

#### ABSTRACT

In view of the contention of certain advocates of reform in education that a new definition or new concept of education itself is required, in this paper an investigation is made of some of the difficulties faced when attempts are made to arrive at such concepts or definitions. The approach is limited to utilization of the study of language plus linguistics, semantics, and etymology.

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### The Magnificent Tangle That is Education

Among those who are aware of a growing wave of dissatisfaction and disillusionment due to the lack of effective education, some go so far as to maintain that what is needed is a new definition or new concept of education itself. This, it is postulated, is fundamental for a thorough overhaul of education. But I feel that the reformers might benefit from a fresh look at some of the pitfalls they face when attempting to formulate such definitions or concepts. Since this is a very wide subject, I can only be concerned in this paper with some of those aspects that can be clarified largely through the use of several valuable but imperfect tools: the study of language as well as linguistics, semantics, and etymology.<sup>1</sup>

Upon investigation, it becomes quickly apparent that what adds up to education today in various countries and societies seems to be a bewildering jumble. The great variety of opinion and uncertainty in education is a reflection of the enormous variety of opinion and uncertainty about countless issues in general in the world. Those who attempt to formulate "definitions of education" or concern themselves with "the meaning of education" or "the concept (or concepts) of education" or "the nature of education" are faced with an uphill task. To begin with, there is a tendency in modern thought to distrust clear-cut definitions and precise meanings for a word like *education*. How can one attempt to compress into a sentence the core of all that may be understood by *education*? Nevertheless, attempted definitions and explanations of the meaning of the word abound and proliferate. Some thinkers regard the word *concept* as almost meaningless, *concept* being, to them, a fictitious entity,<sup>2</sup> while others seem to use it with confidence, aware of what they feel is a fairly precise meaning. Many would look askance at the possibility of emerging with anything very concrete when perusing "the nature" of such a mysterious thing as education. After all, education is most frequently linked with man, and "the nature of man" is perhaps even more bewildering than "the nature of education." Yet others manfully pronounce their views on "the nature of education."

Let us now take a closer look at this slippery word *education*. If we investigate the origin or derivation of *education*, we find that if we work from its supposed etymological root in the Latin *educere*, "to lead out," we are already in trouble, as there is disagreement about this etymology among Latin scholars; some claim that *education* comes from *educare*, "to rear or nurture."<sup>3</sup> These views can provide the

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base for differently oriented definitions of *education*. Furthermore, the adherents of divergent philosophical-ideological views can deliberately give prominence to one or the other of the supposed etymological roots to suit their own ends, a practice that might border on intellectual dishonesty. For example,

Adherents of the 'child-centred' ideology often make the conceptual point that 'education' is connected with 'educere' — to lead out' rather than with 'educare' — 'to bring up' or 'rear', thus moulding the concept towards the development of what is within rather than imposition from without. Thus . . . a 'persuasive definition' of 'education' can emerge, which is one in which there is a definite tightening up of the connotation of a term with a commending function (such as 'democracy') along lines which prescribe a preferred policy. In this case it is stipulated that nothing is to count as 'education' in which such procedural principles to do with 'leading out' are not implemented.<sup>4</sup>

Languages—which, to begin with, are not entirely satisfactory means of communication—are constantly changing, and English is no exception. Because all the elements of a language are interlinked, a change involving one element affects every other. The meanings of individual words alter with time and tend to expand or narrow. Both extension and restriction of meaning can result from a variety of causes, some strictly linguistic, others social or psychological.<sup>5</sup> The word *education* is a case in point. Has the meaning of *education*, beginning with its dubious etymological roots, altered, and, if so, has it expanded or narrowed, particularly in the recent past? Without going into detail,<sup>6</sup> there is no doubt that it has altered, but the answer to the second part of the question is not so simple. It seems to me that, in the last analysis, it has depended on the meaning of the word in the particular society or even with the particular individual with which we are concerned, although there is plenty of evidence that in many circles the meaning of *education* seems to be expanding at present, partly through the impact of the growing universalization of many aspects of man's way of life. For instance, the claim has been made that the way of thinking about education in Western Europe has broadened in recent years.

(Western Europeans) have been accustomed to limit the use of the term education to formal instruction in a system of schools, and, until recent years when new educational methods have been experimented with, to the acquiring of knowledge through books. . . . It is true that recent educational reports have emphasized the importance of relating the subjects taught in the curriculum, as well as the methods of teaching them, to the environmental background of the children, that is to the culture to which they belong. We are well aware, however, that children learn their patterns of social behaviour, their ideas on family life and earning a living, their value-attitude systems in relation to social and economic life, far more intensively and extensively outside school than inside.<sup>7</sup>

But the expansion of the concept of *education* may be taking place on a broad front in many countries of the world. A writer on lifelong education indicates that conditions are ripe for such expansion.

It seems to me, however, contrary to the scepticism which prevails in certain conservative circles with regard to the practical possibilities of this concept (lifelong education), that these are, on the whole, greater than they appear at first sight. The experience which has already been gained through the functional literacy projects and other out-of-school training programmes, as well as the continually expanding communications methods—television and other mass media—today offer exceptional opportunities for the gradual expansion of the concept of education.<sup>8</sup>

Significantly, the broadening of the concept of *education* is seen in such an important work as UNESCO's *Learning to Be* as essential to reform and change in education throughout the globe.

The concept of education limited in time (to 'school age') and confined in space (to school buildings) must be superseded. School education must be regarded not as the end but as the fundamental component of total educational activity, which includes both institutionalized and out-of-school

education. A proportion of educational activity should be de-formalized and replaced by flexible, diversified models. Excessive prolongation of compulsory schooling, which is beyond certain countries' capacities, must be avoided. The extension of continual training will more than compensate for the shorter average duration of initial studies. Briefly, education must be conceived of as an existential continuum as long as life.<sup>9</sup>

Note that in all of the above instances, the writers assumed that the old, commonly held concept of *education* was rather narrow in scope, an assumption that, as we shall see elsewhere, is not universally valid.

The question arises: if the meaning of *education* continues generally to expand, accompanied by, we would assume, a higher frequency of usage, would it become like such words as *thing*, *matter*, and *item* that now mean so much that they actually end up meaning very little in many contexts? I am not so sure that the mere expansion of the scope or dimensions of what adds up to *education* will render the word nearly meaningless; in fact, if, through this process, man comes to a clearer concept of what *education* actually is, just the opposite may occur—a view that I hope to attempt to substantiate in the future.

But not everyone agrees that the meaning or concept of *education* is expanding. Some British scholars seem to prefer a more specific concept of *education* than has been held in the past, but they admit that the concept is a very fluid one.<sup>10</sup> At any rate, if the question of whether the meaning of *education* is expanding or contracting is debatable, I think that we are on surer ground when postulating that with the knowledge explosion in recent history, the number of English-speakers with relatively sophisticated (if often questionable) concepts of *education* has grown enormously.

Words have emotional associations; they can be used, consciously or unconsciously, not to convey facts or to conduct rational arguments but to win a person over by appealing to his emotions.<sup>11</sup> This can also involve attempting to turn the person against someone or something else. But words that are primarily emotive in effect may also be used reasonably; when using them reasonably, we should distinguish them from words that are mainly cognitive—words used to convey facts or rational arguments.<sup>12</sup> Obviously, the word *education* may be used in either way, and this can affect its meaning to the individuals concerned.

For example, in the past, differences in the meaning of *education* and its connotations have had, in certain cases, emotional overtones as peoples who used English as their mother tongue came into increasing contact with others who originally did not but began utilizing it as a second language. This has been a widespread issue in Africa. For instance, at least some people in the Luo tribe in East Africa evidently had a very broad concept of *education* in their language.

The Luo took it for granted that education lasted a lifetime. One of their famous sayings is *Dhano Ipuonjo Nyaka Tho*—Translated literally, it means that a person is taught until he dies i.e. Education begins at the cradle and ends at the grave. It implies that no living person can ignore any kind of knowledge, irrespective of where it is from, on grounds that he has learnt enough. Nobody is regarded as such a fully accomplished scholar in any field that he needs no further instruction. On the other hand, very little direct instruction was given to anybody except in relation to a practice which was regarded as very pertinent to a particular aspect of life.<sup>13</sup>

But during the colonial era it was often assumed that *education* meant schooling or reading and writing. Most or all African tribes south of the Sahara did not have what we now term *education* in the form of *schooling* but did have institutionalized induction into the life of society. With a few notable exceptions, they knew no reading and writing. These are among several reasons why many Western Euro-

peans coming in contact with Africans regarded them as “uneducated” or “lacking education.” More recently, a number of scholars, Africans and non-Africans alike, have endeavored to demonstrate the existence and effectiveness of African traditional education (occasionally noting, however, that the sophistication of African traditional culture and education varied from society to society) and one of their points of departure at times is their definition or concept of *education* itself. For example,

To define education in terms of school or of reading and writing, is to mistake the “part” for the “whole” or the “wood” for the “tree”. Schooling and education are not synonymous terms. If, on the other hand, we define education as “the whole process by which one generation transmits its culture to the succeeding generation” or better still, as “a process by which people are prepared to live effectively and efficiently in their environment”, then it is quite easy to see that before the coming of the Europeans, there was an effective education system in each African clan, chiefdom, or kingdom. Education existed in Africa since man first became a social animal.<sup>14</sup>

Needless to say, various views about the shortcomings of both European education and African traditional education as practiced in Africa in the past and as carried over the present are widespread, and attempts are being made now in African countries to preserve and develop what is “best” from both of them. But it is easy to see that when an individual’s or group’s meaning of the word *education* or the related word *educated* and the connotations attached to them leads to regarding someone else holding a different view of *education* as “uneducated” or “without education,” it can be a highly emotional issue indeed. The matter becomes even more complex when translation between English and one or more other languages is involved.

This leads to still another aspect of the magnificent tangle, the problems faced when the work *education* (and other words closely associated with it) is translated from the English language to another of the 4000-5000 or more languages in the world. If it is true that the community of English-speakers in the world is about 300 million and is growing rapidly,<sup>15</sup> then the sobering fact remains that, as yet, less than one out of ten of the world’s peoples are English-speakers. What about the other nine—the overwhelming majority of the world’s peoples? What is their understanding of *education* in their thousands of languages?

The schematic model of translation between languages is one in which a message from a source-language passes into a receptor-language via a transformational process.<sup>16</sup> But a barrier exists in such translation.

The barrier is the obvious fact that one language differs from the other, that an interpretative transfer, sometimes, albeit misleadingly, described as encoding and decoding, must occur so that the message ‘gets through’.<sup>17</sup>

This changing, or encoding, is usually an unsatisfactory process.<sup>18</sup> All types of translation involve (1) loss of information, (2) addition of information, and/or (3) skewing of information.<sup>19</sup> Generally speaking, then, there is usually no exact correspondence between one language and another.

But in this case it is necessary to determine whether, according to principles of semantics, the same basic barrier exists. Evidently it does. The claim has been made that one of the basic principles of semantic correspondence (or lack of it) is that there are no exact correspondences between related words in different languages.<sup>20</sup> Thus, perfect translation of related terms between languages is difficult and perhaps even impossible, although compilers of interlingual dictionaries, with care, can give very useful approximate descriptions.

To test out this problem as it applies to the translation of the word *education* bet-

ween languages, I requested a lexicographer who has a command of the English, Swahili, Persian, and Arabic languages and is of Muslim background to make a comparative analysis. Although it has been claimed that a lexicographer often of necessity deals with the lexical tip—a dictionary is an inventory of consensual, therefore eroded and often “sub-significant” usages<sup>21</sup>—in this case the writer went somewhat below the lexical tip in his treatment of the subject, and the result is enlightening.

The term “education” (in English) in the widest sense may be held to include the whole process of development through which a human being passes from infancy to maturity, gradually adapting himself to his physical and social environment.

In Arabic and Persian the words “ilm” (ta’lim) and “adab” (ta’dib) are almost synonymous; whereas the former signifies “learning” or “science” the latter signifies “good breeding”, “politeness”, “literature” or “culture of the mind”. In Swahili the word “lea” besides meaning “bring up”, “rear”, also means “educate”. Its noun “malezi” means “rearing”, “bringing up” (both of nature generally, and of education).

According to Islam, in supplementation of, and partial opposition to, the concept of scholarship purposing specialized knowledge, another educational concept develops that purposes to mould the individual as a whole and to regulate the form of his social relations as well as the style and ethics of his professional activities. “Adab”, the general knowledge of everything, completes “ilm”, the thorough possession of one area of information.

Elegance is the criterion of formal perfection. It is supported by taste, taking its place as supreme judge by the side of reason. And the ‘reason’ is not the earnestly searching and augmentative tool of the philosopher; it is rather a compound of good sense and insight into the nature of people and the ways of the world.

To possess learning is not sufficient. The polish of “adab” must be added to perfect both the learning and the scholar who cultivates it. “The adornment of the learned is the beauty of his ‘adab’”, according to Irshad.

“Adab”, (Swahili “Adabu”) as a formal principle is all-inclusive and will fit everybody’s needs. But it will suit best those to whom it owes the best part of its development and who were primarily responsible for its wide adoption—the litterateurs.

Hence in Arabic, Persian and Swahili when we say so-and-so is very educated it does not mean that one is holding good paper qualifications but it connotes that one is learned, is of good breeding, polite in manners, and thoroughly cultured.<sup>22</sup>

If, as an aid in arriving at a more exact meaning for *education* in the process of translation both within the English language and between it and other languages, we seek a complete synonym in English for the word, again we are disappointed. As another basic principle of semantic correspondence, there are no complete synonyms within a language.<sup>23</sup> Thus, in English, words like *schooling, instruction, training, learning, knowledge* are not complete synonyms for *education*.

At this point we might begin to suspect that the word *education*, in some cases, can mean rather similar all the way to quite different things to different individuals and societies at different times. Polysemy is the capacity of the same word to mean different things (such difference ranging from nuance to antithesis) and characterizes the language of ideology.<sup>24</sup> For instance, the difference in meaning of *education*, particularly if used in a phrase such as “education for peace,” or a sentence like “Education is necessary for the progress of my nation,” may be considerable between persons from widely differing ideological backgrounds.

To further muddle the picture, authorities have maintained that *education* has broader and more restricted meanings in the English language. As might be expected, disagreement as well as points of agreement exist as to what those meanings are. To illustrate, here are two samples:

In its broad meaning, education embraces all those experiences of the individual through which knowledge is acquired, the intellect enlightened, and the will strengthened. In its restricted meaning, the term education is limited to the consciously planned and systematically applied *formal* education, carried on through the various social agencies of education, chiefly the school.<sup>25</sup>

Again,

*education*: (1) the aggregate of all the processes by means of which a person develops abilities, attitudes, and other forms of behavior of positive value in the society in which he lives; (2) the social process by which people are subjected to the influence of a selected and controlled environment (especially that of the school) so that they may attain social competence and optimum individual development; (3) ordinarily, a general term for the so-called "technical" or more specifically classified professional courses offered in higher institutions for the preparation of teachers and relating directly to educational psychology, philosophy and history of education, curriculum, special and general methods, instruction, administration, supervision, etc.; broadly, the total pattern of preparation, formal and informal, that results in the professional growth of teachers. . . (4) the art of making available to each generation the organized knowledge of the past.<sup>26</sup>

If it is true that *education* has a broader and more restricted meaning in English and that the relationship between the restricted and broader meaning is a fluid one, what is true for the broadly similar words found in thousands of the languages throughout the globe?

Yet another aspect of the problem needs to be considered. The claim has been made that, properly speaking, what alone has meaning is a sentence; the sense in which a word or phrase "has a meaning" is derivative from the sense in which a sentence "has a meaning."<sup>27</sup> Secondly, each time a word is used in a different sentence or utterance from the one in which it was used previously, the meaning of that word changes (although the change could range from minute to considerable). Assuming that these views apply to *education*, the ongoing, diverse ways in which the word is used in phrases and sentences would tend to further highlight the fluidity of its meaning. The same could very well apply to the words similar to *education* found in thousands of the world's languages.

A basic aim of this paper has been to attempt to throw some light on various aspects of *education* as a word, including, among other things, its meaning. By this point perhaps some portions of the magnificent tangle that is *education* may look less bewildering, while others may seem even worse than before. But a persistent, nagging question yet remains: obviously there are myriads of different meanings or definitions or concepts or views of the nature of education within a language and between languages, but could there be a generalized, universally-held concept that may be identified as something approximating the English *education* that can be found in all or nearly all of the world's living languages? I suspect that at least part of the answer to this question ties in with a closely related area of investigation—the universal characteristics of education. Or does the ultimate answer to this question lie in the future, with, we hope, a much more unified (and peaceful) world and the world-wide adoption of a universal language? Would this help reduce unnecessary misunderstandings? And untangle some of the tangle?

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#### *Footnotes:*

<sup>1</sup> *Language* may be regarded as an amorphous concept generally used to denote verbal forms of communication. *Etymology* may be defined as the investigation of the origin or derivation of words; *semantics* as the popular or elementary study of the meaning of words; *general modern linguistics* as the scientific study of language.

- <sup>2</sup>See J. L. Austin, "The Meaning of A Word," in Charles E. Caton (ed.), *Philosophy and Ordinary Language* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1963), p. 6.
- <sup>3</sup>Van Cleve Morris, "An Educational Theory," in Leslie M. M. Brown (ed.), *Aims of Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1970), p. 119.
- <sup>4</sup>R. S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1966), p. 36.
- <sup>5</sup>Stephen Ullman, "Semantic Universal," in Joseph Greenberg (ed.), *Universals of Language* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1966), p. 244.
- <sup>6</sup>See P. H. Hirst and R. S. Peters, *The Logic of Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 23-24.
- <sup>7</sup>Margaret Read, "Cultural Contacts in Education," in L. Gray Cowan, James O'Connell, and David Scanlon (eds.), *Education and Nation-Building in Africa* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1965), p. 353.
- <sup>8</sup>Majid Rahnama, "The Dimensions of the Evolving Human Being," in UNESCO, *Education on the Move* (Delhi: Vidya Mandal, 1975), p. 108.
- <sup>9</sup>Edgar Faure, et. Al., *Learning to Be; The World of Education Today and Tomorrow* (Paris: UNESCO, 1972), p. 233.
- <sup>10</sup>See Hirst and Peters, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
- <sup>11</sup>George F. Kneller, *Logic and Language of Education* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1966), p. 4.
- <sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup>N. A. Othieno Ochieng', *Education and Culture Change in Kenya 1844-1925* (Nairobi: Equatorial Publishers Ltd., n.d.), p. 17.
- <sup>14</sup>J. P. Ocitti, *African Indigenous Education As Practised by the Acholi of Uganda* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1973), p. 105.
- <sup>15</sup>George Steiner, *After Babel; Aspects of Language and Translation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 468.
- <sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 28.
- <sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup>I. S. P. Nation, "Translation and the Teaching of Meaning: Some Techniques," *English Language Teaching Journal*, 33:171, April 1978.
- <sup>19</sup>Eugene A. Nida, *Language Structure and Translation: Essays by Eugene A. Nida* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1975), p. 27.
- <sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 5.
- <sup>21</sup>Steiner, *op. cit.*, p. 197.
- <sup>22</sup>Statement by Ja'far Tejani, Head of the Department of Languages and Linguistics, Kenyatta University College, Nairobi, Kenya, July 20, 1978, partly citing Gustave E. von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1954), p. 252.
- <sup>23</sup>Nida, *Loc. cit.*
- <sup>24</sup>Steiner, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
- <sup>25</sup>John D. Redden and Francis A. Ryan, *A Catholic Philosophy of Education* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1956), p. 23.
- <sup>26</sup>Carter V. Good (ed.), *Dictionary of Education* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1959), p. 191.
- <sup>27</sup>Austin, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

### Résumé

Certains défenseurs d'une réforme de l'éducation prétendent qu'il faut aller jusqu'à une nouvelle définition, un nouveau concept de l'éducation elle-même. Cet article examine les difficultés que l'on rencontre lorsque l'on essaye d'établir ces concepts et ces définitions. Seule l'utilisation de l'étude de la langue (linguistique, sémantique et étymologie) est envisagée.