

{This} Means Nothing

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Don't gobblefunk around with words.

Roald Dahl, *The BFG*

When I was a child, I adored codes. There was something almost magical about being able to express what I wanted to say without a single other person being able to understand me, unless I had taught them how. Every idea and concept which I could ever desire to communicate, all brought under lock and key and held securely in my pocket.

One of the simplest codes for a nine-year-old to use to bring the world under his grasp—and therefore one of the first which I employed in the rainbow wax of a Crayola 24-pack—is what I know as a Caesar cipher, the very name implying its ability to dominate and subjugate, though in this case its power was only used for diversion and, later, the occasional passed note during study hall. This simple code is practiced by shifting the letters of the alphabet a certain number of ‘spaces’ down the line, reassigning the concepts associated with each symbol. Hence, this sentence would become “Jgpeg, vjku ugpgpeg yqwnf dgeqog.”

While this was extraordinarily fascinating for me as a child, perhaps you can already see the weakness in using this format to obscure one’s message. All you need to do to crack this code is discover one letter’s true character, and then tug on the loose thread until the entire deception unravels. This is typically done by accounting for the fact that certain letters, and particularly vowels, are more common than others.¹ The letter ‘e,’ for example, appears most frequently in the English language. Simply by assuming that ‘e’ will be one of the most common letters in the encoded phrase, you can hazard a guess that it will be transcribed as ‘g,’ which appears 7 times in this short phrase, accounting for a clean 25% of the sentence. And so, by

¹ At least in written systems which make use of what we think of as ‘letters’ instead of ideograms or logograms, which a language must necessarily make use of if it is going to be passed through a Caesar cipher.

shifting all of the letters backwards two spaces, you reveal the entire game.

Codes and ciphers far more complex than the Caesar cipher have been used throughout history to obscure military commands, shade illicit dealings, and cover up generally unsociable actions. Among these: plain English. After all, language itself is a form of code, locking meaning within articulations of the tongue, lips, and vocal cords. No matter how clearly articulated or how simply expressed, unless two participants are speaking the same language, they lack the ability to encode messages which the other can understand or to decode messages sent to them by their interlocutor. Even within the same language, variations of dialect or accent lend certain expressions unintelligible by those whose mental key is cued to a different region or populace.

For a well-recognized example of this, I would point you no further than *Finnegans Wake*, an exceptionally opaque novel by James Joyce. As an illustration of unintelligible idiolects, consider a single sentence from this novel's opening page:

“Sir Tristram, violer d'amores, fr'over the short sea, had passencore rearrived from North Armorica on this side the scraggy isthmus of Europe Minor to wielderfight his penisolate war: nor had topsawyer's rocks by the stream Oconee exaggerated themselse to Laurens County's gorgios while they went doublin their mumper all the time: nor avoice from afire bellowsed mishe mishe to tauftauf thuartpeatrick: not yet, though venissoon after, had a kidscad buttended a bland old isaac: not yet, though all's fair in vanessy, were sosie sesthers wroth with twone nathandjoe.”

When I brawl my way through this paragraph, I glean snatches of meaning from it. Just enough to know that I am reading something which may—perhaps—be intelligible by someone from another place and another time. Yet, for the life of me, I can't do more with it than that.

As evident in this demonstration, meaning is not solidified; it is not stable. It is not

consistent between two societies or individuals. What I envision and associate with the words that I type here on this page is distinct from the meaning which you create as you lift the words off of the page. My mental conceptualizations of certain words, of certain ideas, are not the same as yours. The connections I form between disparate ideas, between various lines of thought, on the subject of meaning are not necessarily the same as those created in your mind as you progress through this page—though some may say that the level of congruency between my thoughts and your thoughts is a key measure of my effectiveness as a writer. This difference in the meanings which you and I experience while interacting with the same text is evident of the fluid and individual nature of meaning.

As someone who is fascinated and inspired by the language arts, I have long understood that language can mean different things to different people. Else why could many of the classic novels which I enjoy be so vilified by my peers? It was clear that my friends and I received drastically different meanings from the books which we read. I intend to build my future career on the ability to communicate clearly and persuasively. How can I do so if I can't even guarantee that the words which I transmit to others will be received in the manner I intend for them to be? In exploring the question of meaning and its creation, I risk finding answers that undermine foundational elements on which I have built so many elements of my life. But if I don't push to understand the way that language and communication function in my society, how can I improve my ability to communicate the truest meaning to others?

One bright side of the fact that you and I and everyone else assign different meanings to things is that we are necessarily capable of advanced interpretation, which often occurs without our conscious thought. In order to understand what someone is attempting to convey to you through speech, you must be able to fill in the conceptual gaps. This applies to our ability to

learn new languages, understand the babbling of toddlers, and divine from context the meaning of unfamiliar terms.

It's also why you can understand your grandmother when speaking to her across the continent. Typical phone calls are restricted to occur between about 400 Hz and 3.4 kHz in order to allow a greater volume of calls to occur simultaneously. However, most humans can hear up to about 20kHz, and a lot of the sounds articulated in speech (such as the difference between [f] and [s]) occur at a frequency above that transmitted by phone carriers.² This means that when your grandmother told you that "she said so," you are interpreting the sound waves which hit your ears through the context of the conversation to understand that she did not say "she fed so." There is no material difference in the formation of the sounds hitting your ear after they pass through the restrictive range allowed by your telephone carrier; the only reason that you interpret your grandmother's statement as making sense is because (a) you want to continue believing she hasn't lost it completely, and (b) you understand the rules and contours of the English language; you receive meaning from your grandmother's ambiguous claim by understanding the context of the statement and assigning the unclear value with that sound which you unconsciously understand as making the most sense.

Looking at this another way, my friend,
 Allow me to invite you to, once more,
 Interpret something as you oft have done
 And read this with a pause between the lines.
 A rhythm, bouncing, flowing, as you go
 Is not inherently coming from me

² Rodman, Jeff, "The Effect of Bandwidth on Speech Intelligibility."

But follows from the training you've received

In how you ought to read your poetry.

Simply by my putting strings of words into a different shape, you associate an additional meaning with them. I'm going to assume here that you either read these lines as a poem (perhaps an unfinished sonnet) or deduced that they must have been written by someone with an over-excited pinky finger that loves to skip on over and insert hard returns several times in each sentence. It doesn't even matter if I actually intended this passage to be read as poetry; the filters constructed in your mind likely interpreted it as such. After all, if I did intend it as poetry, then it is certainly bad poetry. If I didn't, then the question remains as to whether it really ought to be compared to the works of the many writers throughout history who, unplagued by trigger-happy pinky fingers, actually meant for their writings to be read as such. ³

What I am asking, I suppose, is whether intentionality is relevant to meaning. Does it even matter what I, with my fingers on the keyboard or with a pen in my hand or with air in my lungs, want you to understand by my ramblings? Or is the only real meaning that which you create by bringing your experiences onto the playground of sounds and symbols that I create for you? Or is it somewhere in between the two camps, as the most complex and most accurate answers often are?⁴

It would seem that even that most famous of all repositories of meaning, the common English dictionary, is unclear on this point. If you were to look up an entry on "meaning" in order to resolve this quandary, you would find yourself looking straight in the face of the question itself: ⁵

³ Fish, Stanley, "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One."

⁴ Barthes, Roland, "The Death of the Author."

⁵ This particular definition comes from the Merriam-Webster. It's not the Oxford, but still. "Meaning," *Merriam-Webster*.

Meaning (noun) - mē-niŋ

- 1a. the thing one intends to convey, especially by language: PURPORT
- 1b. the thing that is conveyed, especially by language: IMPORT
- 2. something meant or intended: AIM
- 3. significant quality - *especially*: implication of a hidden or special significance
- 4a. the logical connotation of a word or phrase
- 4b. the logical denotation or extension of a word or phrase

As evidenced here, even some of the most authoritative sources on meaning are unable to differentiate between whether meaning stems from that which is intended by the transmitter (1a) or that which is interpreted by the receiver (1b), without even getting into 2, 3, 4a, and 4b.

If I write a few half-sentences that happen to coordinate in number of syllables, or a jumbled series of names on a chalkboard,⁶ and you read it as poetry, is it a poem even though I did not intend it as such? If I ask a biscuit of you and receive, in place of a buttery flake crust lump, a malted milk sugar cracker, did you fulfill my request? Is the accepted intention of a communication that of the transmitter, the one from which the message comes, or that of the receiver, the one who interprets the message produced? Come to think of it, I suppose the only perfect communication that exists is that which takes place inside your own mind, since the message's transmitter and receiver are one and the same. Only you can truly understand the ideas which you intend to express in exactly the way that you would have them understood. And so I must draw the conclusion that speaking to oneself is the only way to hold a completely intelligible conversation. It would surprise me that our society interprets such an effective act of communication as an indication of lunacy only if I had not previously seen its inverse—the

⁶ Fish, Stanley, "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One."

holding of incoherence in high regard—in the case of Mr. James Joyce.

I am going to imagine for a moment that you, like me, had a rather excitable older brother during your childhood, or perhaps that you were that excitable older brother. Either way, I trust that, whether ye be he or she be ye or he be me, we can all remember a child attempting to evade the consequences of an ill-thought-out action by claiming unintentionality: “But I didn’t *mean* it!” For my brother, I remember, this defense was employed when the slick rubber basketball, which was allegedly lobbed so that it would sail harmlessly over my sister’s head, instead collided meteorically with the uneven pigtails and sent them careening into the dirt. It was also used in an attempt to vindicate his spoon upon one occasion, when it journeyed repeatedly from mixing bowl to mouth to mixing bowl to mouth solely in order to make sure that the dough was completely homogeneous and well-sweetened, and most certainly not in any attempt to make half of it disappear before the oven had reached full flame.

If the excitable older brother in your mind had parents at all like mine, it is likely that this nasalized justification of unintentionality made little headway against his oncoming judicial sentencing. In my parents’ minds, if an act was committed whose consequents should have been foreseen, the consequents were achieved intentionally.

If this idea is extrapolated any further, it blurs the connection which is typically assumed between knowledge and intention. Knowledge, the vernacular philosopher might claim, is necessary for there to be any intentional act: without knowing that a certain recipe will result in a cake—instead of a pie or a casserole or a small collection of mice (if you like to dabble in spontaneous generation)—why would anyone who wishes to make a cake intentionally mix together the ingredients of the recipe when they desire to eat cake? However, the position of my parents, and the position of many modern legislative systems, does not always require proof of

knowledge to demonstrate intentionality; sometimes the standard is merely that of what a “reasonable person” would know or do.⁷ In other words, my individual intentions in performing an act are irrelevant in the face of what may be called the ‘mass intention’ of most people who perform that act. This seems to mean, then, that just as I may form words while meaning to express a certain idea, and be held responsible for how another person interprets them, so too can the underlying intention be less important in determining the meaning of an action than how another person interprets it.

On the other hand, a person’s intentions when it comes to communication can go a long way in transmitting one person’s thoughts to another. Although what a person intends to transmit may not always be that message which is received, it is nonetheless true that systems of language allow for intended messages to be communicated more often than would be otherwise possible. Anyone who has ever been asked “What do you mean to say?” serves as a proof that intention is not a guarantee of effective communication. However, anyone who has then gone on to establish understanding with their interlocutor is evidence that without intention, there would be no hope for communication at all. If there were never an intention, a reason to communicate with another human being or a message to be transmitted between two people, then there would never have been a need for the development of language at all.

So while I may have seen in my own life examples of intention gone awry or unintentionality used as a defense against undesirable consequences, it is definitively true that intention is an underlying principle of whatever meaning we find in language. It may not always be present in language, and assuming intentionality in certain contexts may sometimes even lead to misinterpretations, but intentionality is a core building block of communication. Come to

⁷ “Reasonable Person,” *Legal Information Institute*.

think of it, if there had never been any intention embodied in language, the claims and subversions which I made earlier in favor of intentionality's irrelevance would have never been put to the page, as language itself could not exist.

I think the only way to reconcile this contradiction in my mind is to say that intentionality is a founder and regulator of communication, but not communication itself. While communication is not always intentional, intentionality makes language (and even the subversion of language) possible. This can be seen in many works of literature, such as Ian McEwan's *Amsterdam*, Joaquim Machado de Assis's "The Fortune-Teller," or the tragic conclusion of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, which all have at their center misinterpretations of intention that lead to disastrous consequences; yet these works could never have been composed without the author's intentionally setting to do so. Going back mere pages in this very essay, I arranged rhyming sentences into lines with equal numbers of syllables and then claimed that it may not be intentional, but unless if someone long before me had first intended to convey something by the arrangement of rhyming lines and a consistent meter, you would have had no reason to assume intentionality in the first place. Even when I claim that I act unintentionally, meaning is present only because I am drawing from some intentional act in the past that has become encoded into our shared system of communication.

Yet, in spite of the fact that I know intentionality is central to the purpose and function of communication, I am unwilling to consider language unarguably intentional because—even within the most meaningful of interactions—there is always a certain level of arbitrariness. While conversations, at a cerebral level, may be replete with meaning, the individual sounds and words and phrases which are used to perform that conversation are completely arbitrary. Whatever meaning is present in {I love you} could be just as efficiently expressed in the symbol

{ek meit la} if we as a linguistic community determined that it could. The only reason that we give no meaning to streams of sounds which are outside of our language's pattern is exactly that: we have determined that they are not an accepted part of our language.

Though we learn languages and associate definitions with words through the societies that we take part in, there is absolutely nothing in a certain series of sounds that inherently makes it represent a certain thing, concept, idea, or person. This should be clear since there are countless languages in the world, all of which found their own "best" way to talk about the weather. Put another way, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet[.]"⁸ Words act as symbols, and symbols only, for the concepts or things which they represent. {Fire} is not a real fire; it is the pattern of ink markings which we have used to represent the sounds that we associate with the concept of the red-orange-yellow-white-blue combustion process which can destroy villages or fry up a nice pack of bacon. And so are {fuego} and {ignis} and {火} and {نار}.

However, not all words are created equal. Though words can be classified according to several different sorting criteria, let's look at them in terms of generality. {Animal} for example, is a much more general term than {bear}: The first could evoke an image of any kind of fauna, the other only an image of a large furry quadruped with a penchant for fruit, honey, and fish. According to John Locke, the variable generality of words serves as an example of a more overarching principle:

Words become general by being made the signs of general ideas; and ideas become

⁸ By incorporating the words and ideas of individuals whose names and legacies are much larger than my own, what I'm really doing is claiming that I am not the first one to attempt to work through these questions, and that consequently these ideas are worth exploring. In fact, I will be the first to admit that the subject of this essay is not a new one. If it were new, where would my allusions come from? This particular one, of course, is from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene II, Lines 47–48. But then again, a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.

general by separating from them the circumstances of time and place By this way of abstraction, they are made capable of representing more individuals than one.⁹

In other words, Locke, the great empiricist, saw in words a pattern which could be applied to all human ideas and thoughts: abstraction, as a method by which humans extract meaning from the relationships expressed in their surroundings, allows for the grouping of objects and symbols into determined categories. The relationships between words are what allow them to be separated and grouped in any semblance of order.

In the exact same way, relationships are what grant meaning to an entirely different form of communication: mathematics. Sometimes called the “universal language,” mathematics is dependent upon the same principles of generality and symbology as any other manner of communication. While children are taught in school that “ $1+1=2$ ” is an immutable truth, it is really only the representation which our society has created and accepted as a mode of describing that truth. Mathematics is no more an ethereal force floating through the air than is any other written or spoken language. Put another way, “mathematics as we know it is . . . a product of the human mind. . . . It comes from us!”¹⁰

Think for an instant on the geometric figure of the octagon: eight straight sides and eight obtuse angles of 135° , and symmetrical along almost infinite axes, both bilaterally and rotationally. This shape is what {octagon} means, and {octagon} means this shape. Yet this shape can be described in a variety of other manners. For instance, it is the shape for which the internal area is equal to $(p*a)/2$ where {p} is the shape’s perimeter and {a} is its apothem, or distance from its center to the midpoint of its side. The relationship between the shape’s

⁹ Omnès, Roland, *Converging Realities*, p. 14.

¹⁰ Lakoff, George and Rafael Nuñez, *Where Mathematics Comes From*, 9. (As cited, including ellipses, in Omnès, Roland, *Converging Realities*, p. 13.)

perimeter, apothem, and internal area is consistent across any number of individual shapes that can be described as octagons and is the exact same no matter how you view the nature or origin of mathematics. While there are many ways to describe the object in question, the object does not change one whit simply because the manner in which it is being described changes. The relationships between the shape's parts and pieces define its being in a manner independent of other influences. This is the same principle we explored above with the word {fire}. It does not matter what something is called or how it is described; the object itself remains the same.

Hold on, though; while {octagon}'s source of meaning may be an exact parallel to {fire}'s, the fact is that there seems to be something different about the way that an actual geometric octagon receives its identity. Although the name of an octagon may be arbitrarily assigned, the shape itself isn't dependent on the interpretation of any human society, is it? I mean, an octagon in nature—as found in some crystal formations—still maintains the same relationships between its parts as does an octagon on a high school pop quiz. So while the specific language which communities employ to study mathematics is surely a human invention, can it really be said that mathematics is only a “product of the human mind”?

After consideration, and from the viewpoint of a thoroughly non-mathematical person, I really can't find a concrete difference between mathematics and language. Although at first, in writing this essay, I searched for some way to show that mathematics is less arbitrary and more inherently meaningful than any other system of communication, I could not do it. Naming an octagon something else does not change its nature, but neither does renaming a tree. Whether assigning meaning to something by the relationships between its numbers or the relationships between its words, the subject remains the same and the change in meaning occurs in the mind of man.

I only began to feel confident in my thoughts on this subject when I learned more about the various numerical systems used in ancient civilizations. Although most modern nations make use of a decimal (base-10) system, other cultures have used duodecimal (base-12), vigesimal (base-20), and trivigesimal (base-23) numerical systems (among many, many others).¹¹ So if the very way that we assign values to numerals and perform calculations can change without altering the underlying mathematical principles, how is mathematics *not* an arbitrary language? At least, that's how I've come to think.

Now, returning to the aforementioned octagon, let's fill it with a certain shade of red. Suddenly, this shape adopts an almost universal meaning outside of its geometrical origins: STOP. When found in a place of worship, whether Catholic, Muslim, or Buddhist, this same shape symbolizes infinity and holiness. When streamed on a cable network, it's a cage where beefcakes beat each other into millionaires. Yet there is nothing inherent in this collection of angles and symmetry that conveys any kind of interpretive meaning other than that which we bestow upon it.

However, despite the completely arbitrary nature of symbols, they do tend to “fit” with certain things in our society's collective mind. This can be illustrated by the difference between the gibberish nonwords {ketati} and {mola}. But before I explain, envision in your mind the basic facial shape someone would have if they bore these names. Picture Ketati. Picture Mola.

I'll give you a few seconds.

...

¹¹ Alright, now I know this is from Wikipedia, but it is surprisingly difficult to find current sources on ancient numeral systems. Now that we're in this situation, let's take advantage of it: How does the fact that I'm citing Wikipedia change the meaning of this information for you? The words that I've said haven't changed, so what past experiences or context requirements (see pp. 16–17) are shaping the way that meaning is made when I type the following: “List of Numeral Systems,” *Wikipedia*.

Now, it's very likely that our dear Ketati, irrespective of whatever sex or ethnicity you assigned them in your thoughtspace, is an individual with sharp, angled features. Conversely, Mola is likely someone with rounder, smoother features.¹² At least, this is the case for the majority of individuals tasked with a similar assignment.

This phenomenon throws a slight wrench into the claim that symbols are arbitrary, as it suggests that there really may be something in the symbols themselves that suggests particular associations. These names incorporate, on the part of Ketati, short, closed, hard sounds and, on the part of Mola, long, open, soft sounds. The corresponding “feel” of the words as sharp or round, as reflected in the collective imagining of the faces which they describe, almost seems to claim that sounds by themselves do contain and express some basic, inextricable quality through their very nature.

I think this is quite the same process that a young family goes through when bringing home a kitten. Inevitably, ideas for the cat's name will fly around the van, with at least one brilliant suggestion being shot down by his sister's claim—“But he doesn't *look* like a Rufus!”—before the mother settles on something like Tabitha and the rest of the family just has to deal with the fact that their new feline friend has the name of half the world's great aunt once removed. For whatever reason, members of the typical family believe themselves capable of seeing when a cat is a Tiger or a Geoffrey. And so, somehow, sequences of sounds which I have claimed are meaningless have associations attached to them even when there is no denotative connection between the symbol and the symbolized. What's more, this connection seems to

¹² The connection between the images created in our minds by certain sounds and how we perceive those images as matching reality, as expressed in the connection between people's appearances and their names, is a relatively new area of exploration in psychology and linguistics. The articles I am drawing from are by a Mr. David Sidhu, and were both published in the last few months. Sidhu, David M., Kristen Deschamps, Joshua S. Bourdage, and Penny M. Pexman, “Does the Name Say it All?” Sidhu, David M. and Penny M. Pexman, “The Sound Symbolism of Names.”

function in both directions: people given names, such as Ketati or Mola, can think up a person that “fits” with that name, while people given a subject, in this case a kitten, can think up a name that is “right” for that subject. If subjects and objects can both invite the other in a way that tends to feel objectively correct, maybe it’s not really the case that words have no inherent meaning.

Pushing this idea even further, certain collections of words really do seem to have a denotative and formative connection with the concepts they represent. Take, for instance, onomatopoeiae: words which are meant to approximate the sounds they represent. It is very difficult for me to remove the meaning from, or otherwise define, words such as {boom}, {snap}, or {moo}. {Boom} is a boom. It is what it says. If some words clearly have physical ties to their meanings, is it really fair to say that all language is arbitrary? With the mental processes that I tend to use in interpreting the world around me, I can’t bring myself to compromise and say that some words are completely arbitrary and some are not. This, to me, would bring a whole new level of arbitrariness into the mix, one which I’m not sure I could manage: arbitrary levels of arbitrariness.

The position that I’ve found to comfort myself returns to our earlier discussion of how languages represent the same concepts with different signifiers. Because even though a world-traveling rooster would make the same sound in each country that it visited, the way that sound is interpreted may be dramatically different. In the United States, roosters say {cock-a-doodle-doo}. In Spanish, they say {ki-kiri-ki}. And in French, {cocorico}. And so even onomatopoeiae are imperfect transcriptions of a concept, varying by linguistic community. These variations do not totally counteract the fact that these nouns approximate the concepts which they signify, but they do so just enough to negate the claim that they are a perfect linguistic embodiment of what they signify. If they still act as merely symbols, varying based on community and linguistic

system, they must have been chosen—at least to a certain extent—arbitrarily. The closeness of these different forms, however, and the desire to represent the physical world in as linguistically accurate a fashion as possible, attests to another element central to human communication: pattern.

Similarities among different languages, and even between words found in the same linguistic community, testify to humans' ability and desire to form patterns in every context. Looking at the various words constructed around the same “root” provides an illustration of why linguistic communities tend towards developing systems of pattern. Although the words {ignite}, {ignition}, and {igneous} are all different words used in very different contexts, their shared latin root of *ignis* indicates that they share a relationship defined by similar properties: in this case, having something to do with fire or combustion. In a completely arbitrary system, there is no reason that these words should share any resemblance at all; they could be as different from each other as {cat} and {dog}. Yet they are constructed in a way that, by itself, conveys their close relationship to the minds of their linguistic community. This blends nicely with John Locke's perspective on patterns and abstraction: Just as empirical mathematics uses relationships and patterns to determine and describe scientific principles, linguistic communities tend to use relationships to make systems less arbitrary.

In another manifestation of pattern, people and communities tend to use context and past experiences to receive different meanings from identical words. In a mathematical context, for example, {period} is the length of time it takes for a wave or cycle to repeat itself. In a literary context, this same word could mean either a certain time during history or a small dot at the end of a sentence. Across linguistic boundaries, these alterations in meaning can become even more dramatic. In another way, just as a sister's claim that your proposed cat name does not fit into the

pattern of all the other Percivals which she has known seems to disqualify it from consideration, every one of us establishes expectations through pattern as to how we expect our communication and environment to appear and sound. Words and phrases are connected together according to patterns and rules that can exert extreme influence on the concepts which they represent. And so, “I love eating, my friends, and my family” becomes different from “I love eating my friends and my family” in accordance with the change in pattern.

Pattern is very likely present in any of the stories which you know from your childhood, or perhaps from the childhood of your children. Whether they comfort you by their predictably happy ending or shock you at every turn by the unexpected usurpation of your expectations, stories are effective only in the context of pattern.

It is my own observation that there may only be one great story ever told. That is the story of a young person who has received great powers through his heritage, must account for his absent father, discovers that he is a part of a world much bigger than himself—often through a tragic event—and departs on an adventure to defeat great evil. On his quest, he faces great challenges and learns many lessons that ultimately prepare him to give up his own life for the good of his noble cause. Now tell me, is this “hero’s journey” the story of Frodo Baggins, Harry Potter, Eragon Bromson, Katniss Everdeen, Luke Skywalker, or Jesus Christ?

Patterns consistent throughout stories told in a society are significant because they communicate the values of that society. Let us consider stories as objects with which members of a society interact. When an individual is first exposed to a particular story, what is it that causes him or her to identify with a character, to appreciate a plot, to vilify an enemy? In many ways, it is the way that the individual’s society has prepared him or her to experience that story. The symbols which a society connects to certain objects of literature become nigh on inseparable

from the elements of the story itself when they are introduced young and reinforced as the child grows. In general, villains are villains because they do not follow the codes taught by society. Heroes are heroes because they exemplify them.

This is exactly the case in the Greek epics by Homer, *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. The values and story arcs canonized in these works laid the foundation for many of the societal traits which the Western world holds dear. These stories, as objects, were encoded with societal value. The values incorporated in these stories was given a name—*paideia*, roughly meaning “the ideals of a culture.” Then this word too became a concept inextricable from the culture which gave it meaning, being something desired, sought after, and instilled in generation after generation through stories and education.

Once codified in language, even words which describe completely abstract concepts become tangible. As a global world in which more and more barriers between cultures are being challenged every day, there are more and more examples of how concepts and values are exchanged, adopted, or rejected through the exchange of vocabulary. Each year, Oxford Dictionary¹³ selects a “Word of the Year,” which designation is meant to reflect both an interesting linguistic development and a snapshot of the events of the year itself. In 2016, one of the finalists for this honor was the Danish term *hygge* meaning “a quality of coziness¹⁴ and comfortable conviviality that engenders a feeling of contentment or well-being.”¹⁵ *Hygge* was given this position of honor due to a wave of home improvement books which swept the English-speaking world and promised to turn your home just a little more *hygge-y*, making everyone the smallest bit cozier and a touch more hospitable.

¹³ It’s not the Merriam-Webster, but still.

¹⁴ Though I feel like it is betraying something which I ought to hold dear, I standardized the spelling of “cosiness” from the Oxford Dictionary to the accepted American variation.

¹⁵ Altman, Anna, “The Year of Hygge.”

Aside from cute visions of thick socks and cable-knit sweaters, what is really occurring here is the transference of one culture's values and mindset to another. The English-speaking world had identified a new object which it desired, and so adopted without pause. Along with a new arbitrary symbol came the concept which it represents, the concept becoming a part of the cultural value system and the symbol being anglicized in pronunciation for ease of communication. I do not portend to say whether such adoptions of cultural objects are wrong or right, I merely wish to point out that when a symbol crosses cultural borders, so does the concept which it represents.

Of course, having gotten to this point, making any sort of claim that the meaning and symbol of any word must be imported as a package deal seems contradictory to the other points I have explored. I suppose it will remain a contradiction on my record. It won't be the first.

And the last certainly will not be contained within this essay. Anything I write, anything I say, for the rest of my life, will be riddled with contradiction as soon as it takes form outside of my mind. This essay, every part of it, is meaningless. True, some parts may mean something to you. A few sections are quite meaningful to me as well. But the whole thing, every word from the title to the final line, has no meaning.

At least none that I am capable of sharing with you.

Tloap jbxk jlob qexk texq fp pbq altk lk mxmbo.¹⁶

Pix mx qexxiv alex ai gepp e xlmrk.¹⁷

Iwkj awghd hsdifo thea thei whe sa dfknnm wedk whayd el sdf.

¹⁶ Jxvx Xkdbilr, *F Hklt Tev qeb Zxdba Yfoa Pfkdp*.

¹⁷ Wspqed Wlevmj, "Psoo."

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