

Notes on demotivation and increasing linguistic entropy

I think the following is a potentially important line of thought:

There is a process like the increase of entropy at work in the phenomenology of language. As a word is instantiated with a specific referent, it tends to become attached to that referent, or more accurately, the category of which that referent is a member. It also tends to become detached from earlier referents. Since its motivation is based on its relationship to earlier referents, the current instantiation, assuming that it involves a referent categorically different from the original, will produce a loss of motivation, a return of arbitrariness, or the linguistic equivalent of entropy. The process is perhaps most easily seen in the evolution of proper names. For instance, the OE elements *sand* “gravel; sandy shore, seashore, beach” and *wīc* “dwelling place, village, town, camp, bay, creek” compound to the Kentish place-name *Sandwice*, *Sandwicæ*, a proper name based on a topographical metonymy. The name of the region is then applied, in a place-to-occupant metonymy, to the status-holding people of the region, as in the Earl of Sandwich, often shortened, especially in familiar direct address to Sandwich. At this point, it seems likely that the original motivation of the term has already been attenuated: The reference to person and place has become so dominant that the original motivating elements, *sand* and *wich*, if noted, are probably not understood. Then by extension the word becomes attached (i) to the Sandwich Islands, or Hawaii, and (ii) to the menu item, each through a metonymic association with the Fourth Earl of Sandwich. By now it seems likely that the original motivation is completely gone. If there is any motivation at all, it probably only goes back as far as the identification of the Fourth Earl, a weak motivating association kept alive in the etymologies of dictionaries but of no particular force beyond that.

A similar fate demotivated *hamburger*, causing a new semiotic

value to be given to the second and third elements, *burg* “city, town” and *-er* “one from”, which are conflated and come to be taken as meaning something like “hot sandwich,” making possible such new formations as *cheeseburger*, *oysterburger*, and the like, which, of course, rewrites the apparent semiotic value of the first element *ham*, construing it as meaning “meat” or some such.

This demotivation is constant and inevitable, which means that the job of explication is a constant job of restoration and recovery. And this in turn leads to the inevitable problem of where to draw the lines between motivated elements and subelemental patterning, which also represents a degree of motivation, or between subelemental patterning and mere appearance/coincidence/fossilization, as with the *sand* in *sandwich* and the *ham* in *hamburger*.

The tendency of the word, or symbol, to attach itself to the referent and to detach itself from earlier motivated relationships parallels the tendency of the symbol to come to stand between the user and the referent. As Cassirer points out, the symbols we use cut us off from the referential reality; we become to a greater or lesser degree, symbol-bound, automatized, as the Russian formalists would say. The job of poetry and phenomenology (and perhaps in its own way, explication) is to deautomatize us. Deautomatizing is also part of the work of the language arts teacher. See “Making the Familiar Strange.” For deautomatization is part of the job of recovery involved in remotivation. It is part of the job of overcoming arbitrariness discussed by Saussure.

So we have the two basic dialectics of motivation vs. arbitrariness and of automatization vs. deautomatization.

These two dialectics are at the heart of explication’s constant problem of deciding when to draw the line.

There is a close parallel between the phonologists' notion of encoding in the articulation of speech sounds and the sensitivity of spellings to lexical context. Phonologists point out that in a word, say *cat*, the specific quality of the initial [k] is affected by its phonological context—that is, in this case, the fact that it is word-initial and that it precedes the middle front vowel [æ]. Similarly, the [t]'s pronunciation is affected by the fact that it is word-final and that it follows [æ]. Also, the quality of the [æ], which in a sense spreads its influence from beginning to end in the word, is itself affected by the fact that it falls between initial [k] and final [t], two voiceless stops. Thus, you cannot, say, cut a tape recording of [kæt] into a [k], an [æ], and a [t] that can then be rearranged to make the word *tack*, [tæk], or the word *act* [ækt], at least not a word that is natural-sounding or even distinguishable. There is a constant scanning, from beginning to end, at least to the length of a syllable.

This encoding can be summarized by saying that any speech sound is greatly affected and greatly affects its total phonological context. I want to apply that to spelling: Any spelling is greatly affected by and greatly affects its total orthographic context.

One way of formulating it would be to say that there are a huge number of allophonic variants of any phoneme, and the choice among them is determined by the total phonological context in which the phoneme occurs. One could speak of selection rules that determine which variant to use, but the notion of *rule* is odd here: The variation is determined in large part by neuromuscular expediency and in large part by socio-dialectical modeling. The process is not so much driven by rules as it is by muscles and habits.

It makes more sense to speak of selection rules with the parallel

case in spelling: The variant spellings are not biologically determined to the extent that the variant pronunciations are. They are more a matter of artificial convention. They must be learned, and thus they can be described in terms of selection rules, though at times a given rule may be extremely complex and extremely localized. It is however the orthographer's job to lay out those rules as clearly and concisely and exhaustively as possible, trying to emulate through learning the sense of naturalness, ease, and inevitability that is there in the encoded variant pronunciations. This sense of naturalness seems to me to be a product of motivation, maybe the same thing.

The orthographer's job can be seen as another instance of the drive to reduce arbitrariness and increase motivation.