

Making the Familiar Strange: On Defamiliarization

August, 2020

A Work in Very Slow Progress

N.B. Since this is a late summing up – a species of swan song, as it were – it repeats much that is found elsewhere on this site. For which I do not apologize at all.

The classroom is typically a place where students are introduced to new material, and the teacher's job is to make the unfamiliar familiar. But language arts teachers most often deal with material – their students' native language – with which the students are already very familiar. Nearly all language arts students have been using the English language for years. It has become so familiar to them that its parts have blurred out of focus, practically disappeared: Over the years as they have spoken and listened, they haven't focused on the language; they have focused on the parts of their world to which the words of their language are referring. They have focused on what the words mean. The language arts teacher's challenge, then, is not to make the unfamiliar familiar, but – like that of the poet – to make the familiar unfamiliar, to make the familiar strange.¹

Much of our knowledge of our native language is tacit. That is, we know more about it than we know we know. We know more about it than we can tell. For instance, native speakers know when to use the definite article *the*, when to use the indefinite *a* or *an*, and when to use no article at all, though they have probably never thought about it before. And they pretty much cannot explain the usage – which can be tricky, as can be attested by anyone who has tried to explain it to second language learners. So another aspect of the language arts teacher's challenge is to make the tacit explicit, to make it the focus of attention rather than the subsidiary background.²

Although we speak of the meanings of words, words actually don't have meanings — people do. What words have is content, a range of senses that people can draw from to make meanings in the acts of writing and reading, speaking and listening. Content is what dictionaries try to define. And content is always multiple — for instance, for the relatively simple and familiar word *perfect*, dictionaries list 16 senses, or definitions – 13 as an adjective, two as a noun, and with a change in stress, one as a verb. On a grander scale dictionaries list 90 definitions for the word *set*. But when we use the word *perfect* or *set*, we don't use all of those senses: we use just one. So a word always contains more than it is used to mean.

But a word is always used to mean more than it contains because so many of the particulars in the meaning created with the word – the time, the place, what has been

¹ This notion of the poet's job as defamiliarization (sometimes called *deautomatization*), making the familiar strange, is from the Russian formalist critics of the 1920's and 30's.

² For more on the distinctions between tacit vs. explicit knowledge and focal vs. subsidiary awareness, see Michael Polanyi's *Study of Man and Personal Knowledge*.

said before and what will be said later— all of those things enter into the meaning created with that word, but none are in the word's content. And the users of the word – the speaker and listener – also bring much to the meaning that is not in the content: their intentions, the relationship between them, the speaker's expectation of how the listener will react, and how the listener does react. For every act of meaning the makers of that meaning must contribute something to the act. For there to be meaning, as opposed to mere and inert content, there must always be a contribution from the speaker and listener to the act of meaning.

Since words can be used to mean more than they contain, there is always meaning left over, a surplus of meaning that, among other things, causes the content over time to change, sometimes dramatically. For instance, the word *nice* originally meant "Ignorant, not knowing anything," that <n> being related to the <n> in several other negative words like *none* (vs. *one*) and *never* (vs. *ever*). But the *Oxford English Dictionary* shows how over the centuries *nice* has gone through an astonishing array of changing senses: "Ignorant; wanton, lascivious; elegant, smart; strange, rare; lazy; effeminate; delicate; over-refined; coy, modest; shy, unwilling; fastidious, hard to please; precise, careful; refined, cultured; hard to apprehend; subtle, small; slender, thin; trivial; full of danger" – and today "Agreeable, kind," often little more than an affirmative grunt.

While that surplus of meaning constantly urges change, content constantly urges conserving the status quo – especially in our modern world of dictionaries, teachers (much of whose effort is given over to trying to slow down the rate of change), language gurus, and the increasing accumulation of written English in print libraries and other storage systems.

That surplus of meaning also causes the form and content of the word's parts to fade, to slide out of focus as the meanings created with the word dominate the content of the word and its parts. This dominance urges the spread of polysemy "Many senses" – as in *perfect's* 16 and *set's* 90 – and causes a dimming of the content of its parts, like the prefix (*per-* "Thoroughly" and the base *fect* "To make or do." Getting students back to the root senses is an act of discovery and refocusing. To point out this root sense of "To make or do thoroughly" uncovers the senses of the prefix and base and thus provides a mindful mnemonic for remembering (and seeing the historical reason for) not only the content of the word, but also its structure and spelling. It is not just a case of seeing **what**; it's also seeing **how** and **why**. It is a case of highlighting the content of words enough to slow down readers who are used to making instantaneous meaning from them. So the language arts teacher is indeed cast in a role like that of the poet: making the familiar strange, making the normally transparent word at least temporarily translucent.

Beyond the recovery of lost root senses, as with the prefix (*per-* and the bound base *fect* in *perfect*, much more lies hidden for the students to discover in their native English language. There are a myriad of unrecognized connections – similarities and contrasts – within that familiar language and between that language and others. These relationships and patterns can provide unities and simplifications that cast a new light

on old words.

For instance, The words *neglect* and *intellect* are closely related: They both have the base *lect*, which originally meant “Collect” (which also contains *lect*) and later came to mean “Speak, read.” A possible discussion question: “How do you think a word about collecting came to refer to speaking and reading?” Another question: “What do you think the senses of *neglect* and *intellect* have to do with one another?” Some hints: The base *neg* (with that negative <n>) has the sense “Not, no” and the prefix (*intel-* [a form of (*inter-*)] has the sense “Together, one with the other.” Notice that we still say that one mark of having a strong intellect is the ability to put things together, to see how they relate one with the other. Other words with *lect* are *select*, *elect*, *dialect*, *lecture*, and *eclectic*. A follow-up discussion could involve the students’ thinking about and looking up some of those other *lect* words – and discussing their findings. A related discussion: Besides *neglect*, other words with *neg* are *negative*, *negligent*, *renegade*, *renege* – and *negligee*, whose base (like the *lig* in *negligent*) is related to *lect*.

However, English is just one of hundreds of languages that descend from the so-called Proto-Indo-European (PIE) mother tongue. We think the speakers of PIE lived in what today would be southwestern Russia, just north of the Black and Caspian Seas. Around eight or nine thousand years ago they began to spread in a great diaspora – to the east as far as central Asia and India, to the north as far as northern Europe, including Scandinavia, to the south to Persia, and to the west through Greece and Italy, and then throughout western Europe and into Great Britain. This diaspora continues today as European languages have spread to the Americas, and English has spread to Australia, South Africa and parts of Asia and the Mideast and has become an international language of business and transportation. Today the huge Indo-European (IE) family of languages, consists of about 445 living languages, spoken by more than three billion of the eight billion people on Earth. For more on the Indo-European language family go the [Lineages from Indo-European Roots](#).

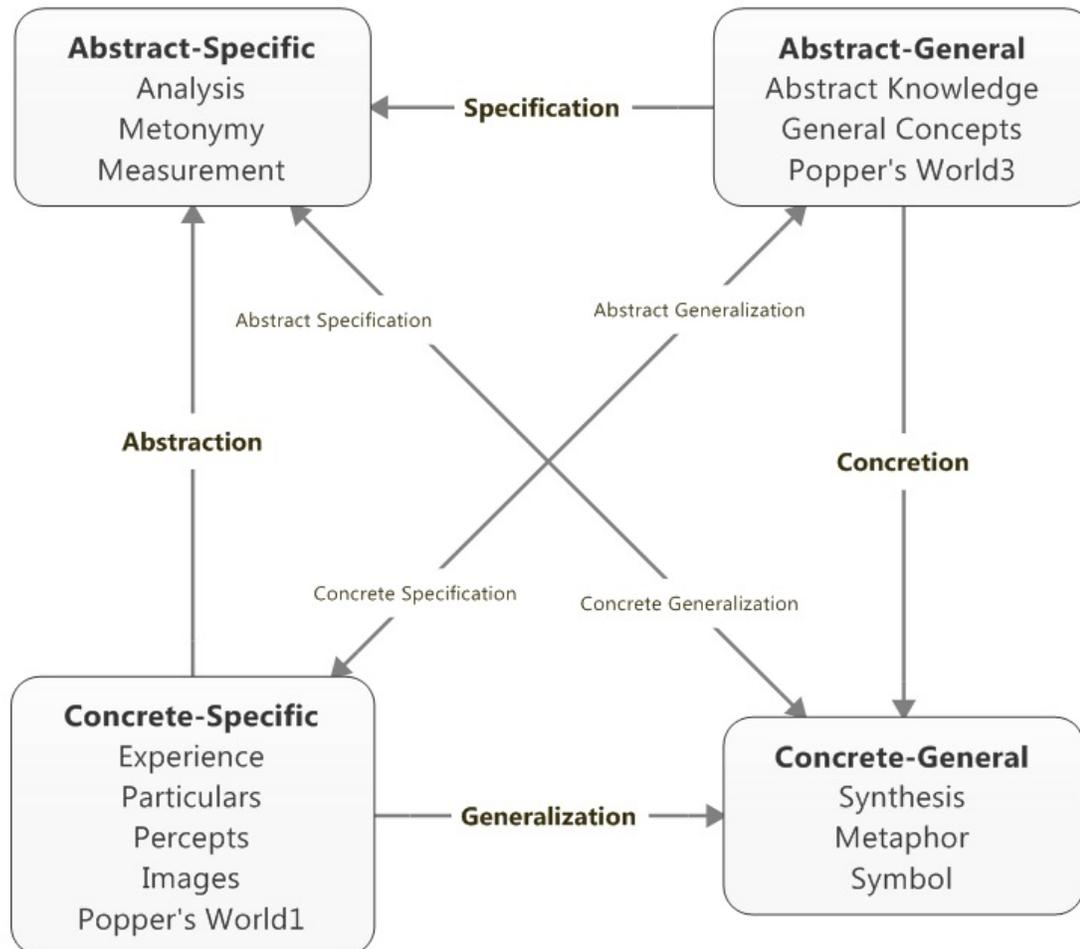
As the diaspora went – and goes – on, the core of the PIE language tended to remain, but with changes brought on by separation from other PIE speakers and by interaction with the indigenous languages and intermarriage with the speakers of those indigenous languages. (For a map of a large sample of the IE language family tree, go to [“The Indo-European Family”](#).)

English’s membership in this huge language family has produced many, many similarities and patterns among it and other IE languages due to their common descent – all of which can be usefully taught. Within our huge language family there are connections, patterns, and relationships waiting to be discovered – and usefully taught. One way to make use of these unities is suggested by the map of English elements and words descending from the PIE root **dhē* “To set, put”: [PIE Root *dhē](#). (For information on getting around in one of these maps, see [“How to Navigate a Word Map”](#).)

The map shows (in green) the three IE languages – German, Greek, and Latin – from

which English has adopted words and word parts (shown in blue) descending from the PIE root **dhē* “To set, put.” These words and elements include the very productive Latin bound base *fect* “To make or do” (172 instances in the Lexis database). Among these words *perfect* has 34 inflected and derived forms in Lexis. And in addition to that prolificacy of form, it is highly polysemous, with its 16 senses (shown in pink).

The orange arrows in the map represent relationships and thought processes involved in the creation of elements and the movement from one sense to another over the millennia (a few of which are tentatively labeled in yellow). Some are fairly straight forward cases of [metonymy and metaphor](#): For instance, the Germanic free base *deed* is a clear cut metonymy of act-to-product, and the Greek word *thesis* seems to be a case of metaphor – seeing the act of putting forward an abstract thing like a spoken or written idea as being similar to putting or setting a physical object, like a rock. Other relationships are less clear, but the diagram of cognitive space below, showing four realms of thought and their relationships, can provide some hints:



The philosopher Karl Popper argued that we exist in three Worlds: His World 1 is the physical world – the outer world of physical objects and their events. It provides the substrate for the Concrete-Specific cognitive realm in the diagram above. World 2 is the inner world of psychological states and responses – of feelings, volitions, perceptions, the world within the

individual human mind. World 2 is represented by the Concrete-Specific, Concrete-General, and Abstract-Specific realms. World 3 is the symbolic world of the Abstract-General: values, principles, and laws, the product of the human mind. For more see “Concrete vs. Abstract, and Specific vs. General” in the [Compendium](#).³

Defamiliarization in the Classroom

I believe defamiliarization, making the familiar strange, and the tacit explicit, grows best in class discussion, discussion that is as open and lively as possible. The point is to get the students interested in and inquisitive about English words, their structure and meanings, their interconnectedness – their life. Getting correct answers, in terms of the words’ actual histories, is not as important as lively, relaxed discussions as the students attempt to articulate connections and relationships.

The idea is to avoid having students sitting quietly and alone memorizing stuff. I believe their learning will be deeper, their memories stronger, if the learning comes through the active give and take of discussion – rather as they learned to speak their native language. The key is not passive, solitary rote memorization, but rather active, social mindful reasoning – together with some thoughtful guessing.

When dealing with exercises like *Word Builds* or *Word Maps* or the **dhē* map, the most common discussion questions should be variations on “How did we get from back there to here?,” “How do we get back there from here?” And “What connections can you see that could have led to such a spread of senses?” And “Even if you can’t define it exactly, given its parts and its history, what do you think this word **could** mean?”

Should the students come up with goofy ideas about meanings, or structure, or history, no harm done. After all, the greatest learning job each of us ever does is to learn to speak our native language, and we do that pretty much on our own through discussion, often playful discussion, that is based on our shared snippets and samples — and mistakes. We learn our native language by trial and error, or more accurately by trial and the elimination of error. It's no exaggeration to say that we learn to speak by persistently screwing up.

Even when they are faced with some very uncommon words — like, say, *astraphobia* “The morbid fear of thunderstorms” in the “Bases *aster*, *astr*, *astro*” Word Map – a word they likely have never seen or heard before and likely will never see nor say again – they still are learning about it in a larger context of mindful thoughtfulness, as part of larger patterns of form

³ For more on Popper’s three worlds see, for instance, his *Objective Knowledge*.

and sense. (On the other hand, during the years I worked on spelling with third and fourth graders, the kids seemed to enjoy dealing with occasional big, hulking words, words they could use to wow their parents: "Dad, I don't think I can mow the lawn today. Looks cloudy and I can feel my astraphobia kicking in.")

Discussion could also involve having the students think of other words that can be built from the words in the exercise. For instance, given the word *perfect*, students could come up with the verb [inflections](#) *perfected*, *perfecting*, and *perfects*, and [derivations](#) like *perfection*, *imperfection*, *perfectionist*, *perfectionism* – maybe even *perfectible* and *perfectibility*, or *perfectivity*. Having a dictionary handy can help such a discussion because in addition to coming up with words on their own, students could simply look for them in a dictionary. Or you might even ask students to make up their own *perfect* words that they define for the class – for instance, maybe *anti-perfectionist* or *perfectophobia*.

The discussions encourage the students to see connections among words that are spelled or pronounced or used to mean in similar ways. Inevitably they are going to come up with false hits. Such students should be praised, for they are getting the general point of the exercise even though their particular example may be off. Sometimes the falseness of the hit can be easily explained. For instance, the lack of a real connection between, say, the [homographs](#) *entrance* (entr+ance) "Place of entry" and *entrance* (en+trance "To put into a trance" is quite straightforward. Other cases can be more complex. A first place to look for help would be the list of topics in the [Compendium](#). For instance, if a student suggests a connection between the [homophones](#) *dessert* "Final course of a meal" and *desert* "To abandon," the *Compendium* topic "*Desert, dessert, deserts*" can help straighten things out. More generally, most false hits can be cleared up by looking closely at the definitions and etymologies in a good dictionary.

The lists of related words in the teacher's versions of the maps should be useful for these discussions. A good dictionary is essential, for both its definitions and its etymologies. See "On Dictionaries and Other Helps for Teaching Vocabulary and Spelling" in the [Short Articles](#) venue of this site and "Dictionaries" in the [Compendium](#).