

# John Wilkins

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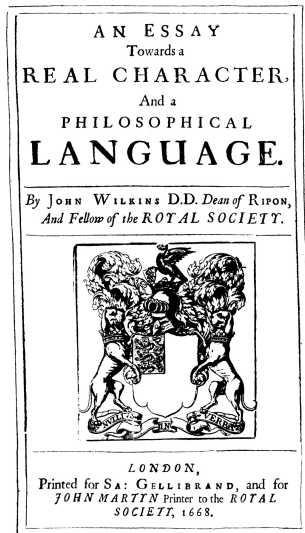
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# John Wilkins

- Last week, we saw that 17th Century France produced a revolution in language pedagogy
- The 17th Century was generally characterised by optimism about man's technological ability to master and improve the world, including the social world.
- Therefore, the idea became quite popular that it would be possible to create an improved language.

# Real Character and Philosophical Language



# Essay

- An enormous work, over 600 folio pages
- A first version got destroyed in the Great Fire of London (1666), second version appeared in 1668
- Almost half of the book gives a systematic description of 4000 English words
- From this a 'real character' (way of writing all languages) and a 'philosophical language' (for logical communication) are derived
- Wilkins also published on cryptography, theology, astronomy and mechanics

# Real Character and Philosophical Language

- (Bishop) John Wilkins (1641-1672) was one of the most well-known scholar who tried to devise a 'real character', a writing system which would represent reality in an improved way and a 'philosophical language'
- The main improvement over real languages of the former was that it would be universally understandable, and of the latter that the relation form - meaning would be more 1-to-1
- "As men do generally agree in the same Principles of Reason, so do they likewise agree in the same Internal Notion or Apprehension of things. The External Expression of these Mental notions, whereby men communicate their thoughts to one another, is either to the Ear or to the Eye [. . .] The Names given to these in several Languages, are such arbitrary sounds or words, as Nations of men have agreed upon, either casually or designedly, to express their Mental notion of them."
- Note that the idea that thought is universal is the same as in PR

# Aristotle

*Now spoken sounds are symbols of affections in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs of — affections of the soul — are the same for all; and what these affections are likeness of — actual things — are also the same.*

# Francis Bacon

*In China and the provinces of the further East, there are in use at this day certain real characters, not nominal; characters, I mean, which represent neither letters nor words, but things and notions.*

*A number of nations whose languages are altogether different, but who agree in the use of such characters (which are more widely received among them), communicate with each other in writing; to such an extent indeed that any book written in characters of this kind can be read off by each nation in their own language.*

(De Augmenti Scientiarum)

# Wilkins on a universal writing system

*So that if men should generally consent upon the same way or manner of Expression, as they do agree in the same Notion, we should then be freed from that Curse in the Confusion of Tongues, with all the unhappy consequences of it. Now this can onely be done, either by enjoyning some one Language and Character to be universally learnt and practised (which is not to be expected till some person attain to the Universal Monarchy, and perhaps would not be done then:) or else by proposing some such ways as, by its facility and usefulness, (without the imposition of Authority) might invite and ingage men to the learning of it; which is the thing here attempted.*

# Wilkins on language variation and change

*If any English man should now write or speak as our forefathers did about six or seven hundred years past, we should as little understand him as if he were a foreigner. [...] The variety of Letters is an appendix to the Curse of Babel. And therefore, for any man to go about to add to their number, will be like the inventing of a Disease. [...] The men of China, who do now, and have for many Ages used such a general Character, by which the Inhabitants of that large Kingdom, many of them of different Tongues, do communicate with one another, every one understanding this common Character, and reading it in his own Language.*

# The deterioration of language

*Though the varieties of Phrases in Language may seem to contribute to the elegance and ornament of Speech; yet, like other affected ornaments, they prejudice the native simplicity of it, and contribute to the disguising of it with false appearances. Besides that, like other things of fashion, they are very changeable, every generation producing new ones; witness the present Age, especially the late times, wherein this grand imposture of Phrases hath almost eaten out solid Knowledge in all professions; such men generally being of most esteem who are skilled in these Canting forms of speech, though in nothing else.*

# The use of an international language

*The reducing of all things and all notions, to such kind of Tables, as are here proposed (were it as compleatly done as it might be) would prove the shortest and plainest way for the attainment of real Knowledge, that hath yet been offered to the World.*

*if there were such an Universal Character to express Things and Notions, as might be legible to all People and Countries, so that Men of several Nations might with the same ease both write and read it.*

# More use of an international language

*[A universal character would contribute to] the spreading and promoting of all Arts and Sciences: Because that great part of our Time which is now required to the Learning of Words, might then be employed in the Study of Things. [...]*

- Wilkins expects that a real character will enhance:
  - international commerce
  - improvement of 'Natural knowledge'
  - 'spreading the knowledge of Religion' and 'contribute much to the clearing of some of our Modern differences in Religion'

# Principles

*“As men do generally agree in the same Principles of Reason, so do they likewise agree in the same Internal Notion or Apprehension of things. The External Expression of these Mental notions, whereby men communicate their thoughts to one another, is either to the Ear or to the Eye. To the Ear by Sounds, and more particularly by Articulate Voice and Words. TO the Eye by anything that is visible, Motion, Light, Colour, Figures and more particularly by Writing. That conceit which men have in their minds concerning a Horse or Tree, is the Notion or mental image of that Beast, or natural thing, of such a nature, shape and use. The Names given to these in several Languages, are such arbitrary sounds or words, as Nations of men have agreed upon, either casually or designedly, to express their Mental notions of them. The Written words is the figure or picture of that Sound. So that if men should generally consent upon the same way or manner*

# Descartes on a philosophical language

*I find that one could add to this an invention, both for composing the primitive words of this language and for their characters, such that it could be taught in a very short time, and this by means of order, that is, establishing an order among all the thoughts that can enter the human mind, just as there is one naturally established among numbers; and just as one can learn in one day to enumerate all the numbers until infinity, and to write them in an unknown language, which are nonetheless infinitely many words, so could one do the same with all the other words necessary for the expression of all the other things that enter the mind of man.*

# Defects of existing languages

- *first Elements or Alphabets*: e.g. it is not always clear how a graphic representation connects to a sound in a 'letter'
- *words*:
  - *equivocals* (i.e. homonymy)
  - 'Synonymous words, which make Language tedious, and are generally Superfluities'
  - 'Anomalisms and Irregularities in Grammatical construction' [i.e. mostly irregular inflections]
  - The difference 'betwixt the writing and pronouncing' of words

# Principles

*But now if these Marks or Notes could be so contrived, as to have such dependance upon, and relation to, one another, as might be surable to the nature of the things and notions which they represented; and so likewise, if, the Names of things could be so ordered, as to contain such a kind of affinity or opposition in their letters and sounds, as might be someway answerable to the nature of the things which they signified. This would yet be a farther advantage superadded: by which, besides the best way of helping the Memory by natural Method, the Understanding likewise would be highly improved; and we should, by learning the Character and Names of things, be instructed likewise in their Natures, the knowledge of both which ought to be conjoynd.*

# Nouns and adjectives

*As Noun Substantives are the names which are given to things, considered simply, ad subsisting by themselves: so Noun Adjectives are the names which are given to the Adjunct natures of things.*

Chap. I. *The General Scheme.* 23

All kinds of things and notions, to which names are to be assigned, may be distributed into such as are either more

General; namely those Universal notions, whether belonging more properly to		GENERAL. I	
{	Things; called TRANSCENDENTAL	RELATION MIXED. II	
		RELATION OF ACTION. III	
Words; DISCOURSE. IV			
Special; denoting either			
CREATOR. V			
Creature; namely such things as were either created or concreated by God, not excluding several of those notions, which are framed by the minds of men, considered either			
{		COLLECTIVELY; WORLD. VI	
{		DISTRIBUTIVELY; according to the several kinds of Beings. whether such as do	
{		Substance; ( belong to	
{		Inanimate; ELEMENT. VII	
{		Animate; considered according to their several	
{		Species; whether	
{		Vegetative	
{		Imperfect; as Minerals; STONE. VIII	
{		METAL. IX	
{		LEAF. X	
{		HERB confid. accord. to the FLOWER. XI	
{		Perfect; as Plants; SHRUB. XIII	
{		TREE. XIV	
{		SEED-VESSEL. XII	
{		Sensitive; EXANGUIOLIS. XV	
{		FISH. XVI	
{		Sanguineous; BIRD. XVII	
{		PARTS; SPECULAR. XIX (BEAST. XVIII	
{		GENERAL. XX	
Accident;			
{		Quantity; MAGNITUDE. XXI	
{		SPACE. XXII	
{		MEASURE. XXIII	
{		NATURAL POWER. XXIV	
{		HABIT. XXV	
{		Quality; whether; MANNERS. XXVI	
{		SENSIBLE QUALITY. XXVII	
{		SICKNESS. XXVIII	
{		Alien; SPIRITUAL. XXIX	
{		CORPOREAL. XXX	
{		MOTION. XXXI	
{		OPERATION. XXXII	
{		Private; OECONOMICAL. XXXIII	
{		POSSESSIONS. XXXIV	
{		PROVISIONS. XXXV	
{		CIVIL. XXXVI	
{		JUDICIAL. XXXVII	
{		MILITARY. XXXVIII	
{		NAVAL. XXXIX	
{		ECCLESIASTICAL. XL	
{		Publick;	

Table 4.4

## Of Beasts.

- §. V. **B**EASTS, may be distinguished by their several shapes, properties, uses; food, their tameness or wildness, &c. into such as are either
- Viviparous* ; producing living young.
    - { **W**HOLE FOOTED, the *soles* of whose *feet* are undivided, being used chiefly for *Carriage*. I.
    - { **C**LOVEN FOOTED. II.
      - Clawed, or multifidous* ; the end of whose *feet* is branched out into *toes* ; whether
        - { **N**OT RAPACIOUS. III.
        - { **R**APACIOUS ; living upon the prey of other *Animals* ; having generally *six short pointed incisores, or cutting teeth, and two long fangs* to hold their prey ; whether the
          - { **C**AT-KIND ; having a *roundish head*. IV.
          - { **D**OG-KIND ; whose *heads* are *more oblong*. V.
  - { **O**VIPAROUS ; breeding *Eggs*. VI.

I. WHOLE  
FOOTED  
BEASTS.

I. WHOLE FOOTED BEASTS, may be distinguished into such as  
*Solid hard hoofs*; considerable for (are either of

Equus.

*Swiftness and comeliness*; being used for riding.  
1. HORSE, *Mare, Gelding, Nag, Palfrey, Steed, Courser, Gennet,*  
*Stallion, Colt, Fole, Filly, Neigh, Groom, Ostler.*

Asinus.

Mulus.

*Slowness and strength in bearing burdens*; having *long ears*; || either  
the more *simple* kind: or that *mongrel* generation begotten on a  
2.  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{ASSE, Bray.} \\ \text{MULE.} \end{array} \right.$  (Marc.)

Lev. 11. 4. 26.

*Softer feet*; having some resemblance to the  
*Cloven footed-kind*; by reason of the upper part of the *hoof* being  
divided, being *ruminant*, having a *long slender neck*, with one or  
two *bunches* on the *back*.

Camelus.

3. CAMEL, *Dromedary.*

*Multifidous kind*; having little *prominencies* at the end of the *feet*,  
representing *toes*, being of the *greatest magnitude* amongst all other  
*beasts*, used for the carriage and draught of *great weights*, and more  
particularly esteemed for the *tusks*.

Elephas.

4. ELEPHANT, *Ivory.*

## II. CLOVEN

Transcend.	General Rel. mixed Rel. of Action	}	Animals	Exanguious	}	Action	Spiritual	}
				Fish			Corporeal	
				Bird			Motion	
	Discourse	}	Parts	Beast	}	}	Operation	
				Peculiar				
	God	}	Quantity	General	}	}	Oecon.	
	World			Magnitude			Posses.	
	Element	}	Quantity	Space	}	}	Provis.	
	Stone			Measure			Civil	
	Metal	}	Quality	Power Nat.	}	}	Judicial	
Herb confid. accord. to the	Leaf			Habit			Military	
	Flower			Manners			Naval	
Seed-vessel	}	Quality	Quality sensible	}	}	Eccles.		
Shrub			Disease					
Tree								

That which at present seems most convenient to me, is this ;

Transcend.	{	General	Ba	Animals	{	Exanguious	Za	Action	{	Spiritual	Ca
		Rel. mixed	Ba			Fish	Za			Corporeal	Ca
		Rel. of Action	Be			Bird	Zc			Motion	Ce
		Discourse	Bi			Beast	Zi			Operation	Ci
		God	Da	Parts	{	Peculiar	Pa				
		World	Da		{	General	Pa		Relation	Oecon.	Co
		Element	De	Quantity	{	Magnitude	Pe	Posses.		Cy	
		Stone	Di			Space	Pi	Provis.		Sc	
		Metal	Do			Measure	Po	Civil		Sa	
Herb confid. accord. to the	{	Leaf	Ga	Quality	{	Power Nat.	Ta	Judicial		Se	
		Flower	Ga			Habit	Ta	Military		Si	
		Seed-vessel	Ge			Manners	Te	Naval	So		
		Shrub	Gi			Quality sensible	Ti	Ecclef.	Sy		
		Tree	Go		{	Disease	To				