Having a Word for It

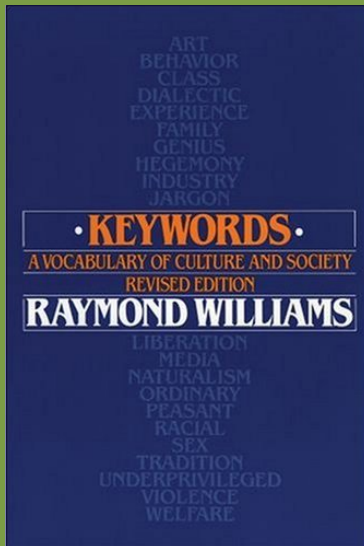**Geoff Nunberg**

i218 Concepts of Information

Jan 22, 2015

Keywords:

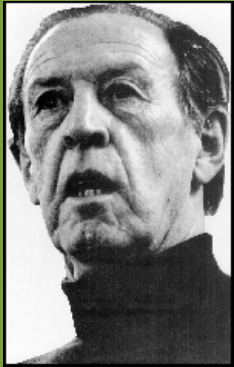"strong, difficult, and persuasive words in everyday usage" and…

"words which, beginning in specialized contexts, have become quite common in descriptions of thought and experience."

"significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought. Certain usages [bind] together certain ways of seeing culture and society."

"This… is the vocabulary we share with others when we discuss many of the central processes of our common life."

On Keywords

The influence of Williams' *Keywords*

Lexicography vs "thick description"

Sequels:

Additions & revisions:

New Keywords: citizenship, colonialism, copy, conservatism, consumption, country

Keywords for American Studies: canon, contract, corporation

(Also deconstruction, desire, diaspora, discipline, difference, discourse, dialect, etc.)

Also, Keywords for Childrens' Literature, Disabilities Studies etc.

The Varieties of Keywords

"Compacted doctrines" (Empson): (apparently) stable words that encapuslate basic cultural and social attitudes

> *work, interest, city/country, family, community, freedom, science, society*

> *Contrast solidarity, fraternalism, republic(an), democrat*, which have no current role as keywords in Eng.-speaking culture

Words that "engage continuity and discontinuity and also deep conflicts of value and belief" – "contested concepts" (W. B. Gallie)

> Williams: *class, imperialism, liberation, elite*

> Later: *multiculturalism, diversity, secularism, representation, *elite, tradition…*

> (Also: words drawn from specialized/intellectual discourses: *alienation, formalist, dialectic, hegemony…*)

What does it signify to have a word* for something?

We could scarcely have a lesson on the growth of our English tongue, we could scarcely follow upon one of its significant words, without having unawares a lesson in English history as well, without not merely falling upon some curious fact illustrative of our national life, but learning also how the great heart which is beating at the centre of that life, was being gradually shaped and moulded.

—Richard Chevenix Trench

*"Word" = "ordinary-language fixed expressions of some currency" (OLFESC)"-- A. Zwicky

Linguistic pictures of lexicalization

Lexicalization: a grammatical or theoretical notion

The molecular theory of word meaning:

- Thoughts are assembled from semantic atoms: percepts, indices, logical relations, maybe other innate stuff. So are words.

- Lexicalization doesn't introduce any (or very much?) new cognitive material:
  - If you can say it, you can think it without saying it.
  - Not "having a word" is no impediment to thought.
  - e.g. *Schadenfreude, cozy, etc.*

Linguistic understanding of lexicalization

But lexicalization has various cognitive consequences.

> If a language provides a label for a complex concept, that could make it easier to think about the concept, because the mind can handle it as a single package when juggling a set of ideas, rather than having to keep each of its components in the air separately.
>
> —Steven Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature*

Psychological consequences of lexicalization

Lexicalization of concepts facilitates coding & recall, chunks content in short-term memory, foregrounds lg-relevant percepts, makes reference more convenient…

relating to the maintenance of a balance between producing and using carbon, especially balancing carbon-dioxide emissions by activities such as growing plants to use as fuel or planting trees in urban areas to offset vehicle emissions

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carbon-neutral*!!!*

What does having a word signify?

A common view: names as convenient packaging

> The stock of words in a language reflects the kinds of things its speakers deal with in their lives and hence think about. … In the case of varieties of snow and words for snow, not only did the snow come first, but when people change their attention to snow, they change their words as the result.
> —Steve Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought*

We give names to things we talk about a lot.

We talk a lot about things we think about a lot.

Appearance of names reflects shift in attention.

Does this explain the fetishizing of having-a-word?

"The so-and-sos have a word for X" →
"The so-and-sos are *quite* interested in X"

Independence of Words & Concepts

Cf concepts that antedate their names

original Having the quality of that which proceeds directly from oneself; such as has not been done or produced before; novel or fresh in character or style. (1756)

originality in this sense from 1782

But cf. Milton's "things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme" (1667)

Hist of concept of originality ≠ history of *originality*

Cf also development of *patriotism*, etc.

Cf *plot twist* (1920) "An unexpected turn of events in a work of fiction"

Two understandings of "lexicalization"

	"linguistic"	**"philological" (history, literature, cultural studies, etc.)**
Crucial data	Oblig. gram. categories or basic lex. cats. (e.g., aspect markers, classifiers, color names, spatial terms, etc.) Mngs easy to contrast X-linguistically, slow to change, invariant w/in S-C	Socially relevant keywords, etc. (e.g., *sincerity*, *sentimental*, *culture*, *community*, *liberal*, *freedom*, *civilité*, *naissance*, *Herrschaft*, etc.) Mngs highly lg-particular, change over time, vary w/in S-C
Relata	lg & thought	words & concepts
Research questions	Theoretical: Does lg shape thought?	Methodological: What does lg reveal about concepts? How do words serve to mobilize/rationalize/legitimate, etc.?
Notion of Language	Individual capacity (competence)	Holistic/Collective (*langue*)
Notion of lexicalization	Synchronic	Diachronic

Still, lexicalization obviously has historical & social implications.

> Signals not just new things (*podcast, palmtop, personal shopper*) but new concepts or new attitudes about old ones
>
> > *ethnic*, WASP, *color blind*
> >
> > *protest march, songs, the literature of ~*, etc.
> >
> > *Traditional furniture (1933), ~ house (1936), ~ grammar (1938/*1960), values (1940's)*, etc.

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Social Implications of Lexicalization

The surest sign that a group or society has entered into the self-conscious possession of a new concept is that a corresponding vocabulary will be developed, a vocabulary which can then be used to pick out and discuss the concept with consistency.

—Quentin Skinner, "Language and Social Change"

Assumptions:

- Concepts belong to groups or societies.
- Concepts (partially?) precede lexicalization
- Lexicalization (often) signals group (meta-)awareness of concept -- something the group wants to be able to discuss (not merely refer to)
- Lexicalization serves to legitimate/defend…
- New items are associated with "vocabularies."
- Lexicalization signals collective interest in coordinating usage/concept.

Social Implications of Lexicalization

Lexicalization signals group (meta-)awareness of concept; often implies critical interest

> E.g., 18th c. appearance of *patriotism* didn't signify that the British had suddenly discovered the love of country but that the claim of loving one's country had become controversial, a part of "the hard currency of party rhetoric" ("the last refuge…")

> i.e., lexicalization often serves legitimation, reification, mobilization, etc. *religious* ("punctillious") *imperialism*, *color-blind*, *traditional* (family, wedding, etc.)…

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We have been of late much perplexed by a new word,
"Imperialism," which has crept in among us... I have
heard of Imperial policy, and Imperial interests, but
Imperialism, as such, is a newly coined word to me.
—Lord Carnavon, Colonial Secretary, 1878
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Lexicalization and vocabularies

The surest sign that a group or society has entered into the self-conscious possession of a new concept is that *a corresponding vocabulary will be developed,* a vocabulary which can then be used to pick out and discuss the concept with consistency. Skinner

(socially significant) lexicalization is (often) associated with "vocabularies."

Vocabulary = a group of words that share an identifiable common provenance (sometimes formally marked) and that are connected to some extra-denotative theme. *(n.b., prob. not what Skinner means…)*

e.g., French borrowings:

debonair, chic, à la mode; *affair, risqué, ménage à trois* (things they do better than we do…)

Cf successive waves of isms.

16th-17th c.: *-ism* forms names of sects considered heretical

Anabaptism, Lutheranism, Romanism, papism, etc.

18th c. *patriotism, fanaticism, republicanism,, despotism, rationalism, ism*, usually disparaging (Metternich: "all isms are abusive").

later 19th c.: names of systems of government, social forces, social phenomena, etc.:

capitalism, nationalism, colonialism, communism…

Cf also modern *racism*, *sexism*, etc.

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Take away the -*ism*, and the 'thing', agency or 'force' constituted by the -*ism* dissolves, leaving behind a whole range of distinct experiences, events and phenomena which might be rejoined or disconnected in a variety of ways… H. Höpfl

Words structure cultural formations

Implications of *information* in its collocations & oppositions:

information explosion, gap, storage, system, transfer, work; -gathering, -giving, -seeking; information processing, information retrieval, information revolution, information science, information technology, information overload, information rich, information warfare.

Not to mention *information society, information anxiety, information glut, information haves & have-nots* etc.

information in its semantic oppositions to *data, knowledge, wisdom…*

information implicates a semantic field or conceptual scheme

Imputing semantic unities: cf values, entitlement, etc.

"It is widely recognized that information theory is a problematic term, and that even the term *information technology* may be a misleading label for data technology or computer technology."

Lexicalization and coordination

Lexicalization permits reference to C without requiring specification of content of C.

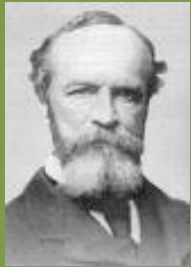Deferential use of language: elms and experts

"Essentially contested concepts"

Fruitcake words: the blind men and the menagerie

Idols of the Market

Lexicalization can lead to reifications, false unities & distinctions, etc.

> Whenever we have made a word to denote a certain group of phenomena, we are prone to suppose a substantive entity existing beyond the phenomena, of which the word shall be the name.
> —William James, *Principles of Psychology*…

> The same words may be used with different significance, and by assuming the word to have the same significance always, erroneous conclusions may he reached.
> — Franz Boas

Living up to the language

It is true that our social practices help to bestow meaning on our social vocabulary. But it is equaly true that our social vocabulary helps to constitute the character of those practices. Quentin Skinner, "The Idea of a cultural lexicon."

Cf the social effects of the right's appropriation of the language of civil rights and diversity: *color-blind, discrimination, preferences, racism, bias*, etc.
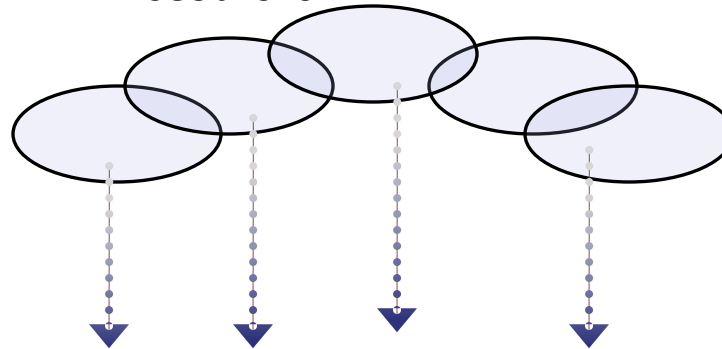
Shifts in linguistic authority

Semantic trickle-down:

Cf recent histories of *demographic, alienation, conformist, ethnic, identity politics, peer-group, status symbol, schizophrenic, narcissist…*

"Lately there ain't been much work on account of the economy"

Specialized discourses
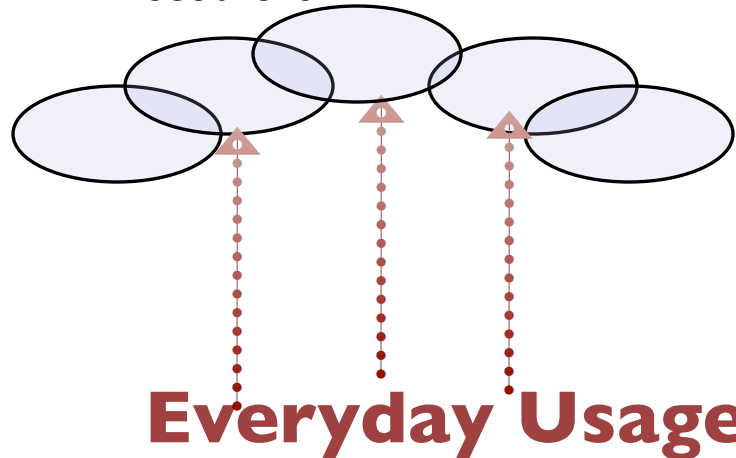
Everyday Usage

Shifts in linguistic authority

Words percolate up the ivory tower

"Technicalization" of vocabulary:

Cf modern development of *community, wealth, depression* (econ. & psych.)

Specialized discourses

Everyday Usage

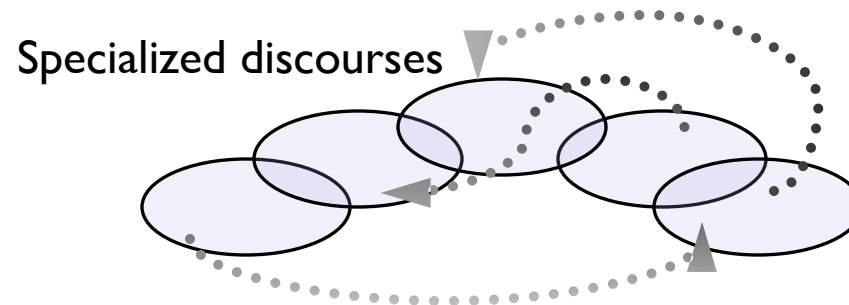# Shifts in linguistic authority

Words circle round the ivory tower (intellectual *Wanderwörter*)

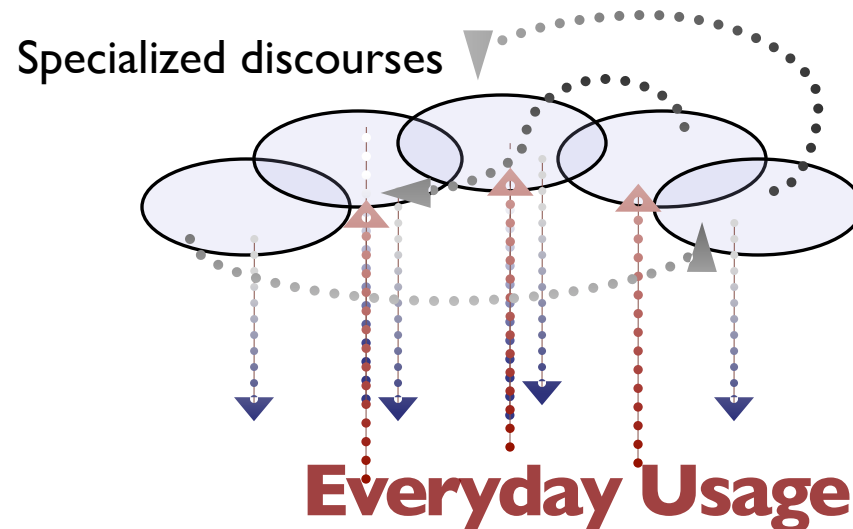Cf recent histories of *network, formalism, grammar, information, recursive…*

Specialized discourses

Everyday Usage

Social implications
authority

Processes combine in complex ways; cf recent history of *information*:
But why should the structure of the (social) lexicon be simpler than the structure of society?

Specialized discourses

Everyday Usage

Lexicalization implies collective acknowledgement of concepts

Lexicalization most significant as it affects "vocabularies"

Lexicalization may also includeg eneral adoption of specialized lg, with attendant shifts in social/linguistic authority

Assignment for 1/27: How Much Information ?

In his introduction to the special section of IJOC, Martin Hilbert argues that it is not only statistically feasible, but also analytically insightful to quantify the amount of information handled by society (Hilbert, 2012). As best you can, quantify the amount of information you handle (i.e., create or store or consume etc.) in the course of one four-to-eight hour period, whether at home, at school, or elsewhere. Remember to include not just the types of sources discussed by Bohn & Short and Lyman & Varian, but also the "incidental" and ambient information that we encounter as we drive to work, eat breakfast, or call home; the idea here is to spread the net as widely as possible. Feel free to use whatever measures or metrics seem appropriate to the task, coming up with your own if necessary. Assess the statistical feasibility and analytic insightfulness of the result: what questions does the exercise raise for a theory of "information" in the large?

Readings for 1/27

Bohn, Roger E. & James E. Short. 2009. *How Much Information? 2009: Report on American Consumers.* San Diego: Global Information Industry Center.

Lyman, Peter, H. Varian, K. Swearingen, P. Charles, N. Good, L. Jordan, & J. Pal. 2003. *How Much Information?* Berkeley: School of Information Management & Systems. Executive Summary.