

Notes on language in Zerzan's primitivism

Tere Vadén
August 2008, Tampere

Introduction

In *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* the self-proclaimed anarchist anthropologist David Graeber (2004, 15) credits author and poet Robert Graves with the (most recent) “invention” of two major intellectual traditions: the idea of a Great Goddess (Mother Earth, Gaia) and a rejection of industrial civilisation. Graeber goes on to say that while Pagans have taken up the first idea, a group of Primitivists with John Zerzan as the most famous proponent, have taken the rejection of civilisation and hope of its collapse even further by suggesting that the adoption of agriculture was a Big Mistake.¹ Graeber is very sympathetic to, indeed adamant on one tenet of “Primitivist” theory: there have been and still are societies (people's, groups) that display very little of the hierarchical and violent tenets that are still often seen as somehow necessary or natural parts of living with other humans. This is something that the anthropological record is clear on, and while Graeber relies also on contemporary work (partly his own) on contemporary societies, the *locus classicus* of Primitivism, Zerzan's essay “Future Primitive” (1994), credits the seminal work of anthropologists like Marshall Sahlín and Richard Lee.

Graeber and Zerzan insist that past and present non-western traditional or non-industrialised societies display a richer and more full realisation of human potential than the Western enlightened societies. They agree that anarchist societies are not only possible or desirable, but exist even now as pockets inside a huge unified wasteland of more or less hierarchical and non-egalitarian societies. In the era of a quickly and mercilessly spreading global mass culture with a very limited set of ideas of human goals, the simple fact that humans have, in fact, lived otherwise and been successful is in itself an important reminder. Quick on its heels comes another common theme for Graeber and Zerzan: the study of these non-Western non-hierarchical societies may yield fruitful experiences and knowledge about how to overcome the current unsustainable practices – socially, ecologically, politically, spiritually.²

What does the anthropological record tell, then, according to Graeber, Zerzan and others? Both the examples we have and a theoretical analysis of the reasons of why they are good examples, point to the covariant absence of violence and alienation with the absence of agriculture, division of labour and symbolic culture. These three characteristics – agriculture/domestication, division of labour and symbolic culture form an interweaving common target for the primitivist critique. They are not only historically linked in that they seem to arise in human evolution roughly simultaneously, but also conceptually connected, in that agriculture demands division of labour and symbolic culture, without which it would be impossible in any large scale. As Zerzan points out, writing arises as accounting; it is a tool of hierarchy from its very inception: “The earliest writings are records of taxes, laws, terms of labor servitude” (LOM). Thus it might be that even though these three and other interconnected phenomena – such as hierarchy, gender systems, organised violence, etc. – could in abstract thought be picked apart and analysed in separation, such an analysis is not helpful as it loses the integral live phenomenon. “Self-domestication through language, art, and ritual

1 Zerzan sees the idea of the Mother Earth as a feature of agricultural societies (1994, 42).

2 See also Douglas Fry's (2005) path-breaking studies that intend to show that aggression and war are not “natural” to human societies. Fry, however, finds both agricultural and gatherer-hunter societies that have a culture of peacefulness.

inspired the taming of animals and plants that followed” (FP, 28); one important consequence to keep in mind is that for Zerzan, the progress of domestication implies the *increase* of violence – contrary to the received understanding of the meaning of the term.

These two anarchists, Graeber and Zerzan, part ways in suggesting the lessons on the basis of the anthropological observations. While Zerzan thinks that only primitive conditions may provide for full human realisation, Graeber does see something quixotic in Primitivist anarchism, comparing it again to Graeber's work: “[...] it is really impossible to know on what level one is supposed to read it. It's both ridiculous self-parody, and terribly serious, at the same time” (2004, 16). Though Graeber does not elaborate, one may guess that one element of self-parody in Primitivism is the fact that Primitivists texts, like Zerzan's “Future Primitive” or “Language: Origin and Meaning”, read a lot like highly civilised treatises, thus in a way taking part in the specialised, mediated and symbolic culture they at the same time refuse. Zerzan himself notes the paradox at the end of “Language: Origin and Meaning”, but goes on to say that he has to use words in order to speak. Indeed, we might want to accept Zerzan's primitivist analysis of the “Big Mistake” only to end up with a conundrum: if symbolic thought is necessary to reification, objectification and alienation, how is it possible to work against it in words, by writing and speaking? One of the things that makes writing and speaking primitivism “ridiculous” is, presumably, precisely this strict impossibility of practising what one preaches – an impossibility that is in a sense as deep as the practical impossibility of gatherer-hunter livelihoods on the contemporary depleted and overpopulated planet.

This paradox might also be at the heart of a curious passage in an interview of Zerzan by Derrick Jensen (Jensen 2000). The context is a discussion on violence and words as weapons. Jensen is frustrated by the fact that while talking is being done, the world deteriorates further and nature is being destroyed. Jensen says; “Or to take another example, I recently read that Gandhi wrote a letter to Hitler appealing to his conscience, and was amazed that it didn't work.” Here is Zerzan's answer: “Gandhi's failure doesn't mean words must always fail. He was obviously directing his words at the wrong place. Had he spoken more radical and effective words to his fellow Indians, things might be different there now.” (ibid.) This is a relatively surprising answer, compared, for instance, with the blanket statement: “Along these lines, in terms of structure, it is evident that “freedom of speech” does not exist; grammar is the invisible “thought control” of our invisible prison. With language we have already accommodated ourselves to a world of unfreedom.” (LOM) Do or do not words always fail? Or, to put it in another way, where does the – obvious – liberating and healing power of language stem from?

To answer these questions we have to look closely at Zerzan's critique of symbolic culture and language, at the same time remembering that these are not to be separated from the larger phenomenon of which they are parts of. Hopefully, this way we might be able to alleviate the paradox without throwing the baby out with the bath-water; without losing the overall critical analysis of civilisation and the Big Mistake.

What is wrong with language?

The quote above already locates the crux of the critique: language is a structure set upon more amorphous and free experience. More particularly, “Symbolising is linear, successive, substitutive; it cannot be open to its whole object simultaneously. Its instrumental reason is just that: manipulative and seeking domination. Its approach is “let a stand b” instead of “let a be a.” language has its basis in the effort to conceptualize and equalize the unequal, thus bypassing the essence and diversity of a varied, variable richness” (RoE, 2) This idea of the petrifying effect of

symbols and language is, as such, a relatively well-known theme even in standard Western philosophy of language³ and philosophical anthropology, as Zerzan demonstrates in “Language: Origin and Meaning”, for instance by quoting the Sapir-Whorf duo and their famous contention of linguistic relativity.

In the so-called analytic tradition of philosophy, the independence of thought (proposition) and language (representation) is often upheld. Consequently, linguistic relativism is denied. However, already Bertrand Russell saw a connection between grammar and philosophical thought. Nietzsche famously speculated on the influence of Indo-European grammar on Western metaphysics and thought. Since Nietzsche, the idea that language somehow forces its stamp on thought and experience in spite of the wish, will or wild flux of the experiencing subject has been a mainstay of many schools of continental thought. In fact, one of the main tenets of 20th century phenomenology in Germany (Heidegger) and France (Sartre) is the description of how language – widely understood – forms that very subjectivity and the social structures around it. An extreme example is the thought of Jacques Lacan, where the introduction of the infant to the symbolic universe is the founding gesture of subjectivity that at the same time guarantees that the subject is always already broken (see, e.g., Žižek 2007).

Corresponding to this idea of language as an oppressive filter on experience is both the philosophical and artistic craving for a form of experience (and possibly expression) that would be free of ossified linguistic structures. As an example one can mention Schopenhauer's notion of music as the direct life of *Wille*, without the practical and symbolic – and therefore servile – sides of all other forms of art. One form of this craving is the idea of art-for-art's-sake; art without any ulterior motives that would set filters or structures on experience.

This is a position that is often seen as naïve. Many schools of philosophy otherwise sympathetic to the idea of liberating experience point out that pure or unmediated experience does not exist. Often this claim of non-existence is taken further by claiming that, consequently, a search for pure experience is not only empirically misguided but also ethically wrong. For example, a Lacanian theorist would point out that human subjectivity is formed by the structures of the symbolic universe so that a yearning for pure experience is a yearning beyond not only subjectivity but also humanity altogether. No doubt, many Lacanians would find the idea of pure experience not so much a topic to be discussed but a symptom to be diagnosed. Likewise, a Derridean thinker would point out that “there is nothing beyond text”; all meaning is constructed – if there is something beyond text that something can not by definition be meaningful. This Derridean point is close to a Wittgensteinian argument against private language: meaningful language is by definition something shared and intersubjective. Therefore a language liberated from the structures of grammar, ideology and so on would presumably lose its intelligibility – we get the paradox of primitivist texts against all other kinds of texts in a new form. A Foucaultian theorist would say that an insistence on pure experience is a move in a game of power/knowledge with specific effects and as such impotent to move outside the existing co-ordinates of epistemologically relevant action.

Most of contemporary continental theory (as well as analytic philosophy, in its critique of the “myth of the given”, i.e., the myth of a theory-free – or symbol-free or interpretation-free – experience) agrees that the structures of meaning and subjectivity are the structures of language, understood in a wide sense. Thus the eradication of language in favour of a non-interpretative, non-symbolic or direct experience is at best an illusion of pre-human existence and at worst a proto-authorative quest

3 For instance, the anarchist philosopher Paul Feyerabend devoted his post-humously published work *Conquest of Abundance. A Tale of Abstraction versus the Richness of Being* (1999) to the theme of how Western philosophy has been obsessed with a trend of oversimplification and a habit of glorifying the oversimplified.

for unproblematic and uncritical authenticity beyond both subjective and intersubjective criteria. Put briefly, according to the critique, to insist on pure experience is to elevate something that can not be discussed or criticised into a decisive role thus promoting a world of might-makes-right.

To his credit Zerzan is willing to bite the bullet and go all the way: if the intersubjectivity of social life and meaningful communication are, indeed, dependent and constructed out of symbolic language and if the road to direct experience means languagelessness, then we have to do without intersubjectivity and communication in the senses given to them in the theories mentioned above: “And if timelessness resolves the split between spontaneity and consciousness, languagelessness may be equally necessary.” (LOM) That, most certainly, means doing without a civilisation recognisable from a Lacanian, Derridean or Foucaultian perspective. Zerzan's primitivism accepts no half-measures here: if, indeed, all of civilisation – including texts, time, psychiatry, family values, etc. – is deeply imbued with symbolic language, then all of it has to go.

It is good to note that the consistent refusal of intersubjective communicative symbolic language by Zerzan does not, as such, answer to the criticism that at the same time meaningful criteria of ethics are lost, and that the search for immediacy and experience happens in a vacuum where authority and force have all the assets on their side. Two points have to be noted here. First, again to his credit, Zerzan does not brush the problem under the carpet by claiming that experiential intensity or immediacy would somehow guarantee non-authoritative or non-hierarchical conditions. Second, – and this is closely connected to the observation of the conditioned nature of experience –, this is where the empirical observation that non-civilised and egalitarian societies do exist becomes crucial. Of course, it would in principle be possible to claim that given the obvious failure of civilisation, the refusal of the essential symbolic structures making civilisation possible – and consequently the refusal of civilisation – would be advisable even if we had no examples of successful non-civilised life: the refusal would be a “jump into the abyss”. However, the fact that increased division of labour, exploitation of nature, spiritual alienation and so on seem to go together, and, vice versa, the fact that when these are decreased, somewhere we end to the point of gatherer-hunter egalitarianism, sustainability and non-violence, give the primitivist argument against symbolic structures the nature of a programme, give it a direction: towards “primitive” conditions. However, in order to answer to the ethical problem, this direction has to be supplemented with a programme delineating how the slide down the slope of the refusal of intersubjective communicative symbolic language is to end in a egalitarian and anarchistic situation and not, say, in an experientially exited rabid nationalism or ethnicism. This problem is roughly analogous to the problem of how the collapse of state power is to lead to a more egalitarian and anarchist society, and not to the rule of warlords and mafia thugs (a problem that concerns Graeber 2007).

With regard to the ethics of the issue, it is instructive to look at the case of Heidegger, whose thought serves as a springboard for nearly all contemporary continental philosophy, including Derrida and Foucault. What does Heidegger say about the relationship between symbolic language and experience? What is his view on domestication? The case of Heidegger is revealing because he has been accused of making precisely the mistake of giving full reign to the search for authentic experience and thereby falling into the allure of Nazism. Heidegger's philosophy presents a picture of humans as first and foremost engaged and embodied beings that can under certain circumstances function as individual subjects. However, first and for the most part humans are a “distributed” opening and experiencing of a shared always-already meaningful world to which they are thrown. Heidegger criticises contemporary civilisation for forgetting this primordial human constitution and covering it up by the object-like structures of subjectivity, science, rationality and so on.

When Heidegger insists that losing oneself into the everyday averageness of what-everybody-says and what-everybody-wants can be countered by resolutely facing mortality and anxiety that reveal a more authentic way of being, the danger of misusing the notion of authenticity does, indeed, appear. For instance, it can be claimed that this Heideggerian description leaves too much room in terms of the content of authenticity: almost any resolute facing of death and anxiety will do (see, e.g., von Krockow 1990). Accepting that human being is based on nothing and that all meaning is going to die, and still resolutely pushing ahead and choosing a hero in the generational battle of a people (as Heidegger puts it in the end of *Sein und Zeit*) becomes a voluntaristic enterprise: national socialism will do, if it promises a rooted and embodied stand in the face of nothingness. Losing oneself in the “authentic” national (*völkisch*) experience, one loses all intersubjective or universal ethical criteria; so say Heidegger's detractors. Heidegger does claim, for instance, that the overcoming of Western metaphysics is a problem that can be encountered only in the German language; if Heidegger is right we who do not speak German as a native language just have to accept this claim without really being able to evaluate it. The same goes for national experience: we who do not belong to it, can not really criticise it or its authenticity either.

Language inside and outside of itself

To see whether this ethical problem possibly applies to a primitivist search for immediate experience, we have to ask what, exactly, is the problem with language according to Zerzan? Simply put, language introduces a distance between humans and nature and humans and their experience: “Though language, in its definitive features, seems to be complete from its inception, its progress is marked by a steadily debasing process. The carving up of nature, its reduction into concepts and equivalencies, occurs along lines laid down by the patterns of language. And the more the machinery of language, again paralleling ideology, subjects existence to itself, the more blind its role in reproducing a society of subjugation.” (LOM) In this very basic sense, language is a tool of alienation, when alienation is understood as explained by Zerzan: “Marx defined alienation as being separated from the means of production. Instead of producing things to use, we are used by the system. I would take it a step further and say that to me it means estranged from our own experiences, dislodged from a natural mode of being.” (Jensen 2000)

To be sure, this tendency exists in language. Heidegger's description of the average everydayness of language and its way of levelling authentic existence provides a similar description. But is this all there is to language?

To say that language is necessarily or only a tool of alienation seems strange given the full continuum of language from the simple cries and calls of animals to full-fledged human language. There seems to be no clear-cut point where the “language” of animals and babies (or, intoxicated, impaired, etc. humans) turns into the necessarily alienating symbolic structure (Zerzan) or the calculating, translatable and universalizable language of the market place and the sciences (Heidegger). Indeed, given the rich variety of calls and cries in the animal world, it is little wonder that scientists widely agree that some animals do possess rudimentary symbolic language. Consider the putty-nosed monkey with its three distinct warning calls (“predator-in-air”, “predator-in-tree”, “predator-on-ground”; see Arnold & al, 2008, 2006). These calls do not work as reflexes on visual or other sensory stimuli, but are generalised and contextualised, i.e. symbolic. Similar observations have been made with regard to dolphin and whale “languages”.

Looking from the other end, it is obvious that human “language” is not always symbolic. The first sounds made by a newborn can hardly be classified as language. However, at some point in the

typical development of a child a mature proficiency is acquired. This means that in nature symbolic language develops out of something that is less-than-symbolic, whether we want to call it language or not. Likewise, in naturalistic (and non-Chomskian) cognitive science, it is usually thought that full-fledged conceptual and representational structures emerge through processes of learning from a more primordial level of non-conceptual and non-representational content.

It seems that Zerzan would not like to call this less-than-symbolic something language. For him, language is in essence communicative, and communication is defined as the transmission of symbolic messages. Or, to put it in another way, language is the structured medium through which experience may be communicated: “It is easier still to begin to locate language in these terms if one takes up another definition common to both ideology and language: namely, that each is a system of distorted communication between two poles and predicated upon symbolization.” (LOM) Here communication is defined as a process where I first experience something inside myself, then code this something into the structures of language, which are then pushed outside of myself by being spoken or written, after which you receive and decode the structures inside yourself and arrive at some mental content and possibly experiences. Again, this may well be a big part of language. It is often taken to be the most important or essential part, as in the Wittgensteinian argument against a private language. According to this view, language that is not communication is not language at all. Ideally language as communication should be as clear and as unambiguous as possible; this forms the kernel of the view of language as counting and (ac)counting that Heidegger, among others, strongly criticises.

However, again both a more empirical or naturalistic as well as a more phenomenological look at language point out that this is not all there is. Even in mainstream high-theory analytic philosophy, it has been observed that certain parts of natural languages do not, in fact, possess conceptual content. For instance, indexical words are meaningfully used even though they do not systematically represent or symbolise, i.e., even though their content is non-conceptual (see, e.g., Peacocke 1995). Likewise, a Heidegger or a Bataille would insist on the non-communicative nature of language. For Heidegger (2007), language is first and for the most part a way in which the world opens itself to us in experience. This opening-up is engaged, distributed and practical, and only under certain circumstances (like the modern West), does the experience get articulated into subjects and objects and the linguistic structures that correspond to them. For Bataille (1988), language is not communication but rather communion, in which experiential energies are expanded and expended as through wounds.

Let us imagine three concentric circles. They could be a house on a yard inside a forest.⁴ In the innermost circle, the house (the *oikos*), things have their definite places. Order is established, and names can systematically refer to objects needed. This circle is limited by the walls and roof of the house, so that a relative stability of conditions guarantees the relative permanence of relationships and functions inside. In order to work as a hub of control and permanence, the house as a limited economy engages in import and export. Around the house is the yard, with some cultivated patches, maybe buildings for storage and work, and pathways between the various places. Here the order and functionality already attained in the house is challenged. The wind may sweep away some spoken words, and make speech indistinguishable from animal grunts. The paths grow in unless used. Fences have to be erected, livestock protected from beasts. The perimeter of this circle is more porous and therefore demands more upkeep than the perimeter of the house. Finally, there is the forest. Here there is no order or limit set by humans. The forest does not have to follow any rules or laws, not even its own. Humans may visit the forest and the forest ultimately visits itself on the yard

4 Or, if one prefers an aquatic myth more in line with the Kantian-Schopenhauerian metaphor of reason as ground/ship and experience as the sea: the house on an island in the middle of the ocean.

and house. The language of the forest is not the setting-to-place and setting-to-work of the house. But the forest is not mute.⁵ The meaningful processes in the forest may be inhumanly long and sophisticated.

The first circle corresponds to language-as-communication. In the house the circumstances for subjects and objects are present. The subject and the object are strictly correlative: there can not be one without the other. However, the subject and the object are something natural, too; simply because there is nothing extra-natural. Therefore they are forms that non-subjective and non-objective experience may under certain circumstances assume: they are later in the development, so they are dependent on the earlier, not vice versa. The second circle is the area where subjectivity is contested, where it is at times achieved and at times lost. Here language too is more rudimentary; more like a tool or a process, torn between the pressures and demands of the house and the forest. Finally, the forest is an area of asubjective (and aobjective, meaning something that comes before the distinction between subject and object) experience and language.

Typically, asubjective experience is described in “negative” terms; such are, for instance, Heidegger's notions of anxiety and nearness-of-death. The crucial thing about anxiety for Heidegger is precisely that in anxiety there is no object of the experience (unlike in fear, in which there is always the intentional structure of being “afraid-of-x”; consequently, for Heidegger fear is an emotion that a subject can have, while anxiety is an experience that *Dasein* undergoes) and no subject either: the subject is dissolved in anxiety – this dissolution is a big part of the “negativity” of anxiety. Somebody like Bataille might turn his attention to more “positive” cases of asubjective experience, such as sexual or religious enrapture. It might very well be that a well-defined Western (adult) subject needs such “extreme” forms of experience for the hold of the subject to loosen, but otherwise we may well expect that there are less extreme and less “glorious” forms. Again, the experience of young babies or very old persons, as well as experiences of profound boredom, intoxication, overjoy and so on may dissolve the subject/object distinction.

It is important to notice that the difference between asubjective and subjective experience is not the same as the difference between unconscious and conscious experience (for an elaboration of asubjectivity see Pykkö 1998, also Vadén 2005, 2006). Asubjective experience can be both conscious or unconscious. The same goes for language. There is no reason why asubjective experience could not be linguistic, could not be in language. What it can not be, is the expression of inner mental states in external symbols. This does not mean that asubjective language (language in the forest) is always or by its nature somehow more simple, elementary or naïve compared to subjective language. The pre-conceptual language of infants is only one example; some forms of

5 The Finnish national epic, *Kalevala*, is based on a body of poems collected during the 18th and 19th centuries. The poems were part of an oral tradition, where each singer of the poems remembered a set by heart. One of the major narrative tensions in the poems is the partly friendly, partly rivalrous relationship between two groups. Kaleva is the southern, sea-going, more agricultural and eventually Christianised community where most of the male heroes of the epic live. Pohjola is the Northern, dark, primitive, gatherer-hunter community, which, oddly enough, has all the eligible maidens and is led by the matriarch Louhi. The focal thing in the poems is called Sampo, a mythical mill that without human intervention gives all wanted riches to its possessors. The Sampo is in Pohjola, and in the epic gets robbed and eventually destroyed by the Kaleva heroes. Vadén (2005) has interpreted the tension between Kaleva and Pohjola as the tension between incipient agricultural society and a gatherer-hunter society which insists on the “old” ways (In the epic, this older conflict is repeated in the inner conflict that Kaleva faces through the process of Christianisation). In this interpretation, Sampo represents the kernel of Pohjola's lifestyle – the supremely leisurely and easy life of the gathering and hunting Pohjola in the eyes of the toiling and more civilised Kaleva people. With regard to the topic at hand, the poems say: “Sampo did not lack words, Louhi did not lack incantations.”; or in John Martin Crawford's translation from 1888: “Incantations were not wanting, Over Sampo and o'er Louhi, Sampo growing old in singing, Louhi ceasing her enchantment.” (<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/kalec10.txt>)

asubjective language may demand complex and sophisticated – if not Byzantine – skills, a long life of committed practice. Here one might think of certain communal (let us say the language used while planting crops by a group of villagers who have lived together all their lives) or artistic practices (let us say a group of surrealists practising automatic writing).

What is asubjective language, then? In order to be grammatical, sentences in Indo-European languages need to have a subject. Even in the so-called passive voice with no definite agent, a surrogate subject is used (“*It is raining*”, “*Es regnet*”). This might lead one to believe that asubjective language is an impossibility, since grammatical sentences (and communicative language) always have a subject, even if only a surrogate one. However, the passive form in, for instance, Finnish is completely subjectless; also objectless as nothing is predicated (there is no X that is said to be Y; no “it” that is doing the raining and no “it” that has the property of raining). For example, let us consider the verb “*ajaa*” (“to drive”, “to go after”, “to hunt”). In the first person singular (“I drive”) the verb would be “*Minä ajan.*” When we start diminishing the subjectivity of the sentence, an inflexion (“-*stu/sty*, -*utu/yty*”) inside the verb can be used: “*Minä ajaudun*” (“I am being driven.”). Again, we need to note that the Finnish has no connotation or implication that this “being driven” is being done by something or somebody; there is no subjective structure of “driven-by-x”. The inflexion simply indicates that my ending up somewhere was not controlled by me and may have happened against my subjective will. The inflexion indicates the dissolution of the subject, even if the subject is still present in the sentence. Further down the road is the completely de-subjectivised passive voice “*Ajetaan*”, in which there is no subject, surrogate or otherwise. Crucially, the passive voice has no number, no gender, no subject and no object. Thus, in translating it to English, one has to introduce these structures; “Driving is being done”, “There is driving”, “Drivingness happens”, or something similar.

The examples from Finnish are not presented in the sense that asubjective language could be found only in exotic environments. Asubjectivity may be easier to find in languages on the fringes of Western colonialisation and globalisation, as they might have preserved more of the linguistic traces that have already been pruned from the core languages of techno-civilisation. However, it is entirely possible, indeed quite likely, that when properly attended to, words like “death”, “mother”, “friend” do not permit a clear cut subject-object distinction even when used in everyday English.

Here things turn metaphysical in a sense. Let us consider an analogy. If someone believes that all things are caused and determined, then it is impossible to empirically prove to her the opposite. If we point out that according to quantum mechanics, individual quantum phenomena happen randomly (and that the randomness is ontological, not epistemological), she can retort that this is only because the causal Grand Unifying Theory that brings together quantum mechanics and relativity theory has not been invented yet. The same goes here. If someone believes that all language is communicative and symbolic, then it is impossible to empirically prove to her that asubjective language exists. Given the examples above, she can insist that humans are born with an innate language, whose grammar governs also cases like “*Ajetaan*”, even if the structures can not be systematically identified from the surface. This deafness to asubjective language is quite consistent with the practice of “discovering” a grammar in the non-European languages of colonised peoples; funnily enough the grammars all tend to look a lot like the grammar of Latin. Grammatical structures and conceptual content can be insisted – and have been insisted – upon also in the case of pidgin or Creole languages, which are in a state of constant flux so that what was “correct” or “grammatical” a decade ago, has changed by now. However, any thinker that takes naturalism seriously has to take into account the continuum mentioned above as well as the fact that more recent and structured phenomena have to be explained in terms of older and less structured ones. Symbolic language, if anything, is a prime candidate for a relatively recent and structured

phenomenon. Consequently, it has to be explained in terms of an older and less structured non-symbolic language.

How can words not fail?

It seems that Zerzan's view of the essentially symbolic and alienating nature of language has, so to speak, bought the propaganda of the Western victors too totally. Indeed, both the belief that symbols and numbers are essential structures of progress and the mirroring belief that they are essentially rotten contain a dose of overconfidence. For if it is the case that symbolic language is based on nonsymbolic language, then symbolic language also always relapses back to the nonsymbolic and gets its live effect – the communion – from asubjective strata.

In “Language: Origin and Meaning” Zerzan writes: “The question is how did words first come to be accepted as signs at all? How did the first symbol originate? Contemporary linguists find this “such a serious problem that one may despair of finding a way out of its difficulties.”” The only naturalistic answer to this conundrum is that they never did, or at least, they are never completely able to persist as signs. We may under favourable conditions pretend that words function as symbols and that we are able to communicate by using them, but the conditions do not have to deteriorate very much (chemically, physically, psychologically, socially) for the illusion to disappear. The functioning of words as symbols is something that is socially produced and takes hard work and long-lasting education. The structures of natural languages are connected to the ways of life; if there are different ways of life, there are different linguistic (and cognitive) structures. If and when the structures of Indo-European grammar are universalised – as the project of Western philosophy, academia and so on has been doing for 2000 years –, we get a stratum of language that is translatable.

Zerzan's critique of the implied obscurantism and quietism of postmodernism are laudable (see e.g. “The Catastrophe of Postmodernism” in FP), but he skips too quickly over the (Derridean) postmodern idea that language is never fully able to represent, to become symbolic, to let a stand for b. There is a kernel of truth in this contention, moreover, a kernel that can be well connected to the fact that language is a piece of nature. The realm of language is a full continuum with no discrete jumps or transcendental areas. This is exactly what one would expect in nature. The same goes for experience. There are no unquestionable areas of experience; whether that unquestionability is put in the garb of human symbolic language (supposedly separating us once and for all from animals) or the garb of authenticity (supposedly giving the right of way). This is the way we should interpret Feyerabend's dictum “every culture is potentially all cultures” (Feyerabend 1999, 33). There is no cultural or linguistic authenticity that could not be, in principle, criticised or reached from a different starting point. The claim of such authenticity is always a metaphysical gesture of wanting to step outside this world, outside the real-life negotiation and struggle of influence and effect. At the same time we have to notice that actualising this potentiality is no minor task. Changing the ways of life of a culture, and in that sense becoming another culture, is not an easy and not a fast process – certainly it is not something attainable by a subject or at will. So the experiences of things like technology in other cultures may be in a sense transcendent to us; we can not reach them in our lifetimes, or even if we could, it would mean that we would be transformed beyond recognition. The change of a culture is, by definition, a social and multi-generational enterprise, and as such belongs to the sphere of asubjectivity, not subjective choices.

In the case of music, Zerzan allows a qualification: it is mainly tonal music that is a picture and element of hierarchy (FP, 75ff). It seems that we need to do the same kind of adjustment in the case

of language: it is mainly symbolic, conceptual, subject/object language that is a tool of alienation. But to claim that tonal music is all music or that symbolic language all of language is naturalistically unacceptable.

There is an interesting parallel in Zerzan's notion of the subject or self. Zerzan often writes in a tone that suggests that current industrial civilisation leads to an underdeveloped or fragmented subjectivity, alienated from a natural fullness. However, as already seen above, the subject is – in all the senses that Zerzan insists in the case of language – a structure of hierarchy and servility. Even more so, for in the case of language there is the asubjective side that inflicts and wounds even the highest reaches of symbolic language, whereas the subject precisely is the problem with and inside of language. The subject is a structure of repetition and predictability. What it means to be a subject is to act and to think similarly – or at the very least understandably – to other subjects given the same circumstances. What it means to be a subject is to perceive the world as objects. Again, learning to be a subject takes time and training. Moreover, it is something that humans may fail to achieve. All of this suggests the asubjective below the subjective. The subject is, by definition, hostile to the asubjective, since the asubjective means the dissolution of the subject. The function of the subject is to guarantee a sense of permanence, continuity and control amid the flux of experience. The subject can never “asubjectify” itself; the dissolution has to be initiated by something non-subjective, such as the forest.

This structural side of the subject is sometimes made less clear by the other common usage of the word subject: in this other sense the subjective is the individual's point of view, in contrast to the objective view. However, on closer inspection the subject as idiosyncrasy falls back to the subject as structure. The separation of experience into individuals with viewpoints of their own opening into an objective common world is already made from a position where the subject/object distinction is assumed. Correspondingly, individuality is a structure of control by which common experience is domesticated by the rules of *divide et impera*.

In the case of a language like Finnish, the imperial nature of the subject is clear. Like we saw above, when translated into Indo-European languages (such as the Swedish and Russian of the colonialists), the subject has to be introduced into the translation. When Finnish is taught at schools and universities, the subject is equally introduced through the theories of grammar, linguistics, philosophical logic and so on. Given enough time, this introduction turns into an occupation. A European subjectivity is formed and lives among the possible residues of asubjective experience still contained in Finnish language and experience. A sentence of “Finnish” may thus contain both elements of asubjective experience and the metaphysics of subjectivity. The subject as an occupier is hostile to the asubjective experience, which in turn forms an anti-subjective tendency manifesting itself as mutism, suicide, alcoholism, hermetism and so on. These traits as well as the peculiarities of the language are something that the Finns that aspire to Europeanness and maturity feel as an embarrassment, something to be eradicated, civilised. However, asubjective experience as such is wholly indifferent with regard to both the subjective and anti-subjective tendencies of experience.

Curiously, there is a symptomatic linguistic phenomenon on the idiosyncratic side of subjectivity. In Finnish, the inflexion of words is very common, e.g., genitive, accusative and so on are indicated by inflexion. Even proper names inflect. The genitive of the male name Matti would be Matin, the family name Virtanen would be Virtasen, and so on. Recently, a growing number of individuals have begun to omit this inflexion from their names, and the habit is spreading to newspapers and the daily media. Presumably, the reason for the omission is, on one hand, the pressure of the non-inflecting Indo-European languages and, on the other hand, the fact that without the inflexion the names are more recognisable and the possibility of mistakes is eliminated (in their inflected forms

some names are indistinguishable from each other). Without the inflexion the name becomes like a trademark, standing out from the text or the speech in the same format every time. At the same time, the non-inflected names literally show up as clumsy – if not orcish – petrifications amid the fluidity of the rest of the language. Thus, the emphasis on subjectivity as individuality again plays in the hands of European metaphysics of subjectivity.

An important corollary of the conclusion that sees the subject as an occupier with regard to a subjective experience is that primitivism can not be a philosophy of the subject. A primitivist can not be a subjectivist in either of the two senses of the word “subject”, because the subject is the structure of universalisation and hierarchy inside experience. The subject is the arbiter that always prefers the predictable, rational and controllable. As a whole plethora of post-colonial critiques have shown, the Western notion of the subject that pretends to be universal and universally liberating, in fact contains a particular bias in favour of Western values.

Another important corollary is the way out of the paradox of “writing primitivism”: language can be used in attacking civilisation, because language does not belong to civilisation; it was born before and it will last longer. Even the most permanent subjects and the most structural symbols are dependent on an a-subjective and non-symbolic layer of experience and can be affected or wounded by it. Zerzan writes “There is a profound truth to the notion that “lovers need no words.”” (LOM) This is, indeed, noteworthy. However, what if it was lovers who invented language? What if language in its innermost core is the intimate and non-mediated communion of lovers? This language does not represent, it is an experience, irrepeatable and unique. What symbolic language is, is the tip of this iceberg; a tip that emerges only under very specific conditions and through a lot of effort. There is no private language, because contra Wittgenstein, there is no permanent subjectivity: language need not be the pushing of messages outside of my self, if my self is not a fortress to begin with.

Here an analogue might be helpful. In philosophy of mind and cognitive science a distinction is made between propositional attitudes (like beliefs, judgements, and so on; these are the contents that can supposedly be represented in language-independent ways) and experiential qualia (the qualitative feel of experience, e.g., the redness of red, the taste of a strawberry, etc.). Propositional attitudes are precisely the stuff of symbolic language: something that can be reliably communicated, represented, inferred (is A believes that a, and that a \rightarrow b, then as a rational subject A also believes that b) and so on. In contrast, the qualitative feel of experience is supposedly ineffable and thus forever “locked” inside a particular subject. This is also the reason why some philosophers of mind want to say that there are no qualia (just as there are is no private language). For instance Daniel Dennett presents a series of arguments against the existence of qualia. One of these concerns the case of Chase and Sanborn, two coffee tasters who have for years been checking the quality of a particular brand of coffee. Now, for Chase the coffee still tastes the same, but he does not like it any more. For Sanborn, the coffee nowadays tastes disagreeable, even if it used to be the best tasting coffee. Dennett goes on to describe three different possibilities of what has happened to the qualia Chase and Sanborn entertain: (i) the qualia (the taste of the coffee) have stayed the same but the aesthetic evaluations have changed, (ii) the evaluations have shifted, or (iii) a little bit of both (i) and (ii). The point is that Chase and Sanborn differ in their own opinion of what has happened. The problem for somebody believing in the existence of qualia is that there probably is no way of telling what has happened. Even if we could devise tests to see how reliable the tasting skills of Chase and Sanborn are these days, there is the further difficulty that “qualia are supposed to affect our action or behaviour only via the intermediary of our judgements about them, so any behavioral test can give us direct evidence only about the *resultant* of our two factors (qualia and judgment/memory)” (1997, 628) Thus there seems to be little possibility of telling the difference between ‘attempted

qualia renormalization' on the other hand, and 'extended aesthetic evaluation', on the other. If there is no difference, no psychological relevance or work to be done in terms of intentional explanation, then, according to Dennett, qualia do not exist. Let us forget for a while the preposterousness of the argument, and propose an alternative interpretation, one that does not entail there is no way that the coffee tastes to Chase or Sanborn. The fact that we cannot experimentally distinguish between 'attempted qualia renormalization' and 'extended aesthetic evaluation' points out that there is no sharp distinction between qualia and aesthetic evaluation and judgment in the first place. The fact that Chase finds the taste of the coffee the same but his reaction to it different is a mental content that does have a feel, too. Similarly, Sanborn's state of mind that finds the taste disagreeable is qualitative – it feels like something to entertain that though. The feel might be less intensive than the feel of jumping into cold water, for instance – typically subjective and conceptual thought is less intensive than asubjective and acocneptual. However, the feel is there. The quale does not reside in the atomistic essence left-over when judgment and other content are taken away, but rather takes part in constituting the overall mental quality. Judgement is a quale, a very complicated and rich one, or perhaps a more or less predictably organised series of qualia.

The same goes for experience in general, and language, in particular. Subjective language is always also asubjective, if only minimally in Western highly subjectivised conditions. Asubjective language can have an effect on subjective language precisely because they are cut from the same cloth, and separable only as abstractions, not in real life. This, simultaneously, is the reason why the ossification of subject/object relationships can also spread further. Once begun, experiential influences can spread in any direction and there are no ultimate barriers that could absolutely stop them. This "democracy of experiences" applies also to the barriers that exist between subjects: there is no *a priori* reason why the socially constructed boundaries of subjects could always act as the limits of experience. Again, it is a commonplace that a newborn and the mother often form an inseparable experiential field: Zerzan mentioned the case of lovers, above. There is no *a priori* reason to think that the newborn, the mother, the lovers would not *speak*. The human brain is already a widely distributed system with centres, margins and dead-ends of its own. It would be a miracle if it would not happen that areas of "my" brain would sometimes be more closely connected to areas of "your" brain – or the non-human environment – than they are to some parts of itself. Asubjective experience by its nature is spread over several experiential centres, and in that sense is always rather collective and shared than individual and punctual. The "small" distributions of child-mother, lover-lover are one example, but dissolution in the hunt or in national experience provide larger-scale examples.

When Zerzan writes that "Civilization is often thought of not as a forgetting but as a remembering, wherein language enables accumulated knowledge to be transmitted forward, allowing us to profit from other's experiences as though they were our own. Perhaps what is forgotten is simply that other's experiences are *not* our own, that the civilizing process is thus a vicarious and inauthentic one." (LOM, emphasis in the original), he is only partly right. Civilization indeed is a forgetting – it is a forgetting of the shared asubjective experience. Asubjective experience is not my "own" in any of the senses of the word: it is not owned (controlled, decided over) by me and it is not "inside" myself. These two characteristics also provide the "uncanniness" of asubjective experience, and are therefore one major reason why civilisation wants to forget and discipline it (as Heidegger, among others, suspected). In "Language: Origin and Meaning" Zerzan writes: "It has been asserted that reification is necessary to mental functioning, that the formation of concepts which can themselves be mistaken for living properties and relationships does away with the otherwise almost intolerable experience of relating one experience to another." We need to add: it does away with the otherwise almost intolerable experience of relating to each other without the barriers of subjectivity. The subjectification of language is a way of forgetting about the subjective community and communion.

To be sure, civilisation is at its peak, language is corrupted and technologized roughly to the same extent as life itself. Other ways of thinking and speaking demand other ways of life. Thus we are back to the question of how to go about increasing experiential immediacy and intensity, decreasing division of labour and reification, without at the same time ending up national socialism, heroic individual life-boatism or something similar. One of the beautiful features of Zen buddhist practice with regard to its promise of getting rid of individual subjectivity and of the mind altogether, is the robustness of the tradition and the power of example. There are no guarantees, no knock-down arguments, just a good track-record and teachers that are willing to show the way. Maybe this is the key relevance of the anarchist anthropological record: to set up the examples that can be taught and applied.

Literature

- Arnold, Kate, Yvonne Pohlner, and Klaus Zuberbühler. 2008. "A forest monkey's alarm call series to predator models." *Behavioral Ecology and Sociobiology* 62(4):549-559.
- Arnold, Kate, and Klaus Zuberbühler. 2006. "Language evolution: Semantic combinations in primate calls." *Nature* 441(7091):303.
- Bataille, Georges, and Leslie A. Boldt. 1988. *Inner Experience*. State University of New York Press.
- Block, Ned, Owen J. Flanagan, and Güven Güzeldere. 1997. *The Nature of Consciousness: Philosophical Debates*. 1st ed. The MIT Press.
- Botz-Bornstein, Thorsten. 2006. *Re-ethnicizing the Minds? Cultural Revival in Contemporary Thought (Studies in Intercultural Philosophy 17)*. Editions Rodopi BV.
- Dennett, D. C. 1997. 'Quining Qualia', in N. Block, O. Flanagan and G. Güzeldere (eds), *The Nature of Consciousness*.
- Feyerabend, Paul. 1999. *Conquest of Abundance: A Tale of Abstraction versus the Richness of Being*. University Of Chicago Press.
- Fry, Douglas P. 2005. *The Human Potential for Peace: An Anthropological Challenge to Assumptions about War and Violence*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Graeber, David. 2004. *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*. Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Graeber, David. 2007. *Possibilities: Essays on Hierarchy, Rebellion, and Desire*. AK Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. 2007. *Unterwegs zur Sprache*. 14th ed. Klett-Cotta.
- Jensen, Derrick. 2000. "Enemy of the State. An Interview with John Zerzan" *Alternative Press Review*, Vol 5, no1. <<http://www.altpr.org/apr12/zerzan.html>>
- Krockow, Christian Graf von. 1990. *Die Entscheidung*. Campus Verlag GmbH.
- Peacocke, Christopher. 1995. *A Study of Concepts*. The MIT Press.
- Pylkkö, Pauli. 1998. *The Aconceptual Mind: Heideggerian Themes in Holistic Naturalism*. John Benjamins Publishing Co.
- Vadén, Tere. 2006. "What is Local Thinking" in Botz-Bornstein, Thorsten. 2006. *Re-ethnicizing the Minds?*
- Vadén Tere. 2005. *Karhun nimi*. 23°45.
- Zerzan, John. 1994. *Future Primitive: And Other Essays*. Autonomedia. (FP)
- Zerzan, John. "Language: Origin and Meaning" <<http://www.primitivism.com/language.htm>> (LOM)
- Zerzan, John. 2008. *Running on Emptiness: The Pathology of Civilization*. Feral House. (RoE)
- Žižek, Slavoj. 2007. *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters*. Verso.