

*Somewhere in There: An Exploration
of Language*

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How does language enlighten and limit the way we see the world? How does communication turn into language? How does definition create ambiguity? What are other (stronger?) forms of communication? How is the form of the communication significant? Why is language limiting? What can't we express through language? How are communication and translation different?

The ability to communicate is crucial, however the nature of a basic method of understanding between all individuals is inherently limiting. There are infinite histories, meanings, and significant human feelings that are omitted or lost in communication. The human tendency to categorize, generalize, name, and define creates ambiguity – as soon as something is classified, it excludes many other meanings and elements that are valid and relevant. My desire to explore the realm of language is compelled by my own experiences and feelings of inadequacy when unable to truly translate and articulate my own feelings and ideas. However, it is also exciting to know how liberating, enlightening, and influential language can be whether it is an eloquent poem, or a cutty tag scrawled on the inside of a toilet.

Throughout our lives we as humans feel. Often times these feelings are so thick, rich, and fundamental that they are difficult or impossible to describe. The articulation of a feeling – addressing a certain swell inside, and knowing where it came from, knowing how it feels, why the feeling exists – a language, or communication one has with themselves, is often enough to extinguish that glow, that swell, or that feeling forever, which comes as a great frustration as we feel we must express or share these ideas and feelings.

The definition of a word is the limitation or classification of a specific meaning for certain uses, as to be more or less universally understood when expressed. As a result however, the word becomes limited– therein lies a cutoff. If someone, for instance, had learned about a word, or an idea, during a bizarre or remarkable event or circumstance in their youth, they would have many things and thoughts and feelings correlated with that word. This is all to say that words can mean very different things to different people, and this isn't always clear. Many possible meanings, passions, and experiences are thus left out and lost when “communicated”. Everything is relative.

This aspect of language can lend itself to frustration, which can be the birthplace of many other forms of communication. Poetry, literature, music, dance, fine art, film, graffiti – these are all manifestations of the frustration of when verbal or written language alone is inadequate in invoking an essential meaning. The context of these forms (the environment in which they exist) speaks to their unique and individual meanings past the actual language itself. Graffiti for instance is something outside, illegal, intense, beautiful, and subsequently often times product of neglect or rigid confinement, one where creativity and form to that extent does not exist. This is why graffiti, punk rock, hip hop, and skateboarding are all youth based cultures. It is within the realm of minors and those with less power but with powerful feelings and thoughts that creativity swells and erupts ultimately into an entirely new form which is outside of the boundaries that are created for them. These boundaries are usually rooted in language.

Music and poetry are two forms that, while utilizing language, are communicative through their form, while also utilizing the absence of language. Rhythm, sound, and style are central in providing an entirely new dimensional landscape for the already existing forms of the language itself. The isolation, the focus, the setting, the conjunction etc. that is provided as the new environment for the form can provide as much significance or evoke as much or even more meaning than that of the words themselves. As Roy Orbison repeatedly wails “*crying* in his

eponymous song, the shifts of inflection on the word conveys his varied feelings. This is furthered when executed in a sweet gentle way, as if admiring his own actions and thick feelings, followed by “over you,” sung in a notably more abrasive and anguished tone, as it is addressing the actual subject of his feelings (like a chimera that tortures him). The crying, however, is more of an ambiguous action, physical and involving a complex range of emotions which is something I find admirable.

However, it is often more effective to not use language at all. “Words are limiting,” according to director David Lynch, as often times the feelings or moments to be translated are so basic, complex, or poignant that to confine or dilute them into spoken or written language is completely ineffective (Vogue), the essence is often ineffable. Film maker Harmony Korine once stated that in modern cinema, “There’s no margin of the undefined; it’s all there for you. In all my favorite movies there’s always something missing. Something to make me curious.” (Ebert). As previously stated, everything is relative, so to mark and define everything without any margin of the undefined would be completely disabling in evoking genuine, rich feelings.

Words of course are also essential in communication. Without verbal and written languages there would be no common basis for humans to succinctly deliver messages and convey certain thoughts and feelings. While they are often incapable of completely capturing and translating the traits of a certain moment, feeling, emotion, setting, or idea, they are powerful because the meaning and weight that they do possess is transferable to other things. Although words can be very limiting in terms of fully and wholly translating the essence of an idea and all of its histories and mysterious shadows, they can have multiple ideas attached to them, and therefore the thoughtful use of certain language in conjunction with other words or simple ideas can create a wholly new meaning for both entities.

Ed Ruscha’s *Tiny Subjects* is a clear illustration of this as it is an epic landscape, a massive, powerful, icy mountain range with the words “TINY SUBJECTS” decisively strewn across the image. The mountains alone represent glory, power, might, and divinity, while the phrase “Tiny Subjects” alone would simply initiate thoughts of miniature, novel things; something that is easy to miss. But the fact that these two things are married and exist only with each other creates a completely new subject and meaning. The fact that the subject is something we think of as somewhat unconquerable with an awesomely grand presence and place in this world, is being tied with “tiny subjects” is to make the viewer think of them as something the same, which becomes a reflection of our very minimal, temporary, and insignificant existence. The immediate reaction to such succinct language is rarely that of a consideration of one’s own existence and such heavy introspection, but as it informs a pre-existing idea, or correlation within the viewer or recipient of the language, it quickly includes and translates many ideas, and feelings, and holds vast power beyond its definition.

The structures, balance, weight, and harmony of a word is also extremely informative, and can often physically inform the definition or idea. Mountain, for example, is a fitting word. It conjures feelings of being tiny and insignificant in the face of might. While it may be partly true that the reason the word mountain is so evocative of these feelings is because we have had the idea, sound, and letters intimately connected with each other for all of our whole lives, the origin - the *very* origin - of that connection between word and subject was not mere gibberish and was not wholly derivative from other places. It is my belief that the thing (the mountain) informed its own word (“mountain”). The shape of the word “mountain” is full of valleys and peaks. It is easy to scream from a great height. It is powerful and glorious and beautiful, and the form, the mountain, informed its name.

In his 1997 book, A Crack-Up At The Race Riots, Harmony Korine devotes a page to a single word: “Hepburn”. “I’d spent like three years just trying to figure out what would be the perfect one word novel,” Harmony explains later, “and I finally just thought of the word “Hepburn”...it just made perfect sense. I felt like all the answers to the world were wrapped up in those letters – or actually not answers, but all the questions.” (Vice). Hepburn is the surname of two internationally renowned 20th century movie stars, Katharine and Audrey. When broken down, the word becomes “hep” and “burn”, “hep” being reminiscent of the word *hepatitis*, a liver disease, and *burn*, which is a common occurrence of incineration. When deconstructed, the two parts follow a tragic path, both fragments of a well known actress’ last name, the two levels looking at the escape and allure of the outside world, and the anguish and destruction within. There is something also about this word in an isolated environment, something evasive and ineffable, far beneath the surface that is touching and attractive and longing and pained – where the answers are not completely clear but the unknown is informative.

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I write graffiti and I rap and I make art and I dance like a ghost and look at things and I admire things and I skateboard and I walk and I take the bus and I spend time in festering mobs and I sit alone at night and sleep and wake up and am happy and sad and I grow taller every day, because there is something completely ineffable and indescribable and shapeless and ominous and beautiful writhing and moving and casting its shadow with in me and beyond me and its being is the surest of anything I’ve ever known, and I am searching for it and it seeks me when I am sitting on a concrete floor in the woods or smelling a swamp or lying by myself with nothing but a pit in my belly in a vibrant pink room because of the glow of my curtains.

I feel like I am trying to recall a dream.

It’s like an eye floater entering my field of vision for a moment before I look at it and it’s gone forever.

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