

CLASH OF “HIGHER” AND “LOWER” SELVES SPLINTERS GROUP

COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

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IF YOU WANT TO GO FAR, GO TOGETHER

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Language We Live

By generations of Magic Residents, adapted by Harper Hug

What do you think about human population increase, natural resource depletion, environmental pollution, and social ills? How successfully may we address these issues with technological innovation aimed at altering the material world, or with cultural evolution driven by governmental policy or “market forces”? Or are these “problems” and “solutions,” as well as many others, mutually reinforcing maladaptive behaviors? How may we shed light on such questions, and by what transformative process might we reach a vantage point from which to examine our circumstances and actions from fresh perspective?

The languages we hear and speak, read and write, are defining qualities of our being. We offer here a few ideas about the role of language in our lives, and about changes to language by which we at Magic, a valuescience-based residential service learning community in Palo Alto, California, are aiming to enhance our own and others’ capacity to adapt successfully to the rapidly proliferating and exponentially growing challenges of our times.

Importance of Word

Though many organisms communicate with others of the same species, humans are unique in extensiveness and complexity of word language. With each passing day, linguistic enterprise—hundreds of separate languages, thousands of dialects, wireless and fiber-optic networks, computers, phones, and high-speed presses, print and broadcast media, libraries and archives of books, periodicals, correspondence, electronic media, and more—is becoming more central to human existence.

Anyone reading these words likely experiences much less of nature directly than did most people in the past or do most humans today. We’ve stripped away darkness of night, cold of winter, heat of summer, force of wind, and wet of rain. What we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch—buildings, roads, machines, electronic devices, clothing, etc.—is increasingly already shaped by human endeavor.

Perhaps more importantly, we experience both nature and artifact through a remarkably pervasive and influential phenomenon of our own making: word. Increasingly, what we “know” is word representation of our own and others’ experience. We live awash in a sea of word.

Maps and Territories

We distinguish fire from the word “fire.” When we learn about fire by placing a hand in flame, we understand something different from what we learn by hearing another admonish, “Fire burns.”

Interacting directly with fire we experience it more fully. By continuing interaction we may test and refine our understanding.

Relying upon word, however, we distort and delete. Passing our words to others, or hearing theirs, we are often loosely coupled to the experiences behind them, and we commonly lack ready means to check how well we match word to experience. Many of us take great pleasure in the thought of learning from others’ mistakes. Yet by our reliance upon symbolic representation, we may more often learn their mistakes.

Though some tout “virtual reality” as a coming attraction, we live increasingly “virtual” existences from the moment we begin to acquire language. The world of word is but an approximation. Like mapmakers, we labor from imperfect knowledge with limited symbols. And like map users, we travel more safely when we remember that words are as distinct from what we represent with them as a menu is from food.

By learning to be more aware as we apprehend, construct, and disseminate language, we may gain capacity to develop more as we intend and to shape a world more to our liking.

Language as Mirror of Experience

Humans write and speak to communicate diverse messages: joy and sorrow, technique and purpose, memories and aspirations. In language we see reflected what those who speak and write today and those who spoke and wrote in the past deemed worthy of communicating. Just as anatomy and physiology reflect DNA-encoded information sufficient for ancestors to survive and reproduce, so does contemporary language evidence communication strategies adequate for us to reach the present moment. And just as with each act of reproduction we create new combinations of DNA that their bearers will test for fitness in an evolving environment, so with each new word and construction, and with every iteration of pre-existing vocabulary and grammar, do we create and recreate language to be put to this test. In an environment as quickly changing as ours, commensurate alteration of language may be essential to our well-being.

Experience as Mirror of Language

To the extent that we think and communicate verbally, we conform our thoughts and how we express them to the particular qualities, including vocabulary, grammar, and syntax, of whatever language we're using. Native tongue, second and subsequent languages, jargon, slang, dialect, and even personal preference for certain words and sentence structures are all factors in individual linguistic identity or idiolect. By linguistic habit we reveal and redefine self, shape listeners and readers, and lay a foundation for interaction with nature and artifact.

Benjamin Whorf, a pioneering linguist who lived during the first half of the 20th century, hypothesized that the language into which we're born and that we evolve over a lifetime serves as both a foundation for and a constraint upon how we view the world. Investigators have since confirmed this assertion at every scale from individual to linguistic communities comprising hundreds of millions.

By examining the place of words we read, write, hear, speak, and think in our lives, each of us may gain a better understanding of how person and idiolect, language community and social structures, become reciprocal images. By learning to be more aware as we apprehend, construct, and disseminate language, we may gain capacity to develop more as we intend and to shape a world more to our liking.

Freedom

Many of us both celebrate and seek personal freedom, defined as "exemption from necessity or restraint." By abandoning language of obligation and compulsion we may enhance our own and others' freedom.

Consider words like "must," "ought," "should," and "have to." Do you speak and think in these terms? Do you interpret them literally? If so, who's demanding what

of whom? What penalties do you imagine, and which do people actually pay for refusal to comply? How often are these outcomes as dire as we imply with imperatives? Perhaps you "automatically" understand these words as mere expression of preference. If so, with what language do you mean and understand real exigency?

With imperatives real and imagined we deny freedom. Why do we shrink from admitting our or others' self-determination? Consider the many examples of the kind, "I want to..., but I must...." What's truly at stake? What will be lost if we ignore what follows "must"?

How often do we employ imperatives to avoid reconsidering the justifications for our lives? Are we apprehensive that if we examine these closely we'll find them wanting, that if we pursue them far enough we'll threaten ideas of meaning and purpose at the foundation of our existence? How much freedom do we surrender by imagining we may escape adverse effects of fuzzy thinking by refusing to look at it?

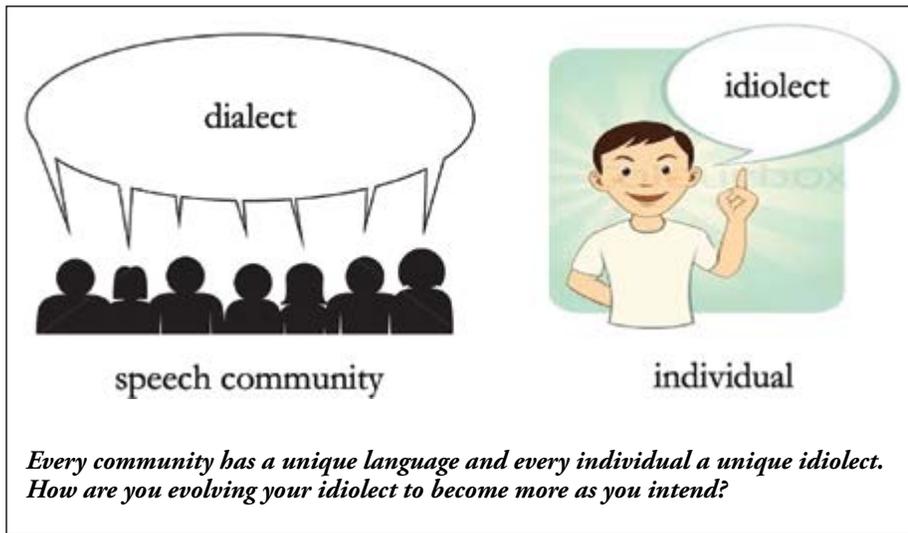
What about the occasions when we terminate interaction with others by saying, "I want to stay, but I have to go"? Do we really want to stay? If we really want to go, we may silently rationalize that we're protecting others' feelings. Might we instead be acting to forestall reciprocal future rejection by the person or people we're leaving?

Looking beyond how we erode our own freedom with imperatives, what do we achieve by telling others what they "should," "ought to," "must," or "have to" do or be? Who are we to claim to be cor-



Magicians converse over dinner about language, thought, and perception.

Photos/images courtesy of Magic



rect in such conclusive directives? How do we justify imposing on others what may be merely our personal preferences?

As we contemplate such questions, we can shed light by re-examining the underpinnings of what we portray as demands and necessities. Often these are just some of many possible lines of reasoning that we build upon only a very partial selection of available evidence, and often we'll be hard-pressed to prove or even convincingly argue their superiority to alternatives. When we see this, we may become better able to exercise broader choice and to support others in doing so.

If we forego imperatives, with what shall we replace them? We may gain by explaining evidence, including “gut” feelings and other emotions, and reasons for what we do or recommend. Rather than command, “You must tell the truth,” let’s confess, “I’ve lied and have rarely felt good doing so.”

With imperatives we divide. Someone commands and someone obeys. When we turn them inward with “I must” etc., we increase potential for internal conflict by dividing self into source and recipient of demand. When we issue or heed imperatives, we raise risk of external conflict. By relying more often upon understanding of consequences and communicating to grow our shared understanding, how much better will we cultivate harmony within and with others?

Guilt

For speakers of English, the verb form “should have” may be little but language of guilt. Consider, for example, “I should have been kinder to you.” With such words we express desire for something other than what we remember. To wish for a different past is futile. What’s done is done. We may be more satisfied if we accept the consequences of what we’ve done and been, affirm principle, admit error, and formulate a plan for remedial action without “should have.” For example, “I value kindness. I was inconsiderate to you. I apologize. I intend to be more thoughtful in the future.”

Many of us have felt guilty. Upon reflection perhaps you can imagine living guiltlessly. Rather than suffer today as we bemoan past behavior, can we concentrate upon being grateful for what we’ve learned and upon how we may apply it? Guilt may be more an obstacle than an aid to becoming more as we intend.

Regret

You may agree that “would have” and “could have,” though lacking the element of compulsion present in “should have,” are other words by which we may express desire to deny what is already done. Perhaps we may fairly label them a language of regret. For many, regret is as unpleasant—or nearly so—as guilt.

How will we change if we replace “would have” and “could have” with words of resolution: “Next time, I plan to...”? What burden will we lift from others by sparing them

criticism in terms of what they “would have” or “could have” been or done? How much more effectively will all of us cooperate if we fix our attention on what lies ahead and how we can apply lessons of the past to act for common good?

Generosity

Almost all of us recoil at the thought of being greedy. Yet few of us have mastered a language consistent with generosity, a language of expanded self, by which we unwaveringly express determination to find mutual satisfaction, rather than settle for gain achieved at others’ expense.

To what extent do we offer, and to what degree do we demand? How often in a day do we say, “I want?” and how often do we ask, “What may I offer you?”

In what circumstances might we beneficially intervene with, “How can we both come away from this interaction feeling good?” And when might we simply give quietly and anonymously, rather than draw attention to our giving and implicitly demand reciprocity?

Violence

Many, especially the males among us, liberally employ language of violence. We “whip” each other in sports, and “beat” our rivals to the market in business. As we move into an era when individual human futures are increasingly joined, and when we’re with myriad technologies growing capacity to harm each other, the circumstances in which violence among people is adaptive may be shrinking.

Might we benefit by more often emphasizing more peaceful and gentler aspects of life? “Both of us played well.” “Customers flocked to our new product.” Will we necessarily talk peacefully to live that way? What is a language of peace?

Adversarialism

Both at home and abroad, critics of the United States label us an overly-adversarial society. Some assert that we live with proportionately more laws, lawyers, and lawsuits than any other people. In recent years what was once a prudent admonition, “Read the fine print,” has become an impossible task as we’ve saddled ever more interactions with voluminous “terms and conditions.”

Collectively we devote enormous quantities of life to squabbling over words about blame and responsibility, often with little consideration for potential to improve all our lives by reallocating the same resources to learn more cooperative attitudes, and thus become better able to rely upon communicative styles less rigid. With the rise of (anti)social media, we've descended into our respective redoubts, reinforcing polarization with divisive invective.

Timidity

In a related development, many aspiring to conciliation are taking refuge in language of qualification, sometimes equivocal to the point of emptiness, and seemingly designed to protect us against later being held to any of a panoply of rigid doctrinaire standards. We are "willing" or "committed," and we "promote" and "encourage." With such language do we undermine capacity to achieve a measurable result? Perhaps if we're a bit less harsh in criticizing each other, a little more generous in shouldering responsibility for failure and sharing credit for success, more of us will be better able to express intention in definite terms, and to realize it.

Humility

"Politicians are crooks." "(Race, religion, nationality) are (adjective)." "Love is..." If we use the verb "to be" to establish our own private experience as "the" reality, we invite dispute. With bold, sweeping generalizations about good and evil we reveal misplaced confidence in what we know and become more vulnerable to ill-effects of acting while ignorant of our ignorance. If we're quick to judge, to assert views, and to defend ideas far beyond personal experience, we may be revealing a desire for control of that which lies without us. To what extent are such ambitions consistent with attaining peace within and with others?

Can we learn to enjoy a consciousness filled more with questions than with answers? Will we create a more healthful and adaptive social milieu by shaping a larger portion of thought as gentle interrogatives? Each of us is but a small portion of humankind. Perhaps we will become more satisfied if we think of ourselves as possessing only one eight-billionth or so of whatever truth is accessible to humankind.

Possessiveness

For at least several centuries, the architects of Euro-American culture have sought satisfaction and happiness by increasing environmental manipulation. Central to this process, some believe, have been ideas of ownership, which we've extended to human beings explicitly with slavery and implicitly in a surprising number of other relationships (e.g., my spouse, her child).

How do we further or limit achievement of our purposes by talking as if any person owns the Earth or some part of it, or as if some other person is "ours"? Can we develop a consciousness of stewardship towards the Earth and respect for each other by using less often the possessive, both the verbs "to have," "to own," etc. and the pronouns "my," "our," "your," etc.? How will relationships between parent and child be altered if we cease speaking of my son, daughter, father, mother? Can we denote these relationships simply as "son John," "mother"?

Integration

How commonly do we fragment self with word? Many refer to body, mind, spirit, soul, ego, id, conscience, as though we can separate these. Speakers of some languages (e.g., Balinese) are reported to find such talk nonsensical, responding with puzzlement to, "I feel physically fine but I'm terribly depressed," and similar statements.

What do you intend when you say, "I made myself do it," or "She forced herself to go?" Often we intend to communicate mixed feelings about something. Maybe by making this explicit we can become more comfortable with it. "With misgivings I did it," or "She went reluctantly"? May we feel less conflict if we eschew partial selves? Will we feel more relaxed and at ease when we live as "I" rather than as "I" and "myself"?

Subjectivity

As we shed the languages of obligation, guilt, and divided self, we can more clearly see how powerful we are. Instead of being passive objects—"I was stung by a bee," or "You make me angry"—we become more creators of our own experience: "I stepped on a bee," or "I'm fuming." Viewing the world this way, we're more likely to ascribe value to personal change. We're subjects acting, feeling, being. Rather than concentrating on external factors, we may turn more attention to choosing and acting wisely.

In some contexts, people with power over others have decreed the eradication of self in written communication by mandating depersonalized action and passive voice. We may see such edicts reflected in much contemporary "scientific" literature: "The material was processed...and it was observed..." Many within and without the scientific establishment assert that such language is intended to bolster claims to "objectivity," and thus enhance credibility of scientific findings. Yet competent scientists agree that sciencing is rooted in a combination of subjectivity and reproducibility of results. Those who represent science otherwise undermine its essence, making it less attractive and less accessible to many who might support, join, and benefit from it, and rendering it vulnerable to claims of authority that transcends subjectivity and are inimical to its essence.





Exchange

For millennia humans have been making measured and recorded exchange the basis for more and more interactions. Today we fill popular media with advice about “getting as much as we give” (or more) in such nominally unconditional relationships as marriage and parenting. We routinely talk of “exchanging gifts,” without considering whether this may be oxymoron.

How will we ever behave in a manner which evidences compassion for those whose needs exceed their resources, unless we de-emphasize the language of bookkeeping? How might we benefit by contemplating a world where gift is common, owing unknown? By what language might we support such a vision?

Negativity

How much negativity shall we entertain? Much that we portray negatively can be rephrased positively. How do you feel when you hear negativity? How do you feel when you speak it? Can you notice any difference if you speak in terms of being “ignorant,” rather than “not knowing,” of being “yet to do” rather than “not having done?” What ways can you discover to reduce negativity and how might you improve your and others’ lives by doing so?

Absolutes

“All...none...every...always...never...” With these short, simple words, we communicate powerful and extreme meaning. We live finite lives of finite experience. Rarely if ever will any of us enjoy knowledge so complete that we may accurately represent it with absolutes. By the simple act of adding a qualifier like “almost” or “nearly” we can remember and remind others of limits to what we know.

Superlatives

“Best...worst...most...least...biggest...” How readily in an age of advertising hyperbole do we utter these? But as with other absolutes, superlatives are generally beyond our ken. To pretend otherwise may be delusion. More consistent with what we actually experience are comparatives like “better...worse...more...less...bigger...”

Reification

One specific and common way in which many of us avoid the role of subject is by reification, giving lifelike qualities to abstractions. We say for example, “Her pragmatism paved the way to victory,” leaving us to wonder where we can find some of this substance to lay before us as we move towards personal goals. Are we better able to see a path to emulating another’s success if we say, “She was pragmatic and triumphed”?

Learning to think as subjects, we become less prone to reification. We more readily assume responsibility for the consequences of what we do. Instead of complaining, “The pollution is awful today,” we admit, “We are poisoning each other by fouling the air.” “Unemployment is up,” we translate to, “Larger numbers of people are failing to agree upon terms for sharing work and rewards.” Unless we enjoy surrendering agency and living at the effect of our surroundings, why reify?

Time

When before in history has time been so precisely and ubiquitously measured? Today in small villages around the globe we find cell phones keeping time with accuracy barely imaginable only a few decades ago. As we’ve made more precise, multiplied, more widely distributed, and synchronized timekeeping technologies, we’ve drawn nearly all of humanity into a megamachine operating to a single rhythm.

“Time is money!” is an expression with which most of us are familiar. We speak of time as invested, saved, wasted, spent, etc., evidencing the ubiquity of laboring for money. Do we abase self and others by pretending human life can be accurately measured by the monetary value we assign it? Can the net worth of the myriad beings and doings of any of us be captured by a single accounting of our monetary assets? How differently will we perceive the world when we replace “time” with “life”? How do investing, saving, wasting, spending translate in relation to “life”? How much more careful will we become to evidence, with all we are and do, the values we cherish?

Channels

Psychologists have determined that each of us relies upon a different mixture of sensory input. Some are tactile, some visual, some auditory, etc. For example, three different individuals might respond to the same presentation by saying, “I get what you mean,” “I see the point,” and “That’s music to my ears.” By learning to discern others’ preferred sensory modes, we may tailor what we say and write to them, and understand them better as well.

Cost and Price

Frequently we ask, “What did that cost?” and the person of whom we inquire responds with a dollar price. In a superficial sense, the communication between us has been successful, since often we ask in order to learn what we might expect to pay.

Implicit in the laws of nature are costs which we only partially reflected in the prices we generate from our own partial understandings of value. Examples include pollution, depletion of finite stocks of natural resources, climate destabilization, loss of biodiversity, and a host of other factors yet to be monetized adequately, or at all.

As humans operate more rapidly and on larger scales, we encounter more limits of natural systems. Thinking in terms of ecological costs, including “externalities,” we may see more clearly how to conform economic ideas of value to ecological ones so that we reflect true cost better with price.

Development

We frequently hear calls for “development” to improve the quality of human life. Those who advocate “development,” whether in the cities and rural areas of the US or in the rest of the world, usually mean conversion of nature to artifact (e.g., building, paving, and manufactured objects). The history of such activities is one of increasing burden for many and privilege for few. We’ve more buildings, roads, and manufactured objects on Earth today than ever before, yet more people starved or suffered debilitating disease in the past decade than in any prior.

Using “development” as code for the behaviors by which we’ve arrived at our current predicament begs the questions, “What words shall we use to describe what we now call development?” and “What kind of development will further common interests?” The first we can answer simply by describing what we’re doing: commanding resource from nature, converting it to our use, and returning it degraded to nature. Of course we do this in many specific ways. The second we can answer with reference to protecting qualities of nature with which we’ve co-evolved and on which we rely for well-being, and to evolving information, both genetic and learned, by which we can maintain a match with the world around us.

Conclusion

These are but a sampling of the changes that we at Magic are testing as we tailor language to serve our vision of healthy people shaping a cooperative society in an hospitable environment so that all may enjoy myriad satisfactions as we live and die well. If you search, you may discover a whole slew of other linguistic quirks and nuances more important to you than the examples offered here. 🌿

Harper Hug led others currently living at Magic in adapting for COMMUNITIES this writing, authored by Magicians over decades. Harper graduated from high school in June 2022, is enrolled at the National Personal Training Institute, and has begun studying psychology at Santa Barbara Community College. Harper lived his first 18 years at Magic (www.ecomagic.org) where he was regarded from childhood as community “glue” for his ability to bring people together in physical activities from hiking to resistance training and in Magic public service projects from feeding the hungry to habitat stewardship.



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