Of Pegs and Nouns, Stuff and Things

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In his story "The Man and the Peg Words," Bert Beesten introduces the notion of *peg words*. In "Peg Words and Parsing," the first "theme" that goes with it, Berrie Heesen claims that in a class which is familiar with parsing and notions such as *common noun*, the story will automatically elicit questions about the relationship between peg words and common nouns. "This can lead to linguistic-philosophical investigations."[1] The "theme" claims furthermore that in the course of a classroom conversation the question will arise quite easily to what extent the set of peg words corresponds to the set of common nouns and the set of things. Below I will try to reflect a little on this question ("philosophize about it").

Because peg word is a new notion, someone who wants to get acquainted with it will just have to analyze Bert Beesten's story. The story treats a number of examples of peg and non-peg words: **table, chair, washing, drawings, sun** and **nose (nozzz)** are peg words, unlike **since, good** and **blue**. There is an in-between as well: **something blue**. We also find a criterion in the text: "words that I can touch and that you can attach a peg to. Those are peg words." However, this is formulated somewhat carelessly, since it confuses words with what they refer to. When the criterion is applied in the story, this confusion is avoided: **table** is a peg word, for "...you can touch a table. You can also attach something to it, a clothes peg for instance." In sum, the criterion can be formulated as follows:

The word **abc** is a peg word as you can attach a peg to an abc.

So, the word **table** is a peg word, since you can attach a peg to a table (i.e., to something

that the word **table** denotes). Further on in the story it appears that "peg" and "attach" have to be conceived broadly: **sun** is a peg word, too, because you can attach a peg (provided it is sufficiently big and heat-proof) to it. (Question: what does "attach" mean when the object is gaseous? Then **air** is a peg word, too. Okay, we will not let physical obstacles hamper us any further ... but what about **smell**?)

And now for the relationship with (a) common nouns and (b) things (or rather, words which refer to things).

(a) The criterion just imposed presupposes by its wording that the word to be tested on its pegability is a common noun: "an abc," it says there — which is only correct English (but see footnote 1) if **abc** is a common noun.

(b) Moreover, on account of the required combinability with **an** (or **a**), the criterion presupposes that the word at issue is a *count noun*.[2] This has consequences for the relationship between peg words and words which refer to things. If we identify the count nouns with the nouns which refer to "things" and the mass nouns with the words which refer to "stuff," the result is that a word is a peg word only if it is a common noun which refers to things.

Yet, this is not satisfactory. On the one hand it seems reasonable to count only common nouns[3] as peg words. But on the other, non-count (mass) common nouns (which refer to stuff instead of things) qualify for that predicate as well: it does not seem objectionable to call **wood** a peg word, for instance, for you can attach a peg to wood (the non-count noun **information**, on the contrary, is not a peg word). In order to avoid the exclusion of mass nouns, we could change the criterion in the following way:

The word **abc** is a peg word if it is a common noun and you can attach a peg to what the word refers to.

Made precise in this way, the notion *peg word* does not only appeal to something linguistic-philosophical, but also to something ontological (i.e., something in reality). What makes a word into a peg word has to do with the way in which (you think) the world is built up.

A straightforward idea would be to identify the peg words with the words (or common nouns) that refer to *concrete* things, and the non-peg words with the words that refer to *abstract* things. But this is not very pleasant, since in

some sense a car crash or a love affair (which are events that can happen to you) are more concrete than a car or a lover (which are unattainable "things-as-such"), whereas **car crash** and **love affair** fail to be peg words, contrary to **car** and **lover**.

Perhaps it is a better idea to revive the ancient dictionary-distinction between *material* and *immaterial*, and to identify the peg words with the words which refer to something material. This yields better results for the examples just discussed. But there is still room for doubt: it will depend on your view of thoughts whether you view thought as a peg word. Whoever considers the mental immaterial will probably say "no." Others might opt for "yes."

NOTES

1. Simplifying (and anticipating) matters, you could say that *common noun* is a linguistic notion, for there are strictly formal (language-internal) criteria to determine whether something is a common noun: **house** is a common noun, unlike **previous**, because (for example) **a house** is correct English, whereas **a previous** is not. This does not hold for the notion *peg word*. In order to check whether something is a peg word, we need to look at the things the word denotes. Being a peg word is a semantic property of expressions — a property of their meaning. In that sense, *common noun* is a linguistic notion, and *peg word* a philosophical one, since linguistics is about language proper, and philosophy of language (in a certain conception) is about the relationship between language and world.

The above can be contested in two ways. First, one can argue about the particular test proposed here: **weather**, for instance, is "intuitively" a common noun, but it does not pass the test — **a weather($\diamond$)**. **If** and **but**, on the other hand, are not "intuitive" common nouns, but we can say things like **he was full of ifs and buts**. Second, one can maintain that such tests are never purely formal: it is not an indisputable fact that **a previous** is incorrect — it does occur in correct English sentences, witness **she was reminded of a previous meeting**. The difference between **house** and **previous** is not that **a house** is right and **a previous** is wrong, but that **a house** can be used to refer to something, and that **a previous** cannot. Thus, the notion *common noun* would not be completely devoid of semantic implications, and hence inhabit the realm of philosophy as well.

2. Within the common nouns, one traditionally distinguishes between count nouns and mass nouns. Clear count nouns are **car** and **table** [**a car, four ta-**

bles vs. **much car($\diamond$), few table($\diamond$)**], clear mass nouns are **wine** and **mud** [**a wine($\diamond$), four muds($\diamond$)** vs. **much wine, little mud**].

It should be noted that almost all mass nouns can be used as count nouns — with a certain shift in meaning. One can say **we drank little wine**, but **we sell Italian wines** is possible too; and we could imagine some health resort specialist talking about **the muds of Bavaria**.

3. Of the other word classes, proper names might be taken into account: **Berrie** is a fine peg word, one could argue, for obviously a peg can be attached to Berrie (or to a Berrie). Intransitive verbs such as **eat** and **walk** also denote sets of things (eaters, walkers) to which you can attach a peg, but the link between the word eat and an eater is much less tight than in the case of common nouns. The same holds for adjectives such as **blue** and **healthy**: you can attach pegs to green and healthy things, but the way in which those words refer to these things is much less direct than in the case of common nouns.

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