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# Words "Dediction"

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#### 1. Introduction

Of course it is not a word, this "dediction"; at least, not yet. But why not? As the story goes, James Joyce was once asked whether his habit of inventing words was because there were not enough words in the English language. He answered that there were enough words, just not the *right* words. To see whether "dediction" might be a "right word", I begin by considering related terms, and then consider what they do for us—why do *they* exist and my new term, "dediction", does not? For example, if we construct for ourselves a simple list of Latinate roots related to writing and seeing, and then add time-related prefixes, we could quickly come up with "post-script", "describe", "description," "prescribe", and "prescription", among others. ("Depict" and "depiction" come to mind as well, but their treatment is beyond my scope here.) If we then do the same for speaking, we have no trouble recognising "predict" and "prediction", but what about "postdict" and "postdiction" or "dedict" and "dediction"?

Recalling one of the previous words that I discussed here, "expectation" (*Futures*, 32:7 September 2000), we may begin to see the answer to the questions above. Prediction may of course be founded upon expectation, to good or ill consequence. As Bertrand Russell noted, "Domestic animals expect food when they see the person who usually feeds them. We know that all these rather crude expectations of uniformity are liable to be misleading. The man who has fed the chicken every day throughout its life at last wrings its neck instead." [1, p. 21] Is it largely the repetition of patterns that gives us the sense of expectation? Can we consequently say that the perception of patterns allows us to feel that we can predict?

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Regarding the notion of expectation, at section 465 of his *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein writes:

"An expectation is so made that whatever happens has to accord with it, or not." Suppose you now ask: then are facts defined one way or the other by an expectation—that is, is it defined for whatever event may occur whether it fulfils the expectation or not? The answer has to be: "Yes, unless the expression of the expectation is indefinite; for example, contains a disjunction of different possibilities." [2]

It is precisely here—in the disjunction of different possibilities—that we may locate some virtual space that opens for multiple futures. It is a space in the matrix of time-plus-speech words. My invented word—"dediction"—works as a placeholder in one of those spaces. And "dediction" does much more than that. It calls attention to the artificial (and to my mind, wrong), normative distinctions among such words as "description", "prescription", and "prediction". Regarding Wittgenstein's point, to say that "facts" are defined by expectations is to make a statement that runs counter to our usual conceptions of facts. Especially in the sciences, we treat facts as though they are determined by the material world. This conception ignores the necessity of interpretation that accompanies the material world such that we can arrive at something and call it a "fact". Therefore, I maintain that facts are constructed by arguments, not things. Yes, but the material world remains a recalcitrant limitation in arguments, one may insist. No more than the social world, I would counter. To illustrate, while thinking about "expectation", I came across the headline "Death Rates at Four Hospitals Higher Than Expected." [3] What could that mean? How do we create such expectations? By announcing a count of past events (deaths), and stating the time at which to count them (the present) such that we can say that they did or did not meet a pre-diction from the past (expectation). I checked with a hospital official in the region as to how such expectations are created, and he told me that they are created by categorising types of procedures, such as heart surgery, and then counting, nation-wide (or sometimes regionally), the number of procedures attempted and the number of survivors. No account is taken of the difference in condition of the patient, the skills or education of the physician and nurses, the technology available, the wealth or poverty of the neighbourhood in which the hospital is located, et cetera.

There is a stronger point to be made beyond this relatively simple point regarding the prediction, description, and the creation of expectations. This stronger point is that these deceivingly simple words which couple time and writing, or time and speaking, also connote powerful normative positions.

An expectation is thus made possible because we have spoken our belief in advance of an event—we have pre-dicted. Prediction, thought of in this way, is the marking in time of the moment when we move from speaking *of* the past, *in* the present, to *create* a future. In this way, "prediction" can be thought of as the word we use while making firm an otherwise unspoken belief—an "expectation". But what is "expectation" if not a linguistic framework? With the prefixes "de-" and "pre-",

we comfortably set the markers of the past and the future, respectively. A pure mechanics of language would suggest that by adding these prefixes to "-dict", we ought to be symbolising our talk about the past or the future. And by adding these prefixes to "-script", we ought to be symbolising our writing about the past or future. It is worth noting that Latour and Woolgar in their *Laboratory Life* characterise technological apparatus in a scientific laboratory as "inscription devices", because it is through these devices that arguments can be brought forth. "Inscription", in this sense, is "not so much a transferring of information as a material operation of creating order". [4, p. 245]

Taking symbols in the oral and the written together, with "description" and "prediction", the simple mechanics of meaning brought about by adding a suffix to a baseword seems to work; not so with "prescription". With "prescription", a normative connotation is introduced which adds a different layer of meaning to the simple mechanics of a time-focussed prefix and a base-word denoting writing or speaking. And it is precisely because we do add connotative meaning beyond the denotation suggested by simple mechanics, that I want to introduce "dediction" to the matrix. This artificial introduction makes conscious the otherwise unconscious process of adding or inventing connotations. One might look to politics, race, gender, economics, or other social forces to explain how audiences invest meaning. But by operation of language alone, Wittgenstein shows us how "expectation" helps to create the mode of the future. And because the operation of language can do this, we ought closely to examine those words that pretend to refer only to the abstract vagaries of language itself, but in practice, tend, if not portend, to create normative comportments. With description and prescription, normative comportments are created through references to time. Therefore I want to ask, why not "dediction"?

## 2. Creating connotations—the time of the signs

Here I must be careful not to suggest some linear origin story. Saussure cautions:

Language at any given time involves an established system and an evolution. At any given time, it is an institution in the present and a product of the past. At first sight, it looks very easy to distinguish between the system and its history, between what is and what it was. In reality, the connexion between the two is so close that it is hard to separate them. Would matters be simplified if one considered the ontogenesis of linguistic phenomena, beginning with a study of children's language, for example? No. It is quite illusory to believe that where language is concerned the problem of origins is any different from the problem of permanent conditions. There is no way out of the circle. [5, p. 24 in original pagination]

To begin simply, I look to the *Oxford English Dictionary* ("*OED*"—Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989) to locate the likely first use of these, and related words. It is not that the *OED* is *the truth* in some a priori way, but rather that as a culturally-

received, powerful and pervasive repository of the English word, it serves as an anchoring point for investigations of the word. In the OED, the following years are assigned to the following words as being the first-found use: "description", 1380, from "describe", Latin, de+scribere (to write), and preceded in ME by "descrive". The earliest reference to "describe" in the sense of "to set forth by characteristics" is 1513. The earliest reference of it in the sense of "to write down" is 1526. "Prescription"—writing beforehand—was used in the 1540s, as was "prescribe". Quite relevant for my purposes is the fact that the same etymological root generates the normative or moral sense of "prescribe". As of 1579, we find "prescription" used to indicate a physician's written orders. Did writing it down make it imperative? Here Plato's objections in the *Phaedrus* dialogue are called to mind. The written word, according to Plato, does not serve to aid or create memory, but rather only to remind us of what we already know. [6, sections 275a-b] In making this critique of the informative sense of acts of communication, Plato does not explore what ramifications writing may have for the moral or normative sense of acts of communication.

To complete the matrix, one finds in the *OED* that "predict" is first recorded as having been used to mean "say beforehand" in 1611, and was made a verb by Milton, although "prediction", was already recognised as a noun in 1561. One finds "post-script" used in 1551, and "postscribe" in 1614; but "postdiction"—to assert something about the past—was only introduced in 1940 with specific dialectic reference to "prediction", a fact I take as evidence to support my method of investigation here. At that time, J. Laird, in *Theism & Cosmology*, states "If however, the future be indeterminate before it occurs, it cannot be fixed before it occurs. For there is nothing determinate to fix. Hence inferential prediction has quite a different status from inferential post-diction."

From their simple etymologies, the words "prescribe", "describe" and "predict" help to create a matrix that yields an interpretive space—a space that the reader will want to fill, due to the structure of the matrix. Already in place are "prescription", "description" and "prediction".

Time-determined communications:

SpokenWrittenPre-dictPre-scribeDe-dictDe-scribePost-dictPost-scribe

(There are words about communication not determined by time as well, both spoken, such as "inter-dict", "a-dict", and "e-dict", and written, such as "inter-scribe", "a-scibe", and a neologism which I have created to mean electronic communication, "e-scribe".)

Separating these terms into simple components, we find two roots—one for writing ("-scription"), the other for speaking ("-diction"). For writing, we have prefixes that place the writing temporally before something else (prescription), one that places the writing contemporaneous with something else (description), and one that places the writing after something else (postscription). So too, for speaking: we have prefixes that place the speaking before something else (prediction), and after something else (postdiction), but noticeably absent is the contemporaneous counterpart of description—"dediction". This hole causes me to pause and wonder, and as I wonder about what I perceive to be a lack here—due to my expectation, I am also struck by the other meanings that the words in the matrix have in addition to their temporal senses. And still more important are the seemingly neutral senses of temporality that permits us our apathy. We let the normative connotation drift by as the uninterrogated shadow of the sturdy temporal denotation.

The vertical divide on this matrix seems to be one that separates the written from the spoken word. If we compare the use, impact and meanings of the written versus the spoken, we may see that perhaps Plato was right when, through the words of Socrates, he ranted against the written word in his *Phaedrus* dialogue: "If men learn this [writing], it will implant forgetfulness on their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks." [6, section 275a]. Plato's position on language and its various forms continues to be echoed in Neil Postman's *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*<sup>1</sup> and Sven Birkert's<sup>2</sup> *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age.* If Plato's prediction was correct in saying that the Athenians would lose oral eloquence due to writing, it would seem that he was only wrong in stopping there.

Italo Calvino bemoans the "pestilence" that has befallen both written and oral language as a "loss". [7, p. 56] By inventing "de-diction" and comparing it to the full development of the written word with "prescription", "description" and "postscript(ion)" may illustrate our loss of focus on speaking. As indicia of this loss, can we take the facts that we have developed a full temporal root, stalk and flower for written communication, but for oral counterparts have only the dormant seed of "prediction"? And with that loss, (or failure to develop), the seed, root, stalk and flower have adapted over generations to their environmental condition that privileges the word. As Michel Foucault and many other contemporary theorists have noted, connotations are held in place by living language power structures of the time. What might we observe about the words in this matrix, which would serve as evidence of this power relationship, and demonstrate variations away from meanings derived from their simple structure of time-plus-writing or speaking?

"Pre-scription", for example, has a very normative capacity about it, extending to both the written word and the oral word. "Description" takes on a sense not only of time—writing about the present, but also of neutrality. It suggests an ability in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> New York: Vintage Books, 1993.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> London: Faber & Faber, 1994.

our language to attach words to things in a neutral way or we might say (since Descartes), in an "objective" way. We must ask ourselves what cultural pressures exist in our language environment to turn the meaning in this way? What purposes are served by a word which not only connotes neutrality, but has been put in place or held in place or left in place with a plausible connection to writing, where for speaking we have none? The artificiality of placing "dediction" in the matrix would send us back to "description" wanting to know why "description" means more than "writing in the present" (literally, "of writing"). Moreover, if we stay on the same side of the oral-written vertical divide on the matrix and go back to "pre-scription", we find a further important connotative difference, of which we must query the cultural pressures that necessitated adaptation. While "pre-diction" connotes saying and writing how things will be before they are, "pre-scription" connotes saying and writing how things ought to be before they are.

Apparently Hume said, "a description of existing facts never logically entails a moral judgement". [8, p. 112.] I must disagree with Hume on this. With reference to the example, the question is "why choose to re-tell those facts? (versus, for example, other facts). It is that sort of selection process that creates a framework, perhaps even a matrix, within which to consider the facts. The dimensions of the framework, which serve to enframe or include descriptions, also serve to exclude other descriptions—a normative function. In the standard oath used for witnesses in most courts of law in the United States, the witness must swear not only that he or she will tell the truth, but that he or she will tell the whole truth. Telling the whole truth, if that is what telling the truth means, requires a witness to have a sense of all that is relevant to the point at issue. And insofar as this is regarded as a standard, it is treated as though it is surely the case that the judge, the lawyers, the witnesses, the parties and everyone present will have the same sense, more or less, of what is relevant. Simply giving some of the facts will not do—the truth (as understood to be the whole truth)—can only be told when one understands the normative standard of all that ought to be included as relevant to that truth. Thus, the descriptive act is indeed a prescriptive one, and in the case of the courtroom, is the prescriptive response to the oath's prescriptive call. So while I remain indebted to Hume for his indictments of both induction and deduction. I must disagree with his position here. Hume provides us with a good example of the language environment—formal logic—that is benefited by accommodating "description" to a neutral position—at least a morally neutral position. But that language environment is not the vernacular or vulgar language environment by which we live our lives in creating meanings.

Writing may corrupt the mind and its ability to remember in the same way in which hand-held calculators corrupt a person's numeracy, or that electronic texts corrupt one's literacy. More important for this investigation is the fact that the physical existence of the written word helps to assign and entrench connotations. Today at least, we find a need to translate Plato as having explicit concern with description and prescription. In *The Laws*, Plato's Athenian says (in what we now recognise as post-16th century translation, given the *OED*'s etymologies): "Thus you see that while it would be wrong to call these various subjects incapable of description, it

is very right to call them incapable of prescription, for prescription can throw no light on their contents." [6, chapter XII, section 968e.]

The temporal sense of being able to say what will happen before it happens (predict) gives us the normative ethos of saying what should happen (pre-scribe). But we often do not speak of what will happen in certain, or absolute terms. Twentieth century quantum physics, and most of science in the Comtean cascade from physics, focuses on probabilities, not certainties, and such common daily concerns as economics and weather are always discussed in probability terms. In this conditional mode of probability, prediction takes on the quality of what *should* happen, given the applicable probability calculation, not what will happen. Once the realm of should is entered, it is easy to see how ambiguity between normative and probable should develop. From there, one could use a reverse logic that goes something like this: We do not have "dediction" because we recognise that "pre-diction" means both the present and the future—as with description; it so thoroughly includes prescription that it too is redundant. Why do we hang on to it? I am presenting "dediction" mostly as an heuristic device, possibly because, to borrow from Joyce, it is one of the "right" words, but not simply because we need more words.

One of the common topoi of classical Greek rhetoric was definition. It certainly still is today. (I should emphasise that it is nothing more than a common topus.) I might say that "pre-diction" literally means to speak before. Typically then, the sense of the word "prediction" is to speak of an event before the event happens. If the speaking-before is sufficiently similar to the occurring-after, we say that the speaking-before is "pre-diction". But the judgement and interpretation that we exercise in comparing the occurring-after with the speaking-before is loose and accommodating. [9, p. 21.] What then, by comparison, would be the definition of de-diction? "Speaking possible futures into existence today." This may sound like a very weak definition, including just about all possibilities and excluding none. But that is not the case. With every formulation that recalls a past or re-enforces a present, an unconscious line is drawn to a particular future. Not all of the possible futures are part of this drama. Some are purposely excluded; others simply do not ever come to be heard. The choice to speak particular facts today does limit the possibilities in the future, and with the selection of facts we speak into existence today, we have selected which futures can be. That selection is therefore a normative act. So through the artificial addition of "dediction" to the matrix, we can make an analogy to another part of the matrix—as a proportion. So the invention of "de-diction" shows us not only that all dediction is pre-diction, but also that all description is pre-scription.

This brings us back to Plato's *Gorgias* dialogue. There, with the support of characters Thamus and Theuth, Socrates speaks against the written word in ways similar to those who since have spoken against other new media of communication—the radio, the phonograph, the television, talking films, the computer, the hand-held calculator. [6, sections 274–275] Speaking, as opposed to writing, has additional features with which we must reckon in our consideration of futures. Speaking is a far more common feature of communication both historically [10] and contemporaneously, for those who cannot write, for those in private or intimate situations, for those in informal situations, for those without a means available for writing. In all

of these cases, futures are being created through spoken language. Dediction is present. And once again we see the proportion whereby, just as all description is prescription, all dediction is prediction. If we push this idea a bit further and extend it to entire branches of thought, we might notice that epistemology—"How do you know?" is more like ethics—"Why do you believe?"

## 3. All description is prescription

Nietzsche provides us with reason to think that with classical civilisation we have the very conditions that made possible our concept of science, such that we can look back at those conditions today and recognise something. From that classical civilisation, Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction provides an example of a linguistic framework that functions beyond a matrix of words as labels. In response, as Nietzsche shows us with his principle of contradiction, non-contradiction operates in the realm of norms and values. Regarding Nietzsche's self-professed project of re-valuing all values, "the most fundamental 'value' of all [is] the principle of non-contradiction, . . ." writes de Man in his *Allegories of Reading*. As a value, this manifests itself as pre-scription, not de-scription—normative, not neutral. De Man finds this to be manifestly clear in section 516 of Nietzsche's *The Will to Power*.

We are unable to affirm and to deny one and the same thing: this is a subjective empirical law, not the expression of any "necessity" but only of an inability. If, according to Aristotle, the law of contradiction is the most certain of all principles, if it is the ultimate and most basic, upon which every demonstrative proof rests, if the principle of every axiom lies in it; then one should consider all the more rigorously what *presuppositions* already lie at the bottom of it. Either it asserts something about actuality, about being, as if one already knew this from another source; that is, as if opposite attributes *could* not be ascribed to it. Or the proposition means: opposite attributes *should* not be ascribed to it. In that case, logic would be an imperative, not to know the true, but to posit and arrange a world that shall be called true by us [11].

Nietzsche's critique raises the question of how one justifies an ordering principle, if a principle like non-contradiction is not what it purports to be. Wittgenstein connects this question to prediction, prescription and personal motivation, when in his *Philosophical Investigations* he shows how a prescription, a command even, can change the course of how we necessarily must interpret subsequent action.

"I am leaving the room because you tell me to." I am leaving the room, but not because you tell me to." Does this proposition *describe* a connexion between my action and his order; or does it make the connexion? Can one ask: "How do you know that you do it because of this, or not because of this?" And is the answer perhaps: "I feel it." [2, section 487]

Among Ludwig Wittgenstein's investigations, number 487 is where we can perhaps best see how language produces, enables and constrains futures. Statements are to commands, as Wittgenstein demonstrates, as description is to prescription. With this theme of the structure of language in mind, we must to consider the following mechanics of the structure.

Kierkegaard says that when Abraham chooses to obey God's order, he is authorising God to command him. God has not forced Abraham to do anything. Likewise for Sartre, the same is true when we choose to obey a law or policeman, or sign. [8, p. 77] These observations help to illustrate how meaning is created not only by the definitions of words, but by the social interpretation of structure, tone, and the mechanics of language. It seems a bit strange to say that neither God nor the policeman has forced the action. And we may be particularly surprised to find such a statement coming from Sartre. But if we examine what has been said, we should notice that we are talking about the creation of meaning and the authorisation for action through commands. Commands are not commands just because of the definitions of individual words contained within them. As Saussure reminded us above, language involves both an established system and an evolution. Moreover, individual parts of the language in the system must be understood in the context of the system, not as free-standing meanings. So while it may take Abraham's authorisation to construct God's statement as a command, Abraham's failure to follow the mandate of the command will be interpreted as disobeying the command, not as some unrelated action. Our social use of language does not permit the hearer of a statement that has been directed at him to ignore the preceding statement when taking subsequent meaningful actions. A hearer cannot say that he heard the speaker, but neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement, and simply chose to act independently. Why is this? Because the systematic nature of the language means that every utterance is made in the context of all language, and every speaker and every hearer is hearing and speaking in the contexts of all speaking and hearing. That is how meanings are created. This means that while the meaning of a statement is not solely for the speaker to determine, as Kierkegaard and Sartre illustrate, so too it is not solely for the hearer to determine. I would even go a step further than this, and say that while it is true that the interpretation of meaning from speaker and hearer are necessary for a command, so too is it necessary to have the interpretation of meaning created by the audience? This is the case because the hearer interprets the statement in the context of what "the audience", real or virtual, may make of it.

Moreover, this meaning is determined by speaker, hearer and audience not only in the definition of words, but in the structure and mechanics of language, in the ethos of the persons involved and the social dynamics of its use, among other things. For example, a command has a meaning different than a statement not just because of the accumulated definitions of the words in the command, but also because of its structure and mechanics. The audience, together with the speaker and hearer, creates the meanings. There is more—it is not only the audience who is present during this particular interlocution, but all audiences in the language family, who are responsible for the meanings created.

Consequently, in the above example, even if the hearer genuinely did not hear

the preceding statement, the audience will interpret the hearer's actions as re-actions to the statement. This means that the statement is functioning as a command—not because of the content of the intentional command of the speaker, and not because of the content of the re-actions of a wilful hearer, but because of the power of the audience to influence the interpretive possibilities of meaning in social speaking and hearing. This dynamic has ramifications for the speaker, listener and audience who make up the social group. The social understanding of group language dynamics plays a necessary and powerful force in establishing the system identified by Saussure. And because we all, at one time or another, are part of the interpretive audience that produces the system, we have contributed to the socially-constructed conditions which remove the ability of the speaker or hearer (was it ever there?) to insist upon his intentional will as the supreme interpretation of the definitional meaning of a statement, and in its function as a command or statement—a prescription or a description. In the evolution of language that Saussure regards as being essential, I would suggest that ultimately this environment of interpretation stops the speaker or hearer from expecting that the audience privilege the meaning that is conscious to the intentional will of the speaker or hearer. Once that expectation is removed, we may see that there is an element of complicity by the speaker or hearer in the dynamic whereby the audience helps to create the meaning for both the speaker and the hearer.

In short, we have moved from the notion that the speaker controls the meaning for the hearer, to the hearer contributing to the meaning, to the audience contributing to the meaning. Once the speaker or hearer acknowledges this, he or she is complicit in the audience's construction of meaning and must surrender the expectation that the singular, intentional will of the speaker must be privileged as the supreme interpretation of meaning.

#### 4. Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have hung my arguments on a framework of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. To that framework then, I give the final words. In investigations 579–81, he writes:

The feeling of confidence. How is this manifested in behaviour? An 'inner process' stands in need of outward criteria. An expectation is imbedded in a situation, from which it arises. The expectation of an explosion may, for example, arise from a situation in which an explosion *is to be expected*.

In an established system that is necessary for language to have meaning, all description is prescription. Adding "de-diction" to the etymological matrix helps to illustrate that point. As an heuristic device that is intended to make us reflect upon the creation of futures through language, we might want to relate it to the deceivingly-simple concept of a model. I recently asked some university students what a fashion model has in common with a carbon molecule model—"toothpicks" was the answer that I received. (One might need to have done primary school science a while

ago to know that models of molecules were constructed with balls and toothpicks.) That may in fact be the only thing that those two models have in common. We are tricked by what appears to be the same word, but I would suggest it functions more as a homonym. Models in science are intended to describe the world as it exists; fashion models, as any woman (or man) will tell you, are not at all like the rest of us—their function is normative, a prescription of how we *should* look, not a mirror of how we do look. The use of the same word—model—for description and prescription allows even the scientist to create models and then look for a world that is like the model, rather than to make a model to look like the world. Within this notion of modelling then, the notion of how description becomes prescription is summarised.

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