

# • Words At Work

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IF WE knew everything about everything, and everybody else did too, we could perhaps construct a language without resort to metaphor. Of course, under such conditions poetry would be impossible—or at least unnecessary, for, like the rulers in Plato's *Republic*, we should all be philosophers, perfect ones, too, and in contemplating the beauty of all being, we should not be expending our energies on man-made representations. But in this state, somewhat rarefied for this earth, we should perhaps be able to find an accidental satisfaction in knowing that we had a word for everything, that when someone talked to us we knew exactly what he was saying, and that, when occasion offered, we could, without scrupling over our interpretation of his words, punch his nose.

But we do not start with a fully developed structure of concepts to each of which we can attach a proper word, and the result is that once we have employed a term for one concept, when we later acquire another related concept we resort to the labor-saving device of loading it onto the same word. We force the word to grow a little, even to become rather muscular and wiry in carrying its burden. We strap one meaning on here, another on there, and often end by hitching on a whole wagon-load of concepts which the word must thereafter take with it wherever it goes.

To bring out this fact with an appeal to common experience rather than to *The New English Dictionary* (even its admirers will admit that it *does* confuse you once in a while, and that it is probably better to get along without it if you can, especially when traveling), let us try to work out a little example of our own. In this we merely follow precedent, that of Aristotle, for example, who would certainly have sneezed at the idea of collating all the examples in the *Rhetoric*.

Let us, then, go back to the early days of the language. The scene is the interior of a primeval hut; the time, the crack of dawn. A certain primitive gentleman stirs uneasily in his primordial bed, groans, and awakens to become fully conscious of a splitting headache.

"What's wrong, dad?" his son inquires with some solicitude, wondering how this new development will react on the filial-paternal relationship. (You will note how well he speaks twentieth-century English—but this is merely for purposes of simplification.)

"My head aches."

And that is all there is to the first part of our story. The point is that the word "head" designates a part of the human body, and nothing more—so far.

But suppose that the same primitive gentleman and his son go for a stroll a little later in the day and, in their walk, discover an ape lurking in the branches of a tree. (We have little or no defense for introducing a simian into the same scene with a primitive gentleman speaking twentieth-century English.) The youth shies a stick at him and cries triumphantly, "Look, dad, I've hit him on the head!"

Not only that, young man, but you have done something to the King's English. An ape's head is not a man's head, and yet you have used the same word for the two. You have not gone about this scientifically—finding out how an ape differs from a man and using a term which will bring out the consequent difference in a corresponding bodily part. What does "head" mean now? To avoid quibbling, let us suppose that it comes to be used in this second sense quite commonly. It means not only the portion of the human body containing the eyes, nose, and mouth (supposing that this is the way in which we implicitly identify the human head in the first instance), and the portion of an ape's body

containing the eyes, nose, and mouth, but when its extension is thus increased, the term has acquired implicitly a third, generic signification: the part of an *animal body* containing the eyes, nose, and mouth. We can diagram the process in this fashion:

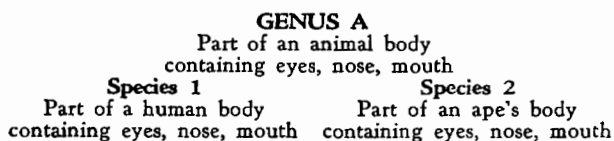


Fig. 1

It is by reference to Genus A that the term originally applied to Species 1 is now also applied to Species 2.

And all this is done, or can be done, without even knowing what the full nature of a human head is, without even knowing that it has brains inside it. A mere description based on externalities is easily enough, especially since all this changing of signification ordinarily goes on without anyone's bothering about a definition. The lexicographer's task is all *a posteriori* to the development of the word.

But matters do not remain long in this simple stage. First of all, the number of species can be greatly increased now: we can apply the word "head" to a part of all sorts of things from elephants to tadpoles. And then, of course, we can start out on a further metaphorical development, applying the term "head" to the working end of a wooden club. In doing so we find that likewise in this application a further generic meaning is implied, which we can also diagram:

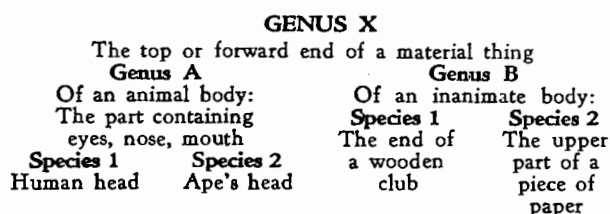


Fig. 2

And under Genus B, as under Genus A, we can again multiply species, Species 2 here given under Genus B being an instance of such multiplication.

The point to observe is that what may be designated as the "basic" meaning of the word

"head" is becoming less and less in comprehension and greater and greater in extension. From meaning a part of the human body, the word has come to designate the top or forward end of a material thing. Now confusion may arise from failure to distinguish this "basic" meaning from the "root" meaning of the word, as it is commonly called. The root meaning of the word "head," supposing the factual accuracy of our description, would be the part of a human body containing the eyes, nose, and mouth. This is Species 1 of Genus A (Fig. 2). As a general rule the root meaning will often designate an object of sense perception, the basic meaning may come to be something abstract.

Now what we have so far considered is really a very limited part of the machinery with which the word "head" operates. To prove this all that need be done is to take up a dictionary and work out a diagram of the various common, recognized meanings of the word, remembering that these include only those metaphorical applications which have become fixed, and that there is always an indefinite number of further applications to which the word lends itself with very little trouble. Some of the dictionary meanings, we will note, follow a metaphorical development independent of the others, thus giving us distinct meanings. Such would be the meaning operative in the phrases "a level head," or "a cool head," where one term of the comparison is no longer anything material, but rather the intellectual faculties. Thus we have a meaning which we cannot group under our Genus X (Fig. 2), *the top or forward end of a material thing*. We leave to the metaphysician the question of extrinsic and intrinsic analogy involved here.

So far our significations are fairly complicated but rather closely organized. But in actual usage, words often come to lose all connection with the original ("root") meaning, and take their commonest signification from what was originally a metaphorical application. Further, we have taken a concrete noun, a very simple example. Much greater difficulties attend other

kinds of words. Then there are many other considerations which complicate our little schemata almost beyond endurance and which cannot be taken up here. This is no place for exhaustive scientific treatment. What has been so far said will suffice to bring out an informative point or two.

Philosophers—always excepting the “pernicious “literary” specimens which have long infested the English philosophical schools, especially since Locke—are concerned with laboriously sifting out the various meanings of terms and using their words with a definite signification. Not so the poet or “literary” prose writer. Either of these latter uses words as he finds them. Let us take the poet, for a moment, as the more likely example for our purposes. He realizes the fact that, by virtue of the development of a word in a language, there are many meanings inherent in it which may serve his purpose. He knows that in ordinary conversation when we throw a word like “head” into a sentence, we depend on the words which surround it to knock the supports out from under certain significations which it has and to leave only a certain one standing. The remarkable part of this process is, of course, that the other words which show us which meaning of “head” to select likewise depend on the word “head” itself to show us what meaning to attach to *them*. But somehow we muddle through.

The process, however, may be an unpleasant one. Suppose that a word has the signification which we are looking for and we use it, though it has other significations which not only are not usable in our context, but positively interfere with the intellectual activity, the flow of thought which we intend our words to set up in our hearers. They may be given a wrong clue by one meaning of the word and have to retrace their steps and start out again to find out what we mean. And all this when we have been anxious to convey to them a very definite judgment.

But a poet can serve up his words in a medium where very many meanings, or even *every* com-

mon meaning which the words may have in the language he is using can be taken out of his words, and *any* meaning seems to make sense, or to keep our thoughts moving in the direction he desires. We are driven to the question whether words can be used this way, and to the further question whether it is necessary for a poet to have always one definite meaning (“denotation”) in what he says. The answer based on much of what is best must be a simple No. Even in ordinary conversational usages, which, it is true, are often more poetic in function than scientific, the denotations and connotations of words shift with varying contexts, and there can be no good reason assigned why I cannot use words even in conversation which may be assigned with equal validity to any of various meanings, simply serving them up to you to see what you can do with them. All the more is this true of poetry. If I thereby fail to attain scientific accuracy, this is far from de-intellectualizing poetry. Rather, it is demanding a greater intellectual exertion, calling on our mind, as it does, to work actively about in shifting meanings and giving it occasion to take pleasure in this very activity itself.

That this way of handling words is an implicit denial of the fact that poetic enjoyment consists in the simple registering of the *formalized* content of a judgment, we cannot deny. But that poetic enjoyment does not consist simply in this is really no news at all.

What are we doing in such a process but making the mind conscious of a great variety of truths at once, giving it the opportunity to revel in truth, to follow its natural desire in any direction which the words may point to, without danger of running into a *cul-de-sac* which pulls it up with an unpleasant jolt? This use of words is what we refer to as “employing the full resources of the language.” This is the way Shakespeare in his richest passages uses words, the way Father Hopkins in nearly all his poems uses words. This represents the tradition in which poetry always thrives.