

THEORIZING TUTORIALS: USING CASSIRER'S CONCEPTS OF "WORD MAGIC" TO INTERPRET WRITING CONFERENCES

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Literary critic Monique Wittig suggests that "with writing, words are everything" (47). She argues that:

When one cannot write, it is not, as we often say, that one cannot express one's ideas. It is that one cannot find one's words. . . . Words lie there to be used as raw material by a writer, just as clay is at the disposal of any sculptor They are things, material things, and at the same time they mean something. (47)

Although theory and experience suggest that the synthesis we crave between words and ideas is a "necessary self-deception

of the mind” (Cassirer, 5), that self-deception is so “necessary” and so pervasive that it often constitutes a singular incentive to keep writing.

For many writers, however, this incentive merges with a suspicion of textual inadequacy. This suspicion breeds a troubling insight that, although words and ideas can be made to cohere tentatively, even that *tentative* coherence cannot be achieved by the writer alone. When this insight occurs, a writer may seek tutorial help. This text examines four such occasions. Using concepts of “Word magic” (44) drawn from philosopher Ernst Cassirer’s *Language and Myth*, I will show how the tutorial encounters I discuss enact gradations and extremes of Cassirer’s concepts. I will also argue that these pedagogical interactions (all of which feature students trying to find the “right words” for their texts), illustrate the need to make written language profoundly conversant, if not entirely commensurate, with human thought.

Using Cassirer’s work as a lens for interpreting specific pedagogical encounters mandates defining his key terms. In *Language and Myth*, Cassirer examines the powerful “interweaving and interlocking” (55) of mythical conception and linguistic expression that pervades non-rational thought. Cassirer uses the term “mythical thinking” (33) to denote a view of the Word as “first in origin,.. supreme in power” (48), and the “ideal instrument” (62) of expression.

“Word magic” (44) is a major component of mythical thinking. Cassirer defines it as a state in which words “are not taken for what they mean indirectly, but for their immediate appearance; [where] they are taken as pure presentations, and embodied in the imagination” (56). To believe in Word magic is to say that appellation equals essence (e.g. the word “rose” defines a rose), and that words contain the “primary force in which all being and doing originate” (45).

This belief in the “supreme position of the Word” (45) to both name and change reality limits one’s ability to view language as a symbolic form of communication. “For in this realm of thought there are no abstract denotations; every word is immediately transformed into a concrete mythical figure, a god or a demon” (97). The fact that modern people can also believe in “Word magic” was dramatized during a conference with Gina,

who came to the Writing Center looking for help with her cover letter.

I. Word Magic: a Writer and a Word List

Gina was applying for a job at Club Med, a chain of vacation resorts, yet her letter made no mention of how she might fill Club Med's needs. "I just need to fill in my objectives," she told me, "and the wording of my experience." Gina said that because she was a management major and was looking for a managerial position, she needed some "management words" to "dress up" her work experience.

In expressing her wish to "dress up" her text with language, Gina was adhering to a strand of classical rhetoric—one that places primary value on a text's formal features and portrays language as the embellishment of thought. For Gina, the practical correlate of this perspective was that a well-worded text would make her a desirable job candidate. "Such is the power of words," writes Horace, "that are used in the right places and in the right relationships, and such the grace that they can add to the commonplace when so used" (87).

By insisting on rewording her letter, Gina was also tapping into one of the primary traits of "Word magic"—the alleged ability of certain words to inscribe a text with a persuasive power that it otherwise lacks. As Cassirer notes, this focusing of "forces on a single point [of word choice] is the prerequisite for all mythical thinking," especially when words are approached "with emotions of fear or hope, tenor or wish fulfillment" (33). It was both hope and advice that inspired Gina to keep writing. She said she had been referred to the Center by her advisor at the Office of Career Planning. "He said that I have the right idea, that I just need to get the right words, and that's why I chose to come here."

In discussing language, Gina said she used the words "progressive environment" to describe what she valued about Club Med. When she defined these words as "like a management position," I suggested that Club Med would probably not share her definition. "Maybe I should say something like progressive or dynamic?" Gina asked. "See that's the problem, I don't know the right words to use." When I told Gina that "progressive environment" made me think of a place that was conducive to

social change, she asked more questions. "Maybe I should say progressive organization?" "Or dynamic organization?" "What do you think is the best?" Then I asked, "Well, what do you mean by whatever words you're going to put down there?"

Gina now became clear: "Opportunity for advancement for myself. . .within the organization." Despite her clarity, Gina still wanted her letter re-worded. Circling words, she said, "If I could just combine these two so that this one sounds more managerial and so that this one sounds a bit more clear. . .I have it made."

It was closing time, and Gina could not figure out how to say that her favorite sports were sailing, waterskiing, and swimming. "What I need," she confided, while raising her voice, "is a phrase that's all inclusive." Before I knew it I said, "Your specialty is all water-related sports right?" "all water-related sports. . .yeah, I like that," Gina exclaimed while writing those words down. "Do you think it's better to say fitness programs or recreational programs?" I kept silent. "Cause people go there for both," she reasoned: Or should I say both? Fitness and recreation. Maybe I should say both. Yeah. My father's into fitness and his girlfriend's into recreation. Guess it's both.

Then Gina surprised me. She opened her notebook, took out a mimeographed list and said, "These are the words I'm supposed to use." "What are they?" I asked. "Management words. . .I got them from the Office of Career Planning. Did you know they have little seminars on how to do things?" Our time was up. Gina said it was "okay to stop" because, although she came to the Center wanting to re-word her letter, she now realized that she had to re-write it. Her last words were "I was looking for words with a specific purpose, but it doesn't really matter."

While this conference illustrates key aspects of "Word magic," it also dramatizes some important pedagogical dilemmas that teachers of writing face. If we fulfill students' requests for "right words," do we become, to use a dependency metaphor, little more than well-intentioned language dealers—all-knowing teachers who dispense "word fixes" to desperate writers thereby encouraging their dependency on us? Also, do we inadvertently fall into authoritarian teaching modes by imposing our words on students? If we supply these words, we may entertain the assumption that our "right words" can become our students'

“right words.” We may also suggest that “right words” exist independently of specific usage—apart from the meaning a writer invests in them, and the historical, social, and rhetorical contexts in which they, both the writer and the text, are written.

Although Gina tacitly believed in “Word magic”—in the idea that “right words” were intrinsically powerful, existed on a list, and could be identified by a tutor—she ultimately saved the conference by shifting into an active learning mode and discussing her language choices. Still somewhat naive in her approach to language, Gina realized that the writer, if not the words, could be open to discussion, deliberation, and change.

II. Word Magic and Text Magic : a Writer and a Thesaurus

This section describes some problems associated with students’ belief in “Word Magic” when that belief is persistently connected to passive learning modes. This conference focused on Lana, a student who, having flunked out of one division of the school, was writing for admission to another. The opening of Lana’s text read as follows:

In September, when I attended-entered the Business School, I was extremely disappointed-disinterested in my courses-classes and I discovered-found them to be excessively-extremely boring & unstimulating. . . The classes were quite-rather tedious-monotonous with no chance- opportunity of-for significant-meaningful discussion. . . I would rather learn about more meaningful-significant-suggestive- expressive subjects such as philosophy and art than accounting and computers.

When Lana asked for my reaction, I chose to play the “dumb reader”—a term Walker Gibson (192) devised for the tutor who asks questions to show the writer where he experiences “wrong turns” (192) with the text. With Lana’s text, however, I did not have to *play* the “dumb reader.” My “wrong turns” were real, since her text confused me. When I asked for clarification, Lana surprised me. “I got these words from the thesaurus,” she

confided, "I want you to circle the right ones for me."

Lana believed in "Word magic" and objective language. She believed the "right words" were listed in the thesaurus, and that I could, and should, identify them for her. Her comments betrayed a "thesaurus philosophy of writing" (Sommers, 331)—one that portrays revision as a rewording activity, rather than a rethinking process. By placing her trust on a thesaurus and my reading of it, Lana illustrated her belief that: 1) word definition transcends discursive context, 2) words are interchangeable and 3) teachers know which words are best suited to a student's text.

For Lana, her thesaurus was a somewhat sacred text whose words could help salvage her academic career. Lana's linguistic, and I might add textual, "ideation" (Cassirer, 56) helped her submit to the text's authority. She did so secure in her belief that a thesaurus and, to a lesser extent, a tutor could do for her admission candidacy what her academic record could not. Though secular, Lana's act of faith in her thesaurus approached "Word veneration" (Cassirer, 45). In this process, the Word is seen as all-powerful and capable of transforming reality. For the believer, the Word "appears in league with the highest Lord of creation; either as the tool which he employs or actually as the primary source from which he, like all other being. . . is derived" (Cassirer, 46). Hoping to unleash the primary power that she believed existed in the words themselves, Lana cast me as someone who could (and should) identify the most powerful ones for her.

Muriel Harris writes that "when a student. . . mistakenly thinks the teacher has the answers, all real thought ceases" (62). This is also true when a student thinks a teacher has the right words. Lana's strategy for eliciting words was similar to Gina's. Yet while Gina was willing to rethink her text, Lana remained a passive learner. When I refused to circle words but offered to talk about what they meant to her, to me, and to her intended audience, she accused me of not "really helping" her write. She then reminded me that her tuition pays the salaries of "unhelpful teachers" like me.

Although this encounter was unproductive, it raises important questions about the assumptions we make when determining which pedagogical strategies are viable for us to use and valuable

for our students to experience. It also raises questions about the roles we play, and can play, in our students' processes of language acquisition.

My first question is *Who should determine a conference's agenda?* Most of us would say that students' agendas, which stem from their "felt need" (Harris, 64), should constitute a conference's highest priority. But is every felt need equally valid? What if students see us as a service? What if they come, as Gina and Lana did, looking for local solutions to holistic problems? If we supply them with words, are we joining the ranks of the "well-intentioned bank-clerk teachers" (Freire, 61) who offer students quick, and much appreciated, help while diminishing their ability to make informed choices and take responsibility for their words? From a rhetorical standpoint, if we ask students to explore "meaning" before searching for words, are we separating meaning from language? Are we saying, in effect, "First tell me what you mean," as if that telling can be done outside of language, "and then we'll work on effective phrasing"?

When helping students, we should not be flattered or begged into doing things to which we are philosophically opposed. But when students come to us with specific concerns which matter to them, don't we owe it to them to acknowledge the reasons behind their concerns? What would have happened had I asked Gina and Lana why they were so concerned with finding the "right words," why they thought I had the "right words," and why they thought certain words could work magic for their texts?

My second question is *When should we suggest specific wording for a student's text?* This question arose during a conversation with a tutor named Rachel. Rachel interrupted her conference to say that Lucy, one of her foreign students, was writing an essay about cooking but did not have the vocabulary to complete it. The word Lucy needed was "whisk." Rachel said she tried to elicit the word from Lucy by asking questions like, "Is it like an egg beater?" She then had Lucy freewrite to the theme of "cooking utensils in English." While Rachel regretted the fact that her "strict" adherence to Freirian pedagogy prevented her from telling Lucy the word, Lucy was becoming frustrated as she tried to freewrite her way to a word she did not know.

My theory is that Rachel could have asked questions, and Lucy could have freewritten, into perpetuity without arriving at

the word “whisk.” This was an issue of knowledge, since “whisk” was not yet in her English vocabulary. My point is that by withholding words from students through naive adherence to theory, we miss our chance to help them acquire language. We also mislead them by not alerting them about their usage “errors” before they publish their writing. For example, I would have been negligent not to let Gina know that few would share her definition of the words “progressive environment.” Also, by keeping “our” words to ourselves, we are being more Socratic than honest. We are not sharing what we know about language with students who want our help.

But what about students who don’t especially want our help because they see “magic” in their own words? How, apart from becoming authoritarian, do we persuade these writers that their word choices are likely to be viewed as errors by many in the academic community?

III. Transcending Word Magic: Personal Utterance in Dialogue

This conference involved Paul, one of my students who was writing a personal narrative. The paper described his dissatisfaction with life and began “As I sat at the window that Sunday, trying to write my paper, I thought of how horrible it all is. The sun was a burning ember. The brown leaves were swirling in the wind. It was a tasteless day.” I asked Paul what he meant by the words “It was a tasteless day.” He said, “Well, with the dead leaves blowin’ around and stuff and I’m unhappy and stuff. . . it’s like blah. . . you know, tasteless.”

Paul’s use of the word “tasteless” revealed an expressionist epistemology—one that situates “knowledge in human ‘consciousness’” and “celebrates the power of the human ‘voice’ to organize. . . experience according to personal needs” (Knoblauch, 131). In discussing this epistemology, C.H. Knoblauch notes that while expressionist rhetoric acknowledges students’ “creative potential” (132), it ignores the “massively real constraints on language use” (133), and deludes them into thinking they can change the rules of language.

One could argue that Paul’s metaphoric use of “tasteless” was unavoidable since “language never denotes simply objects. . . but always conceptions arising from the autonomous

activity of the mind” (Cassirer, 31). Yet this activity entails a potential risk:

Whenever any word... is used without a clear conception of the steps that led from its original to its metaphoric meaning, there is danger of mythology; whenever those steps are forgotten. . . we have diseased language, whether that language refers to religious or secular interests. (Muller qtd. in Cassirer, 86)

While I would not call Paul’s language “diseased,” I will argue that his “conception” of the process of taking “tasteless” from an intrinsic metaphoric status to a combined literal and metaphoric one was somewhat blurred. I say this because Paul told me that he thought he used “tasteless” correctly, that he assumed it could “work in a literal way.” Yet, when I said I never heard it used that way, he offered to remove it. “After all, you’re giving me the grade!” What saved this conference from degenerating into an act of student submission was the fact that Paul was interested in language and would talk about its uses.

I spoke to Paul about the dialogical orientation of modern rhetoric. I said that although language is often put to standard uses, it is not a closed system. We talked about how language is still developing with new verbs like “to party” still evolving. My point was that, although we have inherited a repertoire of words and definitions, we can experiment with them. We can experiment with words like jazz musicians experiment with songs. We can “play” words against their melody lines [read here “standard meanings”] to create new variations, textures, and nuances out of familiar material.

When Paul realized he could be an *inventor* and a *user* of language, he asked, “So I can say whatever word I like and be right. . .right?” I then realized the problem of discussing theory with students. What I had intended as a problem-posing discussion of dialogical rhetoric and language use had been understood as an invitation to indulge in an expressionist position—a *carte blanche* with which to ignore language’s social uses.

Some critics suggest encouraging students’ “tentative engagement with metaphoric writing” (Mazzarins, 527). Leaving aside for a moment the poststructuralist contention that language is metaphor, Mazzarins gives instructors the following tasks: “to

unravel the logic in the students' errors and thus decipher their personal, often idiosyncratic, conceptual codes. . . [and] to acquaint the student writer with the nature, and more importantly, the *value* of his mistakes". Mazzarins compares students' language "deviation" to the linguistic experimentation found in literary texts. The author concludes that in "making writers sensitive to the intellectual and imaginative structures implicit in their own writing", we help them "develop skill and confidence in their own voices" (527).

Although Mazzarins' point is well-taken, I disagree with this argument. For one thing, it overestimates the value most teachers place on linguistic deviation when it appears in student writing. It also overestimates the degree to which teachers will grant students the same authority as published writers. Beyond that, in praising students' linguistic "deviation", this perspective could be romanticizing what may sometimes be the result of carelessness or a misused thesaurus.

In tutoring Paul, I had two goals: to help him understand the dialectic between personal utterance and linguistic convention and to defend his intellectual freedom while helping him refine his language. To this end, I invited him to a second conference where we discussed a passage of dialogical theory. The passage maintained that private craftsmanship in language is impossible because "individual consciousness is not the architect of the ideological superstructure, but only a tenant lodging in the edifice of ideological signs" (Volosinov, 13). When we substituted the word "linguistic" for "ideological," Paul said he could see that writing involves "some freedom and some tradition." Through exposure to theory, mediated by such accessible metaphors as "architect" and "tenant," he could see that even though we communicate within a system, we can still say something new. We discussed the idea that as far as "tasteless" went, there were no "right words" for all time just as there were no intrinsically "good quotes" to be inserted into a term paper.

Paul then asked how he could make his "experimental writing" clearer to his audience. I suggested three things: that he refine his passages so that "his" words worked contextually, that he define words in a glossary or index, and that he gauge his readers' receptivity to his word choice by showing them early drafts. I also let him know that in writing for me, he was writing for an idiosyncratic audience—someone who enjoyed mixing

metaphors in conversation—saying, for instance, that people “smoke like fish.” I also reminded him that this term is not considered acceptable as academic discourse and that some readers would criticize me for using it in a scholarly paper, just as they would criticize him for writing “tasteless day” in a formal essay. The last thing we talked about was how we would always have to make decisions about the words we use and how important it was that those decisions be informed by knowledge of our options. As Elbow writes, there “are agreements and criteria about how to interpret any word in a natural language, but these agreements are not written down and they are always in the process of renegotiation—or at least always up for renegotiation” (294).

Conclusion

Encouraging students to become sensitive to the “constantly shifting agreements” (Elbow, 294) about language use is a central component of teaching writing. Helping students demystify word usage creates a balance between the competing epistemologies of language at work in the academy. These epistemologies are enacted by colleagues who supply students with prefabricated word lists which discourage them from linguistic experimentation. They are also enacted by students who are so intimidated by writing that they look to teachers, lists, and thesauruses for their words. They are even enacted by bolder writers who need to learn that speaking from personal voice does not necessarily entail being understood.

Yet it’s so human and tempting to look for “Word magic.” School is only one place where we seek the precise alchemical combination of words that would make our utterances unique, important, and memorable. Cassirer notes that historically “Language and myth stand in an original indissoluble correlation with one another, from which they both emerge but gradually as independent elements” (88). Interpreting this statement pedagogically, we can reframe it. We can argue that, once students’ myths about language combine with their assumptions about pedagogy, language and myth are still profoundly interdependent. Having worked to subvert my students’ belief in “Word magic,” I don’t know whether my decisions were “right” or appropriate. All I know is part of what happened. Gina revised

her letter and got an entry level management-training position at Club Med. Lana hired a tutor who agreed to circle words. I asked Rachel to tell Lucy the word “whisk” and to explain how you can also “whisk” someone away. And a week after our conference, I received an essay from Paul that read:

As I sat at the window that Sunday evening trying to write my paper, I thought of how horrible it all was. As the sun was fading from view, I could see the leaves swirling around in the wind. For me, it was a dismal, tasteless day.

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