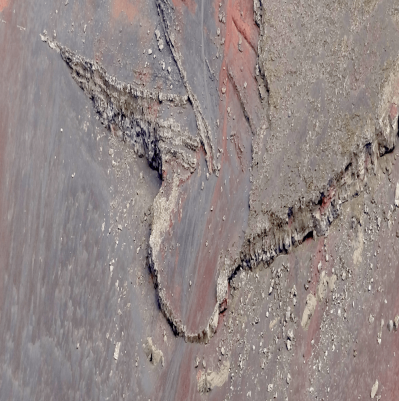




Shibboleth

Description

A Shibboleth is a kind of pronunciation test. You can tell where someone is from, or not from, by asking them to say a particular word. It can also indicate where someone has been. I can tell with a degree of certainty if someone has been to Australia by the way they say “Melbourne.” If they draw out the final syllable, as it’s written, then they have probably not said it often enough and in the right company to be “corrected” to say “Melbourn.”

The word “shibboleth” comes from a story in the Biblical book of Judges 12:6. It simply means “the ear of a grain.” When prompted to say the word, the enemy couldn’t pronounce it with the full “sh” sound as would a native speaker of the Hebrew dialect and so gave themselves away.

Here’s the word in modern Hebrew: שִׁבּוּלֵת .

There’s a spatial aspect to the use of words in this way. Words sound differently according to where they are spoken and by whom. Dialect belongs to place. Something similar applies to vocabularies.

Odysseus was told to carry an oar from his ship with him to the centre of an island. When people he met started referring to the oar as a winnowing fan, then he knew he was a long way from the ocean.

Migrant experience

“Shibboleth” was the name of an art installation by Doris Salcedo at Tate Modern in London. It’s a big crack in the floor of the Turbine Hall. I missed it when installed in 2007. The crack has since been filled in with cement and rendered over to create a smooth but still visible trace. Doris Maria-Reina Bravo provides a helpful [post](#) explaining the naming of the work.

“Every community, culture, and nation has its shibboleth. Among the U.S. military, “lollapalooza” was used during World War II since its tricky pronunciation could identify native, English-speaking Americans. But the sinister history of the word “shibboleth” illustrates how friends and enemies are separated by fine, linguistic lines.

Any stranger in a foreign land appreciates the vulnerability this entails, especially the fear of being outed as a foreigner and exposed in a hostile environment.â•

Here â•shibbolethâ• stands for the displaced, the â•out of place,â• and otherness.

Monsters

â•Shibbolethâ• is a prosaic word but sounds like it should be the name of a monstrous creature. The name is adopted as such in entertainment and gaming: <https://monster.fandom.com/wiki/Shibboleth>.

The term also crops up in online searches for academic papers. The word has caught on as a brand: <https://www.shibboleth.net>. According to the website

â•With just one identity, a user can securely sign into a variety of systems while keeping management free from the burden of maintaining a collection of usernames and passwords. As an open-source project, all Shibboleth software is free and accessible to all and support is widely available through active community forums.â•

As with most words, the sound of the word contributes to its meaning and nuance. Pronounced â•correctly,â• the word starts with the /sh/ sound that we use to instruct others to keep quiet. See post [Whisperators](#).

Shibboleths and secrecy

Iâ•m thinking about shibboleth as itâ•s the title of a section in Dinda Gorleâ•s book *Wittgensteinâ•s Secret Diaries*. In that section she refers to Wittgensteinâ•s sensitivity to Judeo-Christian teaching. She writes

â•Wittgensteinâ•s code system arose from the biblical story of the Tower of Babel (Babylon), in which the non-communication of strange language came into actual existence to confuse the citizens of the cityâ• (72).

She refers to the phenomenon of â•speaking in tongues,â• the adopted of incomprehensible speech uttered in religious experience. She also considers the Jewish mystery tradition of the Kabbala.

â•The Kabbalistic practice rests on the Jewish tradition of shibboleths, the system of mystical codes revealed by God. The prophets hand down Godâ•s normative but sacred words into the words of wisdom handed down from generation to generationâ• (81).

As well as reading Tolstoy and other writers who have been identified with â•mysticism,â• Wittgenstein studied under the philosopher Bertrand Russell and attended his lectures on the subject. Wittgenstein was influenced by Bertrand Russellâ•s paper â•Mysticism and logic.â•

Logic and mystery

In that essay, Russell sets up a distinction between scientific reason, which he equates with logic, and those unverifiable propositions we can't really talk about with any certainty and belong within the realms of *feelings*. For Russell that category includes insights gleaned other than from "sense, reason, and analysis" (9), a belief in the unity of all things, the view that time is a construct, and the sanguine conflation of good with evil.

From the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics, this distinction is dubious. Rationality includes a raft of devices for developing understanding and making decisions. Formal logic is least amongst them. See posts tagged [hermeneutics](#).

Hans-Johann Glock's *Wittgenstein Dictionary* has a helpful section on Wittgenstein's "mysticism." For Glock,

"Wittgenstein drafted mystical themes onto a logical trunk" (251).

Following Russell, Glock consigns questions of ethical value to this realm of the "mystical."

"The mystical is the traditional archetype for something ineffable, something which cannot be put into words but shows itself" (251).

Wittgenstein's apparently "mystical" strand and his engagement with things that cannot be expressed in normal language, his cryptographic practices, coalesce in the final line of his *Tractatus*,

"Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (189).

Gorle©e begins her book *Wittgenstein's Secret Diaries* with this quote. I used to think this a throw-away line by Wittgenstein to remind us that logic is the true route to knowledge. As if to say don't consider anything else.

As yet I am unsure whether Wittgenstein's architecture, his hidden anxieties, his encounters with "mysticism," and his amateur cryptographic practices are sufficiently strong to inform my theme of cryptography in the city though "Shibboleth" has potential.

Dsvivmu mnv xznnmg hlvzq, gsvivmu mnv ofhg yv hrpvng.

References

- Glock, Hans-Johann. 1996. *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Gorle©, Dinda L. 2020. *Wittgenstein's Secret Diaries: Semiotic Writing in Cryptography*. London: Bloomsbury Academic
- Hui, Tingting. 2016. Invisible Border and Accent Control: Is Your Tongue Fit for a Pass? *leidenartsinsocietyblog*, 28 March. Available online: <https://www.leidenartsinsocietyblog.nl/articles/invisible-border-and-accent-control-is-your-tongue-fit-for-a-pass> (accessed 10 April 2021).

- Maria-Reina Bravo, Doris. [approx 2014]. Doris Salcedo, Shibboleth. *Khan Academy*. Available online: <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/global-contemporary-apah/21st-century-apah/a/doris-salcedo-shibboleth> (accessed 13 April 2020).
- Russell, Bertrand. 1917. Mysticism and logic. In Bertrand Russell (ed.), *Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays*: 1-32. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1922. *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*. Trans. C. K. Ogden. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Note

- I created the encrypted text at the end of this post using Wittgenstein's substitution cipher.
- Image is the side of a crater in Iceland at Rangáring ytra ©, 2012. You can tell who's not from Iceland by their inability to pronounce this and other place names, e.g. Eyjafjallajökull.

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. cryptography
2. logic
3. mystery
4. Wittgenstein

Date Created

April 24, 2021

Author

rcoyne99

default watermark