

Stretching language to its limit

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Credit: Paul Brennan/public domain

Language - humanity's finest attribute - becomes stretched to its limit when faced with sacrifice, sexuality, or the brutality of war and predation. In the article "A space that will never be filled: Sharp communication and the simultaneity of opposites," published in the latest issue of *Current Anthropology*, author Alex Pille documents a search for what she calls "antipodal words," words that encapsulate their opposite, or carry out U-turn in meaning.

The article begins with a field note regarding a random meeting between two enemies that took place over a decade ago in Turkey. One man was the recipient of torture, the other a policeman - the torturer. The two men recognize each other and engage in a conversation. They shake hands. The handshake - and image of one hand trembling in the other - conjures opposing worlds; a re-assertion of humanity through ritualized gesture, being horrifying at the same time. Like animals, wolves-when-together, they become addressed as humans when singled out: 'I gave him my hand'. The communication between the men stands out as a representation of the friction between incommensurable worlds, conceived together, a representation also found in Pille's antipodal words.

Pille presents an assemblage of five pertinent examples: the first focuses on Amerindian languages from the Amazon. The Amerindian thought poses challenges to our understanding of the nature of languages spoken by humans who share predatory qualities with other beings, including animals. Another example is of a Sanskrit word from ancient India that means both prodigy and misdeed, furthering the image of the sedimentation of chronic warfare and volatility into a people's [language](#) habits. Other anchor points include the study of sacrifice and divination by leading Africanists within anthropology, and the literary criticism of William Empson. The world of French philosophy and postmodern attitudes towards the substantive word are the final examples: the fate of words as they convey revolution, death, sex and radical displacement for the French.

As each of the distinct examples play out against one another, they keep their integrity afforded by a closed circle of quotations from distinct disciplinary zones. Placed together as such, the conglomerate of images highlights a common awareness and sharpness of perception - or recognition of opposing points of view. Antipodal words are thereby characterized in this paper as a form of "sharp communication" and

irony. In a contemporary world where arrogant self-satisfaction and partisanship are the source of much adversity and violence, such an awareness enshrined in languages merits further attention. The article implies that antipodal words emerge as the nuclear material of languages, embodying "a space that will never be filled." Alongside their formidable potential to articulate predation, violence, revolution, and human excess, antipodal words are portrayed as a form of linguistic growth on the edge of bloody and inarticulate conflicts, briefly opening a semiotic window onto the unspeakable.

More information: Alex Pillen, A Space That Will Never Be Filled: Sharp Communication and the Simultaneity of Opposites, *Current Anthropology* (2017). [DOI: 10.1086/694760](https://doi.org/10.1086/694760)

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