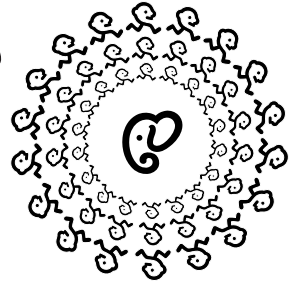


The Elephant's Memory

In search of
a pictorial language

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The Elephant's Memory is a pictorial language consisting of more than a hundred combinable elements called *logograms* or *signs*. The goal of this language is to set up an experimental research environment—the *language kitchen*—which gathers a community of users to explore the field of invented languages and the questions orbiting around their form, structure, and development process. The language kitchens are meant to be educational environments oriented primarily toward children and teenagers, where both students and educators gather to search for new ways to envision communication. The project introduces experimental semiotics and visual grammars as mindscapes to be explored in playful ways; a new dimension where language, communication, and education can be reflected on the thinking patterns structuring our daily experience of the world.




In this article I will present some features of the logographic language I have spent two years developing. My aim here is not to write a tutorial on this language, but to provide a sufficient amount of information for readers to grasp the underlying philosophy of the project, to make people aware of the environmental dimension of language, and to lift up semantic research to the level of an ecology.

You might be wondering why I call this new language “The Elephant's Memory.” The reason is that I hoped the logograms of the language, and the way in which you use them, would be unforgettable to all who had seen them, just like an elephant never forgets. In fact, in French (my native language), there is a popular saying, *mémoire d'éléphant*, which means the ability to remember everything.

As a child I wondered how I would feel if my name was not “Timothee” but “Jeremy,” if a table was not a “table,” and a car not a “car.” Would my home suddenly turn into an alien world because of these new names for familiar things? Language design expands these questions to the entire universe, and

takes everyone back to the time when man gave names to the animals. Why call a camel a "camel" and a parrot a "parrot"? How can one picture the world in words or images?

Every sign and symbol of The Elephant's Memory reflects this philosophical interrogation and asks the questions of representation and interpretation in the fractal dimensions of a logographic cosmology mirroring the human need to find a semantic structure in the chaos of experience.

If I choose to picture the action "walking" with the sign , does it mean that elephants cannot walk, or does it mean that elephants are men? The choice to represent states and actions commonly performed by animals and men in anthropomorphic ways is certainly questionable. What about the delicate matters of gender, age, and race? The standard figures of The Elephant's Memory are anonymous characters, with no sex, no age, and no explicit cultural origin. They show a creature performing an action, and must be associated with other signs to convey more detailed information: Who? How? When? Where (to...)? The issues get tricky when we approach abstract concepts and try to couple them with recognizable things. If I decide to represent a  one way, does it make sense to represent  similarly?



to walk



box



to have

This is an introduction to the concept of metaphor in language design, and by extension, a reflection on the questions of "interface" in general. Since language is the interface to experience, and experience is the water in which we are swimming, it might be worth taking a breath and diving in to search for the secret paths leading to the world and to ourselves. The Elephant's Memory is a living discussion about the common codes chosen and built by people to deal with the universe, to deal with their machines, and to deal with themselves.

In the first part of this article, I will describe some aspects of the language and give various examples of its use, without examining or questioning many of the small design decisions that I made in this language. I will then approach the research topics linked to the development of these features to introduce the educational philosophy of the project. In the final section of this article, I will describe the next steps of the project, and my dream of a logographic software that enables people to speak in a visual tongue.

Aspects of a visual language

An apology and an explanation



I will ask you for a little compassion, as it is sometimes most difficult to write a linear article about a nonlinear language. The Elephant's Memory is something to be discovered in fractal pathways. All parts of the language refer to one another, and what is found here will also be found there. Where to start? It would be best to describe The Elephant's Memory using hypertextual structures, stepping beyond the tradition of linearity in Western writing, and connecting ideas with one another regardless of the sequential constructs of traditional writing. As you learn more and more about The Elephant's Memory, you will understand the need to "hypertextualize" its description. Later I will describe the ideal way to learn The Elephant's Memory in what I call "butterfly learning." However, I must fit my description to the constraints of the printed page for this article, so I ask you to bear with me. The next several sections of this article explain how various concepts (time, subjectivity, causality, interrogation, and so on) are treated in The Elephant's Memory. While I have tried to make each of these sections somewhat independent, the nature of The Elephant's Memory makes this impossible. I hope that when you have read *all* these sections, everything will become clear.

Introduction to logographic language

The Elephant's Memory is a pictorial language consisting of more than 150 combinable graphic objects or logograms and a grammatical structure based on two parameters: position and size. All signs feature associative qualities potentially linking them all together according to formal conditions, depending on their shape and their meaning.

I use the term "logographic language" in preference to the traditional "ideographic/pictographic" terminology, because this dualism doesn't fit with The Elephant's Memory philosophy, even if it draws an interesting line between analog and digital signs, and crystallizes the metaphoric problem at the core of a pictorial language: How can I represent what? The reductive dimension of logograms is unavoidable. It questions our capacity to deal with the arbitrary dimension of codes and signifiers. I want to design a system questioning this arbitrary dimension. The Elephant's Memory logograms are visual concepts on their own. They can be interpreted with one or more words and reveal

different semantic facets according to the context in which they are put. They should be envisioned as elastic semantic fields that adopt different shapes and collapse into particular words in the specific settings of a composition.

The vocabulary of The Elephant's Memory revolves around a set of signs representing ground concepts such as time, causality, existence, and so on. These primary signs are designed as formal roots out of which other signs will derive, inheriting from their shape associative properties and semantic fields. The logographic roots define families of signs sharing the same grammatical and semantic features, echoing each other's meaning and shape in sometimes disturbing ways. It might sound arbitrary to affiliate a sign  to the root , and it probably is. This is a question to be discussed in the language kitchens.

The Elephant's Memory is a nonlinear language enabling people to read and write in every direction, starting and ending from any component of a sentence. The peculiar associative structure of the logograms permits spatial compositions of various aesthetic and semantic qualities. Signs snap together to form sentences much as atoms gather to form molecules.

The logographic sentences are semantic skeletons that can be fleshed out with different media types attached to the signs in order to complete their meaning and enlarge the expressiveness of a sentence. They can be associated with a QuickTime movie, a text, or an image, although none of the examples used in this article do so.

Time in The Elephant's Memory: Here/Now/Me

The Elephant's Memory is rooted in "Here/Now/Me." It takes place in the abstract and fleeting point of *here-now*, in which people talk and refer to other people in other places and other times. It is a distributed subjective language embedding every message in the subjective context of its utterance. The Elephant's Memory enables a form of multiple subjectivity: people talking about other people talking about other people. It enables the encapsulation of subjective statements within other subjective statements, and on and on. A message becomes a planetary system where submessages are orbiting around other messages orbiting around other messages. "I" can be "you" and "you" can be "her."



to be pregnant



causality

The time concepts of The Elephant's Memory are rooted in the *instant-now*. There is basically no time concept in the language, but the ability to situate events and things in relationship with the *instant-now*, with a greater and smaller proximity. The past and the future don't actually exist but are indicated as instants or durations remote from Now, with the ability to indicate repeating, initial, and terminal events. The same happens for space and distance.

The aesthetics of The Elephant's Memory

The logograms of The Elephant's Memory have been designed to be printed at every scale and on every medium without losing their quality and expressiveness. They can be rendered on a black-and-white raster laptop or projected on a giant screen, and they will be equally recognizable and identified. Their rounded shapes create a homogenous style that sets the visual identity of the language and makes them attractive to children. They can be rendered in a simulated 3D effect to give them more solidity and to invite people to manipulate them.

The important thing is that they are meant to be reproduced by hand and give birth to handwritten dialects all over the world. The logograms are meant to be transformed by unique gestures of people's fingers, and turned into handmade doodles evolving over the years into more and more abstract figures, as the Chinese language did over thousands of years. Drawn in sand or snow, tagged on a wall, or carved in wood, they jump out of the screen and invade the real world. A new graffiti style sprouts on the walls of the city, and lots of bizarre messages appear in the cloudy path of a drunken jet plane.

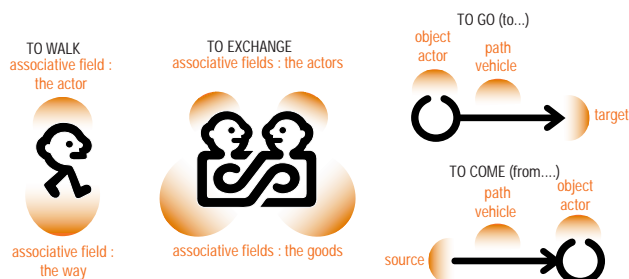
The grammar of The Elephant's Memory

Associative structure of logograms

Each of the logograms of The Elephant's Memory features an associative structure defined by its form and meaning. Following are four logograms, with their associated fields shown as positioned, circular halos:

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These circular halos show where additional, smaller logograms can be positioned to give more detail, or to complete the thought of the “main” logogram. The number of such halos is a function of the meaning of a particular logogram, and the halo position is a design choice that I made. As can be seen in the figure, the logogram has two such halos, the logogram has four, and and each have three. The halos are used to help explain a logogram to someone who is learning The Elephant's Memory, or who needs help in constructing an Elephant's Memory statement. They are not normally seen.

The logograms' associative structure defines a nonlinear grammatical framework out of which visual sentences can be formulated. The Elephant's Memory is a nonlinear language, a molecular system aggregating semantic components with no conventional sense of reading. The messages can be written and read starting from any point of the composition. The eyes follow a network of associations and decipher messages step by step, exploring their meaning as a visual enigma. Multiple verbal interpretations can be produced out of a visual sentence, but the meaning remains constant. Here are two examples:



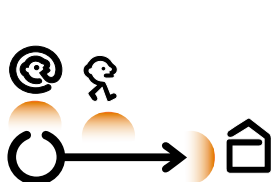
to exchange



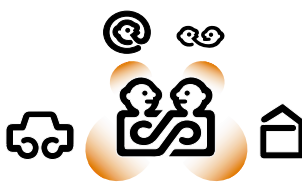
to go to...by...



to come from...by...



I am going to the house by feet.
or
I am walking to the house.



I am exchanging my car for your house.
or
You are exchanging your house for my car.

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Logogram size and position


The logograms can be grouped to form attributes and be associated with another logogram to complete their meanings. Attributes are half the size of the sign to which they are attached. The logogram's size polarizes the sentence around certain signs in order to structure its syntactical hierarchy, as shown at left, above.

"To be" or "Not to be" in The Elephant's Memory

Basic logograms

The elementary sign of The Elephant's Memory is a full circle. It represents the universe, it is . All things and events are included in all; everything that is, and everything that is not.

This is the reason why  is an open circle, it defines a part of all, a finite part of the infinite.

Things or events that don't exist are pictured by an open circle with a cross. Nothing is not all. By extension, these signs enable the relative or absolute assertion and negation  of events or things. They can be combined with everything in every way. Here are these four signs again, with their associative field positioned as halos:



all



to be/yes



nothing



not to be/no

"event/object"



"event/object"



"event/object"



"event/object"



And here are five examples of their use:



"The whole house is burning."



"All frogs live by the water."



"The elephant is not scared."



"There is one rabbit inside the valley."







"None of the birds"

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Linked logograms

It is possible to associate these signs with one another, by linking them with a dash. Events and objects can be associated with conditions of association, exclusion, and inclusion: with  and without , , and .

Here are four examples using linked forms of the  or  logograms:



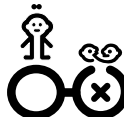
"Walking and thinking"



"The frog without the bird"



"No human but me"



"All humans but you"



to be with

to be without



nothing but

all but


Aspects of subjectivity in The Elephant's Memory

Simple subjectivity







All messages can be put in the subjective context through a system of distributed subjectivity. This system is best understood by showing how The Elephant's Memory constructs logograms. By properly positioning these logograms as part of an even larger logogram, a wide variety of precise meanings can be constructed.

The sign  represents a character speaking to himself or herself.

The sign  pictures a character speaking to another character looking back at the first character.

The sign  represents a character speaking to another character looking in the opposite direction.

In this regard, these signs can be regarded as the visualization of actions (verbs), more than the illustration of people (subjects).

All of these "pronouns" implicitly refer to the action of "talking"  and can be associated with the  sign, as well as the gender signs, , to form , the plural , and . All these signs are meant to perform actions, as in the four examples on the next page.



me



you



someone



to speak



plural



male and female



we



they

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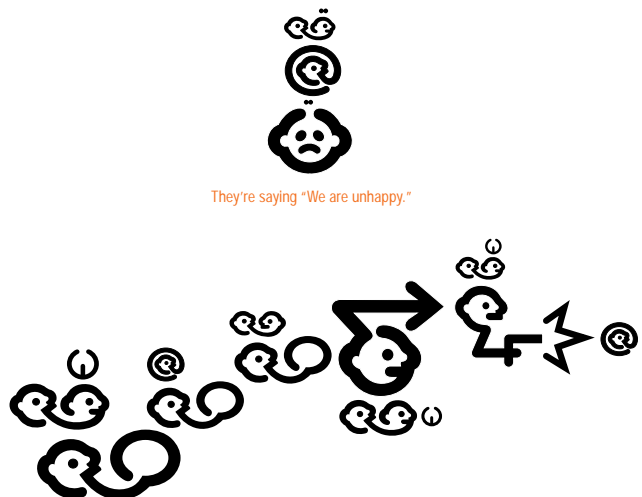
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Complex subjectivity

Each of these signs can be the "actor" (or subject) of one another or of most other signs. This makes it possible to quote people to any depth, and include statements within other statements without losing track of who is saying what about whom, as these two examples demonstrate:



"She says that I say that you say that she intends to shoot me."
or
"I'm saying that you're saying that she intends to shoot me," she says.
or
"You are saying, 'She intends to shoot you,' is what she says I am saying"



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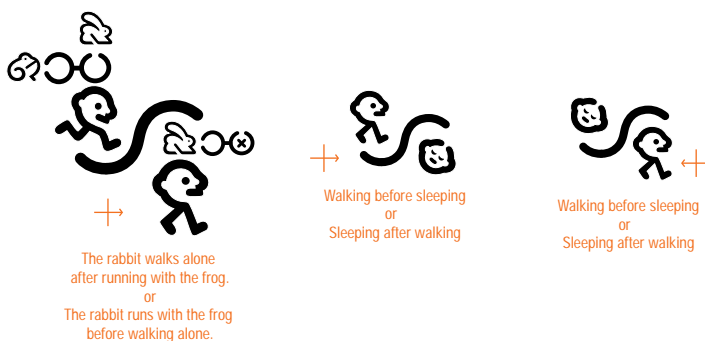
Some aspects of time in The Elephant's Memory

Simple before and after





The  sign represents the fleeting instant—the continuous passage between before and after. It needs to be oriented with the  to determine the direction of time in a particular logographic construction. Here are the four standard orientations:

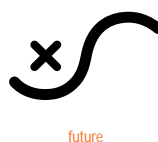


Here are three sample uses of the **now** logogram:



Simple past and future

To express past or future events, the sign  is associated with the . What is not after is before , and what is not before is after ; the present is happening neither before nor after anything. Here are the standard, simple expressions for past and future, complete with the required logographic compass:

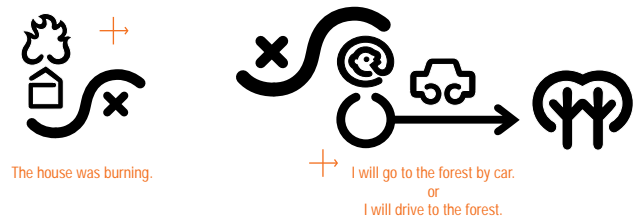


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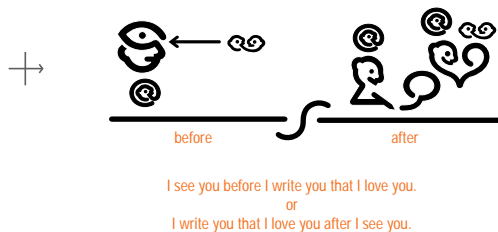
12

Here are two constructions that express past and future events:







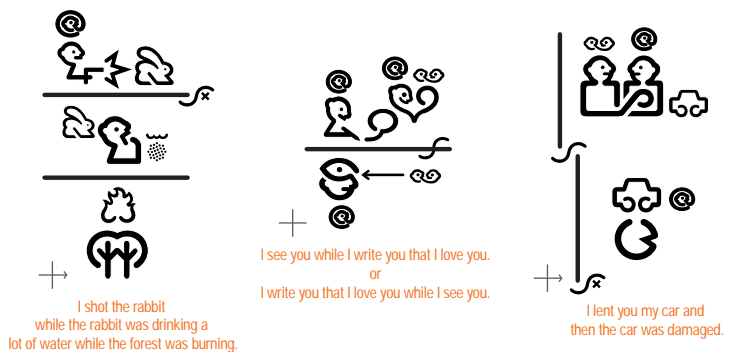
Large expressions involving time

The  sign can be associated with the  for different purposes. The first use is to extend the associative field of  and express complex situations needing more signs and more space to be formed.



Simultaneous actions in the past or in the future

The combination of  and  lets you create two or more simultaneous situations in the past, the present, or the future. Here are three complex examples; note that the  sign is crossed by the  to indicate that the simultaneous actions take place in the present:



Encapsulation of events

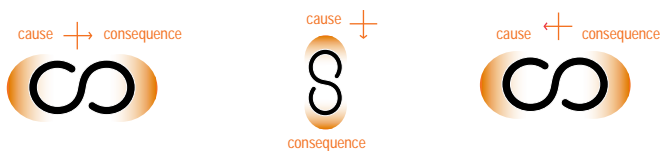
The combination of ∞ and --- enables the encapsulation of past events into future events and vice versa, so that statements such as "Yesterday, I told you that I will travel soon," can be easily constructed. Here are three examples:



Aspects of causality in The Elephant's Memory

Using the basic causality root

It is possible to establish causal relationships between events or situations with the help of the ∞ sign and the $+$ used before. Here are the standard orientations, complete with their associated fields again shown as positioned, circular halos:

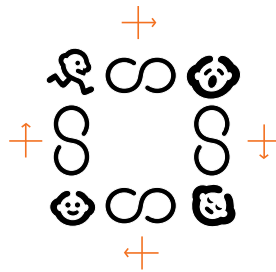


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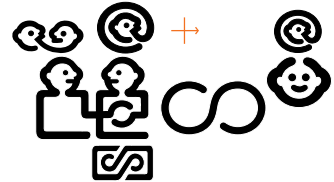
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Here are two examples of causality in use, one with four separate logographic compasses:



Running makes one tired,
being tired makes one sleep,
sleeping makes one happy,
being happy makes one run.
or
Sleeping is caused by fatigue,
fatigue is caused by running,
running comes from happiness,
happiness is caused by sleep.



I am happy because you are giving me money.
or
You are giving me money, which makes me happy.



to cause



to be pregnant







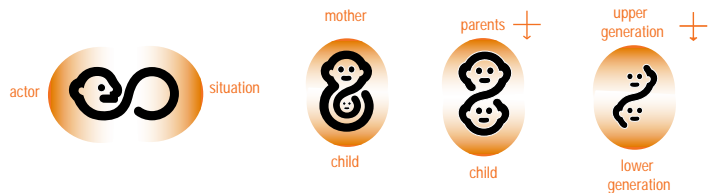
parent/child



generation

Other logograms derived from causality

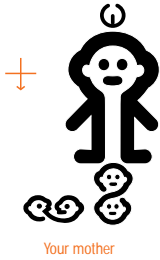
Causality is the root of other elements involving the idea of causality and origin, such as , , and aspects of ancestry  and other generations  that may refer to either ancestors or descendants, depending on the logographic compass. Here are the basic ways in which these are used, with their associative halos:





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Here are two examples of their use:

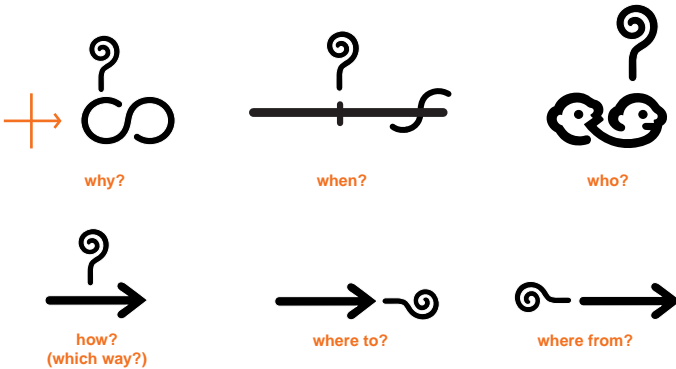


Aspects of interrogation in The Elephant's Memory

Life is strange and full of mysteries: Where? What? Why? How? When? Who? All of these types of questions can be easily formed in The Elephant's Memory, in a simply structured way. The sign  represents a figure wondering about something. It is the logographic root of the question sign logogram .



Here is how the interrogation can be pointed to almost any part of a sign in order to form a question:



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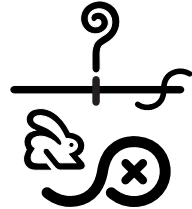
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Here are seven examples of questions posed in The Elephant's Memory:



How do you come from the city?



When did the rabbit die?



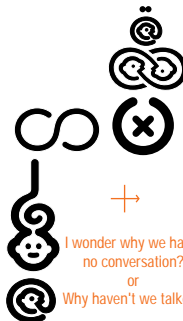
Who is happy?



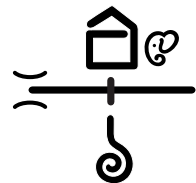
What is inside the envelope?



Who is doing what?



I wonder why we have
no conversation?
or
Why haven't we talked?



Where is the house
of the elephant?

Table 1 shows a large number of The Elephant's Memory logograms that have been defined so far. I am looking forward to seeing many more in the future.

all	nothing	to be/yes	not to be/no	to be with	to be with out	all but	nothing but	to be inside	before/after	future	past
life/death	birth	death	causality	if/then	maybe	field	light	one	plural	a few	a lot
to speak	language	me	you	someone	to shout	very	explode	to come from... by...	to go to...by...	to be scared	to laugh
to write	writing	to wonder	interrogation	to point at	determiner	these	to name	name	to be stunned (horror)	to be mean	to be mean
to do	to trace	to hold	to point at (gun)	to shoot at	to orient	fire / burn	to use	tool	gun	to eat	to take
to hit	to direct	"do !..."	to refuse	to forbid	*don't !!"	right	left	down	up	to be happy	to be frightened
receptacle	box	house / shelter	village	closed	open	envelop	to be down	to be surprised (happy)	day	to be angry	to be disappointed
to have	to possess	to exchange	money	to steal	to lend	to give	car	to lend /to loan	night	to get	to acquire
to pass on	to live in	to protect	to dry	ocean	frog	rabbit	bird	elephant	to sleep	to be tired	to be very sad
to think	to know (information)	to pass on information	intention	to get information	tree	forest	leaf	female (genitals in)	male (genitals out)	copulation	to be angry and sad
to be clothed	cloth	to be sick	to suffer (from...)	to bleed	to be wounded	to be treated	water	to be healed	to be pregnant	parent / child	generation
human	body	damaged	to leak	fixed	to run	to walk	to hear	to see	to hate	to cry	to enjoy
to receive	to send	acquaintance	friendship	sun	fun love	love	early love relationship	love relationship	fun relationship	hate relationship	old buddies

The logographic processor: Miss Rosette

It wouldn't make sense to create a visual language without coupling it with a self-explanatory tutorial and a software environment inviting people to use it. Moreover, we would need a publishing system enabling the instant display of logographic messages written by the members of The Elephant's Memory community, and a networked system linking its members with one another.

Let's first imagine a logographic processor featuring a playful learning environment and a very friendly interface, sort of a mixture between a magnetic refrigerator alphabet, a video game, and an audiovisual storybook. Let's call it "Miss Rosette" as a tribute to Mr. Champolion's discovery of the Rosetta Stone in Egypt. Miss Rosette would be a networking environment providing:

- A logographic database storing all the signs of The Elephant's Memory.
- Logogram typing software enabling the creation of visual sentences.
- An online learning environment storing an expanding database of logographic poems, sentences, compositions, playful grammatical riddles, and downloadable extensions of the language (new signs and updates).
- E-mail software for sending and receiving messages (written in The Elephant's Memory) as well as in existing languages from all over the world.

Once again we must face several questions. It is most difficult to create a logographic processor because of the peculiar structure of the language, and the disconnection between its visual vocabulary and the natural vocabulary of languages such as English and French, for example. As we discussed before, the logograms are not straight illustrations of existing words, but rather are visual concepts on their own. It is difficult to store them without using archival hierarchies, which spoil the open structure of the language, so users will be invited to configure the sign archives according to their preferences. Logograms will be laid out on pages to enable fast retrieval and easy access from the workspace where they will be edited and assembled.

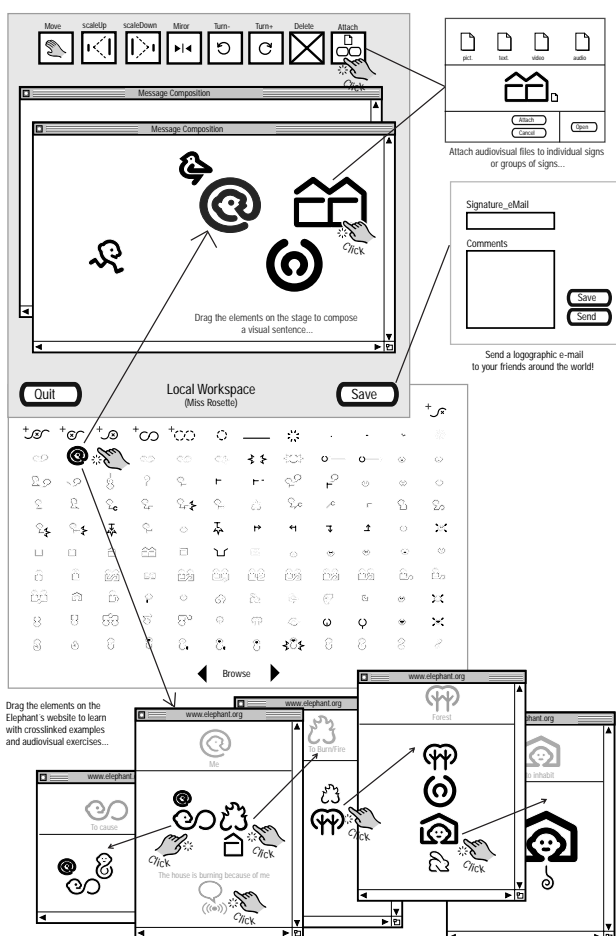
In addition to this archival problem, the typing software requires the ability to transform graphic objects (in size, orientation, and position) and create hyperlinked documents potentially attached to audiovisual files. A global environment harmonizing a tutorial and a functional workspace is then required.

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This environment splits the system into interconnected modules enabling the simultaneous creation of messages and the browsing of a web-based logographic database with examples and exercises updated daily.

Here is a basic idea of what Miss Rosette will look like. Note: This software has not yet been written, it is just the germ of an idea in my mind's eye.



The user launches Miss Rosette on a local machine. The user's network connection links the local machine with The Elephant's Memory's web site, where a growing database of exercises illustrates the grammar and vocabulary of the language.

Miss Rosette stores a logographic archive displaying the signs by family and/or randomly. The signs can be dragged on to the workspace (message windows), where they will be freely associated and edited with a set of eight tools (move, scale up, scale down, mirror, turn right, turn left, attach, delete).

Once the composition is ready, it will be signed with an e-mail address and saved as a file on local machines, and/or sent abroad by electronic mail.

The Language Kitchen—Interesting questions arising from the creation of a visual language

Semantic relativity: The cannibal's smile

There is a funny story about a British anthropology professor who was exploring the jungle seeking contact with native people. Unpredictably, every time he would meet a native, they would run away screaming in utter panic. When the professor returned to England, he mentioned this problem to a more experienced colleague, who reacted to his story with great laughter. It turned out that the region the professor was investigating was full of cannibals, who usually threaten their victims with a smile to uncover a wide expanse of healthy teeth, a sign that the professor had intended would inspire politeness or sympathy.

This story illustrates the theory of semantic relativity: What means “this” here means “that” there. Maybe there is a need to train our communication gymnastics on more of a global scale. This is something Edward T. Hall explored in magnificent ways several decades ago. But in a shrinking, wired planet, we must face two parallel problems: the cultural imperialism of one single language (English, for instance) and the vanishing of local dialects. Both lead to the impoverishment of the cultural diversity that makes the Earth more attractive for everyone.

We need to stimulate knowledge of and appreciation for language in local areas. To stimulate investigation of language in deep ways, we need a tool, and this tool might be language itself, or better yet, a new language. Metaphorically speaking, if the pages of a dictionary could meet in a pub for a conversation, lots of words would be pronounced, discussed, battled, and preserved from sinking into a forgotten silence. This is the goal of the language kitchens: people talking in their native tongue to learn an alien pictorial language, in order to learn more about both their own language and language in general. The new language's structure and vocabulary need a certain amount of verbal communication to be understood. It's a little bit like learning to play chess, with hundreds of figures having all different ways to move across the playground. The Elephant's Memory is a communication agent. It requires verbal communication to enable visual communication.

Interpretation and social interaction: Language as a playground

The Elephant's Memory is a weird linguistic object that bends natural languages to the limit of their own elasticity. The confrontation between The Elephant's Memory and a natural language is the occasion to explore both languages' structures, in a reciprocal movement mirroring each one's associative features in the distorted image of the other's grammar.

The verbal interpretation of logographic messages is a playful communication exercise open to large or small groups of players. Discussing the verbal interpretation(s) of a logographic message is the occasion to explore one's own natural language in its most subtle dimensions—multiple degrees of significance, aesthetics of association, contextual meaning, and dominance of form. One message can have several verbal interpretations and still remain "semantically one," which means that all the interpretations will carry the same basic information, but there can be many discussions regarding the subtext of specific interpretations, on both written and spoken levels. On the other hand, a verbal message can find different logographic translations, equally significant but carrying different kinds of "logographic subtext," which is a fascinating domain to explore. The further development of The Elephant's Memory would lead to various forms of dialects favoring certain forms of logographic expression. It would also open up different fields of research, including language evolution and the arrival of dialects and local forms of use; logographic slang development; transforms of grammar and replacement of the original grammatical rules by pragmatic, improvised ways to combine signs; alteration of syntactical forms; development of second-degree and multileveled forms of communication; subtextual logographic forms of expression; and many others.

Butterfly learning

Much has been written about the transformation of educational structures in the digital age. More than 30 years ago, Marshall McLuhan described what has become now a common situation: computers and multimedia technologies revolutionizing educational institutions, schools, and families, and the individuation processes they are meant to put into context. Information is no longer the treasure of the elders and the masters, but the common wealth of a generation immersed in the ubiquitous presence of media. The interaction between students and educators can no longer be set on the traditional patterns of transmission. Something else is going on.

The intention behind the language kitchens of The Elephant's Memory is to set up environments where learning is divided into thousands of microexperiences. The use of hypermedia suits this purpose, and creates environmental sets of ideas, letting people hop from one to the other without following a sequential road map. The Elephant's Memory's learning archives are designed to be a set of interconnected exercises linking every sign displayed on screen with pictorial games describing, in audiovisual ways, the sign's function.

The very structure of the language, with its conceptual roots and graphical families, defines a form of holographic learning enabling the understanding of general rules in particular cases, and particular rules in general cases. The use of sound is particularly essential in this regard, since most of the exercises are based on associative games translating visual compositions in spoken sentences.

Learning by playing and learning by imitating are the patterns of integration. Learning a language cannot be divided from social integration. It is driven by the dynamic relationships continuously knit between the members of a group. The variable verbal interpretation of visual sentences generates vivid oral communication. There is, therefore, a fascinating social dimension to be explored within a group of users (online and/or offline): The communicational performances of some influences the others and triggers a kind of mimetic competition that pushes creativity further.

Reactions to The Elephant's Memory

I have shown The Elephant's Memory to many people in different environments. Most people liked it, some adored it, and some hated it. A South Korean policeman wrote me that his life was more beautiful since he saw The Elephant's Memory. Everybody reacts differently.

My experience with children using The Elephant's Memory has been limited by the poor functional qualities of the early prototypes. I would put children in front of the screen and show them an interactive demo of how it works. Some would ask me lots of questions and others would want me to shut up so that they could have fun by themselves. I would see them move around the signs and form undecipherable but very beautiful compositions. Sometimes totally messy, sometimes very organized, they all seemed to have a very affective relation to the signs: the ones they liked, the ones they didn't like, and the

ones they ignored. I often asked them to invent a name for the sign they had just composed. They would usually choose totemic names like the ones Native Americans use: angry rabbit, sleeping sky, sad tree, blind frog, shouting man, very small car, and so on. Rare would be the ones who would ask me what the meaning of a sign was. Most of these kids were under 10 years old and had no logical approach to the world: They looked at things with the heart and just knew.

Teenagers would react very differently. Some liked the concept and thought it was cool without checking the details. Some would get into terribly complex questions, as if they wanted to hack the system and blow it up from inside. Most adults would find it lovely and some would immediately want to learn it.

Unlearning

I think life is very strange and beautiful, and that if it is not strange and beautiful enough, there is a problem in our heads. This problem might come from the way we as people talk and learned to talk in schools and families. Perhaps should we question the way grammar structures our universe with a telescope looking into the soul, and how we can have fun unlearning the world as much as we got bored learning it.

Unlearning is a creative process disguised in a destruction process. What are we creating when we unlearn the world? We are learning to see everything as a living question rather than a frozen answer, and we are learning to see "things" related with one another instead of seeing them isolated. I wish the mental attitude arising from the unlearning game would be an everlasting capacity to question and rebirth objects or events, and to see reality as a sculpture commonly created by human beings in the course of their interaction. The Elephant's Memory dreams of a world in permanent genesis throughout language and form, an enjoyable construction game, puzzling its players by asking them to cut out the pieces and snapping them together simultaneously.

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Conclusion

It is now time to conclude this article, and I would like to quote the words of a man whose thinking had great influence on me. There is no better way to express the spirit of The Elephant's Memory than this excerpt from Gregory Bateson's last lecture:

"I recommend you take your hand home and take a look at it when you get there—very quietly, almost as part of meditation. And try to catch the difference between seeing it as a base for five parts and seeing it as constructed of a tangle of relationships. Not a tangle, a pattern of the interlocking of relationships that were determinants of its growth. And if you can really manage to see the hand in terms of the epistemology that I am offering you, I think you will find that your hand is much more recognizably beautiful as a product of relationships than as a composition of countable parts. In other words, I am suggesting to you, first, that language is very deceiving, and, second, that if you begin even without much knowledge to adventure into what it would be like to look at the world with a biological epistemology, you will come into contact with the concepts that the biologists don't look at. You will meet with beauty and ugliness. These may be real components in the world that you as a living creature live in. ...Of course natural history can be taught as a dead subject. I know that, but I believe also that perhaps the monstrous atomistic pathology at the individual level, the national level, and the international level—the pathology of wrong thinking in which we all live—can only in the end be corrected by an enormous discovery of those relations in nature that make up the beauty of nature."

("A Sacred Unity: Further Steps to an Ecology of Mind," lecture delivered October 28, 1979, at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.)



The Elephant's Memory is my own personal attempt to walk toward an Ecology of Mind. I don't know if I will ever get there, but sometimes traveling feels a bit like home.

About the author

Timothee Ingen-Housz (elephant@khm.de) is a French-Dutch artist working in the expanding field of media arts. He has degrees in biology and philosophy, and the cross-media arts (painting, photography, and video) from the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Decoratifs (Paris). He also travels the world and is interested in cybernetics, astrophysics, and Eastern metaphysics.

In 1993, he discovered the Internet and started working on a pictorial language. In 1995, he joined the Academy of Media Arts Köln (Germany), where he produced a CD-ROM about The Elephant's Memory. The following year, he worked with children in the east of France with The Elephant's Memory, and helped to build the first kid-invented virtual cosmology: Tohu_Bahut. He now resides in Germany, where he shares his time between various commercial activities and artistic research.

More information on The Elephant's Memory, including interactive demonstrations of logogram construction, can be found at www.khm.de/~elephant.