On How We Think

In *How We Think* John Dewey points out that, "Language has such a peculiarly intimate connection with thought as to require special discussion." In so offering this discussion, he makes several distinctions. One such distinction is between artificial and natural language. It is this distinction which I shall discuss here.

For Dewey, in order for the meaning of anything to be apprehended, the meaning must be held within a particular sensation or object which is sensible. Signs are those things which are both deliberately and artificially given for that reason. Symbols as such are "particular exsistences" set aside in order to fix meaning. Both signs and symbols as they are naturally artificially produced represent language. Furthermore all such existences, in as much as they are "vehicles of meaning", are not complete things in themselves. Hence, we are not here concerned with the thing itself but only with the meaning it presents.

Dewey notes that, "to say that language is necessary for thinking is to say that signs are necessary." However, as stated above, signs are not always deliberate and artificial. Natural existences are also given to us. Yet, as Dewey views them, they represent other things and events separate from themselves. So it is that the buds on the trees tell us of the approach of summer and that the sound of thunder warns us of lightning - or is it the other way around? Nonetheless, all such signs have a usefulness but only as they point to some other event, as on page 52 of *Pixie* when we are told that when Mr. Mulligan frowns, he means what he is saying. The problem with such signs, says Dewey, is that they are very limited. First of all, such natural signs tend to distract us from what is actually being indicated. For example, Pixie may tend to draw her attention to Mr. Mulligan's frown and less to what he is actually indicating. Second, when natural signs exist by themselves they tell us nothing. We must wait for further signs or the event itself to give a meaning. Third, natural signs were not meant to be signs and are, therefore, quite unmanageable and inconvenient. It is very difficult to carry the buds of trees or thunder around with us.

On the other hand, says Dewey, artificial signs and symbols; as those Mr. Mulligan tells the class they will read at the zoo, are invented to convey particular meaning. They are, as is talking itself, deliverately intended to represent the particular. Thus says Dewey: "It is therefore indispensable for any high development of thought that there exist intentional signs."

Artificial and deliberate signs are thus produced to overcome the restrictions inherent in natural signs. First, printed marks, sounds and words have very little sensible value in themselves. They do not distract us from what they are indicating. For Dewey, they have value, as such, only in there "representative function." Hence, if Mr. Mulligan's frown is a deliberate act produced consciously to draw attention to what he is indicating then it is an artificial sign and not natural and in such it is as valuable as the words, for it is produced to represent meaning. Second, unlike natural signs, we do not have to wait for further signs and events to give meaning to artificial signs. They are at our control and, as when Brian speaks to the giraffe, they can be produced when we feel the need for their production. Third, artificial signs produced to be signs, they are therefore manageable, as Dewey sees it, and convenient. We can talk of the relation of thunder to lightning or of the buds on trees to summer without physically producing them.

Thus, Dewey says that it seems that it is for these reasons that talking has been designated as the primary form of deliberate language. When we talk, we seek to represent a function beyond the words themselves. When talking we can modify not only the quantity of signs we produce but also the quality of a particular sign or word. When Pixie screams at the top of her lungs, she gives immediate meaning to a sign which in itself has very little sensible value. The production of the cry gives value though only as it is produced deliberately to be given immediately as a sign.

I believe that we can easily point to the distinction between natural and artificial signs, as Dewey sees such, on page 52 of *Pixie*. Here Pixie points to the meaning of Mr. Mulligan's frown and it is also on this page that Mr. Mulligan speaks of reading the signs at the zoo. I also believe that an understanding of what Dewey sees as the intimate relationship between language and thought may also be of value in discussing several episodes throughout *Pixie*. For what Dewey is ultimatly pointing out as concerns our use of language in *How We Think* is that language not only is produced from and provides to particular existences a particular meaning but more importantly artificial language is necessary for intellectual growth.

It may thus be the case why Pixie has such a concern with Brian's lack of verbalization. What is obvious as concerns Pixie, with language and its relationship to thinking, is that Pixie in her relationships with others seems to be in search of the artificial. The question becomes: why does Brian seem to seek the natural when it appears so obvious, in terms of Dewey, that the natural is so inconvenient and unreliable?

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References

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