in to this passage and continue to explore the city in a hitherto unknown dimension. (Think of this passage as akin to platform 9³/₄ in the Harry Potter series if this helps you.) This secret passage doesn't run north, south, east or west. It doesn't run upwards or downwards. In fact it takes up no room in the fabric of space-time that we are familiar with. Through the passage, though, you are able to explore the city in ways that you could never do just by walking the streets.

The device that you hold in your hand, of course, is a book and the passage, or fifth dimension, is the written language that is imprinted on to the face of each page. Let's assume that the

book is a tourist guide of the city you are visiting, and as you trace the language on the page in your mind, it opens up a new dimension which allows you to explore the city through 'streets' and 'alleyways' which don't appear on any map. A new world has opened up before you and you have been given a new map of the city. Suppose the city is Agra and the first paragraph (1.1), according to a popular travel guide, reads like this.

1.1

The magical allure of the Taj Mahal draws tourists to Agra like moths to a wondrous flame. And despite the hype, it's every bit as good as you've heard. But the Taj is not a stand-alone attraction. The legacy of the Mughal empire has left a magnificent fort and a liberal sprinkling of fascinating tombs and mausoleums; and there's also fun to be had in the bustling chowks (marketplaces).

(India by Lonely Planet^[2])

As you read the guide, think about how the language creates a passage through a dimension that didn't exist before. As your mind 'travels' through this dimension, think about how the words flow from left to right into sentences and the sentences into a paragraph. There is a sense of being transported somewhere: to the Taj Mahal, tombs and mausoleums; a sense of travelling perhaps through a fort or busy marketplaces. This is not a trip through space however, but a journey through the dimension of language.

You may be thinking at this point that this thought experiment is a bit of a fiddle. After all, we read language in books and on screens every day and we don't normally perceive an extra dimension popping up each time we do this. Nor do we get a sense of 'travelling' and 'walking' the words and sentences in the same way that we would walk the streets of a city. But my argument here is not based on language as some wishy-washy, mystical dream-world, better suited for fantasy fiction or make-believe. My claim is just this: that language is, and should be considered as, a dimension in the fabric of the universe just as space and time are. As we go about our daily lives, we don't

11. Conclusion

normally perceive space and time as dimensions in and of themselves; we just accept them for what they are. The same goes for language. Scientists have long since speculated as to whether extra dimensions of reality are hidden from us, rolled up tightly in front of us so that we do not perceive them. Language is one such dimension, I suggest, although probably not the type those scientists were expecting! I will probably need a lot more text and pages than a thought experiment to convince you of this, however, so stick around for a few pages if you can as we unravel this dimension of language.



Figure 1.1 Language rolled up as a hidden dimension

Agra travel guide analysis

A traditional interpretation of language in the Agra guide in 1.1 would say that the paragraph merely describes the city of Agra, or *represents* it. However my claim in this book is that language is not merely a means to describe the physical world but is in fact the *world itself*. Language creates structures and events that are separate from the physical world and opens up an extra dimension so that as we read we perceive this dimension and travel through it. Let's take a sentence from the paragraph to show how language creates this new space.

1.2

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

The magical allure of the Taj Mahal draws ...

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

... tourists to Agra like moths to a wondrous flame.

Notice how the sentence in 1.2 starts on the left with the word 'the' and moves rightwards towards the final word 'flame'. Each word is like a flagstone as we traverse this 'road' with our mind; we end up on the other side of the road with the basic idea that 'something draws someone to somewhere like somehow'. These flagstones though are not just simply meaningless blocks of sandstone linked together in a chain. Each flagstone in itself has meaning and a special relationship with the other stones in the chain. For example, the 'something' in this sentence is the *subject* which is in a syntagmatic relation with the *predicate*, the rest of the sentence (see 1.3). (The piping character | highlights a linguistic relation, not a physical one.)

1.3

●	●
The magical allure of the Taj Mahal <i>subject</i>	draws tourists to Agra like moths to a wondrous flame. <i>predicate</i>

The *head* of the subject is the word 'allure' which is a noun (see 1.4). Other words within the phrase act to modify this headword. For example, the *adjective* 'magical' specifies the quality of the allurement and suggests some enchanted charm or attraction. The *prepositional phrase* 'of the Taj Mahal' acts to restrict the head word to one particular monument.

1.4

●	●	●	●
The <i>article</i>	magical <i>adjective</i>	allure <i>head</i>	of the Taj Mahal <i>prepositional phrase</i>

In the predicate (1.5), the *verb* 'draw' means to attract or to pull the *object* 'tourists' to some *location* as specified by the phrase 'to Agra'. The last part of the sentence uses a *simile* 'like moths to a wondrous flame' to suggest metaphorically how this attraction takes place. The Taj Mahal is a 'wondrous flame' and the tourists are 'moths' who cannot be anything but drawn to the Taj's mystical qualities.

11. Conclusion

1.5

● ● ● ●
draws | tourists | to Agra | like moths to a wondrous flame.
verb *object* *location* *simile*

It is not important to understand the grammatical terminology I am using here. What I want to illustrate are the special relations between the parts of the sentence, relations which exist only in the linguistic domain. It is not the physical proximity of the words that is special but the linguistic nature of the relations. The result is that within the space of seventeen words the writer has created something which is so unique and sophisticated that only language can carry it. Language lifts us out of the physical world into another dimension through which we can journey. It allows us to create and follow structures and events that are not part of the physical world; they are not part of the physical space and time dimensions that we are accustomed to.

The author of this travel guide has chosen to describe the city of Agra in their own unique way to capture the readers' attention but there are many other ways we could have described it. In fact, there are probably an infinite number of expressions we could have used each one creating a unique and fresh description of the city. The point is not that there are different ways to describe something but that each description is situated within the linguistic dimension and created afresh. Language enables us to create new ideas and descriptions whenever we want to without the need to build them in to the physical domain. This extra dimension is always available, right in front of us, and seemingly we are only too willing to fill it up with language at every opportunity.

The main thesis of this book then is that language in itself is separate to the physical world. Language creates its own structures and realities that don't form part of the physical world. By *physical world* I mean the dimensions of space and time and the matter and energy that fill up these dimensions. The idea that the Taj Mahal can have a 'magical allure' is not part of the fabric of

the Taj Mahal itself. It is not part of the physical world. There is no 'magical allure' hidden in the bricks and mortar of the building. Nor is there in any sense a capacity within the Taj itself to 'draw tourists' – the Taj is not a gigantic magnet. And tourists who go there go under their own steam on airplanes, boats and rickshaws, not as 'moths to a wondrous flame'. It is language that has enabled and created these concepts and language that holds and supports them.

Some readers might pass off the language of the Agra guide as non-existent fiction: something that is not real, just in the mind of the beholder. The mind however is central to our identities as individuals and what goes on in here can be just as real as the Taj Mahal itself. Language I suggest is the DNA of the mind. It is the basic building blocks of everyday thought, communication and society. We *are* language in a sense. Everything that we think, say or do is constituted in language. Our homes, our schools, our institutions all rely on language to function as we know it. Without language there would be no education, no history, no politics and no law. Our societies would be severely restricted to smaller groupings and our relations with each other would be purely physical. There would be no internet, television, sport nor humour, and you would not be here reading this book. And you would probably not know of the Taj Mahal nor of its 'magical allure' and its ability to draw tourists like 'moths to a wondrous flame'. It is language that has created this 'magical allure' and 'moths', and language that creates and enables the world as we know it. And like Alice in Carroll's rabbit hole, we are only too keen to follow it down.

You might be wondering why I am claiming that language is a dimension. Could language not just be part of our brain resulting from some particular patterning of the neurons? This is idea of monism – the belief that there is just one kind of phenomena in the universe that we inhabit. This book is arguing against this idea. A dimension is not something that we can easily touch or feel but we perceive it as fundamental to our existence

THIS IS A SAMPLE
THE NUMBER OF PAGES
DISPLAYED IS LIMITED

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