GÖRAN KJELLMER

Cowed by a Cow or Bullied by a Bull? On Distinguishing Homonymic and Polysemantic Words

Docent Göran Kjellmer vid engelska institutionen, Göteborgs universitet, diskuterar här olika komplikationer då det gäller att bedöma förhållandet mellan homonyma ord, dvs ord som är genuint åtskilda, men som råkar ha samma utseende, och polysemantiska ord, ord som inrymmer mer än en betydelse, men som ändå kan betraktas som samma ord.

Linguists have intermittently devoted a great deal of energy to discussing the distinction between homonymic and polysemantic words. In simple terms, homonyms are different words that happen to have the same form, while a polysemantic word is one which can be applied to different referents and still be regarded as the same word. Words that are frequently used to illustrate this distinction are on the one hand the homonymic words *bank* 'money-lending institution' and *bank* 'river bank', which are thus conceived of as being two different words, and on the other hand the polysemantic word *head* in the senses of a part of the body as well as the top or first part of something (the head of the page, the head of a queue), the last sense being normally regarded as a metaphorical use of the word denoting the body-part. We shall take a brief look at one rather spectacular example to see what conclusions can be drawn from it.

A long succession of linguists have observed the two types of identical forms and suggested criteria for distinguishing between them, writers such as Bloomfield, Ullmann, Lyons, Kempson, Leech and Coates, to mention only a few. Among those criteria are formal distinctions and different historical origins. To illustrate the former, if the pointing device called "mouse", which most computers come equipped with today, is given the plural form "mouses", as sometimes happens in technical magazines, this would be an indication that the computer mouse is being regarded as a different word from that denoting the rodent, and that consequently we have two homonyms *mouse*. To illustrate the latter, *bark*, the covering of a tree, and *bark*, the sailing ship, have separate origins (the first Germanic and the second Classical), which might also be an argument in favour of regarding them as two homonyms.

It has been pointed out by several writers that the different-origins argument is a dubious one. For one thing, formally identical words that derive from different sources may have or develop senses that suggest some kind of semantic link. The *ear* of corn and the human *ear*, words which have

quite different ultimate origins, have become related semantically and are often regarded as two uses of the same (polysemantic) word (Leech 1981:228). For another, different uses of a polysemantic word may become established and lose touch with each other. The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* thus records the two (homonymic) words *cycle[1]* and *cycle[2]*, *cycle[1]* meaning 'a number of related events happening in a regularly repeated order', 'the period of time needed for this to be completed' and 'a group of songs, poems, etc. ...', and *cycle[2]* meaning 'bicycle'. Nevertheless, both words derive from the Greek word κύκλος via Latin and French. William Safire recently provided some material for further debate in his column "On Language".

Safire discusses the verb *to buffalo*, as used in "I'm not going to be buffaloed into appointing independent counsels" and says,

> The meaning of *to be buffaloed* is "to be overawed, intimidated or confused." ... The origin of *buffaloed* may be in "to be cowed," or frightened into submission; *buffalo* has long been used for "a cow without horns" as well as for the bison. The Dictionary of American Regional English cites an 1896 Dialect Notes entry, "Buffaloo: to confuse, 'rattle,'" In 1929, American Speech reported, "When a cow becomes confused it is *'buffaloed.'*"

To cow 'to frighten into submission' is thus firmly associated with the noun *cow*, in the same way as *to buffalo* is associated with the noun *buffalo* and is actually used as a parallel to explain the latter. The argument seems to be: just as a verb *to cow* with the meaning 'to frighten into submission' is derived from the noun *cow*, so a verb *to buffalo* with the same meaning is derived from the semantically related noun *buffalo*. In homonymic-polysemantic terms, the noun *cow* is viewed as potentially polysemantic, with the transferred sense 'intimidator, frightener' alongside its primary sense 'female adult bovine animal', and this transferred sense is then seen as giving rise to the verbal derivative.

Historically, there seems to be no connexion at all between the noun *cow* and the verb *to cow*.[1] Nor would one assume that speakers of English generally associate the meanings of the two words except, perhaps, facetiously. (This assumption is supported by unsystematic and informal interviews with native speakers.) Nevertheless it is obvious that the association is made by some. Safire made it (above), and the *OED* says under **Cow** *v.*[1]: "app. often associated with Cow *sb.*" A parallel association, which may have strengthened that between the two *cow*s, is one between the equally unrelated *bully* and *bull*. The noun *bully* was originally a term of endear-

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[1]The noun was *gwōus in Indo-European (Greek βοῦς, Latin* *bōs*) *(OED)*, and the unrelated verb was probably borrowed from Scandinavian (Danish *kue*, Swedish *kuva* 'to subdue, suppress'), cf. Old Norse *kúga* 'to cow, force, tyrannize over' (Hellquist).

ment 'sweetheart, darling' (early 16th century) but later developed less favourable senses: 'blustering gallant, tyrannical coward' (late 17th century and later, *OED*). The *OED* explains this sense-development thus: "the sense of 'hired ruffian' may be a development of that of 'fine fellow, gallant' ...; or the notion of 'lover' may have given rise to that of 'protector of a prostitute', and this to the more general sense." But it adds: "In the popular etymological consciousness the word is perhaps now associated with BULL *sb[1]*". Partridge 1958 also suggests that the development is due to influence from the sense of *bull*. That this kind of association "in the popular etymological consciousness" may have helped the sense-change along seems quite possible, particularly as regards the verb *bully*, which appears in the early 18th century with the sense 'to act the bully towards; to treat in an overbearing manner; to intimidate, overawe'. If, say, *flooded, wounded* and *heated* are analysed as meaning affected or afflicted by a flood, wound or heat respectively, an analogical analysis of *bullied* as affected or afflicted by a bull in a metaphorical sense ('a man who is big, clumsy, and often aggressive, and who has little consideration for other people's feelings', *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary*) lies near at hand. The semantic link between *bull* and *bully* v. seems in any case stronger than that between *cow* n. and *cow* v. — we may be bullied by a bull, but who would be cowed by a cow?

To come back to the distinction between homonymic and polysemantic words, the above examples force one conclusion on us. Sense associations between identical forms that are obvious to some speakers may never even occur to others. To the first group of speakers the forms are different applications of one polysemantic word, but to the second group the forms represent different homonymic words. With regard to the distinction between homonymy and polysemy we have to say that although there are clear cases of either type, there is a grey middle zone with no generally valid line of demarcation.

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GÖRAN MOBERG

Some Meanings of Literacy: Vocationalism or Critical Thinking?

Göran Moberg är *Associate Professor* i engelska vid Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), som tillhör City University of New York. Han har doktorsexamen i engelska och jämförande litteratur från Columbia-universitetet i New York. Hans artikel rör *literacy,* förmågan att läsa och skriva. Diskussionen behandlar tre nivåer av literacy med olika implikationer för individ och samhälle: en miniminivå, en funktionell nivå och en kritisk nivå. Utgångspunkten är den amerikanska situationen, men problematiken är universell.

Helping children and others improve their literacy is the primary business of English teachers in America. In the age of textuality, to be literate is to know how to use texts (to write and read) to one's own advantage.

Since the various meanings of the term literacy at this moment enact a drama on center stage of national discourse in many countries, I want to define and explore a few of its most common usages: *minimum, functional,* and *critical* literacies. As Andrea Lunsford said at the first Modern Language Association Conference on literacy (1988), "There are many kinds of literacy and whatever one we choose is a political decision." Literacy is not neutral. My preferred choice is the third one, critical literacy.

3 uses of literacy

Whenever literacy is again a national issue, it signifies that other underlying problems require the redefinition of culture itself. Through this publicity emerges a sad secret: American civilization is not as literate as assumed.

According to some estimates, the United States of America ranks low in literacy, down there with third-world countries. Apparently millions of Americans who are classified as literate, for example, cannot perform simple tasks of reading and writing.

Among the kinds of failures in literacy that have moved Congress, the business community, and segments of the public to diagnose a crisis are reportedly the following: some high school graduates cannot or do not want to write a simple business letter; some college graduates are uncomfortable producing a research report; some nurses and mechanics have problems keeping records; some technicians cannot read their manuals; some parents do not comprehend their children's school books; and many unemployed cannot fill out job applications. We can see, then, from the vast ground covered by these complaints that the usage of the term literacy varies in the many definitions and meanings. In this essay I will explore three such uses.