A Thesauromachy

A word is not a crystal, transparent and
unchanged;
it is the skin of a living thought,
and may vary greatly in color and content
according to the circumstances
and time in which it is used.
—Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes
Towne v Eisner, 245 US 418, 425 (1918)

Readers who have visited Lima in Peru, Arles or Nimes in southern France—or a score or more cities in both Spain and Portugal—are probably aware that there are stadia in all those locales dedicated to the cultural spectacle known as tauromachy (from Greek tauromakhíā, taûros, bull + mákhē, battle, war, contest;[1] tauromaquia in Spanish). Most people probably know it by the common name of bullfighting.

I thought it might be instructive—and fun—to pit three thesauri against each other in a sort of linguistic smackdown. I promise that no blood will be spilled (unless some reader gets really mad at me). And this being an election year, I thought I would challenge these references with some words related to politics, law, and public office.

Before the exercise begins, some background about the thesaurus might be in order, starting with that plural—*thesauri* or *thesauruses*? *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary,* 11th edition (2004) (*M-WCD11*), lists the *-i* plural first but also lists the *-uses* form. A Google search reveals an almost 4-to-1 preponderance for the former.

A thesaurus is a sort of atlas or museum of the mind's holdings—a veritable Louvre of human conceptual experiences—and of how they are interrelated verbally. The word originated in the Greek word for storehouse or treasury.

Peter Mark Roget (1779–1869) conceived of his "catalog of ideas" in 1805 but refined it for 47 years before finally publishing it in 1852. When it appeared, writers and publishers alike quickly recognized that he had turned the dictionary on its head: Roget had categorized groups of ideas and recited the words that one might conceive of to apply to each rather than starting with an alphabetical list of words and reciting their definitions. That is, he proceeded concept to word rather than word to concept.

Roget conceived of all knowledge as being broadly divisible into "Abstract relations, Space, Physics, Matter, Sensation, Intellect, Volition, and Affections".[2] When read cold, those classes seem rather vague, but an example will make his logic apparent: Consider the word *pun* (which you first locate in the alphabetical index at the end of the volume). *Pun,* the index tells you, is found in class Eight (Affections), subclass I (Personal Affections), section C (Pleasure and Pleasurableness), category 878 (Humorousness), number 8 (Wordplay). Preceding number 8, in the same category (878) you find 5, 6, and 7: "buffoonery", "joke", and "witticism", respectively. Following it, you find 9, 10, and 11: "old joke", "prank", and "sense of humor", respectively.

Thus, the word's placement among similar bedfellows lets you perceive rapidly its flavor and character. Had you not known its meaning before—and if you were also unfamiliar with the expression *word play*—you now at least understand that a pun is in some way pleasurable and intended to be humorous, but at the same time you are warned that it might also be a bit of a groaner or knee-slapper because of its proximity to "buffoonery", "old joke", and "prank".

Thesauri are available in dictionary style, but I find the "definition" approach less illuminating than the "bedfellow" approach. Roget's system is a sort of linguistic parallel to the Linnaean taxonomy of kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, and species, which took the scientific world by storm 50 years before him. The reader is presented with a context of synonyms and other words of close affinity, one of which might convey an intended meaning more precisely than the one originally searched for. And for me, that is the chief advantage of Roget's original system.

The Word Hawk

The University of Chicago's American and French Research on the Treasury of the French Language (ARTFL) Project has placed online the entire year 1911 1000-headword edition of Roget's *Thesaurus* at *machaut.uchicago.edu/?resource=Roget%27s*. Although the 1911 version contains fewer words than more recent editions, it is one of the few numerically indexed thesauri available online and as such is valuable as a check against current usage. A more up-to-date resource is the online thesaurus hosted by Personalized Online Electronic Text Services (POETS), a research project of Kyoto Notre Dame University (KNDU). Containing the same 1000 headwords as ARTFL's resource, the POETS version is available at *poets.notredame.ac.jp/Roget/*.

In This Corner . . . . So now, with lances leveled, let the jousting begin. The three knights tilting in my little tournament (wordament?) are the Thomas Y Crowell Company's number-indexed *Roget's International Thesaurus*, third edition (*R3*) (1962),[3] the CD version of the *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Thesaurus* (V. 3.0) (*M-W*) (2003),[4] and the online-only *Visual Thesaurus* (*VT*) (2005).[5]

To test those worthies, I deliberately invoked some terms that are obscure, dated, or slangy to plumb their depths. To keep them on an even footing, I used the same part of speech across the board in all three thesauri if more than one part of speech could apply to a given spelling (for example, I used the noun form of *campaign* in all three cases rather than the verb). It should be noted that in the case of *R3*, I cited each word's reference number and listed the "most commonly used" headwords that accompanied the searched entry or, if none or only a few are listed, the ones that seem most familiar in current usage. In the case of *VT*, I listed the immediate cluster of words that surrounded the target word. "NEF" signifies "no entries found".

The "advantage" in each case went to the resource that seemed to provide the broadest, most helpful range of meanings for the word at hand.

Bunting. *R3*: 567.6: flag, pennant, banner, streamer, ensign, standard, colors. *M-W*: NEF. *VT*: cloth, fabric, material, textile. **Advantage:** *R3*.

Campaign. *R3*: 742.13: drive, crusade, canvass, solicitation, stump excursion, whistle-stop. *M-W*: NEF. *VT*: movement, effort, drive, cause, crusade, political campaign. **Advantage:** draw, *R3/VT*.

Caucus. *R3*: 742.9: legislative caucus, congressional caucus, mixed caucus, mongrel caucus, parlor caucus, secret caucus. *M-W*: NEF. *VT*: gather, meet, forgather, assemble.
M-WCD11 defines *caucus* as "*noun*: a closed meeting of a group of persons belonging to the same political party or faction usually to select candidates or to decide on policy; also, a group of people united to promote an agreed-upon cause; *intrans. verb*: to meet in or hold a caucus". No entries struck me as especially helpful in conveying this sense, and no reference supplied *both* the noun and verb senses of the term, at least not as used in the US presidential primary process. **Advantage:** None.

Democracy. *R3*: 739.4: (governments) federal government, federation, confederation, republic, commonwealth, representative government, self-government, self-determination. *M-W*: NEF (!), although *democratic* (adj.) was listed, and—supremest irony—*tyranny* was listed in the reverse thesaurus when *democracy* was entered as the search term in the regular thesaurus. *VT*: [primary] majority rule, autocracy, republic, commonwealth; [secondary] ideology, political theory, political orientation. **Advantage:** *R3*.

Electorate. *R3*: 742.23: electors, constituency, constituents, electoral college. *M-W*: NEF. *VT*: citizenry, people. **Advantage:** *R3*.

Gerrymander. *R3*: 733.10: maneuver, manipulate, machinate, jockey, engineer, finagle, wangle. *M-W*: NEF. *VT*: divide, part, separate. **Advantage:** *R3*.

Graft. *R3*: 742.35: (political corruption) boodleism [colloquial], jobbery, pork-barrel legislation, political intrigue. *M-W*: NEF, but the reverse thesaurus listed *graft* and similar terms under the headword *protection*: graft, extortion, shakedown, squeeze, bribe, payola. *VT*: bribery. **Advantage:** *M-W*, principally because the terms in *R3* are so dated and unfamiliar.

Hustings. *R3*: 215.13: platform, stage, dais, rostrum, podium, pulpit, soapbox, stump. *M-W*: NEF. *VT*: campaigning, candidacy, political campaign, electioneering, candidature. **Advantage:** *R3*.

Logrolling. *R3*: 740.16: (legislative procedure) closure, filibustering, talkathon, steamroller methods, speaking for Buncombe [a county in North Carolina and the source of the word *bunkum*, later shortened to *bunk*]. *M-W*: NEF. *VT*: exchange. **Advantage:** None. All entries fell short of the central meaning of exchanging legislative favors to further one's own cause.

Mudslinging. *R3*: 969.2: defamation, vilification, denigration, smear, blackening, muckraking. *M-W*: NEF. *VT*: did not list *mudslinging*, but it did list *mudslinger*: muckraker. **Advantage:** *R3*.

Nominee. *R3*: 778.8: assignee, consignee, appointee, selectee, candidate. *M-W*: NEF, but the reverse thesaurus listed *nominee* and several related terms under the headword *candidate*: applicant, aspirant, hopeful, seeker, nominee, dark horse, also-ran, has-been, campaigner, electioneerer, stumper, whistle-stopper. *VT*: campaigner, candidate. **Advantage:** *M-W*.

Plurality. *R3*: 100.2: majority, more than half, the greater number, the greatest number, most, preponderance/preponderancy, bulk, mass, lion's share. *M-W*: NEF. *VT*: relative majority, pack, multitude, large number. **Advantage:** *R3*.

Vote. *R3*: 635.15: poll, ballot, cast a ballot, hold up one's hand, stand up and be counted. *M-W*: elect, ballot, choose, decide, cast one's vote for. *VT*: pick out, choose, select. **Advantage:** draw, *R3/M-W*.

Summary. Somehow, I expected going in that *R3* would trump the other two works—I guess I should call them databases—but I was surprised by how clearly superior it was. *M-W* was particularly weak, a pathetic, pale, Boo-Radley cousin of its fine *11th Collegiate Dictionary* stablemate. Overlook the word *democracy*? I was astonished! I do like *VT* a lot and find it handy for quick lookups, especially of words with an international origin or slant, but it does not stand up to *R3* in comprehensiveness.

Reflection of the Month: "A politician looks forward only to the next election. A statesman looks forward to the next generation." — *Thomas Jefferson*

References

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