

Articulation and trans-articulation

It started as a joke, or perhaps play. The word matters, as the word we choose changes the way we see things. A joke suggests someone being misled whereas play is more musing and random manipulation, often shared. But jokes can be shared as well and are often about puns on words, which is exactly what this is about, playing with words, playing with language, playing on language, and ultimately the playing of words; the performance of language.

So let's say playing with words.

I had written elsewhere that "day-to-day life is suffused with computation" and we were discussing the phrase. "Suffused" is a rich word, a sort of conceptual soaking, and emphasises the contrast between "day-to-day", the mundane and human, with "computation". Could the words be changed, perhaps "suffused with technology"? Somehow this is not as effective - to some extent a shock value, but technology is a different kind of word, suggesting the things, whereas computation denotes both an action of computation and also an essence, the very nature of those actions of computation.

Other words have this same essential quality, words that it would be reasonable to be "suffused with": beauty, growth, transcendence. Some of these are basic things like growth: both the act of growing "the growth of the plant" and the quality of that act. Many "-tion" words have this essence. Information is both the abstract noun for things that convey (here hard not to say information) meaning or communication; but information is also the essential quality of these information-carrying tokens.

By chance, in a picking of words to try this game with, looking at these "-tion" terms, we came to "articulation". Articulation is the act of speaking out, of giving external form to meaning, or, in semiotic terms, of emitting the sign that represents the signified. But there is no essence of articulation, it would not make normal sense, except in some poetical language, to talk of a world suffused with articulation.

Or could it?

If it were to have sense what would that sense be?

It almost seems possible to talk of a poet or orator being "suffused with articulation", but even this sounds a little odd. Are the fingernails somehow embodying an essence of articulation? Perhaps so for a gesturing Italian or an expressive actor whose very body speaks. Certainly it would make sense to say that a poet's heart or soul were suffused with articulation. Also we could say of a society it is "suffused with articulation"

meaning it is focused on the external production of text and image as an expression of, or perhaps even at the expense of, its own being.

So can day-to-day life be suffused with articulation? Well if we consider social life, not just the words, but also the actions, then certainly the ethnomethodological focus on "accountability" does suggest precisely this. When observing actions in a social environment the ethnographer expects that these actions are accountable; that is each actor is acting in the knowledge that their actions will be interpreted by each other actor and that each action therefore needs to make social sense. Each action is not just an articulation in the physical sense of limbs and joints, but also in the linguistic sense of telling messages to one another.

And finally, the world. Can the world be suffused with articulation? Articulation is the telling of the meanings within, the externalisation of these inner meanings into external form. In some sense this parallels the relationship between essence and phenomena in all things. By the creaking articulation (in the physical sense) of branch against branch in the wind, is the tree in a sense articulating its essence, telling by the gestures of its movements something of its inner being: the tension and compression of fibre and bark, the ebb and flow of sap, the compliance with and resistance to the blowing wind and the secret hidden currents of air itself? Is the very being of a stone at a place like a word speaking of its existence?

For those who believe in essentials beyond mere measurables, this is perhaps the deepest meaning of all: the final word, the speaking of all things linking ontology and phenomenology.

But is this specious, a meaningless association of dissociated meanings to a word? Well yes and no. Given any word almost certainly we could have played a similar game, digging down, mining the semantic roots, reaching out, pulling in threads of connotations, to build a new denotation.

But it is certainly not arbitrary. If the word had been made up, perhaps "gornelspan", then there would be a truly a random mapping between word and meaning, a made-up meaning for a made-up word. But perhaps even then not completely arbitrary, as the sound of the word would have had its own associations and disassociations - it does not sound like a word for deep emotions, at least not in English.

The meanings attached to "articulation" as essence were not ones that were trying to get out, an already formed concept looking for a name, but were built from the more concrete meanings it already had, from the web of meanings and linguistic associations we knew, from the knowledge and experiences within. The new meaning, drawn from the attempt to say the word, did not give voice to a pre-formed entity, but did form and name one that has conceptual integrity both within itself and in relation to other words and meanings.

The intellectual conceptual space is not like the space of physical things, where there are edges and surfaces. Instead there are innumerable boundaries that could be drawn and it is partly the chances of culture and language that give rise to some not others.

And it is the naming that draws them.

Whilst articulation is the giving name to a meaning or essence, this exploration of "articulation" is doing the opposite. By saying the word "articulation" in a new context we called forth the meaning, created the essence: the appearance of the signified from the sign. It is the very opposite of articulation, an exercise in *trans-articulation*.

This particular exercise in trans-articulation is somewhat artificial, the trying to create a meaning for a word in a discrete definitional sense. However, trans-articulation is by no means an unnatural or unusual process; it is as essential to language and mundane semiotics as articulation.

Sometimes the trans-articulation of a word is, just as in this essay, by a discrete act or *fiat*: the Department of Transport declares that the road sign for "stop" shall be a red octagon with the word "STOP" inside. More often it is part of the evolution of language as word meanings are fluidly driven by the needs of expression, but also take a life of their own changing and shaping our intellectual landscape.

This geographical metaphor is no accident.

This discussion all takes place driving along a road in Cumbria, not far south of the Scottish-English border. Cumbria is in England, Dumfries across the border is in Scotland. The word "England" has many meanings, historical, cultural, racial; but let's focus on it purely as a geographical term.

The phrase "Scottish-English border" has meaning - a precise line on the map, a set of geographical co-ordinates, a point on the road where the sign says "Welcome to Scotland". But this border has arisen through a process of conflict, agreement, emergence and declaration. It is not arbitrary but is moulded by natural boundaries such as rivers and mountains, and also by human forces of language, culture, and ethnic descent.

However, it is not determined entirely by these physical and human constraints - why does it follow the north-east line from Carlisle to Berwick? Why not follow the Roman boundary where Hadrian's Wall crests the escarpments due east between Carlisle and Newcastle? These are accidents and movements of history - the actual boundary is called into being by the word England itself and because of this Cumbrians call themselves English and the people of Dumfries are Scots.

These borders have moved and continue to move. I recall that in my childhood Welsh maps of Wales had thirteen counties whereas English-produced ones had twelve. It was only in local government reorganisation

in the 1970s that Monmouthshire was at last ceded by the English and became officially part of the new Welsh county of Gwent.

The use of words in the intellectual landscape is strikingly similar.

Some concepts, like islands, have clear well-defined meanings: proper names, numbers (although philosophers would argue even these). For these the naming is very much an attribution of a sign to a pre-existing signified. The act of trans-articulation is merely assignment. But these unequivocal concepts are rare.

Other concepts, such as "love", "green" or "warmth", are tied to the continuity of the real world and thus have no clear edges except those defined by language itself. Whenever we try to define these meanings, to tie them down to a painter's palette or a dictionary, the real world challenges us, defying our artificial boundaries, like the Reivers harrying and raiding across the Scottish-English border. Even here there is a shaping force of the language; because we describe the world in colour words. We can easily see green leaves on brown tree branches, and painters have to learn to unsee the word colours and instead look for the subtle hues, textures and highlights that are really there. These seem to be like kingdoms forged in the open plains and it is often in these places, where the borders have no boundaries, that the hardest battles are fought between armies or academics.

In addition there are those words which denote categories that owe their existence only to our culture, civilisation or mental endeavour: "mathematics", "table", "Rome". It is in these categories that the trans-articulation of language is most effectual.

In the physical world the borderlands may be places of excitement and danger, the wild west; they may be cosmopolitan centres of interchange, or cultural hinterlands. Exploring these borderlands, the concepts that seem to fall between words, can often be a rich way to understand the centrality of concepts.

However, these boundaries are also places of fear: "here be dragons". That which we cannot name is dangerous or difficult. If we cannot talk about a concept or thing we try to move towards those things we can discuss. If I want to make furniture then I may offer you a chair or a table, but something that falls between is hard to sell. So I make things that look like chairs or things that look like tables and the arbitrary naming of categories by its very naming changes the way we act and work and the things that we make. Not just the intellectual landscape, but the physical world is altered by the force of words.

This is a sort of drawing in of the borders of words, establishing badlands or demilitarised zones where no-one ventures.

Even Neolithic stone circles have widths and lengths that are whole numbers of standard paces - almost certainly not because a practised human pace was vested with religious significance, but because we can talk about whole numbers. In fact, it is the fractions, like borders, that are semi-mystical, defined only by relations between wholes.

The world we create is the world we can talk about. Trans-articulation pushes beyond language to physicality.

We see similar forces in the cultural and academic world. If I want to publish academic papers I must call myself a mathematician or computer scientist, sociologist or psychologist. And by that naming we decide our community, bind ourselves to cultures of values, and by that binding create those communities and cultures. When writing we must conform to, or at least knowingly break, particular genres or styles: romance or whodunit, travel or biography ... the names on the bookshop shelves define the types of books that are written.

We can only play the notes on the piano keys.

And yet in the wild borders, in the conceptual interstices, there is often new life. Existing words sometimes expand to fill these meanings, but often too in those voids new concepts form. In an anti-dialectic evolution of language, the tension between terms drawing away from their boundaries, eschewing conflict for determinacy, leaves gaps that call forth new words.

The formation of the world through words and negotiation of words and meaning is not normally, like this essay, a declaration, a fiat, but is part of the constant unfolding use of language. Every word said both refers to a point in the intellectual landscape and also stakes out a territory in that landscape.

The ultimate performative act of language is the formation of language itself.

And of course this essay is not only a trans-articulation of an essential meaning for "articulation", but is also an articulation and a trans-articulation of "trans-articulation" itself. We have been discussing the shaping of a word to capture the formative nature of words, of which I was already aware, and yet are driven, in that shaping, by the word itself coined because of the consideration of articulation and thus linked to the inverting of the meanings of articulation.

Building meaning by the discussion of building of meaning.

Word play.