

# CHAPTER TWO

## THE LEXICULTURAL PROPAGATION OF CONCEPTS

THOMAS DYLAN DANIEL  
TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY

**Abstract:** The term ‘lexicultural realm’ refers to the mix of various threads present within a linguistic feat such as writing or speaking. A lexicultural realm is a kind of abstract, mental space within which these feats have extension and duration. Reading involves placing oneself into this kind of realm, and writing involves creating such a space. Recognition of the sense in which this process involves corporeality is key to understanding how language works to allow individuals to relate to each other and to the society within which they use language as well as to the very possibility of truth. When Einstein said he had seen further than other men because he was able to stand on the shoulders of giants, this is the phenomenon he was referring to.

The world is changing rapidly. With the internet, information is passed more readily than ever before from one place to another. Language, specifically binary code, makes this phenomenon possible. To philosophically approach language after such a remarkable linguistic innovation, which can simplify almost any message to 1s and 0s, it is necessary to creatively and concisely survey a number of different areas of overlap between language and its object. The concept of a lexicon is a valuable abstraction to this end. The word itself refers to the sum total of words in a language, a sort of master vocabulary. The lexicon, in any language, is shaped by the needs of the people who speak the language. Linguistic innovation defines the domain of the lexicon and is itself necessitated by a culture’s interaction with its environment. Neither term alone is sufficient to describe the way by which each is shaped by the

other. This essay will explore a new term, 'lexiculture,' as a means of describing the interplay between lexicon and culture in an attempt to bundle them together so that these factors can be used in tandem to talk about language in terms that are not incomplete or ambiguous with respect to the question of their origin. The lexicultural propagation of concepts is the phenomenon to be found at the center of the various abstract and concrete meaning-related factors, which all collaborate to produce the groundwork for the particular linguistic feat that occurs. The justification for this view will be derived from cognitive neuroscience, anthropology, linguistics, and in addition, philosophy.

In the propaganda, which is typically circulated to convince young children to spend their time reading books, an intriguing theme is developed. The central idea is that the act of reading a story can take a person outside of the physical space he or she currently inhabits and, as if by magic, transport him or her to a different place. This can be a difficult thing to grasp for an inexperienced reader. However, fictive works can be seen to produce an abstract world, which is then experienced by the reader as the work is read. Works of philosophy, history, and nonfiction have the same type of impact according to neuroscience, even if the places they contain are closer to home in some sense. To an extreme degree, the potential contents of a work of literature owe to the development and dissemination of the lexicon of a language.<sup>1</sup> As this comprehensive inventory of terms morphs over time, some words are added and others fall out of usage – the phenomenon that occurs is in every sense a fluctuation in capacity. The fundamental capabilities of the language change over time. This is a result of the changing of culture as well as the ends to which the language is employed.

Akkadian was gradually replacing the written language originating in ancient Babylon as Sumerian in everyday use.<sup>2</sup> Writing did not start as a grassroots phenomenon and gradually take hold; rather, a group of wealthy and powerful religious leaders began developing a system of symbols to use to preserve their religion and their dominance via their language. After all, the very usefulness of a word lies in its referring to things by virtue of a unique situation, namely the cultural environment within which it finds itself. Instead of retaining its original *telos*, or end, exemplified in the story of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments carved into a stone block, written language has developed a plethora of new uses, including the

---

<sup>1</sup> Imagination is also necessary for this kind of textual engagement. However, the vocabulary of the communicator is the limiting factor here, and this is controlled by lexical development and dissemination.

<sup>2</sup> A very similar tale can be told about the development of Sanskrit in ancient India.

internet.<sup>3</sup> The five thousand year history of written language includes its inception as a vehicle by which authority expressed and propagated itself as well as its current role in politics and its widespread availability. The greater trend regarding writing is the gradual emergence of a communal role in lexicon control evident in shortcuts taken by average users of services such as text messaging. This is a departure from the initial role of writing as a means to curb or slow the inevitable change a language undergoes through usage.

The historically recent interaction between lexicon and culture in written language can also be formulated as a sudden increase in the number of people using language for advanced computation. The role of the lexicon lies in defining what can be said; however, it is also tied to the development of the culture within which it exists. Growth does not only take place on the level of academia, but it is rather frequently seen to occur in heavily populated lower class communities and then propagate throughout society using a vehicle such as pop music or television. The recent trend in linguistics and anthropology, for this reason, is a closer and closer relationship between the two. This marriage is occurring because of the ultimate impossibility of divorcing language and culture from one another.<sup>4</sup> Antonio Damasio's interpretation of modern neuroscientific discoveries<sup>5</sup> will be an indispensable tool for illuminating precisely what is taking place in a person's brain when language is used to communicate.

Damasio is interested in the philosophy Spinoza wrote hundreds of years ago because he sees myriad parallels between Spinoza's pantheism, his conception of the body, and the revelations made possible by neuroscientific perspectives available and scientifically verified today. To paraphrase Damasio's view, psychical realities of mind and perception are very much corporeal phenomena. Seeing this word printed upon the page

---

<sup>3</sup> In fact, all computation is language based. Written equations make possible the very act of writing this paper on a laptop as well as the evaluation process via which the ideas this paper contains will be critiqued and reviewed.

<sup>4</sup> As the authors of the piece referenced here acknowledge, greater integration between previously divorced anthropological fields is necessary to the continued and increasing success of anthropology in producing successful models of human behavior. The hint at insufficiency even of the combined model produced by synthesizing the cognitive and symbolic branches of anthropology argues compellingly for a need to incorporate linguistics. Waltraud Kokot, Hartmut Lang, Eike Hinz. "Current Trends in Cognitive Anthropology," *Anthropos* 77. (1982): 329-350.

<sup>5</sup> Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain*. (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc., 2003).

causes a physical change in the primary visual cortical region of the brain of the person who sees it. This brain consists of a number of different centers wherein consciousness is produced as an interrelation between maps of body states; hence the visio-spatial cortical representation of an object is in direct or indirect neural contact with the consciousness of the individual who perceives it. The phenomenon is very complex, but one way of summing it up is to say that continual self-perception and repeated interaction and interrelation between neurons in a human mind produce a self as a means to the hypothesized end of homeostasis preservation of the organism to whose self we refer.<sup>6</sup>

The self, formed from layer upon layer of conscious perception and emotional processes is the culprit responsible for the continual production of self. Following Damasio, the mind can no longer be treated as an abstraction, which is capable of existing independently of the physical processes or circumstances within which it occurs.<sup>7</sup> When we conceive of the perception by a reader of a written word, we must understand the reader's brain to have physically changed and to have mapped the new body state. It then uses a complex array of memory and feeling to contrast these maps and a reaction becomes visible, i.e., a response manifested in a new body state, which is then mapped and appropriated for use by the self. The repetition of this process throughout the course of a life ideally leads a person to make good decisions based upon empirical evidence and thereby persist in maintaining a state of health.

However, it is likely that more evidence must be presented from the standpoint of linguistics to provide a convincing account of my vision of Damasio's neuroscience in a linguistic setting. Aldous Huxley contributes the observation that the mind is a filter.<sup>8</sup> In *The Doors of Perception*, Huxley gives an account and analysis of an experience with the drug mescaline that broke up the routine of his consciousness and led him to conclude that the mind was a kind of pattern recognition machine. Given the minimal amount of bodily process, which requires conscious control and attention by the self, Huxley's conclusions about perception are likely to be relevant as we unpack that self in relation to others.

Benjamin Lee Whorf complements Huxley's view with his conception of language as a tool. He focuses on differences between Hopi and

---

<sup>6</sup> Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York NY: G.P. Putnam, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain*. (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception: Heaven and Hell*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

English, specifically the way that subject *and* object are implicated in the usage of a single verb. This seems to fall from an implicit awareness of context allocated for by the Hopi language and not the English. Significantly, “the Hopi actually have a language better equipped to deal with [...] vibratile phenomena than is our latest scientific terminology.”<sup>9</sup> Language is constituted by a reality like that of a hammer: it has a function, a purpose, which is essential to its existence. A study of Hopi, in particular, conveys a linkage between a culture and its language in a way that more widespread languages like English are unable to reproduce. The need for generality in a language spoken worldwide is ultimately responsible for its tendency toward the universal, whereas Hopi is spoken by a relatively small community in a relatively isolated cultural area and is hence more capable of specialization. The benefits of one language over another are largely circumstantial, and it is certainly not my intention to make an argument for the superiority of one language or another in this paper. However, in a survey of multiple languages, the development of lexicon can be repeatedly tied to the environment within which the people who speak a given language live and these different characteristics find different uses.

This environmental view of language does not only arise in Whorf. The vision Chomsky suggested of a generative grammar via which the process of acquisition takes place might be better described with a different analogy.<sup>10</sup> Language acquisition by infants indirectly implies that the role of language is to create a communal<sup>11</sup> space within which vocabulary is developed. To take part in the community, language must be embraced. This is, in many ways, reminiscent of swimming lessons for children and babies. A child does not know how to swim before it learns; yet it cannot be told or instructed in how to remain afloat in the water. For this reason, a swimming teacher is physically present to support their bodies as the young swimmers initially experience the water. The teacher cannot express the content of the experience of the swimmer with language, for it would be unnecessary to have a physical presence in the pool with the young ones. The space occupied by community is the pool in this analogy – filled with meaning rather than water. Navigating this meaning involves

---

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality*. (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1956), 17.

<sup>10</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures*. (The Hague: Mouton, 1957).

<sup>11</sup> This is to say language exists communally in the sense that language only exists within physical bodies such as the mind of the speaker or upon the page. It only has value insofar as it can be interpreted.

getting into the pool and learning to do it for oneself, according to Chomsky's theory of language acquisition.

To take the pool analogy a step further, it could be said that there are many different ways of navigating through the water. These varied techniques could be thought of as different styles of swimming. This is especially true between languages, given Whorf's understanding of different languages described above. However, it is also important to note that each person who uses a particular language does so in a fundamentally different way from each other – we all teach ourselves. Speaking the same language as another person involves the sharing of limits with regard to what that particular language is capable of expressing. Thus a lexical filter is communal, creating a link between two or more essentially unique perspectives. The point, which underlies this discussion, is that language is, by nature, something people use and not something that uses them. The language a given person speaks can impact the things he or she is able to talk about, just as the options of a carpenter who only possesses a saw are limited. However, much like technologically advanced saws have developed alongside fasteners such as screws and nails and adhesives, language is constantly being adapted to suit new needs as they arise. This is made known by Kenneth Burke: “the various tribal idioms are unquestionably *developed* by their use as instruments in the tribe's way of living.”<sup>12</sup> Language is always a means to an end, always under construction, always modified to suit the needs of the people using it in the context within which they need it to help them navigate and produce meaning.

Lexical development among a group reflects the use that the group puts the lexicon to, but Burke added that this use is not always honest. In an echo of Nietzsche's criticisms of Christianity, Burke observes that “the Bible solves the problem by putting ‘God’ into the first sentence – and from this initial move, many implications ‘necessarily’ follow.”<sup>13</sup> This particular observation is used by Burke to highlight a usage of language, which essentially consists of circular logic. His idea is that the Bible prevents a reader from questioning the existence of God by making it an axiom in the first sentence. This is the mechanism via which Whorf's descriptive analysis can function. A word has a given meaning, and its use has consequences. The basic structure is assembled upon a foundation, consisting here of ‘God,’ which then serves the purpose of a foundation

---

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 44.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

upon which the rest of the rhetorical<sup>14</sup> construct can be built. Without 'God' in the Bible, there would be little to tie the work together. Hence, to study philosophy of language is to study the method of production of communal meaning as it is both shaped by its usage in communicative enterprises and as the decisions made in the ordering of this system continue to have consequences. There is a two-edged sword at work here.

To clarify this, one meaning of the word 'true' is the sense in which it can be used to describe the arrow, which hits the mark. True statements are thought to be honest ones, which also can be seen to hit the mark in that their goal is to avoid skewing the reconstructive interpretation by the party receiving the statement. The difficulty philosophy finds here is that skewing the reconstructive interpretation is the primary function of speaking in the first place; the only use a word has ever had is to represent information. Using a word in the first place is only done because of the speaker's desire to aid in the audience's task of extracting meaning from the statement – otherwise, there would be no reason to attempt to communicate linguistically.

Cognitive neuroscience, anthropology, philosophy, linguistics, and other fields share the same language, and an increasingly complex lexicon is produced between them as their research is completed, interpreted, reviewed, and disseminated. The development of this lexicultural interaction is the end result of the explorations of scientific fields. After all, an unwritten cure for cancer would need to be rediscovered to revolutionize the medical field and save even one person from dying. Similarly, the key to beginning a new research project is a full grasp of the meaning communicated by others to treat relevant projects. The set of conceptual relations between the terms discussed can then be studied, explored, and reconfigured for further experimentation and development. The results of this process are then made accessible using the appropriate tools from the relevant lexical domain before being disseminated for dialectical evaluation in a peer review process, which generally results in modification, commendation, or irrelevance. These processes might be reimagined as the construction and interaction of minds in contact with one another in lexicultural, rather than merely physical, realms.

The entrance of one mind into another is not possible, of course, but the maps we linguistically produce put forth a set of instructions, which attempt to lead additional minds to comprehend particular relationships between concepts. Lexicultural propagation is the process by which a person is able to see the results produced by the studies of another without

---

<sup>14</sup> Intended meaning of a written work.

doing all of the work it took to get there. This propagation thus allows people to learn from books without having to take part in the same process of experimentation the author underwent. The scientific studies and authors used to demonstrate the current developments, which potentially lead modern minds to an understanding of this embodiment, have far-reaching consequences for the way in which language is studied and interacted with. Cognitive neuroscience has yielded a fundamentally different outlook, which impacts its direct subject, the mind, but also the things which the mind interacts with. The spaces between sciences, languages, people, and environments must, as a result of these developments, be described in ways that yield a higher resolution and enable us to more completely describe them. Lexiculture, then, refers to a medium through which, including language as well as culture, abstract concepts can be communicated from one mind to another.

## References

- Burke, Kenneth. *Language as Symbolic Action*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1966.
- Chomsky, Noam. *Syntactic Structures*. Mouton: The Hague, 1957.
- Damasio, Antonio. *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. New York, New York: Penguin Books, 1994.
- . *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain*. Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Inc., 2003.
- . *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain*. New York, New York: Random House, 2010.
- Huxley, Aldous. *The Doors of Perception: Heaven and Hell*. New York, New York: Harper and Row, 1963.
- Kokot, Lang, and H Hinz. "Current Trends in Cognitive Anthropology." *Anthropos*, no. 77 (1982): 329-350.