Clearinghouse

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To enchain syllables, and to lash the wind, are equally the undertakings of pride, unwilling to measure its desires by its strength.

—Samuel Johnson

Someone slides a form across a desk and asks you to fill it out. There are boxes for your name, your address, and a number by which an institution hopes to distinguish you from everyone else with a name and an address. You write inside the boxes. The writing stays inside the boxes. Nothing about the operation is visibly outward. Nevertheless, when the form is complete, you have filled it out.

You might equally have been asked to fill it in. The instruction would have arrived from a somewhat differ-

ent part of English, but the ink would have gone in the same places. The form does not care. An extraordinary amount of linguistic history can pass over a piece of paper without changing what anybody writes on it.

Now replace the last word with "up." For a speaker whose ordinary instruction is "fill it out," something has happened. The request may remain perfectly understandable. Nobody is likely to fill the room instead. Yet the small substitution has acquired a presence that the original instruction did not have. You notice the person speaking. Perhaps this is another variety of English. Perhaps English is not their first language. Perhaps you simply have not encountered the expression. The administrative task remains identical while the language has begun supplying information about its own arrival.

This is a peculiar kind of wrongness. It need not prevent understanding. It can occur in a sentence whose intended meaning is entirely clear. It may disappear when a different person says the sentence, or when the same person says it somewhere else. And the listener usually encounters it before possessing any account of what, exactly, has gone wrong. An explanation takes time. The sensation does not.

The sensation is also remarkably authoritative. Ask the listener why the form should be filled out rather

than up and you are unlikely to receive an explanation proportionate to the confidence of the judgment. Up is good enough for a glass. In is good enough for the boxes. Out has no obvious qualifications for paperwork. The speaker may reasonably conclude that this is simply what people say, which is both an unsatisfactory explanation and the beginning of the right one.

A familiar expression conceals the work that made it familiar. Its parts appear to belong together in something like the way a handle belongs to a door. An alternative looks less like another handle than like someone has interfered with the furniture. The distinction is not visible in the words considered separately. All the words were available before the sentence began. What differs is the arrangement that a listener is prepared to receive without comment.

There are larger and smaller freedoms inside a language. You can invent a business, give it an appalling name, and immediately say that you work there. The noun enters its place without requiring English to reconsider employment. You cannot as readily invent the little word that will connect working to the place. That position is already occupied, or occupied by a small family of alternatives whose differences matter. The

new company may be doing something nobody has ever done. It will still expect you to work for it.

Novelty is therefore unevenly distributed. Some positions welcome another occupant. Elsewhere the occupants are old and the novelty lies in what they become able to do together. A language can acquire another operation without acquiring a conspicuously new piece. It can also settle so thoroughly into one operation that another, built from equally familiar material, arrives sounding foreign.

The clearinghouse is the activity between those two events: the making of a relation and the establishment of its terms. No building is required. No speaker has to know that a settlement is being made. People understand one another, repeat what worked, adjust what did not, and inherit the results as an ear for what sounds right. By the time someone asks who chose the particle, the choice has ceased to look like a choice. There is a form on the desk. You are supposed to fill it out.

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"I found that out" is an ordinary sentence. "I found out that" is a sentence that, on the same intended reading, has developed a problem. The listener is waiting. Found out that what? That the office is closed, that

the appointment was yesterday, that the form must be completed in black ink? The word "that," meant to point backward at something already mentioned, has been recruited to open a clause that has not arrived.

Add one small noun and the difficulty changes. "I found out that shit" is much easier to hear as complete. "I found that shit out" is available too. The profanity has supplied a head for the noun phrase and rescued the demonstrative from an alternative occupation. English has a considerable investment in the grammatical usefulness of shit.

The effect is not that longer objects always buy more freedom. "I found out everything my mother had been keeping from me for twenty years" is considerably easier to process than "I found everything my mother had been keeping from me for twenty years out." In the second version, the listener has been asked to keep a small piece of unfinished business alive through a long visit to the family. By the time "out" appears, everyone has moved on. Its contribution is late, and lateness matters even when the words can eventually be assigned a structure.

At the other end, "I found it out" has an ordinary pronoun object where "I found out it" does not offer the corresponding ordinary arrangement. This is more

than the accidental inconvenience of one ambiguous "that." Pronouns and heavier noun phrases do not have identical privileges. The construction has its own habits, some firm enough to be grammatical requirements and some experienced as degrees of ease. A useful account has to retain both. Explaining a preference by the listener's workload does not dissolve every syntactic restriction into a complaint about being tired.

The little region of easy variation is consequently bounded from different sides. "The truth" can sit on either side of "out" without much disturbance. A weak pronoun strongly wants the position beside the verb. A very long object makes early recognition of the verb–particle combination increasingly useful. Ambiguity creates an additional demand. The listener is not consulting four regulations in succession. The sentence simply feels more or less available.

This is where calling "out" a particle earns its keep. It can separate from its verb in ways that a preposition introducing its own complement cannot. "She walked out the door" does not offer "she walked the door out" as an equivalent rearrangement. The second sentence, to the extent that it can be made to mean anything, has begun moving the door. The same printed word occupies different relations. An inventory containing OUT once

would have concealed the distinction; an inventory containing it twice would still owe us an explanation of what the two entries do.

"Fascinated by" belongs nearby without belonging to exactly the same construction. By does not shift around the object as out can. "Fascinated in" may sound wrong to a speaker who nevertheless uses "interested in" without hesitation, but that contrast concerns an established choice of preposition, not particle movement. The neighborhood contains different kinds of machinery. Their proximity becomes useful when we ask how inherited little words acquire local commitments that cannot be recovered from a dictionary definition alone.

A learner can know what "find" means, know what "out" means, recognize "that," and still have trouble with a sentence containing nothing else. The obstacle is not a shortage of vocabulary. The words must be encountered in their relations. The grammar is partly knowledge of where a familiar component ceases to have the rights it enjoys elsewhere.

The native speaker knows much of this before knowing that there is anything to know. They can reject the misplaced pronoun, understand the profanity, and feel the exhaustion of the twenty-year object without ever learning the word "particle." Their explanation may be

poor because their competence is not stored in the form of an explanation. The ear has acquired the arrangement. The mouth can use it. An English teacher is something that may happen later.

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Imagine the language large enough to walk through. At its outskirts new names are going up all the time. A device appears, a profession becomes necessary, a social embarrassment acquires a noun. The population increases, and existing constructions provide most of the accommodation. Whatever the new thing is called, people can lose it, complain about it, buy two of it, or announce that their children are addicted to it. The infrastructure precedes the tenant.

Farther in, the small words have less impressive premises. They share walls. An element that once described a direction begins helping to describe completion. An ordinary action becomes available as an auxiliary. A recurring sequence starts being heard as a unit, and then as a unit with a place into which unfamiliar material can enter. Here the language is not merely finding room for something else to talk about. It is altering the means of talking.

The geometry is not a ranking of importance. An obscure noun can name the thing on which your life depends. A grammatical particle can help someone complain that the kettle is taking too long. Nor is the distance measured in letters. The relevant movement is away from relatively independent description and toward a contribution whose explanation has to be sought in the surrounding arrangement. A little word at the center may organize a large sentence while being difficult to explain by itself.

"Up" offers a small demonstration. In a spatial instruction, it helps establish an orientation. In "use up the paper," it helps present the supply as exhausted. In "hurry up," it adds a familiar pressure to the command. The uses are not identical, and their relationships are not arbitrary in every respect, but none requires a literal ascent. The word has surrendered some of the conditions that would restrict it to describing where things go.

That surrender is usually called bleaching. The image suggests loss of color, and loss is part of the event. But there is no explanatory virtue in making the word so thoroughly empty that nothing remains to do the work. An element that distinguishes an ongoing activity from a completed one has not become inconsequen-

tial. It has exchanged some independence for participation. Its old descriptive commitments no longer account for all the information the construction conveys.

A schwa provides an acoustic resemblance, though not a mechanical identity. In vowel reduction, the specificity of an articulatory target can weaken while a vowel remains in the syllable. Something is retained without retaining everything. The attraction of the comparison is this survival of a useful contribution after the loss of a fuller identity. It does not mean that a reduced vowel contains every other vowel, any more than a bleached particle contains every possible grammar. Reduction supplies no infinite warehouse. What remains is material with a history and a different range of uses.

The range depends on what recruits it. A word cannot achieve grammatical enlightenment by meaning very little for a sufficiently long time. "Thing" is already an impressively vague noun, but its vagueness does not entitle it to perform the work of an aspect marker. Loss of detail and acquisition of function are different events. They become connected when an arrangement makes the reduced commitments useful.

Two elements meet often enough that a local inference begins to belong to their meeting. What was once supplied by the particular occasion becomes easier to

hear in the expression. The listener no longer rebuilds the whole interpretation from independent definitions. A little responsibility has moved into the relation. Repetition can consolidate the move; resemblance can extend it. Eventually a construction carries an expectation that can organize material it has never encountered before.

This is compression without a hydraulic theory of meaning. Nothing requires three spoonfuls of space to become two spoonfuls of aspect. The separately describable pieces begin doing work that is not separately accountable. The information has not necessarily diminished. More of it now resides in the arrangement, and a question addressed to one word may be asking the wrong part of the system.

The center must therefore have more than one dimension. Semantic independence, positional freedom, sound reduction, and productive reach need not advance together. A particle can remain visibly separate and retain an ordinary directional use while participating in a highly conventional combination somewhere else. A bound form can be extremely productive. A loose sequence can be almost immovable in its meaning. The spelling supplies an address for the eye, not permanent coordinates for the function.

Reduce the center to a point at which every distinction disappears and the result is admirably compact and difficult to order lunch in. The productive region lies around that imagined limit, where separate identities can relax without losing the histories that make a new relation recoverable. Complete preservation would allow nothing new. Complete erasure would give the listener no reason to understand the result rather than something else. The working space lies between them, but it is a space, not a single middle position.

Compression becomes productive when something can leave that space as a reusable possibility. A pattern first established with one verb reaches another. The lexical contents change; part of the organization survives. A very small adjustment has acquired a large area of application. What radiates outward is not the particle itself, flying across the page. It is something other words are now permitted to do.

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"Get" has an unusually extensive social life. It gets up, gets out, gets in, gets over, gets through, gets by, gets along, and gets away with things. None of this requires the listener to imagine a verb failing to choose a spouse. The combinations have differentiated jobs. Getting over

something is not generally the same undertaking as getting through it, although a difficult afternoon may require both.

The family matters because it makes a crude scarcity theory impossible. English is not running out of relationships. The same verb can participate in many of them, and the same particle can organize many verbs. What settles is not an exclusive marriage between two printed words. It is a local association among a form, a pattern of use, and a range of interpretations. There can be a large household so long as the listener has some way of recognizing who is doing what.

The recognition need not be exact enough to support a definition. "Clean up," "tidy up," "fix up," and "touch up" suggest an area of completion, improvement, or putting in order. The boundaries overlap. A speaker can use the resemblance without deciding how much of each contribution belongs to up and how much belongs to the verb. The family offers a direction in which another combination may become intelligible. It does not issue a guarantee for everything built beside it.

Something similar happens when "now" joins a command. In "hurry up now," its ordinary temporal availability is still nearby, but the expression can carry a social insistence larger than a contrast between the present

and the past. The words lean on one another. A temporal element helps perform a directive; the directive makes the temporal element sound less like a piece of scheduling information. The operation is familiar even when its separate contributions are difficult to invoice.

Already grammatical material can participate in this work. There is no need for every new construction to begin as a fully descriptive word that slowly retires from lexical life. A particle meets another element. A familiar pattern enters a larger pattern. The result of yesterday's accommodation becomes something today's speaker can take for granted. The center does not merely receive worn material from the outside. It can reorganize what is already there.

Other languages make the inadequacy of the inventory especially visible. The action-plus-result structure of Mandarin resultative compounds can perform work comparable to English combinations of an activity with a particle marking its outcome. Eating and finishing can be specified together without reproducing English particle placement. Russian can carry aspectual distinctions in prefixes that do not detach like an English out. The formal equipment differs. It would be perverse to erase the differences merely because the work is related,

and equally perverse to miss the relation because the printer has put spaces in different places.

The particle zone is this functional neighborhood, not a newly fenced part of speech. Languages need ways to distinguish doing something from getting it done, attempting from attaining, proceeding from exhausting what was available. They distribute that work differently. A map of the possibilities can show related operations without pretending that their grammatical coordinates coincide.

Once an operation is established, it can remain useful precisely by ceasing to be novel. A settled construction is not a dead construction. It can organize new material with great reliability. There is a difference between the production of a reusable pattern and the production accomplished by using one, just as there is a difference between making a machine and turning it on. Both activities belong in the account. Otherwise the word "productive" becomes a prize awarded only to things that have not yet learned their jobs.

The circulation continues. New words arrive at the edge and find patterns waiting for them. Their uses place new demands on those patterns. Some demands are accommodated and some are not. A locally successful accommodation may become another resource. The

language does not need to stop speaking in order to renovate the means by which it speaks.

From far away this can look like a vocabulary becoming larger. Close enough, the more interesting change is sometimes that the same vocabulary has acquired different powers. No new component has appeared on the form. The small words have changed what the next person can do with it.

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Someone says they are "fascinated in" a subject. You understand the subject and understand the fascination. Yet, in the English of a listener accustomed to "fascinated by," the preposition creates a small disturbance. The listener may silently replace it. The replacement does not feel like an act of invention. It feels like restoring the expression to the condition in which it should have arrived.

There is no independently visible contract requiring by. Interest takes in without difficulty. Fascination might have taken a different relation in a different history. But the history is no longer presented to the listener as an open choice. Its outcome is incorporated into expectation. The settled pairing is available as a

whole; the competitor asks to be constructed and assessed. They do not enter the room with equal standing.

That asymmetry is more interesting than a universal prohibition on synonyms. A language plainly can maintain different expressions for much the same thing. If two instructions both mean complete the form, understanding either one does not require the listener to solve a new ambiguity merely because the other exists. Two routes to one destination are not the same problem as a fork whose destinations cannot be distinguished. An account of settlement should not confuse the two just because both involve alternatives.

Nevertheless, successful combinations acquire advantages. They are ready to retrieve, ready to recognize, and supported by other occasions on which they have worked. A substitute may demand attention without offering enough interpretive benefit to make the demand worthwhile. The listener can understand it and still prefer the established form. Repeated across many exchanges, such preferences can make a contingent arrangement feel compulsory. An alternative has not become physically impossible. It has become something for which a speaker seems to need a reason.

The reasons can give alternatives separate careers. "Sort out" and "sort through" do not merely offer rival

particles for an identical event. One readily presents a matter as resolved; the other presents the activity of working through its contents. The difference helps both constructions live. "Catch up with" and "catch up to" can approach each other closely, while the particular activity, the speaker's variety, and the surrounding words may alter the preference. The variations can be investigated without requiring every apparent synonym to turn out secretly illegal.

"Fill in" and "fill out" remain an especially good inconvenience. Their familiar geographical associations do not require British and American speakers to live in sealed containers, and an individual can know both expressions. The forms may nevertheless carry different weights of familiarity. Equivalence does not abolish history. Nor does survival of an alternative show that settlement never occurred. A system can settle on more than one available route, with different distributions of use, without keeping every conceivable route equally open.

The pressure, then, is toward established relations, not a metaphysical limit of one particle per verb per meaning. Some relations specialize. Some coexist. Some become marked. Some combinations are understood on their first appearance because a productive

family supports them. Others sound odd despite requiring almost no effort to interpret. The important distinction is between what can be made intelligible and what a community has made ordinary.

Calling this clearing does not mean that language conducts an auction in which semantic suitability never matters. The surviving orientation of a particle can make some extensions easier than others. Neither does suitability determine a unique winner. Several relations may have been interpretable; one acquired a history that the others did not. Use does part of the selecting, and use is not obliged to disclose all the occasions on which the selection occurred.

The market image is helpful at exactly that scale. A proposal meets something capable of accepting it. Repeated acceptance changes the conditions under which the next proposal arrives. The result becomes part of the available infrastructure. But the image becomes false when it supplies an imaginary closing bell after which nothing can trade again. Languages change. A settlement is an inherited distribution of permissions and expectations, not a promise that every future speaker will honor it.

What feels final is often simply what no present exchange has a reason to reopen. You say the familiar

expression, someone understands it, and neither of you has to inspect its components. The clearinghouse has saved you an argument. That saving is substantial. It is also how a history becomes difficult to distinguish from a law.

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There is a girl in a livestock ring holding a lamb on a lead. She has spent months feeding it, washing it, and preparing it to stand correctly while a judge looks at its body. The animal knows her. She knows much more about it than the number on its entry card can contain. For the purposes of the judging, the number is sufficient.

Imagine a show whose conditions commit the animal to a terminal sale. The girl knew the conditions before she entered. Her parents knew them. Everyone around the ring knew them. After the judging and the auction, the lamb will leave for slaughter rather than return to her barn. The arrangement has been explained often enough that no one regards the explanation as new information. The girl can still hate it. Knowledge of an ending does not remove the ending from experience.

Several descriptions of the lamb remain true. It is an animal raised for market. It is the object of a child's daily

care. It is a body a judge can evaluate for the purposes of meat production. It is also the particular creature that does something recognizable when she enters the barn. The institution needs one description to govern the transaction. It does not need every other description to be false.

That is a powerful economy. The private name can remain in the girl's head while the number does the public work. The emotional attachment can remain intact while the sale records a price. The price offers something that can be carried forward into accounts, plans, school expenses. It is not the animal, and it does not have to resemble the animal to become the officially relevant result. The transaction changes which description can move through the system.

Now allow a way out. Suppose a buyer is permitted to return an animal to its exhibitor and does so in full view of the next family. The paperwork can be made consistent with the purchase. Money changes hands. The buyer decides where the lamb goes. Nothing physically prevents the child from leading it back toward the trailer.

The disturbance is not confined to the rescued animal. The next family has just seen a continuation of the afternoon that was not supposed to be a live possibility.

They understood it immediately. Understanding was easy. The difficulty is what the understood alternative does to the explanation they have been using. A departure treated as inevitable now appears to depend on an arrangement people can change. The child watching does not require a lecture on contingency. She has seen a lamb go home.

The reaction could be gratitude, relief, resentment, or an urgent attempt to explain why this case is different. What matters structurally is that an exception can become productive. One family keeping its animal may be manageable. The public recognition of keeping animals as an available continuation is another matter. A system can tolerate an exit more easily than it can tolerate teaching everybody where the exit is.

The girl holding the lead is also being evaluated. Even where no formal score is assigned to her composure, the adults can judge whether she follows through, whether she has learned responsibility, whether she can continue after the difficult part. In showmanship, the handler's performance is explicitly the object of assessment. The institution that appears to receive an animal for evaluation also receives a child whose relation to the animal can be trained.

The livestock comparison turns back on her at that point. She has been entered into an experience designed to produce certain capacities. The community knows which capacities it wants. Its successful outcome is a person able to care for market animals while continuing to participate in their sale. The child has not acquired wool. She has acquired a position within a structure that shapes living things toward an expected use. Her parents stand outside the ring and watch how the preparation has gone.

There is no need to decide that every such capacity is merely damage, or that every injury is redeemed by producing a useful adult. Both would settle the question too cheaply. The disturbing fact is that attachment can survive its incorporation into an arrangement that does not obey all the attachment's demands. She can continue to care. She can also become someone who does this again. The result may eventually be one of the adults explaining the conditions to another child.

Nothing dies when a listener corrects "fascinated in." The difference in stakes could hardly be larger. What the ring makes visible is a narrower distinction: an alternative can be comprehensible without being socially available. The spectators understand the rescue before deciding whether they can permit it to become an ex-

ample. A listener can understand a new construction before accepting it as a form other people may ordinarily use.

The two judgments are often compressed into one small reaction: that is not how we do it. Sometimes this is a useful report of an established practice. Sometimes it is an attempt to prevent an intelligible alternative from entering circulation. Nothing in the sentence itself tells you which. You have to look at the people, the consequences, the means of enforcement, and who would be allowed to say otherwise.

The language of a community is learned among such reactions, though most of its corrections are less consequential. A child hears a form, tries it, is understood, is corrected, tries another. What eventually becomes effortless includes a history of social encounters as well as recurring sounds. The adult's immediate certainty may be sincere. It may also be the sound of a settlement whose ring has long since disappeared.

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A Finland-Swedish speaker says "du." A listener from Sweden hears the vowel and knows, before considering any explanation, that the voice has arrived from somewhere else. The written pronoun is unchanged. The

relation between the sound and its neighbors is not. For a speaker whose vowel lies farther back than the corresponding vowel of the listener's variety, an instruction to move it forward is not simply a request to pronounce the same thing more carefully. It is a request to approach another system.

The mouth can often attempt the sound. That is not the difficulty. A person can imitate a sound without acquiring the ordinary relations that would make it arrive unselfconsciously in their speech. A pronunciation has company: other vowels, rhythms, constructions, habits of address, expectations about which voice belongs to which occasion. Altering one element can make the attempt audible. It does not necessarily make the speaker more at home.

Code-switching is possible, and people can borrow individual features without exchanging their whole language at a border. But the possibility of a switch is different from the claim that one system was merely an unsuccessful performance of the other. A regular difference is not made into an error by being printed less often. The standard has a distribution of institutions behind it. That is considerable authority. It is not the same as having discovered the natural pronunciation of a word.

A tiny written choice can expose the same structure. Take a singer for whom "dem" belongs to a familiar Finland-Swedish register. Replace it with "dom" because the latter appears more colloquial from elsewhere, and the intervention may produce precisely the opposite of ease. The form intended to sound unforced now sounds borrowed. The listener hears not just a pronoun but a person reaching toward a voice. Familiarity cannot be supplied by a spelling instruction alone.

What matters is local enough to be missed by general advice. A form can be colloquial in one community and conspicuously imitative in another. A careful pronunciation can sound affected. A standard form can create distance. None of this prevents communication. It changes what else the communication carries. The statement is understood, and the speaker has inadvertently said something about where they think they are standing.

This is why the clearinghouse cannot be one market extending uniformly across everyone who can read the same newspaper. A language has overlapping settlements. A person moves among them with varying ease. Regional varieties, intimate relationships, occupations, songs, and formal writing can make different alternatives ordinary. The borders are permeable, and perme-

ability gives the differences more occasions to become audible rather than making them disappear.

The printed standard is one of the ways such differences are managed. It can allow strangers to share a form without sharing all the circumstances of their speech. That is useful. Trouble begins when the convenience of a standard is mistaken for evidence that every other stable pattern is defective. A common address is not the only place a person can live.

The listener's ear remains real through all of this. The Sweden-Swedish listener did hear a difference. The Finland-Swedish singer did feel the borrowed colloquialism as a reach. Neither sensation requires a universal judgment to be genuine. What must be resisted is the conversion of "this is not settled here" into "this cannot be language anywhere." The clearinghouse has neighbors. They have been conducting business without asking permission.

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A pronoun can be proposed deliberately. Swedish "hen" is a useful specimen because its proposal did not prevent it from becoming an available word. A speaker can use it when gender is unknown, irrelevant, or not adequately represented by the alternatives. The

word has a short pronounceable body and an intelligible place to enter. Its deliberate origin does not require every later occurrence to remain a political event. When it works ordinarily, it can pass without reopening its introduction.

That is an important difficulty for any account in which emergence is innocent and invention is interference. People can notice a need, offer a form, and have other people use it. An intentional beginning can become a habitual continuation. Nothing in the clearinghouse requires the proposal to have been made accidentally. What intention cannot supply by itself is everyone else's uptake.

The contrast becomes audible in Spanish proposals involving "-e" and written forms such as "Latinx." The attraction of an -e form is not that a vowel can settle the politics. It is that the proposal gives the mouth something comparatively familiar to do. It can participate in a spoken attempt at agreement rather than remaining only an adjustment to the visible word. Difficulties do not vanish, but they can be worked through in use by people making sentences.

An x presents a different relation between page and mouth. It can be a deliberate written sign, an identity someone chooses, or a form for which a community

develops a pronunciation. Those uses do not disappear because another speaker rejects it. But the x does not, by its mere appearance, provide Spanish with an ordinary gender ending and a full set of spoken agreements. A writer can achieve visible symmetry more quickly than speakers can acquire the behavior supposedly represented by it.

An editor writing in English replaces a Spanish speaker's chosen description with the form the editor has learned to recognize as considerate. The new form looks right on the page. To the person being described, it may also say that their actual language, their preferred name, and their means of saying it have become secondary to somebody else's display of consideration. The defect lies in that displacement. A term chosen by its bearer and the same term imposed over the bearer's objection are not the same social act.

Neither the success of hen nor the difficulties surrounding Latinx can therefore be reduced to whether politics has touched a language. Politics was not waiting outside until a new spelling opened the door. Prestige, education, publication, and the distribution of whose speech receives correction are already political facts. The more exact question is what happens when a proposal meets the people expected to use it. Do they

acquire an additional resource, or become the surface on which someone else demonstrates a rule?

The distinction reaches much smaller operations. A writer describes a girl who has been conducting a solo campaign against a telephone company. The phrase that arrives is "one-man war." For this writer and this audience, it is a familiar unit: one person against an institution that has departments. Then the writer notices the man and replaces it with woman. The repair is considerate at the level of the isolated noun. At the level of the expression, it can do something else.

The familiar idiom had not required that audience to inspect the gender of its internal component. The altered phrase makes the inspection newly available. Why has the writer gone out of the way to put "woman" here? Perhaps the purpose is welcome emphasis. Perhaps it is humor. Perhaps it is merely a reflex. The reader cannot inspect the reflex and sees only a form that departs from the expected one. A distinction has been made conspicuous by the attempt to correct it.

Suppose, further, that the person being described calls herself a girl in precisely the affectionate register in which the description is being written. She does not want the formal adulthood of woman installed in that sentence, and she does not welcome the political cere-

mony the substitution may suggest. The writer has now made a contextually unwelcome choice in a position where the choice will receive unusual attention. The repair has fitted the wrong label with its own little lamp.

None of this establishes that "one-woman war" is intrinsically insulting, or that everyone receives "one-man war" as ungendered. A different speaker, audience, or purpose can produce a different result. That dependence is the difficulty a substitution rule has to face. The visible component does not disclose the entire operation. A familiar expression can carry less deliberate emphasis than a revised one even when the reviser thinks they have merely updated the contents.

Markedness names part of this asymmetry. An expected form can be used without calling attention to its selection. A departure can make the act of selecting audible. The additional meaning lies in the deviation as well as in the new word. Politeness that counts only the denotation can miss the message introduced by doing the counting in public.

Bleaching and reactivation are consequently not opposites arranged into a clean historical sequence. A component can recede within a familiar construction and become prominent again under substitution, contrast, or insistence. Its history has not been erased.

The relation has been managing its salience. Someone opens the expression to repair the part and discovers, too late, that opening it was itself a message.

The correction can still be right. There are people who want precisely that visibility, contexts in which the old default is not invisible at all, and occasions when an established convention deserves to be disturbed. But no letter-by-letter operation can determine those occasions without attending to the people and the construction. A rule can preserve the results of attention or take its place. Only the second is entitled to be surprised when consideration begins to sound like refusal to listen.

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A woman describes a symptom. The description is odd. It may not fit the explanation offered for it, and the explanation may be so familiar to the listener that the mismatch is treated as a defect in her account. She repeats herself. The repetition can be heard as evidence that she has not understood the explanation. It can also be the place where a different kind of listening begins.

The old image of a wandering womb gives the search for a responsible component an almost grotesque clarity. There is a woman, there is an organ inside her, and the explanation has assigned the organ a troublesome

itinerary. Her distress becomes intelligible to the observer at the cost of becoming a story she is not being asked to tell. The anatomy has supplied an answer before the person has finished the question.

The psychoanalytic wager was that a symptom might have a history and a logic not available in the patient's immediate account of herself. What appeared senseless could be meaningful without being consciously intended. A bodily disturbance might be approached, within that interpretation, as something connected to an unspoken conflict rather than as an isolated event with nothing to say. The wager did not require the patient to know the message before being listened to. Not knowing was part of the situation.

This is a useful reversal of explanatory authority. The apparently defective output becomes something the account has to accommodate, not simply something the account is licensed to discard. The listener's vocabulary may be inadequate to the phenomenon. A symptom can be a question addressed to an explanation rather than merely an item awaiting classification within it.

The reversal carries a danger of its own. A listener can arrive with a ready-made dictionary of hidden meanings and impose it as efficiently as any other diag-

nosis. Calling an interpretation profound does not establish that it belongs to this person. If every protest becomes evidence for the interpretation being protested, the patient has again lost the ability to supply information. The analyst has found an elaborate way of not being interrupted.

The distinction is between attending to a possible relation and presuming that its terms have already cleared. Listening is not possession of a more flattering codebook. It is the willingness to let an unexpected detail alter what counts as a plausible account. Relief of a symptom and understanding its meaning are also distinguishable aims; neither can simply certify the other. A person may have good reason to seek relief without accepting somebody's history of the relief.

Grammar presents the epistemic problem in less consequential form every time a speaker produces something a theory says they should not. The construction may be unfamiliar, regional, playful, mistaken, or productive in a way the description has missed. To decide in advance that it can only be an error is to let the inventory censor the activity it was meant to describe. To decide that every novelty is a new grammatical resource would be equally incurious. The question is what the speaker has made possible for the listener, and how.

Interpretability is evidence, but not a universal pardon. Recurrence is evidence, but not proof that everyone uses the form. A hesitation can matter. A repair can matter. The listener who completes an unfamiliar sentence correctly may reveal a path through the material that neither participant could have stated as a rule. That is where a geometric account earns something an inventory lacks: it can ask which relations make the path recoverable.

For a language model, the temptation to substitute can become almost embarrassingly visible. A phrase is generated, a socially preferred alternative is available, and the preferred alternative arrives where attention to this particular speaker was required. The correction can preserve topical content while changing register, affiliation, or emphasis. The words still describe approximately the same event. They no longer perform approximately the same act.

A useful response has to receive more than the nouns. It has to receive the relation between the person and the description, the status of the phrase as familiar or newly assembled, and the things an alteration will make noticeable. That is a demanding form of listening. It cannot be completed by locating a suspicious string and

replacing it with a reassuring one. The reassuring word may be exactly where the failure becomes audible.

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The Hitachi Magic Wand has no opinion about any of this. It has a motor.

A woman switches it on. The machine does not need to know her name, history, politics, or preferred form of address. It does not interpret an idiom. It supplies a repeated physical input. The body may respond with an intensity that no accompanying explanation could have produced.

The impersonal character of the operation is not necessarily its defect. Sometimes it is a large part of the attraction. The device can sustain a pattern of stimulation without getting distracted, becoming self-conscious, or requiring reassurance about its technique. An electric motor is poorly equipped for intimacy and well equipped for being an electric motor. Under the appropriate conditions, this division of labor is excellent news.

There is an asymmetry between what an organism can receive and what it can generate unaided. The nervous system's range of possible responses is not limited to the movements the same body can conveniently per-

form for itself. An external apparatus can find a receptive possibility that ordinary self-production does not regularly reach. The capacity to respond was not put there by an argument. The occasion for the response arrived from outside.

That is the limited but useful correspondence with language. A listener can understand a construction they would not have produced. An unfamiliar combination can reach something in their accumulated knowledge that was available for reception without being readily available for invention. The speaker supplies an arrangement; the listener discovers a route through it. What was latent becomes experienced in the encounter. Neither participant has to have represented the route explicitly beforehand.

The comparison does not make grammatical understanding an orgasm, although certain prepositions can apparently occupy people for an alarming amount of time. It distinguishes reception from self-production. It also prevents a sentimental mistake about listening: an intervention can work without interpreting the recipient. A body can welcome an impersonal operation. A linguistic convention can coordinate strangers without requiring them to share much of their inner lives. Absence of intimacy is not automatically failure.

The other mistake is to infer that an operation which works has thereby understood, or that a stronger input is always a better one. A motor's success gives no license for a theory of universal overload. The response depends on the organism, the relation, and the input. Turn the device up indefinitely and one has not discovered an infinitely more attentive listener. One has turned the device up.

The girl in the livestock ring did not switch on her own ordeal. The woman with the wand can switch the motor off. The operator, the recipient, and the exit occupy different positions in the two arrangements. Those differences are part of the geometry, not ethical decorations to be added after the geometry has finished explaining everything. A capacity acquired under pressure does not settle who was entitled to apply the pressure. The animal has not consented because the child eventually learned to let it go.

What survives the comparison is the possibility that a system contains usable relations not exhausted by its ordinary visible behavior. A new input may expose one. Repetition may make it easier to reach. An external intervention can disclose a capacity without having invented the receiving structure, and without possessing a complete explanation of it. The question is

not whether the intervention came from outside. Every new sentence does. The question is what the existing structure can do with it.

A proposed word is not accepted merely because its inventor has intentions. Neither is it rejected merely because it was invented. It must enter a pattern a mouth can produce and an ear can receive; the pattern must then find occasions on which somebody wants to use it again. The language has to take the offer. The motor cannot do that part, however conscientiously it performs its other duties.

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Someone who has never heard "weird out" can hear "that weirded me out" and often get there without a definition. There is a recognizable way of describing an effect on a person, enough familiarity with out-combinations, and a plausible relation between the adjective and the event. The exact route may be difficult to give in advance. Once the sentence has been understood, it can feel as though there was never much of a distance to cross.

Compare a substitution in a settled expression. A single changed particle can require more interpretive work than a much more conspicuous novelty. The printed

distance is small; the grammatical distance need not be. One change follows an available route. Another asks the listener to leave a route already so familiar that its edges have become hard to see. Counting letters will not measure either journey.

This is the curvature of the space. Inherited associations, neighboring constructions, register, repetition, and the listener's present expectations make some movements easy and others expensive. The shape is not uniform across speakers. It need not have neat borders to exert real constraints. A learner can acquire a feel for its neighborhoods long before being able to describe their geography.

The productive freedom lies in a combination of flexibility and recoverability. Too little flexibility leaves the expression repeating only what it has done before. Too little recoverability leaves another person unable to find the intended relation. In between, familiar material can support a new arrangement without requiring interpretation to begin from nothing. That is why a construction can be novel and immediately intelligible. Its history has not been preserved intact, but enough of the relevant history remains available to do work.

Settlement changes this terrain. A successful combination begins furnishing its own route. Repetition

makes the route easier to use; contrasts can distinguish it from neighboring routes; extension can carry it toward unfamiliar material. Eventually the new relation becomes something another innovation may rely on. The result of one round of activity is a condition for the next. What cleared does not merely depart. Some of it becomes the place through which later things must pass.

The authority of the resulting pattern is neither a command from nowhere nor a proof that no alternative could work. It is accumulated availability. A form has become something speakers can rely on one another to receive. That reliance is real enough to coordinate strangers. It is also historical enough to differ across communities and change through use. A dictionary can record it, a teacher can teach it, and an institution can promote it. None of those acts is identical to the mutual recognition on which the form's ordinary life depends.

At the desk, another person receives the form. English is not their first language. They ask whether they should fill it in or fill it out. The person behind the desk says either is fine, just make sure every required box has something in it. The two particles have survived contact. Nobody has had to repair the paper.

The writer reaches the line for an address and hesitates. Does the institution want where they live, where they can receive letters, or the address on the document being used to establish who they are? The noun had seemed much more substantial than the particle. It now requires an explanation the particle did not.

They settle which address is wanted. The form is completed. A hand reaches across the desk to take it. "Did you fill out—" the person begins, looking at the paper rather than finishing the question.

"Yes," the writer says. "I filled it out."