

ABSTRACT/CONCRETE
LANGUAGE
LESSON:



ABSTRACT LANGUAGE

- **Abstract terms** REFER TO IDEAS OR CONCEPTS; THEY HAVE NO PHYSICAL REFERENTS.

Ex. *love, success, freedom, good, moral, democracy,*

- THESE TERMS ARE FAIRLY COMMON AND FAMILIAR, AND BECAUSE WE RECOGNIZE THEM WE MAY IMAGINE THAT WE UNDERSTAND THEM—BUT WE REALLY CAN'T, BECAUSE THE MEANINGS WON'T STAY STILL

ABSTRACT LANGUAGE: EXAMPLE

- TAKE *love* AS AN EXAMPLE.

ABSTRACT: YOU'VE HEARD AND USED THAT WORD (**LOVE**) SINCE YOU WERE THREE OR FOUR YEARS OLD.

1. DOES IT MEAN TO YOU NOW WHAT IT MEANT TO YOU WHEN YOU WERE FIVE?
2. WHEN YOU WERE TEN?
3. WHEN YOU WERE FOURTEEN ?

ABSTRACT LANGUAGE: EXAMPLE

- HOW ABOUT *freedom*?
- THE WORD IS FAMILIAR ENOUGH, BUT WHEN I SAY, "I WANT FREEDOM," WHAT AM I TALKING ABOUT? DIVORCE? SELF-EMPLOYMENT? SUMMER VACATION? PAID-OFF DEBTS? MY OWN CAR? LOOSER PANTS? THE MEANING OF *freedom* WON'T STAY STILL

CONCRETE LANGUAGE

- **Concrete terms:** REFER TO OBJECTS OR EVENTS THAT ARE AVAILABLE TO THE SENSES. [THIS IS DIRECTLY OPPOSITE TO *abstract terms*, WHICH NAME THINGS THAT ARE **not** AVAILABLE TO THE SENSES.]
- EXAMPLES OF CONCRETE TERMS INCLUDE *spoon, table, velvet eye patch, nose ring, sinus mask, green, hot, walking*. BECAUSE THESE TERMS REFER TO OBJECTS OR EVENTS WE CAN SEE OR HEAR OR FEEL OR TASTE OR SMELL, THEIR MEANINGS ARE PRETTY STABLE.

ABSTRACT/CONCRETE: COMPARISON

IF YOU ASK ME WHAT I MEAN BY THE WORD *spoon*, I CAN PICK UP A SPOON AND SHOW IT TO YOU.

[I CAN'T PICK UP A *freedom* AND SHOW IT TO YOU, OR POINT TO A SMALL *democracy* CRAWLING ALONG A WINDOW SILL. I CAN MEASURE SAND AND OXYGEN BY WEIGHT AND VOLUME, BUT I CAN'T COLLECT A POUND OF *responsibility* OR A LITER OF *moral outrage*.]

WHILE ABSTRACT TERMS LIKE *love* CHANGE MEANING WITH TIME AND CIRCUMSTANCES, CONCRETE TERMS LIKE *spoon* STAY PRETTY MUCH THE SAME. *Spoon* AND *hot* AND *puppy* MEAN PRETTY MUCH THE SAME TO YOU NOW AS THEY DID WHEN YOU WERE FOUR.

GENERAL/ SPECIFIC TERMS

- GENERAL AND SPECIFIC TERMS
- GENERAL TERMS AND SPECIFIC TERMS ARE **NOT OPPOSITES**, AS ABSTRACT AND CONCRETE TERMS ARE; INSTEAD, THEY ARE THE DIFFERENT ENDS OF A RANGE OF TERMS:
 1. **General terms** REFER TO GROUPS;
 2. **Specific terms** REFER TO INDIVIDUALS—BUT THERE'S ROOM IN BETWEEN.
- LET'S LOOK AT AN EXAMPLE.

Furniture IS A GENERAL TERM; IT INCLUDES WITHIN IT MANY DIFFERENT ITEMS. IF I ASK YOU TO FORM AN IMAGE OF FURNITURE, IT WON'T BE EASY TO DO. DO YOU SEE A DEPARTMENT STORE DISPLAY ROOM? A DINING ROOM? AN OFFICE? EVEN IF YOU CAN PRODUCE A DISTINCT IMAGE IN YOUR MIND, HOW LIKELY IS IT THAT ANOTHER READER WILL FORM A VERY SIMILAR IMAGE? FURNITURE IS A **CONCRETE TERM** (IT REFERS TO SOMETHING WE CAN SEE AND FEEL), BUT ITS MEANING IS STILL HARD TO PIN DOWN, BECAUSE THE GROUP IS SO LARGE.

GENERAL/SPECIFIC LADDER

Reducing General term

- WE CAN MAKE THE GROUP SMALLER WITH THE LESS GENERAL TERM, *chair*. THIS IS STILL PRETTY GENERAL (THAT IS, IT STILL REFERS TO A **GROUP** RATHER THAN AN INDIVIDUAL), BUT IT'S EASIER TO PICTURE A CHAIR THAN IT IS TO PICTURE *furniture*.



GENERAL/SPECIFIC LADDER

Reducing to more specific

- SHIFT NEXT TO *rocking chair*. NOW THE IMAGE IS GETTING CLEARER, AND IT'S EASIER TO FORM AN ATTITUDE TOWARD THE THING.
- THE IMAGES WE FORM ARE LIKELY TO BE FAIRLY SIMILAR, AND WE'RE ALL LIKELY TO HAVE SOME SIMILAR ASSOCIATIONS (COMFORT, RELAXATION, CALM), SO THIS LESS GENERAL OR MORE SPECIFIC TERM **COMMUNICATES MORE CLEARLY** THAN THE MORE GENERAL OR LESS SPECIFIC TERMS BEFORE IT.



GENERAL/SPECIFIC LADDER

Tightening to specific

- WE CAN BECOME MORE AND MORE SPECIFIC. IT CAN BE A *La-Z-Boy rocker-recliner*. IT CAN BE A *green velvet La-Z-Boy rocker recliner*. IT CAN BE A *lime green velvet La-Z-Boy rocker recliner with a cigarette burn on the left arm and a crushed jelly doughnut pressed into the back edge of the seat cushion*. BY THE TIME WE GET TO THE LAST DESCRIPTION, WE HAVE SURELY REACHED THE INDIVIDUAL, A SINGLE CHAIR. NOTE HOW EASY IT IS TO VISUALIZE THIS CHAIR, AND HOW MUCH ATTITUDE WE CAN FORM ABOUT IT.