

Linguistic Gerrymandering

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One of the so-called tenets of good writing in English is to write nervous English in the sense of employing mostly those Germanic words native to the language, as compared with the artificial lace-work of unnecessarily added Romance embroidery. Samuel Johnson has from time to time been accused of doing just that: wallowing in the froth of vague Romance abstractions. Obviously this simplified vision of Germanic English being good and Romance English bad has long since been abandoned, to be replaced by a new approach of balance: not too many Germanic and not too many Romance words. It will therefore now prove interesting to cite a passage from *Rasselas* by Samuel Johnson followed by a translation of it in which some underlined Romance words have been translated into their roughly Germanic equivalents, and then to try to determine whether differences in style cause differences in meaning:

The valley, wide and fruitful, supplied its inhabitants with the necessaries of life, and all delights and superfluities were added with the annual visit which the emperor paid his children, when the iron gate was opened to the sound of musick; and during eight days every one that resided in the valley was required to propose whatever might contribute to make seclusion pleasant, to fill up the *vacancies of attention*, and lessen the *tediousness of time*. Every desire was immediately granted. All the *artificers of pleasure* were called to gladden the festivity; the musicians exerted the power of harmony, and the dancers shewed their activity before the princes, in hope that they should pass

their lives in this blissful captivity, to which th(o)se only were admitted whose performance was thought able to add novelty to luxury. Such was the appearance of security and delight which this retirement afforded, that they to whom it was new always desired that it might be perpetual; and as those, on whom the iron gate had once closed, were never suffered to return, the effect of longer experience could not be known. Thus every year produced new schemes of delight, and new *competitors for imprisonment*.¹

The valley, wide and fruitful, supplied its inhabitants with the necessaries of life, and all delights and superfluities were added at the annual visit which the emperor paid his children, when the iron gate was opened to the sound of musick; and during eight days every one that resided in the valley was required to propose whatever might contribute to make seclusion pleasant, to fill up *the times when the mind wanders out of boredom*, and lessen the *weariness caused by this*. Every desire was immediately granted. All *who could cause their onlookers pleasure* were called to gladden the festivity; the musicians exerted the power of harmony, and the dancers shewed their activity before the princes, in hope that they should pass their lives in this blissful captivity, to which th(o)se only were admitted whose performance was thought able to add novelty to luxury. Such was the appearance of security and delight which this retirement afforded, that they to whom it was new always desired that it might never end; and as those, on whom the iron gate had once closed, were never suffered to return, the effect of longer experience could not be known. Thus every year produced new schemes of delight, and *new persons who wanted to be there*.²

As the footnote to the translation indicates, not all Romance words have been replaced by Germanic ones, but only some to give an idea of the resulting drift of meaning. 'Vacancies of attention', against 'the times when the mind wanders out of boredom', indicates the new material to be introduced in the Germanic version in an attempt at rendering the suggested meaning of the Romance English faithfully. Contrasted with 'gaps of understanding', which is shorter Germanic, 'the times when the mind wanders out of boredom' is clearly superior in conveying the meaning intended by the writer. What both Germanic versions lack, however, is the wide

¹S Johnson. *Rasselas, Poems, and Selected Prose*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965, pp. 506-507 (my emphases).

²Horribly selectively gerrymandered Germanised version.

stretch of the Romance words. In other words, the Romance version could be lifted out of context and slotted into any roughly similar text situation, while both the Germanic versions are not text-bound but context-bound, which is a serious shortcoming if an attempt is being made at coining terms to name concepts. 'Gaps of understanding' also obviously has an undesirable pejorative meaning in this text.

The same goes for 'tediousness' and 'weariness caused by this' as for 'vacancies of attention' and 'the times when the mind wanders out of boredom'. If the phrase 'caused by this' is omitted, 'weariness' would be too specific and the links achieved by the two Romance nouns and the preposition 'of' would be lost entirely. Obviously the Germanic way of forging links through verbalisation, as opposed to Romance nominalisation, causes more roundabout phrasing, as well as establishing very close links with the immediate context, as is evinced by 'this', which in fact harks back to the whole of the preceding Germanic circumlocution, 'the times when the mind wanders out of boredom'. 'Artificers of pleasure', contrasted with 'who could cause their onlookers pleasure', again attests to the above, the Romance phrase having wider implications in suggesting that the artificers always cause pleasure, while the Germanic 'could' suggests only the possibility of pleasure. 'Will' in 'who will cause the onlookers pleasure' is also too time-specific, as it indicates only the future causing of pleasure, and the same argument of overspecificity would apply to any other tense or modal form of the verb employed. The 'for' in 'competitors for imprisonment' indicates a close relation that is completely lost in the periphrastic Germanic rendering of 'new persons who wanted to be there'. The Romance word 'competitors' strengthens the close relation between the 'wanted' and the 'to be there'. A further factor setting off the Romance coining is that normally nobody competes to be imprisoned. It is in any case very clear that the Romance renderings convey generalities or so-called eternal truths that are not in any way limited by the context but purely text-related, which is not the case with the specific context-bound Germanic versions.