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WINGS FOR HUMMINGBIRDS TO FLY WITH

Creativity as a Play of Symbols

Innovation requires, as the cliché has it, thinking “outside the box.” Curiosity comes from the Latin word *cūra*, “concern, attention,” and evokes, as Michel Foucault (1997:325) says, “the care one takes of what exists and what might exist.” One has to define what makes the box a box (the context of one’s knowledge), find the ill-fitting pieces, and look at known things in a different way.

Social continuity flows naturally from the structuralist model since existing norms are tacitly available. On the other hand, social change requires new norms. To introduce the possibility of change, I explore paradoxes and plays. In this chapter, I develop a symbolic model of creativity. “Appropriation, mimicry, quotation, allusion, and sublimated collaboration consist of a kind of *sine qua non* of the creative act” (Lethem 2007:61). I develop a dialectical approach to individual representations of the other. I illustrate this model with the ancient Maya creator god, Itzamnaaj. He enabled life by, for example, giving hummingbirds their wings and making maize sprout. Scribes, potters, mask makers, and other artisans worked for him at his court. Itzamnaaj served as a role model for creation in ancient Maya society.

Fishing for Pearls and Information

Figures of speech are fundamental to both communication and creativity. Two operations—relationships of contiguity (or metonymy) and relationships of similarity (or metaphors)—are needed to speak intelligibly (Grigg 2008:151–169; Jakobson and Halle 1956:58; Ricoeur 1977; Schmidt 2010; Tilley 1999). Jakobson and Halle (1956:63) distinguished between contiguity

and similarity disorders. Stroke patients with the contiguity language disorder known as Broca's aphasia are unable to form coherent words and sentences. The most extreme case was Victor Leborgne, who could hear and understand everything that was said to him but responded to every question with a gesture and *tan, tan*—earning him the nickname Tan (Broca 1861:343). Speakers with a similarity disorder are unable to find alternative words. For example, a patient notes that bachelors live in his apartment building (Jakobson and Halle 1956:60). When asked what a bachelor was, the man became distressed because he could not come up with a synonym or a definition.

Contiguity is associated with metonymy, the figure of speech that relates elements of the same domain; the Greek word μετωνυμία means “a change of name.” Similarity is associated with metaphor, the figure of speech that relates elements from separate semantic fields (the original Greek μεταφορά means “transfer”). Someone who “fishes fish” can extend the expression to “fish pearls”; the latter is a metonym that draws on catching things in the sea as a shared domain (Dirven 1999:281). In contrast, “fishing for information” is a metaphor that links the hope of catching something to a new domain unrelated to the sea.

Metonymy and metaphor represent relationships of contiguity and similarity, respectively. Both contain two aspects each. Contiguity involves combination and contexture, whereas similarity involves selection and substitution. To illustrate contiguity, I use novelist Paul Auster’s (2008:34) definition of speaking: “Words come out, fly into the air, live for a moment, and die.” Each sound combines different features simultaneously (for example, a *t* is a voiceless stop pronounced at the alveolar ridge) while *come out* means “emerge” only if both words are present. In contexture, sounds are joined into words and words are linked into sentences. Words “fly into the air” and are understandable only if spoken in a specific order. Switching places changes the meaning (“words air into the fly”) or scrambles it (“words into fly air the”). Any sign consists of constituent signs and occurs in combination with other signs (Jakobson and Halle 1956:60). Metonymy, which is a relationship of contiguity, is transformative (Schmidt 2006:109–111; 2010:133–135). It creates an integrative identity in which dissimilar entities take on mutual attributes (Ricoeur 1977).

Metaphors express a relationship of similarity. They imply a choice from alternatives and the possibility of substituting one sign for another. While Auster hears words “coming out,” a different writer may prefer them “to emerge.” Substitution compares possible similarities and differences in

form and meaning. Every utterance reflects two processes. The combinative, or syntagmatic, process places units (for example, sounds and words) from the language's inventory into a higher order (sounds become words, words become sentences); its hallmark is contiguity. The selective, or paradigmatic, process chooses a specific unit from alternatives; its hallmark is similarity.

Metonymy and metaphor allow one to express ambiguity, sarcasm, irony, and semantic subtleties. Contiguity allows for inversion. People may berate a cheating friend as "awesome," expressing their disappointment by exploiting the meanings of *awe* that range from "fear" to "wonder." Similarity allows for opposition. Feminist Irina Dunn employed opposition when she declared that "a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle."

Metonyms and metaphors call attention to five aspects that I develop further in the following sections. First, they bring two or more elements together. Parallelisms are well known in western culture (Ezra Pound's poem "In a Station of the Metro" is an elegant example) and, as I show later, also in Maya culture as diphrasic kennings. Second, figures of speech require linguistic and cultural context to be intelligible. Classic Maya would find the comparison of a man with a bicycle as opaque as westerners find aspects of Maya culture. Third, metonyms and metaphors are open-ended. Inversions and oppositions demonstrate that meanings are not settled. Relationships of contiguity and similarity create a continuous tension (Ricoeur 1977). Fourth, metonyms and metaphors require readers/listeners to look beyond the literal. Their interpretation rests on self-reflection and imagination. Fifth, figures of speech raise the question of whether and how metonyms and metaphors can become embodied.

Rabbit? Duck?

The duality of structure explains tradition (Schwarz 2013). Social systems remain the same because tacit schemas and resources guide human behavior. The mutual dependency of structure and agency makes explaining change difficult (Sewell 1992:14–15). This interdependency rests on the assertion of tacit schemas and resources, that is, structural properties that human beings are mostly unaware of. Instead of following consciously specifiable rules of behavior, humans act on a "gut feeling." The opposition of rules and gut feelings is artificial, however. It reflects Wittgenstein's (2001) concept of *Sprachspiel*, or "language-game," which I discuss to develop a dialectical approach to tradition and change.

Speaking generates the meanings of words by interweaving language with the context in which it is used (Wittgenstein 2001:nos. 7 and 23). Speakers of a language classify and name their worlds not through rules but by recognizing family resemblances (Wittgenstein 2001:nos. 66–67). As an example, Wittgenstein mentions that board games, card games, ball games, and team sports are all games. The large variety of games are connected by a series of overlapping similarities instead of a single essential feature. By emphasizing Saussure's *parole* over *langue*, Wittgenstein moves from rules to tacit knowledge. Later social theorists apply this insight to their models of society (for example, habitus in Bourdieu [1977]; the concept of agency in Giddens [1984]). Humans create meaning through language-games. “It is what human beings *say* that is true and false, they agree in the *language* they use” (Wittgenstein 2001:no. 241; emphasis in the original). Truth then becomes a meaning shared by and restricted to a community of speakers. Wittgenstein's notion of language-games also implies that meaning is no longer universally shared. Speech communities create their own worlds of meaning. Wittgenstein illustrates this with the rabbit-duck illusion (Figure 2.1).¹ “Would it be conceivable that someone who knows rabbits but not ducks should say: ‘I can see the drawing as a rabbit and also in another way, although I have no word for the second aspect’? Later he gets to know ducks and says: ‘That’s what I saw the drawing as that time! Why is that not possible?’” (Wittgenstein 1980:1:16e)

One sees either a rabbit or a duck but not both at the same time. To interpret anything, humans must already understand what they interpret (Heidegger 1962:194; 2006:152). A hermeneutic circle encloses viewers of the rabbit-duck illusion. Although Heidegger (2006:312–314) coined the term “hermeneutic circle,” he also saw it as an inapt term. The circle expresses the basic structure of being but does not confine understanding (Heidegger 2006:153). Humans should not try to get out of the circle but rather to come into it in the right way (Heidegger 1962:195; 2006:153). In their quest for understanding, humans realize and consider the existence of the circle. The existential structure of being is therefore a “fore-structure”—it exists before the process of understanding—and the first, last, and constant human task is to work out our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception in terms of the things themselves (Heidegger 1962:195; 2006:153). In other words, Heidegger does not see hermeneutic circles as closed.

How can humans transcend the fore-structures of being? Hans-Georg Gadamer (1990:270–312) develops his answer out of humans' engagement with what Heidegger calls “things themselves,” or the context of their

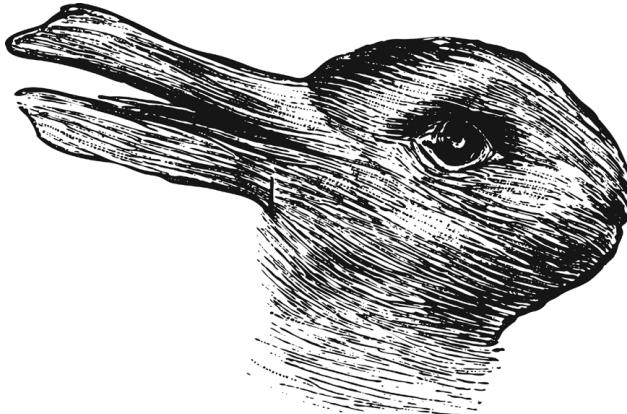


Figure 2.1. The rabbit-duck illusion (adapted from *Fliegende Blätter* 97(2465):147, published on October 23, 1892).

existence. Learning to translate a Latin sentence involves “constructing” the sentence in its entirety before being able to understand its meaning (Gadamer 1990:296). The ability to discern its parts—verbs, nouns, adjectives, and so on—and their relationships requires previous knowledge about grammar and vocabulary. Understanding of the whole rests on its parts while every part can be understood only through its reference to the whole. This hermeneutic circle is not closed, however. Translation involves the application of general rules—the context—to a specific text. Meaning arises from the consideration of context and text. The circle appears, after all, as if printed with a dot-matrix printer; up close every dot is visible yet the shape remains unidentifiable. Only by holding the paper at a distance can one recognize the circle.

The circle and the dot, the whole and its part, form the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic process lies in the movement from dot to circle and back. Gadamer (1990:300) identifies the ephemeral space of moving between dot and circle—the in-between—as the true home of hermeneutics. The two poles are the horizon for the oscillating viewer (Gadamer 1990:307). Like watching the sun rise or set on the horizon, contemplating dot and circle makes the interpreter aware of time and space. He or she is then capable of realizing that the process of interpretation is circular only for a godlike entity who looks at the hermeneutic circle from above. For the interpreter on the ground, the process of interpretation unfolds like a spiral that leads to ever-higher levels of understanding.