

Ordinary Language, Visible Language and Virtual Reality

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First of all, let's talk about ordinary language, which is probably the closest thing to a miracle in the natural world. It's the major neurological manifestation of difference between ourselves and other animals and primates, and it's not a physiological difference, it's a difference in behavior. Language represents the most complex behavior ever observed in any animal, and certainly it's the most complex thing any of us ever learns to do. We're born into what William James calls a "blooming, buzzing confusion," but by the acquisition of words we mosaic over various sectors of this blooming, buzzing confusion with words. We replace the unknown with the known through the substitution of words, and by the time a child is two or three they have completely created a cultural mosaic of words that is interposed between them and reality. Reality from that point on is only an unconfirmed rumor brought through the medium of language, and every culture accentuates different parts of reality, so that in a sense every culture is a different reality. Language is the stuff of the world; not quarks or wave-packets or neutrinos, but language. Everything is made of language. All the constructs of science are actually interlocking constructs of syntax. So that's ordinary language, which seems to define reality through a kind of process of lying about it. For instance, by creating subject-object distinctions, which are in fact not true to the matter, but somehow operationally necessary for us to navigate in the kind of lower-dimensional space that we inhabit.

Then there is the phenomenon of non-ordinary, or what I call "visible" language, and this is very interesting to me. This is where technology, virtual reality, cybernetics, human-machine interfacing can actually make an impact and explore a frontier. Visual language is a transformation of the physiological impulse towards syntax into a final product, speech, which is not heard with the ears but beheld with the eyes. It's very interesting that all our metaphors of clarity of speech are visual metaphors. We say, "I see what you mean, he spoke clearly." This means that at the organismic level we associate a higher signal clarity with visual input, and on DMT and other tryptamine psychedelics you actually experience the field of language, both heard and self-generated as something that is visibly beheld. It's almost as though the project of communication becomes high-speed sculpture in a conceptual dimension made of light

and intentionality. This would remain a kind of esoteric performance on the part of shamans at the height of intoxication if it were not for the fact that electronics and electronic cultural media, computers, make it possible for us to actually create records of these higher linguistic modalities. In other words, it's possible to imagine a virtual reality that was driven by a speech-operated synthesizer where the various parts of ordinary speech — adjectives, modifiers, subjects and objects — were interpreted by the cybernetic environment as topological manifolds of various shapes, so that speech would then generate a visibly beheld topology; and it's possible to imagine a future world where in setting up marriage contracts or in negotiating corporate takeovers, in areas where clear communication, clear expression of intentionality was very important, that people would actually go into the virtual reality to use the visible language because its capacity for conveying intent would be much greater than ordinary spoken language.

It's not for nothing that Plato connected up the notion of the Good, the True, and ultimately, the Beautiful. The Beautiful, of those three concepts, is the primary concept, because it is visibly beheld, because it is seen. This is the great convincing power of the psychedelic experience: that it ultimately appeals to us through the sense that we value most, that we existentially relate to as the most authentic, and that is the visual. Visible language is a kind of telepathy, because if I make a statement in visual language and then you and I regard my statement, we are somehow made one in the act of regarding, because meaning is not being created out of interiorized dictionaries which we each consult in the privacy of our own mind, but rather meaning is a visible manifold in the public domain. Meaning goes public, and the differences between people then decline toward being insignificant. It's a kind of final confirmation of the McLuhan apotheosis, and I think visible language is coming. Life in the imagination is to be the life of creativity carried on through these virtual environments driven by linguistic engines.

The starships of the future — in other words, the vehicles of the future — which will explore the high frontier of the unknown will be syntactical. The engineers of the future will be poets. This is what virtual reality holds out to us — the possibility of walking into the constructs of the imagination. In a way culture *is* that. Our cities, bridges, highways, airliners and art galleries are condensations out of the imagination, but at tremendous cost, because we must make them out of matter. Once we can make them out of light, out of electrons, then we won't build skyscrapers 120 stories high, we'll build them as high as we want. Roof height will no longer be a factor ruled by cost effectiveness and gravity, it will be a parameter ruled by the imagination, as will all other parameters, and then we will discover what man truly is — when we are able to erect, stabilize, share and explore our dreams in a kind of virtual hyperspace that, carefully analyzed, is seen to be linguistic. That's what its connectors are made out of, that's what its ferroconcrete and steel is, the edifice of language. This is what the stuff of the imagination is made of and I think this is what we're moving toward. The psychedelic shamans have always known this. Now the psychedelic underground art community points toward this goal and leads

the way.

If we could see language, if language were a project of understanding that used the eyes for the extraction of meaning rather than the ears, that would be a kind of telepathy. There would be both a fusion of the observer with the object observed and with the person communicated with. The place in nature where something like this has actually evolved and occurred is in the cephalopods: the squid and the octopi. These are animals that diverged from the line of development that leads to human beings over 600 million years ago. They're molluscs, they're related to escargot, it's an organism very different from ourselves. Nevertheless, one of the things that evolutionary biologists always talk about is the convergent evolution between the eyes of cephalopods and the eyes of higher mammals. This is because the cephalopods live in an extremely complex visual environment; and, in fact, they have evolved a form of communication that approximates this visible language that I'm talking about, because these octopi have chromatophores all over the exterior of their bodies. Chromatophores are cells that can change color. Now, many people know that octopi can change color, but they think it's for camouflage, for blending in with the environment. This is not at all the case. The reason octopi change colors — in a very large repertoire of stripes, dots, blushes, traveling shades and tonal shifts — is because this is for them a channel of linguistic communication. In other words, they don't transduce their linguistic intentionality into small mouth noises like we do, small mouth noises which then move as sound across space in the form of vibrations of the air. Rather, they actually change their appearance in accordance with their linguistic intent.

What this boils down to is that they physically become their meaning, and one octopus observing another is watching the unfolding of internalized neurological states within the organism being reflected in color changes on the surface of the skin. Now, these octopi not only can change their color; because they're soft-bodied creatures, they can also change the texture of their surface from smooth to rugose and folded. They can also fold and unfold and reveal and conceal different parts of their body very rapidly, so they're capable of a visual dance of communication that is an extremely dense kind of visual signal. In the so-called benthic octopi, the species that have evolved in very deep water where very little light reaches, they have evolved light-emitting phosphorescent organs, some of them with membranes like eyelids over them, so that even in the darkness of the abyssal depths of the ocean they can carry out this dance of light, self-enfoldment, color change and surface texture which is their linguistic style. In fact, the only way an octopus can experience a private thought is to release a cloud of ink into the water into which it can retreat briefly and hide its mental nakedness from its followers. This kind of biologically intrinsic wiring into the potential of language is something that we may be able to mimic and achieve, using psychedelic drugs as the inspiration for the direction given to a virtual reality development program. In other words, we might be able to create kinds of visibly beheld syntax that would be the human equivalent of the dance of light, texture and positioning that constitutes the grammar and syntax of squid and octopi.

Operationally, what these psychedelics do is dissolve cultural conditioning. Cultural conditioning is like software, but beneath the software is the hardware of brain and organism, and by dissolving the cultural conditioning to speak English, German, Swahili or whatever, then one returns to this *ursprach*, this primal language of the animal body, and can explore the real dimension of feeling that culture has a tendency to cut us off from. Culture replaces authentic feeling with words. As an example of this, imagine an infant lying in its cradle and the window is open, and into the room comes something, marvelous, mysterious, glittering, shedding light of many colors, movement, sound, a transformative hierophany of integrated perception. The child is enthralled, and then the mother comes into the room and says to the child, "That's a bird, baby, that's a bird." Instantly the complex wave of the angel, peacock, iridescent, transformative mystery is collapsed into the word. All mystery is gone, the child learns this is a bird, this is a bird, and by the time we're five or six years old all the mystery of reality has been carefully tiled over with words. "This is a bird, this is a house, this is the sky," and we seal ourselves in within a linguistic shell of disempowered perception, and what the psychedelics do is burst apart this cultural envelope of confinement and return us to the legacy and birthright of the organism.