

Aspire: An Etymological Exploration

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Among the myriad forms of life on Earth, human beings alone have language. This is not to say that other animals do not communicate; animals communicate through an astonishing array of vocalizations, visual cues, and even scents. To date, however, no study has revealed that any non-human organism uses a true language. For example, no study has shown that even among chimpanzees, our closest genetic relatives, adults use vocalizations or gestures to teach their offspring how to react to a hypothetically dangerous future encounter. Their young see the adults react to a poisonous snake in real time without the benefit of a prior *if this happens/then* discussion/explanation in preparation for the encounter. True language, with tense, syntax, declension, case, etc., is solely the purview of humans, and characterizes the key difference between human consciousness and all other forms.¹

One of the marvels of language is its adaptability and flexibility. Seemingly of their own accord, words change meanings, words no longer useful fall from use, and new words appear.² Rarely can such instances be documented; they just seem to happen through tacit agreement of the speakers of a particular language. In some cases, most notoriously in German, existing words are slammed together to create new ones.³ Although these types of words occur in English, which is considered a Germanic language, English is something of a linguistic mongrel borrowing words from all over the globe, and the most frequent origin for English words is Latin (29%).⁴ When considering Latinate words in English, we speak of roots – prefixes, suffixes, and sometimes whole words taken from Latin. Looking at an English word's Latin roots, as well as how a key root reappears and is used in other words, can tell us about ourselves, since words are symbolic expressions of our thoughts, attitudes, and feelings. Let's explore the word *aspire* for this purpose.

The verb *aspire* means *to have great ambition or desire* and *to direct one's hopes or ambitions toward achieving something*. Its origin is the Latin word for *desire*: *aspirare*. The primary Latin root is *-spirare*: *to breathe*. The direct connection of *aspire* to something as vital for survival as breathing connotes the essential quality of aspiration to those who coined the word. Obvious connotations include desiring something so much that going without it will cause death and that desire is an elemental quality of life. Because *aspire* came to English (through French) as a word with the prefix *a-* already attached, we know its meaning; however, “[n]ote

that the prefix *a-* is ambiguous: it may be a form of either *ab-* ‘away’ or *ad-* ‘toward’.”⁵ For *aspire*, we know it is the latter (*ad-* commonly translated as *to*, in this case), but it is interesting to consider *a-* in *aspire* as denoting *ab-*. Both versions seem to support the same definition. Aspirations can be viewed as coming from within (*ad-*), from the fundamental self, and as reaching outwards from that self to interact with the world (*ab-*). (Even an aspiration to self-betterment shares this quality.) To aspire is to look within in order to direct action out.

Exploring the use of *-spirare* in a few other common English words adds to our understanding of *aspire*. Foremost among these is the word *spirit*. *Spirit* can refer to that which gives animate beings life or an ephemeral animating quality that extends beyond the physical world (as ephemeral as breath).⁶ The word can also refer to an energetic attitude, a bravado, *joie de vivre*. Both meanings interact nicely with our deeper understanding of *aspire*. *Respire* affixes the *re-* to *-spirare* to mean *to breathe again*. *Perspire* affixes *per-* (through) in place of *re-*. These three related words are functions either of processes essential to maintaining life or describe life itself. The etymology of *inspire* reveals the breath in this case is infused into the object from without, as from the breath of a divine. The definition was originally *to motivate to act or to be guided by divine breath (i.e. spirit)*; however, now the divine source is usually left implied or ignored altogether. Finally, the prefix *con-* means *with*, and therefore *conspire* carries the idea of speaking so closely to another as to share breathe. It can also imply that the conspirators share the same animating spirit. (Although *conspire* is perhaps most frequently used today to describe potentially nefarious or criminal discussions, a conspiracy isn’t necessarily of that nature, e.g. its use in the song “Winter Wonderland.”)⁷

This exploration of the etymology of *aspire* and some related words, brief though it is, has shed some interesting light on connotations for the word. The root *-spirare* alone implies a life-bringing urgency to aspirations, aspiring as a necessity for life. The connection to *perspire* and *respire* suggests an element of work, and *inspire* connects *aspire* to spiritual insight (not to mention the word *spirit* itself!). Because aspirations must extend from the mind into the world to become realized, *conspire* intimates that aspirations are best shared with others, rather than kept hidden, to help them reach fruition. Taken together, these words suggest aspiration, like language, is a fundamental and uniquely human trait. As expressed by John Steinbeck,

For it is said that humans are never satisfied, that you give them one thing and they want something more. And this is said in disparagement, whereas it is one of the greatest

talents the species has and one that has made it superior to animals that are satisfied with what they have.⁸

Our aspirations both humanize us and make us human. They have led to our grasp extending beyond our reach, for both good and ill.

Notes

¹For a full examination of the differences between human and animal language and the implications regarding different types of consciousness, see Daniel C. Dennett, *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds* (2017). Chapter 5, “The Evolution of Understanding” is of particular interest regarding this topic. In it, Dennett proposes that consciousness is not an all or nothing scenario and creates broad categories for types of consciousness. Among these, human consciousness differs in degree from the others.

²For the first, consider the word *ton*. It appeared in Old English as *tunne*, meaning a large cask, shifted meaning to a measurement of 2,000 pounds weight, and is most frequently used today to signify a large quantity or number of something (*e.g.* a *ton* food or a *ton* of people). (When was the last time you used *ton* to mean 2,000 lbs.?) Dennett (*op. cit.*) refers to such generally authorless, cultural-bound features as *memes*, not in the popularized Internet sense, but in the sense coined by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1976). As a broad definition, memes are a way to do something. Language is memetic, but so are many other things from tying shoes to wearing a baseball cap backwards. In the case of the latter, not only can no originator of the practice be identified, but whatever purpose it may have originally served is lost. Yet, some people wear their caps in a manner opposite to that intended by the manufacturer, so many in fact that some caps are now designed specifically to be worn that way. Dennett argues, in part, that the susceptibility of our brains to be infected by memes is the key physical evolutionary event that enabled human consciousness to develop.

³As Mark Twain famously observes in *A Tramp Abroad* (1880), “Some German words are so long that they have a perspective.” Twain then asks readers to consider the examples *Freundschaftsbezeugungen*, *Dilettantenaufdringlichkeiten*, and *Stadtverordnetenversammlungen*.

⁴Latin, alone, accounts for 29% of English. French, a Romance language closely related to Latin, accounts for another 29%. Taken together, then, Latin and French account for 58% of English, while Germanic words (and English is considered to be Germanic) account for 26%.

⁵Eli E. Burriss and Lionel Casson, *Latin and Greek in Current Use*, 2nd Edition (1949), p.104. The quotation is not in reference to the word *aspire*. Etymological analysis appearing in this discussion is based upon information from this text as well as a variety of easily found online resources. Word definitions come from a synthesis of sundry print and online dictionaries.

⁶Whether an individual has a spirit beyond the physical body or feeling such is merely a reflection of a psychological phenomenon of consciousness (what Dennett calls “the Cartesian Theater” (*op. cit.*)) is immaterial to this discussion; however, the linguistic implications of the mind/body split codified by Descartes are fascinating. For example, it is difficult to speak of the physical body without using the possessive form. Typically, one says, “My leg hurts.” This implies the leg is a possession of the speaker, when the leg (and the rest of the body, including the brain where the thought originated) *is* the speaker; they are synonymous. (It is superfluous to differentiate between the leg of the speaker and the leg of the listener in this case.) Language

limits our abilities to express this thought in a way other than the leg being *apart from* the speaker rather than *a part of* the speaker. One could say, “I am experiencing leg pain,” but it is unlikely anyone would. Are such linguistic limitations a consequence of human consciousness (an “unintended” byproduct), or were they somehow causative?

⁷ Richard B. Smith (lyricist), “Winter Wonderland” (1934). The referenced verse is “Later on, we’ll conspire/As we dream by the fire/To face unafraid/The plans that we’ve made/Walking in a winter wonderland” – Hardly nefarious!

⁸ John Steinbeck, *The Pearl* (1947). Although these words are spoken by the narrator, the question remains open as to whether Steinbeck believes this or is merely being ironic here. After all, Kino’s aspirations, though seemingly innocuous (new clothes, his child becoming literate, a rifle), lead directly to the death of Coyotito and the destruction of everything Kino holds dear. It should also be noted that these aspirations are only made “real” to Kino when he speaks them to others. The act of speaking them out loud (*i.e.* expressing them through language) calls them into the possibility of existence, like Yahweh in Genesis.