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Decoding Acting Vocabulary

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By Daniel Granke

BFA, University of Michigan April 2003

Director: Dr. Aaron Anderson

Associate Chair, Department of Theatre

Virginia Commonwealth University

Richmond, Virginia

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Abstract

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By Daniel Granke, Master of Fine Arts.

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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013
Major Director: Dr. Aaron Anderson, Associate Chair, Department of Theatre

This paper compares seemingly similar words from a variety of acting teachers, and shows how it is impossible to draw clear comparisons between words that are often used as synonyms. The paper is a reflection of the journey from believing in translation to recognizing its impossibility. In Chapter 1 we focus on one of the most common elements in actor training, *Attention/focus/concentration*, and analyze the shades of meaning in those words and the difficulty of talking about them in isolation. In Chapter 2 we look at the way in which semiotic analysis can explain the words resistance to equivalence. In Chapter 3 we look at one of the central terms in most collegiate actor training *objective*, and see how it reveals both the problems inherent in translation. In Chapter 4 we look at how this knowledge can influence the classroom in a positive way.

Chapter 1. The Words We Use: Observation/Concentration/Attention

In this chapter we look at how similar acting terms from different vocabularies can have vastly different meanings, taking as our example Attention/focus/concentration. This set of words was chosen because they are frequently taught to actors early in a system and seen as foundational to the work.

“Art ends where philosophy begins.”

-Stanislavski (Benedetti x)

It is a curious statement for the man who is credited with creating a ‘system’ for acting. While his life’s work was essentially a philosophy of acting, Stanislavski understood the dangers of confusing the philosophy with the art. Yet Stanislavski’s philosophical endeavors resulted in great artistic success, and a lineage of acting teachers who have had a hand in the artistic success of American theatre since. The border between art and philosophy exists, but it is imprecise. While we may not always be able to draw the line, we can map the connection and localize it in the classroom. The work of the teacher/trainer of theatre has a profound impact in the art of the student. The teacher/trainer has a duty to understand how the problems of language can impact the student, and consequently the art.

“It lacked truth. I didn’t see you play your objective. You weren’t really listening. What were your tactics? You weren’t really present, or in the moment.” What does any of that mean exactly? For those of us who teach acting, or have spent any amount of

time in an acting classroom, these words mean a great deal. We know exactly what we mean when we say them. However, do our students understand? If we were to sit and parse out exactly what we mean when we say *concentration* or *action*, would we all be in precise agreement, or would there be patches of difficulty? A vast jargon of acting has developed in the hundred years since Stanislavski began his work. Acting teachers have strong disagreements over the method of training actors, and the way to describe what the actor does. This all arises in the way we represent the ideas and patterns that characterize successful acting. The words we use are fraught with problems. Yet if we look closely at how and why these problems arise, we can begin to see how those very problems may allow us to better understand what we are doing and actually train better actors.

In his work *Keywords*, Raymond Williams takes a look at how complicated words function in our vocabulary. Williams states that his goal is not to parse out the meanings of these words in various specialist contexts, but rather how they are used in a general sense. Williams is not however operating in a general world. His analysis focuses on how those words are used in the context of intellectual conversation. He is discussing how they are used, re-used, and influenced by various specialists groups as the meanings blend and bleed between disciplines and into the general vocabulary. He discusses how he became fascinated with how certain words. He noticed how they were used to entirely different ends, and fraught with problems of meaning bound up in the very problems they were discussing. He posits there are two issues at work here: the lack of a specificity of meaning but also connections that were made both implicitly and explicitly in the process of making an argument. He realized that the issues being

debated couldn't be fully explained or explored without understanding the role the words played in the problem (Williams 13-15).

I would propose we face similar problems in the world of acting. In our attempts to communicate fundamental ideas to students, we have similar issues of meaning. In our debates over those fundamental ideas we have similar issues of meaning. It isn't a matter of pulling out our dictionaries and defining these words. They belong to a different class of word. This makes pulling out the dictionary an "irrelevant procedure" When dealing with words representing ideas and values, the overlap of intention and history results in a word with a wide range of meanings and shades of meaning. We may perceive the word to have one meaning, but this is not so. Williams cites words such as *industry, family, nature, class, rational, and subjective* (17). Think about words like *truth, objective, listening, tactics, presence, and moment*. I would propose that they, like a significant portion of our jargon, belong to that same class of words.

Before going farther in this exploration it is worth noting that even though dictionary definitions are by nature "philological and etymological"(19), there is still an ideological bias present (18). There will be an ideological bias in any search into meaning. Williams is looking not for philological specificity, but intellectual clarity (21). This should be our goal as well as we try to analyze our own vocabulary. There are three major factors at work in analyzing acting vocabulary. Williams puts emphasis on the historic and applicable (22). His goal is to view both their historical use and present meaning (23). Any work on acting vocabulary must acknowledge both their history and present function in our professional jargon as well as their history and present function in the general lexicon. However we must also acknowledge the semiotic problem.

Semiotics is the study of signs and how meaning is generated in language. One of the fundamental observations of semiotic theory is that the word is not the thing itself, and we can separate a word from its material phenomenon (Fortier 19-20). Subsequent advances in the philosophy of how words represent things have a great bearing on our questioning of acting vocabulary. This work has a bearing on translation, which is a fundamental problem for us. In his study Williams points out the difficulty of coming to grips with terms which developed “key meanings in a language other than English” (20). Given our common root in the work of Stanislavski, English language teachers of acting will have to deal with the issues that arise in translation.

Attention/Concentration/Focus: Examining the differences

We are discussing jargon, not words in general use. However in our case we use words that also have meanings in the general lexicon, and meanings which are as fraught with difficulty there as they are in our own profession. Often we use words that have shifted in their meaning over time. While words shift meaning over the course of a lifetime, this can be a significantly faster process, taking as little as 5 years (Williams 12). We use words that represent abstract concepts both to represent important ideas and describe their application. Think of words like *Imagination*, *concentration*, *atmosphere*, *quality*, and even *organic*, a word that Williams explores in *Keywords* (227-229). These words all have multiple meanings, observe in particular *concentration*.¹

¹ For the purposes of differentiation, I will italicize words when I mean to use them in as representative of acting vocabulary or jargon and not when I mean to use them in their general context or in a more casual way. I will also only italicize them when speaking of the sign as a whole, leaving them unitalicized when discussing as signifier.

We begin here because it and words like it are among the most common elements across a variety of systems and are consistently addressed early in training. *Concentration* is frequently cited as a crucial element in the makeup of the actor. Benedetti's version of Stanislavski's work presents it as the first step in mental action, but immediately begins to use synonyms and alternate words for the concept. He couples it with focus, and ultimately packages it in the phrase "*circles of attention*" (Benedetti). Think of these three words for a moment. *Attention*, *focus*, and *concentration* all have slightly different connotative meanings. *Attention* carries the weight of the military context; *Atten-shun!* It also has a sense of the authoritarian and receptive; you pay attention in school. It also might put the onus outside ourselves. We tend to describe objects as holding our attention.

Focus has a completely different set of meanings that tug at what it is. *Focus* has a hardness to it. Modern camera equipment means that we ask whether something is in-focus or out of focus. *Focus* is the preferred word of Viola Spolin, although this was a development for the third edition of her book. Prior to that she used "*point of concentration*"; the reason for the change was that focus was a more active word (Spolin 21). This is interesting because focus implies a point, whereas concentration may not. Yet we could reformulate it as "Concentrate on x" and arrive at an active formulation. *Focus*, however, packages this neatly for us, but it certainly puts a hard edge on the issue. Yet some contemporary training methodologies suggest that *focus* in this sense has nothing to do with the ability of the actor to be present and aware of something. Bogart's viewpoints training explores the notion of a *soft focus* as a central part of Viewpoints practice, but the very fact that she has to qualify it with the word "soft"

implies a historical connotation of hardness is attached to the word (Bogart and Landau 32).

Concentration is the preferred term of Strasberg and his teacher Boleslavsky. Boleslavsky places it as the first of his six lessons. Strasberg places it second in the method after relaxation. Both discuss how *concentration* requires an object of focus, and both how the concept involves something more than observation. Boleslavsky discusses it in terms of control of spiritual and intellectual forces, and Strasberg in terms of focus on an imaginary object for the purpose of recreation. Once again notice the relationship of focus and control in relationship to the underlying concept (Boleslavsky 9, Strasberg 131). If we look at Stanislavski's writing there is a precedent for this type of work. The exercises described to practice concentration are similar. They involve focus on an object and subsequent recollection of details (*An Actor Prepares*, 71-73, *An Actor's Work* 96-98).

Another complicated question arises in how the title of that chapter in Stanislavski's book is translated. Benedetti translates it as "Concentration and Attention." There are two possible ways of looking at this. Either we can look at it as two separate concepts or synonyms. The chapter itself fails to bear out any clear differentiation of what is meant. Hapgood's translation however translates this chapter heading as "Concentration *of* Attention" (Emphasis mine). This is a different beast altogether. To concentrate in this way means something entirely different. The shift from and to of implies a different more concentrated type of attention, and casts concentration not as an act of mental focus but one of essentializing. It is this more

complicated picture of *concentration/attention/focus* that surfaces within the work and lineage² of Michael Chekhov.

Returning to Benedetti's sequence, he describes the purpose of *circles of attention*, as controlling and directing the attention and focus of the audience (32). The National Michael Chekhov Association³ approaches the concept as *focal point*, and uses "*circles of concentration*" (Dalton and Kilroy 69). While they use the circle concept to approach a similar idea, their circles are radically different from the "*circles of attention*" of Benedetti. Chekhov was a direct student of Stanislavski, but he and his students have taken the vocabulary and radically shifted it in application. The "*circle of attention*" is focused on the on stage space, including imaginary space, but is rooted *in* space (Benedetti 32, 39). The "*circles of concentration*" of the NMCA are rooted in objects, some of which are localized and some which are not. They talk about circles as focusing on self, partner, present environment (including objects imagined as present), non present objects (memories and fantasies), and the spiritual plane (Dalton and Kilroy 69). Benedetti has no numbered set compared to Dalton and Kilroy. Stanislavski himself adds to the circles of external concentration a kind of inner concentration. Benedetti doesn't speak of it in his workbook, though he does translate that portion of Stanislavski's book (*An Actor Prepares* 77, *An Actor's Work* 106). Chekhov himself presents *concentration* as having two kinds: the attention you pay a beautiful object and *willed concentration*. Notice the differentiation he makes between attention and concentration as he describes the concept. He goes even farther, at one point he

² Lineage is an important part of understanding the history of a given vocabulary, but for reasons that become clear later, I feel it is best to acknowledge teachers in the same lineage, while treating their vocabularies as independent.

³ Hereafter abbreviated as NMCA

suggests that the student concentrate on an object and after 15 minutes put it down. He then suggests they observe the resulting feeling and power. It is as though he is describing abstract concentration, an idea which Strasberg believes cannot exist (*Lessons to the Teachers* 16, 17). At another point Chekhov suggests it is identification with an object (26). He is moving away from what we think of as the standard definition of concentration as it relates to observation. He begins to move to the common usage definition as it relates to essentializing (think juice concentrate). He exhorts the student to “be concentrated” (29). He says that, “for us concentration has special meaning.” It is not enough to observe we have to feel the spirit of a physical object (47). He draws a clear contrast between seeing the outward qualities of an object and “penetrating into the life and depth of an object” (50). This sort of concentration begins to sound like the kind of identification the physical theatre teacher Lecoq is describing in his *mimage*. We can see an object move and it will create a similar movement in us. Even if it is an inanimate object, it can spark this identification (Lecoq 47-48).

Examining the practical effects of the different words

Concentration, while a seemingly simple concept, is clearly quite convoluted. Before diving any farther down the rabbit hole, let’s take it back to the world of the practical for the moment. Try it for yourself. Pick an object and concentrate on it the way that Strasberg might suggest, with hard focus. Stare at it and memorize detail. Will your concentration on it as Chekhov might suggest. After a while, put it down. Try to

recreate it with your imagination. See it where it is not. If you are losing it focus on the detail. Release that focus and see how concentrating in that way makes you feel.

Now try the same exercise with the thought of attention. Soften your focus. To do this allow your eyes to drift to the horizon, blink them rapidly, and then shut them tightly. The moment you open them, before they alight on any one thing, they will be in a soft focus. With a minimal effort you can look at and become aware of things. Rather than focusing on an object, allow an object to catch your attention. Remain in soft focus, and allow details to come to you. Contemplate the object. Close your eyes again. Try to recreate the object for yourself while in soft focus. Allow it to appear. How much detail can you create this time? Let it go and again, see how you feel.

Finally try the essentializing version of the exercise. As you observe an object, ask, “what is its essence?” In Chekhov’s words, “feel you are flowing to the object” (*Lessons for the Teacher* 25). Ask what kind of movement it awakens in you. When you are ready remove the object, and rather than recreate the object in its literal exactness, try to recreate the essence of your reaction to it. Hold it in your imagination. Release that and see how you feel. Notice how different each of these versions of concentration are. Notice the difference within you. The goal of exploring this is not to prove that one method or other is the “right” way to think about concentration, but rather to show the vast area covered by the concept, and encourage thought about the way in which a given word, e.g. *focus*, *attention*, or *concentration* can have a remarkable effect on the work.

Let’s also try a comparison of Benedetti and the Dalton/Kilroy’s version of the circles. You are already in a “*Circle of Attention*”, which Benedetti refers to as an “*object*

of attention” as you read this paper. Set the paper down on something. Continue to read but allow yourself to widen your attention to include one or two other objects on the surface. Widen it to include the entire desk or table. Now widen it include the whole room (Benedetti 40). You have moved from attention on an object through attention on increasingly larger circles. While you have most likely been shifting your focus back to this paper throughout the exercise, recenter now. According to NMCA you are now in the “3rd circle.” Focus instead on yourself. Think about how you feel about this paper. Are you bored, wondering how the hell I got into graduate school? Or are you excited by my ideas and flowery prose? This is on you, the “1st circle.” Call someone in the room, or on the phone. Ask them a question about their day or something they care about, and listen to the answer, now we are in “2nd circle.” After they leave or you hang up, focus on the room in general. Go ahead and come back to an object, say this paper, or any combination of objects in the room, or the room in general. Come back to “3rd Circle.” Now remember a paper you wrote once and what it was like to be in school, think of a friend or relative who lives far away, or better yet think of the nice meal you are going to have later to treat your self for a hard day’s work. By going to objects that are not present in time or space, you are in “4th circle.” Lastly, reach out to whatever sort of spiritual power you believe in, or if you believe in no spiritual forces, simply try to hold the infinity of the universe in your mind. Welcome to the “5th circle.”

Digest and compare these two exercises. Both clearly involve learning to control and shift focus yet both are remarkably different experiences. Stanislavski’s via Benedetti focuses on the issue of size, while Chekhov’s focus on the how the object affects the quality of the focus. Apply the heuristic of one to the practice of the other. A

Chekhov devotee would say that Benedetti's exercise remains in 3rd circle, only shifting the location of focus and size of it. Benedetti might say that focusing on self or other is the same as an object of attention. Possibly the same might be said of a non present object. But there is a distinction to be made in size and splitting of focus. Imagine a mouse. Now imagine an immense elephant. The size of your focus has changed but it is still an "*object of attention*" not a "circle." Now take your elephant and see both the tail and the eye. The size of the target hasn't really shifted, but it's gone from a united object to a field of them. Again, our goal is not to identify which of these is the definitive way for the actor to train this particular skill but rather to see how quickly different words and ways of describing what may seem like one idea create deep complications in practice.

Further complications: how one word is used depends on others.

Compare all this to Spolin's notion of *focus*. Pick a single object and place your focus on it. While the way you are actively seeing has perhaps shifted. Now try to focus on the whole room. Compare that experience to trying to widen the circle of attention. The word changes the experience. Spolin rarely talks about focus being split or expanded, She is quite emphatic about the "focus on a changing moving single point," and the "singleness of focus".(22) By qualifying *focus*, she is already beginning to blur into other concepts, She pulls on the threads surrounding *objective*, and describes something akin to Declan Donnellan's "*target*". We will delve further into this later when we focus on *objective*.

For the sake of some clarity I have attempted to parse *concentration/attention/focus* out from other ideas. This involves two faulty intellectual processes. First I have used the words focus, attention, and concentration in an attempt to discuss the same words as jargon. To try and break down the acting concept without recourse to a more general usage is an impossible task. In this way acting jargon is unlike other professional jargons described by Williams (14). I would posit our extensive borrowing of common words to describe phenomena of the theatre has created confusion between the day to day and the theatrical. On the flip side there is a tremendous positive element to this borrowing, but we will come to that in due time. The other is the way in which one concept depends on and tugs on another. Any discussion of *concentration* as an acting tool will bring up important ideas about *imagination*, an equally difficult term related to image, one of Williams' keywords.

The American school of Stanislavski uses *concentration* for the purpose of recreating objects in detail. Boleslavsky suggests the creature listen to an imaginary mouse (12). Strasberg is explicit that observation is for the purposes of recreating what is not there, and leads to the "workings of the imagination" and to a "kind of belief or faith" that is essential (131). It is worth noting here that *belief* and *faith* often appear in various acting lexicons.

Some others don't seem to mention it directly. Meisner never describes *concentration* as an acting term, but he describes needing something to concentrate on as essential to character (Meisner 24). His famous impossible task is a source of "concentration and eventually emotion" (39). His student Bill Esper entitles a chapter in his book "Developing Concentration," and emphasizes that the activity must demand

“real concentration” (Esper 60). Uta Hagen doesn’t explore the set of terms explicitly in an acting context; however she devotes two chapters of *A Challenge for the Actor* to the physical senses (74-82). Most of the acting teachers who teach concentration do so in the context of the *five senses* (Benedetti 33-35, Strasberg 132-133). Benedetti also suggests *concentration* requires *justification*, another important acting word/concept (40-41). While Stella Adler doesn’t address *concentration* directly in her book, she has her own version of the observe an object exercise, and is particularly brutal on the recall of specific detail (Adler 45-47). She also brings up something about *imagination*: “Your imagination consists of your ability to recall things you’ve never thought of” (50).

Stanislavski himself structures *An Actor Prepares* with *imagination* preceding *concentration* and *attention* as concepts. He begins like Strasberg and Adler with real objects, and only touches how it connects to imagination. When he moves on to inner concentration, he suggests there are still objects, but they are affected by the *magic if* (*An Actor’s Work* 106). Chekhov also reverses the flow. *Imagination* precedes concentration, and they appear together in the first chapter of *On the Technique of Acting*. Unlike Stanislavski his work is rooted in the *if* as much as the object. He starts with observing what is and manipulating it mentally using some variation of the *what if* concept. *Concentration* follows for the purpose of maintaining *imagination*. As he does in his other work, he describes *concentration* as communion with the object, *communion* of course being another acting word (1-14). *Concentration* is now linked to the *five senses*, *imagination*, *recreation*, *creation*, *magic if*, *justification*, *specificity* and a number of other acting terms in ways that make it difficult to separate from the web of jargon.

Looking again at the practical results

Let's do a little more arbitrary slicing and pull out *imagination* and *concentration*, *magic if* and the *five senses*. We have seen that different teachers use these concepts in different orders, which gives de facto primacy to one or the other. Two actors create or recreate an imaginary object. Most acting teachers would agree with Strasberg that their own *belief* in the details of what they are imagining as real is the key to us believing it as well. The easiest way for the actor to achieve this is through *specificity*. A wealth of details about the object allows the actor a constant source of renewal when that faith waivers. However the method approach, working with the *five senses* from object to recreation of imaginary object privileges detail drawn from "real life." Contrast this with the Chekhov trained actor who may be able to manufacture marvelous detail for a thoroughly unrealistic image, due to the emphasis on using the *what if* and *imagination* to change the object of concentration. We can also think back to our elephant, and point out that there is a difference between moving from part to part seeing each in detail, and the ability to sustain the essence of the whole in the mind. These concepts are complicated, intertwined, and result in significant differences in the way the actor approaches craft, as well as the results.

Take an object for yourself, and attempt to recreate it in a photo realistic way with the *five senses/focus/concentration* set as your way of describing what you are doing. Record every detail you can about it and attempt to keep to the object as it appears. Now look at it again. This time allow your mind to make it fantastical. Make it bigger and more brightly colored, perhaps cubist, or impressionistic, but no less detailed. Use these

imaginary details in your recreation. I would suggest that the importance is *specificity*, not the veracity of the details. Each of these recreations would be, for a short time, compelling and truthful neither is necessarily to be preferred. It's the difference between realism and a different style of theatre.

The problem is that the structural relationship between the concepts, as well as the concepts themselves will create certain tendencies. The potential pitfall of the version of *concentration* that pulls on the *five senses/recreation* pattern of words can result in actors with little imagination, unable to work outside of the bounds of realism, overly analytical, and possibly uncreative. The *imagination/creation* approach can result in an actor who takes short cuts and works with a low level of specificity; their acting may become general and clunky.

Think back over the different qualities that different words had on the exercises. I would suggest that all of the different ways we've approached the webs of words around *concentration* might be useful to the actor⁴. In fact a well trained and skilled actor may activate different glossaries at different time. As an acting teacher we have to take some kind of angle, but it is incumbent upon us to be aware of the subtle shades of meaning contained both in the words we use and the larger structures of language they embody. But why is this so? Before moving on to another example, it may be worth our while to take a look at some of the concepts in semiotics that allow for this complication of meaning, and after another example, see how these seeming issues can be a boon for us as teachers of art.

⁴ I will use this term as unisex. Use of the pronoun he for the actor is chosen for simplicity and is not intended to privilege a gender, but rather to keep it simple. In this I have Uta Hagan as company.

Chapter 2: Ideas in language, not language for ideas.

In this chapter we show why acting terms behave this way by treating a given acting teachers vocabulary as a sign system in which each sign cannot be extracted as it is dependant on others for meaning, and suggest that there is no universal idea hiding behind these terms, but rather that each use of them has to be treated as a unique idea.

Why do *concentration*, *attention*, and *focus* behave this way? We can ascertain via Williams that words change meaning over time, and that these shifts can create difficulties in meaning. Williams is firmly grounded in a Marxist perspective. His “cultural materialism” is grounded in existing practice and historical context (Counsell and Wolf 193). We can see how different words compete to give nuances of meaning to the act of observation. Williams is noted for looking at how there are dominant, emerging, and residual forces in culture (Fortier 156). How can this help us understand the confusion of terminology used in teaching actors *concentration*?

The three words *focus*, *concentration*, and *attention* clearly have interplay in our educational theatrical culture. Like any term we use in acting jargon, there are dominant meanings. In the case of our American acting tradition it is most likely the use of the senses in a hard focus to gain a detailed memory of an object. The resulting skill can then be used to focus on different objects and areas during performance. There are also emerging meanings, in this case perhaps the identification with an object a la Lecoq and Chekov or the sort of open awareness sought by Bogart in her Viewpoints training.

Of course there are also residual meanings of the word in the case of theatrical jargon; we may identify these as the meanings of the word before it became an acting term. Concentration was a word meaning both to focus mental attention on something, and to reduce something to its essence. In the latter case it may be related to the emergent meaning of Chekhov. Here is where we see the potential for these meanings to coexist and overlap. In dealing with acting vocabulary we are always dealing both with the word as it was used prior to its adoption into jargon, as well as the multitude of ways it is used by the growing body of teachers and authors. It may not be best to use William's scheme, as there may not be enough agreement amongst practitioners to establish a truly dominant meaning, and in fact the nature of words and language may make such agreement an impossibility.

While the historical materialist perspective is one key way to begin to understand our acting lexicon, it is also worth examining the semiotic perspective. Meanings can shift and change over time, even within one lineage that appears to share a common vocabulary. Think of the journey from Stanislavski's *attention* through Chekhov's *concentration* to the NMCA's *focal point*. To understand this journey, and justify a further examination of individual acting jargons as things in themselves it may be useful to examine them through semiology. How would Saussure, the father of semiology, look at *concentration*. *Concentration* is a word, a sign which represents an important idea for actors to understand. In Saussure's terminology this sign can be broken into two parts a signifier, in this case the word concentration, and a signified, the thing we mean when we say concentration. The important thing to note here is the essentially arbitrary relationship between the two parts of the sign (Counsell and Wolf 4, 5).

This becomes further complicated by the notion that a sign can only exist in a sign system, they are “interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of others” (8). This should be quite clear to us in our exploration of *concentration* as we saw how pulling on one idea in acting pulls on all of them. We can’t understand *concentration* (or *focus/attention*) without understanding our senses, observation, movement (tempo/rhythm), etc. They exist as part of a sign system that points at a bigger idea, acting itself. How these systems are deployed and how they slice the big idea becomes fundamental as we explore the concept of teaching acting.

It is not enough to have a sign system we have to have someone to interpret it. The artist has little need of a sign system. He has no need to reveal how he did something. The thing is all. Meisner was fond of saying “preparation was private and personal” He is explicit about not revealing the how (86). Hagen admonishes the actor that sharing inner objects causes them to lose their power (90-91). It is only the teacher of acting who needs to unpack what is happening and find ways of communicating it. In doing so, we find our interpretant in the student. Charles Peirce theorized that any sign must have a receiver who understands the system (Fortier 22). This can become a tremendous problem with our students, because we are trying to use signs they may not yet be able to interpret.

Often our students carry residual, or perhaps dominant, understandings of our acting jargon into the classroom. Think of those different contexts associated with *attention*, *focus*, and *concentration*. A student may walk in with an authoritative context for attention, a camera context for focus, and an orange juice concentrate context for

concentration. Our goal may be to divest them of these connotations but initially they will impact how the student applies the concept. Perhaps the student with the authoritative angle will initially practice *concentration* exercises with too much tension if we use the word attention, as might the OJ kid if we use the word concentration. The camera student might react to the word focus with a hard gaze or a more coldly analytical approach. In this Peirce's semiotic analysis aligns with Williams's cultural analysis. Words carry history and weight.

Roland Barthes provides some clues to how this happens. It goes slightly beyond our interpreting student and back into the overall system of language. Barthes wants to know how signs work together to create the illusion that things are the way they should be (Counsell and Wolf 12). The interdependence of a set glossary becomes in itself something that is then represented by a larger concept, in our case acting itself. The idea is that we take a group of ideas and words and with them construct a larger myth of what we teach.

Concentration can't be understood outside of how it serves the larger idea of what acting is. Envision for a moment the classroom so aptly described by Stanislavski, Adler, and Strasberg. See a bunch of students looking at an object and trying to memorize detail as fast as possible to repeat back to a teacher. Assuming they excel at their courses and the teaching is effective what kind of actor will they be? Imagine now a classroom where students are trying to absorb the essence of an object in an alternative type of concentration. Again, with the above assumptions, ask what kind of actor will they be? Is either one a truly "better actor"? Certainly each will be different enough to better suit the tastes of a particular audience or director. Think of the things

that are privileged in the difference of the two identical signs in their application: a multitude of detail vs. what is essential, physical reality vs. imaginary reality, individual senses vs. integrated experience, etc.

Examining the impact on pedagogy

Any acting teacher worth their salt, or any actor with any introspection, would agree that all of the above are important for the actor, but how do we approach them as teachers? A fundamental question here is: are we teaching the same big ideas? For the sake of the moment, let's assume we are. While there are always problems of aesthetic, let's assume that there are some fundamental skills at the heart of performance. The solution then would be better signs. If a word like *concentration* carries too much historical baggage or is too inexact let us tear it down and build a new sign!

This doesn't necessarily solve the problem. Even if we can agree that there are some fundamentals they only exist in the sign as it stands. Saussure points out that the two parts of the sign, the signifier and the signified are like a two sides of a sheet of paper, distinct but inseparable, and to cut one is to cut the other (Counsell and Wolf 7). We also presume that the idea at the heart of *concentration*, the signified, precedes the signifier. Jacques Derrida critiques this logocentrism. This idea that we can develop better jargon is based on the idea that we can get closer to the "real thing". Yet the ideas we are speaking of don't exist outside of their expression. We assume that to represent something it must first be there, but it doesn't have to be. It may work the other way. We may be creating something when we try to represent it. Derrida points

out that we “think only in signs” (50). The very idea of *concentration* does not exist absent of its sign. We can’t point to exactly what a given concept in acting is because the idea is never present, nothing identical with itself. This allows for slippages of meaning. In spite of what appears to be a general agreement on the area of *concentration*, each iteration of it is essentially isolated (Fortier 64, 65).

It may seem to us that we can translate between different vocabularies. After all, most acting teachers address *focus/concentration/attention* in some way. However this may be illusory. I would propose that these concepts are not equal, even among teachers and authors in the same lineage who use nearly identical vocabulary. We may seem to be able to translate due to the common cultural referent of the English language, or due to a dominant acting jargon, but we have to remember that any given word is deployed in a language system. The complicated relationships between different words in a given acting vocabulary defy translation. To truly grasp the meaning of a given concept we have to understand the relations it has to other concepts. Essentially we have to speak the language of that sign. Each teacher’s vocabulary becomes their own particular network of signs. Similarities may exist, but if we take Derrida to heart this is not because there is some ur-acting vocabulary to which these signs point.

While there may not be some set of ideal acting concepts, there are consistencies in the ways in which acting teachers divide the greater practice of acting into manageable pieces. We should recognize that there is a framework underneath a given vocabulary, a way in which it connects and functions. Words cannot directly translate; my *concentrate* cannot mean exactly the same thing as your *concentrate*. Yet in our linguistic systems they seem to be similar. This is not because we are trying to

signify the same concept but rather because there are similarities in our patterns of dividing the concept of acting. This is what happens in translation; we can take a framework and baptize certain points on the web with new names. While the signs belong to the translator, the underlying framework can correlate. Since our vocabulary has a historical root in the act of translation it will be worthwhile to look to debates about that act.

Chapter 3: Another word: Zadacha? Objective? Task?

In this chapter we analyze objective, the central term in most acting systems and show how it is impossible to analyze it without pulling on several terms in any given system. We examine the problem of translation both historically and in theoretical terms and suggest that ultimately there cannot be translation between acting systems.

We have looked at some of the cultural issues surrounding words, as well as a brief foray into the nature of words in general. We have to acknowledge that our jargon essentially developed in another language. As we dive into objective, the first place to start is that notion of translation. We have noticed the discrepancy in how Benedetti and Hapgood translate the word between concentration and attention in Stanislavski's text. The work of Stanislavski has a remarkable history in its text format. A recent Routledge edition of *An Actor Prepares* proclaims that the "acting trilogy" of *An Actor Prepares*, *Building a Character*, and *Creating a Role* "belong on any actor's short shelf of essential books" (2). The three books are presented as Stanislavski's work, but at what point did they become the work of initial editor and translator Elizabeth Hapgood?

Stanislavski died before publication of all three. Only *My Life in Art* may be said to be in any way definitive. Given that at the end of his life he left the autobiography, "one volume on acting still being revised, a series of drafts and some titles" (Benedetti xi). We are basing our jargon on a loosely sketched system at best. The grammar of acting Stanislavski was looking for may be incomplete. We don't have all the signs necessary to understand the place of the signs in a greater system. In practice we know

the system we received however provisional is detailed and coherent, but we have to acknowledge that its creator thought of it as a work in progress.

Benedetti believes that we must attempt to understand the system, however provisional it is. He believes the work may be supplemented and completed by the records of the Open-Dramatic Studio, a four year project at the end of Stanislavski's life. He posits that this was Stanislavski's attempt to pass on the system as a coherent whole (Benedetti xi-xii).

Laying aside the issues of completeness for a moment, Hapgood is the originator of our jargon historically speaking. Regardless of the original intent of Stanislavski's work, his particular framework and the relationship between the signs, the skeleton of his framework is all that will remain when it is translated. Hapgood had to come up with an English term for everyone of Stanislavski's Russian terms. When she did that, in part due to her choice to translate the terms into pre existing English terms, two fundamental things happened. First, She introduced into the jargon all of the prior baggage carried by those particular words. Secondly, she created new signs. If the meaning of the sign is tied to the sign, this means she ultimately changed what was being represented. Although the relationship between the word and what it represents is arbitrary, they are intimately connected. The shift in language will result in a recreation of the ideas behind the language.

This shift in meaning will be guided by the agenda of the translator, and we should look at the translated text as product almost solely of the translator. Hapgood's agenda is clear in her note in *An Actor Prepares*. She states that the purpose of the Moscow Art Company was to do away with "what has *become* **artificial**...to present the

externals of life and their **inner repercussions** with **convincing psychological truthfulness**” and that this was in response to conventions that stood “in the way of fresh art and **sincere emotion** on stage” (emphasis mine) (6-7). Think of the weight of these words. While Stanislavski was no doubt interested in sincere emotion, psychological truth, and inner life, He was interested also in art, the root of artifice. He was also interested in the externals, something which became a source of conflict for Adler and Strasberg, despite the fact that both had external elements in their training. While Adler emphasized action over effective memory, Strasberg maintained exercises involving animals and tempo/rhythm (*An Actor’s Work* xx, Brestoff 1995 88-89, 108-109).

Benedetti feels strongly that there were mistranslations in the work of Hapgood. His own retranslation unites *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character*. He argues that the two were always intended to be one volume and consequently frames them as *An Actor’s Work*. He argues this is how they were originally intended as two parts of a whole and that Stanislavski himself was concerned about breaking them (*An Actor’s Work* xvii). One of his more consistent beefs with the work of Hapgood is in the translation of the words *objective* and *unit*. He posits that this was not a mistranslation but a deliberate choice to replace a simpler word with something more abstract (Xviii-xix). Benedetti prefers the words *task* and *bit*. The original word for *objective/task*, according to Benedetti, has immediacy to it. *Zadacha* might be translated as “an immediate task I have to perform, or a mathematical problem I have to solve”(Benedetti 151).

We can see the issues of translation as representation as opposed to recreation. If we look at *objective* or *task* as representing *zadacha* which in turn represents the real idea, we are falling into the same fallacies of presence that Derrida derided. Translation is not a second order semiotic system but a recreation in its own right. The frontispiece of *An Actor's Work* is about as good a piece of self promotion as the one in the Rutledge edition of *An Actor Prepares*. "Readers and students have had to contend with inaccurate, misleading, and difficult to read English language versions. Some of the mistranslations have resulted in profound distortions in the way his system has been interpreted and taught." It goes on to praise Benedetti for "a lively, fascinating, and **accurate** text in English," and for remaining "faithful to the author's **original** intentions" (Emphasis mine) (i).

Our search is not for a more accurate representation of Stanislavski's work. Any translation will of its nature be a new artifact. It has to be treated not as derived from Stanislavski but rather as a set of terms in its own right, its own linguistic system. In this sense Benedetti's translations owe as much to Hapgood's as they do to Stanislavski's original. Benedetti's work is reactionary. He argues that the purpose of his book is to undo confusions wrought by Hapgood and confusion with the method, and claims that only a privileged few had any real knowledge of the authentic Stanislavski (xxi). Yet the only way to know the "authentic" Stanislavski would be to read Russian, or better yet fetch a time machine to go study with him. Imagine if there was no Hapgood translation, and the American Method had not been popularized via Hollywood. I highly doubt Benedetti would wear authenticity so conspicuously on his sleeve if his work were the first. If we are to move beyond the pure text, we have to see Benedetti's translation not

as an objective act, but rather as an act trapped in the myth of contemporary acting, a myth born when Adler returned from Paris, or perhaps when Boleslavsky came to America.

The contemporary battle waged in Benedetti's work is a literary proxy of the early split in methodology, and one that has been waged in both books and classrooms as people question the way we address acting problems. Many of these disagreements center around that word *objective*, one which we already see is complicated in the way it is translated. Armed with the knowledge of how signs function and work in a system, it's worth parsing apart the distinctions different acting teachers draw, and examine how they might affect meaning and consequently acting.

The complications of objective as a sign in the system

Objective is the foundational term as far as we are concerned. In my experience, the following is the most common set of words I have heard used in educational theatre. In most collegiate programs, the breakdown of a script into *beats of playable action* is the primary task for the actor, and *objective* is the primary concept in this process. The other concepts employed in direct relation to *objective* are *beat*, *tactic*, and *action*. *Beat* in this case refers to a given portion of the script, *tactic* to the method used to achieve your *objective*, and the *action* to particular each particular step. For example, if my *objective* in a scene, a *beat*, is to get the other character to confess a secret, I can threaten them, a *tactic*. Specific *actions* may or may not include raising my voice,

walking toward them, leaning into their personal space, placing my finger on their chest etc.

There are problems with some of these words as well. *Unit* is Hapgood's word for *beat*, and *beat* itself may be a linguistic shift from *bit*. Benedetti uses *bit*, and suggest that the implication is supposed to be more like a slice of bread or meat (151). The use of the word *tactic* has no antecedent in any of the literature I can find, but in practice it carries a unique connotative meaning. When trying to teach the concept of tactics to students, they often conflate it with strategy. Rather than playing one simple "to" verb, they inevitably use it as a ploy, thinking a move or two ahead. The military connotation around *tactic* I believe leads to this kind of mistake.

Action seems to be a consistent word in various vocabularies, but has great variance across teachers. In some cases it changes places with *tactic*. Adler in particular devotes large sections of her discourse to *actions* which are phrased as infinitive verbs, the grammatical device associated with *tactics*. Although interestingly she also describes physical activities such as washing clothes along side of more abstract things like to escape, to argue, and to take care of (Adler 94-124).

The central term in the structure however is *objective*, and it is from *objective* that most of these issues and deviations arise. The centrality of the term is clear in both the Hapgood and Benedetti texts. When this particular glossic node is introduced, there are changes in the text. First, as the students enter the classroom, there is a "large placard" on which the words *Bit/Unit* and *Task/Objective* are inscribed. This is the first time in the text that the words associated with the lesson are given this special treatment. Torstov describes this moment as a very "new and important stage/new, extremely important

phase”. Stanislavski then tells the story of dinner at a famous actor’s house with his children, and they proceed to make a metaphor for the *Inspector General* out of a turkey. This is the first time we have seen a group outside of the classroom who appears to understand the jargon of the classroom and it is a group of professional actors, not just students (*An Actor Prepares* 97-98 *An Actor’s Work* 135-137).

Looking at the words in the primary sources, Hapgood translates it as *objective*. Benedetti, whether through a desire for “authenticity” or in reaction to Hapgood has chosen the term *task*. In his own work, Benedetti argues that the term *objective* is more “abstract and less hands on” (151). When outlining the method of physical actions, Benedetti starts with the *supertask*. There is a corollary in *An Actor Prepares*, the *superobjective*, but it doesn’t appear till after *objectives* and *actions* (122). In his own work Benedetti moves to *basic actions, tasks, and actions* (7).

Already some fundamental issues are popping up. In doing this, Benedetti is going in reverse order from the way that these ideas are presented in *An Actor Prepares/An Actor’s Work*. In Stanislavski’s framework, the ideas are presented *Action*, and then *Tasks*, with *Supertask last*. It is understandable why Benedetti would do present them in this order. This is how we move from the script to the performance. In the story of the turkey, the turkey is carved from big to small, not assembled from small bits to large. Yet in his classroom activities, Benedetti talks very little of *tasks*, and does start with *actions* as a fundamental building block. As a teacher, do we present concepts in the order they are to be used or do we present them as independent ideas?

Where we present a concept adds a notion of priority. Stanislavski, and Benedetti after him, may have ordered it this way to avoid the “literary problem.” In Stanislavski’s

work, he describes one student's choice of task as "not bad but too rational, too literary. Literature is a fine thing but it is not everything in acting" (*An Actor's Work* 145). Although we most often in our theatre move from the page to the stage, we may want the actor to think of his work as free of literary constriction, of course we may also want to do the reverse, as it is rare that the professional actor will work from any direction other than the text. The complication here is one that cannot be fully undone. The actor must be able to move from the text to the actions, but at the same time must be able to bring appropriate actions to the text. The actor will learn to move both ways in the course of a career, but the order the concepts are presented in might have a residual impact on the way the actor approaches his work.

The second problem arising in Benedetti's presentation is the feathering of *action* and *task*. In his application of the terms to the script process, he suggests *basic action* comes prior to *task*, which is followed by *action*. This could introduce a massive amount of confusion. It would be very difficult for a beginner to separate the concept of action from basic action. This could lead to questions in the order of creation and emanation. Benedetti gives an example from the rehearsal process for *Hamlet*. He describes Hamlets use of obscure words and extensive wordplay in his meeting with Polonius as an *action*. The immediate *task* connected to that is "to use my madness to express my contempt for Polonius". The *basic action* for this is "to use madness as a cover while I find out if Polonius is guilty or not". The *Supertask* is provisionally labeled "just retribution" (117, 120-123).

Not quite cut and dry. If we look at the phrasing of the *basic action* and the *task*, the line between the two is very fuzzy. Both involve "to use madness." as part of their

framing. If we were to see them without explanation, one would be hard pressed to identifying them as serving different functions. Earlier in his work Benedetti phrases the *basic action* as a larger action from which smaller actions derive. He gives the example of “tidy the room”, which could then have *actions* such as “vacuum the floor” and “dust the furniture”. This seems remarkably different from the *task* “to use my madness to express my contempt” which has an *action* of word play. This is not to suggest Benedetti’s structure is broken. The idea inherent here is the scale of action.

If we return to way Benedetti presented the idea of *attention*, we’ll remember he presented it in scales of size, not in terms of quality. The thing that Benedetti is doing here is shifting between two different qualities on two different scales. There are two types of verb, and the verb is what Stanislavski was after in this work (*An Actor’s Work* 149). There is a scale of “to” verbs and a scale of things you actually do, and the movement up and down these scales is controlled by two questions “Why?” and “How?”

The *basic action* is tidy the room, “how?” by vacuuming. The *action* is vacuum. “Why?” it fulfils the *basic action* of tidying the room. If we think in terms of *tactics* and *tasks/objectives* there is a parallel scale. If my I is “to seduce”, “why?” to fulfill my *objective* “to have sex”. If my *objective* is “to have sex,” “how?” first I’ll try “to seduce”. If that doesn’t work perhaps I’ll try “to beg”.

In the course of sliding up and down this scale we can shift back and forth between the “to” verb scale and the physical action scale. If my *task* is “to have sex” I may go out to a bar for the night, the *basic action*. At the bar I may look around for an attractive person, find one, make eyes at them, say hi, tell a funny joke, and touch them in a sensual way, *actions*. If that doesn’t work I may tell them how desperate I am, buy

them lots of drinks, get down on my knees, and ask them really nicely, more *actions* but a shift in *tactic*. We've essentially described the same progression in two different ways, both times with verbs. We could call one *objective* to *tactic*, or one *basic action* to *actions*, but neither way of looking at it would be quite accurate. In Benedetti's Hamlet breakdown we might see the *basic action* in a similar place as the *objective*. The *task* supplied as more of a *tactic*, although I would argue it is poorly phrased; Hamlet is trying to take the piss out of Polonius, not to use his madness to express contempt.

Looking at other vocabularies

Again as with *concentration/focus/attention*, there is a tremendous variance in potential understanding and use, even within one particular vocabulary. However that is only one vocabulary, in others we can see a pattern, a repetition of this location. Boleslavsky talks in terms of *dramatic action*. He uses active phrasing, but abstract verbs. He suggests a score of actions that are akin to musical notes. He gives examples such as "I complained" and "I scorned" (60-61). Although phrased as actions in the past, these seem closer to the common usage of *tactics*. To complain and to scorn could result in a variety of *actions*, but aren't concrete actions in themselves.

Boleslavsky has good company in this type of phrasing. While it's worth noting that her book doesn't present a concrete, coherent pedagogy, Adler has a similar definition of *action*. She uses that word to describe a series of "to" constructs. Among the more interesting notions she presents is the chain of communicating, in which she suggests there is a series of infinitive verbs that build in a natural and increasing

progression (95-102). The idea that actions operate not only scales of size but intensity begins to pull on other threads in acting discourse such as *stakes*.

Adler also uses *action* like Benedetti does, to refer both to infinitives and to what we would recognize as actions in day to day life. Adler does use the word objective, but not as a concept on the scale of action. Rather to her the “objective” carries a connotative meaning of object of the action, or goal. She suggests having an objective for an action is what makes for a “weak” or “strong” action. For example “I want a cup of coffee” is stronger than “I would like something to drink” (Adler 106). Here, by trying to define what is, or is not, a good action. Again Adler is beginning to pull on other acting ideas such as *stakes*, *specificity*, and *justification*.

Mamet rejects all the schools of acting derived from Stanislavski (Mamet 6). Yet his own methods of training at the Atlantic theatre school are clearly related to many of the concepts taught in Stanislavski derived classrooms. He certainly rooted his teaching of actors in the concept of *action* (Brestoff 2010 215-223). Mamet’s students base their technique, “practical aesthetics”, in a concept that exists near on the *objective/task/action* node. They use the word *action*, and describe it as having nine requirements. The primary one is it “must be something physically capable of being done.” At first this all sounds like a form which lives in the verb-in-action world not the infinitive, yet the example given by the students of Mamet is “pleading for help” (Bruder et al 14). Much like Boleslavsky and “I scorned,” This actually seems related to a “to verb.” We can interrogate it with the “how?” How do you plead? Do you fall on your knees? Raise your voice? Repeat your request over and over?

While the technique claims that there are only two elements to acting, *action* and *moment*, these are mini webs with in the larger web, akin to Barthes' myth (8). They contain many other elements within them. Among the qualities of the *action* are that it must be "specific" and it must "have a cap". These both place other threads within the concept (13-15, 17-18). *Specificity* of the action is exactly what Adler discusses, and Adler's use of objective uses the notion of a cap, the thing you could get that would satisfy the need e.g. the cup of coffee. It's worth noting that one of the authors studied with Adler prior to studying with Mamet.(93) The supposed clarity of finding an action is shaded with a great deal of other ideas.

As students of Mamet, they emphasize that the *action* must be in line with the playwright's intention (18). This is precisely the goal of the *Supertask/ Superobjective* of Stanislavski and his translators. It provides a standard by which to judge if an action serves the play. Like Stanislavski/Hapgood/Benedetti, they seem to use two different qualities of verbs, but contain them both in the term *action*. They divide action into the *literal* and *essential*. This would seem to conform to the difference between the use of the conjugated verb and the infinitive. They use Stanley as an example; he is literally screaming for Stella, *literal action/action*, but the *essential action* is to beg a loved one's forgiveness, *task* or *tactic* (28). The similarity here is not in the inherent idea, but in the pattern of pointing to verbs in potential and in action.

If we look at the use of *action/objective/task* as a means to moving up and down a scale by means of a how? what? questioning, then the vocabulary needn't be a word, it can be a question. The idea here is to treat a question as a sememe, an indivisible linguistic unit. By doing this, we can find acting teachers who don't seem to have this

node in their jargon still discussing the concept. Let us return to Adler's use of objective as a cap, or end goal for the action. This means any interrogation of desire ultimately points to the action. Uta Hagen doesn't specifically describe *action* as a concept, but she does use it throughout her writing. She contrasts her style of acting to formalism based on the method that *actions* are arrived at (42-44). She describes a series of concrete actions in response to *transference*, another concept. She imagines her student is a series of different individuals and she describes how she greets him in different ways. The word she uses here is *behavior*; one of the purposes of her *transference* is to "discover the character's behavior" (71-73). While she never speaks of *objective* or *action* as big ideas, she takes them for granted. She emphasizes the importance of the verb, and the actions are "instigated by your wishes, needs, and objectives"(116-117).

While she doesn't speak of them as specific concepts, she frames her technique as a set of six questions. Among those questions she has two that deal directly with the nodes of *action* and *objective*. She asks "*What do I want?*" and reframes it as "what is my objective? What is my immediate need or objective?" She also asks "*What do I do to get what I want?*",and reframes it "How can I achieve my objective? What's my behavior? **what are my actions?**" (134 Emphasis original). As she examines the latter question she states a clear preference for the infinitive. She marks the difference here between want, which is the objective, and the methods to achieve. While she eventually spells out the actions, the concept itself is part of a question, a how? What Hagen essentially does is reveal the opposite side of *objective/task* and *action* which is why and how. She roots her pedagogy in a questioning process. This may ultimately have

something to do with her critique of formalism. Grounding the scale in the question might give the acting process more possibility and less certainty in terms of result.

Another teacher who grounds it as a question is Michael Shurtleff. While some might question his status acting teacher, Shurtleff is unquestionably qualified as a judge of acting, after years of working as a casting director. He has also spent years coaching actors on how to cold read, and deliver a performance in a scene. His book may be titled *Audition*, but the guideposts within can be read as a set of rules for acting as well as auditioning. He describes the *units/objectives* process quite simply and directly, although he frames his knowledge as second hand. He uses goal and motivation to describe the *objective*, and argues that the use of those words or any customary terms won't necessarily result in something useful. Shurtleff prefers the question "*What are you fighting for?*" He is quite explicit that he uses this question because of what it implies. It contains within it conflict. It will create a goal which is both strong and positive. We can easily see in this the node of *stakes*, and the point of it being a positive fight is that it does lead to action. While he never discusses the nitty gritty of detailed *action*, he makes it clear that you do need to find "as many ways as you can of going about getting what you are fighting for." (Emphasis original) In his description he uses simple action verbs on the order of the "to" verbs (42-43). Compare this to practical aesthetics. The question "what are you fighting for?" will most likely lead us to an *action* with a built in cap that is rooted in the physically doable. The alternate direction would be to select an *action* and then check it against the cap and whether it is physically doable.

The use of the question to represent the concept can include several important aspects of a concept that might be lacking in a simple term. It is worth identifying these questions as complete signs within the system, a set of words that actually represent an acting concept. The strategy of using a question as signifier in acting vocabulary has a multitude of pedagogical pitfalls and possibilities that will be addressed in the next chapter.

The complicated web of the verb in the infinitive, in the doing, the how and the why finds another twist in the work of Michael Chekhov. Chekhov conforms to the use of *objective*, and credits Stanislavski as its creator. He uses the word *goal* as a synonym. He also proposes that the method of discovering it is not analysis but practical exploration something Hagen seems to agree with (Chekhov 1991, 107-108 Hagen 127). While Chekhov doesn't speak of how this *objective-as-goal* results in any kind of particular action, he does use a word that others have not, *activity*. He describes *activity* on stage as being either mechanical, dead, and forced, or as an effortless, intrinsic wave. He is explicit that inferior *activity* is located in one particular part of the body while the superior kind is not localized anywhere and suffuses the actors being both psychologically and physically. It seems that Chekhov is not interested in the particulars of behavior but rather that if the actor is using *concentration*, *imagination*, *objective*, and *atmosphere*, action will happen (Chekhov 1991 112-113). He describes watching Vahktangov work on an improvisation, and how he would flow from moment to moment, yet what Chekhov describes most is his specific behavior in the improvisation. It is his own suggestion that action is derived from external inspiration and not the script

author or director (71-72). Chekhov believes technique should open inspiration, not spell out the process.

His students add some interesting twists to the objective concept. The NMCA uses *objective* as one of the points on the chart for inspired acting (Dalton and Kilroy 17)⁵. In their work, they spend very little time on *objectives* in their work but they bring up several critical issues. First they suggest that the *objective* should be expressible as movement. This is a step past merely phrasing the *objective* as a verb. While they don't particularly mention *action*, to express the *objective* in movement would be pulling an action out of it. They have a scale of size for *objectives*, connected to the "whole production, the story, the character, the smaller units and beats." They also suggest that the *objective* must have a clearly defined win/loss. This relates the idea to the *action* of Practical Aesthetics and to the cap (71). At another point they bring up the idea of *jewelry*. *Jewelry* are small pieces of organic, justified behavior discovered in improvisation (73). While not specifically connected to the other concepts of *action* we have discussed, it seems in line with Chekhov's principle whereby *activity* merely flows from being rooted in the character.

The biggest issue in *objective* work for the NMCA however is the "*what for?*"(71). The concept is emphasized during their teaching sessions as Chekhov's unique and powerful contribution to the way of looking at *objectives*. Initially *what for* would seem to be on the why scale, just a step up. But as it was explained to me by Lisa Dalton, the *what for* has less to do with action and more to do with the sub and unconscious reasons why a character has a given *objective* or chooses a given *tactic* to fulfill that

⁵ See Appendix 1

objective. For example, the “*what for?*” of “to have sex”: It could be I have a biological drive. It could be I feel lonely and want company. The resulting action “go to a bar” could have a “*what for?*”: I don’t want a long term thing; I just want a casual fling. The choice to begin with seduction could have a “*what for?*”: I think I’m really good looking and I can have anyone I want.

Notice how the *why?* can take us in remarkably different directions here. The answer could lead farther up the chain of objectives and action. It could also lead us sideways into other territory. For every action there are at least two implied whys. What greater action does that action serve, and why that particular way of going about that greater action. These still operate on an almost infinite scale. We could ask why to infinity in both directions. Lisa Dalton shared that some of her Russian colleagues are beginning to think of Super-what-fors to complement their *Supertasks*.

Ultimately this can be identified as part of the pattern of *justification*. Justifying actions is a crucial part of Stanislavski’s system. Immediately after discussing *units/bits* and *objectives/tasks*, Stanislavski’s narrative moves to *faith/belief* and a *sense of truth* (*An Actor Prepares* 110, *An Actor’s Work* 152). Benedetti talks about *necessity* and *justification* (7, 25). Hagen doesn’t speak to it directly, but it’s clear that is one of the goals of her work on *transference*. She points out that one of the reasons for it is “to substantiate your faith” (73). Adler immediately follows her first chapters on actions with a chapter on *justification*. She posits that the first job of the actor is the action and the second is the why. She actually divides it into two different aspects, inner and instant. Instant has to do with the first of our whys. Adler calls it the immediate reason for what you are doing (126). The inner justification connects to the pattern of the *what for*. It is

the causes behind what you are doing. It “has less to do with the object and more to do with why the object is used in a certain way or why an action is done in a certain way” (Adler 133). This is not exactly the what for, because it begins to pull on other strings, *qualities* and the “*as if*”, but in application it relates the same strategies of connection. Why’s are applied in similar ways even if not all whys are the same why. Our goal however is not to get too far from *objective/action* and the underlying pattern in systems of acting vocabulary. Yet it is necessary to understand that a term has no identity outside of the way it functions with other terms. While we can isolate that point for a while, we can’t sustain it forever, as all of the slices are part of the same loaf, and the way we cut it affects the next slice.

Before we wrap up our meditations on *objective/task/action*, it’s worth looking at some of the practitioners who appear to reject or overlook the patterns of *objective* and *action*. Bogart finds the use of the *objective* or *what do I want?* as shackling the actor to psychological intention and ultrarealism. Yet Viewpoints and Composition are still about generating action, which means there is still a place in the system for our verb work (Bogart and Landau 21). Bogart also advocates breaking a scene into a 3 or 5 smaller pieces, which is a clearly uses the *unit/bit* pattern. Action is to be created through exploration, much like in Hagen and Chekhov. The viewpoints also mesh with other approaches. Bogart has worked with actors trained at the studio and Landau works with Steppenwolf. Within SITI Company, the repetition exercise of Meisner is used. While Bogart protests a radical break with the system/method, we can see similar patterns at work in her own practice and vocabulary (Brestoff 2010 254-258).

Meisner also doesn't talk directly of *objectives*, but does speak of doing and tasks. His maxim is "acting is the reality of doing". Philosophically he has linked himself initially to the action node within our web. He initially focuses on showing the actors the difference between actually performing an action and just pretending to (16-18). An important part of his early exercises is the impossible task. In this instance the task is not an *objective* or "to" verb, but rather an actual activity that one performs. It must be difficult and be important. Again, without being named as explicit concepts, patterns of *justification* and *specificity* rear their heads (39). Pedagogically, the exercises can reach the same concepts of *action* and our relation to it, but not every scene can allow for a task. Meisner's student Esper explicitly addresses *objectives* in his work, but for him they are almost a part of the *justification* node. All they do is justify why you are there, but other than that it lies fallow. It is an "inert" ingredient. It isn't the source of action (Esper 108).

Viola Spolin's theatre games don't explicitly explore the idea of *action* and *objective*. Brestoff posits that she developed her technique because the Stanislavski system was making actors too serious and too intellectual. But he also points out that many of Stanislavski's principles are at work in her games. In particular while playing a game, "you had an *objective*, which was to follow the rules of the game, and you engaged in actions which supported that *objective*" (Brestoff 139, 146). Brestoff is right that the rules described by Stanislavski are still in play, maybe not the concepts themselves but the underlying patterns. If we look at the patterns of association around *objective*, it generally relates to one object, there are no teachers who teach multiple at the same time *objectives*. Any game, like the good *objective* of NMCA or good *action* of

practical aesthetics, must have a win/loss or a cap. The rule of the game that is the measure of winning or not, the single essential rule is the one that comes closest to the *objective* node. In this case, the *objective* pattern comes closest to full expression in Spolin's notion of *focus*.

Now our two sets of patterns combine. Here we have a word *focus*, that when activated in Spolin's linguistic system activates concepts that in the larger linguistic systems of theatre that include both *attention* and *objective*. Think about all of the discussions of *focus* in Chapter 1. Think about the importance of the impossible task in Meisner's work. Its job is to consume the focus of the actor. Think about how *concentration* is classically trained and defined, through focus on an object. The goal is to achieve a *willed concentration*, the ability to focus attention in absence of an attractive object. In Spolin the *focus* of the game is tied implicitly in the language and the structure to the *goal/objective*.

If we revisit why Spolin changed from *Point of Concentration* to *Focus*, it was because it was a more active word (21). As we have seen, the ideas around *objective/task/action* tend to involve an active verb, and focus lives a dual life as noun and active verb. We can focus on something, or have focus. Throughout Spolin's book, all games are outlined by the same method which if "understood and absorbed" will allow you to own the exercises. The primary step in every exercise is the *focus* (52). Earlier she describes it as an "additional boundary" (23). This isn't quite true in practice. The *focus* is what the game is about. It is what you are doing. It gives a measure of what is essential. For example in slow motion freeze tag, the focus is moving in "complete slow motion," while the rest of the rules involve those of regular tag (212).

Notice it is not to win the game of tag. If it were, someone who violated slow motion would still essentially be playing the *focus* of the game. It may be helpful here to bring up the concept of *obstacle*.

If we think of the rules of the game, the *focus* tells us which rule fills the pattern of *objective*, and which fill the pattern of *obstacles*. We would all have minimal problems trying to move in slow motion on its own. It is only difficult to maintain within the context of the game. Here we see the pattern of primary rule and secondary rules creating conflict, in a similar relationship to the way *objective* and *obstacle* do, but packaged in the word *focus*. Not only within language but in practice, *concentration* and *objective* are bound together. If we have an *objective* with a series of *obstacles*, any time that our focus drifts from the *objective* to one of the *obstacles* dealing with that *obstacle* becomes the temporary objective.

Seeing it in this way, it becomes easier to understand the Meisner based approach to *objective* work. The importance is not holding to the chosen *objective* doggedly. Rather the *objective* serves as a start, and it brings with it the *justification*, the why, which is an inherent part of the sign network. This the genius of the repetition exercise paired with the impossible tasks. In the exercise Meisner gives the students two tasks which both demand total focus. Listening to your partner well enough to engage in the repetition exercise and being able to maintain focus on an impossible important task is not merely a matter of splitting focus. At any moment in the exercise the totality of your concentration must shift wholly to one or the other. The wavering between listening to your partner and attempting to complete the impossible task creates a constant shifting of focus and hence of moment-to-moment *objective*. The flip

side of this problem is the question of the student being able to take and apply this to scene work and other forms of acting. While the exercise trains the actor to do this in fact, will they be able to understand how to apply it outside the exercise? They need a vocabulary, but that vocabulary will begin to limit them.

Objective/task/action has become the privileged and cardinal point in the linguistic network of most acting teachers. Even teachers who ultimately seem to reject *objective* cannot escape the need for a strategy that deals with behavior or an equivalent point on a “What are you doing/Why are you doing it/How are you doing it/Why are you doing it in that way” continuum. If we look back to Stanislavski, in his framework there is a conceptual point, the sign *zadacha* which has a crucial place within the system, both of signs and for the production of acting. Hapgood and Benedetti model their linguistic systems on Stanislavski’s. In doing so they use the structure of his system as a model, but they ultimately rewrite the system. The signs within the system occupy similar places and have a similar relationship. However they do not have a direct relationship in terms of being able to stand for one another. Still, there is a metadialogue between systems as there are underlying patterns of relationship between the words. If we were to write a glossary of acting, we couldn’t necessarily translate directly between different teachers, even when both use the same signifier to represent a similar signified, which locates a similar place within their sign system. However, all of these systems contribute to the evolution and development of the next system. This allows us to have an evolving vocabulary of acting, which has a set of terms with rich and varied possibility. We analyzed some of the specifics of the uses of *attention/focus/concentration*; now let’s look at the web of *objective/task/action*.

Practical implications of different uses of objective

If we accept the premise that acting is rooted in some kind of activity, something that is actually done, then we can understand why all systems of acting need some way to represent how action is created and how actions have qualities and how they occur both on scales of intensity and scales of meaning. At one level we have the most basic behaviors of human life, simple actions. We have scales of why which find larger purpose directing the actions, and on another hand we have scales of why that narrow possibility, and help create guidelines for the shifting flow from big to small and vice versa in a logical way.

Action can have a range of implications. Verbs can exist as infinitives or as conjugated realities. The simple flow of the two questions how and the first version of why form a flow that moves from extremely concrete to the broadly general. The interesting thing about most acting language systems is that they locate the most important nodes in the system often lie somewhere between the fully abstract and fully concrete. This will become vital in our discussion of language as pedagogy.

Here are the words that seem to operate in concert, and at similar places in respective networks: *Objective, Task, Tactic, Action, Basic Action, Essential Action, Literal Action, What do I want? What do I do to get what I want? What am I fighting for?, What for?* There are three common patterns. Sometimes the focus is on action as derived from intention, and sometimes the focus is the justification of actions. Secondly there are scales both of size and intensity. A larger action, perhaps the basic action,

contains a number of smaller actions. A larger objective contains within it a number of lesser “to” verbs. There can also be shifts between these two modes, a task may generate a specific action, and a specific action may be justified by an objective. The last, the signifier may also be a question. Questions exist as a parallel but similar framework, a sort of shadow scale that moves in several directions from the simple how/why scale.

In addition to the connotations created by each of the words in their acting context, they still carry their weight as words. We have already discussed that in reference to *tactic*. Benedetti's critique of *objective* as an abstract term is completely valid. Spolin doesn't use the word in her teaching but she does include it in her “definition of terms” section in which she defines it as the opposite of a being subjective (Spolin 364). While an actor may be able to deploy the term in an acting context it will always carry the connotation of a clinical mindset.

A similar critique may be leveled at Benedetti's own choice of *task*. A survey of the literature suggests that there is an important place in any linguistic system of acting for the infinitive construct. *Task* leans remarkably close to *action*. *Task* has connotations of an errand. Think of a task you have to do. It is most likely to be a chore, not the kind of activity that is described as an infinitive. Of course *action* is used by practical aesthetics to describe the “to” construct. However the idea is qualified by the requirement that the action “cannot be an errand” (Bruder et al 16).

Action has a similar difficulty; is it the raw physical behavior or is it the generative construct of the “to” verb? The problem with action as a vocabulary term is that it throws the weight toward the physical behavior. That emphasis can be beneficial, as it pushes

students to make abstract thought concrete. The other side of that is that it can result in behavior for behavior's sake. This is the tragedy of most "action" theatre. It becomes about MOVE! and has little to no connection to purpose other than behavior. It is far removed from the why pole, and as deep as we can go to the how. The use of the word "action" in standard theatre could result in unmotivated behavior, or mechanical behavior. Motivation allows for improvisation in behavior. The "to" verb allows for freedom and improvisation in the actions. Going another step away on the why scale, wants and objectives can result in improvisation and possibility in the "to" verbs, depending on the level of freedom allowed by the script.

Questions, as Bogart correctly points out, prioritize psychological justification for actions by plucking on the thread of *justification*. Questions center the concept in the why, not in the how, but they still create a place for the how by grammatical necessity. One sign can only be understood in the presence of the other. Phrasing this node as a question forces the actor to engage other nodes directly. It points away from itself, and in doing so, forces the actor to engage with other concepts. It also forces the actor to approach their process as a questioning, and allows for play in discovering the answer rather than being given it. The negative is that the actor can become fearful of uncertainty, unable to act to discover the answer, acting only after a satisfactory answer has been achieved in their head.

The inevitable problems and necessity of slicing

The notion of *objective/task/action* requires and implies the existence of several other places in the web. It connects to *justification*, which may be connected to signs of *as if, truth, belief, faith, substitution, transference*, and through these to *imagination*. It connects to *obstacle* and *conflict*, and to *plot* and *story*. *Events, beats, facts, and units* all have a defining relationship with the concept. We can see how the idea connects directly to *concentration, attention, and focus*, to the point where there is difficulty in discussing one in absence of the other. The glossaries of each acting teacher are whole linguistic systems. Each word within the system relies on other words to create meaning and in doing so makes it almost impossible to examine them as discrete concepts.

Much like Shustov's turkey, acting must be sliced and diced if we are to deal with it. Yet no part of the turkey is the whole turkey. To go farther, what makes each slice possible is its necessary relation to other parts: e.g. that is the wing because it is not the breast. When we dissect acting the word dissect implies it is dead. It is. The wing only functions in relation to the breast as part of a system. Our linguistic system of representation supports that. The signs used are dependent on one another for meaning.

NMCA teachers use Chekhov's chart for inspired acting. One of the interesting ideas formulated in the chart is it establishes a relationship of technical concepts to acting. No one concept in the circle is a part of acting. Rather each is a path to inspiration, a way to acting. What's more, activating one point awakens all others. For example, when you use *objective* you will naturally have a *focal point*, and vice versa. This is of course if you have achieved inspired acting. It's one of their Guiding Principles: "use each point on the circle of inspiration to awaken all other points on the

circle” (Dalton and Kilroy 85). This appears to be a practical expression of our linguistic problem. Each node in the web is a part of acting, but is not acting itself. It may be a path to acting, but when you are acting you are using all the concepts unconsciously. The problem of synthesis is a tremendous one. We need to be able to see both the whole and its constituent parts and know when to move back and forth between each way of seeing.

Before we move on to how to deal with this as teachers operating within these linguistic systems and the greater systems they feed, it would be useful to look at one last option for dealing with the system, which is to try and always keep it whole. Declan Donnellan attempts this in *The Actor and the Target*. He suggests that there are eight questions he commonly deals with as a director that hold actors back. Rather than dealing with discrete strategies for dealing with each question Donnellan suggests a heretofore unnamed concept that he calls “the Target” (12-14). *The Target* has a multitude of functions, much like the simplified *action* in practical aesthetics. Simplifying any system results in nodes being aggregated under a larger concept, forming a complex myth. *The Target* is a place of focus, although Donnellan is explicit that you “see” the target as the word focus can be misleading, and he argues it is not an *objective* though it will provide motivation (27). While he argues, and I agree, that his words cannot be translated into other systems the similarity of the patterns is undeniable. He does describe *the Target* as having our attention and is clear about his preference of that word to concentration. He prefers that the energy come from the outside and not from willed concentration (28). While he describes *the Target* as different from the objective it serves some of the same functions as

objective/task/action. Donnellan splits *the Target* into a possibility of something to be won and something to be lost (51). This is similar to the “cap” of the *action* in practical aesthetics or the win/loss ascribed to the *objective* by the NMCA.

The problem with this approach is one of both under and oversimplification. If we still have to cover roughly all the same nodes in the process of discussion, we are still de facto breaking down the concept into a linguistic system. There is also the problem of understanding: I read Donnellan’s work as a theatre practitioner with over 10 years of understanding and practice. It made perfect sense to me. Would it have made sense as the first book on theatre I read? I doubt it. Essentially his book is a manual for those who have already acquired a certain expertise. It is advanced acting. What we have to navigate at some point is the leap from needing an analytical principle to understand how to act, to just doing it intuitively, the leap from proficiency to expertise in the Dreyfus model of skills acquisition⁶ (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 12). As teachers how do we guide our students to that? After slicing the turkey into manageable bits, how do we make sure our students have got the whole bird?

⁶ See Appendix 2

Chapter 4: The words we choose.

In this chapter we suggest how this knowledge might be useful to the teacher of acting. We examine what we might hold in common, a desire to teach mastery, and look at how the lack of translatability creates room for possibility, play, and art.

Thus far we have demonstrated how the language of acting flows. Common sense dictates that we are talking, to some degree, about the same thing. The consistency of terminology across teaching methods suggests that. However the shifts and slippages in meaning from teacher to teacher, the semantic differences, and the disagreements over language systems and training methods prove that it's not that simple either. If we accept current theories of semiotics and deconstruction, it becomes clear that direct translation is an impossibility. Each linguistic system contains what it represents within it, and what it represents is not acting itself, rather just the direction it lies in. However given the consistency of certain nodes in the glossary we can see an underlying skeleton to the jargon. It is a trace, or a set of differences that must be expressed regardless of the exact signs used to express them. Given all that, how can we ever talk about acting in any kind of effective way ever again without driving ourselves crazy?

First of all, this is a way to think about teaching acting, not a way to train an actor. Stanislavski is quite correct; all this philosophy could mean the end of art. The importance of analyzing the glossaries of acting is not to clarify them or perform a rigorous semiotic analysis. To busy an actor's mind with the nature of a term would take

them farther away from acting than the use of rules and terminology already has. We aren't looking for some kind of universally applicable performance theory, but rather the tools that allow actors to achieve mastery. We don't want a language: "rooted in anthropology, sociology, or semiology... the language of commentary and critical analysis, not of creative rehearsal work...Actors in rehearsal do not explore concepts or work on the basis of a theory of performance" (Benedetti ix-x). Benedetti is quite correct here. Semiotics is useless for the actor, but for us it is both a practical requirement and a unique opportunity.

We could argue for a universal theory of acting that allows for all of our vocabularies to coexist, and to describe the same thing. We could argue that there is some sort of ur-acting out there from which all of our work emanates. All subsequent approaches of various acting teachers are merely matters of taste, and differences in vocabulary are merely differences in style. Individual approaches are bound in aesthetic, but if we can find a way to get past that aesthetic, we can approach a universal. While there may be merits to these ideas, I'm not sure they are important.

First, they assume that everyone will agree that there is some sort of ur-acting. Even if we could agree on that, there is the problem of Derrida's critique of logocentrism. The words we use don't necessarily represent something outside of themselves. Each use of a particular term within a linguistic system stands only in relation to the system, not to some truth that is outside the text (Fortier 63-64). If this is the case then there cannot be any translation between vocabularies. There in fact may be no unity even within my own application of my own theatrical glossary. However there may be one thing we agree on: mastery.

Regardless of a given acting teacher's opinion regarding acting, or the potential for a universal truth of acting, as teachers we are training actors who we hope will operate at a level of mastery:

Although, according to our model, there is no higher level of mental capacity than expertise, the expert is capable of experiencing moments of intense absorption in his work, during which his performance transcends even its usual high level. We discuss this stage in Reference [12] where we note that this masterful performance only takes place when the expert, who no longer needs principles, can cease to pay conscious attention to his performance and can let all the mental energy previously used in monitoring his performance go into producing almost instantaneously the appropriate perspective and its associated action (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 14).

I think you would be hard pressed to find an acting teacher who would say that this is not what they want from their students. Acting of any form, regardless of aesthetic, is an embodied task and skill. Part of the goal of the principles is eventually to lose them. If we understand our principles to be based in the moment, and in practicality rather than some universal truth, we can help actors understand that the techniques and concepts we teach aren't everything, but are rather means to an end. Oddly enough theory in this case can prevent us from getting too theoretical. The concepts of acting have no essential truth to them, they only point the way to a masterful performance. The purpose of giving the student a vocabulary to describe what they do is only to get them started. They must shed it like a pair of training wheels.

The notions of truth and meaning as being slippery can help us when dealing with our colleagues, our students of skill, and our students who are blocked. One of the problems many of us face is that we work within institutions. This creates two potential issues. One is if the institution has a common vocabulary, the other is if it doesn't. If the

institution has a common vocabulary it most likely doesn't match our personal lexical set. Unless of course you are the author of that vocabulary, you will most likely be teaching your students a set of terms you don't personally own. This may not be a bother us, but if we are to guide our students to expertise, we need to have a certain mastery of the system we are teaching. The other potential problem here is that the glossary was developed by committee and lacks the internal coherency that most webs of acting have. If that is the case there is no clean way of dealing with it in the classroom other than attempt to effect institutional change, and in the meantime, grow the system in a way that honors its guiding principles.

In the second case, no common vocabulary, you are free to use the one you have mastered, but your students will be constantly forced to shift their own organization from class to class and semester to semester. This can affect students of single teachers as well, as a student may bring with them a preexisting vocabulary through other training and reading. This may not be the worst of all possible worlds. The student can benefit from exposure to a variety of vocabularies provided the situation is managed well.

The first step is to resist the urge to translate. While it may seem fruitful to compare concepts, that might not be the case. As pointed out in the case of Stanislavski, Hapgood, and Benedetti, translation may be an impossibility. While we may be able to see similarities between a concept in one system and a concept in the other, this doesn't mean the two terms translate. Terms are not ideas but approaches, and are not essentially equal. To attempt to translate is an aggressive act of recentering. In a classroom context to inform a group of students that "y" term used by

professor A means the same as “x” term from your own lexicon subordinates their sign to your system of signs. The students are in your class hopefully absorbing your way of slicing the acting turkey. They will begin to associate others words with your methods. In your student’s minds they may now in the other class be thinking in your language substituting the other instructors’ words, like a novice speaker of a second language.

Rather if faced with a system that is institutional, it’s your job to learn to speak it. Ideally we have used our own vocabulary, our own web of analytical principles, to achieve a level of expertise in acting. What we should be doing is working at re-slicing the turkey. Look at the basic process of learning acting as a skill: It is a big idea, so let’s break it into manageable bits. The way we break it is somewhat arbitrary, but we have to maintain a semblance of how it fits together. After gaining proficiency through application of axioms, we eventually begin to work intuitively. At this point we have put the bird back together. Understanding the big picture should allow us to work rapidly backwards. Take what we understand in the peak performance state and break it down according to the new linguistic system. If an acting teacher had a sufficient level of expertise it should not take long to master a secondary vocabulary set. The danger here is to only pay the process lip service. To claim a “beginner’s mind” as we approach new methods is laudable, but we must be sure not to fall back on our habits or unconsciously rely on other language systems to define the terms we are given.

In a situation in which there is no common vocabulary, the issue of remaining respectful of colleagues’ work and providing students with a measure of coherency from class to class. One way of doing this is to rely on the de facto common glossary we all share, in addition to the webs of different modalities that we have mastered, as well as

our own idiomatic webs. When faced with this mixture of different vocabularies, there are two possible solutions, intermingling or cohabitation.

There is that web we do share, the so called “Americanization” of the Stanislavski System. This is an effective vocabulary, but it is indeterminate and inexact. With no definitive layout of the system, we cannot be sure that we are really using the same word to mean the same thing. Benedetti attempted to create a standard. He framed his version of the system as an “authentic” interpretation and retranslated Stanislavski in counterpoint to Hapgood and in support of his own sign structure. At this point, it may be too late to center our work on Stanislavski. While his work is our foundation, and will always be a crucial part of our dialogue, the myth embodied by his name has acquired connotations that cannot simply be shaken off. We cannot undo his connections with the “Method” of Strasberg or the critiques of his system that have arisen. Those critiques are now part of the system. They illuminate it, and even if they are eventually dismissed, their presence lingers and effects the application of the principles.

Even those critiques have begun to sprout their own myths. Often defenders of Stanislavski point out that the real issue is confusion with Strasberg’s work, and if only we could undo that unfortunate connection we could save Constantin from mean old Lee. This is a remarkable injustice to Strasberg. Actually discussing Studio exercises with colleagues who have been there, or looking at Strasberg's work shows a far greater variety of work than simply emotional memory (Brestoff 1995 115). While that was a key node in his web, he taught actors a variety of techniques, including highly physical ones designed to deal with actors who are too subjective and emotional (Strasberg 147). Strasberg was looking at an individual student and what they needed as being more

important than the structure of his method. Ultimately the simplification of any system to a manageable idea does it some injustice, and it seems any system is a sign which has to live in binary with something that came before. Each teacher needs to say “My System is not that system, it is different from, and superior to, that system.”

The advantage of imprecise language

This provides the way out and the value of looking at the ways we talk about acting. From both within and without, words, and therefore languages, are defined by what they are not. This deferred meaning provides room for a world of possibilities. If we can translate, and there is only one ideal way to really slice that turkey, then it's merely a matter of finding the perfect way to do that. We should be out having grand debates, and watching the great actors. Which teacher trained the most great actors? There system is clearly closer to the truth. All we need to do is purge any system of error, and we can produce perfect actors. This would turn acting from an art into a quantitative problem. Science, as much as philosophy, can be the death of art.

While a pedagogical case may be made for the importance of consistent vocabulary across classrooms and productions within an educational institution, there is a case to be made that having to navigate different lexical systems can be of benefit to the emerging artist. If we don't have an institutional vocabulary, don't rely on (except in a referential way) the cultural vocabulary, and resist the urge to translate, we offer ourselves and our students a unique opportunity. We still teach from our own idiomatic vocabulary or chosen modality, and we encourage our students to approach each class

as a separate system, not to be mixed just yet. In doing so we push them to develop novel ways to solve the acting problem and remain creative.

We do make an effort to understand, at least in a rudimentary way, the vocabularies of our colleagues. With a multitude now in play, and a lack of need to master them for teaching purposes, we don't need to master each version the way we would if there was a common institutional vocabulary. However in the interest of being able to speak to our colleagues and students who latch on to their particular lexicon, it is key that we understand that vocabulary to some degree on its own terms. While we shouldn't make attempts to translate, as it forces students to squeeze any terms they hear into our frame, we should allow them to translate for themselves. They will gravitate to particular webs. When they begin to translate it means they are starting to see the larger picture, they are approaching the point where they need to leave axiom behind. It is a sign they are creating their own web.

Production should be approached as the place where the actor tries to work free of the maxims of the acting classroom. To make the first step in the Dreyfus model, the **performer** must learn to recognize patterns (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 16). It is not enough for us to point them out if the performer can't begin to experience the slices in the context of the whole. The production process can be a chance for the performer to begin the process which will hopefully make us unnecessary. If they are working with a director who has a unique vocabulary that is important to the process, they can treat it as another classroom environment and attempt to learn the particular system relevant to the process.

The key for the artist here is to learn what makes us different and not what makes us alike. Martial artists often have intense disagreements over how to train, and similar arguments can arise among teachers of acting and their devotees. The “my Kung Fu is better than your Kung Fu” debates get pretty heated. These sorts of fights miss the point. Every system has its value. The perspective of any given acting vocabulary is valuable. All of them offer something unique, and all of them have a number of potential pitfalls and problems. As we noted before in the discussion of *attention/concentration/focus* and *objective/task/action*, the choice of word may have an impact on the actor. They will privilege a certain perspective and a certain web which will have an effect on how the performer performs. Movement specialists encounter this all the time. It is easy to spot a trained body, and a movement specialist versed in a number of modalities will often be able to spot the traces of certain modalities. Classically trained dancers tend to move with suspension. Martial artists move up and down very little. Based on their training, we may be able to spot the vocabulary of an actor in their performance. Stanislavski worked on his grammar to help actors transcend cliché performance, but what if any system results in some cliché? Hopefully we as teachers don't seek to produce little versions of ourselves, but when we use a particular vocabulary we may inadvertently do this. Our aesthetic is bound in our vocabulary and our vocabulary in a very specific system of breaking down acting.

So what do to? How do we choose a way to approach training if there is no right way? Lecoq suggest that the student: “Beware of formalism and sectarianism...Beware of aesthetic formulations...we all tend to look for security. But nothing is fixed, engraved forever on tablets of stone. Everything must be put to

question. Errors are necessary in any teaching method. Accept them. Learn from them” (Qtd in Robinson 111). Strong words from someone who ran a theatre school. Errors are necessary because they prevent anything from becoming fixed, or set in stone. If we can accept that our vocabulary is of its nature inexact and not tied directly to any kind of universal truth we can offer our students two opportunities. The first is the importance of their own journey to mastery; the second is the play inherent in error.

As part of a workshop at the 2013 Southeastern Theatre Conference, Steven Wangh presented on teaching. He told the old Zen Buddhist koan: “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill the Buddha. If you meet the patriarch, kill the patriarch.” The idea here is that here is that acquiring expertise, leaving behind mere proficiency, involves abandoning authority, leaving behind your teacher. If there are necessary errors in our teaching, perhaps as the result of imprecision in language, the slippages and deferrals rooted in our concepts, the student must leave those behind. The student must internalize our vocabulary. The nature of words makes this an impossible task. When the student internalizes vocabulary, they remake it with their own meanings attached. This allows them to go forth and be creative. This is why we can teach our vocabulary, and as long as we don’t insist on formalism and sectarianism, our students can be free to recreate our process anew.

Wangh elaborates this further in *Acrobat of the Heart*. He suggests that the value of a given technique is not in its inherent truth or effectiveness. Rather a technique is like a set of training wheels that allow the artist to go out and experience with confidence. Even more important than giving them a technique, is inspiring them and making them feel safe sharing with you. Ultimately any technique, or vocabulary, will be

reinvented by the artist (319-320). This process can be aided exposure to a multitude of personalities and vocabularies, even if they appear to contradict.

This is perhaps a way to reach the student who seems unreachable. We periodically encounter students who just don't seem to get it. While there may be students who are indeed hopeless, it also may be a failure of our vocabulary as a strategic approach. As a student's concepts of how to slice up acting begins to grow they may anchor their understanding in a radically different web. This may be due to influence of another instructor or even the way in which a student's thought process is organized. The ability to immediately come at that student in a completely different language may get results. The trick here is not a different word, but an entirely different sign system. This may prove difficult in a classroom situation where we must teach to the majority of the room, but at least it can help us give that student a taste of success. We can then guide the student toward a teacher whose vocabulary he is more naturally inclined to understand.

There is also a value in exposing a more secure and successful student to a variety of vocabularies. The student may be happy and confident in the system you are teaching them, but this can become a problem when it limits the student from moving to the next step in the work because of their comfort and security in the technique. If they like the training wheels too much, they may never take them off. Our best students may be the ones who are ultimately the most limited as artists. Exposure to another language can prevent them from becoming locked into one approach.

At the early stages of training, it is important to not confuse the actor. There has to be some foundational vocabulary. But it can be useful to quickly begin to introduce

other possible vocabularies. Initially the technique must serve to give the actor confidence in their process. This initial learning of vocabulary and success in a simple process is important. However part of this process is not only learning a technique that may or may not be useful for future acting, but also to begin the process of discovering what acting is. I suggested earlier that the advanced actor may be able to master alternate vocabularies faster, as they have an idea of how to move from the thought into the practice, and may be able to exploit the process in reverse. Just so, the student actor may progress faster if they are asked to repeat the steps of learning a vocabulary a few times. It can help them not only see the possibilities inherent in different vocabularies, but gives them more opportunities to discover how to make the jump from system to practice, and draw the connections in the system that give any vocabulary meaning.

Within our own work, even in our own vocabulary, it is crucial to see the artistic freedom that can come of knowing that our own vocabulary is inexact. The acting process is a whole thing, but it cannot be presented all at once. Something must come first. In choosing what comes first, we inject priorities into the system. We have to start with script or improvisation. We have to decide when script work is necessary. Some concepts may require a script, and some may be taught without scripts. As we pointed out before, trying to discuss any one word or technique will pull on several other threads in the system. While this maybe an example of one of the necessary errors in any teaching practice, there are two primary pedagogical benefits to this.

The first is the ability to play with this process. If the entry into a particular vocabulary system is arbitrary it is useful for us as teachers to vary where we start. It is

important to recognize the overall strengths and weaknesses of the class in front of us and decide based on that which concept to start with as well as what word follows next. This should be grounded in the students rather than in some sort of logical process dictated by outside values. This manifests itself in the rich exercise.

The best exercises are those that with only slight manipulation can be used to teach a variety of acting lessons. Of course just getting up and doing a scene or free improvisation with circumstances is the fullest expression of acting, but then it becomes difficult to focus. It's like trying to eat the whole turkey at once. What is more valuable is the exercise that contains possibility. There are some activities which after working them for a short time reveal what issues the actor is having the most difficulty with and can be "sliced" in the moment to help that actor. Exercises such as simply pushing an actor off of a spot or the plateau exercise can be both a diagnostic tool and an immediate way of addressing problems as they arise. Exercises that allow us to check on the actor and respond to them without having to start from our vocabulary can allow us a great deal of freedom in teaching the actor. The interconnected nature of the concepts is what allows us to shift these exercises. If we understand what threads are pulled by one word, we can take an exercise that focuses on that acting concept and quickly modify it to put the emphasis elsewhere.

Of course we have to deal with vocabulary. We may feel we can do without it. Our work is embodied, a skill that must be trained. We could theoretically teach acting without concepts. All we need to do is give the students the exercises that practice the concepts and then when confronted with performing they will have to react intuitively as they will have no analytical principle to cling to. There are three problems here. First is

finding students who would naturally thrive in this environment. Yes, it might be possible to do this, but you would be hard pressed to find students who would feel safe and competent while working this way. Some would, and would most likely turn out to be fine actors, but this is hardly a universal approach.

Naming something provides the students with a sense of ownership, which leads to the second problem. Even if we attempt to keep principles and rules out of the classroom the students will make them up for themselves. This is what we ultimately want them to do, to create their own vocabularies and rules, however we want to be a part of this process. We want the student to trust us and enter a dialogue as they create the method they will use to create.

It is not only the student that would sabotage the attempt at a jargon free acting classroom. We ourselves would. Our own jargon would guide the construction of the syllabus and the steering of the classroom day to day. The nodes of our individual web would still be there and the names would be conspicuous in their absence. Secondly our jargon would creep into any discussion of the exercises. This acting class would have to be conducted with a vow of silence and no analysis of the exercise. At this point the students might as well not have a teacher, just a list of exercises.

Jacques Lecoq himself is an example of this. Lecoq is known for his own version of the *via negativa*. This is not to be confused with the *via negativa* of Grotowski and Wangh. They are interested in removing blocks to the freedom of the actor. Lecoq was interested in the student discovering his own creative process. Lecoq's student Dody DiSanto related his philosophy to me in this way: "we must put the student in confrontation with himself in a constant search for the truth." Lecoq aimed not to pass

on a body of knowledge but to come to an understanding with his students. (20) A vocabulary is, essentially a body of knowledge, the ability to perform is an understanding. We must in the end ask if our goal is for our students to perform or to know, and in the end do the words we choose stimulate performance and creativity, or stifle it.

There is one concept of Lecoq's that bears exploring here and that is *le Jeu*. In the translator's note to *The Moving Body*, it is noted the word is key for Lecoq. The translator has chosen to translate it as the English word play. He notes that it can also be translated as acting or performance. The word can also mean the script. The importance of the concept is linked to improvisation and carries the connotation of playing a game or playing around (xiv). There is another connotative definition of play that may be useful here. That is the notion of play as in give, or possibility. We talk of unknown quantities that may effect and outcome as "still being in play." We talk about a control that has some give and lack of precision as having play. Think of the statement, there's some play in the wheel. Play can have an implication of a certain amount of wiggle room. In the end, the post structuralist view of our vocabulary affords us this: more possibility.

In paraphrasing Derrida, Mark Fortier writes that "the free play inherent in writing means that categorization, identities, and unities arising inevitably in western language and thought are always undermined by slippage" (64). I would quibble with the word undermined. In our case the slippage sets us free. It prevents the language of acting and the categories and unities of our respective vocabularies from becoming scientific. If we allow that play, it can help us find renewal as artists, even in our own process.

Derrida himself says: “and if I speak so often of the incalculable and the undecidable it is not out of a simple predilection for play, nor in order to neutralize decision: on the contrary I believe there is no responsibility, no ethico-political decision that must not pass through the proofs of the incalculable and undecidable” (Qtd in Fortier 66-67). It is the predilection for play we should be after. Without it we have no creativity and no art, merely formulae and cold calculated products. The lack of meaning in our vocabulary is something to celebrate. It doesn’t invalidate our knowledge and process; it merely opens them up to growth and change. As teachers it doesn’t mean decision is impossible it means that the decision is not tethered to hard truth. We have wiggle room, and we can give that gift to our students.

We still need a vocabulary, and we owe it to our students to master that vocabulary. But as we master and create, we must remember that what we want is a “vocabulary not a dictionary” (Williams 26). Our goal shouldn’t be to fix our terminology, return to some authentic vocabulary or in any other way “purify the dialect of our tribe” (24). Rather we need to celebrate the possibilities inherent in the post structuralist analysis of our vocabulary. We need to be aware of the impact our vocabulary has on us, on our students, and how we view and make art. We owe it to our scholastic community to understand a variety of vocabularies and to make sure that we understand all of the possible implications and shades of meaning in a words history and in the words continued growth. Fixing and studying our glossary in this way “is not to impede but to make possible the sense of an extended and intricate vocabulary, within which both the variable words and their varied and variable interrelations are in practice active” (23).

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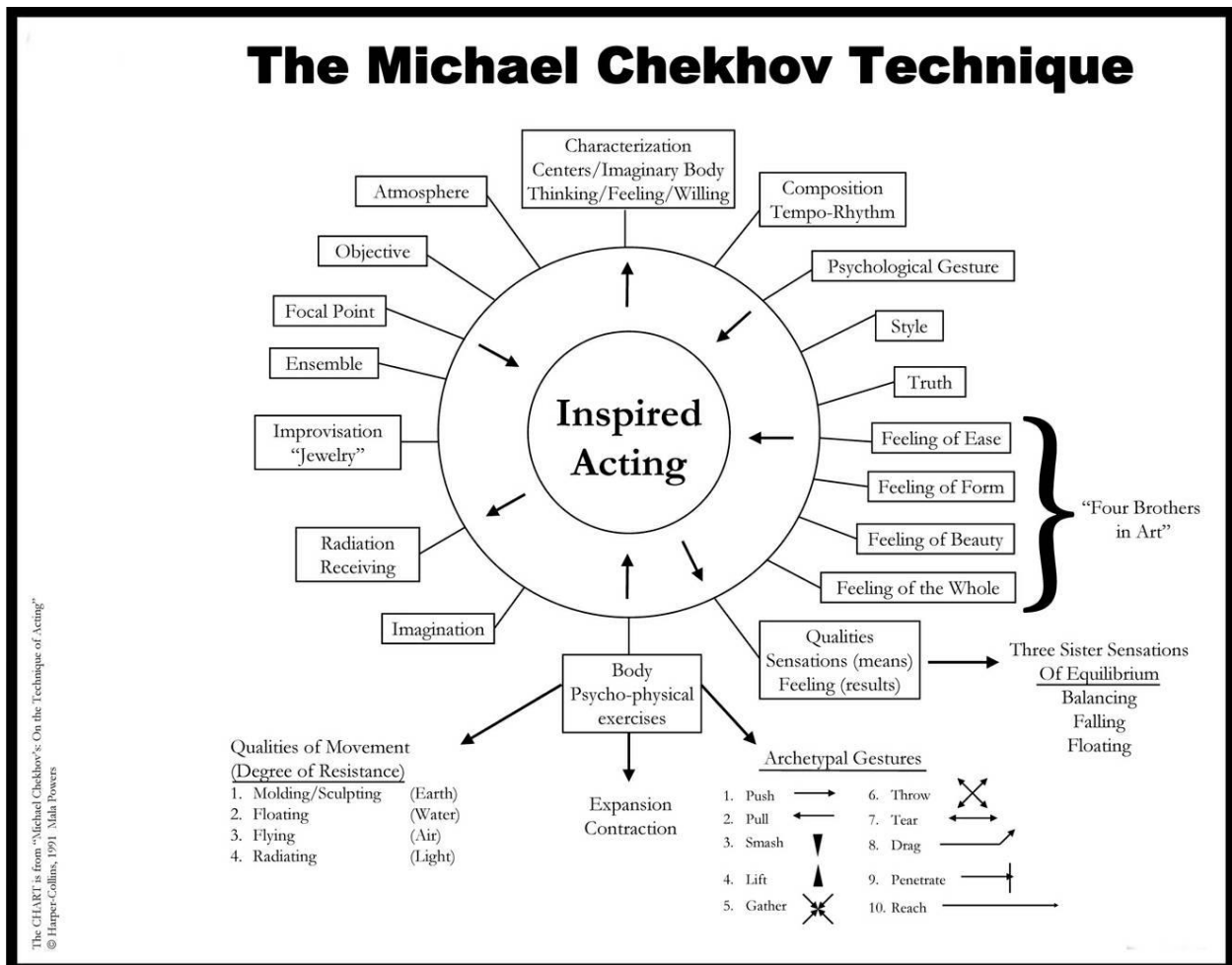
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Appendix

This chart was given to Mala Powers by Michael Chekhov.



Appendix

2

Novice to Expert: the Dreyfus model of skill acquisition

Introduction

This document contains two versions of the Dreyfus 'novice to expert' model, one combining the main features of both versions of the model published in the early 1980s, and the other taken from the Institute of Conservation's professional standards.

The Dreyfus model is used fairly widely (a) to provide a means of assessing and supporting progress in the development of skills or competencies, and (b) to provide a definition of acceptable level for the assessment of competence or capability.

The 'expert' level does not signify that development stops, as expert practitioners need to evaluate their practice and keep up-to-date with new evidence.

Further reading

Dreyfus, H L and Dreyfus, SE (1986) *Mind over Machine: the power of human intuition and expertise in the age of the computer*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell

Benner, P (1984) *From novice to expert: excellence and power in clinical nursing practice*, Menlo Park CA, Addison-Wesley

Introduction and adaptations of the Dreyfus model by Stan Lester.

© Stan Lester Developments 2005
s.lester@st-devts.co.uk
tel +44 (0)1823 333091 fax +44(0)870 052 3087

Novice-to-Expert scale (1)

<i>Level</i>	<i>Stage</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>How know- ledge etc is treated</i>	<i>Recognition of relevance</i>	<i>How context is assessed</i>	<i>Decision- making</i>
1	Novice	Rigid adherence to taught rules or plans Little situational perception No discretionary judgement	Without reference to context	None	Analytically	Rational
2	Advanced beginner	Guidelines for action based on attributes or aspects (aspects are global characteristics of situations recognisable only after some prior experience) Situational perception still limited All attributes and aspects are treated separately and given equal importance	In context			
3	Competent	Coping with crowdedness Now sees actions at least partially in terms of longer-term goals Conscious, deliberate planning Standardised and routinised procedures				
4	Proficient	Sees situations holistically rather than in terms of aspects Sees what is most important in a situation Perceives deviations from the normal pattern Decision-making less laboured Uses maxims for guidance, whose meanings vary according to the situation		Present	Holistically	
5	Expert	No longer relies on rules, guidelines or maxims Intuitive grasp of situations based on deep tacit understanding Analytic approaches used only in novel situations or when problems occur Vision of what is possible			Intuitive	

Adapted from: Dreyfus, S E (1981) *Four models of human situational understanding: inherent limitations on the modelling of business expertise* USAF Office of Scientific Research, ref F49620-79-C-0063; Dreyfus, H L & Dreyfus, S E (1984) "Putting computers in their proper place: analysis versus intuition in the classroom," in D Sloan (ed) *The computer in education: a critical perspective* Columbia NY, Teachers' College Press.

Novice-to-Expert scale (2)

	Knowledge	Standard of work	Autonomy	Coping with complexity	Perception of context
1. Novice	Minimal, or 'textbook' knowledge without connecting it to practice	Unlikely to be satisfactory unless closely supervised	Needs close supervision or instruction	Little or no conception of dealing with complexity	Tends to see actions in isolation
2. Beginner	Working knowledge of key aspects of practice	Straightforward tasks likely to be completed to an acceptable standard	Able to achieve some steps using own judgement, but supervision needed for overall task	Appreciates complex situations but only able to achieve partial resolution	Sees actions as a series of steps
3. Competent	Good working and background knowledge of area of practice	Fit for purpose, though may lack refinement	Able to achieve most tasks using own judgement	Copes with complex situations through deliberate analysis and planning	Sees actions at least partly in terms of longer-term goals
4. Proficient	Depth of understanding of discipline and area of practice	Fully acceptable standard achieved routinely	Able to take full responsibility for own work (and that of others where applicable)	Deals with complex situations holistically, decision-making more confident	Sees overall 'picture' and how individual actions fit within it
5. Expert	Authoritative knowledge of discipline and deep tacit understanding across area of practice	Excellence achieved with relative ease	Able to take responsibility for going beyond existing standards and creating own interpretations	Holistic grasp of complex situations, moves between intuitive and analytical approaches with ease	Sees overall 'picture' and alternative approaches; vision of what may be possible

From the professional standards for conservation, Institute of Conservation (London) 2003 based on the Dreyfus model of skill acquisition.

Vita

Daniel Kenneth Granke, was born August 6th 1981 in Ypsilanti Michigan. He attended Interlochen Arts Academy where he received a high school diploma in 1999, University of Michigan, where he received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in 2003, and Virginia Commonwealth University. He is a Certified Teacher of Stage Combat with the Society of American Fight Directors, and a Certified Teacher Candidate with the National Michael Chekhov Association. He has worked as an actor, director, and fight director in New York City, and has taught at institutions there and throughout the Midwest and Southeast. He has served as the Editor in Chief of the SAFD's newsletter, *The Cutting Edge*.