

THE GRAMMAR OF POWER: HOW THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CONSTRAINS THE 'LIBERAL' IN LIBERAL ORDER

INTRODUCTION

We exist in a world which is repeatedly defined as a "liberal international order." This term is a requisite catch-phrase of foreign policy wonkery, academic discourse, and headlines. But what does it actually imply? The conversation usually focuses on economics (free markets), politics (democracy), or specific institutions (like the UN or NATO). We endlessly debate its triumphs and its crises. Yet, we rarely pause to examine the very glue that holds the idea together: the language itself. The particular manner in which we speak English—its grammar, vocabulary, its unstated metaphors—makes the "liberal order" seem like common sense, a natural, inevitable reality, and not something constructed and debated. It's like a pair of glasses we've had on so long we forget that they tint everything we look at.

The durability of the Liberal Order isn't merely in its militaries or its economies, but in the very language in which it is expressed. It quietly structures the way we see international politics and, most importantly, it structures our imagination for what is possible within it. By rendering some relationships and hierarchies as sound, this "grammar of power" renders alternatives hard to even imagine.

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We are, in a way, prisoners of a narrative written in one key, and in order to shift the story, we need to be able to tune in to the music first.

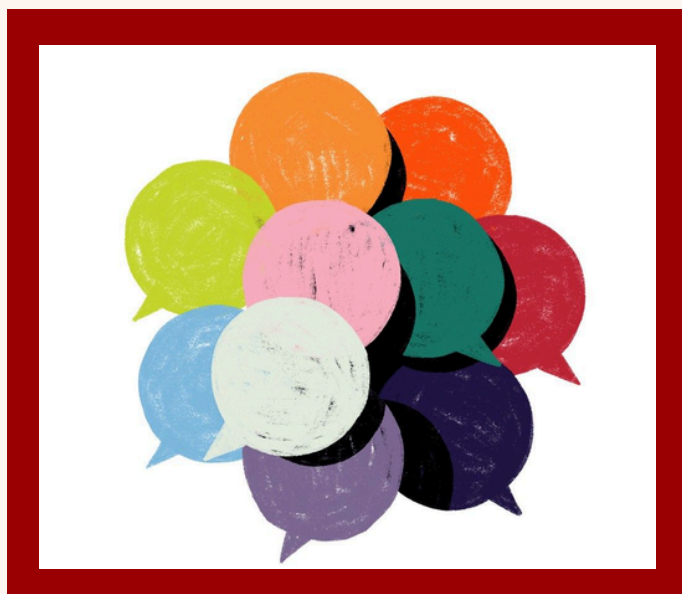
THE SYNTAX OF AGENCY: WHO ACTS, AND WHO IS ACTED UPON?

Fundamentally, grammar is role assignment. In every sentence, you have a doer (the subject), a doing (the verb), and something or someone done to (the object). This isn't a rule of language alone; it's a potent device for building political reality. Sentence structure can gently instruct us in who counts and who doesn't, who commands and who obeys.



If one listens carefully to conversations regarding world politics, an unmistakable trend becomes apparent. The "West" or "liberal democracies" are nearly always the sentence subjects—the agents of the action. They "build," "keep," "guard," "stand behind," and "unite." In contrast, much of the remainder of the planet—commonly referred to as "emerging" or "developing" countries—frequently finds itself in the object position within the sentence. They are the ones that are "developed," "assisted," "brought into the fold," "sanctioned," or "provided with aid." It's not always a deliberate conspiracy; it is a speech habit that reifies and maintains deep-rooted assumptions regarding international hierarchy.

This grammatical pattern inflicts a silent but potent hierarchy. It assigns agency and initiative as being largely Western attributes. Action radiates out from the seen center of the order, affirming a patriarchal vision of international affairs.



Here, some states are the masters and designers of the system, while others are its subjects, its beneficiaries, or its unruly pupils. The very language naturalizes this power imbalance, describing it not as a political preference, but as rational and natural to the world. It engenders a sort of "grammatical destiny" in which actor and recipient appear predestined.

THE LEXICON OF NORMATIVITY: THE UNMARKED "US" AND THE MARKED "THEM"

Language is never evenhanded. The vocabulary of the liberal order is filled with words that sound descriptive but are actually richly value-laden and normative. These words serve a double purpose: they purport to report the world while also judging it.

Look at the key adjective itself: liberal. Its opposite is "illiberal," a label that immediately makes any rivaling option out to be lacking, backward, or dangerous. Everywhere around us, this binary coding produces a world of stark heroes and villains in international relations discourse:

Open vs. Closed: We speak of "open societies" and "open markets" as being somehow good, and "closed" ones are automatically labeled as old-fashioned and

suspicious. The positive implication of "open" is transparency and cooperation, and "closed" implies secrecy and solitude, without any space for situations in which protection could be a sensible option for a developing economy.

Rules-Based vs. Lawless: The order is characterized as "rules-based," which necessarily implies that its critics and opponents are necessarily anarchic or disordered. This skillfully evades the all-important issue of 'who drafted the rules' and in whose interest they largely operate. It makes dissent into a repudiation of order, rather than opposition to a given set of rules.

Progressive vs. Traditional: Progress is invariably "progressing" or advancing "forward," and its opponents are frequently framed as seeking to "turn back the clock" to a less advanced past. This linear conception of time, as philosopher Walter Benjamin argued, rejects other possible futures and traditions that diverge from the Western modernist project.

This language system, according to political scientist Ivan Tirelli, creates an "unmarked" category—the liberal norm, which is depicted as average and typical—and a "marked" category—the illiberal 'other,' which is specific and deviant. A country that conforms is merely a "democracy." One that defies the system turns into an "illiberal democracy" or an "autocracy." The terminology does the pre-judging, baking a moral framework into descriptive terminology that we use on a daily basis. It's a linguistic pre-emption that renders it difficult to make the argument on merits, because the very words you

have to employ are already against you.

METAPHORS THAT BUILD WORLDS

Metaphors are a lot more than mere ornamentation; they are basic patterns of thought that organize our grasp of such matters as are inherently difficult and abstract. We employ them to think about something in terms of something else, and by doing this, we inherit a complete set of presuppositions. The liberal order relies on a handful of very influential, pervasive metaphors that operate unnoticed behind our thinking.

1. The Order as a Building or Architecture: We always speak of the "architecture" of international institutions, the "pillars" of the order, and the necessity to "buttress" or "shore it up" against those that would "undermine" it. This metaphor, linguist George Lakoff has demonstrated in his book on conceptual metaphors, has profound associations of stability, design, and intentionality. The natural reaction to any disaster, therefore, is one of engineering and restoration. It keeps us from even thinking about the possibility that the earth under the building itself is moving, or that we may require an entirely different type of shelter altogether—one that is more resilient, such as a web or a network.

2. The Order as a Journey or Path: Countries are said to be on a "road to democracy," they can "stray from" the liberal path, or must be "brought back into the fold."

This uses a metaphor of one linear path of improvement to some familiar destination—a destination claimed by the West to have already been attained. This construction, decried by post-colonial thinkers such as Arturo Escobar, sees other economic and political orders not as viable alternatives, but only as detours, roadblocks, or delays on the single universal trajectory of history. It denies the potential for multiple, parallel tracks of development and the worth of varied civilizational experiences. It's a map that indicates just one way, so all others appear to be mistakes.

These metaphors drastically constrain our political imagination. In case the order is a building, all we can do is support it or let it come down.

THE PASSIVE VOICE OF POWER

One of the most powerful grammatical weapons is the passive voice. It enables the speaker to delete the "agent"—the doer of the deed—thus hiding power and responsibility. It's the lingo of bureaucracy because it keeps the actor at arm's length from the effect.

Contrast in these sentences:

- . "The sanctions 'crippled' the country's economy." (Active voice, explicit agent)
- . "The economy of the country 'was crippled' by sanctions." (Passive voice, less emphasis on agent)
- . "The economy of the country 'was crippled'." (Passive voice, agent removed entirely)

When, in speech concerning the liberal order, one is speaking negatively about consequences, the passive voice is often utilized. Economic displacement, cultural uniformity,

and political instability are usually described as disembodied forces—as things which simply "occur" due to "globalization" or "market forces." In doing so, this depiction dislocates these consequences from the particular policies and choices made by influential actors in the order. As linguist Steven Pinker has noted, this language use "can obscure agency and responsibility." It takes away accountability and renders systemic issues as imprecise, insistent forces of nature, and not as immediate consequences of human decision and power. It makes political decisions instances of acts of nature that cannot be challenged or reformed.

DECODING FOR A NEW DISCOURSE

If we truly want to engage with the future of world politics, our initial challenge is to become literate in the language we have inherited. We need to learn how to read it. We need to ask ourselves repeatedly: Who is the subject of this sentence, and who is the object? What normative judgments are built into the adjectives being employed? What type of world is this metaphor subtly building? This is not simply an intellectual exercise; it is a constitutive act of political consciousness.

A more equal, just, and resilient world system in the future will demand a new political grammar. This new vocabulary and lexicon must be able to support multiple agents with agency of their own, different developmental trajectories, and co-owned and negotiated responsibilities,

and not simply those imposed unilaterally. It would be an active voice grammar to specify responsibility, a network and ecosystem metaphor to insist on interconnection, and vocabulary that can speak of difference without always assigning hierarchy.

It starts with a deep insight: the words we are using are not simply reporting a world order; they are constitutively making it.

Our language is the bricks and mortar of political reality. So the work of constructing a new world may well begin by most carefully deconstructing the unexamined grammar of the previous one. By laying bare this invisible structure of power, we recover the capacity to envision—and to speak into being—a different kind of world.

