

On my computer, I store a bunch of texts and images in a folder and then I give that folder a name in terms of which I can retrieve all those texts and images.

This is also how a word works. A word—say, for example, the word “democracy”—is a “file name” in terms of which a human being retrieves a bunch of “texts” and images from his or her head. What are these mental “texts” and images? They are mental records of experiences we have had, images and media we have seen, dialogue we have heard, and texts we have read that are “filed” under “democracy”.

Your “democracy” file may be much bigger or much smaller than mine. It all depends on what experiences you have had, what images and media you have seen, what dialogues you have heard and been part of, and what texts you have read. Since the “meaning” of “democracy” is all this stuff in your head, based on where your mind and body has been, the word means something different for you than it does for me.

Since the word means something different for each of us, what happens when we hear or read it? Since the speaker or writer has different stuff in his or her head than the listener or reader, then, that should be a problem. How can they “communicate”? Well it is not a problem, it is the heart and soul of communicating. When we hear or read a word, we engage in a negotiation with the speaker or writer. We see if our experiences “square” with each other. Given the stuff in my head in my “democracy” file, what must be in your head when you use the word the way you do? Should I dismiss your “file” as too small (“you haven’t seen the half of it”) or without the “right” stuff in it (“you haven’t been in the right places”)? Should I conclude that you have seen and done some things—given how you are using the word—that I ought to learn from and add to both my file and to the sorts of experiences I seek out in the world? Perhaps, we will keep talking and do things together and have enough common experiences that our “files” for “democracy” become more and more alike. Perhaps, your experiences are so different from mine that I see I have a lot of “homework” to do in getting more stuff into my “democracy” file if I want to understand you or even work with you.

This is a very different view of language than the traditional one. It says that words are just labels for files full of experiences, images, texts, and dialogue. These files are “mental” but they are the result of where our minds and bodies have been in the world, they are the result our trajectories through social space and time.

Bigots are people whose “files” for certain words are closed. They are not going to add to them in any substantial way—just put more and more of the same sort of stuff in them. They are unwilling to concede anyone else’s file is “right” unless it looks just like their file. Since our word files are the records of our lives, only people who look and act like them are “good” and “right”. Genuine religious or political debate is founded on the premise that someone might concede that their experiences are not the only good ones and that their files could be enlarged, changed, or radically updated.

Note how this view of language renders most of how we teach and learn language, literacy, and second languages in school odd. How could people be “learning” language and literacy if they are not moving through the world and negotiating with others about how their experiences in the world do or do not “square” with that of others and how and whether they need new experiences in the world?