

MR/LB

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Therese Tobin
MET



Dear Therese

It is good to see the magazine in its re-vamped form and to feel that it has an editor with time to edit it. I would hope that the circulation decline has now been arrested.

I enclose the piece we discussed on the phone. Please feel free to chop and change as needed - I was brought up in Reuters and know how much an external eye and hand can improve a piece, whatever the author's egoism tells her/him.

Yours warmly

Mario

Concepts that warp me
by Mario Rinvoluceri
Pilgrims and Cambridge Academy

EFL is full of ideas that most of the time we rightly take for granted. If we didn't, we couldn't get on with thinking. And herein lies the danger: we may take for granted what needs questioning. In this article I want to share with you a few concept words that I know warp my thinking with their apparent plausibility.

Let me start in the area of language description:-

Past Tense

A good deal of the time the "ed" form is indeed a preterite. But how about sentences like these:

"I wish she smoked less"

"If the cat mewed, there might well be an earthquake shortly".

To normally think of the "ed" form as past tense means that understanding the grammar of the above sentences became unnecessarily hard. Without further context it is not clear whether mewed is a genuine past tense or whether it is without time reference.

The problem I face here is that the term "ed" form, as used by Pat McLdowney* and some of the Hyderabad survey linguists is also confusing as it does not elegantly cover irregular verbs nor clearly distinguishes this form from past participles.

*Therese, please check spelling with Manchester University.

Greek nonsense

The ancient Greeks brilliantly created a categorisation of language that has weighed down a hundred generations of language thinkers over 2400 years. Take the absurd term adverb which comes to us through Latin from the Greek word epi rima (rima = verb). These strange useful birds fly freely around the sentence and are in no way restricted to qualifying verbs. Their name belies their reality:

"Actually, the whole business confuses me"

"I met her purely accidentally..."

"He was hopelessly rude to them".

Another bit of our heavy Greek baggage is the idea of synonymity. This to me is a seductive one and yet, deep down, I know that no word can ever be synonymous with another in just the same way as identical twins are not just carbon copies of one another. Each word will have its own way of being in sound and on the page: think how different "wide" and "broad" sound. Each word has its own collocational grammar which is there even when either word will do in purely semantic terms. Let me illustrate the point by collocating wide and broad incorrectly:

"He is very wide-minded"

"They had a broad-eyed child"

"A wide hint"

"It was broad of the mark"

"Do you have any wide beans today?"

"Far and broad"

"Broad awake".

Each time I use either word in a context where either will do, like

"a broad tree-lined avenue" or

"a wide tree-lined avenue"

the word brings its collocational networking with it, even if you don't consciously think about it. The two words have to be neurally stored in such a way that natives collocate them correctly most of the time.

Finally, too, each word has its own very different associatative webs. If I am telling a story and the river my hero has to cross is the opposite of narrow, as I imagine standing on the bank with him, the words "wide, wide river" will come to mind.

And Aristotle would have us believe that the words wide and broad have the same meaning! What is dangerous is that a whole speech community accepts this nonsense and this indeed warps my thought unless I actively fight against the acceptance.

The Concept of Four Skills

If you ask most people they will tell you a car has four wheels:

(cartoon of woman changing a car wheel)

And how about the so-called four skills? If we just take the business of writing we have a whole bundle of skills. Here are some of them:

- Ideation at a pre-language stage - there is beginning to be proof that the brain has areas that process pre-language thought and this fits with some of the cognitive sensations that top flight interpreters report (when tired, a real professional is capable of forgetting which language she is rendering into and producing text in the source language - the extraordinary thing is that the words and constructions she uses are often different from those used by the person she is interpreting for - this suggests there is an a-linguistic 'meaning zone' between the two languages).
- Bringing the ideation somehow into language - a powerful form of internal monologue.
- Listening to the inner production of the sentence/s, listening to their flow, savouring them or rejecting and changing them.
- Re-reading the last bit that's down on the page to see if they fit with what you have in mind is right.
- Producing squiggles on the page (graphemes) that represent the sounds previously held/heard in the head.
- Worrying about the pictures on the page - "does apartment have one p or two?" Visualising it both ways.

No way can anybody write anything intelligent without using all the so-called skills. Some odd language schools actually have whole lessons devoted to one of the so-called skills. Such is the administrative power of untenable ideas.

Accuracy/Fluency

There are people who seem to think that when a second language speaker is being accurate her fluency falters and that full flow of language will entail a crop of detailed mistakes. There is emerging neurological evidence that speech rhythms and grammar accuracy are engineered in the same area of the left hemisphere of the brain, the anterior persylvian sector on the front side of the rolandic fissure (see A Damasio and H Damasio, Brain and Language in Scientific American, Special Mind and Brain issue, September 1992).

When you speak a foreign language don't both your fluency and your accuracy depened on how well you get on with your interlocutor? Aren't you both more accurate and more fluent if you love the person you are talking to and are in harmony with them?

I think the accuracy/fluency dichotomy was dreamed up from artificial classroom talk and not from fully motivated situations.

Objective Testing

Some amazing people use the above term and the men in white coats have not yet come for them.

(cartoon)

Yet in an examination hall with 150 students there will be some rearing to go like adrenaline-boosted racehorses on the starting line. There will be others in a state of near panic. One eighth of the 150 will be having a period which for some will be painful. How many signs of headaches can you see as you look round the hall?

In talking of human affairs the dichotomy subjective/objective is a pretty parlous one. All human behaviour is subjective by definition. Once again we are caught up by those brilliant Greeks in hopeless, seductive thought categories.

Unless I can see, hear and feel my way out of the thought distortions of the sort listed above, I have to think from a deep jungle of nonsense. Once I am aware of the wrong formulations I am on the way. The really dangerous concepts are the ones I have not questioned. Which concepts in EFL, psychology and linguistics have you come to disagree with? The editor of MET would like this to be the first of a series of jungle-clearing articles. She is awaiting your contribution.