

Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?

Scott Thornbury

In a radio broadcast made in 1929, the English writer Virginia Woolf had this to say about words: "Words, English words, are full of echoes, memories, associations. They've been out and about, on peoples' lips, in their houses, on the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries...". These "echoes, memories, associations" that words accrue are what we now call a word's connotations, and they will vary from person to person. The word *field* (in the Woolf quote above) will have quite different associations for a farmer and a city-dweller, for example, or for a hunter and an ecologist, or for a cricketer and a soldier. Nevertheless, knowing a word means knowing something about those connotations of the word that are generally shared between speakers of the language as a whole – knowing what makes a *field* so different from a *meadow* or a *prairie*, for example, or from the Spanish *campo* or an Egyptian *feddan*.

Virginia Woolf goes on to say that: "It is a very obvious but always mysterious fact that a word is not a single and separate entity: it is part of other words... words belong to each other". Here she neatly captures the interdependence of words, and that knowing a word means not only knowing its connotations but knowing the words that it commonly occurs with – its collocations. Hence, part of knowing the word *field* is knowing that it collocates with words like *study*, *vision* and *view* (as in *his chosen field of study*) as well as in such combinations as *field trip*, *field test* and *field work*, and *magnetic field*, *gas field* and *ice field*.



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A third feature of word knowledge that Woolf identifies is the way that this knowledge is organized into semantic networks – highly idiosyncratic and much more convoluted than the relatively straightforward word lists you find in textbooks. She writes: “[Words] are the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most untouchable of all things. Of course, you can catch them and sort them and place them in alphabetical order in dictionaries. But words do not live in dictionaries: they live in the mind... And how do they live in the mind? Various and strangely, much as human beings live, ranging hither and thither, falling in love, meeting together.”

The fact, well attested by linguists and teachers, that words are context-

sensitive was also evident to Woolf: “[They do not] like being lifted on the point of a pin and examined separately. They hang together in sentences, paragraphs, sometimes whole pages at a time”. Hence, to say that someone works *in the same field* may mean two quite different things, depending on whether it is said by a farm labourer or a rocket scientist. Attempting to define words apart from their contexts of use is – as teachers well know – an often-perilous activity.

Part of a word’s resistance to easy definition is due to the amazing elasticity of words, as they constantly adapt – and are adapted – to new uses, new needs, new contexts, new users. “In short [Woolf observes] they hate anything that stamps them

with one meaning or confines them to one attitude. For what is their nature, but change. Perhaps that is their most striking peculiarity – their need of change. This is because the truth they are trying to catch is many-sided, and they convey it by *being* many-sided, dashing first this way then that, saying one thing to one person, another thing to another person...”

All this provides a challenge to the learner – and to the teacher. Part of the pleasure of word-learning, though, is to experience the power of words – including their resilience over time – a living proof of which is the way Virginia Woolf’s own words still resonate many decades after they were first uttered.

ELT professional

An interview with Scott Thornbury

*Scott Thornbury has written a number of books about language teaching (including *How to Teach Grammar* and *How to Teach Vocabulary*), as well as lots of articles for journals and magazines.*

How long have you been writing about ELT methodology? SCOTT THORNBURY:

I started writing my first methodology book (*About Language*, CUP) in the early nineties, after completing an MA in TEFL at the University of Reading (although the book wasn’t published until 1997), and have been more or less writing about teaching ever since.

How many hours a week do you spend writing?

It depends – if you include articles, reviews, reports, and managing my website discussion list – I suppose about 10 hours on average.

What is the key to a successful ELT book?

It has to say something interesting in a way that is relevant to practising teachers – in a wide range of teaching contexts. It also helps if it appeals to teacher trainers as much as teachers – that way it has a chance of getting on to the book list of training courses.

What does your book give teachers that others don’t?

How to Teach Grammar and *How to Teach Vocabulary* combine a fairly up-to-date background in theoretical issues (such as recent developments like the lexical approach and corpus linguistics). They are also written in an accessible and non-technical style, with lots of practical ideas.

What advice would you give to someone who was thinking of writing an ELT book?

Find your niche – that is, find a point of view that is different – or differently expressed – than in the existing published books on the subject.

What was the last film you saw and what was it like?

It was called “Italian for beginners” and made by one of the Dogme 95 group of filmmakers, using minimal means for maximum effect – in the way I think teaching should be – and, because it was about a language class, it had an added interest. It was very accurate in portraying the classroom as a social context as much as an educational one – or rather, it showed how education (including one’s own personal development) is socially constructed.

What luxury would you take with you to a desert island?

My computer, since I could not bear to be off-line for more than 24 hours. Pathetic, isn’t it?

What is your all-time top tip for English teachers?

Stop teaching... start talking.