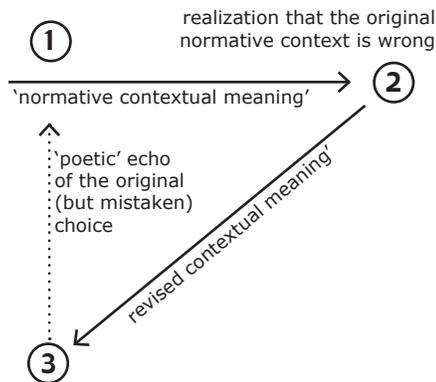# anacoluthic pathway

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What is thought? The difficulty of the question lies in the abundance of analogies of thought that offer misleading comparisons. In the study of neurologically 'brain-dead' patients, the test of cognition has been to begin sentence with a word with a main conventional meaning that is reversed by the ending of the sentence: 'The shell was … (thinking of sea-shells) … fired at the tank' (Groopman, 2007). The secondary meaning is virtually present but has to be revived as context shifts. Rhetorically, this is the figure of the anacoluthon, which can be diagramed as chiasmus', the V-shaped figure of double meanings. The broad temporal and spatial aspects of chiasmus show how meaning's 'gold standard' may in effect be equivalent to the Turing test's 'minimum cognitive estimate', a pathway of exchange that, lacking further evidence, substantiates 'thought' without reference to external analogies or

realization that the original normative context is wrong

'normative contextual meaning'

'poetic' echo of the original (but mistaken) choice

revised contextual meaning'

representation

artifact

'revision' involves recovering the meaning contained as 'artifact' in the original signifier

The 'Turing Test' comes close to the truth by showing that the 'minimum test' can be accurate if in fact consciousness uses its own 'minimum action' to return the repressed/rejected surplus of meaning to a territorialized temporal sequence.

1. polysemy and contextualization

Signifiers, Lacan was fond of saying, are inherently ambiguous and, in ordinary conversation, 'slide past' each other until 'quilted' through the influence of a 'master signifier' that organizes a semantic field. The master signifier is — for important reasons — a-rational; a process of converting effects and coincidences into causal chains. One word has, in a sense, 'no meaning' because it has multiple meanings (polysemy), and until the word is contextualized it remains 'open' to various formations and semantic structures, and even then it may retain a component of openness that makes it, in Michel Rifaterre's terms, 'permanently poetic' (*soupirail*, or 'cellar window', is the example Rifaterre cites). The process of quilting involves semantic revision where one context is abandoned for another. Yet, the first, more conventional, meaning is not completely forgotten. It is 'retained' as a shadow sense — a predecessor meaning — that 'illicitly' contributes to the new meaning. The formerly dominant and now recessive meaning, the new meaning, and the mysterious connection (temporally logical but spatially illogical) can be diagrammed, and the diagram is the figure of 'chiasmus', the well-known strategy of connecting opposed lines of thought, words, music, etc. The 'X' of chiasmus is typically halved as a 'V', set sideways to show the left-right progression of 'normative' meaning, shadowed by a not-quite-parallel line that meets it at an intersection. The intersection is not equivalent to any resolution. Rather, it is the temporal event that reflects the prior condition of shadowing, as the conclusion of a mystery story (identification of the 'whodunit') does not correct the crime but, rather, reveals what was implicit in the crime, namely, the perpetrator.
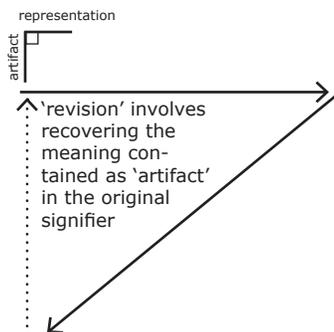
2. the meaning of triangulation

Temporally, the chiastic model of anacoluthic revision involves a complex and irrational fact. Meaning, typically regarded as a 'diachronic' sequence of signs that selects and discards alternatives as it goes along, seems to reside at several positions in the temporal 'line', creating in some sense a time-map that establishes a field of permanently available positions for each temporal node functioning in the process of meaning construction and destruction. As a spatial map, time can 'be' both its past and the cancellation of its past. Any one moment can be regarded as the portal linking the present to other equally accessible moments. How? The process of triangulation re-traces the steps of signification back to the original error. As it does this, it goes both forward and backward in time, thus the 'vector' allowing this simultaneous reverse motion is the artifact of the original signfiier, the phonemic 'support' of the signifier, the context and noise that was repressed through the process of signification (the 'accident' of the conventional use of phonemic sounds 'tree' to represent the large plant whose equivalent in French is *arbre*, in German, *baum*, and Spanish *àrbol*, etc.). Returning to those previously repressed contents is to recover the temporal aspect of repression — in effect saying, with Lacan, that 'the letter always reaches its destination', meaning that repression 'always' returns, and that the process of return is identified with the Real, one of the three components of mental life as a whole (symbolic, imaginary, Real).

3. Turing

The triangle is, as a minimal 'kernel of thinking', a replacement for the orthogonal angle of representation and artifact, and the structural component of Lacan's L-scheme that prefigures the Möbius-band twist of subjective and objective structures of this scheme. The Real can return in the case of the automaton (machine 'thinking'), as in the case of Nathan's suture of his own intelligence into the doll Olimpia ('The Sandman'). Alan Turing was criticized for substituting a minimum standard in place of a true definition of consciousness, but it appears that consciousness itself may employ a 'minimum standard', a kind of 'error standard' or 'idiocy standard' for itself in this revisionary map of the signifier's return of its excessive, repressed component.

Reference: Jerome Groopman, "Silent Minds: Scan Technology and Vegetative Patients," *The New Yorker* (October 15, 2007): 38.

figures: the anacoluthic pathway