

Word Meanings and Learning

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My love of a dictionary can hardly be overstated. When I am sick, I take a dictionary to bed instead of a detective novel. A dictionary is a thriller. I am never sure what strange word or undreamed of etymology I may encounter on the next page – or in the footnotes among the archaic and obsolete words which fascinate us most. (Richard Armour, *Out of My Mind*.)

The word “dictionary” is from the Latin word *dictionary*, (from *dico, cere* (*to say* or *to speak*) literally, “a repertory of phrases or words humans speak and through which humans communicate”. The first dictionary is one of a collection of Latin words, arranged by subject, placed in sentences for the use of students learning Latin and was written by an Englishman, Joannes de Garlandis in 1225; the first English language dictionary containing only “hard words” was published in England in 1547.

The above story about dictionaries comes from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, perhaps the dictionary of dictionaries; this *OED* was first conceived by one Richard Trench, Dean of Westminster in 1857; the first printing occurred in 1877 and was completed in 1928. The OED provides the birth and history of all words within what is called the English “language”.

A good dictionary is one which includes the “root” words, literally the word’s language of origin and meaning. Such a dictionary is “good” as well as necessary because a word’s root meaning provides the reader with its origin and thereby provides a history, or denotative meaning of the word. This dictionary gives context to the reader to understand the current so-called “connotative” meanings because daily use of the word allows additional meanings to accrue it, if you will, as barnacles accrue to the hull of a ship when it plows through the ocean water.

A good example of such a word is “school” which now is listed as meaning “a place to study”. But, “school” comes from the Greek, *schola* from the verb, The first Greek word, a noun means “leisure, rest, ease” and the second Greek word, a verb means “to be at leisure, to be at rest, to be at ease”. Both words reflect a Greek culture in which the nobility, that is, all born in Greece and thus, citizens of Greece, almost all Greeks who owned land; so Greek culture was at leisure because the slaves, all non-Greeks did the manual labor. So, since the Greek citizens had nothing manual to do, they studied and went to school! Now, from such a culture and from this one word, whether noun or verb, we have thirty-two cognates in what we call the English “language”:

Scholar, scholar hood, scholar less scholarliness, scholarly, scholarship, scholiast, scholastic, scholastically, scholasticism, school, school age, school board, school mart, school man, school master, school mistress, schooldays, schoolboy, schoolgirl, school

hours, schooling, schoolbag, schoolbook, schoolfellow, schoolhouse, school maid, schoolmate, schoolroom, schoolteacher, schoolwork, schoolyard.

Thus, the most obvious thing “root words” do is increase one’s vocabulary since knowledge of “root” words also increases one’s understanding both of history and culture; in the case of this Greek word “schola”, we understand that the leisure enjoyed by the Greek citizens was based on slavery. Here we see an entirely different view of cultures – the Greek culture based on slavery. Of course, American “culture” bases itself on the consumer as an economic buyer whose worth is based on buying power, which makes the American an economic slave whose worth consists in his or her buying power! Yet, whereas the Greeks used leisure time to study and learn, Americans use leisure time for recreation as a distraction from the boredom of economic labor both direct as a laborer and indirect as a buyer!

Take another example, namely, the “mortarboard”, what American students wear on graduation day. What does “mortarboard” have to do with graduating from school, be that school, elementary, high, college or university?

A Master of a Greek school wanted something to distinguish his student graduates from the non-student and other school children. He looked about the Greek city-states and decided to use the flat-board on which the stone masons carried their clay as a symbol that his students could use their school experience as a flat base upon which to build their lives. Or, indeed, to change the metaphor, the knowledge they acquired from and in school becomes the “mortar” or material which they will use to put together the various situations and experiences they will now confront as they enter the world so they might build their lives. In both cases, the school learning would enable his students to live constructive lives and enable them to build new and stable lives in the world. Thus, the mortarboard became the symbol graduates wore at school graduations.

In addition, the dictionary provides us with so-called “foreign” language phrases and words which the English “language – a language, by the way, which is foreign to the North American world, both when “Englishmen and women” settled here and even now when the major language spoken and written in the North American hemisphere is Spanish - some such phrases are:

C’est la vie;
C’est la gere;
Status quo;
Alibi;
Savoir-faire;
Bona fide;
Magnum opus;
Au revoir;
Faux pas;
Re’sume’;
Wanderlust;

Scintilla;
 Objet d'art;
 Alias.
 Caveat emptor

Yet, do not forget that a minimum of eighty percent (80%) of what we call “English” is “foreign”, namely, 66% direct from Latin, another fifteen percent indirectly from Latin through French, or Greek; in addition, note that most of other twenty percent (20%) comes either from Old High German or Anglo Saxon. Most so-called four letter and single syllabus words which are non-phonetic, such as barf, burp, fart, and the likes are Anglo Saxon and convey meaning through sound – some comment that this is due to the fact that Anglo Saxons were lip lazy! Examples of Old High German words (which are non-phonetic and must be memorized because they are non-phonetic) are: read, write, spell and speak as a few. Whereas all Latin and Greek cognates are multi-syllabic and phonetic, that is, can be sounded out and thus pro-noun – ced.

“Vocation,” “avocation” and “advocacy” are three other Latin based words; these words, as well as the following forty-three come from the “root” *voco*, *vocare*, literally to call (with words).

avouchment	advocacy	vocal	convocation
advocate	advocatory	vocals	convoke
advocating	advocate ship	vocabulary	evoke
avocation	advocates	vocabularies	evocable
		vocally	evocation
	avocation	vocalic	evocative
	advocator	vocalism	revoke
			revocation
			provoke
			provocation
		vocalist	invoke
			invocation
		vocalization	revocable
		vocalize	irrevocable
			invoke
		vocation	provocative
		vocational	
		vocative	
		vociferated	
		vociferate	
		vociferous	
		vociferousness	

This word, “vocation” is chosen for a particular reason; the “vocation” to which the human being is called is to be intelligent and to communicate that intelligence through

words, namely to share knowledge through words and their works. All other “calls” are avocations or diversions to this original, natural call. Thus, the more we learn, the more we know; the more we know, the more we can communicate, so the more we can communicate, indeed, the better we know the language through which we communicate, then the more we can share with others and the richer they are through the riches we have gathered through the knowledge of language.

Language is the human being’s artifact; indeed, the human being is the architect of the verbal world within which each human lives – so the richer one’s vocabulary, the more beautiful the house in which each one lives. How necessary it is, therefore, for a human to know the words of the language into which that person is born, chooses to speak and through which the person builds sentences, writes stories and through which that person conveys meanings and sparks imagination. Next to being virtuous, the greatest human achievement and riches which the human can have is word wealth! Word wealth can be given merely by using the dictionary and taking mental note of the root” meanings, that is, cognate words which grow from and depend upon the “root” meanings.

Yet, remember: words contain and convey the meanings which humans give them, but it is we, as human male and female who confer those meanings. As Genesis states:

Yahweh God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a helpmate’. So from the soil Yahweh God fashioned all the wild beasts and all the birds of heaven. These he brought to the man to see what he would call them; each one was to bear the name the man would give it. The man gave names to all the cattle, all the birds of heaven and all the wild beasts. But no helpmate suitable for man was found for him. So, Yahweh God made the man fall into a deep sleep. While he slept, he took one of the ribs and enclosed it in flesh. Yahweh God built the rib he had taken from that man into a woman and brought her to the man. The man exclaimed: ‘This at last is bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh. This is to be called woman for this was taken from man’.
(Genesis: 2:18-23; The Jerusalem Bible, 1966)

Of course, as sacred as the human vocation to give names to everything in the human world is, the Oriental philosopher, Lao-tzu offers a caveat in his *Tao*:

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Tao is eternal and has no name.

Though its simplicity seems insignificant, no one in the world can master it.
If kings and barons would hold on to it, all things would submit to them spontaneously.

Heaven and earth unite to drip sweet dew.

Without the command of men, it drips evenly over all.

As soon as there were regulations and institutions, there were names,

As soon as there are names, know that it is time to stop:

It is by knowing when to stop that one can be free from danger.

Analogically, *Tao* in the world is compared to rivers and streams running into the sea.

Given the fact that we humans confer names and thus, give meaning, we must be careful to understand the meanings conveyed by and through words as they were originally “given”, so the “root” or denotative meanings of human words should command our attention. However, as words are used and spoken throughout ages and within cultures, they develop what is called “connotative” or daily use meanings which might provide meanings entirely different from their original., root or denotative meanings. But, understanding these “root” meanings gives us perspective upon the contemporary “connotative” meanings. An example would be “bad”; “bad” was first used in Middle English, about 1280, as “bade”, meaning “...an effeminate fellow, a womanish man”. Of course, such an original meaning tells us about the culture of the Medieval times, just as the word “school” told us about the Greek culture. Yet, more is revealed here because today, our contemporary youth use the word “bad” to convey the meaning “good”; this word, therefore, has come three hundred and sixty degrees and means the very opposite of what it originally meant! So Lao-tzi’s caveat must be carefully taken to heart!

Another “take” on words is provided by the Greek Heraclitus, fourth century B.C. Heraclitus observes that words are not just meant to be spoken, but they also are meant to be acted upon:

1. Although this *Logos* is eternally valid, yet men are unable to understand it -- not only before hearing it, but even after they have heard it for the first time. That is to say, although all things come to pass in accordance with this *Logos*, men seem to be quite without any experience of it -- at least if they are judged in the light of such words and deeds as I am here setting forth. My own method is to distinguish each thing according to its nature, and to specify how it behaves; other men, on the contrary, are as neglectful of what they do when awake as they are when asleep.

10. To be temperate is the greatest virtue. Wisdom consists in speaking and acting the truth, giving heed to the nature of things.

“Logos” is a Greek word whose first meaning is speech, the second, reason, the third, the act of reasoning according to nature, that is, logic. Now, speech uses words, so the first meaning is the act of speaking. Thus, Heraclitus emphasizes the fact that speaking and acting must go together and when they do, then a person is acting according to nature and such action means that the person is pursuing human wisdom. In other words, in Medieval terms, *agree sequitur esse*, that is a being’s to act follows upon that being’s to be, so the being of human is the acting of rational. When humans, therefore, act according to the nature of reason itself, these humans are acting temperately which in Greek means that such humans are acting “in the middle”, that is, neither acting too much and being, say foolhardy, nor acting too little and being cowards; people acting in the middle, or temperately are acting virtuously, neither too much nor too little.

Here again we find that the Chinese culture of 5 B.C. to be synchronized with Greek culture of 4 B.C.; in other words, humans must use words sparingly and with temperance. Such people act wisely, that is, loving wisdom, or philosophically, that is, as seekers of wisdom.

Now, just as the Old Testament, Genesis refers to God's word as the breath which created the world (Genesis: 1-2:7-25), a biblos; biblos originally was the Egyptian word for papyrus, or "paper" so, biblos means the paper on which the word of God was written. Indeed, this Old Testament is the word of Yahweh to the Hebrew people. a "two edged sword". Thus, the Old Testament conveys the "word" of the "living God"...the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob..." to the Hebrew people through Moses, as Yahweh commented to Moses through the burning bush. (Exodus: 3; 1-6; 13-15) So also is the New Testament the Word of God, but in an entirely different sense. This "word" is the "word made flesh", the Incarnate God.

In the beginning was the Word; the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things came to be, not one thing had its being but through him. All that came to be had life in him and that life was the light of men, a light that shines in the dark, a light that darkness could not overpower...The Word was made flesh; he lived among us and we saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth. (St. John: 1: 1-18)

Thus, not only Jews, but, so-called Christians should have a peculiar interest in words because as the Old Testament, the creative word of Yahweh confers life and as the New Testament's God, the Father brings about the Incarnation of the Word of God, who is grace and truth. Therefore, just as Yahweh originated life through creation, so the Son of God as Incarnate sanctified human nature through His birth, life and death. Christians, therefore, according to Christ Himself will perform as Christ did: "...whoever believes in me will perform the same works as I do myself; he will perform even greater works because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask for in my name, I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask for anything in my name, I will do it." (John: 14; 10-14)

Words, therefore, are a lot like the sun in earth's planetary sky: they bring light to illuminate the darkness and also to nurture new life; yet, the light of words also can burn and destroy! Words can soothe someone who is sick; this is called compassion. Words can ignore or revile someone; this is called indifference and prejudice. Words can help someone; this is called the love of friendship; words can also reject someone; this is called hatred.

Words give humans great power. Use words well and words will serve. Use words humbly and respectful of their power and you will wield an instrument of love. Use words badly and words will rule you. Use words intelligently and you will never cease learning. The tongue is mightier than any sword and can be more effective than any other human weapon.