

Our worries about ‘nonce’. Something more than a terminological problem

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It is time lexicographic (both diachronic and synchronic) studies in the first place, and then text linguistics, discourse analysis, semantics, pragmatics, and the more recent cognitive linguistics started reconsidering the notion of “nonce”.

Right at the start I should like to emphasize the paradox that underlies the problem I am going to deal with: while it is normally language that generates meaning, in the case of nonce formations it is meaning that generates language. This is the assumption to be considered if we want to get to a more informed and better founded notion of “nonce”.

The meaning of *nonce* is much too often given for granted. The hasty definition given by the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “a word invented for one particular occasion” is based on its etymology: < M.E. for *ðan anes* = for the one (occasion) > for *ðe nanas* (where the -n of the dative is attached to *anes* for wrong segmentation) > Mod.E. “for the nonce”. But this is not enough to give it a safe interpretation and definition for linguistic and literary purposes. Strangely enough lexicologists (I am not using this term in the Chomskyan sense, but as a merger of lexicologists + lexicographers) have disregarded the problem. There are, though, here and there, dictionaries and handbooks of word-formation (cf., e.g., Barnhart 1980, Adams 1973, Bauer 1983) that have grasped some, but not all, of the fundamental traits of nonce formations.

The other shortcoming of the term “nonce” is that in current literature it is referred exclusively to lexical formations, while it should be referred also to occasional word combinations and occasional shifts of meaning, function and status.

Another point that is necessary to make to clear the ground from con-

fused notions is that the passage from “*langue*” to “*parole*” (the shaping of thought through language) always has a nonce character: language, in fact, has to be selected, manipulated and adapted to specific situations of discourse in order to fulfill the needs of communication. With “*parole*”, moreover, the circumstantial semantization of the “*langue*” carried out depends on time, place, mode and the communicative situation in which words are uttered.

Conventionalized words usually have a fixed sense and denotation. Their first task is to refer to the mental categories into which the culture underlying a given language has organized human knowledge and experience. Their second task is to identify the referents. But they have also a third task: that of conveying all the possible connotational and circumstantial nuances intended in the discourse. To achieve this in coding and decoding a message all the facts associated with it, i.e. the context and situation, must be taken in due account. Meaning, in fact, either “denotative”, “referential”, or “connotative” depends heavily on context and situation. But what about innovations? In a language like English we are confronted with more and more neologisms whose meanings we are often hard put to get to. In order for an innovation to be understood, the author of an utterance or text has to adopt specific strategies and procedures, make the right linguistic choices and supply all possible hints conducive to the perception of meaning; s/he also has to make the right “presuppositions” as to the linguistic, rhetorical and cognitive competence of their interlocutor. This is imperative particularly in the case of nonce formations. Let us note, in passing, that the interest of lexical studies has moved from “dictionary meaning” to “contextualized meaning” and lately, with cognitive linguistics, to “situated meaning”.

That of lexical innovations is a multitudinous sea and it would be out of place to try to investigate it wide and large here. For the sake of this inquiry I propose to adopt the following gross classification:

A. New words like “trade names” (*Kodak*, *Omo*, *Frisbee* etc.), “technicalisms” (*blip*, *fax*, *Boolean* etc.), “imitative coinages” (*bleep*, *glitz*, *slurb* etc.), “borrowings” (*ombudsman*, *guru*, *kimono* etc.). These categories of words are arbitrary: they are not based on shared knowledge (sound-symbolism is not a safe communal certainty), they are not the outcome of text organization or of a mode of articulation, they are not negotiated by the linguistic community and their acceptability does not depend on social consensus or solidarity, they are simply imposed either by necessity, by contact and contagion, or by institutions and powers of various kinds, they are released as “durable”, not as “temporary”.

B. Nonce linguistic expansions of all kinds. By "expansion" I mean the fact that all simple linguistic items are apt to produce new derivatives, new compounds, new collocations, and variations of function, sense and status. Expansions can often be unusual, transgressive, fanciful and far-fetched and if they become idiomatic, they usually settle down as "durable". These new formations in any case rest on the awareness of some stable linguistic structure and cultural notion. They can be classified into:

Morphological:

- 1.* "Prometheus, the *stealer* of fire" [this unusual 'defining' -er/derivative is used here to discriminate from thief which is semantically lexicalized].¹
2. "It is a rule that every fish caught must be kept alive, and after being weighed must be put back into the water by the official *weigher-in*" (*Daily Telegraph*, 1928) [an unusual agentive derivative of *weigh-in* that is used in boxing and fishing games].
- 3.* "They *Pan-Am-Aired* to New York" [an "unexpected" case of conversion].

Collocational:

4. "[...] you did not disdain to talk to the occupants of '*passage houses*'" (Priestley, 1938) [the use of quotes in the text underlines an unusual collocation; see full quotation below].

Semantic:

5. "[...] the detached, ironical, *adverbial* James" (Kermode 2002: 29) [the semantic development of "adverbial" here is decidedly odd and idiosyncratic].
6. "Then we heard the voice of Mrs. Mardick *seargent-majoring* the truant few who were enjoying the first breath of cool air instead of dressing up" (E.A. Robertson, *Four Frightened People*, Ch.II, quoted by Zandvoort 1960: 43).
- 7.* "A tourist *ad-libbing* his way across the Continent" [a term semantically not yet stabilized on both sides of the Atlantic and used in an extempore way here].
- 8.* "I just don't want to be your *everything*".
9. * "She *spreadeagled* in the sun".

Articulatory:

10. * "I *would-have-rathered* lemonade".
11. "But there was such a *to-ing* and *fro-ing* that I had no chance to make any impression on her" (Tey 1995: 26).
12. * "We *coffeed* then and there".

¹ This example and all the following ones introduced by an asterisk are drawn from unretrieved sources: in time I have collected them but unfortunately I have lost track of their exact contexts.

13. * “What are you *poor boying* about?”
14. * “Mrs. Parkington lunched, *teaed*, *tangoed*, dined, danced, and supped”.
15. “[...] I had a wife and a new child. The dog and child, we had reasoned, would get along wonderfully. Simple and domestic – *wived*, *childed*, and *dogged*” (Kessler 1967: 143) [note the nonce jocular conversion of the three verbs].
16. “The keen smell of the bacon! The trotting of feet bearing the repast; the click and clatter as the tableware is finally arranged! A clean white cloth! ‘Ready Sir!’... The *going in*! The *sitting down*! The *falling to*!” (Wells 1926: 2).

All the terms exemplified above are the result of a form of linguistic articulation and even though in some measure they may be conditioned by culture, context, and situation, they are produced through the articulation of the system and are therefore understandable outside their contexts. From “temporary” they can become “durable” and be “established”, because they rest on shared and durable knowledge; they usually require social consensus to acquire currency.

C. nonce-words proper or contextuals or contextual concretions (see below): these formations depend on textual evidence and situation; they are articulatory and temporary and, being text-dependent, they cannot be used outside their context and situation of discourse; therefore they never acquire autonomy and currency; social consensus in their case is out of the question:

17. “When you lived in Ogden Street, you did not disdain to talk to the occupants of ‘passage houses’ [houses with doors opening on to both sides of the street], but nevertheless, if you were a woman who knew how to enjoy yourself, you could afford to be sympathetic towards a humble *passage-houser* or put a presumptuous one in her place” (Priestley 1938: 12) [this new complex formation would not be understandable outside its context].
18. * “It was what you might call a ‘walk-on part’, or should I say a *swim-on part*? All he had to do was swim in a straight line past the camera” [without the model “walk-on part” the expression “swim-on part” would not be fully understood outside its context].
19. “Reading about some people’s major prejudices, I broke off – I am a great *breaker-off* these days – to ask myself what my own prejudices were” (*New Statesman*, 1971) [the text is essential to disambiguate the meaning of this unusual agentive derivative].
20. * “One way of distinguishing kinds of knowledge is into practical *knowledge-how*, propositional *knowledge-that*, and *knowledge-of*. However, the various sorts of *knowledge-of* seem reducible either to *knowledge-how* or

to *knowledge-that*" [these nonce formations can be understood only in their situation of discourse].

21. * "Are you a *thisser* or a *thatter*?" [quite exceptional agentive derivatives used in an inquiry as to the preference for *this* or *that* as anaphoric pronouns: they would not make sense outside their context].
22. * "He had been *cathedral-looking* at Avignon" [a spontaneous creation that is a real brainwave]

Thus it is the syntactic structure and the context and situation of discourse that operate like a lexicogenic matrix and reveal both the linguistic function and the semantic charge of a nonce formation.

The boundaries between 2) and 3) are often fluffy and blurred, but the dividing line, in any case, is whether the nonce formation can be understood outside its context or not. Obviously some of them might be conventionalized in an act of force exactly as the neologisms of the first category above.

THE IDENTIKIT OF A NONCE-WORD

The basic traits:

- a. a nonce-word is created for the occasion, but is entirely text-dependent and unusable outside its text;
- b. it has a utilitarian character: it is a remedial trick or makeshift solution contrived on the spur of the moment to overcome an immediate difficulty in or urgency of communication;
- c. its ambiguity is resolved through the text.

Some recurrent secondary traits:

- a. a nonce-word has a high index of linguistic, cultural and cognitive presupposition understood by the author of the utterance;
- b. expressive force;
- c. uninhibited, transgressive and provocative boldness;
- d. it is tinged with a zest for playful, fanciful, picturesque language;
- e. it is an idiosyncratic form of self-expression, a search for originality to produce a fresh, interesting effect, to make one's point in an original and memorable way;
- f. it is a linguistic epiphany, a brainwave.

NONCE LANGUAGE IN A HISTORICAL DIMENSION

What problems does nonce language pose to the historians of the language? Certainly they are faced, first and foremost, with methodological and theoretical problems. Since nonce language is a mode of linguistic creativity that has operated in every age: a) is *s/he* always in a position to distinguish between established words and occasional, ephemeral and volatile formations, particularly for ages in which the language had not yet been bridled and codified or ages for which records are particularly scarce? b) how important has the practice of nonce language been for the history of the English lexicon? Furthermore, to make a more pointed example, how much of Shakespeare's vocabulary is nonce and to what extent did he, as a text producer and a master pragmatician, worry about making himself understood, when he used nonce words? This will certainly be a good testing bench for the recently born historical pragmatics.

Given the new technical means available now, this inquiry can be understood also as an invitation to re-examine the written production of the past, particularly literary works, in the light of these argumentations, in order to get more incisive and speculative insights into the history of linguistic productivity and the related problems of its recording and codification.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus we have words produced by the language system (hinged on the awareness of formative patterns) and words produced by the text (hinged on the awareness of text structure and the organization of meaning). The gist of this inquiry therefore rests on the initial assumption that while normally it is language that generates meaning, in the case of "nonce formations" it is meaning, or in other words the way meaning is structured and implemented in linguistic form, that generates language.

My proposal, in conclusion, is that we should adopt the term "contextuals" or "contextual concretions" for all nonce formations that are decidedly text-dependent and are not re-useable outside their contexts. I hope it is apparent enough that the need remains, in any case, to redeem the term "nonce" from its vagueness and ambiguity.

Given the nonceness of this inquiry, after noncing away my time with these randomly and dubiously nonced ruminations, I am afraid I have qualified as the oddest noncer of the year. But, *alea jacta est*, and, whatever the results, the terminological and notional problems at least are open for debate.

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ABSTRACT

This paper wants to call the attention of the linguistic and literary community to the need of reconsidering the notion of *nonce* and its relationship to *parole*, linguistic pragmatism and lexical innovation. *Nonce* is a creative act of thinking and language. It is a variable that can become an important ingredient of linguistic expression.

The real issue that this paper intends to raise, therefore, is that *nonce language* should be held in greater consideration in the studies of the growth of English. Neither historians of the language nor descriptivists have ever tried to evaluate how relevant *nonce* has been in the development of the English lexicon and to what extent it has improved its operative force.