

Systemic Causation

Studying cognitive linguistics has its uses.

Every language in the world has in its grammar a way to express direct causation. No language in the world has in its grammar a way to express systemic causation.

What's the difference between direct and systemic causation?

From infancy on we experience simple, direct causation. We see direct causation all around us: if we push a toy, it topples over; if our mother turns a knob on the oven, flames emerge. Picking up a glass of water and taking a drink is direct causation. Slicing bread is direct causation. Punching someone in the nose is direct causation. Throwing a rock through a window is direct causation. Stealing your wallet is direct causation.

Any application of force to something or someone that produces an immediate change to that thing or person is direct causation. When causation is direct, the word *cause* is unproblematic. We learn direct causation automatically as children because that's what we experience on a daily basis. Direct causation, and the control over our immediate environment that understanding it allows, is crucial in the life of every child. That's why it shows up in the grammar of every language.

The same is not true of systemic causation. Systemic causation cannot be experienced directly. It has to be learned, its cases have to be studied, and repeated communication is necessary before it can be widely understood.

That's right. No language in the world has a way in its grammar to express systemic causation. You drill a lot more oil, burn a lot more gas, put a lot more CO₂ in the air, the earth's atmosphere heats up, more moisture evaporates from the oceans yielding bigger storms in certain places and more droughts and fires in other places, and yes, more cold and snow in still other places: systemic causation. The world ecology is a system—like the world