

Derrick Lin

Professor Jonas Cope

2nd Semester English 1000H

Bryson: Enlarging Vocabularies for a Fuller Language

Bill Bryson's essay "Where Words Come From" discusses how words are brought into the English language. According to Bryson, words have five origins: creation by error, adoption from other languages, spontaneity, changes in definition, and adding or subtracting affixes. Bryson uses multiple examples of the five origins in his writing, creating long lists of synonyms, words with similar meanings. Bryson is trying to show his readers that there are words for everything and that they should not settle for using only a handful of words. In this way, he is recruiting his readers away from the people who want to make English a minimalist language. Bryson shows off his mastery of English and the vast quantity of words in the language, but he also points out that several words are missing. There are many words to describe two extremes, but few words to describe the middle ground between the two. There is also a lack of positive words to go along with their negative forms, due to negative affixes making the new words more popular than the root words. By broadening their vocabularies, Bryson hopes that his readers can prevent words from fading from common use and the English language can remain plentiful. Not only that, but he also wants his readers to create or re-popularize more positive words and more moderate words. Bryson educates his readers with smaller vocabularies on the definitions and uses of words, and challenges his readers with larger vocabularies to find the hidden examples of the five origins in his writing. The readers with smaller vocabularies are instructed in the components of the English language and, when their vocabularies are large enough, they will be able to prove that they are capable of carrying out Bryson's mission of enriching the language

and the lives of those who speak it with words of positivity and moderation. This will do away with the minimalist use of extremes and negatives that is popular among most English speakers. Bryson writes about the five origins of language, but his shadow argument is for the expansion of his readers' vocabularies in the direction of positivity and moderation.

Bryson says that dictionaries are full of "words describing the most specific of conditions, the most improbable of contingencies, the most arcane of distinctions" (808). Arcane is not a word that is commonly spoken in everyday conversation. Bryson uses "arcane" as a symbol for words that are relatively unknown to the general population. One of the definitions of arcane happens to be "known or understood by very few". Bryson also says that a critic of the English language could "argue that English is an untidy and acquisitive language, cluttered with a plethora of needless words" (809). "Plethora" is not a word that is commonly used. Bryson could have just said that English has a lot of needless words. He used "plethora" in place of a simpler word as an example of the many uncommonly used words that are deemed "needless" and, at the same time, is alluding to one of the definitions of "plethora", which is "excess". In effect, Bryson is mocking the hypothetical critic by using an uncommonly used word that has several commonly used synonyms. This imaginary critic symbolizes a person with a small vocabulary because neither understands the use of the many words that are available to them. They know of the words, but they don't know the meanings. A person with a larger vocabulary understands the cleverness of Bryson's use of the word "plethora" in the critique of needless words. The critic is opposed to the use of words that cause clutter, but he still uses "plethora", an uncommonly used word that causes the clutter that he opposes.

Whether it is out of necessity or enjoyment, Bryson often uses one sentence to provide an explanation and an example of the explanation. While discussing the uses of affixes, such as

prefixes, suffixes, and infixes, he says that “this inclination to use affixes and infixes provides gratifying flexibility in creating or modifying words to fit new uses” (819). “Flexibility” not only illustrates the various uses of affixes, but the word itself also contains four affixes. A person with a smaller vocabulary will benefit from learning what an affix is, while a person with a larger vocabulary will benefit from learning how affixes can make a word more specific in its extremity or moderation and positivity or negativity. When Bryson is explaining how prefixes can be used to express negation he says, “*In-*, for instance, almost always implies negation” (819). He later gives several examples of words with negative affixes that do not have negative definitions, which add to smaller vocabularies. His first example of an exception to negative affixes, though, is hidden in the sentence regarding negation that was previously referenced. “Instance” has *In-* as an affix, but “instance” does not have a negative definition. A large vocabulary with an understanding of affixes is able to notice that Bryson provides an example of an exception to negative prefixes in the same sentence as the explanation for exceptions to negative prefixes. This awareness of negative prefixes will allow Bryson’s expansionist readers to provide positive prefixes as alternatives.

Bryson displays an expansive vocabulary in his writing, but he still complains that there are not enough words. He says that English is “strangely lacking in middling terms” (808). Bryson wants to be able to precisely distinguish “the middle ground between hard and soft, near and far, big and little” (808). Using a simple word, such as “big” or any of its synonyms is not enough for Bryson. He wants some specificity in his writing. Bryson also notes the abundance of negative words that are missing their positive form. His examples are filled with words that are no longer in use. He says that English would be a fuller language if its speakers could “praise a capable person for being full of ept or an energetic one for having heaps of ert” (808). “Inept”

and “inert” are commonly used words, but “ept” and “ert” have been erased from normal conversation, and Bryson wonders why that is the case. He wants to know why one word was allowed to remain in the public’s vocabulary and its opposite form was forced out. Bryson is like a mad collector in the way that he brags about the vast quantity of words that he has mastered, and then wishes that there were more words to add to his vocabulary. These examples are used as warnings to Bryson’s readers. Words fade from common use when vocabularies shrink.

Readers pay the most attention to Bryson’s main points about the five origins of language, but Bryson encourages his readers to find and understand his shadow arguments. Bryson’s goal is not just to enlarge the vocabularies of his readers with synonyms, but also to help them develop more positive and middle ground words. Bryson wants his readers to live lives of moderation instead of lives of extremes and negativity. He thinks that his readers’ vocabularies are too extreme and negative due to the multitude of synonyms of extremes and lack of positive word forms. Of course, this means that Bryson’s readers should add words to their vocabularies that aren’t too positive, or in other words, they should add words that are moderately positive. Bryson doesn’t just want his readers to add words to their vocabularies; he wants them to add the right words. A person’s vocabulary equates to their lifestyle. Bryson’s goal is for a fuller vocabulary to lead to a fuller life experience.

Bryson wants his readers to realize that there are so many words at their disposal. He doesn’t want them to be satisfied with a limited number of words or phrases. Readers with smaller vocabularies notice the long lists of examples that Bryson provides them and their vocabularies grow in that way. Readers with larger vocabularies notice the hidden words and definitions that contribute to Bryson’s shadow arguments and their vocabularies grow in that way. Bryson suggests that the way a person speaks and writes is a reflection of how they live. He

wants his readers to live healthier lives of moderation and positivity, instead of lives of extremes and negativity. Bryson just wants to open his readers up to the possibilities of language.

Works Cited

Bryson, B. "Where Words Come From." *A World of Ideas: Essential Readings for College*

Writers. Ed. Lee A. Jacobus. 9th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2013. 808-21. Print.