

# The Language of Magic: Semiotics, Memes & Magickal Reality with Toby Chappell

Hey listeners, it's Adam, and welcome to the first episode of *The Cult of You* on our new membership space—our own kind of private platform. So you'll notice things are a little bit different. I'll give you more insight into that in a future episode. But first, today we have our very first interview on this new platform—an interview with the devil.

My guest is someone you've met before: Toby Chappell. Toby and I have had conversations before on this show when we spoke about his work *The Infernal Geometry of the Left Hand Path*. In our last conversation, Toby was hinting at his new book *The Language of Magic*, and I couldn't wait to bring him back. This is one of the few times I've found a practitioner of the arts who is lucid, technically accomplished, and intellectually precise. He has brought together an incredible piece of work. I think it's very important—especially if you're new to the path or trying to break free from superstition. What's powerful about *The Language of Magic* is that it explores semiotics and its relation to the practice of magic. As I've said many times before, magic is the result of conscious and unconscious communication. Our universe is fundamentally energy, and our reality is a result of those communications—whether it's habits, rituals, identity, symbolism, or environment. All of these are forms of communication. Toby breaks this down in exquisite detail. He starts with one of my favorite ideas—the concept of the mimetic entity, or as he refers to them, "meme machines." You're going to get a lot of value out of this episode. So sit back, relax, and remember: live deliciously.

Toby: It's a fantastic opportunity to be back. I really valued our last conversation—it came at the perfect time. I was in the middle of writing *The Language of Magic*, and being able to articulate those ideas really helped. To return now and talk about the fruits of that work is wonderful.

Adam: It's amazing work. I delayed our interview so I could get through the entire book. Not only did I enjoy it, but I believe it's a cornerstone—an essential piece. It's not left-hand path or right-hand path. It's what I love most: the science of magic. Why does this technology work? Why is it relevant today? And how can we use it as a meta-framework—beyond religious dogma—to understand *what actually makes magical systems work*?

You articulated ideas I've been toying with and teaching for years. I want to dive into the basics and build our language from there. Let's start with *The Selfish Gene* and the idea of memes. People online talk about memes without knowing where the term came from. Dawkins introduced the idea that ideas replicate like genes, calling us "meme machines." What's your frame on that?

Toby: *The Meme Machine* is a book by Sue Blackmore. She has a background in parapsychology and later moved into psychology. Her work is deeply influenced by Dawkins. A meme is any unit of culture—an idea, word, behavior—that we copy, transform, and pass on. Like genes, memes mutate. Some survive and reproduce; others die out. A change in DNA might cause a disease or go unnoticed. Similarly, a meme might spread or fail depending on its "fitness"—how well it resonates in an environment. Within magic, this becomes critical. If you and I discuss a new magical idea and you start using it, adapting it, and teaching it—this becomes a vector for transformation. Magic spreads memetically. Think of Austin Osman Spare—his idiosyncratic, powerful techniques changed how people approach magic. Ultimately, magic that *works* survives. That's the true test—not tradition, not age. Utility determines longevity. Effective magic is fluid, adaptive. Ancient techniques persist because they're useful, not because they're old.

Adam: It's fascinating how magical traditions persist even though people dismiss them as irrational. But for the serious practitioner, there are clear patterns. These aren't arbitrary; they reflect a deeper grammar. For the average listener, this might seem disconnected from their spells or rituals—but this is ground zero. This is the architecture beneath the system. So help us understand: what exactly is semiotics, and how does it relate to magical practice?

Toby: I start the book with a discussion of language and communication—not just magical communication, but human communication in general. Humans are linguistic creatures. And anything built into our cognitive software is ripe for magical use. Magic is built *on top of* normal communication. Semiotics is the study of signs. A sign is anything that refers to something else—a word, image, idea, feeling. Language is just one type of sign system. For example, the word "book" refers to a physical object, but there's no inherent reason that particular collection of sounds should point to that object. It's arbitrary, agreed upon by convention. In magic, we work with signs constantly. A sigil, a gesture, a sound—all are signs. When you perform a ritual, you are referencing something—evoking a possibility—and through repeated, meaningful association, you bring it into reality. Magic is about turning internal symbols into external phenomena.

Adam: That leads beautifully into the Kabbalistic idea of the four worlds—from archetype to form. And how context changes meaning. A word might evoke power in one context and be mundane in another. This feels neurological to me—symbols must resonate with the practitioner's inner world.

What, then, is the role of context in shaping magical meaning?

Toby: This was a turning point in anthropology. Bronisław Malinowski, studying indigenous cultures, observed that their magic *worked*—not because of external proof, but because within their worldview, it made sense. He noticed rituals used the same words as normal speech. So why were they magical here, but not there? The answer: context. Context imbues language with magical meaning. This idea from linguistics—pragmatics—teaches us that words don't carry meaning alone. The context *activates* their significance.

Magic is just another context. A ritual changes how a word is perceived. That's why magical speech—barbarous names, invocations—carries power. They gain meaning in context and become living tools.

Adam: It reminds me of hypnotism and NLP. The idea of a *meta-frame*—how setting a context changes perception. A person can be confident in one context and insecure in another, purely based on symbolic association. We create identities based on projected semiotic maps.

You also talk about codes and sign networks. How do these operate in magic?

Toby: In semiotics, a code is a system of related signs. Think of behavior at a coffee shop—that's a code. There's a way people behave, dress, and speak. If someone violates that—say, starts shouting invocations to the Headless One—it becomes immediately noticeable. Codes become visible when broken.

In magic, we construct codes—rituals, robes, tools, timing. But they're not fixed. Magicians adapt. For example, I might perform a sigil ritual using Austin Spare's technique. The statement, the symbol, and the process all form a code. I might adapt the shapes based on personal resonance. That flexibility is key.

You're adding magical code to mundane code. If you're applying for a job, the mundane code is: write a resume, attend interviews. The magical code might be: create a sigil to enhance awareness of opportunities. Now you've merged codes. Your magic infuses the mundane system.

Adam: That's profound. And that magical overlay can become *salient*. It dominates your experience of the job hunt, tilting the odds. Even in psychology, this overlaps—confidence, certainty, and reality dominance influence social dynamics. A well-designed magical syntax boosts your sense of personal efficacy, shifting reality.

Toby: Exactly. Magic is connection. You're connecting ideas, signs, and realities. The *law of contagion* and the *law of sympathy*, from Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, explain this. If I create a sigil for success and link it to my job search, those signs now carry power. It doesn't guarantee success—but it influences outcomes. Magic is about increasing likelihood, not certainty. It's symbolic leverage.

Adam: I love that. You also discuss *hyperstition*—the idea of self-fulfilling myths. Can you break that down?

Toby: Hyperstition is a term from the CCRU (Cybernetic Culture Research Unit) at Warwick University. It means a fictional idea that becomes real through belief and repetition. Think of space travel—it seemed impossible until it wasn't. Enough people believed in it, and systems aligned to make it real.

In magic, hyperstition is vital. You might say, "I am a successful magician," before it's true. But by behaving as if it is, you begin creating the reality. Art, language, even Lovecraft's mythos operate this way. His made-up entities became real *memes* in culture. That's hyperstition.

Adam: So even spirits, gods, and systems can be hyperstitional tools—psychic technologies encoded in symbolic language. And once widely adopted, they have real effects.

Toby: Exactly. Magic is engineering belief. The magician isn't just casting spells; they're authoring symbolic operating systems—scripts for reality. These must resonate with personal codes to be effective.

Adam: That explains why systems fail for some. If the inherited map conflicts with the individual's unconscious, the spell fails. But if it resonates, it unlocks potential.

Toby: That's why Crowley emphasized *finding your own correspondences*. Spare created his own alphabet. Your system must be living—rooted in personal symbolic networks.

Adam: That ties into breath and vowels. They're open, continuous, and vibrational. Spirit, breath, and logos have been linked for millennia.

Toby: Yes. Greek vowels were sacred because they're voiced and continuous. They open space. Consonants are stops—vowels are flow. They're ideal for connecting with the infinite. Magic is shaping the infinite into form—symbol by symbol, breath by breath.

Adam: This brings me to my final question. Given all this—semiotics, memes, spirits—are these archetypes and spirits real, or tools for transformation?

Toby: That's the big question. With Lovecraft, he wasn't a magician, but his ideas became magical. His correspondence spread memes that evolved into rituals, entities, even real grimoires. Magic made them real.

Magic doesn't require spirits to exist independently. It requires *us* to engage with symbols as if they're real—and then shape our lives around them. The effect is the reality.

Adam: That's incredibly powerful. I love your phrase: *The secret of magic is to transform the magician*. It's not about belief—it's about becoming. If you become the kind of person who can hold the power, the results follow.

Toby: Absolutely. Magic starts with transformation. Each new peak you reach shows you a new horizon. You thought you climbed the highest summit—until you see the one behind it. And that's the path of the magician.

Adam: Thank you, Toby. This has been incredible. For everyone listening, links to Toby's work are below. I highly recommend *The Language of Magic*. If you're serious about understanding why magic works, this book will open portals. And as always—live deliciously.