Words And Worlds:

Language and the Perceived Separation of Humans From Nature

*by Mark Meisner**

Introduction

Cultural representations of the world permeate much of human experience of that world. In this society, it seems increasingly unlikely that there can be experience that is **not** somehow overlaid by representation. Under such circumstances, it is our forms of representation that have the greatest impact on how we understand, give meaning to, and value this place in which we live. Perhaps the most significant of those forms is language, for it is both the most pervasive and the one through which the others are most often interpreted.

Given its centrality in our lives, it is not surprising that "language" is often deemed to be what distinguishes humans from the rest of Nature. What is meant by this assertion seems to be that humans have "language" whereas other species do not, and this somehow makes us exceptional and superior. While I disagree with both the logic and the implications of this claim, it suggests a curious irony that I would like to explore in this paper.[1] That irony is in the prospect of a relationship between human language and the type of worldview that would lead us to believe that somehow our language makes us an exceptional species.

This paper, then, is an enquiry into another sense in which language "distinguishes" humans from Nature, namely the possibility that, in the West, it has historically contributed to the increasing human *perception* of separation from, and domination of, non-human Nature. In other words, I would like to explore how historical changes in the *form* of language (ie. speech, writing, printing), by shifting human consciousness[2] away from immediate experience and into a linear world of symbolic representation, may have resulted in an intensification of the belief that humans are separate from, and able to control Nature. In turn, those changes made possible certain uses of language, uses which, in enabling a measure of actual control over aspects of Nature, may have had the effect of reinforcing this belief.[3]

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When I say language, I simply mean words and ways of combining them. However, language must be understood as more than just that. It is a way of, and a capacity for, symbolically representing experiences, things and phenomena. But, language does not simply re-present; it also helps to shape and give meaning to our experiences. In other words, language is not a neutral set of labels for describing the world in objective terms. Rather, because it is imbued with cultural assumptions and values, with connotations as well as denotations, with multiple meanings and ambiguities, and with particular ways of seeing the world, language is an active element of perception.

To understand this, we need to understand the idea that realities are multiple and constructed; there is no one "objective" reality. What we take as reality, and assume to be independent of our perceptions, is actually more of a product of the interactions of our experience of the physical and social world with the conceptual and ideological artifacts that we bear. However, in general, humans in the West tend to think of reality as objective, and this is largely because of language, as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann explain:

> I apprehend the reality of everyday life as an ordered reality. Its phenomena are prearranged in patterns that seem to be independent of my apprehension of them and that impose themselves upon the latter. The reality of everyday life appears already objectified, that is, constituted by an order of objects that have been designated *as* objects before my appearance on the scene. The language used in everyday life continuously provides me with the necessary objectifications and posits the order within which these make sense and within which everyday life has meaning for me.[4]

In this way, language becomes a sort of imperceptible lens through which the world is understood, and not simply a neutral means by which we describe, communicate and give meaning to our experiences.[5] Thus, in moving from the domain of pure experience (if there is such a thing) into the

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domain of representation of that experience through language, we begin to "construct" reality.

While this paper does not, for the most part, address the content of language, or the ways in which words and grammar work upon us, this concept of the social construction of reality is nevertheless significant. This is so because the form that language takes also affects how it works and what we are able to do with it. The form of language has a relationship to the way in which the world is perceived through it, as I will suggest in this paper. "Reality," for people living in oral cultures, is different from "reality" for people living in literate cultures, and in part, this is because the form of language is different.

So, in order to better understand human relationships with non-human Nature, it seems sensible to explore the possible links between the changing form of language and the increasingly abstract and detached view of Nature which now characterizes Western industrial society and which lends itself to a growing human imperialism towards non-human Nature. However, in this paper I will be highlighting one particular interpretation of language, namely its disjunctive characteristics.[6] Furthermore, I will be emphasizing language as a general capacity for communication and action, in its different forms, as distinguished from (but not unrelated to) the uses that are made of language or language behaviour.[7]

The Beginnings of Language

It is impossible to say exactly where, when or how language as such emerged. In all likelihood it was neither an isolated nor a clearly identifiable event. Language has been changing, and when the sounds and gestures of prehistoric peoples became a language is a matter of speculation. What is interesting to ask is whether the advent of spoken language may have influenced human perceptions of, and relationships with, non-human Nature.

In **Technics and Human Development** Lewis Mumford suggests that in the absence of language there is a significance to the world such that "the concrete experience of every animal including man [sic] 'makes sense' without the intervention of symbols, if the creature is alert and responsive."[8] In this way humans already lived in a meaningful environment prior to the establishment of language. Things, beings and phenomena were what experience of them said they were. There may not have been the symbols, or the possibility for discussing experience, but there was some form of experiential meaning.

It is thought that prior to the advent of spoken language, humans acted out gestures in the repeated context of events in such ways that the gestures eventually took on symbolic meaning; they became rituals. It is most likely from the symbolism of such rituals, including those between mother and child and those of the hunt, that language eventually emerged. What type of language emerged at that time is unknown. Andrée Collard feels that the "collective nurturing and the play element involved in the caring of the young is likely to create a language rich in emotional nuances and a vocabulary far more imaginative, complex, and affective than the language derived from the hunt."[9] What she seems to mean by this is that the act of nurturing and caring would seem to promote a more relational and evocative language, whereas the act of hunting would promote more of an instrumental, control-oriented language. Given the type of language we in the West have today, it is quite possible that the hunting-oriented version largely crowded out the nurturing version.

From the beginning, language helped humans to express the meanings they felt in their existence and experience. However, according to Mumford, it was also used in "the disciplining of the unconscious, the establishment of a coherent and stable social order, [and] the perfection of the social bond,"[10] all of which may be seen as part of the process of human self-domestication, or of distancing ourselves from the world of Nature.[11] Furthermore, according to Mumford, language created a symbolic world that was more compelling than the world it was attempting to model. "The world that was symbolically organized, mainly in language, became more significant, more essential to all specifically human activities, than the raw 'outer' world mutely taken in by the senses, or the private inner world of dream."[12]

Early language also allowed for the creation of new ideas and situations in the mind, simply through the use of symbols:

> That abstract sounds could bring to mind actual people, concrete places and objects, was the fundamental magic property of speech: but there was even more potent magic in the fact that these same or similar sounds, differently organized, might bring into the mind events that had ceased, or project entirely new experiences.[13]

In this way, part of the magic of words was to transform human perceptions of the world in such a way that it gave the impression that, through language, humans could control aspects of their environment.

To understand this, we need to consider the centrality of myths in oral cultures. Myths were a vital part of the meaning frameworks of early

human societies, and language was the principal medium through which myths were created and passed on. In discussing the work of Ernst Cassirer, Harold Innis suggests the following relationship of language, myth and thought:

> Mythology reflected the power exercised by language on thought. The word became a primary force in which all being and doing originate. Verbal structures appeared as mythical entities endowed with mythical powers.[14]

In particular, myths could be used to serve as a source of power "over" Nature, as suggested by Mircea Eliade:

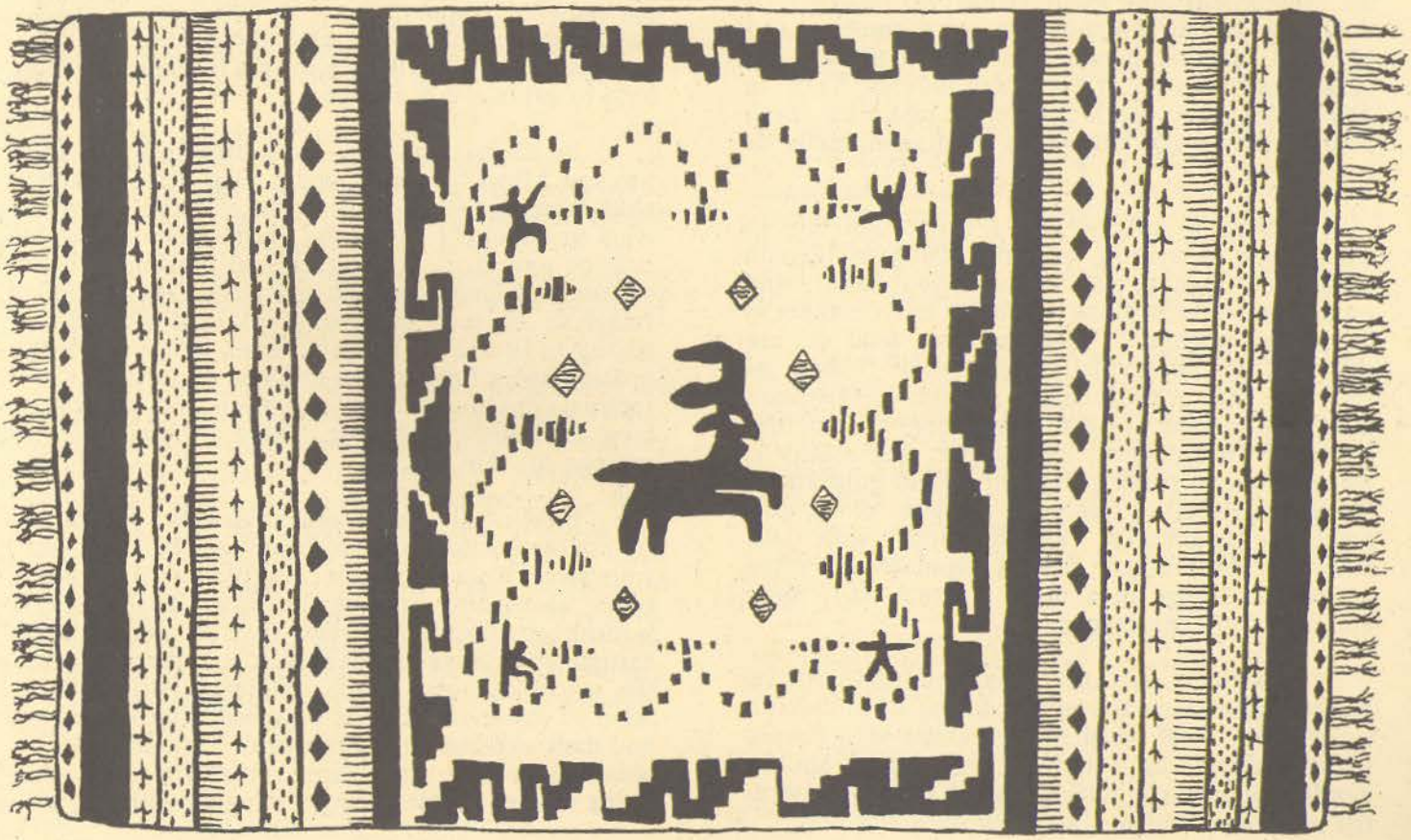
> We see, then, that the "story" narrated by the myth constitutes a "knowledge" which is esoteric, not only because it is secret and is handed on during the course of an initiation but also because the "knowledge" is accompanied by a magico-religious power. For knowing the origin of an object, and animal, a plant and so on is equivalent to acquiring a magical power over them by which they can be controlled, multiplied, or reproduced at will.[15]

In addition to the possibility that the advent of language changed human perceptions of the world, with its refinement, early humans were able to use language in an instrumental way to actually affect the physical world. For example, language permitted early hunters to strategize and coordinate with each other, thereby improving their effectiveness. It was also refined by those who did the food gathering, for that was an activity that required identification by naming.[16] "Oral peoples commonly think of names (one kind of words) as conveying power over things."[17] Thus the idea of controlling Nature was enhanced through the use of language to help in the actual realization of a measure of control. Furthermore, language's facilitation of such instrumental tasks may have further reinforced the perception of separation from Nature.

Orality and Literacy

In this section of the paper I would like to speculate further on language, specifically on some of the differences between orality and literacy as forms of language, and on how those differences might help to explain the modern Western view of Nature.

It is difficult for us literate folk to imagine what it is like to live without any form of writing or even the knowledge of such a possibility. The fact of being literate changes our whole worldview to such an extent that we simply cannot comprehend the centrality and importance of the spoken word in oral cultures, nor can we fully understand what sorts of meanings the world resonated with in such cultures. Nevertheless, despite uncertainty about the



details, it appears that literacy has had significant implications for how humans perceive the world. It has even been suggested that writing, "more than any other single invention,...has transformed human consciousness."[18]

To begin with, the aural world of orality was perceived as a more dynamic and alive place than our literate world. This is because in an oral culture, the form of language (speech) is an event. "Sound exists only when it is going out of existence...there is no way to stop sound and have sound."[19] In this way, spoken words were not perceived as things, since they were never static.[20] Indeed, in orality, words, as such, were not perceived; there were only utterances (which we *now* see as being made up of words). "Only the alphabet has the power to create "language" and "words," for the word does not emerge until it is written down."[21] Furthermore, in order to have sound, there must be life. Whereas it is possible to smell, see, touch and taste something that is dead (a buffalo, for example), it is not possible to hear it.[22]

Because in orality the form of language is speech, by necessity it is always used (regardless of the use) in direct relation to other people. Even sustained analytic thought was always done with at least one other person, so that the listener could stimulate and ground the process.[23] This is because the thinker had only their memory to record their thoughts, and if the thoughts were complex and involved, another person was needed to help the thinker maintain her or his line of thought. Thus, in orality, language use is inherently relational, even though it may not have been used relationally or connectively.

Related to this is Ong's suggestion that in comparison to writing, oral expression, at least in form, is "close to the human lifeworld," and grounds thought in close proximity to its context of human experience.[24] "Oral cultures tend to use concepts in situational, operational frames of reference that are minimally abstract in the sense that they remain close to the living human lifeworld."[25] Furthermore, he suggests that orality is empathetic and participatory in that to gain knowledge of something one must achieve "close, empathetic, communal identification with the known."[26] In contrast, literate peoples most often understand things in a more abstract way, more detached from experience.

In addition, oral discourse depends heavily on non-verbal and paralinguistic forms of communication. "The oral word...never exists in a simply verbal context, as a written word does. Spoken words are always modifications of a total, existential situation, which always engages the body."[27] Such communication blends speech and body movements, and our embodiment is the most obvious indication that we are part of Nature.[28]

The final characteristic of orality that is of interest here is the fact that it manifests language as sound, rather than as visual representation, as writing does. Ong suggests that hearing is a unifying sense whereas sight is an isolating sense. As he puts it:

> Vision comes to a human being from one direction at a time: to look at a room or a landscape, I must move my eyes around from one part to another. When I hear, however, I gather sound simultaneously from every direction at once: I am at the centre of my auditory world, which envelops me, establishing me at a kind of core of sensation and existence.[29]

Thus there is the sense of being immersed in the world of sound, whereas in a world dominated by sight, one cannot feel immersed.

While the oral form of language is undoubtedly a partial abstraction from experience and therefore seems to be an initial step in the process of the reification of Nature, all of these characteristics of it still seem to indicate a mode of perception that is dynamic, relational, experiential, empathetic, embodied and unifying.[30] It is perhaps significant that these are in opposition to the modern scientific way of knowing Nature which is detached, abstract, theoretical, manipulative and "objective." An understanding of how literacy differs from orality may help to explain this change.

In discussing **The Domestication of the Savage Mind** by Jack Goody, Ong notes that the shift from orality to literacy is closely related to what are thought to be the shifts from magic to science and from "prelogical" to "rational" consciousness. Goody argues that those shifts ought rather to be seen and explained as a shift from orality to literacy.[31] Literacy, then, is seen to have precipitated a further step towards abstract logical-rational conscious thought and away from participatory, experiential knowing. There are a number of reasons for this.

First of all, while oral discourse, supported by non-verbal forms of communication, is but one step away from experience, writing is a second-order abstraction from experience. In this way, writing establishes a context-free discourse; texts assume an independent existence, and perception of the world changes. Once completed, writing is a form of expression that is detached from its author and their experience of the world. "Writing fosters abstractions that disengage knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle with one an-

other. It separates the knower from the known."[32] Since writing is a detached and disembodied form of language, it is less able to convey the fullness and subtlety of experience. Whereas in orality meaning is always contextual, in literacy meaning is largely seen to be concentrated in language itself; it is "autonomous."[33] Accordingly, as Harold Innis says, "writing *enormously enhanced* a capacity for abstract thinking which had been evident in the growth of language in the oral tradition." [emphasis added][34]

Secondly, by isolating words in a visual space, writing emphasizes sight as a way of knowing. As I have already mentioned, sight is a disjunctive sense when compared to hearing. In **The Natural Alien**, Neil Evernden suggests that the emphasis on vision as a way of knowing is partly responsible for our perception of being separate from Nature. "Vision permits us the luxurious delusion of being neutral observers with the ability to manipulate a distant environment."[35] Furthermore, the visual form of language initiated the perception that words are things in and of themselves. "Writing makes 'words' appear similar to things because we think of words as the visible marks signaling words to decoders: we can see and touch such inscribed 'words' in texts and books."[36] By beginning to reify the words with which Nature and experience were talked about (the representation), writing may have enhanced the reification of Nature already begun by naming aspects of it. It seems possible, then, that literacy was partly responsible for humans seeing the world reduced to elements and discrete entities.

This perceptual process would have been enhanced by the fact that in freeing the mind from its memory task, writing permits language to be used in the organization of elaborate reductionist analyses, and the creation of linear sequences of causality. Indeed writing itself seems to foster a comparatively atomistic and linear view of things and events set in neutral space.

Finally, writing seems to have fragmented the understanding of the self in the community. Since sustained analytic thought could now be a solitary activity, with the thinker engaging in a dialogue in her or his mind, and with the written word, there was less need for social interaction. Reading and writing are solitary activities. Indeed, as Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders put it, "the idea of a self that continues to glimmer in thought or memory, occasionally retrieved and examined in the light of day, cannot exist without the text."[37] Literacy, then, may have been the catalyst for the idea of the discrete, autonomous individual.

Changing Perceptions of Nature

Parallel to the shift from the dynamic relational character of orality to the comparatively static detached world of literacy, people have increasingly come to view the world and Nature as a static place of discrete objects, rather than a dynamic field of relationships. The evidence suggests that these changes were not simply coincidental to each other.

Carolyn Merchant describes an example of where the advent of literacy changed the fundamental relationship of a culture with its natural world by emphasizing a visually-biased way of knowing. In this case she is referring to the experiences of North American Natives with European cultural imperialism in what is now New England. She begins by describing the consciousness of oral Native cultures:

> For Native American cultures, consciousness was an integration of all the bodily senses in sustaining life. In that mimetic consciousness, culture was transmitted intergenerationally through imitation in song, myth, dance, sport, gathering, hunting and planting. Aural/oral transmission of tribal knowledge through myth and transactions between animals, Indians, and neighbouring tribes produced sustainable relations between the human and the non-human worlds....For Indians engaged in an intimate survival relationship with nature, sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch were all of equal importance, integrated in a total participatory consciousness.[38]

This participatory consciousness, which Merchant says characterizes the oral life of the Native peoples, and which many ecophilosophers present as an alternative to Cartesian resourcist thinking, is described in more detail by Morris Berman in **The Reenchantment of the World**. Essentially it is a mimetic consciousness "in which the subject/object dichotomy breaks down and the person feels identified with what he or she is perceiving."[39]

Merchant goes on to describe how when Europeans invaded the Native communities during what she calls the "colonial ecological revolution," vision became the dominant sense within the Indian culture, thus breaking the participatory consciousness. This was because of the subtle effects that lay-literacy brought about through the focus on "God's word" as *written* in the Bible. Merchant explains:

> Alphanumeric literacy became central to religious expression, social survival, and upward mobility. The Puritan imposition of a visually oriented consciousness was shattering to the continuation of Indian animism and ways of life. With the commercializing of the fur trade and the missionary efforts of Jesuits and Puritans, a society in which humans, animals, plants, and

> rocks were equal subjects was changed to one dominated by transcendent vision in which human subjects were separate from resource objects.[40]

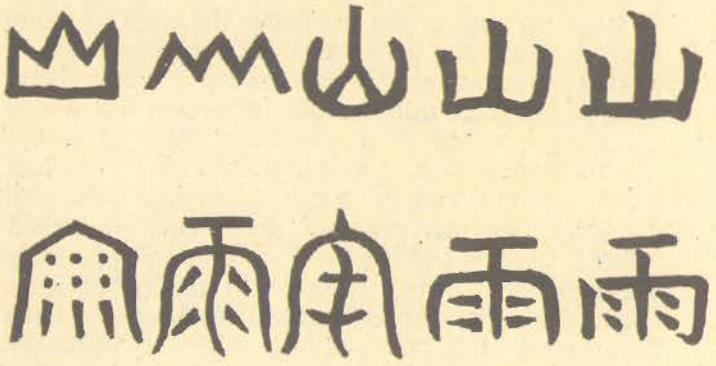
While literacy was subtly changing human consciousness and perceptions of the world, it was also a key element in the concentration of material/technical power and the building of military and political empires.[41] We know that such empires are also dependent on exploitation of the natural world and that they often cause the degradation of Nature. In this way literacy seems to have been a catalyst for the accumulation of material and technological powers "over" Nature. As Mumford says, "the 'myth of the machine' [his phrase for the almost religious belief in technological salvation] would have been inconceivable, and its operations impracticable, without the magic of language and the formidable increase in its power and scope through the invention of writing."[42]

The Greek Alphabet

While writing seems to have generally changed the way humans perceive and experience the natural world, its most significant form may have been the Greek alphabet. This is because the "alphabet" was (and still is) a unique way of visually coding language. What makes the Greek alphabet unique is the fact that it was the first truly phonetic alphabet, in contrast to other writing systems which used syllabic, ideographic or pictographic codes or alphabet-like systems without vowels. The Greek alphabet was a way of visually coding the spoken sounds of any language with a small number of totally abstract symbols. It was only through the recording of those sounds that it provided meaning. It did not directly record ideas or images.[43] In contrast, the symbols of most other writing systems were meaningful in themselves, since they were usually visually derived from things in the environment.

In their paper "Alphabet, Mother of Invention," Marshall McLuhan and R.K. Logan outline how the Greek alphabet developed and how it differs from other writing systems. They argue that as a result of the invention of the Greek alphabet, Greek consciousness and the consciousness of those cultures whose writing systems developed from the Greek (including ours) were significantly altered. They further suggest that the uniquely abstract character of the Greek alphabet was partially responsible for the formation of the dominant Western worldview and the enhancement of abstract ways of thinking. "The effects of the alphabet and the abstract, logical, systematic thought that it encouraged explains why science began in the West and not the East, despite the much greater technological sophistication of the Chinese."[44]

Both McLuhan and Logan, and Dolores LaChapelle use the Chinese way of writing as a contrast to the Greek alphabet in order to suggest the profound effects it may have had on Western epistemology and perceptions of Nature. LaChapelle's contribution is especially interesting in that she is coming to the issue from the perspective of deep ecology. The difference is essentially that whereas the Greek alphabet is entirely abstract and detached from the lifeworld, Chinese retains meaning within each of its over 40,000 characters, as it is a pictographic and ideographic form of writing. "Their written script grew directly out of the drawings of actual physical things in the environment...Thus in the Chinese language, the human cannot get himself [sic] out of the total picture--nature and human are always interconnected."[45]



Two Chinese characters as they changed over the years from pictographs to their contemporary forms: mountain and rain.
Source: Edoardo Fazzioli, **Chinese Caligraphy** (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987)

With any writing system, the written symbols are an abstraction of the spoken word which is, in turn, an abstraction of experience. With the alphabet, however, the abstraction is even greater because of the fact that the characters are arbitrary and have no meaning in themselves. This, argue McLuhan and Logan, encouraged the creation of conceptual abstractions, classification schemes and atomistic thought within Greek society. Furthermore, they suggest that as a result of the alphabet, a new way of knowing emerged:

> With writing, what is recorded or remembered becomes separate from the writer, existing in a book or a scroll. Knowledge takes on objective identity, separate from the knower. The Greek, in this way, developed the notion of objectivity and detachment, the separation of the knower from the object of his [sic] awareness. This was the beginning of the scientific method and the source of the dichotomy the Greeks created between subjective thinking as found in art and poetry, and objective thinking as exemplified by philosophy and science.[46]

This points directly to the alphabet and the shift it brought about in Greek thought as a source of our current worldview. In particular we can see here the origins of the scientific epistemology that now dominates contemporary assumptions about how we ought to know the world. As Morris Berman, Carolyn Merchant and others have pointed out, this epistemology bodes ill for Nature.

Another passage from McLuhan and Logan's paper is particularly revealing of the literate Greek's idea of "nature." It further suggests that present views may be seen to be partially rooted in ancient Greece:

> The Greeks invented "nature" (*phusis*) which is their classification of the objective external world. "Nature" does not include man [sic] or any of his [sic] artifacts such as the alphabet, which may explain why the Greeks never studied the *effects*, even of their own technology, a radical flaw in their objectivity. It was the separation of man [sic] from nature, perhaps, that allowed Western thinkers to consider nature as an object to be studied, or a resource to be exploited.[47]

Overall then, the invention of the Greek alphabet seems to have represented a significant turning point in Western thought. It seems to have enhanced the linguistic basis for a linear, abstract and analytical mode of thought, and for a detached view of Nature. It therefore may have further contributed to the domination of Nature because, in lending itself to rational, scientific and technical thinking, it allowed for further inventions that could be used to control and exploit Nature. The Greek alphabet becomes even more significant when we consider that all Western alphabets are descended from it. So, even though the languages differ, the ways of visually coding them are similar in their abstract character, and perhaps the ways of thinking about the world are also similar.

Printing

In terms of the historical changes in the form of language, there is one other invention that deserves comment in this context. That is the advent of mechanical printing. Essentially print extends and heightens the process already begun with writing. It suggests even more than writing that words are things; it reifies words.[48] This is because it is much more precise at controlling the visual presentation of words and because it more effectively locks them into space. In doing so, it not only reifies them, but also further eliminates the need to sound words out as one reads them.[49] This takes the user one step further away from the aural world where words are sounds and events. As Walter Ong suggests, print completed the process of the technologizing of the word. Furthermore, mechanical printing was a manufacturing process, and by putting language into that process, words were commodified.[50] All of this suggests a further perceptual distancing and separation of language from its grounding in experience, and perhaps of humans from Nature as well. I think ecophilosopher Alan Drengson sums up well the impact of printing on the human participation in the processes of life:

> The hazard of print culture, and the modern industrial technology that goes with it, is that all of our thoughts and perceptions will become structured according to modes of organization that these technologies make possible. This has a powerful effect on our own dimensions of creative intelligence and flexibility. It tends to constrict our openness to Being.[51]

As with all of these changes in the form of language, both the form itself and the uses which it makes possible, intertwine with each other to further perceptually separate humans from non-human Nature.

Conclusion: Language and Nature Today

This paper has been an exploration of how some of the historical changes in the form of language may have affected human perceptions of non-human Nature. In particular, I have suggested that language may have been a catalyst for a perceived separation of humans from the rest of Nature. This process seems to have begun with the advent of language, become intensified through writing and then printing, and been especially evident in the West where our alphabets are descended from the original Greek alphabet. Furthermore, language seems to have enhanced the ability of humans to manipulate and control aspects of the world, and in doing so, may have further reinforced this initial perception of separation. I realize that this has been somewhat of a preliminary consideration of these questions, for they probably deserve a more detailed analysis than space has permitted me here. Nevertheless, in outlining them I have hopefully been able to contextualize the current issues we must face and added to our understanding of how we got here.

Language remains a critical issue in today's context of the domination of humans and Nature, for in a number of different ways, it continues to order and shape the meanings we give to our experiences. In both its form and its content, it continues to be a powerful force in shaping human consciousness. Just one example of this is the fact that many of the names we apply to aspects of Nature seem to reinforce a detached and use-oriented view of it. Consider the ubiquitous label for valued aspects of the natural world: "natural

resources." The implication of this phrase is that the sole purpose of non-human Nature is to benefit humans. This term is a symbol for the anthropocentric-resourcist view of Nature that permeates Western society. By using the label "natural resources" we may not be intending to promote such a view, but the fact is that that view is implied in the choice of words. There is a sort of incidental persuasion in the way that the label acts to reinforce the values and attitudes associated with the dominant view of Nature. The same may be said of such terms as "environment," "our land," and perhaps even "nature."

These are not isolated examples; in all cases where we talk about Nature, our experience of it or how we relate to it, we are actively constructing an idea or view of what it is. In this way we can say that we linguistically construct "Nature," and the way we construct it has direct implications for how we act in relation to it. As Carolyn Merchant puts it,

> a society's symbols and images of nature express its collective consciousness. They appear in mythology, cosmology, science, religion, philosophy, language, and art....Ideas, images, and metaphors legitimate human behaviour toward nature and are translated into action through ethics, morals, and taboos.[52]

This idea that our representations of non-human Nature affect not only how we see it, but also how we act towards it, applies to all forms of discourse that use language, including, and perhaps especially, science.[53]

In this paper I have emphasized those characteristics of certain language forms that seem to have had a bearing on human perceptions of Nature, particularly those that may have had a disjunctive influence. However, I do not mean to suggest that the history of language has been simply a history of its having caused humans to see themselves as separate from Nature. In many ways language has enhanced our understanding of the world and of ourselves. Furthermore, I believe that it is possible to think of, and use language in ways that can overcome its disjunctive influences. For, as Lewis Mumford reminds us,

> the very qualities in language that offend the logical positivists--its vagueness, its indeterminateness, its ambiguity, its emotional coloring, its reference to unseen objects or unverifiable events, in short its 'subjectivity'--only indicate that from the beginning it was an instrument for embracing the living body of human experience, not just the bleached articulated skeleton of definable ideas.[54]

Thus, language can be used in a more evocative and relational way, but we must learn to use it that way if we hope to bring about a change in our relationship to the rest of Nature. To do this, we first need to explore how our existing language is contributing to the problem and how it may provide opportunities for change. This involves questioning both its appropriateness and its adequacy. Secondly, we need to re-understand language in a non-anthropocentric and non-utilitarian way, and find new ways of talking that will promote new ways of thinking. We need now to regain a sense of wonder in our language and to use our voices to speak within our species about how we feel about Nature. I am hopeful that just as feminists and other social justice advocates are now finding their proper voices, Nature advocates will as well.

Notes

1. As with other rationalizations for human specialness, this is based on an arbitrary definition of the characteristic in question, and is symptomatic of an anthropocentric worldview. Human language is but one form of communication among the many that exist in Nature. Human beings are unique, but that does not make us more special, since all species are unique and special in their own ways. For an analysis and critique of the view that sees human language as our unique quality see Harvey Sarles, **Language and Human Nature** (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

2. Consciousness is used here to mean the general perceptual orientation and awareness of one's environment, which includes oneself.

3. By no means am I suggesting that language is the only factor that may have contributed to this perception or to the existing ways in which humans dominate non-human Nature, for there are a number of others, including agriculture, patriarchy, and science, that have been or need to be examined.

4. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, **The Social Construction of Reality** (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin Books Ltd, 1966), pp.35-36.

5. David V.J. Bell, "Political Linguistics and Political Education," **Teaching Politics** 6 (1977), p. 222.

6. Contrary to historical tendencies, language need not be made an instrument of separation and control, for there is a connective or relational quality to it that has been historically muted. Despite the fact that this is an important concern in the context of human interaction with non-human Nature, I will not really be addressing it here. For an evocative discussion of the connective aspects of language see Erazim Kohák, **The Embers and the Stars: a philosophical inquiry into the moral sense of nature** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

7. The role of language in society is far more complex than I can put it here, especially when it comes to historical interpretations, so it is important to say that this paper should be seen as both a speculative venture, and as a particular slice into the larger pie.

8. Lewis Mumford, **The Myth of the Machine. Vol.1. Technics and Human Development** (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1967), p.75.

9. Andrée Collard with Joyce Contrucci, **Rape of the Wild** (London: The Women's Press, 1988), p.43.

10. Mumford, p.84.

11. On the idea of humans as a self-domesticated species see John A. Livingston, "Ethics as Prosthetics," in **Environmental Ethics: Philosophical and Policy Perspectives**, ed. Philip Hanson (Burnaby: Simon Fraser University Publications, 1986), pp.70-71.

12. Mumford, p.78.

13. Ibid., p.83.

14. Harold Innis, **Empire and Communications** rev. ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), p.18n.

15. Mircea Eliade, **Myth and Reality** (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp.14-15.

16. Mumford, pp.80-81.

17. Walter Ong, **Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word** (London: Methuen and Company Ltd., 1982), p.33.

18. Ibid., p.78.

19. Ibid., p.32.

20. Even though in orality words were not reified, that is not to say that those things which the words represent are not partly reified, for they are. That is the difference between orality and the absence of language.

21. Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders, **A.B.C.: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind** (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), p.7. This is a difficult idea to comprehend. As literate people we are accustomed to thinking of language as being made up of words, which we see as things. In an oral culture, however, there are only sounds--phonemes--that make up utterances. The concept of "word" did not exist in orality, even though we habitually now refer to "words" when discussing it.

22. Ong, p.32. Even such entities as rivers and rocks are seen, in an animistic worldview, as alive.

23. Ibid., p.34.

24. Ibid., p.42.

25. Ibid., p.49.

26. Ibid., p.45.

27. Ibid., p.67.

28. For more on this see Sarles.

29. Ong, p.72.

30. It is not clear how far those oral modes of perception extend beyond human societies to include Nature. Most likely, the relationship to Nature was already somewhat disjunctive, but not to such an extreme as it now is.

31. Ong, p.29. The shift from a magical worldview to one of scientific rationality is discussed in detail in Morris Berman's **The Reenchantment of the World** (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

32. Ong, pp.43-44. Ong's use of the word struggle is part of his reference to the agonistic tone of oral discourse.

33. Not surprisingly, within a literate worldview there is a tendency to believe that words are carriers of meaning--dictionaries are the best indication of this--rather than the truth which is that human beings create meanings.

34. Innis, p.10.

35. Neil Evernden, **The Natural Alien: Humankind and Environment** (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p.84.

36. Ong, p.11.

37. Illich and Sanders, p.72.

38. Carolyn Merchant, "The Theoretical Structure of Ecological Revolutions," **Environmental Review** 11 (Winter 1987), pp.272-273.

39. Berman, p.346.

40. Merchant, p.273.

41. On this subject see, for example, Innis.

42. Mumford, p.95.

43. Illich and Sanders, p.9.

44. Marshal McLuhan and R.K. Logan, "Alphabet, Mother of Invention," **et cetera** 54:4 (December 1977), p.375. While McLuhan's work is often highly ambiguous, and his apparent technological optimism needs to be critically challenged, this paper seems well developed with the exception of his well known assertion that somehow television and "electric process" will allow us to recover the participating consciousness of the oral tradition.

45. Dolores LaChapelle, **Sacred Land, Sacred Sex, Rapture of the Deep** (Silverton: Finn Hill Arts, 1988), p.24.

46. McLuhan and Logan, p.378.

47. Ibid.

48. Ong, pp.118-119.

49. For the most part, words were "strung together without any physical definition," and writing was "an unbroken series of letters" until roughly the seventh century, according to Illich and Sanders, p.46. See also pp.119-123.

50. Ong, p.118.

51. Alan Drengson, "Introduction to this Wilderness Issue," **The Trumpeter** 3:2 (Spring 1986), p.2.

52. Merchant, p.272.

53. For an interesting discussion of the social construction of Nature in scientific discourse see Elizabeth Ann R. Bird, "The Social Construction of Nature: Theoretical Approaches to the History of Environmental Problems," **Environmental Review** 11 (Winter 1987), pp.255-264.

54. Mumford, p.73.