

DICTIONARY SYMPHONY

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Looking up the definition of a word is one thing, but looking up the definition of the words in the definition of a word is another. And looking up the definitions of the words in the definitions of the words in the definition of a word is yet another. The more definitions you look up, the deeper you travel into the labyrinth of language.

Each individual definition in the examples below is separated from the others by slashes. The equal sign marks words which have grammar (but not content) definitions; in grammar definitions, the original words are used. Synonyms appearing in definitions are capitalized. No changes are made in the definitions to account for tense, number, etc., although some of the defined words are in the past tense, pluralized, or otherwise grammatically different.

Take FEW, an apparently simple word. The first-level definition according to the Merriam Webster Pocket Dictionary is "not many : a small number." What does that tell you? Not much. But if you take the definition of each of those five words, the meaning begins to unfold like a symphony. The second-level definition of FEW shows the word to be more complex than its few letters would suggest:

(2) / =not / a large number / =a / few in number / a group or aggregate not specif. enumerated /

The word FEW is repeated in the second-level definition, a cymbal clashing once to echo the original word itself. Furthermore, NUMBER introduces a dissonant motif in a pair of mathematically vague phrases--LARGE NUMBER and FEW IN NUMBER. The negative NOT sounds a wistful note twice, like a piccolo in the background, suggesting the incapacity of this definition to actually define the original word. But the music shifts dramatically at the third level:

(3) / =not / =a / exceeding most other things of like kind in quantity or size / a group or aggregate not specif. enumerated / =a / not many : a small number / =in / a group or aggregate not specif. enumerated / =a / a number of individuals related by a common factor (as physical association, community of interests, or blood / =or / a mass or body of units or parts somewhat loosely associated with one another; also : the whole amount / =not / DEFINITE, EXACT / to determine the number of : COUNT /

Where the second-level definition was understated, the third-level definition trumpets its meaning. The powerful opening of EXCEEDING MOST OTHER THINGS OF LIKE KIND IN QUALITY OR SIZE strikes a bold counterpoint to the hearty refrain, A GROUP OR AGGREGATE

NOT SPECIF. ENUMERATED. After melodically drawing together INDIVIDUALS, BLOOD, and BODY OF UNITS, the definition crescendos with the thunderous DEFINITE, EXACT and closes with the brash finale: COUNT. By the third level, FEW is already much more than "not many."

Let's try another word: WORD. The word WORD itself resonates with possibilities. If you pursue the meanings through higher and higher levels, you can uncover as many words as you want. Millions. Billions. Your only boundaries are time and space. The first three levels set the tone:

- (1) / something that is said; esp : a brief remark /
- (2) / some undetermined or unspecified thing / WHO,WHOM,WHICH / =is / =said / especially / =a / CONCISE; also : CURT / the act of remarking : OBSERVATION, COMMENT /
- (3) / one unspecified / =undetermined / =or / =unspecified / IDEA, NOTION / =who / =whom / =which / =is / =said / SPECIAL, PARTICULAR / =a / expressing much in few words : TERSE, SUCCINCT / in addition : TOO / rudely short or abrupt / that in particular / a thing done : DEED / =of / to express as an observation or comment : SAY / a conclusion drawn from observing; also : REMARK, STATEMENT /

These definitions ring with understated irony. WORD, the foundation of thought, is called A BRIEF REMARK, CONCISE, CURT, SUCCINCT, TERSE, RUDELY SHORT OR ABRUPT. The words OBSERVE, REMARK, and COMMENT chime persistently through levels two and three (and all higher levels forever). In the second level, WORD comes to life: it is personified through the use of WHO and WHOM. In the third level, it becomes SPECIAL, PARTICULAR--not just letters on the page or sounds in the throat. It is A THING DONE : DEED. It is the sublime music of poetry: EXPRESSING MUCH IN FEW WORDS.

But the true beauty, the secret of language, the key to the way thoughts are transmitted, appears in the opening phrase at level three: ONE UNSPECIFIED. The WORD is an amorphous chimaera, a shadow of sound flickering on the wall of memory. It is ONE, but which one? Not the number, nor any other thing in particular, but anything in general to which it is applied, an UNSPECIFIED utterance: WORD without meaning, WORD without end. Pure WORD.

At the fourth level, the meaning of WORD verges on magical. At the fifth level, it approaches mystical. After that, the definitions extend beyond all preconceived limits of language. "Ineffable" hardly begins to describe it: "incomprehensible" is putting it mildly. By the 26th level, so many words are generated that counting them would take light years. If they could be written on atoms, one word per atom, there wouldn't be enough atoms in the universe to hold them. There is no final definiton: WORD dissipates into an infinity of words, to which the only response is silence.