

- Cultures as deep patterns of how to live •



.3. Cultures hold all our accumulated ways of knowing & living

3.5.2 Natural Language as a Pattern Repository

If you think about where natural language came from, it appears the role of words in our lives is for connecting our cultural meanings with the natural design patterns we found meaningful, and needed the words for referring to. Nouns, verbs and adjectives may have many related semantic meanings, but would mean little if they had nothing to refer to. Take the word “noun” for example. Without words that name things, the word ‘noun’ would not have much meaning.

Before exploring a few details, I should mention the ways this rich resource of natural patterns can be used. Any time you see a word in a sentence you can use this approach to search for the naturally occurring pattern of experience the word originated from. It might be a word noticed for having some pivotal meaning to an author or to the story or circumstance you want to better understand. Another pattern writer, Takashi Iba, uses a similar technique. He draws on what he calls “center words” that he finds in pattern descriptions to start his search for images to illustrate design patterns (Iba 2015). A good dictionary is of course also a good resource for learning more about what experience of nature a word refers to, but here we’re also focusing on using words to study the germ of design in nature being responded to.

If you trace words to their subjects like that, what we generally find is that words are used for common traits that apply to numerous and richly varied examples, like “apple” referring to all the kinds of apples and our cultural uses and associations with the word. Looking for the natural design patterns being

referred to uses natural language as a repository of references to natural designs we find meaningful. It can be either done simply or with more effort, but we essentially only need to explore the “contexts” the word refers to identify the “forces” that are brought into balance in our experience, to give them the meaning we find in their nature.

An easy example might be the word “frigid”, which quickly brings to mind a number of situations where you’d use that. You just think over the natural patterns of relationships it brings up to see the combination we are responding to. It’s a feeling of being somewhat exposed and almost attacked by the cold, not just about a temperature. So the way we use words to express qualities, most anywhere that word seems to apply it is likely the circumstance leaves someone both somewhat exposed and attacked, as the pattern. I find it works very often and produces surprising insight, just from the use of words that seem intuitively right for the circumstance.

That way of looking at words as a reference to a natural pattern also makes the word a name for design pattern referred to, as well as for the collection of semantic and cultural meanings associated with it, a gigantic reservoir of associations really. I understand this probably seems unfamiliar at first, and may take searching around for how to become comfortable with at first. We start from thinking of words only in relation to the meanings that come immediately to us, with no thought of them referring to anything else, such as natural relationships and experiences.

For mining natural design patterns from words it can help to study families of words with related meanings. When taken out of normal context and looked at as a group, the meanings for a group of words can then stand out better, and be seen in relation to the original subjects they refer to. In English it can be done by looking at how words are built combining meaningful parts, a ‘root’ word with its modifiers, as ‘prefixes’ and ‘suffixes’. What we find is that a modifier sometimes adds associated natural meaning to all the root words it modifies, sort of like a seed does the same job for every plant.

Take simple words ending with “-or”, for example. That suffix adds the natural design meaning “doer” to each one, as in the words “tractor”, “actor”, “projector” or “progenitor”. The root words mean something by themselves, but together with their action mean a lot more. The combination gives the new word strong “emergent properties”, and most compound words seem to be built with combined meanings work like that.

The patterns of meaning added are clearer when looking at lists of words with the same modifiers. As you look at a number of them you recognize the common action being referred to, and see the richness the modifier adds, that highlights the pattern of the natural design referred to. You might think of these powerful combinations of simple meanings as “events”, imagined as the “ah ha moments” at some moment in time when the two parts were put together to create the burst of new meanings. There are large collections of these kinds of words.

Figure 14 shows how the parts of the word “community” are assembled, combining “comm-” meaning ‘together’, and “unity” meaning ‘one’, so referring to things brought together as one,

another word structure with curious transformative properties, referring to an important natural design. One would then need to study a number of root words transformed this way to become really clear as what forces are balanced and how that unifies the connection of two thoughts. From there the next step would be to study the overall pattern of natural relationships as a nameable design, and identify the implied “forces” and the “unifying organization” that presents them as a nameable ideal.

• Pattern words that identify natural ‘centers’ •

*Community: [comm-unity]
Bringing “together” a “unity”*

The word structure turns our attention:

- to the common natural occurrences,
- to it having natural properties and design
- to a great variety of examples we each know of,
- and the diverse and layered associations we are all familiar with.

14. Words built from names for natural designs

To better understand how modifiers amplify root meanings with their roles in nature, it helps to look at whole lists of similarly modified root word meanings. Below, for example, are a very few of the over 2,000 common words in English that have the “-tion” suffix. It helps to study some of the whole list to appreciate the kind of action the suffix fairly consistently associates with the root⁸. That then helps you turn your attention back and forth between the meaning of the word root⁹ and how the modifier,¹⁰ transforms its meaning, in this case to create names of common transformative processes and the ends states that result.

What these richly meaningful terms of English have in common is this simple way of being elevated in meaning. It’s a linguistic invention that came to English from the Latin of early Rome¹¹. The added meaning the device produces has one more twist. What seems very curious and important is that these “-tion” words are used to both name how a transformation takes place and the end state it results in, a double meaning of both temporal and spatial designs. I was shocked when I first found that. The third part of the meaning is the association of those natural designs with all our accumulated cultural experiences of them. It is like a whole textbook of complexly related meanings in every word! (Figure 15).

⁸ OneLook dictionary search for words ending in “tion”:

http://www.onelook.com/?w=*tion&scwo=1&sswo=1

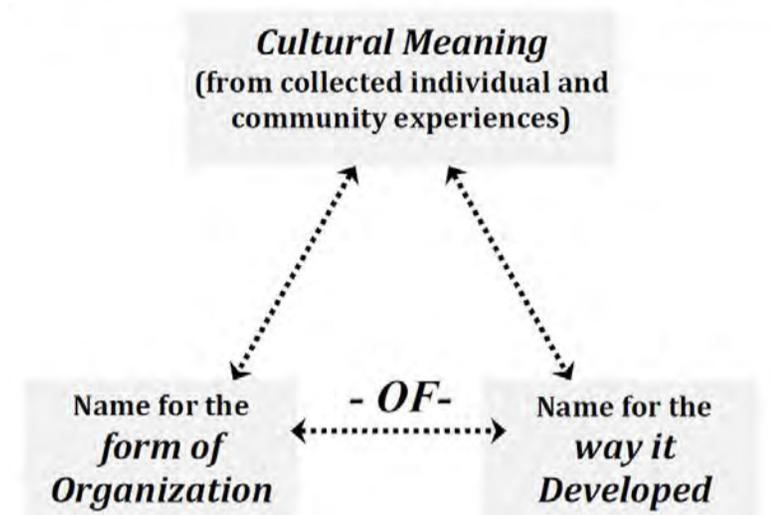
⁹ ‘root’ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/root> “The element that carries the main component of meaning in a word and provides the basis from which a word is derived by adding affixes or inflectional endings or by phonetic change.”

¹⁰ ‘modifier’ http://www.orbilat.com/General_References/Linguistic_Terms.html “a word or phrase that makes specific the meaning of another word or phrase.”

¹¹ - tion: suffix of Latin origin, to form abstract nouns from verbs or stems, to express actions, states or associated meanings - <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/tion>

So as for each word in Table 3, the compound word refers to both the end state and how it came about. “Abbreviation” refers to both the shortened form as well as the way it was shortened, along with all our cultural associations with both. To understand any state of being you’d surely want to know all three, but who would have guessed that combining 1) our recognition of important natural patterns, 2) our understanding of how they developed and 3) our cultural experience of them, would be all combined in the meaning of our words for them?

• Meanings from Perspectives on Nature •



15. Words with 3 Dimensions of grounded meaning

Table 3. Words modified to name transformations and their end states

<u>Root + Suffix</u>	<u>The Action</u>	<u>The Result</u>
• <i>comm ◦ uni ◦ cation:</i>	The process	What was made one
• <i>co ◦ oper ◦ ation:</i>	The practice	What was achieved
• <i>vocal ◦ iz ◦ ation:</i>	The expressing	What was expressed
• <i>abbrev ◦ iation:</i>	The shortening	The short form
• <i>dele ◦ tion:</i>	The removing	What was removed

So as for each word in Table 3, the compound word refers to both the end state and how it came about. “Abbreviation” refers to both the shortened form as well as the way it was shortened, along with all our cultural associations with both. To understand any state of being you’d surely want to know all three, but who would have guessed that combining 1) our recognition of important natural patterns, 2) our understanding of how they developed and 3) our cultural experience of them, would be all combined in the meaning of our words for them?

This approach is easily done for very casually like this, or as a research. In either case it is likely to deepen your appreciation of the many living qualities that common language gives us access to, and to give you more ready access to them where it matters.