

I Don't Know What You Mean

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Through audio collage, I am exploring the liminal space between language and communication. I am interested in exposing the variety of mental and physical languages we translate between in order to communicate, as well as the perspective lenses we bring to each translation. My fascination with the gap between language and communication stems from a desire to expose the depth of the gap, the variety of methods we employ to cross that gap, and the human tendency to forget or disregard the existence of that gap. “I Don’t Know What You Mean” focuses on communicative obsession with meaning, and our ability to infuse or fabricate meaning where there appears to be none, which I argue stems from our desire to understand and relate to one another.

In order to reveal the variety of mental languages and perspective lenses of my participants, I crafted a five-question interview to be used as a constant in my makeshift experiment. The questions were asked in the same order every time (though participants had the option to skip a question and come back as well as revise an answer later), and I attempted to be as objective and removed as possible. The questions, in order, are:

- How do you process? What is your unique perspective on life? What is your unique approach to navigating the world around you?
- If you were to create an analogy for the way you process things, what would that analogy be?
- Do you have a mantra or phrase of significance that you find yourself repeating, either aloud or internally? Where did it come from? What does it mean to you? When do you use it?

- Here's a different interviewee's mantra. What do you think it means? What would it mean if it were your mantra?
- Here's a phrase that came up multiple times in someone else's interview. What do you think it means.

After a round of interviews, I cut the audio up and collaged it together into a sound piece. As I collected more interviews, I weaved in the new source material and allowed the collages to grow.

In order to craft my interview, I did a lot of research on the psychology of what I refer to as perspective lenses. I started out researching Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences and Cattell, Horn, and Carroll's theory of fluid versus crystallized intelligence, which are the most famous theories in their family and the basis of many personality and intelligence tests.

Gardner's theory simply states that different people learn in different ways, and that while there is a general intelligence factor (what we colloquially refer to as IQ), everyone has learning processes of varying strengths, such as kinesthetic learning, visual/spatial learning, linguistic learning, etc. Cattell, Horn, and Carroll's theory, or CHC theory, states that there are two types of information coding and recall: fluid and crystallized. Fluid intelligence refers to one's ability to generate novel solutions based on contextual information, and generally peaks at age 25.

Crystallized intelligence refers to one's ability to access previously learned information, and continues to increase as one ages. These two theories are often married in order to create a model or algorithm for learning style. Fluid and crystallized intelligence are both big factors in communication and language, and we use both in order to solve problems.

I then researched theories of social intelligence and communication. Sternberg's Triarchic Theory of Intelligence states that there are three components of intelligence: analytical intelligence, contextual intelligence, and experiential intelligence. I argue the act of translating

between mental languages, spoken language, and communication is a form of problem solving, where the problem is the gap between what we “mean”, what we “say”, and what others “understand”. If we think of Sternberg’s Triarchic Theory as a model of the components of problem solving, and apply it to the process of translation, we end up with a model for social intelligence. From there I crafted my own model of what I refer to as socio-linguistic intelligence, which is one’s ability to interpret information received in a conversation.

My model was also triarchic, and states that there are three types of processes we use to interpret the words of others: interior, exterior, and interactive. Interior processing refers to interpreting the words of others using previously stored information, such as memories, facts, beliefs, etc. Exterior processing refers to interpreting the words of others using information provided externally, such as context, deductive reasoning, and social cues from others participating in the conversation. Interactive processing refers to interpreting the words of others using the cues of the conversation itself: the content, the prosody, the tone, and the rhythm. If I were telling a story and mention my cat, an interior processor might imagine their own cat, or the most popular breed of cat, an exterior processor might imagine a white cat because they noticed white fur on my black pants. An interactive processor, however, might not even imagine the cat at all, but instead might read in the tone of my voice that the cat is not important information to the story. Once I had drawn out my hypothetical model, I crafted the interview and began testing it on people until I found a set of questions that worked. I found that the order and delivery of the questions was very important, and had to be the same every time. The interview structure worked as follows:

- The first question (how do you process?) was a warm-up question, to get the interviewee engaged in reflective thought and allow them to become comfortable with the dynamic of the interview.
- The second question (create an analogy for how you process) allowed the interviewee to analyze and describe how they process, and revealed on tape how they viewed and conceptualized their own processing method.
- The third question (do you have a mantra?) was a break from self-analysis, and a chance for me to collect raw source material to use later on in the project.
- The fourth and fifth questions (here are other people's mantras, please interpret them, and here are phrases from other people's interviews, please interpret them) were the truly experimental portions of the interview. While distracted by the task of figuring out the meaning of the phrases given to them, the interviewee would often end up thinking and processing aloud, and reveal their inner process on tape. This allowed me to create collages of people's inner process, such as in "60 Dog, 40 Glass", which was crafted from responses to the fifth question.

One of my interviewees, Drew Elder, said in response to one of the prompts, "Someone once told me there are three voices we hear: the voice in our heads--you know, the narrator we all have--then there's the voice we hear when we speak out loud, and then there's the voice that others hear when we speak aloud..." I was very inspired and intrigued by this thought, and even wrestled with the idea that perhaps the third voice refers more to the voice we hear in *our* heads when others speak to *us*, as opposed to the other way around. Using editing and sound design processes, I created three audio collages, each depicting one of three "voices" that Drew's words had inspired me to investigate. For the voice that we hear in our own heads, our narrator, I

created a piece called “Why Am I Still Talking?”, which deals with the frustrations and pitfalls of having the imperfect tool of language as our main method of communication. For the 3rd person perspective voice, the voice that we hear when others speak or the voice that others hear when we speak, I created a piece called “60 Dog 40 Glass”, which focuses on the absurdity of using a fluid and varying instrument like language as a communication tool, and allows listeners to appreciate the coincidences that allow us to understand each other. The third piece, “What It’s Like”, deals with the voice we hear when we speak out loud and the change in meaning that words undergo when we hear ourselves say them out loud. The third piece deals almost exclusively with the transformation of meaning from thoughts transitioning to spoken words, and does not delve into the next transition--into someone else’s thoughts--which makes it the most literal and least disconnected. This particular piece is the payoff, the reward for putting up with the struggles of language and communication. Together, the three pieces represent the triangular nature of interpersonal communication, of transforming abstract thought into language, and of creating, discovering, and revealing meaning from words.

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