



# LANGUAGE AS ARCHAEOLOGY

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Where do words come from?

This question then leads to a similar, but broader, question - where do languages come from?

The study of the origin of words forms a special category of history, namely, historical linguistics, which is best described as the archaeology of language.

The metaphor that defines the very essence of archaeology is "the dig," wherein the earth is pierced and the layers of human existence it enfolds are revealed and read.

Thus, to dig is to go back, not necessarily to an origin, but certainly to a chronological reckoning of the human past.

The very root of the word "archaeology" points us this way; the Greek *arkhaiologia* means a "collection of ancient things;" by extension "antiquarian lore," or "ancient history." There is also *-logia*, which is *logos* - that grand term of Greek philosophy which means, "word," "speech," "reason," as well as "logic."

More than anything, archaeology teaches us that material objects are fragments from a larger universe of a culture long vanished, which we can only partially know.

Indeed, wholeness and completeness are antithetical concepts to the science of archaeology - because it entirely depends upon fragments in order to read the past. To understand the past by way of brief remnants requires the highest sort of wisdom - that gained only by a well-disciplined imagination.

When archaeology begins to read the past by way of the fragment, it is broadening its scope to include more than shards, encrusted weapons, worn out coins, and bones.

In this way, archaeology comes to include the entirety of human culture, and what is more human than language?

As we dig objects from the earth, we lay them before us and seek to classify them, to fit them into broader patterns of human civilization.

This "fit" is determined by an associative process - if a shard displays a certain pattern, then it will fit into a category determined by pots and shards that carried similar patterns; and these patterns were used by such-and-such culture, which flourished at this or that time.

Thus, around the fragment we construct a narrative, a story, a history. And by way of this narrative, we make sense of all the ages that came before us.

In effect, archaeology provides the words which physical fragments lack. Ancient objects need to be returned to language so that they can become comprehensible again.

Now, if we shift gears a little bit and imagine language as ground, as a field, which we can dig into, just like soil, and extract historical artifacts, we are participating in linguistic archaeology.

This is more than mere "word origin" or etymology (which comes from the Greek *etumologia*, or "the true sense [of a word]").

Digging into a language brings us to the very dawn of human culture – when humankind began to connect sounds that came from the larynx to the reality outside, as well as the reality of ideas.

Language can at once refer to both the material world, and the world of ideas.

Thus, when we speak of the archaeology of language, we mean all those things that are constructed by way of words and ideas.

And what are these things? Intellectual concepts, religion, ritual, mythology, folklore, poetry. These things leave a mark not on the earth, but on the ground of the human psyche.

This means that linguistic archaeology allows us to dig into human psychology itself – it allows us to construct the mindset of ancient humanity.

And it is this mindset which allows us to speak, as it were, with the past, and hear and learn its wisdom.

History is not a set of "lessons," as commonly explained. Rather, history is humanity accessing the collective moral experience of lived moments.

What does this mean? Ancient artifacts are things to think with - they are aids to memory.

Here it is worthwhile to recall Plato's [explanation](#) of where knowledge comes from - that knowledge is innate in our souls, because it was printed on it during our existence long before we assumed physical shape. Our search for truth, then, is our quest for dimly remembered eternal ideas.

Thus, studying the origin of languages is an imitation of this quest, for it is the search for truth long forgotten.

In his [Philosophical Investigations](#), Ludwig Wittgenstein makes this observation: "...as to the essence of language, of propositions, of thought....they see in the essence, not something that already lies open to view and that becomes surveyable by a rearrangement, but something that lies *beneath* the surface. Something that lies within, which we see when we look *into* the thing, and which an analysis digs out."

Each word carries an ancient history, a deep memory. Where do words come from? From such history and memory. Where do languages come from? From the experience of moral and physical reality within human memory.

To dig into words is to look upon the hidden soul of meaning, which is to say, the hidden history of the human past.

*The photo shows, "Maiden Meditation," painted in 1847, by Charles West Cope.*

