Language, Culture, and the Limits of Economic Imagination: A Psycholinguistic Inquiry

Stephen Bray, Family Business Consultant

Synopsis

This paper explores the ways in which language structures and is structured by race, class, species boundaries, and professional disciplines. Drawing on insights from Terrence McKenna and developments in business communication, it argues that linguistic limitations reflect broader constraints in human perception, cognition, and cultural inheritance. It further proposes that even seemingly universal systems like mathematics encode specific cultural biases. The conclusion calls for a broader, more ecologically aware 'language of business' that transcends binary ideologies like capitalism and communism.

1. Wales and the Regional Roots of Language

Language begins with geography. In Wales, the persistence of Cymraeg (Welsh) alongside English offers a vivid example of how cultural identity becomes embedded within phonemes, intonations, and syntax. Language here functions as both a marker of resistance and a medium of inheritance. The structure of Welsh, with its verb-subject-object syntax and mutations, reflects a cultural world-view that resists easy translation. This phenomenon is not unique to Wales. Regional and indigenous languages across the world function as semiotic boundary-markers, reinforcing both continuity and exclusivity within populations (Williams, 2014).

Today, the Welsh language intersects with technology in novel ways. Speech recognition models trained primarily on English struggle with the unique prosody and structure of Cymraeg. As AI becomes more influential in communication, translation, and governance, its linguistic biases may either support or suppress minority languages, further reinforcing dominant patterns of speech and cultural access.

2. Speech Systems, Race, and Class

Within broader linguistic ecosystems, speech is unequally distributed. Not all forms of articulation carry equal weight in public discourse. African American Vernacular English (AAVE), for instance, is often stigmatised despite its grammatical coherence and expressive depth. Similarly, working-class dialects are marginalised in institutional settings, reflecting deeper socio-economic divisions (Labov, 1972). These speech systems are not simply alternative vocabularies; they are different configurations of thought. To speak differently is often to think differently—and to be judged accordingly.

AI systems, especially large language models, are trained predominantly on standardised and elite-coded forms of speech and writing. As such, they risk reinforcing hierarchies of linguistic legitimacy, where professionalised or academic tones receive amplification, and vernaculars are filtered or corrected. This has implications for access, justice, and representation.

3. Linguistic Bubbles of Profession

Language operates not only across race and class but also within occupational tribes. Legal, academic, medical, and business communities each develop domain-specific lexicons that become impermeable to outsiders. These linguistic bubbles serve as both tools of efficiency and instruments of exclusion. As Wittgenstein suggested, "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (Wittgenstein, 1922). This becomes especially visible in corporate jargon, where even simple ideas are repackaged into idiomatic opacity—"circle back," "leverage synergies," "move the needle." Such speech reflects not clarity but a kind of performative fluency.

AI increasingly operates within these bubbles, replicating the tones and styles of corporate and professional subcultures. While this can optimise productivity and communication within teams, it also risks calcifying language, reducing imaginative flexibility and encoding occupational silos.

4. Cultural Inheritance and the Prison of Language

Language transmits more than information. It carries affect, bias, prejudice, and world-view. Every idiom is an archive. Cultural inheritance takes place through linguistic repetition. Myths, taboos, hierarchies, and ideals are passed on not just through action but through the stories we allow ourselves to tell. For humans, language functions as a mediating layer between perception and experience. As such, cultural language barriers may prove inescapable, not due to ignorance, but due to the recursive structure of the psyche. We language the world before we even know it.

This recursive entrapment may explain why human beings often struggle to conceptualise alien intelligences. In McKenna's view, 'aliens' may not be beings from other planets but rather psychic projections, refractions of our own unused mental territory. Echoing Jung, McKenna suggested that such 'contact' could be internalised: a form of mythic or symbolic awakening, not a physical encounter.

5. Mathematics as a Language

Even mathematics, often viewed as a universal grammar, reveals anthropocentric assumptions. The dominance of base-10 systems likely stems from human anatomy: ten fingers and ten toes. But alternative counting systems have thrived. The Babylonians used base 60; ancient Celts used base 20. These choices reflect not mathematical superiority but cultural necessity. Computers, by contrast, rely on binary logic (ones and zeros) to represent

everything from logic gates to image files. This shift marks not only a technological evolution but a linguistic one: the world is now increasingly 'spoken' in digital binary, which reshapes our perception of what is true, efficient, and even real (Turkle, 2011).

Moreover, AI reflects and extends this logic. Every natural language processed by AI is mapped into a numerical form, abstracted through matrices and neural weights. In doing so, we risk forgetting that language once emerged from breath, gesture, and pulse rather than calculation.

6. Terrence McKenna and the Limits of Ideology

Terrence McKenna argued not for communism nor capitalism, but for a third path: a kind of technognostic pluralism. In his view, industrial society had become intellectually bankrupt, addicted to spectacle, consumerism, and shallow novelty. McKenna warned that both capitalist and communist systems failed to honour the complexity of human consciousness and ecological interdependence (McKenna, 1992). He envisioned an emergent global consciousness, seeded not by ideology but by psychedelic experience, digital interconnectivity, and mythic imagination.

McKenna also challenged our idea of space travel. He proposed that the real frontier lay not in external exploration, but in inward dimensional access so, a psychic, linguistic, and imaginal space. Here, entities encountered in altered states function not as 'aliens' in the science fiction sense, but as linguistic attractors, echoes of a deeper intelligence encoded in the psyche and revealed through symbolic language.

7. Towards a Wider Language for Business

Business, today, faces a choice: remain embedded in narrow transactional lexicons or evolve a language spacious enough to include ethics, ecology, and emotion. A wider business language must move beyond abstractions like ROI and KPIs, to include concepts such as stewardship, rhythm, trust, and regeneration. This requires not just a change of vocabulary but a change in consciousness: a willingness to language the world differently, not merely to control it but to cohere with it.

In this new model, businesses become not extractive machines but resonant fields: organisms that listen, adapt, and sustain. We must therefore imagine new forms of enterprise-language that allow us to speak complexity with clarity, and to hear what the world says back.

If AI learns to generate, translate, and moderate such language, attuned to rhythm as much as to scale, it may yet become a tool not just of efficiency, but of wisdom.

References

Labov, W. (1972). *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

McKenna, T. (1992). *Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge*. New York: Bantam.
Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books.
Williams, R. (2014). *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. London: Fontana.
Wittgenstein, L. (1922). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
Jung, C.G. (1959). *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.