

# Digital literacy, dead metaphors, and a continuum of ambiguity



**MMU, 2 December 2015**

<http://doughelshaw.com/ambiguity>



**Dr. Doug Belshaw**  
@dajbelshaw\*

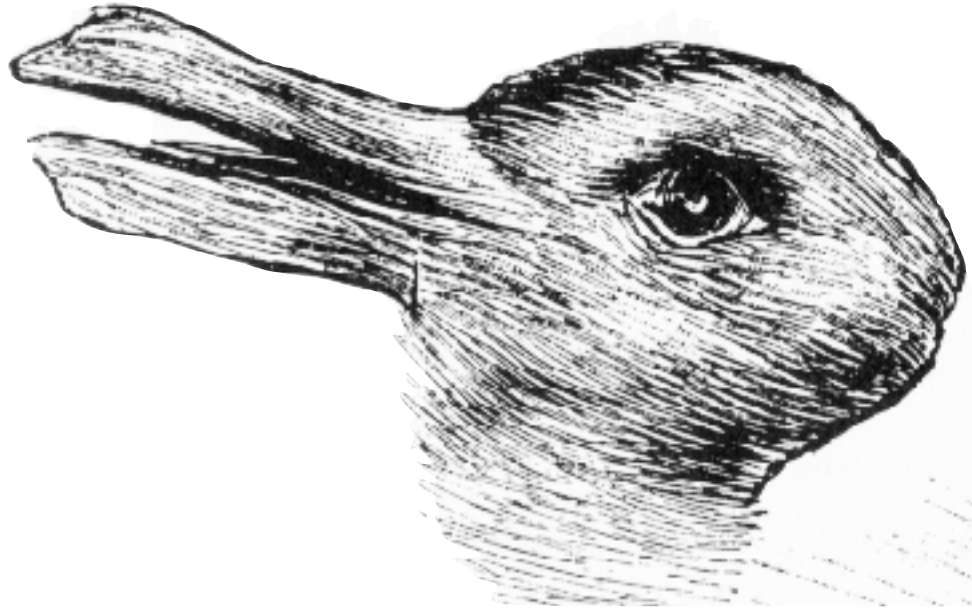
\*not tweeting until 2016

A close-up, high-angle shot of a theater stage. The focus is on the heavy, deep red velvet curtains, which are draped in elegant, sweeping folds. The bottom edge of the curtains is finished with a thick, dense fringe of gold-colored threads. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the fabric and the shimmer of the fringe. The background behind the curtains is a solid, dark grey color.

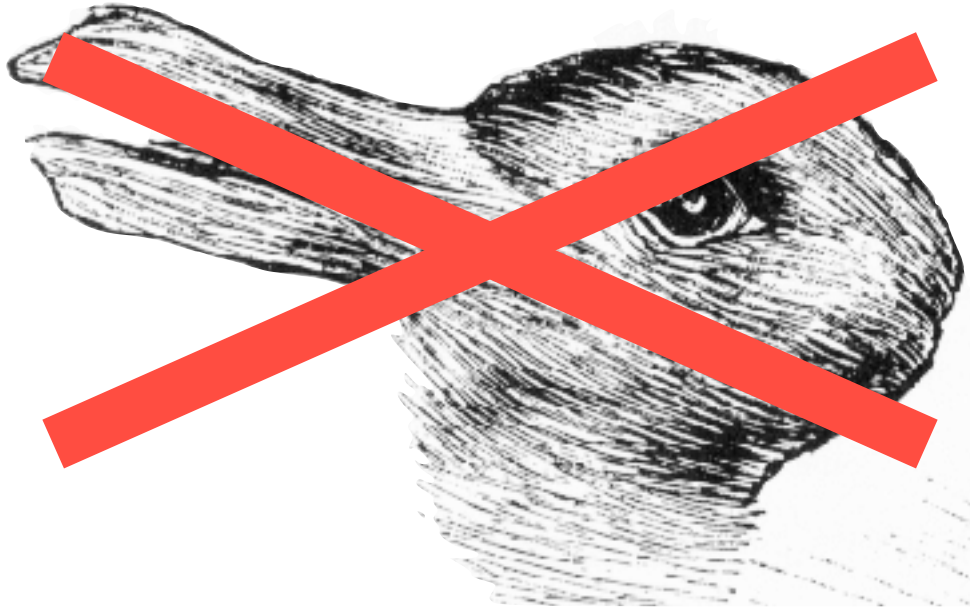
# ACT ONE

**AMBIGUITY**

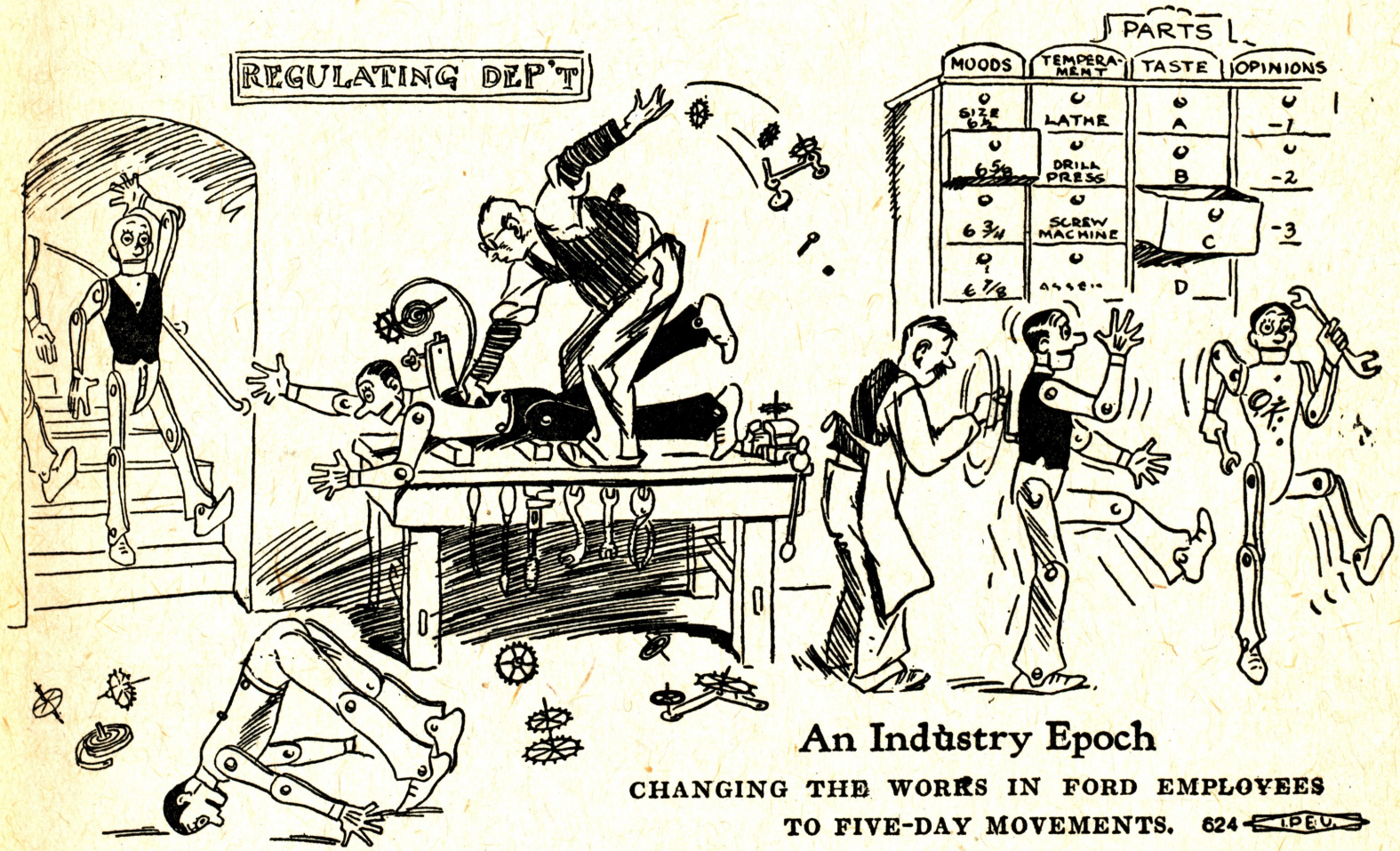




**AMBIGUITY**



**AMBIGUITY**

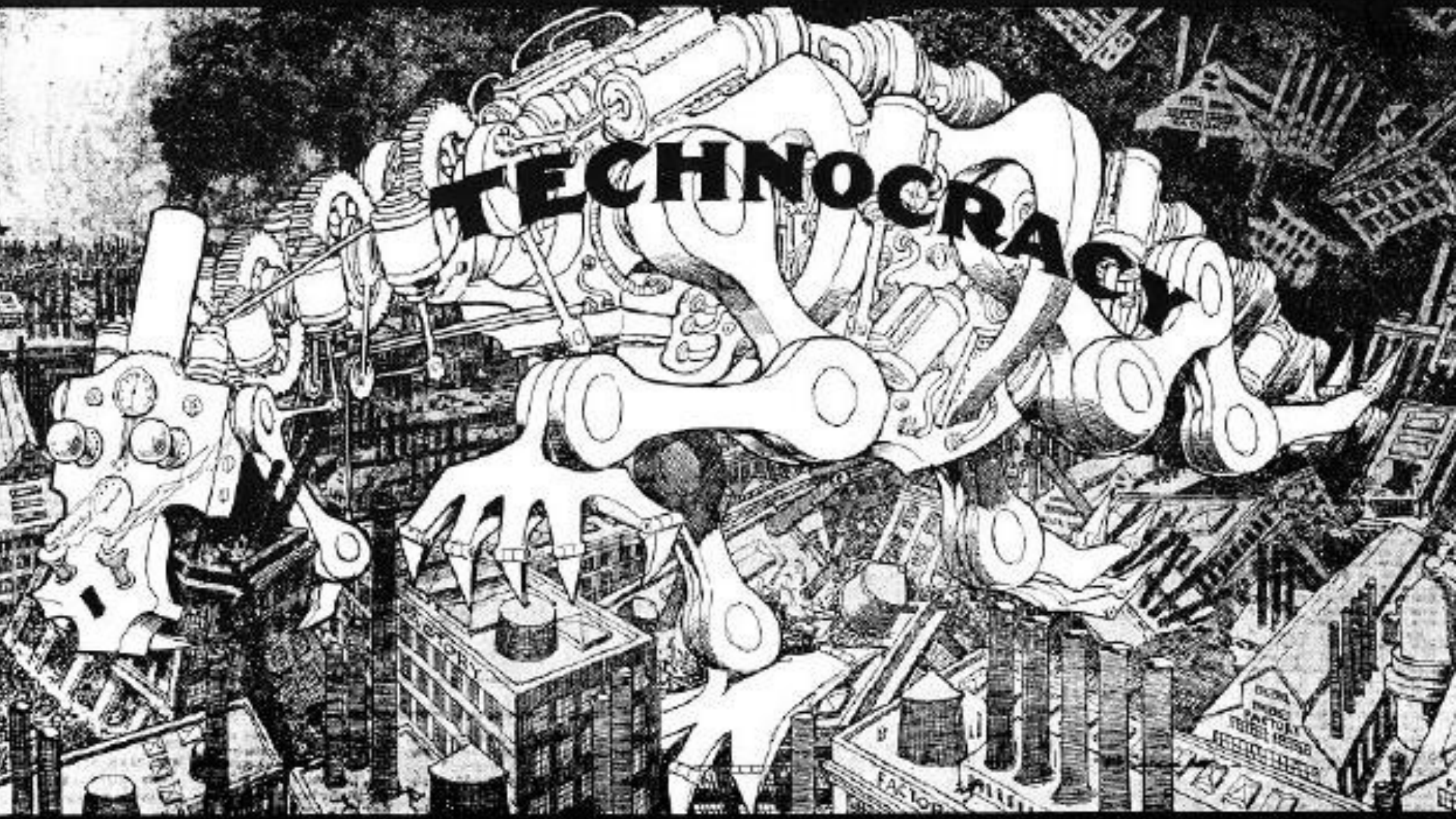


REGULATING DEP'T

PARTS			
MOODS	TEMPERAMENT	TASTE	OPINIONS
0 SIZE 6 1/2	0 LATHE	0 A	0 -1
0 6 5/8	0 DRILL PRESS	0 B	0 -2
0 6 3/4	0 SCREW MACHINE	0 C	0 -3
0 6 7/8	0 ASSEMBLY	0 D	

**An Industry Epoch**  
 CHANGING THE WORKS IN FORD EMPLOYEES  
 TO FIVE-DAY MOVEMENTS. 624 ~~IPFU~~





**TECHNOCRACY**

THE  
INDUSTRIAL  
FACTORY  
TRUST  
FACORY

FACORY

FACORY



Search



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Tweet

# Hearts on Twitter

Tuesday, November 3, 2015 | By Akarshan Kumar (@AkiK), Product Manager [14:46 UTC]

We hope you like what you see on Twitter and Vine today: hearts!

We are changing our star icon for *favorites* to a heart and we'll be calling them *likes*. We want to make Twitter easier and more rewarding to use, and we know that at times the star could be confusing, especially to newcomers. You might like a lot of things, but not everything can be your *favorite*.

The heart, in contrast, is a universal symbol that resonates across languages, cultures, and time zones. The heart is more expressive, enabling you to convey a range of emotions and easily connect with people. And in our tests, we found that people loved it.



## Accounts to follow



Vine  
@vine

tweet @vinehelp for support



Periscope  
@periscopeco

Explore the world in real time through someone else's eyes

## Tweets

[Follow](#)

Twitter for Good  
@twitterforgood

1h

Founded in '12 by @htimms, see how Twitter propelled #GivingTuesday into a global movement: [blog.twitter.com/2015/celebrate...](https://blog.twitter.com/2015/celebrate...)  
[pic.twitter.com/ZklGpyZn0n](https://pic.twitter.com/ZklGpyZn0n)

Retweeted by Twitter



<https://blog.twitter.com/2015/hearts-on-twitter>

Twitter

1h

## Social media

# Twitter's heart hits the wrong beat

## Emily Bell



Forcing our visual language on social media means we can't express what we really mean



Twitter @twitter · 7h

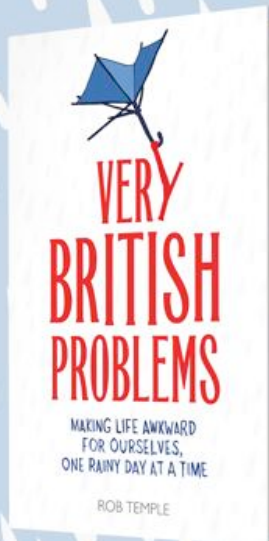
You can say a lot with a heart. Introducing a new way to show how you feel on Twitter: [blog.twitter.com/2015/hearts-on...](http://blog.twitter.com/2015/hearts-on...)

### Most popular



Cabinet approves Syria airstrikes motion





**VeryBritishProblems** ✓

@SoVeryBritish

+ Follow

Alternative symbols to Twitter Hearts:

1. A stiff handshake
2. The word "fine"
3. A pint
4. A nice biscuit
5. "6/10"

#Likes

RETWEETS

2,637

LIKES

3,303

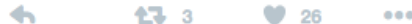


8:23 AM - 3 Nov 2015



**John Bonazzo** @johnbonazzo · Nov 3

@SoVeryBritish Also the word "Quite"



Show more

<https://twitter.com/SoVeryBritish/status/661579574740930560>





**VeryBritishProblems** ✓

@SoVeryBritish

+ Follow

Meanings of "right":

Correct

Not left

I'm about to leave

I'm about to shout

I don't understand

Have it your way

I'm not listening

RETWEETS

4,852

LIKES

5,375



1:54 PM - 10 Nov 2015



**Len Fisher** @LenFisherScienc · Nov 10

@SoVeryBritish @deevybee How to think British

WHAT THE BRITISH SAY

WHAT THE BRITISH MEAN

<https://twitter.com/SoVeryBritish/status/664199458431848448>

I disagree and do not want He accepts my point of



**VeryBritishProblems** ✓

@SoVeryBritish

+ Follow

Things that mean "no"

1. "We'll see"
2. "Yes and no"
3. "In a way"
4. "Could do"
5. "I'll see how I feel"

RETWEETS

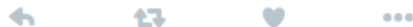
4,432

LIKES

4,733



7:38 AM - 4 Oct 2015



**Roland Jones** @JonesRoly · Oct 4

@SoVeryBritish @mathewi #4, my favorite



**amy** @amyxlp · Oct 13

@SoVeryBritish COULD DO @mrdavehill!



<https://twitter.com/SoVeryBritish/status/650681395212353536>

**Ambiguity:** ‘the capability of being understood in two or more ways’

**Vague:** ‘couched in general or indefinite terms’ being ‘not definitely or precisely expressed’

(Oxford English Dictionary)

# Problems:

1. The symbol can be mistaken for the thing signified
2. Proliferation of terms can confuse the landscape
3. Borrowing existing words/terms can hinder debate

A close-up photograph of red theater curtains with a gold fringe, partially open to reveal a dark stage. The curtains are draped in a way that creates deep folds and highlights the texture of the fabric and the fringe. The lighting is dramatic, with the gold fringe catching the light and the red fabric appearing in various shades of deep red and maroon.

# ACT TWO

Since we cannot introduce the realities themselves into our discussions, but have to use words as symbols for them, we suppose that what follows in the words will follow in the realities too.

[...]

Whereas words and the quantity of sentences are limited, realities are unlimited in number.”

(Aristotle)



CHAIR?





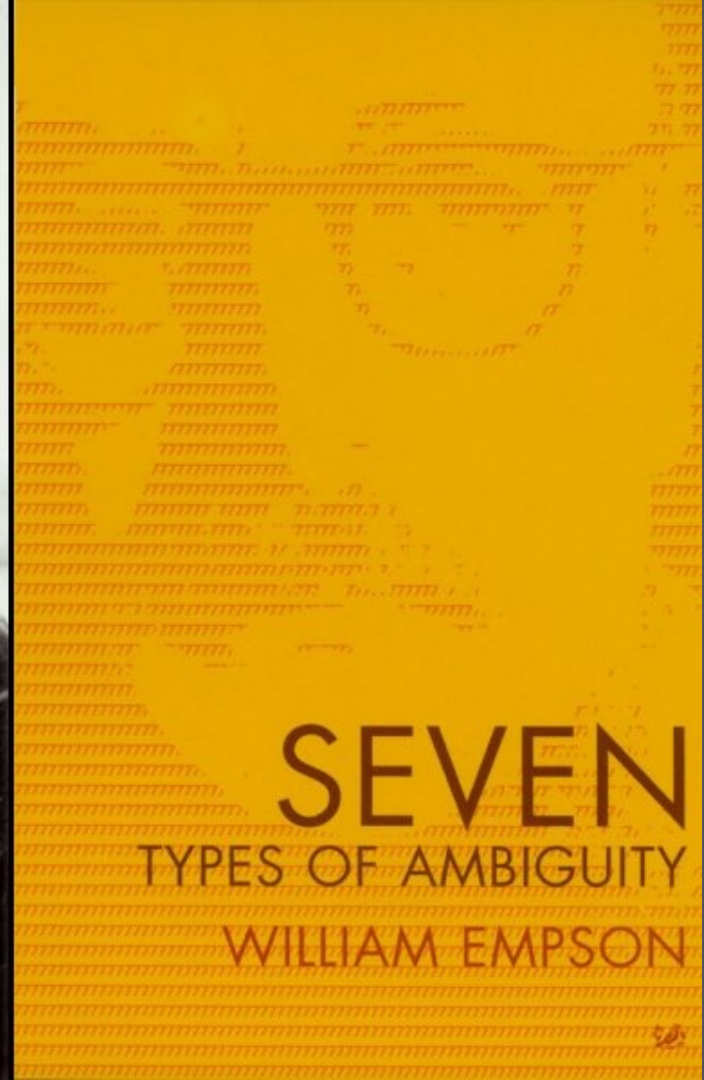
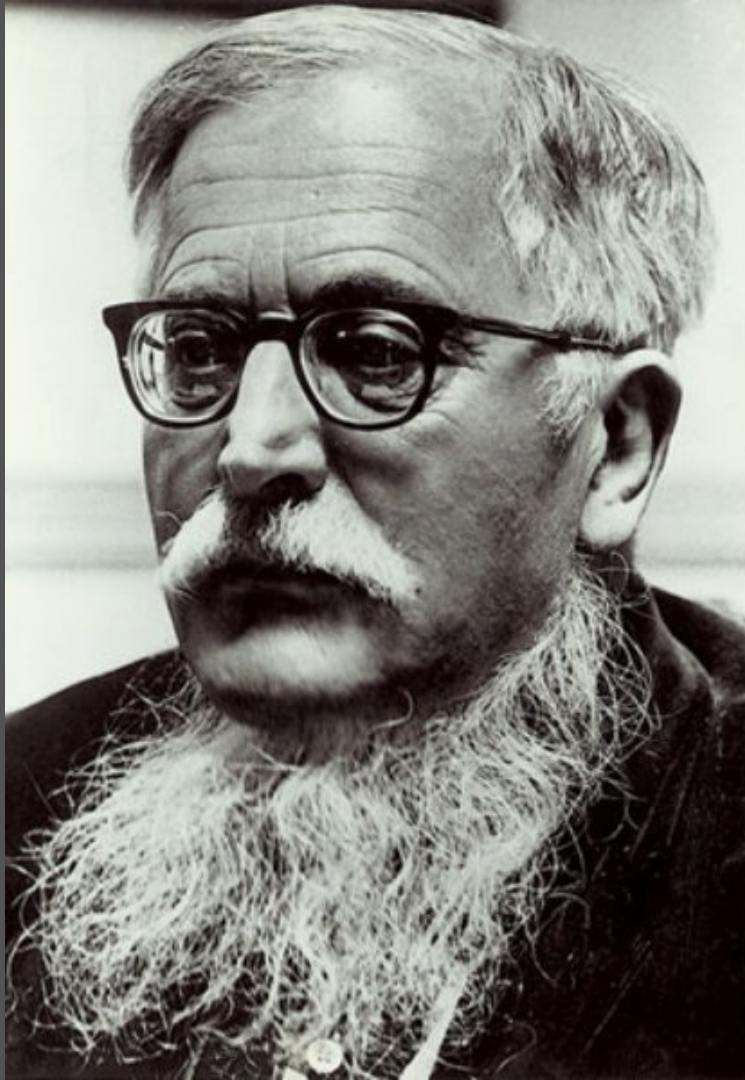
**Connotative  
aspect**

A Venn diagram consisting of two overlapping circles. The left circle is labeled 'Connotative aspect' and the right circle is labeled 'Denotative aspect'. The overlapping area in the center is a vertical green bar containing the word 'AMBIGUITY' in white, capital letters.

**A  
M  
B  
I  
G  
U  
I  
T  
Y**

**Denotative  
aspect**

impressive  
neck beard!



# SEVEN TYPES OF AMBIGUITY WILLIAM EMPSON

# Empson's Seven Types of Ambiguity

1. Two things are said to be alike
- 2. Two different metaphors used at the same time**
3. Two ideas given through one word (connected by context)
- 4. Two meanings combine to make clear a complication**
5. Author discovers idea in act of writing
- 6. Statement says nothing so reader has to invent meaning**
7. Two words, in context, mean opposite things

# Continuum of Ambiguity

	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
Empson (1930)	Two words, in context, mean opposite things	Statement says nothing so reader has to invent meaning	Author discovers idea in act of writing	Two meanings combine to make clear a complication	Two ideas given through one word (connected by context)	Two different metaphors used at the same time	Two things are said to be alike

The Hatter opened his eyes very wide... but all he said was, 'Why is a raven like a writing-desk?'

'Come, we shall have some fun now!' thought Alice.

'I'm glad they've begun asking riddles. - I believe I can guess that,' she added aloud.

'Do you mean that you think you can find out the answer to it?' said the March Hare.

'Exactly so,' said Alice.

'Then you should say what you mean,' the March Hare went on.

'I do,' Alice hastily replied; 'at least - at least I mean what I say - that's the same thing, you know.'

'Not the same thing a bit!' said the Hatter. 'You might just as well say that "I see what I eat" is the same thing as "I eat what I see"!'

(Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland)



Image CC BY-NC Clair Graubner

# Continuum of Ambiguity

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“The executioner's argument was, that you couldn't cut off a head unless there was a body to cut it off from: that he had never had to do such a thing before, and he wasn't going to begin at his time of life. The King's argument was, that anything that had a head could be beheaded, and that you weren't to talk nonsense.”

(Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*)



# Continuum of Ambiguity

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Abbott (1997)	Interactional ambiguity	Contextual ambiguity	Narrative ambiguity	Durational ambiguity	Syntactic ambiguity	Ambiguity of locus	Semantic ambiguity
Robinson (1941)			Relational univocity		Sliding ambiguity		Naive ambiguity
Belshaw & Higgins (2011)	Generative ambiguity			Creative ambiguity		Productive ambiguity	

## Sources:

Abbott, A. (1997) 'Seven Types of Ambiguity' (*Theory and Society* 26(2-3), pp.357-391)  
 Empson, W. (1930) *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Routledge, London)  
 Robinson, R. (1941) 'Ambiguity' (*Mind*, 50(198), pp.140-155)

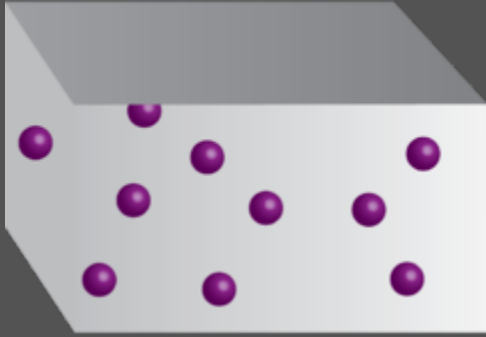
# Vagueness

Generative  
Ambiguity

Creative  
Ambiguity

Productive  
Ambiguity

Dead  
Metaphors



**Generative  
Ambiguity**



**Creative  
Ambiguity**



**Productive  
Ambiguity**



# Dead Metaphors

Rorty, R. (1989) *The Contingency of Language*. (in Russell Goodman (ed). 1995. *Pragmatism: A Contemporary Reader* Routledge).



The early dialogues frequently represent Socrates as seeking for definitions of terms. Now, before we seek to define a term we should make sure that it has only one sense, or at least which of its senses we are trying to define. But Socrates never does this in the Platonic dialogues. In every case he puts the question and proceeds to look for an answer with the most perfect coincidence that the word means the same thing every time it is used.

(Robinson, 1941)





A close-up photograph of red theater curtains with a gold fringe. The curtains are draped and folded, creating deep shadows and bright highlights. The fringe is made of many thin, gold-colored threads. The background is a solid dark grey color.

# ACT THREE

# Digital Literacy

Prozeugma?



Hypozeugma?



**Which is the adjective?**

# Continuum of Ambiguity (as applied to New Literacies)

	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
Empson (1930)	Two words, in context, mean opposite things	Statement says nothing so reader has to invent meaning	Author discovers idea in act of writing	Two meanings combine to make clear a complication	Two ideas given through one word (connected by context)	Two different metaphors used at the same time	Two things are said to be alike
Belshaw & Higgins (2011)	Generative ambiguity			Creative ambiguity		Productive ambiguity	
New Literacies		Electracy	Transliteracy	Digital Literacy	Media Literacy	Information Literacy	Visual Literacy

# Three takeaways:

1. Academic

2. Professional

3. Personal

# Three takeaways:

1. Academic

2. Professional

3. Personal

“I like the tension you elicit there. It strikes me as what Abbott would call an ‘ambiguity of locus’ - would you agree?”



# Three takeaways:

1. Academic

2. Professional

3. Personal

“What you fail to realise, Vice Chancellor, is that I’m trying to avoid turning the university into a dead metaphor.”

# Three takeaways:

1. Academic

2. Professional

3. Personal

“Given previous experience, the notion that you ‘just want a surprise’ for Christmas is unproductively ambiguous.”



Thanks!\*

<http://dougbelshaw.com/ambiguity>

\*further research necessary