

Word Parts in “Out of the Silent Planet” – How Dr. Ransom Learned Vocabulary –

“Out of the Silent Planet”における語の分解 – ランサム博士は、いかに語彙を習得したか –

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Abstract

C.S. Lewis loved words, and in his science fiction story *Out of the Silent Planet* (the first episode of what is called “The Space Trilogy” or “Cosmic Trilogy”), a philologist, Dr. Ransom, recognizes word parts in order to help him learn the language spoken on the planet Malacandra (Mars). The method of vocabulary learning that Ransom uses of breaking down words into parts helps him to remember complex Malacandrian words. The English language also uses word parts, and the technique Ransom uses is a useful way to remember new vocabulary in the English language, especially complex words. Through C.S. Lewis’s story of Dr. Ransom, we are not only presented with an effective vocabulary learning technique, but one that may even lead to having a new appreciation of words in the English language.

Key Words : vocabulary learning／word parts／study methods／memory retention

I Introduction

C.S. Lewis produced works as a literary critic and scholar, wrote about Christianity, and wrote fiction that continues to be often read (Downing, 1992). His story *Out of the Silent Planet* was published in 1938, and was the first episode of what is called “The Space Trilogy” or “Cosmic Trilogy,” followed by *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength*. *Out of the Silent Planet* is a fascinating science fiction story with imaginative descriptions of another planet and insights into different worldviews. Along the way, through the main character Dr. Ransom, a scholar of languages, the story also gives insights on language learning by showing a method of vocabulary learning called the word part technique.

C.S. Lewis’s specialty was literature, but like Dr. Ransom, who Lewis made a philologist, Lewis loved

language. Even though his specialty was not languages (Lewis’s good friend and fellow story writer J.R.R. Tolkien specialized in languages), Lewis had enough experience studying languages, several old and a few modern, to qualify as a philologist (Downing, 1992).

Lewis appreciated the English language and the history of individual words. Lewis (1944) expressed his care for English in his essay “The Death of Words,” where he explained how some words lose their meaning and fall into a vague abyss where they lose the sharpness they once had. In his book *Studies in Words* (1960), which Lewis wrote mainly for students of literature, Lewis examined the meanings of a series of words with lost meanings. Lewis wrote that if one wants to study literature, philology, which is “the love and knowledge of words,” is a necessity (p. 3).

II Word Parts in the Malacandrian Language

Out of the Silent Planet begins with Dr. Ransom, a

philologist at a Cambridge College, on a walking tour in the countryside and looking for a place to stay the night (Lewis, 1938). Lewis said he made Ransom a philologist because the story needed the character to be a fast language learner (Ransom will be taken to another planet and proceed to learn the language there).

Ransom runs into trouble during his walking tour and is abducted by two men, a scientist, Dr. Weston, and an opportunistic accomplice, Devine. Ransom is put on a spaceship by Weston and Devine and makes the journey with his abductors to the red planet named Malacandra. Ransom is told that Malacandra is the native name for the planet, but he is not told what planet Malacandra is. He later learns that Malacandra is Mars. For Weston and Devine, who each have their own motivations for interplanetary travel, this is a return trip to the red planet.

Weston, a physicist, views Ransom's specialty of philology as "unscientific foolery," and an area of study that money should not be wasted on, but rather should go to research (Lewis, 1938, p. 15). Weston looks down upon Ransom's lack of scientific accomplishments, thinking Ransom has little skills of real value to offer society. However, as seen throughout the story, Ransom's language skills help him learn to communicate effectively, survive and get along well on Malacandra (Lewis, 1938).

On Weston and Devine's previous journey to Malacandra, they misunderstood a request given to them by a giant species on the planet called *sorns*, and thought they were being instructed by the *sorns* to bring back another human with them to serve as some kind of sacrifice. Ransom catches wind of this while on the spaceship and makes an escape soon after arrival on Malacandra (even though in reality the *sorns* are friendly and need not be feared) (Lewis, 1938).

After his escape, lost and alone on Malacandra, Ransom encounters an interesting creature next to a body of water. The creature is tall, has a coat of smooth black hair, short legs, and webbed feet and fingers. What really shocks Ransom, as a philologist and scholar of languages, is that the creature talks. Ransom's experience in studying languages give him

the immediate conclusion that the sounds the creature makes are not just noises but articulate words. Ransom's love of languages and fascination with a new language of another planet overrules his fear of the creature. As a scholar of languages Ransom immediately has thoughts of a Malacandrian grammar project, writing a textbook introducing the language of Malacandra, and putting together a Malacandrian-English dictionary (Lewis, 1938). In *Perelandra*, the second episode of the Space Trilogy, we learn that the language Ransom hears on Mars is called "Old Solar" and is spoken on other planets as well, such as Venus (Lewis, 1943).

Ransom encounters the creature face to face. Striking his chest, the first word the creature teaches Ransom is what he is, a *Hross*. Ransom repeats the word, strikes his own chest and says "Man." The *hross* then picks up a handful of ground and says *handra*. Ransom then makes a connection in the new language. Lewis (1938) writes,

Malacandra? he said in an inquiring voice. The *hross* rolled its eyes and waved its arms, obviously in an effort to indicate the whole landscape. Ransom was getting on well. *Handra* was earth the element; *Malacandra* the "earth" or planet as a whole. Soon he would find out what "Malac" meant. In the meantime "H disappears after C" he noted, and made his first step in Malacandrian phonetics (p. 58).

After learning the words *handra* and *Malacandra*, Ransom continues his interaction with the *hross* and is immediately able to connect the word part *-handra* to another new word. He also begins to learn general rules about the language, seeing that it has affixes:

The *hross* was now trying to teach him the meaning of *handramit*. He recognized the root *handra*- again (and noted "They have suffixes as well as prefixes"), but this time he could make nothing of the *hross*'s gestures, and remained ignorant what a *handramit* might be (p. 58).

Ransom soon learns about the geography of Malacandra as he travels with the *hross* on a boat. Seeing the land before him, Ransom is able to make the distinctions through signs and pointing, and then through talking with the *hross* Ransom grasps the meaning of *handramit* as well as another word containing *handra*. Lewis explains Ransom’s thought process:

He [Ransom] wondered what the cloud-like red masses were and endeavoured to ask by signs. The question was, however, too particular for sign-language. The *hross*, with a wealth of gesticulation — its arms or fore-limbs were more flexible than his and in quick motion almost whip-like — made it clear that it supposed him to be asking about the high ground in general. It named this *harandra*. The low, watered country, the gorge or canyon, appeared to be *handramit*. Ransom grasped the implications, *handra* earth, *harandra* high earth, mountain, *handramit*, low earth, valley. Highland and lowland, in fact. The peculiar importance of the distinction in Malacandrian geography he learned later (p. 62).

Ransom continues to learn the language as he lives among the *hrossa* (the plural of *hross*), including the name for his own planet, Earth, which is called *Thulcandra*. He had already learned part of the word *Thulcandra*, *-handra*, now he learns *Thulc-*, meaning “silent.” Earth is named the Silent Planet.

Other words Ransom learns include *honodraskrud*, an edible pinkish white weed covering ground in the low parts of Malacandra (the word part *honodra* looks like it could be related to *handra*, earth, while *-skrud* is the plant itself), *arbol hru*, which means “Sun’s blood” (what we call gold, and the reason Devine is so interested in Malacandra), and *hnakrapunt*, a combination of *hnakra*, a type of fierce sea monster, and *-punt*, slayer. Ransom also learns from a *sorn* the name for the planet Jupiter, *Glnandra*, and also *Parelandra*, which we learn is the planet Venus in the next episode of the Space Trilogy (and

where the spelling is slightly changed to *Perelandra*) (Lewis, 1938, 1943).

III Word Parts and English

English, like the Malacandrian language, uses word parts, and in *Out of the Silent Planet* Ransom uses what is called the word part technique to help him remember new vocabulary. This long-known but neglected second language learning technique involves breaking down a new word into parts, seeing the meaning of those parts, and then connecting that to the meaning of a new word (Webb & Nation, 2016; Wei & Nation, 2013). Native speakers of English also build vocabulary using Latin and Greek roots.

Ransom takes mental notes of the new word parts he hears, and is able to connect known parts to new parts. This technique helps Ransom remember new vocabulary, and it is especially useful for complex words (Webb and Nation, 2016). Ransom learns *Thulcandra* by connecting it to *-handra*, also a word part of *Malacandra*. Also using the word part *-handra*, Ransom learns words that describe the lay of the land such as *handramit*. Later Ransom uses *-handra* to learn the names of other planets like *Glnandra* and *Perelandra* (Lewis, 1938).

This kind of connecting of word parts is easily done with English as well, and the following are some examples from Wei and Nation (2013) using the word part technique with English. If the word *aware* is known, this can help in learning the word *wary*, which uses the same word part *-war* (“to watch carefully”). The often used word *describe* contains *scribe*, which is used in lesser known words such as *transcribe*, *inscribe*, *prescribe*, *scribe*, and *scribble*. Wei and Nation write that some connections are especially interesting, such as the word *astonish*, which has *stone*, since when astonished it is like one turns to stone. In these examples, high frequency words are connected to low frequency words.

Ransom’s method of vocabulary learning is well supported among language teaching professionals. When Laufer, Meara, and Nation (2005) were each asked to give a list of ten ideas for vocabulary learning,

Nation included learning the most useful 10 to 15 prefixes and suffixes. Among the variety of vocabulary learning methods, Laufer (2017) recognized the word part technique as effective for learning complex words. Wei (2014) found that the word part technique had better vocabulary learning results with university students than the keyword method on the translation test format.

Ransom handles word parts with ease, and according to Wei and Nation (2013), remembering vocabulary through word parts is indeed an easy method. Wei and Nation say that most use it to some extent already since it is plain to see similarities between words, but English as a second language learners miss opportunities to use it more. Many complex English words can be studied in parts, since so much of English comes from Latin or Greek, languages that also have word parts.

Ransom immediately learns useful and frequently used word parts. For those learning English as a second language, frequently used affixes should be learned first and others added gradually (Nation 2013; Webb & Nation, 2016). Bauer and Nation (1993) ranked affixes into seven levels as a guide. Wei and Nation (2013) created a list of the 25 most useful word stems. Sasao and Webb (2017) made what is called a Word Part Levels Test to determine how well learners know affixes.

Ransom, and C.S. Lewis, loved words and languages. Wei and Nation (2013) wrote that learning about words and how other languages have influenced English can build interest in word origins, and perhaps increase appreciation for the English language. Learners can then begin to use the method independently. In *Studies in Words*, Lewis (1960) wrote that his word studies were at first a necessity for his occupation, but later became a hobby.

IV Conclusion

In *Out of the Silent Planet*, Dr. Ransom demonstrates an effective way to learn vocabulary. While the Malacandrian name for the planet Earth is *Thul + candra*, which means “Silent Planet” (you

must read the book to find out why Earth is called “silent”), I still wonder what *Malac* means in the word *Malacandra*. Lewis (1938) wrote that Ransom finds out what it means, but we are never told in the book. Perhaps even the curiosity and desire to know the meaning of *Malac* shows the effectiveness of the vocabulary learning technique that Ransom uses. Let speakers of English, second language learners and native speakers alike, take note of Ransom’s attention to words. It could even be a small beginning in sharing the kind of love for words that Dr. Ransom and C.S. Lewis had.

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