

APPLICATIONS  
STORIES &  
DIALOGUES

# The Man and the Peg Words

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BERT BEESTEN (meaning Bertie Beasts)

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**T**he room was a shambles. Toys and clothes were everywhere and an open book was lying abandoned on the ground. On the table there was something to drink. It seemed as if no one cared, at least not about the mess.

There was talking at the table. A lot was being said. The man sitting there was talking about his life. He had been out on the street a lot, demonstrating with others. In large groups they'd march through street after street, shouting slogans. Super slogans, like "We shall fight on!" and sometimes "International solidarity!"

Demonstrating, that is what you do when you disagree with something. It is easiest when there are a lot of you. You pretend you all think that this is not the way things should be done and you go out into the streets and shout slogans together.

"No," the man said, "It wasn't like that. Everyone really believed things should change. We

weren't pretending."

He had not finished yet. He said, "When I had marched the streets for ten years I said to myself: 'That's enough, now don't do it for the next ten years.' And I haven't marched the streets shouting slogans since."

Littl'un had been concentrating on drinking his Britvic and maybe he had even picked up something. Anyway, Littl'un asked, "What does 'since' mean?"

What should he say, the man? Since means something like: from then on. But was that really what Littl'un wanted to know?

The man forgot about his protest story and began another one.

"Listen," he said. "Since is a word, like table or chair, but it's different, too. Look, you can touch a table. You can also attach something to it, a clothes peg for instance. You can also put a peg onto a chair. But you can't do that with since. You can never attach a peg to it. I cannot point to since at all. It is nowhere in this room. But there are a lot of other words that I can touch and that you can attach a peg to. Those are peg words. Do you understand?"

Littl'un finished his Britvic and said, "Grandma hangs up the washing with pegs."

The man nodded. "What else could you peg on the washing line?"

Littl'un knew. He was quite willing to say. His glass was empty. "You could peg out all my drawings outside." And he continued, "Then our next door neighbor won't have to watch the birds or the sky any more."

That was funny, everyone laughed. The man next door was always looking at the sky, and then Ike would ask, "Is it still blue, neighbor?"

The man was still thinking about his pegs. Littl'un was up in the sky.

Ike heard an iron bird fly over and looked out of the window. The sky was so blue today. The sky was deep! Ike would like to dig into it; to dig a very deep hole until he reached the water.

The man liked Ike's joke about the man next door. But not enough to forget about his peg words. He asked Littl'un, "Look, do you know another word like since that you cannot put a peg on?"

Littl'un looked out of the window and said, "Good."

"Yes, yes, very good, the word good," the man said. "You can't put a peg onto it either, at least not in a sentence like 'What our neighbor is doing is good.' Do you know any more of those words that you can't put a peg onto? These pegs can be either very big or very small. No one has ever put a peg onto the sun. But if someone could fly to the sun with a peg that was big enough, then he could attach a peg to the sun. However big or small your peg may be, you can never use it for words like since or good."

The man stopped talking for a moment. It was silent among the mess.

"One more, Littl'un."

It is not known whether Littl'un said what he was thinking. Maybe he wasn't thinking anything at all. Anyway, Littl'un said, "Blue."

The man frowned. "Blue. Yes, blue is a word that is hard to attach a peg to. Where is blue? If something is blue, that is different. Wonderful, Littl'un, that's right. You cannot touch blue at all. Putting a peg on it is impossible."

Maybe Ike had still been listening, but he had not joined in the conversation.

Now he suddenly got up, fetched a peg from the hall cupboard and walked up to the man, who was also his father. He put the peg on the man's nose.

What could he say, the man?

He said in a nasal voice, "Nozz izzz alzzo a beg word."

# MANUAL: The Man and the Peg Words

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BERRIE HEESEN

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Given a schoolclass familiar with parsing and concepts like "common noun" and "verb," this story will automatically elicit questions about the relationship between peg words, nouns and things. A fine opportunity for some linguistic-philosophical investigations!

The familiarity of the students with parsing might be stimulating when regarding everyday terms from another viewpoint, and this takes us to concept analysis. "Peg words" as a concept for a collection of words is unusual. To what level peg words are defined must appear from the text. Everything that is known about the term can be found in the story, no other source is needed. If someone wants to state something about the status of peg words, one is forced to go over the lines Bert Beesten has written. In class, one can only start defining peg words as far as this is done in the story, given a common agreement about the interpretation of the text. Apart from the elaborations hereafter presented, Herman Hendriks, an Amsterdam philosopher of language wrote a linguistic approach about the phenomenon of peg words.

A question easily raised in class conversation deals with the comparison of the collection of peg words and the collection of nouns and the collections of things.

## DOING: Peg Word, Noun, Thing

For each word, mark the collection to which it belongs. If it does not belong to any of the given collections, leave it blank. If it belongs to more than one collection, mark all the collections to which it belongs.

Words	Things	Nouns	Peg Words
Sun	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Trousers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Blue	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Class	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Thing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Life	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Squeeze	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Water	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tomorrow	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ant	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Noun	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### QUESTIONS: About Peg Words

1. Find a word that is not a peg word.
2. Find a noun that is not a peg word.
3. Is there a word for a thing that is not a peg word?
4. Is *peg word* a peg word?
5. In the story, only words referring to things are peg words. Can other words be a member of the collection of peg words?
6. How do children learn the words that are called peg words in this story?

### DOING: Peg Words, Yes or No?

Tracing peg words results in isolating words from their daily linguistic context, a nice analytic exercise. Words get their meaning precisely from the way and situation in which they are used. Words are not just verbs or nouns; the function of a word in a sentence is essential.

Look at the following sentences and make up your mind: Is the **bold** word a peg word?

1. Everybody decided that endless **knitting** of peglike festoons was completely boring.
2. I want to read a book because I have to wait before I can **book** that dream trip to the Bahamas.
3. That truck almost killed me. It was a **hair** breadth escape.
4. On first sight we had a rather quiet **class**, but rumors were buzzing around.
5. We are **eleven** together.
6. Marvellous **images** can be seen when watching music clips.
7. Matthew gets an **idea** every once in a while. And Ann?
8. At her **birthday**, MaryAnn got pegs in all colors of the rainbow.
9. He got **wind** of our secret plan, so we changed quickly, for we love secrets.

### THEME: Protesting, Always Easy?

Demonstrating, that is what you do when you disagree with something. It is easiest when there are a lot of you. Here, something is said about protesting: it is easiest when you are with many. In the following sentences the importance is stressed of being really convinced that things need to change. The group protesting needs to believe in their protest. Protesting has two sides. A group of people is questioning an existing practice or a rule. The protesters agree about the need for change. Changing a practice or rule demands an idea of what the alternative can be. If it can not be done any longer in the usual way, it must be done differently. The protesters do not have to agree about the alternative. Their agreement reflects their rejection of the actual state of affairs. Take August 1991: the majority of the USSR rejects their existing communist system. Did all these people agree about what the alternative should be?

So it seems easier to protest together. For the time being, your common agreement is expressed in public. If you are protesting individually (and we all do this every now and then), it is much harder to avoid the pressure of offering an alternative. It is much more difficult to stick to your protest against a given practice. Others force you to propose an alternative: "So how do you think things have to be done, Smarty?" A group is harder to bring to the fore in that way. A group can stick to protesting against a certain practice or rule without being forced to present alternatives. Of course, both the individual and the collective way have their functions.

### QUESTIONS: What is Protesting?

1. Why is it easier to protest with a lot of people?
2. Why is it more difficult to protest alone?
3. Who is willing to protest first? Think about a case.
4. Why does the man stop participating in demonstrations?
5. Does someone who disagrees with a certain rule always have to protest against it?
6. Does invisible protest exist?
7. Say a democratic society goes to war. As a result, demonstrations are held against the war.

Who can be happy with these protests in that democratic country?

### THEME: Telling and Forgetting

The man in the story changes subject twice. First, he starts a protest story and is interrupted by Littl'un's questions about the word "since." The man forgets his memories about demonstrating and starts explaining about words and language. Later on, Ike makes a joke and the man does not forget that he was explaining about peg words. He picks up the thread of the story again.

We can compare the two moments. Why do we forget one moment what we are doing and let ourselves be lead along with the conversation, while other times we stick to the subject? Which factors are influencing us in these situations?

Some factors can be expressed, like the man's involvement with the subject, (he seems to be more interested in explaining language than in telling about demonstrating), the reactions of others, the way our memory is organized, and the inevitability of some associations and the absence of other connections.

### QUESTIONS: Forgetting and Not Telling

1. The man in the story is interrupted twice. The first time he forgets what he is telling, the second time he does not. How come?
2. If you are interrupted when you are telling a story, sometimes you forget the whole story and on other occasions you do not. How come?
3. What can one never forget?

### DOING: The Interrupted Story

Write a paper about yourself or someone else from your class who is telling a story. Every now and then the teller is interrupted. Each interruption changes the story. The title of your paper: *What one must not forget!*

### THEME: Speaking and Thinking

It is not known whether Littl'un said what he was thinking. Maybe he wasn't thinking anything at all.

The relationship between speaking and think-

ing has been a philosophical question for quite some time. Is it necessary to master a language (including a sign language) in order to be able to think? Is thinking merely language, or is there also a form of thinking apart from language — for instance, in pictures? Do we think in pictures before we start talking (as Julia Kristeva points out)?

### QUESTIONS: Speaking and Thinking

1. Can we know what a person thinks if that person does not tell us?
2. Is it possible to say something which has not been thought?
3. Can we know ourselves whether we say what we are thinking?
4. Is a thought a part of you?
5. If you are talking aloud when sleeping, have you first thought the words you are saying?

### DOING: Drawing of Thoughts

1. Draw someone who is without thoughts.
2. Draw someone who is trying to catch his or her thoughts.
3. Draw a thought or idea looking for a person.
4. Find a way to draw the weight of a particular thought; decide what thought you want to express.
5. Draw two persons who have the same thought, or, draw two persons who think they have the same thought.

### DOING: Describing the First Thought

With a partner, write an answer to the following question: What might be the first thought ever thought by someone?

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