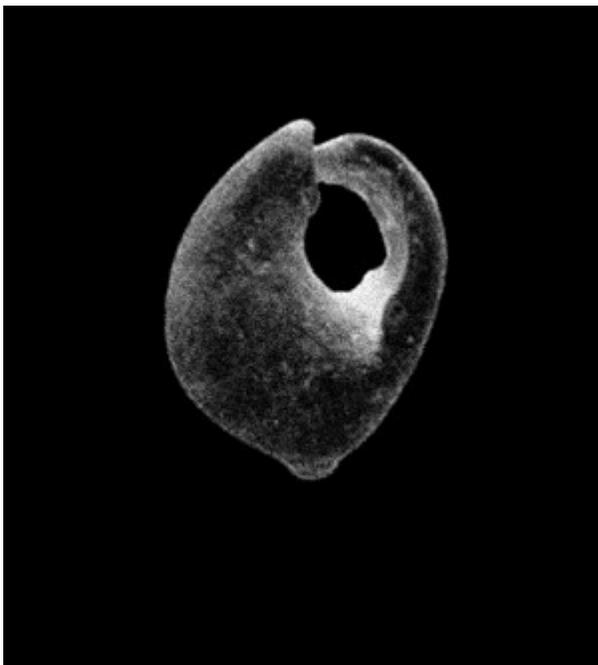


Some thoughts on the earliest visual poetry, adapted from *Likeness & Language*.

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If we think of the different identities of a set of 26 letter-beads as being represented by differences in color, the relational sequencing behind the orthography of language is revealed as a sequence of colors. This approach to visually transforming language allows it to be recast in modalities of expression which have historically emerged within the earliest manifestations of the symbolic mind. Language is not normally examined in relation to the archeological artifacts which provide the evidence for its emergence; so although the use of adornments such as shell beads and pendants is cited as evidence of the early existence of the capacity for language, language is not investigated in relation to those artifacts--despite the fact that they exhibit a form of patterning similar to the patterning which underlies the linguistic code.



100,000 year old shell bead

Language is much older than previously thought. A discovery of perforated shells used for beads made headlines in 2006 because they were worn as adornments over 100,000 years ago. But some archeologists, such as Robert Bednarik, have examined beads which they believe are much older (1). A bead is not only a significant historical indicator of the presence of language by virtue of its cultural implications, it also relates to the conceptual foundation of language because it is concerned with a fundamental aspect of concept-mediated expression, *identity*. The wearer of a bead must have a concept of identity which includes an awareness of how this concept relates to themselves and all the things around them--or there would be no interest in collecting beads and using them as adornments. Awareness that identity exists as a feature of one's self and the things outside one's self is the basic criteria for language. The first step in naming something is being cognitively aware that there is something significant to name. To adorn ourselves with beads, is akin to naming ourselves with beads. The same can be said for color, the wearing of a pigment causes the name or identity of the color to be a means of identifying the wearer (she is the woman in red). However, the naming capacity within language is not based on a one-to-one association. A name in language most often refers to an entire class of sensory projections.

The objects identified by the word *bead* can be made of bone or wood, mineral or stone, glass or plastic; they can be colored or clear, round or faceted or even irregular; and a found seashell can also be a bead. All of these different objects can be identified as *beads*. Research has been conducted concerning naming behavior but this research does not tell us how we are actually able to formulate the class of a named identity and distinguish the members of that class from other sensory projections connected to other classes of named identities. Stevan Harnad deals with this topic in *Experimental Analysis of Naming Behavior Cannot Explain Naming Capacity*:

"..., if you have learned, by honest toil, to call horses 'horses' when you see them, reliably

distinguishing them from members of other categories with which they might be confused, and you have learned likewise by honest toil, to call stripes 'stripes,' then, even though you have never encountered one, you are in a position to correctly name your first zebra upon merely being told that a 'zebra' is a 'horse' with 'stripes.' That's (symbolic/propositional) *theft*; it can spare you an awful lot of honest toil; and it is the true power of language. Nor is it explained by (or equivalent to) associative equivalence. It will be explained by a successful explanation of what internal structures and processes give us the capacity to learn to categorize and name classes of inputs by detecting the invariance in their sensory projections, and then how strings of names in the form of propositions about category membership can give us the capacity to name new members of categories we have not encountered before.

An explanation like this is impossible from just the experimental analysis of behavior: one must also hypothesize and then analyze the internal structures and processes that generate the capacity to exhibit the behavior" (2).

Sensory projection of an object plays an important role in the determination as to whether or not the object might be characterized as a bead. For example, a piece of paper lying flat on a table would never be confused with a bead, but a wadded piece of paper might be a paper bead. The form of an object and its other visual characteristics are important factors in determining if it falls into the class of the generalized identity indicated by a name. But there are a host of references to other forms which are also called into play. We would not normally describe a wad of paper as being a paper bead unless someone was wearing a necklace consisting of small wads of paper. In fact, the visual form of a necklace, which is a referent for identifying an object as a bead, is actually more important than the form of the bead itself. If someone walks into a room wearing a string of tiny zebras around their neck, it's quite likely that someone will describe the adornment as a "zebra bead necklace". But the form of a necklace need not be present to play a role in the identification. If we see a pile of tiny ceramic zebras on a table and they all have a hole through them suitable for a string to pass through, we will know they're beads because the hole in the object references the form of a necklace. The referenced form determines the name/class-identity of the object but the referenced form exists within the mind as a relational manifestation of a concept which is never evoked in the form of imagery (unless we *consciously decide* to try and visualize what the pile of zebra beads might look like as a necklace). The

physical form of a necklace has been reduced to an abstract concept which is referenced through a codified transformation of its relational content--*the referenced form of the necklace is recalled from the level where constructions of language are stored. The holes through the ceramic zebras are the visual signs of a natural language which references the formal concept of a necklace stored within our memory.*

In our minds, the configurative patterning of a necklace has become a sequence of neurological code which, like the genetic code, could be described using a sequence of letters. It could also be described using a sequence of colors resembling the same string of colored beads we used to describe the sequencing of the orthography of language. Some abstract concepts are not directly derived from sensory-based phenomena but their codified neurological sequences would also have to conform to the same criteria as sensory-derived concepts. Most likely this feature of our neurological system was originally designed to store and access only those codifications of sensory-based phenomena necessary for survival. But somehow it evolved into a mechanism which is also capable of codifying, storing, and accessing abstract concepts--this capacity for abstract association is being mislabeled as an instinct specific to linguistic phenomena (language instinct), but as demonstrated by the zebra necklace, no purely linguistic references are required for the abstract associations to occur. Our perception of the holes in the tiny ceramic zebras recalls the concept of a necklace as effectively as reading the word, *necklace*. Yet, the holes bored through the zebra beads are signs which reflect the ancient origins of the symbolic mind--they mirror the earliest markings ever found, *cupules* (dot-like holes pounded into stones).

1. Robert Bednarik. “Beads and the origins of symbolism”. 2000. <http://www.semioticon.com/frontline/bednarik>
2. Stevan Harnad. “Experimental Analysis of Naming Behavior Cannot Explain Naming Capacity (a commentary on research by Horne & Lowe)”. *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*, 65 . 1996. pp. 262-264.