

Re:Re:Re:Re:Re:Re:Re:Re:Re:Ontology

*In our former lives, we have all been earth,
stone, dew, wind, fire, moss, tree, insect,
fish, turtle, bird and mammal.*

Mathias Énard, requoting Thich Nhat Hanh
requoting the Buddha

Restarting all verbs with re-

One might well imagine a verb dictionary in which all the entries begin with re-. Frontloading all verbs — including verbal nouns and gerunds — in the language with this little prefix might usefully draw attention to the fact that when you get right down to it all use is re-use, all breathing rebreathing, all verbing reverbing. As thought-provoking as this retooled dictionary might be — or thought-reprovoking — it would also ultimately be redundant for paradoxically it suggests that all verbs have an embedded prefix anyway that we had previously failed to notice and that was just being pointed out. In other words, it implies that the initiative allegedly performed or expressed by any given verb is somehow a re-initiative, and all performance re-performance, all doing redoing, all reading rereading, all discovery rediscovery, all action reaction. Indeed, the dictionary's conceit actually seems to invalidate the very conditions of possibility of an *event* taking place at all since it inscribes action itself in an endless web of causal factors. In philosophical terms, this re-dictionary would seem to make an outrageous ontological assertion: that being is rebeing, and that to be is to re-be. On the face of things, that is something that sounds not only nonsensical but infuriating. Inasmuch as it strips us of the very possibility of originating anything absolutely afresh, it insults our self-image as agents of creative authority and authorship. And it does so through language usage itself, which feels predominantly calibrated to uphold the constituent subject — the cogito upon which pretty much everything else is contingent. Re- is a common prefix, and very much a subaltern one, for those who rely on linguistic hand-me-downs. Recycling may be praiseworthy, but it is linguistically sentenced to entropy.

Relooping reuse

Still, the fact that any verb, gerund or gerundive whatsoever can be put into an infinite loop merely by prefixing it with re- is intriguing. Though such usage may be jarring to the ear, it remains grammatically irreproachable. Perhaps it's jarring because a language-immanent value system has habituated us to proceeding otherwise, and as we get used to the repeating logic of re- a more complex web of morphing reuse will become perceptible. At any event, it is also true that many common verbs take easily to the prefix re-. For instance, any verb expressing some sort of recombinant action involving a preexistent set of component parts or ingredients: reuse is spontaneously more logical than use, repurposing clearer than purposing, retooling truer to life than tooling. Or what about activities that follow the rhythm of the seasons or the recurrent cycles of life? Rebuilding, replanting, repairing, reproducing...

Refarming the lifeworld

Let's take things a step further. Like ancestral epistemologies, recent ecosystemic theory has drawn attention to the intractable connectedness of everything. All lifeforms and agents are endlessly remade from one another — what else, indeed, could they be remade from? We are all one, redistributed; forever remade, reformed, remixed, recoded, reintroduced, renamed; endlessly part and parcel of one another. The breath you just exhaled is already mine, for a moment; breathing is rebreathing is refarming the atmosphere. To live together in a biosphere is to remake use — or make reuse — of that atmosphere, of all that it is and all that is in it. Same

goes for any landscape, literal or figurative. To even mention such a thing should be redundant — a statement of the obvious. That it is clearly isn't says something about the ideology embedded in use in general, and in language use in particular. This suggests there is something quite profound, from an ontological perspective, about reuse — and about the community of (re)users that make use and reuse. Let's consider this from the point of view of language (re)use.

Redistributed reuse

Meaning — all the meaning there is in the world, and by extension, all the tentative stability it provides — is generated, modified and upheld within language by the community of users of that language. Meaning results from a conflictual relationship between speech and language, between potentiality and power: individual usage (speech acts) may challenge or subvert collective usage (the institution of language), but if it challenges it too much, it strays from the realm of the collectively admissible and fails to take hold in language; conversely, if usage blandly reasserts the norm, innovation founders and meaning grows brittle. This means that as users of language, we are collectively entrusted both with upholding and renewing meaning — all the meaning there is. That's a daunting task, though it is sufficiently redistributed as to make it manageable. Language, though, is paradigmatic in another way too: since no one user invented language — which was always already available for use — we might as well say that in circular fashion language invented its users. This means, though, that it is logically inconsistent to speak of simply *using* language inasmuch as every component of it has already been *reused*, countless times over in countless permutations, and hence that there is only language reuse, making of us not users but quite literally re-users.

A reassuring ontology

Here language reuse can be seen as the paradigm of reuse in the broadest sense. Modernity contrived of many ways to put us humans on a higher plane than other lifeforms, but reuse would seem to put us all on an equal ontological footing: as re-users of the conditions for reproducing life itself, we find common ground with a planetary re-usership. Ontologically, it's very reassuring.

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Rebeing: A practical exercise in psycholexicography

In your mind, go through the entire alphabet from A to Z choosing as quickly and spontaneously as possible one verb per letter, prefixing each selection with re-, writing the verbs down as you go.

Repeat twice for best results.

Here's my first list, by way of example.

A second list will redig the same imaginary, just a little deeper.

The third, a little deeper still.

Reappropriate
Rebuild
Recommission
Redig
Reestablish
Refashion
Regarnisse
Rehash
Reintegrate
Rejuvenate
Rekiss
Relink
Remember
Renumber
Reorder
Repurpose
Reroute
Reseed
Retract
Reuse
Revigorate
Rewrite
Rexerox
Reyeast
Rezone