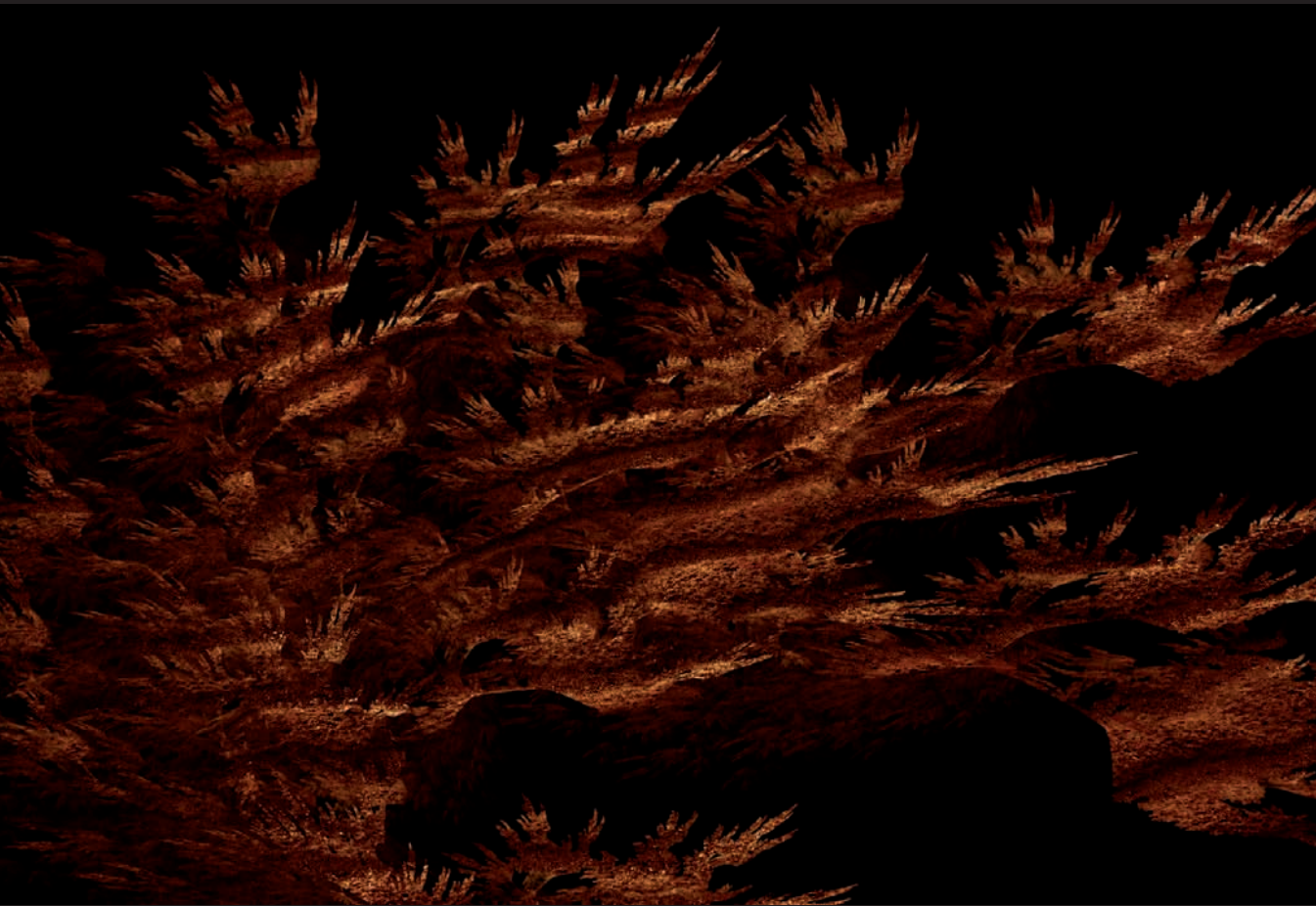


REASON TO WRITE



GINA L. VALLIS

we use when we speak or write—profoundly affect meaning in ways that have nothing to do with the dictionary definition of the words that we use.

2 LANGUAGE AND ASSOCIATES

Language is powerful. People are persuaded by language. Religious texts, political speeches, philosophical treatise, laws, contracts, and constitutions have compelled people to all sorts of actions and beliefs. Despite our protestations that only sticks and stones have the ability to do so, such things as profanity or racial slurs can offend or hurt people.

In turn, even how one uses language can reflect one's origin, one's class, and one's level of education. People judge others based upon the way that they speak. Even a person's name, which usually won't be found in a typical dictionary, can provide huge amounts of information to others about a person. Yet, as so many people have pointed out, these are *just words*.

One of the things that gets in the way of understanding why these are not “just” words is our reliance upon the dictionary to define what language is, for us. A dictionary gives people the impression that language is merely a bunch of unrelated words organized in an alphabetical list.

In our use of language, however, it is quite the opposite. All language is what could be described as *associational*: each word is linked to words to which it is alike, to words in which it is in opposition, and to words to which it is in some other kind of relationship. Those associations are often not so much logical as much as categorical, or even based simply on how the word sounds. Each word shares a variety of things in common with other words, and those relationships impact upon the way that we perceive the world, which is determined, to a large degree, by language.

This is why one could pick practically any word and begin to create an associational “web” of related words, even if the relationship has nothing to do with the definition of the words, themselves. Let's take a simple example: the word **boat**.

From a dictionary, “boat” would probably be listed following a word such as “boastful,” to which it has little relationship besides sharing the first few letters. The word **boat**, in general, would probably be defined as a noun and a verb. It would probably be described as a man-made means of transportation that travels on the water, that

is propelled by sails, or an engine, or oars, and that is somewhat synonymous to such words as “ship.”

If one accepts the way that the dictionary structures language, then one can imagine that *boat* refers to those objects in the world that fit that definition, and leave it at that. However, its true associational relationships are much more complex than that:

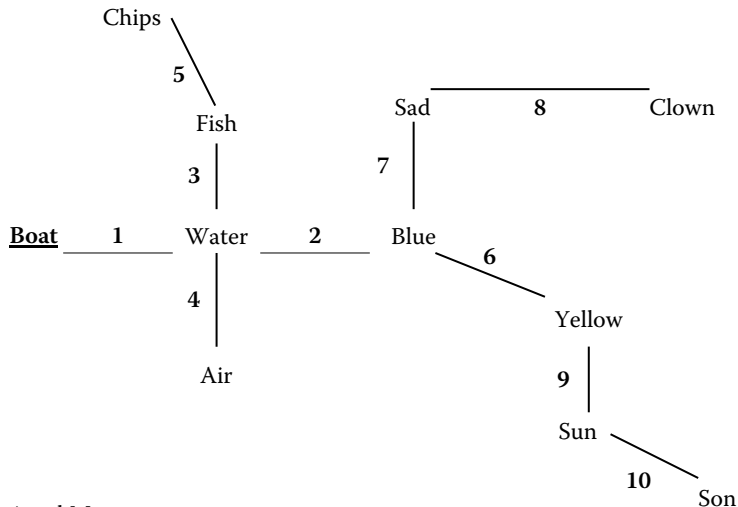


Fig. 1: Associational Map

Obviously, this map could get a lot more complex. Even with the simple diagram, here, if each number represents a certain kind of associational relationship, we could catalogue them as follows:

1. boat/water: *purpose association*
A boat travels on water, and not air or land
2. water/blue: *cultural association*
Water is often represented as blue, and can look blue or green in certain light, although, unadulterated, it is a clear liquid.
3. water/fish: *purpose association*
Fish live in water, and not on land or air
4. water/air: *categorical association*
The four elements: fire, air, water, land

5. fish/chips: *cultural association*
“Fish and Chips” is a common food pairing
6. blue/yellow: *categorical association*
Blue and Yellow are Colors
7. blue/sad: *metaphorical association*
Blue is Sad
8. sad/clown: *cultural association*
Clown faces are often painted in a Sad expression
9. yellow/sun: *cultural association*
The Sun is often represented as Yellow, although light provided by the sun is actually a spectrum.
10. sun/son: *homonym or homophone association*
Sun and Son sound the same, although they have different spellings and different meanings.

Shakespeare made good use of the last associative link in his famous line from the play “Richard III”: “Now is the winter of our discontent/Made glorious summer by this sun of York” (1.1.712). In these lines in the play, “sun” has a double meaning, because it also refers to the newly crowned eldest “son” of the Duke of York. Puns also rely upon these kinds of associations, which is one of the reasons they can be so painful, as in: “A man sent ten different puns to friends, thinking at least one of the puns would make them laugh. No pun in ten did.”

In the associative map that is drawn, here, it is easy to see why “Boat” is associated with “Water” (a boat floats on the water), and “Water” associated with “Blue” (water is often perceived, and represented, as blue), and “Blue” is associated with “Sad” (to be blue) and “Blue” is associated with “Yellow” (they are both colors), but it’s harder to see the associational relationship between “Boat” and “Clown.” That’s because the associational relationship depends upon proximity: the further away on the web two words get, the weaker the association.

In the dictionary, words are alphabetized, with neat definitions. However, that’s not the way that words are organized in our heads. When we respond to language, we respond to its *syntagmatic* and *paradigmatic* quality.

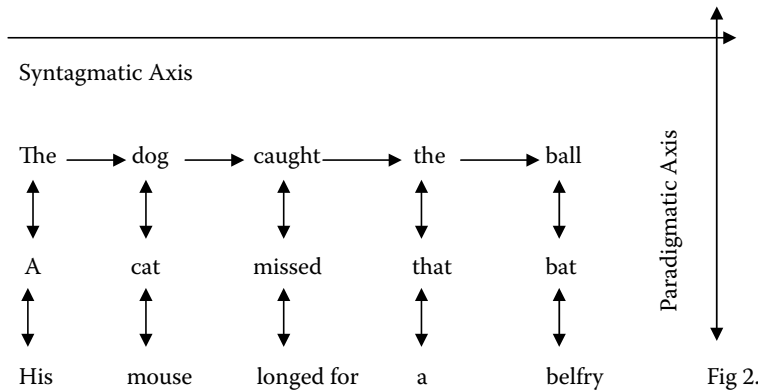


Fig 2.

The horizontal, left-to-right sequence is called the *syntagmatic* axis. You can think of this as *syntax*: the order of words as they appear in a sentence, and that indicates the word’s potential function (eg.: a verb). The English language tends to follow an S/V/O pattern, as in: “John (Subject) walked (Verb) the dog (Object).”

Because we tend to pattern our sentences in this way, we are often able to ascertain the function of words simply by the order in which they are placed, in the sentence, even if we don’t know their meaning.

For example, Lewis Carroll’s famous poem “The Jabberwocky” begins with the line: “’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves/Did gyre and gimble in the wabe” (1.1.22). None of this should make any sense; most of these words don’t exist in the English language. Yet we know that “brillig” and “slithy” are probably adjectives, and “toves” and “wabe” are probably nouns, and “gire” and “gimble” are probably verbs. Why? Because of the syntagmatic axis: the position of the words in the sentence.

The up-and-down lines make up the *paradigmatic* axis; this is where the earlier map comes into play, because each association would create the potential for a new association. The paradigmatic axis in language is the relational quality of words—the way we categorize meaning. It offers the *connotative* quality of words.

On the one hand, there is what a word *denotes*. (dictionary definition)

On the other hand, there is what a word *connotes*. (association)

Denotation: Rose: A type of flowering bush.

Connotation: Rose: Romantic love, poetry, beauty, etc.

So what does all of this have to do with writing? Everything. Although we can’t anticipate what personal association a reader may have with a word (maybe your reader

was attacked by a rose bush), we *are* responsible, as writers, for accounting for our shared associations of a word, especially when writing to those with whom we share a common language.

Connotation is simply the associations of a word that give a word a certain “slant” that we all recognize, but don’t always notice, while we’re writing. That connotation can change the meaning of what we really intend to say in using a given word.

Let’s take the word *individual*. This term has connotations of rugged independence, the rebel, innovation and invention, entrepreneurship, and refusal to relinquish one’s moral fortitude. These connotations are what we transmit when we use the term, not the standard dictionary definition of “related to a single person or thing.”

To define the term in a conscious manner is take control of connotation. If one were, for example, to read Erving Goffman, one would find that society always offers its members a prefabricated role to play within the group context. That role can be positive or negative (a jock, a prison guard, a police officer, a student, a drug dealer, a celebrity, etc.).

These roles have scripted lines (“Step out of the car, please, ma’am”), a uniform or costume (one goes to the prom in a dress or suit), and expected behaviors (a preppie is supposed to drive a certain car, have certain friends and love interests, etc.)

These roles exist before a particular individual steps into them, and continue to exist after a particular individual is gone. An individual playing a certain role may stretch the boundaries of that role (come to class in pajamas), but only so far. Cross a certain line that has any societal stakes (a male jock fights when challenged) and one may quickly find one’s ability to play the role in jeopardy.

In addition, these roles include ways in which we form our identities at a given time in our lives: if one is a white male firefighter in the middle class who is the father of two children, the underlined words give specific guidelines concerning what to do in given situations, and how to act, but also make up a large portion of how others think of us, as well as how we think of ourselves.

On the other end of the extreme, one can find persons who refuse to conform to established social roles. Such people are outcasts, living on the edges of society—the extremists, the hermits, the criminals, or the insane. In this sense, occupying established social roles has nothing to do with being individualistic, but with conforming to what is expected.

Therefore, an *individual* could be defined, in this sense, as a person who does not conform: one who forms his or her primary identity outside of the predetermined roles provided by the social context. It would also not necessarily represent a desirable or comfortable role.

Here are three sets of words. Their *denotation* is the same (they are synonyms, in the dictionary), but the words carry different *connotations*.

The best evidence that we communicate in language primarily at an associational level is the fact that if there were no real differences between these words, we wouldn't have come up with several versions of them. Language is economical—no two words are exactly the same. We use different words because we need them to convey slightly different connotations, even if their denotations are too similar to notice a real difference.

<u>Positive</u>	<u>Negative</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Really Negative</u>
public servant	bureaucrat	government employee	pencil-pusher
detainee	convict	prisoner	criminal
believer	zealot	religious person	fanatic

Now let's see how this works in language usage. The following sentences say the same thing, but the associations produce a different *connotation*:

1. Former prisoners are spied upon even after they return home.
2. Ex-cons are closely monitored after release from prison.
3. Former inmates are observed after release from penal institutions.
4. Criminals, when released into the civilian population, are placed under close surveillance.

In writing, there is no innocent use of language: all words are guilty by association.

Words and their combination are the stuff of writing, and a portion of the meaningful communication we do with one another. The most powerful tool that you have in crafting prose is to make the relationship between your intended meaning, and the associative quality of the word or phrase you use to express that meaning, as close as possible. This is what instructors mean when they talk about creating precision in your writing.

3 METAPHOR: WORDS ARE SLITHY TOVES

“Everything is vague to a degree you do not realize until you have tried to make it precise.”

—Bertrand Russell

EVER WONDERED?

The Latin “e.g.” and “i.e.” are often used to list thing/s that refers to the statement that is made. The difference between the two is that “e.g.” means, basically, “for example.” Use it to list one or more items when there is a range of examples you could have given, as in: “There were toys in the room (e.g.: blocks, crayons, and picture books).” In contrast, “i.e.” is used when you mean “this or these, specifically,” as in “The toys were for young children (i.e.: two—five years old).”

Most language is associational because it is fundamentally metaphorical. A metaphor is a situation in language wherein one thing is described in terms of another. Often we use a concrete term (e.g.: “rose”) to describe an abstract concept (e.g.: “love”). In doing so, we make a comparison.

Metaphor: A = B

Metaphor: Love (A) is a Rose (B)

If you’ll notice, this statement is profoundly illogical. Love is not a rose. Love is an emotion. A rose is a plant.

However, we all understand that what we are really saying is that love, like a rose, is beautiful, transient, can hurt, etc. One could blame this on that darned literature stuff—poetry, and the like—which tends to mix up logic. However, it’s not that simple.

Think about the following statement:

Whenever I make it home, my brother can’t stop going on about how I really got my act together this last year, but my sister never stops talking about ancient history.

Seems pretty straightforward.

Yet every word that is underlined is metaphorical. How does one “make it” home, beyond actually constructing a building, and what’s the difference between “home” and “it”? How can someone “go on” regarding a topic—ice skates? Is the speaker in a play, so that he or she has to “act,” and what is he or she bringing “together” in doing so? If the speaker’s sister “never stops talking,” how does she sleep? And what does the Neolithic Period have to do with anything?

Although metaphor is so common in language that it is nearly impossible to avoid its use, metaphor is a blunt tool—it always leaves things out. Love may be beautiful, like a rose, but we do not usually mean that love is long-stemmed or may have aphids. Metaphor offers the gist of meaning through comparison. To use an “extended metaphor,” if you want to be clear in writing, you’ve got to “sharpen” the meaning of a term to a more “precise point.”

Most metaphor in language is already in usage. We know the meanings because the metaphors are *idiomatic*. When a statement is *idiomatic*, it means that we are relying on something other than the dictionary definitions of the words to understand their meaning. Instead, we’re relying on context and on associational links, including things such as shared cultural understanding.

When we say what we don’t actually mean, we rely upon a shared understanding or context, to prevent misunderstanding. If someone were to ask you: “Were you born in a barn?” you would not respond with the answer “No, I was born in a hospital,” unless you were profoundly oblivious to the idiomatic quality of the question—which is not actually a question. Rather, it is a request with emotive kick, often meaning something like: “Close the door.”

In writing, we lack our full arsenal of contextual clues to allow our audience to “get” statements that are not to be taken literally—we don’t have gestures, or a particular timeframe, or even a physical context, to help us avoid such mishaps. To compensate for the possibility of misunderstanding—and to say what we really mean—we must define any ambiguous terms for a reader.

Let’s take the word “love,” as we understand it. In the context of the English language, at this time in history, in places such as the United States, this word will refer to, (depending on when and how and where we use it, and who we are), the feelings we have, among others, for a parent, a friend, a child, a sexual partner or spouse, a hometown, a country, objects, a pet, states of mind, and, potentially, chocolate.

So how do we know what someone means when they use that word? Sometimes we rely upon context. Terry Eagleton gives the following example:

Imagine that far into the future, all that is left are the ruins of our current civilization. Even the simplest of signs might be confusing. How would someone from that time, for example, interpret a sign that said: “Dogs Must be Carried on Elevators.” Does this mean that, if one has a dog, the dog must be carried while on the elevator? Or, does it mean that, in order to get on the elevator, one must be carrying a dog? (6)

Without the context, things get ambiguous, quickly. The other way to make our meaning clear is to choose our words carefully, and to use definitions in our prose.

There's no way of getting away from this slippery quality in language, but it is good to know that it is slippery. This means paying attention to what you are really saying, and not just what you think you mean.

Get the picture? Good—as Scott McCloud says, “I’d like a copy.”

4 GUARD RAILS FOR THE TRICKY BITS

Being careful with language is more than just avoiding being careless. If you do not define your terms, language will happily take over and speak for you, either obscuring your meaning, or hurting your credibility as someone capable of objective analysis. Some typical examples include:

Emotional Language

Adjectivitis

Wine-Bottle-Label Language

Glidge

Generalities

Emotional Language

You probably could figure out that calling a religious person a “zealot” is not going to result in writing that sounds objective. An essay is not an editorial, and emotional language has no place in academic writing. For example, neither of these statements sounds particularly objective:

“Those no-good garbage-sorting atheistic latté-guzzling intellectual tree-hugging environmentalists are ruining the country”

“Those no-good intolerant anti-civil-rights pro-business religious zealots are ruining the country.”

Any word that is “loaded”—that is, value-laden or biased—will immediately signal to a reader that a writer’s ability to be fair and honest may be in question. While there is

no need to be stiff, academic writing, across all disciplines, is a discourse that strikes a tone of logical objectivity.

Adjectivitis

Most writers get into trouble in this area when they employ abstract adjectives—descriptive words that are left undefined. An abstract term refers to something that is not concrete, and therefore cannot be experienced in the world. If one were to walk into a room and describe it, the difference would be the following:

Abstract: A beautiful, cozy room with a delightful and welcoming ambience designed to make people feel comfortable and relaxed.

Do you know what the room looks like? Probably not. Could a lot of rooms fit such a description? Probably.

Concrete: A small room with low lighting and dark blue walls with three oversized velvet armchairs placed in front of a warm fireplace.

This description is much more specific. It's not that a writer can't use abstract terms—writers must use abstract terms, in fact—but rather that abstract terms don't convey much meaning until they are defined for the reader.

Glidge, or Wine-Bottle Labels

Some descriptive phrases are so overused that you can create the impression of being an untrustworthy writer, even if the rest of your reasoning is entirely valid, and you intended to be fair. They are common phrases that we hear people use around us, and that sometimes enter our keyboards, through our fingers, without being filtered through our thought processes.

This can be called “Wine-Bottle-Label-Language” because it sounds great, but means nothing, as in: “A generous bouquet, yielding its darker hints to the soothing tones of a sweet afterglow.” Some examples of these phrases would include:

- | | |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Law and order | Military-industrial complex |
| Crime in the streets | White power structure |
| Law-abiding citizen | Hardened criminal |
| True Self | Corporate greed |

The reason that the people who read our writing tend to see us as biased when we use words with these kinds of connotations is because, frankly, we usually tend to use those words because we *do* have a certain bias.

Such phrases can even be used to deliberately obscure what is actually being described. There is a term for the deliberate use of these kinds of phrases to persuade an audience, and it's the same in the academic world as in the real world. It's called *lying*—deliberately obscuring the truth of a thing by making it sound different than what it is. George Orwell points out a few of the following examples in his essay “Politics and the English Language”:

elimination of unreliable elements

Shooting people who oppose your political viewpoint

collateral damage

Bombing the school when you were aiming for the airbase

final solution

Genocide

transfer of populations

Removing a group of people from an area, against their will

These are obvious examples. However, some connotations are harder for us to spot, and can even indicate a bias we may not know that we have.

Glidge

Most abstract terms are tricky—they include such words such as *freedom*, *natural*, *human*, *love*, *smart*, *evil*, or *personality*. If a writer does not define these kinds of terms, the associative quality of words will simply act on their own to control the meaning conveyed. Why? For the same reason people climb mountains—because they can.

If one were to write: “It is *natural* for people to fear snakes,” what one could mean is that: “It is *understandable* for people to fear snakes,” or “It is *common* for people to fear snakes.” That is because “natural” and “understandable” and “common” are associated terms.

Yet despite what one might have meant, that is not what one has said. What one has said is that people are *biologically predisposed* to fear snakes. That is not a true statement. It is not “natural” to fear snakes—there are plenty of people who find snakes quite delightful creatures, and who study them, and even have them as pets.