CHAPTER 1

Time and Traction: Blazing the Trail

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Abstract

A cross-cultural analysis of some important words and metaphors used to explain time, as in the cognates of the Latin trahere—to draw, drag—a group including “trace.” In Ndembu, a Bantu language, the word chijikijilu, literally a blaze or trail-marker, illuminates how humans negotiate the paradoxes of getting traction when passing from the known into the unknown.

Keywords


One of our most powerful metaphors for time itself appears when we explore the etymology and usage of the word “trace.” The past is the trace of what was before, and in memory we retrace our steps. We seek a track that we can trace into the future, we decide which path or “trace” or trail we shall make or follow into unexplored territory (in the sense of the Osage Trace, the Spanish Trace, Hull’s Trace, the Chisholm Trail, the paths made by the American western pioneers). This paper proposes a cross-cultural semantic and philosophical analysis of this word that is used by humans to explain the phenomenon of time: an etymologically related group of words and concepts in the Indo-European family of the Latin trahere—a group that includes “trace.”¹

To trace is always laborious to some extent, even if the toil is a mere trace. This becomes obvious when we look at the cognates of the word—drag, draw, traction, trail, track, draught, trace in the sense of a draught animal’s harness. The word always carries notions of mechanical difficulty and the relation of objects being moved or moving themselves through a resistant medium. What is time-consuming is what offers resistance or difficulty or opacity; what is

¹ See the Online Etymological Dictionary entry “tract.”
quick and momentary is what is slick or slippery or light and transparent and thus slips by or is passed through without complications. The paradox arises that for a self-moving entity to move along, it must get purchase on its environment, and purchase is afforded only by a resistant medium. To swim we must push against the very water that allows our passage. We walk by pressing against the ground that brakes our inertial passage across it. One important form of slickness or difficulty is cognitive—it is easy and quick to get through or see through something that is known, and hard and slow to get through or see through something that is unknown. Problems that are heavy and thick ("dense," French lourd, German schwer) take up time; clear solutions to lightweight problems are foregone conclusions. Thus the boundary between the known (and thus easy) and the unknown (and thus difficult) is basically that between past and future, and it is an important locus for understanding our fundamental intuitions about time.

These linguistic associations and the implicit philosophical concepts that underlie them are not confined to the Indo-European languages, and indeed for me the clearest explication of their logic is found in an African Bantu language. Among the Ndembu people, as the anthropologist Victor Turner explains in his book *The Ritual Process* (15), the term for a fundamental religious symbol (what Catholics would call a sacrament) was *chijikijilu*. This word was itself a metaphor: in its literal sense it means a blaze, the mark one would cut on a tree in order to find one's way back from unknown territory—to blaze a trail, to trace a path. One of the most dangerous aspects of living in a hunting/horticulture society like that of the Ndembu is getting lost when one is exploring or hunting. So a *chijikijilu* is a real thing, a physical mark on a tree; it reveals real territory, previously unknown; but it also changes the landscape, adding an area—whatever is within eyeshot of the blaze—to the known territory of the village. One cuts it at the exact boundary between the known and the unknown—in linguistic terms, between the cliché, the expected and understood conversational formula, and the babble (or Babel) of gibberish. It is poetic language; but it is eminently useful, and a real feature of the world once it is made.

The Ndembu thus solve the pretty paradoxes of Ludwig Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent” (108) and “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (89). At first glance what these statements mean is that we are forever trapped within our verbal means of understanding and expression. We cannot say what we do not have words to say. There are no true discoveries. The world of nature is for us constructed by our language; our language is a dictionary, each of whose entries is glossed by other entries; and we are