

Fickle messengers

In this article, James Carter explores some of the conscious and unconscious ways in which we relate to words and language, and what implications this might have for written interpretation.

Visuals get people's attention, but words make our meaning clear. Or do they? Do words have an unambiguous sense that will let us get our ideas across to the audience? I don't think language works like that.

In this extract from a poem, Edward Thomas uses a series of similes to describe his raw material:

*You English words
I know you
You are light as dreams
Tough as oak*

Thomas establishes the idea of words as 'light' to evoke their insubstantial nature: the written word is nothing, just some marks on paper. Using a comparison with 'dreams' instead of a well-worn cliché like 'feathers' makes you notice the idea more. But the word 'dreams' also carries a whole association of ideas with it apart from its literal meaning. Dreams are where we see visions of how we might like the world to be, or of how we fear it might be; where meanings and possibilities lurk beneath the surface of troubled waters, ready to nudge our flimsy raft into unknown adventures. These associations become part of Thomas' meaning in addition to the dictionary sense of the word.

This ability of words to suggest more than their literal meaning is also key to Thomas' next line. Describing words as 'tough as oak' is just right for the poem, since oak is so much an icon of Englishness.

Sound and rhythm

The sounds of words and the rhythms they create are also important, in prose as well as in poetry. As we saw with Thomas' poem, written words are nothing in themselves, simply marks on paper. Those marks are symbols to represent another symbol: the sound you would make if you read the piece out loud. I believe that when we read silently we hear the text subconsciously, and writing that makes an impact uses the music of speech to emphasise its point. To take an example almost at random, read this sentence out loud:

'The Lowlander has inherited the hills, and the tartan is a shroud.'

Feel how the repeated 'h' sounds draw out the first part of the sentence, and give it a softness that sets up the punch of the 't - t' in 'tartan' like a drum beat. The sentence closes with the falling, enveloping 'shroud'. The sound suggests being

wrapped in something; the sense gives *The Highland Clearances* by John Prebble a suitably mournful ending.

Interpretation needs to make use of these qualities of language, the magic that makes it so flexible and rich. These ideas are especially relevant to writing text for panels and exhibitions, where every word must work hard for its place. Writing like this is not easy, although the end result may appear simple.

The symbols we call words are immensely powerful, but they are fickle messengers. Their meaning shifts almost daily: before the late 1990s, the word 'text' was a noun, meaning words printed on a page or a passage from the Bible. Post mobile phone it is also a verb. This process is organic and unstoppable, despite the fury of columnists on papers like the Daily Mail. 'Google' is beginning to appear as a verb, as in 'I googled his name and came up with loads of websites'. Google's lawyers were apparently trying to restrict this use: perhaps they should read the story of King Canute and the tide!

This powerful symbol system works because we share a common currency of meanings and associations, but the real power of words is created inside our own heads, with all the quirks and associations we bring from our individual experience of the world. This in turn means that the 'meaning' of interpretation is essentially individual. We cannot predict exactly what people will learn or do in response to the words we put in front of them, because they will create their own meanings from their particular set of cultural reference points and experiences.

If this is the case, it raises some questions about the extent to which we can ever evaluate interpretation according to a set of specific cognitive objectives. Instead, perhaps we have to use words to present an individual view of something we find intriguing, or exciting, or moving, and hope that the power of language will inspire our audience to their own way of looking.

Words

They mean nothing

So you can't hurt me

I said words

They mean nothing

So you can't stop me.

(Doves: The Last Broadcast)

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"First learn the meaning of what you say, and then speak"
Epictetus, (55 AD–135 AD)