

## **THE SYMBOL THEORY**

by Norbert Elias. London: Sage, 1991.

This short book argues a new perspective on the sociology of knowledge. The thesis argued is that language, knowledge, and cognition are just aspects of the same phenomenon: the use of sound-patterns to communicate.

The arguments are based on the following:

- The unit of analysis is humanity
- The key difference between humanity's forebears and other hominids was the genetic modifications providing for our
  - Ability to make an infinite variety of sound patterns
  - Ability to hear the same sound patterns
  - Ability to store in memory the same sound patterns
- These abilities are the bio-genetic foundation for language (speaking, hearing) and learning
- Languages developed as a means of communication among humans about events and experiences. A language transmits knowledge, and the symbols used in communication made possible thinking and planning for future action.
- Each language contains a fund of knowledge about events and experiences, social as well as natural, observed in the world that a language community has encountered throughout its history. In a certain sense the language *is* the culture.
- With the development of writing in the fourth millennium BC the ability for intergenerational transmission of knowledge increased significantly. In particular the scope of social organisation entered a new level on the scale from lineage group to humanity.
- With the advent of the scientific approach to increase the reality-congruence of knowledge the ability for planned discoveries improved on humanity's ability to control and exploit its environment. In particular the increased power of the environment led social organisations to a new level on the scale from tribal Chief to leaders of modern states.

The main functions of language are

- 1) the transmission of knowledge for orientation in the world, and
- 2) to provide symbols for thinking and planning for action

It is hypothesised that groups with languages where concepts were more reality-congruent would have had better chances of survival compared to groups with languages less reality-congruent. Over time a growth in reality congruence in relation to fantasy content of concepts can be observed.

It is observed that humans, unlike animals, can change their behaviour dramatically without changing genetic characteristics. Changing patterns of behaviour is explained by changes in culture due to, among other things, the less than perfect communication and learning in the intergenerational transmission of knowledge.

This last observation has interesting implications that are not discussed by Elias<sup>1</sup>. One obvious conclusion must be that languages are a kind of species whose development would be guided by the evolutionary dynamic (at language group level and not at individual level like the biological evolutionary dynamic). It would not be the survival of the genetically “best” endowed groups that shaped humanity, but the survival of those language groups imparting to its users the best means of orientation and coordination of action.

One may with this as a point of departure speculate further that

- the first competitive edge that languages gave our forebears would be improvements in the ability to organise collective action for example in defence against predatory incursions of other hominids. But also in foraging and exploration of landscapes and their resources.
- after humanity became the dominant hominid the interesting competition would be among distinct languages or rather the groups speaking a language. The imperfect learning of languages and the imperfect transmission of knowledge creates a powerful dynamic for diversity of languages. One might hazard a guess that since the advent of writing the long term trend has been in the direction of decreasing diversity of languages despite a tremendous increase in population.
- the source of the modern competitive edge of language is still tied to
  - ability to organise collective action and
  - ability to exploit the scientific approach to reality-congruence to create social power and improve the ability for collective action.
- There may perhaps be a rather direct link between genes and language. Words are to a variable degree able to evoke emotional reactions. This may also vary across cultures. If there could be established a kind of emotional “index” for each word, one might think of an “emotional landscape” overlaid the language.

These last speculations points to possible empirical investigation. It might be interesting to compare an emotional index with for example an index of reality-congruence (of the conceptual content of the word), or more narrowly the emotional landscapes of the vocabulary for cooperation and collective action.

It would also seem possible to investigate languages comparatively in terms of their vocabulary for collective action and rank them according to the variety of actions available for coordination and collective action, and the emotional value of each type of action. This could then be compared to experimental observations of propensity to display trusting behaviour, choice of egoistic actions, or conditionally cooperative attitudes from the same language groups.

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<sup>1</sup> Maybe because he died while he was writing the introduction the this slim volume?