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The Bewitching Trickery of Language



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Language is a wonderful thing. It allows us to categorise, simplify and describe our complex and confusing universe, applying words to objects and actions that might otherwise remain as unusual blobs of shifting shape and colour, forever unlabelled and elusive. Language brings order, creating a beautiful, intricate structure that we use to create common understanding within our species, paving the way for mastery of our environment.

Language is one of our greatest skills, but there's a downside. It's so deeply

embedded in our nature, and used so liberally, that we often forget that its primary function is to *describe* our world. We confuse the descriptive word that comes out of our mouth with the thing itself, as though the word is more real than the thing we're describing. A cow isn't the word *cow*; it's the burly, black and white thing with the nipple-clad, pink undercarriage standing in front of you. The word *cow* is just a label that we use to identify something, not the thing itself.

The confusion between expression and reality was illustrated wonderfully by Belgian artist Rene Magritte, who painted a pipe with the words "this is not a pipe," cleverly reminding the viewer that the image of the pipe is *not* an actual pipe, just as the word *cow* isn't an actual cow, but simply a useful noise that we're using to express ourselves.



Rene Magritte — The Treachery of Images

Another great example can be found from semantics scholar Alfred Korzybski, who remarked that "the map is not the territory," highlighting the common confusion between models of reality (the map) with reality itself (the territory). The map is purely a *representation* of the landscape, just as the word *cow* is a representation of an enormous, methane-oozing animal that likes nothing more than to spend its day grazing and mooing.

Confusing the label/representation with the actual thing that is being described can have the regrettable consequence of diminishing our *appreciation* of it, by reducing it down to nothing but a mere abstraction. The sound that we make when we say *cow* can never be as wonderfully intricate as the actual thing that we're identifying, and while language is effective at categorising our world, it can have the unfortunate side-effect of removing all sense of depth and curiosity from our observed object. In reality, a cow is a natural marvel that can weigh over 1300kg, has 360-degree panoramic vision, and can smell something from over 6 miles away. The word *cow* is just a useful abstraction — great for simplification, but with the downside of blinding us to the marvellous minutia of the actual animal itself. As we simplify, we depreciate.

“Sentences are only an approximation, a net one flings over some sea pearl which may vanish.” — Virginia Woolf

One might say that the glass that I'm currently drinking out of is *just a glass*, but it's also an invention with an almost 4000-year history, originating in the heat of India, advancing towards Europe to the mighty Roman Empire, and eventuating as a handy drinking receptacle used by billions of people worldwide. It's much more than *just a glass*. By reducing something down to a single word, and then confusing the word with the actual thing itself, we're compelled to forget its rich history and delightful features, and so take it for granted.

Language is not reality. When we realise this, we're brought *closer* to reality, being compelled to recognise that the sounds that we utter are a mere depiction, with the real world right before our eyes. Words create an impressive and convincing illusion in which we come to identify everything in the real world as nothing but a selection of muttered letters — short, compartmentalised, and boring.

Top highlight

“To see the truth you need to step out of the word jungle” — Bharath Gollapudi, Quora

Sam Mendes' masterpiece *American Beauty* reminds us of our world's dazzling intricacy by encouraging us to *look closer* — an invitation to expand on an all-too-brief, short assessment of a thing, to better understand

its hidden beauty.

“It was one of those days when it’s a minute away from snowing and there’s this electricity in the air, you can almost hear it. Right? And this bag was just dancing with me. Like a little kid begging me to play with it. For fifteen minutes. That’s the day I realized that there was this entire life behind things, and this incredibly benevolent force that wanted me to know there was no reason to be afraid, ever. Video’s a poor excuse, I know. But it helps me remember... I need to remember... Sometimes there’s so much beauty in the world, I feel like I can’t take it, and my heart is just going to cave in.”

— Ricky Fitts, *American Beauty*

There’s an *entire life* behind things — endless, fascinating detail, which we have better access to if we remind ourselves that the *word is not the thing*. Even something as seemingly banal as a plastic bag, dancing in the wind, can be heart-wrenchingly beautiful. We just have to look closer.

A similar theme can be found in Alejandro Iñárritu’s impressive film *Birdman*. During one scene, the protagonist actor Thomson Riggan rages at villainous critic Tabitha Dickinson, accusing her of mistaking words and labels for the reality that they represent:

“Let’s read your fuckin’ review. ‘Callow.’ Callow is a *label*. It’s just... ‘Lackluster.’ That’s just a label. Margin... marginalia. Are you kidding me? Sounds like you need penicillin to clear that up. That’s a label too. These are all just labels. You just label everything. That’s so fuckin’ lazy... You just... You’re a lazy fucker. You’re a lazy... [picks up a flower] You know what this is? You even know what that is? You don’t, You know why? Because you can’t see this thing if you don’t have to label it. You mistake all those little noises in your head for true knowledge.” — Riggan Thomson, *Birdman*

For Riggan, the critic who promises to “kill his play” is a fraud, failing to look past her abrupt descriptions to a deeper truth that she is too lazy and complacent to see. As a writer, Dickinson is so immersed in the world of language that she’s unable to separate words from reality, choosing to pigeonhole Riggan and his play before she’s even witnessed it. This is just one small, subtle element of a major theme of the movie — the confusion of

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fantasy and reality. Though Riggan frequently delves into fantasy himself, undergoing impossible feats such as moving objects with his mind, he’s aware of the beguiling potential of words, even keeping a sign at his dressing room desk that says “A thing is a thing, not what is said of that thing”.

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If we want to increase our world’s worth before our eyes, we must remind ourselves that the *word is not the thing*. This is not to say that we should spend our days wandering from object to object, mouth agape at everything we encounter. We need semantic brevity in order to get shit done. But if we pause from time to time and examine our world a little more closely, our blessed sense of appreciation will be heightened, and we’ll slowly become more grateful for this spectacular, fascinating world that we’re living in.

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