

# Internalising new linguistic symbols and patterns

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I read an interesting article in the Guardian Review at the weekend describing something that often happens to me. The writer had been Foreign Correspondent for somewhere like St. Petersburg and often described the architecture there, including big statuesque figures which form part of the columns or support of a building. Years later he discovered the term for this — caryatid. He writes,

"I felt a moment of foolishness which must be very old. Whoever invented fire, I suspect, must have quickly lost ground to the man who found a name for it."

I think this is very well put and describes something of the power of words to capture complex ideas. Obscure words with precise meaning risk confusing and alienating the reader, but if they absorb the meaning (which they will do if they have a need for it) they may discover that something they thought was complicated and ill-defined or localised is covered by a much more general idea. I think the Caryatid Effect is a nice name for this and, by virtue of the Caryatid Effect, I'll think of it as that from now on :-)

What terms do linguists have for this, and can someone point me to some lay-person's reading on what happens when symbolic patterns are created in this way?

Something similar happens when programming, which is where my main interest in it comes in. Programs should be written for future readers; using an obscure but powerfully general idiom risks making your program seem unclear but can provide the reader with an insight into patterns he wasn't aware of. There's a tension between this and the power and benefits of using the plainest "words" available, given two "words" with the same meaning. The powerfully general idiom seems like "plain speaking" to those who have internalised it, and like baffling mumbo-jumbo to those who haven't. I don't know where the tipping point between accessibility and dumbing-down lies.

Thanks,

Jim

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