

# English verbs of intellectual activity in the Renaissance: A cognitive approach

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

How does language, and in our particular case, the English language, refer to our intellectual abilities, activities and experiences? If language reflects the way we experience, apprehend and understand the world and ourselves, how does it help us conceptualise a rich and subjective world such as man's mental phenomena? On what terms are our mental experiences conceived? What is the origin of the lexical items that refer to them? What mechanisms have been involved in their development?

A first exploration reveals that a considerable part of the English vocabulary referring to intellectual activity was borrowed from Latin during the Renaissance. The revival of learning and the expansion of knowledge that took place at that time had a well-known effect on the English vocabulary. The growing importance of the empirical method and rational argument was reflected in the items which were introduced in the lexicon. The borrowing of a term from Latin, which was still the lingua franca of learning in Renaissance Europe, was by far the commonest strategy used in the elaboration of the English language so that it could be used in scientific discourse.

Among the exceptional number of terms of classical origin that were added to the English lexicon in the Renaissance, there were obviously terms which referred to intellectual activities. Although some of these verbs, such as *ponder*, *muse* or *comprehend*, had already been introduced in the Middle English period, other verbs such as *cogitate*, *speculate*, *meditate*, *contemplate*, or *ruminare* were new additions to the English lexicon in the 16th and 17th centuries.

A preliminary etymological study soon reveals that those verbs derive from Latin terms which originally referred to physical perception or activities. There have been, then, semantic shifts by which verbs alluding to physical actions have come to refer to mental activities. This paper explores - from a cognitive perspective - the origin of such verbs, focusing especially on the inter-domain connections between their concrete and abstract senses.

Cognitive linguistics, which views human language as part of our cognitive system, can provide new insights to the study of semantic change. What paths are followed in speakers' minds in the process of meaning change? What connections are established by the speakers between the earlier and later senses? Are there regular trends in meaning change? Are there senses which systematically give rise to other

senses? A cognitively based framework is, to my mind, highly adequate to approach these questions.

Research in cognitive linguistics has stressed the importance of metaphorical connections in human cognition and language (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999; Sweetser 1990). Metaphor permits an understanding of one kind of experience in terms of another and this is extensively reflected in language. In the same way as many everyday expressions are metaphorical, as Lakoff and Johnson have stressed, many abstract terms have their origin in metaphorical transfer. Sweetser (1990) has provided ample evidence that change operates in general from concrete to abstract domains. As we will see, the vocabulary which we use to refer to our intellectual abilities has been built up making extensive use of metaphors of which we are, however, largely unaware.

The study of the patterns of semantic change helps us to understand human cognition, since they reflect the connections that generations of speakers have established between meanings. How has the activity ‘thinking’ been conceived? What does language and especially lexical change reveal about it? In this paper I’m going to explore what specific meanings in the concrete domain give rise to the following verbs of thinking: *contemplate*, *consider*, *speculate*, *meditate*, *cogitate*, *reflect* and *ruminate*.

## CASE STUDIES

*Contemplate* has its origins in a verb of physical perception and it illustrates the pervasive tendency of verbs of physical perception to come to refer to mental perception. Introduced into English in the early sixteenth century, it derives from the past participle of *contempro* # “to look at”. This Latin verb was related to the noun *templum*, which referred to an open space for the *observation* of the augurs and the interpretation of omens. This early meaning is illustrated in the following example:

1. The day wherein God did rest and contemplate his own works.  
Bacon. *Of the advancement of learning*: I. vi.

When one looks at something attentively and thoughtfully or the object of contemplation is not something physical, but abstract, then *contemplate* comes to be used in the sense ‘view mentally’ or ‘consider’:

2. She [the soule] is able to contemplate herselfe.  
T. Bowes. *De La Primaudye’s French Academie* :II, 13.

The semantic development of the verbs *consider* or *speculate* is similar. *Consider* was borrowed from French *considérer* in the fourteenth century, and it came ultimately from Latin *considero*, which was probably a term of astrology or augury, related to *sidus*, stars forming a constellation. Its early meaning “look at closely, examine carefully” (now archaic):

3. And with inspection deep Consider’d every Creature  
Milton. *Paradise Lost*: IX. 84

was extended “to contemplate mentally”, to mental perception and activity:

4. Is man no more then this? Consider him well  
Shakespeare. *King Lear*: III.iv.107

5. This is a good lesson Us to consydure.  
Towler. *Towneley Mysteries*: 93

*Speculate* also derives from a verb of physical perception, Latin *specular*, “to watch”, “spy out”, “observe”, related to *specula*, a watchtower. In the following quotation, it has the sense “observe”, physical perception:

6. I shall never eat garlike with Diogenes in a Tub, and speculate  
the Starres without a shirt  
Shirley. *Grateful Servant*: II. i

and in the next, it is used in the sense of mental perception or activity:

7. A gluttonous stomacke causeth such a mist before the eyes of the  
soule, that shee cannot possibly speculate any spiritual matters.  
Wright. *The Passions of the mind*: IV.ii

Such metaphorical transfers are common. As Sweetser ( 1990: 32-34 ) has shown many verbs of vision have given rise to verbs of the intellect. And this is not an arbitrary fact since in human conceptual organisation and understanding of the world sight and knowledge are intimately related. We only have to think of some everyday expressions such as “I see what you mean”. Knowing is metaphorically conceptualised in terms of seeing because visual perception is the usual way we acquire most of our knowledge and the most common source of data (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 238).

Vision can be applied not only to the intellectual domain but also to the religious, through a metaphorical connection between spiritual and physical vision. *Contemplate* and *speculate* illustrate physical sight being metaphorically mapped on to spiritual vision:

8. But retired in the Wildernesse to contemplate on the presence of  
God.  
W. Austin. *Devotionis Augustinianae flamma, or certaine  
meditations*: 194

The verb *meditate*, which was also introduced into English in the Renaissance (1580), from Latin *medita#ri #*, provides another example of a verb of intellectual ability which can have religious connotations:

9. He that accustoms himself to meditate upon the greatness of  
God.  
R. South. *Sermons preached upon several occasions*: X.i.

*Meditate*, however, does not have its origins in a verb of physical perception, since *medita#ri #*, originally referred to all kind of exercise, physical as well as intellectual, and it was later preferred to refer to intellectual activity. It is in this sense, then, that it was introduced into English.

10. And Isaac went out, to meditate in the field, at the euentide.  
*Genesis*, XXIV.63

It is worth commenting, though, that whereas many verbs of ‘sight’ come to develop a mental meaning, in the case of *meditate*, for a while, the opposite process took place: It was used with the meaning “to observe with interest”. That is a new proof of the close links between sight and intellectual activity, but at the same time it

provides a counterexample for the usual unidirectional tendency of concrete senses to become abstract:

11. He bowed his head upon his pillow, and meditated me.  
S. Richardson. *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*:  
IV.xvii

The meaning of visual perception that *contemplate* had in the Renaissance, which was similar to that of the Latin term and is still kept in, say, Spanish *contemplar*, is not the most common one in Present-day English. The prototypical meaning of *contemplate* is now “to have in view as a possibility”. Once one has a future prospect in mind, the sense of *contemplate* easily becomes “have in view as a purpose, as a possibility”, “intend”:

12. The decree contemplated a negotiation between the executive power in France and our minister there.  
A. Hamilton. *Works*: A Letter to G. Washington

The same extension of sense can be observed in *meditate*, which, as in Latin, also had the meaning “to plan by revolving in the mind”, “to plan”.

13. A creature meditating mischief.  
Goldsmith. *Natural History*: VII. 167

*Cogitate* and *reflect* are other verbs of Latin origin which show a metaphorical transfer from concrete to abstract. *Cogitate* derives from the past participle of *co#gito*: *co*, an intensive + *agito*, “to turn over”, “agitate”. Even in Latin, it was already applied to something in the mind and came to mean “to turn over in the mind”. Ideas, then, have been conceptualised as entities in motion which revolve in the mind.

14. We both day and night reuoluing in our minds did cogitate nothing more...  
J. Foxe. *Actes and Monuments of these latter and perillous dayes*: 780

The earliest meaning of *reflect* (14th c), ultimately from Latin *reflecto*, *re* + *flecto*, to ‘bend’, is “to bend”, “turn back”:

15. Not quite strait, but a little reflected upwards.  
T. Pennant. *British Zoology*: II. 353

and it has given rise to several meanings. When what is turned back is one’s thoughts, as for example in:

16. When I reflect my thought and eye upon that I have formerly written.  
Sir J. Harington. *Nugæ Antiquæ*: II. 166

the sense is extended to mean “to think of” or “meditate on”:

17. Having reflected a little on the Danger which we had escaped, we viewed the second Pyramide.  
A. Lovell. *Thevenot’s Travels into the Levant*: I.134

Whereas *cogitate* can be used transitively in philosophy to mean “to form a conception of”, when *reflect* is used in Present-Day-English with a direct object, it is usually apprehended in another of its several senses:

18. The hills reflect the sound (“cast or send back”)

19. The Walls reflected a hundred thousand Lights to me from my two Candles (“emit, give out a light, as the result of reflection”).

D. Defoe. *The Life and strange adventures of Robinson Crusoe*: I, xii

20. Two glasses where herself herself beheld

A thousand times, and now no more reflect; (“mirror”)

Shakespeare. *Venus and Adonis*: 1130

In the preceding examples, there is implicit the idea that thoughts are in movement, either going back or revolving in the mind. In the verb *to ruminare* from Latin *rumino* “to ruminare”, “to chew the cud” and “to turn over in the mind”, we can also see the metaphorical transfer of ideas in motion, being turned over. The meaning “to chew the cud”, “turn over in the mouth”:

21. And for his lips and his teeth to ruminare.

*Song of Solomon* VII. 9

has been considered similar to “turn something over and over in the mind”, hence “to meditate deeply and for a long time”:

22. I may revolve and ruminare my greefe.

Shakespeare: *The First Part of King Henry VI*: V.v.101

At the same time, *ruminare* illustrates a new conceptualisation: that of ideas as food (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 241). That metaphor is also pervasive in our everyday language: Cf the expressions *appetite for learning* or *insatiable curiosity*.

In the same way as *contemplate* and *cogitate*, *ruminare*, when used with an object which can refer to a future prospect, came to mean “devise in the mind”, “plan”

23. To ruminare strange plots of dire revenge.

Shakespeare: *Titus Andronicus*: V.ii.6

## CONCLUSION

The verbs of thinking discussed here have their origins in verbs of physical perception or activities and by a process of metaphorical transfer they have arrived at a common meaning: think. *Cogitate* originally meant ‘to turn over’; *contemplate*, *consider* and *speculate* ‘to look at, observe’; *reflect*, ‘bend’ or ‘turn back’; *ruminare*, ‘to chew the cud’ or ‘turn over in the mouth’. Although most of these metaphorical transfers, however, had already occurred when they were introduced into English, their original meanings show the different ways speakers view this highly abstract and subjective activity or the different aspects they choose to focus on. Thus, in *contemplate*, *consider* and *speculate* physical vision has become mental perception. Although there is usually unidirectionality in the metaphorical transfers - from concrete to abstract -, *meditate*, which was introduced as a verb of ‘thinking’, came to mean physical vision, as well. *Cogitate*, *reflect* and *ruminare*, on the other hand, focus on ideas as objects moving and revolving in the mind.

Different metaphorical transfers are then involved in the examples studied: Physical perception becoming mental perception and activity (*contemplate*, *consider*, *speculate*), that is to say, thinking conceptualised as perceiving; ideas viewed in

motion going back (*reflect*) or revolving in the mind (*cogitate*) and ideas compared to food which is turned over and over in the mouth (*ruminare*). These are only some of the ways we conceptualise our mental phenomena. Other metaphorical transfers may also be involved, consider the case of *ponder*, *deliberate* or *examine*, where ideas are objects that can be weighed, or *grasp*, where ideas are objects that can be held or manipulated. In all the cases mentioned, however, we find a metaphorical conceptualization of our mental acts.

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