

Skeuomorphic/Shibbolethic Uncertainty

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A Pseudo-Parable

And the Gileads and Ephraimites again waged war for forty days and forty nights, and it was so that on the final day a lone soldier of Gilead found two travelers in the passages of Jordan. The first traveler spoke with the dialect of the Ephraimites, and so the soldier of Gilead took him, and slew him, but as the first traveler lay dying, he said, Why brother? My forefathers are from Ephraim, and this is the dialect of my forefathers, but I was born in Gilead. And so, the traveler died, and the soldier from Gilead wept. The second traveler also spoke with the dialect of the first, and so the soldier of Gilead let him pass, judging him another friend, but then he was slain by the second traveler, who stabbed him in the back, and as the soldier of Gilead lay dying, he said, Why brother? Art thou not from Gilead? And the second traveler said, Nay, I am from Ephraim.¹

Judges 12:16-20, *Pseudo King James Bible*

Introduction

Analyses of cultural artifacts may be systematically vulnerable to misattributions, in two converse forms: either 1) due to attributing relevance to irrelevant features, or 2) due to attributing irrelevance to relevant features. These misattributions are caused by two formal features of cultural artifacts, skeuomorphs, features inherited from a broader class, and shibboleths, features distinguishing a narrower class. Because skeuomorphs and shibboleths do not distinguish themselves as such, their interpretation as such is dependent upon the discernment of the observer, and thus are easily misattributed. These misattributions have several culturally important effects, including aesthetic disagreements and political divergences, as well as a generalized condition of interpretive indeterminacy. Several solutions to these uncertainties are available, including default interpretive doubts, reasonable interpretive ranges, and scientific interpretive methods, though all of these solutions have tradeoffs. These considerations have special importance for the analysis of popular culture, where these features intersect in a manner that is both especially uncertain and especially impactful.

¹ The original parable reads: “And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay; Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand.”

—*Judges 12:5–6*

Features

Cultural artifacts are replete with features that distinguish their super-classes but are irrelevant to sub-classes and also features that are irrelevant to their super-classes but distinguish their sub-classes, what we will refer to as skeuomorphs and shibboleths respectively. In what follows, we further define and describe these two features (Preston, 2022).

Skeuomorphic Features

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a skeuomorph is “An ornament or ornamental design on an artefact resulting from the nature of the material used or the method of working it.” Some obvious examples of skeuomorphs might include decorative arches on buildings that may have once been structural, the levers on slot machines that once were functional, and the shapes of lightbulbs mimicking the shapes of candle flames. In our sense, we are using the word skeuomorph generically to describe the feature of a form that is an inherited, holdover feature from broader class of forms. The evidence provided by an artifact in support of a theory about that artifact may be substantive, but it also may be skeuomorphic, inherited from a previous artifact. If the evidence is skeuomorphic, that evidence says something about the heritage of the artifact. However, arguably, a skeuomorph is only incidentally related to the meaning of the individual artifact. Thus, generally, a skeuomorph can tell us a good deal about the generic origin of some present form, but not its specific present meaning.

Shibbolethic Features

Again, a shibboleth is a “A custom, habit, mode of dress, or the like, which distinguishes a particular class or set of persons.” Some obvious examples of shibboleths include the accents of peoples from different regions, the colors worn by people of different political parties, and the pronunciation of the word “shibboleth” itself, which was used by men of Gilead to distinguish themselves from Ephraimites in a famous passage in Judges (pseudo-quoted above). In our sense, we are using the word shibboleth generically to describe the feature of a form that is a distinguishing feature of that form or its narrow class. The evidence provided by an artifact in support of a theory about its broad class may be substantive, but it also may be shibbolethic, incidental in distinguishing that artifact or a narrower class of artifacts. If the evidence is shibbolethic, that evidence says something about the narrow class of the individual artifact. However, arguably, a shibboleth is only incidentally related to the meaning of the broader class of artifacts. Thus, generally, a shibboleth can tell us a good deal about the meaning of some specific present form, but not its generic origins.

Failings

However, the problem with skeuomorphic and shibbolethic features is that their intermingling in a given cultural artifact results in easily made misidentifications. In what follows, we define and describe the confusions occurring when identifying the two features (Damer, 2012).

The Shibbolethic Fallacy

When interpreter overattributes the meaning of the artifact to apparent shibboleths, they are committing:

The Shibbolethic Fallacy: the error in reasoning of attributing special significance to a feature of a specific set of forms when that feature is an inadvertent inheritance from a broader set of forms (i.e., when we think it's a shibboleth, but it's not).

The shibbolethic fallacy is a fallacy of irrelevance for the general class, akin to the Red Herring Fallacy because it attributes significance to the incidence of a feature that is ultimately irrelevant, rather than to the persistent features of the broader class. If we have a presentist bias, without much heed to historical context, we will be prone to misidentifying skeuomorphs as shibboleths.

For example, in architecture, we might think that the arches of a house are critical features of its modern design when really they are merely ornamental inheritance from previous designs.

To use a philosophical example, it seems plausible to suspect Aristotle of committing the shibbolethic fallacy in his analysis in the *Poetics* because in attempting to determine what is specifically shibbolethically significant about the tragic form, Aristotle interprets many features of the tragic form as important to that form, which may actually just be skeuomorphic holdovers of from a broader class of forms (Aristotle, 1964).

The Skeuomorphic Fallacy

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The Skeuomorphic Fallacy: the error in reasoning of attributing special significance to a feature of a broad set of forms when that feature is a distinguishing feature of a narrower set of forms (i.e., when we think it's a skeuomorph, but it's not).

The skeuomorphic fallacy is a fallacy of irrelevance for the specific instance, akin to the Genetic Fallacy because it attributes significance to the genealogy of something rather than to the significant features of something. If we have a historicist bias, we will misidentify shibboleths as skeuomorphs.

For example, in art, one might interpret painting with specific color to be a cultural marker, like purple can signal royalty, but an instance of usage of that color actually may be nothing more than indicator that this is this individual painter's favorite color, and nothing more.

To use a philosophical example, it seems plausible to suspect Nietzsche of committing the skeuomorphic fallacy in his analysis in *Birth of Tragedy* because in attempting to analyze the genealogy of Greek theatre and thus identify what is skeuomorphically persistent, Nietzsche interprets many features of the tragic form as holdovers of the broader form, which could be shibbolethic distinctions to that form (Nietzsche, 1993).

Skeuomorphic/Shibbolethic Uncertainty

Together, the Shibbolethic Fallacy and the Skeuomorphic Fallacy combine into a mutually enforced sense of confusion:

Skeuomorphic/Shibbolethic Uncertainty: the combined error in reasoning in which the importance of features in a narrow instance is taken as importance for a broader class and/or the importance of features in a broad class is taken as importance for a narrower instance.

The skeuomorphic/shibbolethic uncertainty specifically arises in cases where the skeuomorphicity or shibbolethicity is uncertain, unknown, or unknowable and thus skeuomorphs

and shibboleths become interpretively interchangeable. In our sense, skeuomorphs and shibboleths cannot be the same, because a distinguisher of a broad class cannot also be a distinguisher of a narrower class, but they can be confused.

To return to a fashion example, one person might buy a shirt with a band's logo because they like the band and identify with it; another person may buy the shirt at resale because they like the logo, oblivious that it is the logo of a band. In the former case, the logo may be a shibboleth, identifying the person as a fan; in the latter, case, the logo may be a skeuomorph, identifying the origin of the shirt and nothing else. Thus, the same incident may have completely different interpretive outcomes on the spectrum of skeuomorphic/shibbolethic uncertainty. This is the same thing that is happening to the soldier from Gilead in our opening parable: we see a paradigmatic case of skeuomorphic/shibbolethic uncertainty, first making the error that assumes shibbolethy falsely, and then making the error that assumes skeuomorphy falsely, in almost indistinguishable circumstances.

Examples

Skeuomorphs and shibboleths pervade everything that we do, and where they appear so does the skeuomorphic/shibbolethic uncertainty, to the extent that skeuomorphicity and shibbolethicity are largely invisible and indistinguishable in their appearance in cultural artifacts. Indeed, skeuomorphic/shibbolethic confusion must be our default disposition towards artifactual features, given that perfect examples cannot exist and only imperfect examples exist, as can be shown.

Perfect Examples

Even if such cultural artifacts do not exist, we can perhaps imagine the perfect skeuomorph and the perfect shibboleth at the outer peripheries of the spectrum of artifactual possibilities.

The perfect skeuomorph would be an artifact entirely composed of traits of its broader class. One might imagine a painting entirely composed of the tropes of other paintings. A collage might be the perfect skeuomorph in this respect in its incorporation of features of other pieces. Or imagine a piece of architecture built from the pieces of other buildings. Everything is a skeuomorphic feature, nothing distinctive to the piece, and thus in a sense the piece becomes a perfect exemplar of its broader class. And yet, a perfect skeuomorph *must be impossible*, because even if all features are inherited, their arrangement cannot be without becoming merely a perfect copy.

The perfect shibboleth would be an artifact entirely composed of distinctive traits. One might imagine a book that is entirely composed of new sentences, new words, and new letters. Everything is a shibbolethic feature, everything distinctive to the piece, and thus in a sense the piece becomes a part of no class—a class unto itself. And yet, a perfect shibboleth *must be impossible*, because even if all features are distinctive, their composite parts cannot be, without becoming composed of entirely new form of matter never observed before.

Imperfect Examples

So, given that only imperfect skeuomorphs/shibboleths are possible, we draw our attention to examples of cultural artifacts on the spectrum of artifactual possibilities, between perfectly skeuomorphic and shibbolethic. Some of the most subtle examples of skeuomorphic and shibbolethic forms are linguistic because the varying semantic content of linguistic forms tend to

illustrate the full range of possible degrees of skeuomorphic/shibbolethic uncertainty. So, we will thus review a few linguistic forms at different degrees of the spectrum here.

Letters are some of the cleanest examples of skeuomorphs in language. A letter was chosen to be a certain shape by some person, at some time, and for some reason, and that shape has persisted into the common usage carrying its signification with it; however, to attribute a modern speaker with the reasons of the person at the time of the inception of the letter would be rather ludicrous, and most of us know this. The only usages of letters that are clear shibboleths would be deliberate misusages, for example, the use of “differance” for “difference” by Jacques Derrida (Derrida, 1978).

Words are some of the cleanest examples of skeuomorph/shibboleth ambiguity in language. Like letters, words are mostly the skeuomorphs of other times, excepting neologisms; and yet, because words can have multiple senses, and because their senses are ambiguous. A word might be merely unwittingly repeated by someone who recently heard the word, who has no concept of its greater meaning, nuance, or context; or, a word might be deliberately calibrated by someone who is deeply calculating all of their communications carefully.

Phrases are some of the cleanest examples of shibboleths in language. Because phrases are largely uniquely used, and because those unique usages become more unique the longer the sequence of words, phrases that get repeated are usually not repeated unwittingly; and even though phrases are composed of skeuomorphic words and letters, the skeuomorphic quality is not conferred upon the unique combinations. The only usages of phrases that are clear skeuomorphs are idioms and adages that have long ago entered the common usage and now come to us as unconsciously as words

Example Parable

Looking back to the parable that we began with as a test case, we can identify several obvious skeuomorphs/shibboleths and several less obvious ones.

Of course, the parable is *about* shibboleths and skeuomorphs. The soldier from Gilead is overcome by skeuomorphic/shibbolethic uncertainty, not once but twice. But the parable is also *composed of* shibboleths and skeuomorphs, which we can elaborate upon briefly.

The style of the new parable has skeuomorphic features. Using the *King James Bible* as its source and inspiration is skeuomorphic to the extent that these features are distinctive of the genre of parable, but they are not ultimately distinctive to the content of this particular parable itself. For example, some of the wording is purely skeuomorphic, like the phrase “forty days and forty nights” and “the passages of Jordan,” which signal the parable as biblical, but contribute nothing further to the semantic distinctiveness of the particular parable; “[twenty] days and [twenty] nights in the passages of [Syria]” could as easily have worked.

The content of the new parable is largely shibbolethic. This new parable distinguishes itself from the old biblical parable, and the shibbolethic features become apparent when comparing the two parables. Notably, in the old parable, the Gileadites use the pronunciation of the word “shibboleth” to distinguish themselves from Ephraimites; in the new parable, the Gileadite soldier fails to distinguish Gileadites from Ephraimites in two different ways. Thus, the distinguishing feature (the “moral of the story”) of the new parable is the uncertainty of identifying shibboleths, in contradistinction to the old parable. But, we would be making a

mistake if we were to attribute this moral, unique to this particular parable, as shared amongst to broader class of parables generally.

Explanations

These failures of identification of features of cultural artifacts are explained as undesirable but easily made mistakes, because most shibboleths and skeuomorphs blend into discourse as invisible, implicit features, not as obvious, explicit features. As Arthur Danto suggests, the history conferring the meaning upon an artifact is not stored on the surface of the artifact (Danto, 1974). And these skeuomorphic and shibbolethic valences likewise may not be apparent either, causing epistemic obscurity in several layers of uncertainty of valence—indistinguishability, immeasurability, and incommensurability (List, 2023).

Indistinguishability

First, skeuomorphic and shibbolethic features may be indistinguishable. Features do not advertise themselves as explicitly skeuomorphic or shibbolethic, just as present affordances of unspecified, decontextualized historical origin (Norman, 2012). They seamlessly disguise themselves as each other, which makes significant features of a specific work easily confused for significant features of a class. Indeed, in the extreme case, two formally identical features could differ only in their shibbolethicity/skeuomorphicity. This indeterminacy makes for a Schrodinger's shibboleth/skeuomorph, appearing shibbolethic or skeuomorphic depending upon how one looks at it, or what we perhaps can call a "skeuo-bboleth" (to coin a very ugly word). And, due to indistinguishability, mistakes in emphasis are easily made and perhaps unavoidable. So, understanding that the emphasis may be different for different people.

In order to distinguish, one would have to compare features of a given cultural artifact to features of other cultural artifacts (perhaps all others of the super-class and sub-class), comparing and contrasting to determine which features are indeed skeuomorphs and shibboleths. Sometimes present themselves as skeuomorphic or shibbolethic when minimally contextualized, but sometimes distinguishing requires deep research. But, because most humans do not contain the catalogue of all culture in their brains for quick comparison, this is not workable—and could not be enjoyed by individual persons who has not partaken of even one percent of the "Great Unread".

Immeasurability

Second, even if skeuomorphic and shibbolethic features are distinguishable, they may be immeasurable. Aesthetic features are not necessarily easy to quantify and categorize. And, due to immeasurability, mistakes in emphasis are fuzzied by uncertainty. Skeuomorphs/shibboleths only become apparent through comparative aesthetic analyses (a lot of work) (representative sample).

In order to measure, one would have to enumerate quantify cultural artifacts of various classes, but this is probably not workable due to the orders of magnitudes involved alone, let alone the problem of estimating populations from samples.

Incommensurability

Third, even if skeuomorphic and shibbolethic features are measurable, they may be incommensurable. What is the interpretive exchange rate: how many skeuomorphs is one

shibboleth? The units of analysis by which to compare different artifacts are not established, let alone agreed upon.

In order to commensurate, one would have to decide upon units of analysis by which to set up comparisons, but this would necessarily require arbitrarily divvying up and systematizing artifacts according to classification schemes.

Consequences

The prevalence of the skeuomorphic and shibbolethic misattributions about cultural artifacts can account for a lot of consequent confusion in various areas of discourse. Differential semantic emphasis emerges from accumulating attributions of importance to elements of discourse, and these attributions of importance may be errors to the extent that they confuse skeuomorphs with shibboleths, and vice versa, and thus skeuomorph and shibboleth identifications and misidentifications are highly epistemically important.

Interpretive Indeterminacy

Even if there is some doubt about a given claim being merely skeuomorphic/shibbolethic, that doubt is enough to weaken any critique dependent upon that claim, making it possibly (or probably) skeuomorphic/shibbolethic, and therefore not substantive to an assessment of a super-class/sub-class.

Biting the bullet on skeuomorphy requires that we just admit that our topic is skeuomorphy. However, this takes the bite out of our critique, because it turns every personal, specific, contemporary account into an impersonal, generic, historical account. This allows us to be critical theorists but defanged, because we can retain all of our criticisms, but the practical aim of the criticism is absent.

Biting the bullet on shibbolethy requires that we just admit that our topic is shibbolethy. However, this takes the bite out of our analysis, because it turns every impersonal, generic, historical account into a personal, specific, contemporary account. This allows us to be historians but biased, because we cannot escape the return of our moment, the analytical aim of study is absent.

Even if we believe that “validity in interpretation” is possible (à la E. D. Hirsch, 1967)—even if only in the very weak sense that some interpretations can be better than others—skeuomorphic/shibbolethic uncertainty makes achieving such validity less plausible.

Disciplinary Disagreements

Various interpretively laden disciplines are affected by the skeuomorphic/shibbolethic uncertainty.

This uncertainty can occur in aesthetic analysis. The range of interpretation in aesthetic discourse, why a whole range seems right, is a different weighting of different features as aesthetically relevant. As some might interpret, this all but assures the unresolvability of finding agreements in definitions of art. Thus, the correctness of interpretation can be interpreted as the extent of distance between a weighing and a proper weighting of skeuomorphic/shibbolethic features. Both retaining and abandoning skeuomorphs/shibboleths has semantic cost to aesthetics: on the one hand, it risks becoming mere philology, and on the other hand, it risks becoming mere paraphrase.

Of the aesthetic disciplines, literary theory is perhaps the worst offender because the pure symbology of literature requires the most interpretative leaps. Given a literary theory (or the abundance of kinds of literary theories) the evidence of the features of the text must be appealed to (Fry, 2012). Thus, all literary theory runs the risk of overattributing meaning to skeuomorphic/shibbolethic constructions, which may be indistinguishable from substantive constructions, a hermeneutic error. This confusion in the literary context can be thought of as a specific kind of skeuomorphic/shibbolethic fallacy, a Philologist's Fallacy, in which we misattribute importance to the past usages of words in our interpretations of present usages (the Nietzschean move, par excellence). Depending upon their disciplines, literary theorists may attribute significance to biblical, feminist, or colonialist features of texts, but these features may merely be skeuomorphs of their genres, not shibbolethic features of a specific text; likewise, features excluded from or deemphasized by these disciplines may indeed be shibboleths, not skeuomorphs. So, contra-Plato, it is less that poets are liars and more that poets are imprecise, because poetic language relies on word play, which is possible because words are homonymous, and thus are imprecise, prima facie interpretable both as skeuomorphs and shibboleths (Plato, 1983).

This uncertainty can also occur in political analysis. Political disagreements are often a matter of rhetorical emphasis of importance. Thus, an enormous amount of political discourse is almost certainly reducible to a mere matter of shibbolethic/skeuomorphic confusion. The shibboleths of one party may not be of the other, but worse, may be the skeuomorphs of the other, and vice versa (Winner, 1980). We can point to some notable real world examples of such political confusion.

First, we might take political issue with the use of a word, interpreting that word as signaling a political stance, when really that person uses that word more generally in non-political ways and this is merely one such instance. For example, the phrase "no can do" has apparently racist origins in the mimicry of the broken English of Chinese immigrants, but now (circa 2024) the phrase has since become entirely benign and accepted in common usage without any such connotational residue, and most users are unaware of the less-than-admirable origins of the phrase. So, to interpret "no can do" as a racially inert is plausible, and yet we may be mistaken, if the user is invoking the phrase's origins, and it may be an instance of the skeuomorphic fallacy (Lyons, 2020).

Second, alternatively, we might not take political issue at the use of a word, interpreting that word as part of common usage, when really that person is using that word specifically to signal politics. For example, the "ok" symbol began with benign origins, without any political implications, but "ok" has since become coopted by certain political groups, notably neo-Nazis. So, to interpret "ok" as racially loaded is plausible, and yet we may be mistaken, if the user is unaware of the racial usage, and it may be an instance of the shibbolethic fallacy (Neiwert, 2018).

Unfortunately, in both instances, the mistake is plausible enough to make due to skeuomorphic/shibbolethic uncertainty, but the mistake also has the dire consequence of amplifying divergences in political narrative.

Solutions

Although skeuomorphs and shibboleths and their confusion pose an potentially intractable problem for aesthetic and political discourse, a few solutions present themselves.

Default Interpretive Doubt

First, an awareness of the problem of skeuomorphic/shibbolethic uncertainty is a solution in its interpretive humility, recognizing unknowns without committing to convictions. Taking the default stance of confusion allows for premature assumptions of skeuomorphy/shibbolethy to be avoided. Given uncertainty, default interpretive doubt is the most reasonable opening stance. But, doubt is also an unsatisfactory closing stance, since we often want to say something more than “I don’t know,” so we may have to move to the next solution.

Reasonable Interpretive Ranges

Second, simultaneously establishing two mutually exclusive but equally plausible interpretations, a skeuomorphic interpretation and a shibbolethic interpretation respectively, has the potential to set interpretive bounds. Taking the upper and lower bounds on acceptable kinds of interpretations, demarcating where these acceptable interpretations begin and end, at skeuomorphy on the one end and shibboleth on the other end, we can narrow down our possibility of errors. This skeuomorphic/shibbolethic spectrum then is the set of interpretations of an features within which interpretation is prima facie plausible, until further evidence is provided to narrow the interpretation, litigating between interpretations inside the spectrum. This comes with a rejection of interpretive exclusivity, embracing interpretive ambiguity, but still retaining the ability to disqualify interpretations that are truly unreasonable as beyond the skeuomorphic/shibbolethic bounds.

Scientific Interpretive Testing

Third, the development of a technical methodology could resolve skeuomorphic/shibbolethic uncertainties with some precision, narrowing the range of plausible interpretations down even further. Such solutions would have to have means of handling the indistinguishability, immeasurability, and incommensurability issues (discussed above) at the core of the problem. Commensurability requires apples to apples calibration and standardization of units by selecting a scale of analysis. Measurability requires surveying and representative sampling the domains compared. Distinguishability requires statistical differentiation by hypothesis testing. Iterating comparisons, one can interpret something as X, then compare and contrast, determining it is not X, thus narrowing range of reasonable interpretations. Perhaps, something like Mill’s methods (from John Stuart Mill’s *A System of Logic*) could apply.

However, because of the inhuman amounts of computing required for such a task, the only candidates are digital techniques, which collate and compare all artifacts and make statistical differentiations between them (*Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0*). As such, a big data technical solution might be workable, but only in cases of high fidelity computational methods; given that such methods are not personally usable in average human situations, most situations cannot rely on such precision. Since big data may be impractical to an average human context, we may have to revert to the previous solution, establishing a reasonable interpretive range.

Conclusion

Having discussed the incidence of skeuomorphic and shibbolethic features in cultural artifacts, we have established the problem of skeuomorphic/shibbolethic uncertainty and given a few tentative but incomplete solutions. All in all, if anything we have done due diligence in describing an important epistemic problem, though at best we have encouraged readers to recognize the skeuomorphic/shibbolethic uncertainties in their own phenomenal encounters and consider ways of mitigating their consequences.

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