

SEXIGRAPHY

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The meaning of a word--its linguistic essence, so to speak—is encapsulated in its dictionary definition. Can one learn more about a word by repeating this process? In “Dictionary Symphony” in the August 1990 issue, Dave Morice proposed replacing the essential words in a definition (typically the nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs) with *their* definitions, to create a second-level definition that would enhance the first-level one. In turn, the words used in the second-level definition can each be replaced with their definitions, and so on.

Let us see how this works with the archetypal synonym for “copulate”, as given in Webster’s 10th Collegiate. Lexigraphy, according to Webster’s Third, is “the art or practice of defining words” so the following exercise can plausibly be called sexigraphy.

1. to ENGAGE in COITUS with...
2. to TAKE PART; PHYSICAL UNION of MALE and FEMALE GENITALIA accompanied by RHYTHMIC MOVEMENT...
3. JOIN, PARTICIPATE, SHARE; of or relating to the BODY; an ACT or INSTANCE of JOINING TWO or MORE THINGS into ONE; of or relating to the SEX that PRODUCES GAMETES which FERTILIZE the EGGS of a FEMALE; of or relating to the SEX that BEARS YOUNG or PRODUCES EGGS; the ORGANS of the REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM; marked by or MOVING in PRONOUNCED RHYTHM; CHANGE of PLACE or POSITION or POSTURE...

The descriptors increase rapidly, from 2 to 9 to 32. Dave Morice commented on the recursive definition of 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 definition; WORD dissipates into an infinity of words, to which the only response is silence.

In the August 1970 Word Ways, Dave Silverman observed that recursive definitions inevitably lead to the chasing-one’s-tail phenomenon. As one proceeds down the ever-lengthening list of definitions, one will eventually encounter a word which uses in its definition

only words which have already appeared in the list. Early printings of Webster's Second Edition offered an outstanding example of such circularity: RAFTMAN a raftman (the editors meant "raftsman"). The only way out of this paradox is to decide (as mathematicians do) that there are certain undefined terms which are used in various combinations to define all others.

In his privately-published book, *The Wordtree*, Henry G. Burger proposed that every transitive verb can be split into two components that capture the essence of the original, such as LOVE = LIKE + DESIRE or CRY = SOUND + EMOTIONALIZE. In turn, each of these components can be split, and so on, producing a family tree of words which, in some sense, collectively describe the original. To avoid infinite regress, Burger lists 86 words (43 paired opposites) which cannot be further reduced. These are listed below:

in-out	horizon-vertical	up-down
ploy-deploy	materialize-dematerialize	enring-rosette
whorl-spiral	speck-bestrew	linearize-dispunct
septuple-seventh	quintuple-quinquesept	triple-third
halve-halfhalve	maximize-minimize	ascertain-uncertain
agree-differ	equal-unequalize	point-dispoint
need-unneed	convex-concave	port-starboard
partner-solo	levorotate-bedrug	integrate-disintegrate
odize-immune	pluralize-singularize	enter-vacate
front-unbare	emotionalize-deemotionalize	greaten-lessen
gather-ungather	temporize-detemporize	change-unchange
spatialize-void	straighten-courb	power-weaken
fit-unfit	relate-disrelate	order-disorder
free-unfree	subjectify-desubjectify	back-unback
center-uncenter		

One can think of these as linguistic elements analogous to the 100-plus chemical elements. Each transitive verb is then a specific mixture of these. For example, WAG = DIRECTION + ALTERNATE is a mixture of 9/32 CHANGE, 5/32 RELATE, 4/32 SPATIALIZE, 4/32 STRAIGHTEN, 4/32 UNBARE, 2/32 FIT, 2/32 ORDER and 2/32 PLURALIZE. (However, I doubt that anyone given these proportions would be able to conclude that the word they characterize is WAG!)

The closer the elemental mix, the closer the meaning of the underlying words? It doesn't seem to work in practice. Take TUNK (to tap on a burial chamber wall, so the archeologist can detect a hidden void on the other side) and AUSCULTATE (to tap on a patient's chest, so the doctor can hear the echo through his stethoscope). At the third level, TUNK generates STRIKE, FORCE, DEENERGIZE, DISCONTINUE, USE, DISBELIEVE, DEFINE, ASCERTAIN but AUSCULTATE generates MEET, RELATE, ELECTROPHONE, SENSIZE, INQUIRE, ITERATE, DEBUNK, UNINVENT--not a single component verb in common.

As the 86 irreducibles suggest, Burger is not above converting other parts of speech to nonce-verbs when he needs them. One is reminded of a January 25 1993 cartoon in which Calvin informs Hobbes "I like to verb words...I take nouns and adjectives and use them as verbs. Remember when 'access' was a thing? Now it's something you do. It got verbed." Some

verbifications are idiosyncratic, creating hapax legomena: CRADLESNATCH, POTSMOKE, MOUSEBURGER. (That last word is the fusion of INSTRUCT and PERSEVERE, in case you wondered.)

It's time to return to our knitting--how does Burger's system treat the sex act? We start with his verb COIT, apparently a back-formation of COITUS. (Alternatively, we could have started with BRIMMER, from BRIM which has as its primary meaning "a pig in heat". However, Burger unhelpfully splits BRIMMER = FILL + UNFILL.) The first five steps of COIT are given below (COIT = COPULATE + UNVIRGIN, COPULATE = COUPLE + COMPLETE, etc.). Irreducibles have been capitalized.

coit	copulate	couple	pair	double	GATHER increase
				RELATE	
			direct	STRAIGHTEN	
				right	FIT ORDER
		complete	fill	FIT	
				close	discontinue limit
			perfect	make	halfmake form
				finish	END close
	unvirgin	touch	contact	meet	near affect
				RELATE	
			sense	resonate	vibrate synchronize
				Morse	encode electrify
		utilize	adapt	CHANGE	
				FIT	
			use	activate	POWER INTEGRATE
				destine	ORDER direct

Sexual overtones are certainly present in the first and second stages, but have been largely replaced by more abstract verbs in the third one.

Six out of the 16 fourth-stage verbs are irreducibles, as are seven of the remaining 20 fifth-stage ones. Most of the rest terminate in a few more stages; however, one verb that doesn't terminate quickly is ENCODE. This branch runs into a glitch in Burger's classification system--the verbs LIKE and DISLIKE eventually return to themselves:

DISLIKE-deaestheticize--deculturate--disaccustom--dishabituate-
deemotionalize immune differentiate halt

enigmatize--unpattern----indart--misrepresent--blunder----
misbehave uncharacter flaw immaterialize re-present

nill-----unwill--DISLIKE
transhuate absent

Because of this, the table of components of COIT never ends.

It is a daunting task to characterize COIT by its irreducibles. There are at least 40 different ones represented, including a number of paired opposites which, at least in part, cancel each other. The most important irreducible appears to be RELATE, with a proportionate weight of at least 45/256 (but 8/256 of which is canceled by DISRELATE). The next three irreducibles are CHANGE (at least 44/256), FIT (at least 30/256) and STRAIGHTEN (at least 20/256). Perhaps Burger is on to something here—in sexual intercourse, a man and a woman RELATE to each other, CHANGE their positions (from vertical to horizontal), cooperatively FIT his penis into her vagina, and complete their intercourse after the former has been suitably STRAIGHTENed!