

---

6

**Money Language**

**T**here is an American adage that 'money talks'. This phrase can be described as the opposite of an oxymoron. An oxymoron is a phrase that is stupidly contradictory. This might well be called an oxysavant. Brilliantly contradictory.

Another oxysavant would be a 'high school philosopher'. At cocktail parties, professional philosophers dread the response they get when describing their job. 'Oh my dear professor, when I was in high school so many of my friends told me I should be a philosopher', meaning she was the Ann Landers of the school.

Respecting the social importance of philosophy is the savant part of 'high school philosopher' and recognition that money is language

the savant part of *money talks*; but confusing personal mating advice with philosophy is oxy and so is the assumption that a direct connection exists between money and power.

Plenty of very rich people are pathetically weak and some very powerful people have little money.

Some people have observed that money has qualities like language; it is pervasive among humans, has many forms and seems integral to life.

This disCourse makes one simple point: Money is not like language, it is language.

It is important to make this distinction. Money can not be compared to language as a metaphor. It can be examined directly, and it is not *a* language but language. A money language would be American money, just as we have *a* spoken language, English.

**Digression showing the confusion of real  
and metaphoric**

This point needs clarification. Let us substitute *two games* for money in this discourse. People often talk about games being metaphors for daily life; but this comes from an inaccurate reading of games. It results from seeing the parallels of games and daily life not the context of daily life that selects particular games.

Go is the classic thinker's game in Japan as Chess is in the West. Neither game should be read only as a metaphor for the larger society.

---

They are actually metonymical, a small fragment that represents the whole.

This is best illustrated by asking one question. What was the longest war in Japanese history and the longest war in the West?

In Japan it was Hideoshi's two day battle at Osaka. In the West it was the 100 year war between France and the Flemish countries.

Throughout Japanese history armies were amassed, confronted each other and then their leaders negotiated. If the power or might of either army was in doubt, a single all-out-battle was fought to evaluate the armie's relative strength before resuming negotiation.

In Europe, armies for millenia would amass every spring, fight during the long summer days and return home in the fall, year after year until physical and economic attrition determined the outcome.

These military procedures are the same as the rules of action for Go and chess. In Go the opposing sides keep putting pieces on the board until all of them are on the board then the cells they surround are counted to determine the victor. In chess, the pieces are removed until attrition leaves the board nearly empty.

Neither games are metaphors they are actually the way our relative societies carry out military operations.

Language is not a metaphor for money, money is actually language.

### Definition

The Encyclopedia Britannica is very vague in its definition of language. The definition has to do with *arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which social groups cooperate*. The whole section is much longer and is hopelessly anthropocentric in the eyes of anyone who has worked with cetaceans or knows that many bird species can pick up variations on their songs by associating with other birds.

Language is most readily comprehended by listing and evaluating what it is and what it isn't.

It **is** what bees do when one dances to direct the others to honey. Clearly a symbolic representation of the world is presented by the one for the many. When bees are taken to new environments they adapt their dance accordingly. Therefore they are using symbols which have substantially broad contextual meanings.

It **is** sign language that is used by the deaf. Interestingly, sign language is different for each linguistic culture and because it uses different senses, two hands and eyes it is very different syntactically from spoken language. Sign language among experienced users is not as linear as spoken language.

We would also include as language facial expressions and mathematics.

What we probably would **not include** as language are power, thought, smell, work, silent prayer, glossolalia, media and swimming.

Power is not language because it isn't explicit. Three people can say a particular symbol is a sign of power and three others would disagree.

For example: (1) 'Getting elected is a sign of power!' (2) 'No the power is behind the throne' (3) 'No it's in the hands of the biggest campaign contributors', (4) 'No, it is in the hands of the power brokers in Washington who represent the contributors'...and so on. Power and its symbolic elements are not explicit enough to be widely agreed upon; however, it is certainly real enough to affect human behavior.

Thought and silent prayer have another distinction. In neither case do they involve interaction with recognizable beings. Language must involve detectable interaction and some behavioral consequences of that interaction.

Smell signals, such as perfume and swimming are too weak in symbolic variation to be language. They might be treated as proto languages. Smells lack a range of distinctions, in spite of a broad range of intensities. Not enough people can distinguish peach from pear. Swimming similarly has too few strokes to be a useful language.

What we would list as **generally not** language but occasionally is language, would be music, dance and clothing.

Music is customarily not language because of its ambiguity and the extensive range of sensibility available, but when used in films to an-

nounce evil, terror, joy and sorrow it is a simple language. The same is true of dance. It is generally much greater in its span of communication than spoken language but in its most reductionist format, say mime, it can be language that is used to tell a very explicit story.

### **Symbols and context**

Money is purely symbolic. Symbols have distinct meaning only in context.

Context is determinative when it comes to symbols. For example a piece of colored cloth can be a national flag or a diaper depending on the context. In the context of an emergency it can be both.

Generally money is a form of encouragement, an inducement of desired behavior. You buy a cup of coffee from me several times and I'll get in the habit of having it available for you.

This occurs on a large and small scale, buying gasoline from the Saudis or from a neighborhood station. This symbolic encouragement can come in innumerable, different, detailed forms; sometimes it is called a wage, sometimes a purchase price, even a tip.

Of course money can be used discourage too. Pay someone less the more work they do, or send the frisky 16 year old off to Paris for a year to get her away from her neighborhood boy friend.

Symbols gain their meaning in context. The very same symbol does not always retain the

same meaning. For example, the same act of offering \$1.00 in payment for a cup of coffee can be an insult, an act of charm, a joke or paternal rebuke.

It would be an insult when you pay a host in his own house after he serves you breakfast; an act of charm when you are a 6 year old and the \$1 is gift wrapped for a grandfather; a joke when the boss brings coffee to the secretary and she hands him the dollar; and a paternal rebuke when a forty year old rudely pays for dinner with his 70 year old father who turns around and hands the waiter a dollar requesting an after dinner coffee. Symbol is context is language.

### **Context is the Transaction**

Money is generally seen in the narrowest conceptual frame, the one given to us by economics. Economics, as early as Adam Smith, focused on the *exchange* of money for goods and services. You hand me \$10, I hand you the book. That is the exchange. But the smallest unit of money is actually the *transaction*. The transaction includes the service, information, credit, repair, maintenance, recourse and many more aspects that are always associated with the exchange. This was discussed in chapter 2.

The transaction is the actual unit of money intercourse. With this in mind it is easier to see the flexibility, vitality and extraordinary power of money. Just as the spoken language of Roosevelt, Churchill or Hitler were able to bring about inordinate social consequences, so can

---

the act of a few skilled experts in money from Rockefeller and Giannini to Armand Hammer.

### **Money specifics**

Forms of money can become unacceptable just like words (nigger, spick) in spoken language. This has happened to American bills in denominations over \$100 because banks were required by law to register the numbers of each one. Now nobody uses large bills.

Money language has rules as does all language and for money, which is over 3,000 years old, these rules are extremely complex.

Prostitutes, numbers runners, dope dealers want cash in advance, so does McDonalds and the Bremerton Ferry . But try to pay cash to the doctors and nurses in the delivery room when a baby is born and you'll create pandemonium.

There is a wide range of times when money is taboo, when the payment of money is taboo and where the mention of money is taboo. Consider funerals, private sex, and certainly consider the situation where you are the defendant in a court room and the object of your pecuniary offers are jurors or the judge. Taboo.

### **Not directly analagous to spoken language**

Money is language but trying to draw close analogies between specific forms of money and words in spoken language is not useful.

While money has a wide range of meanings, all contextual, as do words, the analogy will fail because the popular conception of words is



misleading.

Most people think words have inherent and invariant meaning, '*just look in the dictionary*' they would say. Words probably have no meaning outside of context, even though the existence of dictionaries suggests otherwise. The words *up*, or *five* can't be uttered by themselves at a cocktail party and have meaning, but said while walking into an elevator, they might.

To give an example of how poor the money-spoken language analogy can be, let us try one that might appear logical: 'a large bank account is like a large vocabulary'. The analogy doesn't work on either end of the comparison. A bank account is a minor component of a money language, it has many representations from its appearance on a financial statement to notations in a savings pass book. A vocabulary is a major component of spoken and written language.

To go one step further in showing the poor correspondence between money language and spoken language, a big vocabulary is not inherently more significant than a small one. Consider the case where the big one is possessed by a migratory farm worker and the small one by the President of the Teamsters Union.

There is a comparison between money and spoken language that might be interesting. If one were to say the word *garage* loudly every hour on the hour in your average daily life, and dispensed a \$5 bill at fifteen minutes after the hour every hour you would probably get the

same social reaction to both actions. To that extent words and forms of money have a slight analogy.

### **Money Rules**

Money certainly has rules, not unlike grammar. Like grammar much about your social status is communicated by your use and understanding of the money rules. The person who doesn't pay personal debts on time may evoke the same social response as one who says 'don't you all be pickin on me'. And a person whose checkbook is a mess with bouncing checks is often seen in the same light as a person whose syntax is chaotic.

Money has some unique attributes not found in spoken language. There is negative money for instance. A parking ticket. You can also lose money and net worth, which is comparable only to Alzheimers disease in spoken language.

Like spoken languages the absence of money communicates. If you are dissatisfied with the work of an interior decorator, taking six months to pay the bill is comparable to not returning phone calls for the same period of time.

Money has a wide range of forms. Bus tokens, credit cards, equity securities, invoices, letters of credit, dozens of debentures, myriad near cash forms from bankers acceptances and repo's to CD's. New forms are generated all the time, old ones fall out of favor, the uses change (the functional role of stocks and bonds has been reversed in the past 60 years), and new

forms are borrowed from other cultures (the 'bankable corporate payable' recently came from Japan). All very much in the way of a spoken language.

Most importantly, because money is language, there are different money languages in different cultures.

In Japan wedding guests are given money in an envelope but children don't get allowances. In Syria, in the street market, the member of one family might pay \$500 for the same horse that the member of another family would have to pay \$800 for. In the U. S. wealthy people can expect less wealthy social climbers to always pick up the tab for a meal, but not in Mexico or Ghana. In Japan and Sweden a taxi driver will give you back a tip, in New York you may get physically assaulted for not giving the driver a sufficiently large tip. In the U.S. you can pay for merchandise and service with a bank check then stop payment on the check. This practice is rare and even illegal in other parts of the world.

Money is language. The American monetary system is our language.

#### **Chapter summary**

There is no summary to this chapter. I wrote a book more than fifteen years ago called *The Seven Laws of Money*, Random House, which continues to sell at the same 7,000 copy level every year; it covers this subject in a more practical advice form. I give speeches on the

subject occasionally, and have introduced the concepts covered here.

The striking reality of my life has been that there have been no other books or intelligent contributions to the subject and I feel like I'm talking to a forest. The subject is ripe for great research and any serious study would blossom into a classic contribution. But its too lonely a subject to pursue independently.