



“The words made me do it”

Description

In the sprawling metropolis of Neo-Victoria, Detective Kiera Hayes stood over the lifeless body, her mind racing to make sense of the scene. The suspect, a renowned linguist named Dr. Elena Marlowe, sat in the corner of the dimly lit room, her eyes wide with a mix of fear and revelation. “You have to believe me, Detective,” she whispered, her voice trembling. “It wasn’t me; it was the words. The language in the ancient texts—they compelled me. Every phrase, every syntax pattern—they took hold of my mind. The words made me do it.”

Hayes raised an eyebrow, skeptically. “Are you saying some old book forced you to commit murder?”

Dr. Marlowe nodded fervently. “Not just any book. These texts were designed by an alien civilization, their language woven with cognitive triggers. Once I deciphered them, they embedded commands in my subconscious. I had no control. The words made me do it.”

As Kiera processed this bizarre explanation, she couldn’t help but wonder about the true power of language and the unknown realms of influence it could wield.

That slice of fiction was generated by ChatGPT in response to my prompt: Perhaps you could make up a fiction or perhaps a science fiction paragraph where a character claims, “the words made me do it.” I couldn’t think of an example from literature or news reports where an accused person explicitly blamed language for their bad action, but this fiction shows that it’s possible to imagine it. I attach the 10 page transcript of my interaction with ChatGPT on the subject as a [PDF](#).

Language as urban generator

Large language models (LLMs) generate text. Language is also generative in any case. It shapes and influences possibilities. I’m not really thinking of words as commands, orders, warnings or even as vehicles of persuasion, but in the way they frame worlds of possibilities, and therefore generate possibilities.

If you don’t have the words to expression an action you might take then it is less likely that the action occupies your repertoire of potential actions. To pick an ordinary example, if you have never

heard the word "deadheading" then it is less likely that you will be found in the garden removing faded and wilted flowers from their stems to encourage new growth. By the same token, knowing the phrase and given the opportunity, it might just be an action that starts to appear on your gardening todo list.

I'm careful here to discuss this generative, or enabling, power of words in terms of *likelihoods*. There's always the possibility of performing actions for which we don't have a name, but naming has positive generative power. I think several authoritative sources add weight to the generative power of words.

Words and actions

I think Foucault's influential book *The Order of Things* successfully conflates words with power. Which it to say, language enables and disables certain actions, a theory that extends to whole attitudes, practices and political movements within societies.

The SciFi scenario with which I began this post suggests a highly deterministic relationship between words and actions, as if there's something that might undergird a set of words that triggers actions without us being aware of that influence. Without appealing to alien intelligence, George Orwell's novel *1984* points to the power of *propaganda*, the manipulation of vocabularies and modes of speech that encourage or preclude certain actions in the case of that novel, to diminish the likelihood that the citizens entertain thoughts, and therefore acts, of rebellion, and conform positively to a set of actions that sustain the social system in play.

Then there's Martin Heidegger's elevation of language as "the house of being," insisting that language shapes who we are. He was particularly interested in what he regarded as the *poetic* uses of language. As it happens, the word "poetry" derives from the Greek *poiesis*, which carries the meanings of *revealing*, *unfolding* and therefore of *making*. As far as I'm aware, Heidegger does not use the term "generating" in this context, though he makes much of *making* and relates it to the interest of architecture as concerned with dwelling. Hence his essay under the title: *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*.

At first we may think of language as operating at one remove from the human agent who carries out the generative function. At most, language "programs" the human as agent, hardware, or "wetware," to perform generative actions. Contrary to this I think Heidegger's assertions, and that of other thinkers, puts the matter of agency on hold. Their emphasis on Being suggests that we are caught up in something grander than a collection of individuals. This phenomenological world view deprecates the distinction between subjects and objects, agents and actors, actions and causes in favour of a lifeworld in which language is the house of Being.

I'm formulating an argument about the ubiquity of *language* within cities, even independently of sophisticated communications networks and AI. Chat GPT helped me say it best.

Language, through its semiotic functions, pervades urban environments, shaping and reflecting the social, cultural, and economic dynamics of city life. Signage, public discourse, legal language, and everyday communication all contribute to the construction and evolution

of urban spaces.

Cities have always had the character of semiotic entities, enabled through technical and cultural narratives. But language has long enabled and inhibited, which is to say *shaped*, public discourse, and therefore actions. In this and other respects, language is a major generative element within the formation of cities.

References

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Category

1. Artificial Intelligence

Tags

1. generation
2. language
3. power
4. urban
5. words

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