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THE TROUBLE WITH TEACHING VOCABULARY

The sea of teaching materials on vocabulary and the articles that issue forth from the professional presses are built on the assumption that it is in fact possible to teach someone vocabulary words. But, how well founded is this notion? Can instructors actually teach vocabulary to students? There are many problems with the notion of "teaching" vocabulary that are related to questions of how speakers of a language acquire the meanings of words, what the words stand for in the mind of the people who use them, and, ultimately, how much the understanding of the meaning of a word can be influenced by a teacher's direct explication of a vocabulary item.

However, articles and texts recommending various techniques to teach students vocabulary abound. They tend to endorse four common tactics:

1. *Etymological History.* Students are instructed in the history of particular words. The rationale is that by understanding the origins of a word, students will be better able to remember it. According to one author, the etymological approach is the nucleus which, when expanded, can generate an interest in language and vocabulary.

2. *Morphological Components of Words.* Students are taught word roots and affixes on the theory that the meanings of many new words can be derived through an understanding of the underlying units of meaning. One author, for instance, comments in an article on vocabulary development through the use of morphemes that students may be accustomed to looking at words as wholes and may not have recognized that some words are composed of two or more meaningful units, each of which not only has meaning but may be combined with others to

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compose words. He suggests games with titles like "morpheme baseball" and "morpheme wordo" to develop students' vocabularies.[1]

3. *Sentence Context.* Students are shown how to use the information within a given sentence to decipher the meaning of an unfamiliar word.

4. *Dictionary Drills.* Students practice selecting appropriate dictionary definitions for words according to their use in sample sentences.

While these techniques may be unfamiliar to people who are not involved in teaching reading, the idea that vocabulary can be significantly improved through such exercises is widespread. Many a fluent reader has dashed out and bought a vocabulary cram book just before taking the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). Or, one may remember swallowing a vocabulary book whole in the seventh grade, delighted with the distinction between "misogynist" and "misanthrope." Certainly there are situations in which knowledge of a word root, or a browse through an etymological entry in a dictionary, may have been helpful in understanding an unfamiliar word. Many fluent readers have on occasion employed a vocabulary development technique to fix the meaning of an unfamiliar word, and the meaning has stayed with them. But, however effective short forays into vocabulary building may have been, these techniques are not the usual way in which people acquire vocabulary.

There are sharp differences between linquistic arguments for how meaning accrues to lexemes and the techniques of vocabulary development presented in skills texts. The skills approach assumes that vocabulary can be acquired independent of experience; linguistic theory suggests, in contrast, that vocabulary develops only out of experience and thus can be taught only indirectly. One cannot learn a set of meanings for most words by being given lessons in how to do so; meaning, instead, accrues to lexical items out of the experience of the speaker and coalesces in the definition or definitions of a particular word.

Lexemes, defined by Lyons[2] as "the words and phrases that a dictionary would list under a separate entry," are abstract entities and, as such, do not have a form. They are, instead, associated with one or more forms. For instance, English dictionaries generally have separate entries

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1. E. Burmeister, "Vocabulary Development in Content Areas Through the Use of Morphemes," *Journal of Reading,* XVIV, 6 (March, 1976).

2. J. Lyons, *Semantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 23.

for "found" meaning "establish" and "found" meaning "melt and pour into a mould." That there are two separate entries means that the editors decided that two distinct lexemes were involved and not one lexeme with two meanings. In contrast, as Lyons points out, English dictionaries have a single entry for "eye," whether it means organ of sight or hole in a needle. As the meanings are taken to be related, "eye" is treated as one lexeme with a number of meanings.[3]

Particular lexemes may have several meanings, any one being determined by a reader in the context in which a word occurs. As Britton[4] points out, many common and powerful words are relatively flexible in meaning; for such words as *make, get, seem, thought, reason,* and *purpose,* no single out-of-context definition can do much.

Historically, the study of the accrual of meaning to lexemes received little attention until the advent of research in early childhood language acquisition devices. This neglect came about, suggests Lord in his review of the formal study of vocabulary, because words became "a kind of pawn in the larger game of grammar."[5]

While it is still not clear how utterances become meaningful to infants, studies of children's definitions of words indicate that children assign unique and limited sets of properties to the lexemes they use. As they mature, the set is modified and expanded.

> Since the reading of a particular lexical item is dependent on the sentence and situational context in which it is produced, the list of readings for a particular lexical item expands as it is observed in new structures that are acquired and comprehended. For this reason also, the structure of a child's lexicon continues to change and grow for a long period of time.[6]

There are strong indications that lexical items do not have meanings separate from the sentence contexts in which the child uses them until after the child is ten.[7]

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3. Lyons, p. 21.

4. J. Britton, *Language and Learning* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1970), p. 163.

5. R. Lord, "Learning Vocabulary," *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching,* XII, 3 (August, 1974) p. 51.

6. P. Menyuk, *The Acquisition and Development of Language* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 196.

7. Menyuk, p. 177.

Children have a powerful capacity for increasing their vocabularies. Measures of vocabulary development among children from ages one to six, which have shown a range of 50 to 2,500 words, are only estimates of what is produced and do not even attempt to measure additional words which might be understood. Methods by which lexemes acquire meaning during these early years are sometimes considered overgeneralization, or lack of generalization or differentiation. There may be developmental differences in the stages at which children acquire semantic properties of lexical items belonging to different semantic fields. For example, the properties of locative terms may be acquired before time terms.[8]

While it is not clear how utterances accrue meaning, the theory is questionable that adults name objects and children then practice these names.

> There is evidence that many of the first lexical items produced are used as sentences and not as names of objects. It has also been suggested that the functional use of an object given a particular name by adults leads to an understanding of the word. However, many early words are not objects that can be used functionally ('in', 'on', 'off', etc.)[9]

It is striking to note the way in which children add layer after layer of meaning to individual words in their productive vocabularies. Until they are ten, the children's meanings for lexemes are unique and context-dependent. That is, their answers to questions about the defining properties of words are based upon the context in which the words are found. After age ten, however, children begin to formulate dictionary meanings: they begin to modify and expand the unique and limited sets of properties they have assigned to lexemes, and they learn to formulate meanings separate from the sentence contexts in which they use words.

Most importantly, the child's ability to formulate dictionary meanings does not develop out of instruction in these meanings; rather the ability to state context-free meanings develops out of the child's knowledge of context-dependent meanings.

Theories on the acquisition of meaning suggest that the *direction* of a learner's attention to a particular word is contrary to the direction that vocabulary drills depend upon. While vocabulary charts present a list of

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8. Menyuk, pp. 163-197.

9. Menyuk, p. 195.

items upon which the learner's attention is then presumably to be fixed through instruction and drill in the meaning of the items, some theories of semantic acquisition suggest that the learner's attention is not on the word and a specific meaning; rather, attention is on the contexts beyond the word, and it is through these contexts that semantic meanings are established.

Polanyi and Prosch present an argument for this process, giving a rationale for the way in which a speaker's intention in using a word may be fixed on that which the word bears upon, and not on the word itself. "A word and its object are not equal partners in an association," they comment. "A word . . . *bears* on something else which is its meaning." They suggest that Bertrand Russell's phrase, "the peculiar transparency of language," is a way of describing speakers' subsidiary awareness of words in contrast to their focal awareness of what words mean.[10]

> Words, understood in this way, function as indicators, pointing in a subsidiary way *to* that focal integration upon which they bear . . . . It is what is at the end of the cane that engages a blind man's interest, not the feeling in the palm of his hand. It is the meaning of a communication in words that engages our attention and interest, not the words as such.[11]

Polanyi's argument is based upon his more general position that readers attributions of implied meaning to passages have significant impact on their understanding of what they read. He argues that intellectual powers are grounded in tacit knowing, that "tacit thought forms an indispensable part of all knowledge."[12]

> All *explicit* knowledge, however crystallized in the formalisms of words, pictures, formulae, or other articulate devices, relies on the grasp of meaning *through* its articulate forms, on the comprehension that is its tacit root.[13]

If one follows the argument that an understanding of text is rooted in the tacit, that words stand for a wide range of meanings, and that the

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10. M. Polanyi and H. Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 66.

11. Polanyi and Prosch, p. 71.

12. M. Polanyi, *Knowing and Being* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 20.

13. Polanyi, p. xv.

language user's attention often focuses not on the word but upon that which the word is known to mean, then one must conclude that it is not possible for people to acquire a significant sense of the dictionary meaning of words by direct instruction. One cannot "teach" vocabulary because the meanings of lexemes are rooted in the layers of individual experience. If readers bring experience to bear in understanding words, they cannot travel easily in the reverse direction: from a definition of a vocabulary item to productive understanding of a word.

A couple of examples may help to reinforce this point. People who have taken the SAT will recognize the experience of an 18-year-old student who bought a vocabulary review book and studied it diligently before taking the test. Several months later she acknowledged that she'd forgotten all of the words except "procrastinate," the only one she had placed in a meaningful context. "I do that all the time," she joked, "and now I finally know the word for it."

Or, one may recall the experience of being new to the vocabulary of a field one was beginning to study. Students often need to look up unfamiliar vocabulary, like "phenomenology" or "epistemology" in philosophy, each time they use the words until they have done enough study in a field to provide them with a context for understanding the terms.

How, then, does a language teacher, recognizing students' need to acquire academically respectable and useful vocabularies, proceed? If we know that children's vocabularies expand without specific instruction, we also know that students who are past puberty and first beginning to study a second language in a situation where the language is practiced only in the classroom have difficulty in acquiring vocabulary. Lord comments that only through intense work can a few adolescent or adult language learners acquire substantial new vocabulary.[14] The false notion that the lexicon is static, however, has perpetuated the plethora of vocabulary development materials.

A static vocabulary is one in which the meaning of words is fixed, as on a vocabulary list. Using a list implies a belief that learners can acquire the meaning of words through study. There are many arguments, however, that one cannot "provide" people with vocabulary; the acquisition process is not that direct.

Britton says that the way in which we learn to interpret the various contributions a given word may make to the meaning of an utterance is

14. Lord, 1974.

through a combination of reading and listening, reinforced by talking and writing.

> . . .The whole notion of 'vocabulary' as a reservoir at the child's disposal is somewhat misleading to my way of thinking. It cannot be denied, of course, that a text containing more than a certain proportion of words unfamiliar to the reader is one that he cannot make sense of. Nevertheless, when the proportion is not disabling, to succeed in making sense of a text containing unfamiliar words is the *normal way* of enlarging one's linguistic resources. In other words, it is from reading (or more completely from reading and listening, reinforced by talking and writing) that we learn to interpret the various contributions that a given word may make to the meaning of various utterances.[15]

Britton criticizes the Plowden Report, the 1967 national survey and analysis of England's schools, for misrepresenting the truth about vocabulary when it claimed that "one of the most important responsibilities of teachers is to extend their ideas by analogies, and by the provision of suitable vocabulary." He argues that the notion of providing vocabulary is a "limited and misleading one, suggesting an all too static conception of language."

> Language is a flow, a current of activity, and not any sort of reservoir. The words a child can come by in this deliberate fashion at the teacher's providing—in the course of a vocabulary lesson—will tend to be those of limited use, necessary at times but with little power to vitalize the current of speech. Teachers need to care about the flow—about reading 'as though it made sense', and writing and talking—and when they do, the reservoir will look after itself. To put it another way, it is from successive experiences of words in use . . . that a child builds up his resources, and there is little point therefore in our dragging things in by their names.[16]

ON DRAGGING VOCABULARY IN BY ITS NAME

The vocabulary exercises outlined at the beginning of this article are the opposite of the sorts of language strategies that Britton suggests—exercises that provide for successive experiences of words in use. Instead, the usual approaches to vocabulary building present words out of

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15. Britton, p. 162.

16. Britton, p. 163.

context, dragged in by their names, in lists or drills that are by definition fragmented. This approach seeks to teach the skill of vocabulary acquisition outside of the language contexts of reading, listening, talking, and writing. In so doing, the exercises ignore the ways that speakers appear to evolve vocabulary—out of the relationship of language to experience.

The drills also seem to beg the question of how vocabulary is used. Is a learner's goal to be able to produce a word in writing or to be able to give a synonym? Adult speakers are notoriously incapable of reproducing exact synonyms for words they have used. Children are able to pronounce, spell and recognize in print certain lexemes, but are unable to give a context-free definition until after the age of ten. What level of vocabulary performance should the language teacher have in mind? Does the ability to use a word in writing and speaking result when one is taught the word in a vocabulary lesson?

My experience teaching reading at the community college level suggests that students don't, in fact, learn through vocabulary lessons to use words in speaking and writing. The students in my community college reading program drilled and exercised to learn ten words a week on which they were quizzed. Their teachers discovered a phenomenon which I imagine is common: students could match synonyms for the new words if the synonyms were provided in the textbook. They could only rarely, however, use the new vocabulary words in sentences of their own devising, except those of the useless format, "I think that ..... is very interesting." Spelling, pronunciation, and ability to inflect new items were also poor. Thus, it is not clear that the students had actually achieved much of an understanding of these words.

To argue that one cannot "provide" vocabulary is not, however, to argue that one cannot involve students in language, so that their vocabularies, both in terms of competence and performance, will expand.

Britton's suggestion that any language instruction involve reading, writing, talking, and listening seems fundamental. Students must enlarge their linguistic competence through making sense of unfamiliar words in a full-language context, not through a series of isolated or fragmented skills designed to teach a particular vocabulary word or "skill".

It seems equally fundamental that the materials used be ones which can build upon the readers' backgrounds and interests; it is not necessary to seek out texts which are at variance with the readers' background store of knowledge. Bruner argues that the ability to move beyond and generalize

from given information is the "most characteristic thing about mental life."[17] He suggests that this occurs because the individual is able to place the present given in a more generic coding system. One then "reads off" additional information from the coding system which is the individual's manner of grouping and relating information about the world. This coding system is constantly subject to change and reorganization; individuals acquire new information only in relation to that which they already know. The acquisition of meaning is firmly rooted, then, in the regimen of one's past experience.

It would seem apt, therefore, that materials be used which are related to readers' backgrounds, that these materials be coherent texts rather than disembodied paragraphs or sentences and that they be mined through the combined experience of reading, writing, talking and listening.

A CLASSROOM EXAMPLE

One reading text supplies a list of "Vocabulary Words for Science Students." While I would argue that such lists are a backwards way of going about involving students in language, I do think that English teachers working with science or technology students could use an attentiveness to science as the basis for a class's exploration of the ways in which language is used in scientific, and even literary, writing.

For instance, there is the interesting question of the lexicon of science. The received view of the language of science is that the lexicon is purged of connotative meanings, and that part of the struggle for clarity and reproducibility in science results in the trimming of the language so that the lexemes are less susceptible to personal and emotive associations.[18] "Hard," after all, can mean many things in common parlance; in the laboratory it means only "the resistance of a solid to being scratched." But, it might be instructive to determine how successful scientists actually have been in restricting meaning in the lexicon. I can imagine a lesson in which students interested in science or technology examine the personal and emotive meanings attached to items in the lexicon of a particular science writer. How objective is the language? There is certainly a

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17. J. Bruner, "Going Beyond the Information Given," in *Contemporary Approaches to Cognition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957).

18. W. Heisenberg, *Across the Frontier* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), and T.H. Savory, *The Language of Science: Its Growth, Character, and Usage,* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1963).

difference between the style of Charles Darwin and the style of a typical biology textbook. Does this mean that the biology textbook is "more objective" in its use of language? Perhaps there are other explanations for the language of science besides those stressing the deliberately rigorous nature of the lexicon. Perhaps textbook writers want to present the development of scientific knowledge as a stately, ordered dance of hypothesis, experiment, confirmation or rejection. This style of textbook writing may reflect the way the process of scientific discovery is codified afterwards rather than the way it occurs in process. A comparison of Watson's account of the pursuit of the structure of DNA in *The Double Helix* with the standard textbook account of the discovery might be enlightening in this respect.

There are other "vocabulary" issues in the language of science that also might prove interesting. Savory argues that the language of science has a relative constancy of form and function in comparison to the language of ordinary discourse.[19] He says that science is the enemy of language, injecting a kind of linguistic hormone that impedes growth. A test of this notion—using a description of an experiment by a nineteenth century physicist and narrative by a literary writer of the same time—might be an interesting exploration of the ways that different modes of discourse use language.

Clearly there are many ways that students' vocabularies may be expanded as a result of activities organized in English classrooms. One assumes that English teachers have gone about this task inventively for years, following their own good sense that, in general, students acquire a widening vocabulary as part of their expanding linguistic awareness.

The plethora of vocabulary drills, skill builders and texts available today for the basic skills market, and the pervasive use of such materials in developmental classes and reading/writing laboratories, however, suggest that teachers have become somewhat sidetracked. The notion of "providing" vocabulary must be examined for its intellectual origins, and its efficacy in any classroom for any specified level of language production. At present, it seems that vocabulary building techniques affect only the most superficial of changes in students' linguistic competence.