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# Register and Charge: Using Synonym Maps to Explore Connotation

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Darren Crovitz and Jessica A. Miller

# Register and Charge: Using Synonym Maps to Explore Connotation

To “help students think carefully about specific words and their uses,” Darren Crovitz and Jessica A. Miller conceive a diagram that visually expresses the spaces and ties between words. Students eagerly explore contextual connotations and defend subtle shifts in word meaning, discovering how time, use, and circumstance all influence meaning.

**D**riving down I-20 on our way to a state conference for English teachers, we are talking about—what else?—language and how to teach it. Jessica has recently started teaching sixth graders, Darren works with preservice English teachers, and the shoptalk rarely stops. If anyone else were in the car our conversation might make a fine lullaby, but to us it’s energizing and endlessly fascinating.

At the moment we are trying to figure out a way for Jessica’s students to gain a better sense of the connotations of words. Conventional English class lessons have taught them terms such as *synonym*, *simile*, and *metaphor*, but though most of her students can parrot memorized definitions of such terms, they don’t seem to have much of a sense of how word choice affects meaning.

Take the concept of *synonym*. Most of Jessica’s students can supply a conventional definition, some variation of “a word that means the same as another word.” But this understanding is at best an oversimplification and at worst a way to end thinking about what words actually signify. A better definition might stress that a synonym is a word not the same as but similar to another word; the subtlety of just how and to what extent it is similar makes all the difference when it comes to choosing the best word for a given purpose. The word *difficult* is similar to *strenuous*, *hard*, *challenging*, *arduous*, and *tough*, but each of these synonyms carries particular contextual and connotative differences in meaning that render them not quite the same as the rest. Similar, yes, but not the same.

Too often, however, essential discussions about what synonyms actually mean are skimmed over in typical lessons. Instead, the classroom thesaurus becomes a quick and dirty way to get “variety” into one’s writing—with a simple right-click in some word-processing programs, we can do the same—without sustained thinking about what makes certain synonyms more appropriate than others in certain situations. That is, students (and teachers, too) end up glossing over important language choices people make regarding *connotative impact*. When this happens, words get reduced to mere placeholders. This means that one synonym is as good as another, the only caveat being that any single word shouldn’t be used too often.

In the previous week, Jessica has attempted to introduce and discuss the notion of connotation with her students, but she has met with limited success. As we cruise down the highway checking signs and tracing our route on the map, we wonder if perhaps there is a way to create a graphic representation of how similar words relate to one another. What would such a visual aid look like? And how could it be used as a tool for students to interact with both familiar and unfamiliar words within a sensible system?

## Departure Points

It’s an ironic fact that many of us become English teachers because of a love affair with words, and yet the words *vocabulary instruction* do little to warm our hearts. The conventional drill-and-kill approach—

with students introduced to a new set of unfamiliar words on Monday and memorizing definitions for a Friday quiz—has driven much of the joy from learning about what words mean and how they work. This approach is also mostly ineffective, emphasizing rote learning of obscure words that most students have never previously encountered

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and whose meanings they will likely soon forget (Nilsen and Nilsen vi). The traditional task of looking up dictionary definitions, as Janet Allen has pointed out, is less a sense-building activity than a simple copying exercise (33–35). And as our colleague Jim Cope has noted, teachers employing this approach can spend up to 40 percent of their instructional time on a system that simply doesn't

work—though it can certainly keep students busy locating definitions, filling out worksheets, and taking quizzes. Some teachers simply avoid explicit vocabulary work at all, often on a mandate from a department or district. Others will use a quasi-contextual approach by deriving word lists from the texts students are currently studying, making the reasonable argument that students will thus have encountered the word at least once in actual use.

We are well aware of the pressures that have led teachers to these decisions, as we have felt them ourselves. But we also believe that there are better ways to help students think carefully about specific words and their uses than relying on pointless memory drills or random appearance in curricular texts. In *Words, Words, Words: Teaching Vocabulary in Grades 4–12*, Allen advocates a systematic approach to the subtleties of word meanings, often built around graphical organizers. Similarly, Judith Rowe Michaels asks students to consider the phonological, etymological, evolutionary, and allusive aspects of the words they encounter as a means of deriving a fuller understanding (9–12). We are particularly fond of the source-based approach to vocabulary instruction as detailed by Alleen Pace Nilsen and Don L. F. Nilsen in their *Vocabulary Plus* texts, which offer students a way to understand the oft-hidden relationships that connect seemingly unrelated words. Nilsen and Nilsen use

common morphemes as the starting point for talking about words (most of us are familiar with morphemes in the form of root words, suffixes, and prefixes—some of the smallest units of language that carry meaning). From creating and considering a web of related words originating from individual morphemes, students can next move on to explore the rich metaphorical extensions of these concepts that fill our everyday language (1–3).

Both of us have had success with lessons and activities integrating a source-based approach to vocabulary into our classes. Puzzling now about how to teach connotation, we are trying to envision a similar system that starts with how words are connected. It slowly occurs to us that what we are talking about are *the spaces between* similar words as much as the words themselves. That is, we are trying to understand how words are oriented and to negotiate the pathways that tie them together.

What we need is a word map.

### Charting a Course

Since Darren is driving, Jessica is working on an initial sketch. In a notebook she's drawn the diagram shown in Figure 1. She explains that the horizontal line represents denotation: the standard literal definition of words. The looping spirals that intersect with the line are what particular words connote in different contexts. So a verb such as *terminate*, with its denotative meaning of *to end*, simultaneously carries with it a connotative meaning that extends from this baseline idea.

We ponder this diagram for a while. It makes sense, but at the same time it seems somehow limited, as if the visual metaphor isn't fully explained. After a while we try another diagram, this one immediately familiar to anyone who's ever taken an algebra class: a simple matrix with an x-axis and a y-axis (see fig. 2). Now we have two dimensions, and thus potentially two variables by which to evaluate words. "What if we make the y-axis *word charge*—you know, the emotional

FIGURE 1. Connotation: An Initial Sketch

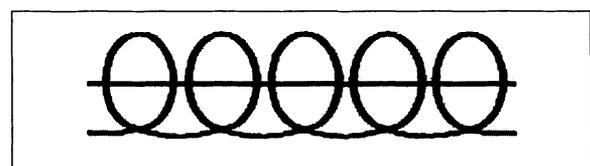


FIGURE 2. Two-Dimensional Matrix

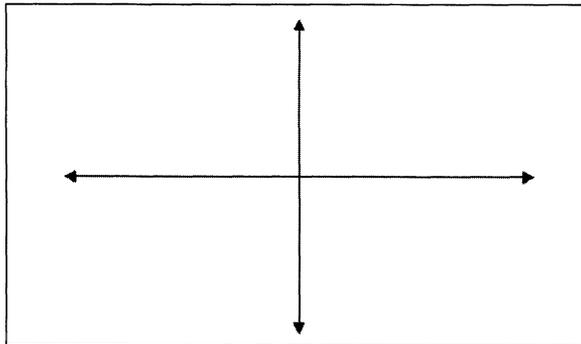
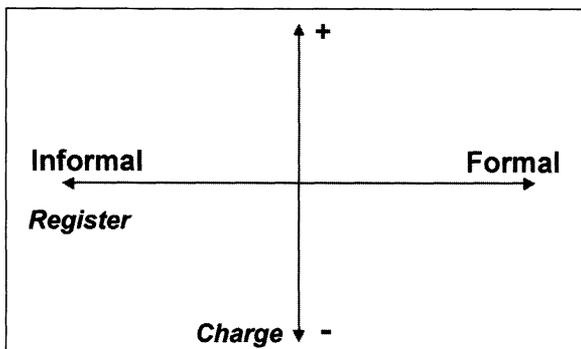


FIGURE 3. Register and Charge Matrix

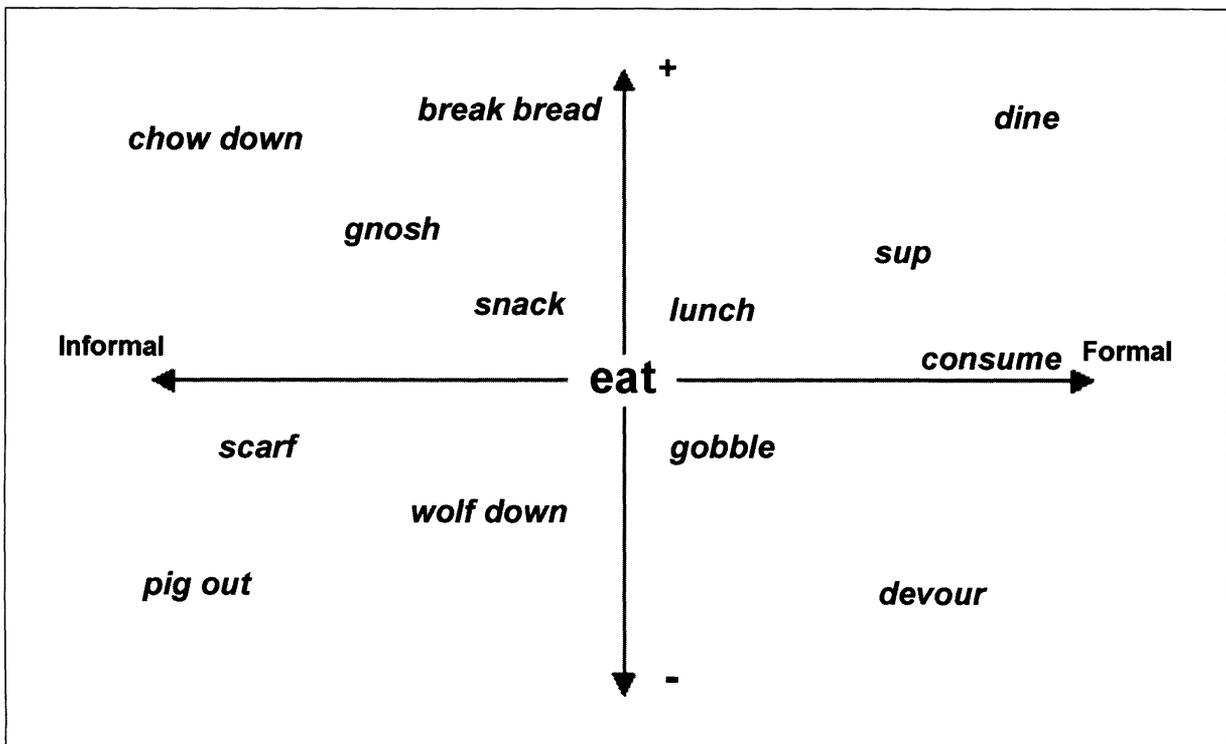


sense some words have—and it goes from negative to positive,” Darren suggests. “And the x-axis . . .”

“That can go from informal to formal. *Register*.” Jessica jots down the labels. Now we have the diagram in Figure 3. We begin playing around with how this diagram might work.

“We could put a word—a simple, common kind of word with lots of synonyms—in the middle,” Jessica points out, “and then we can chart the synonyms.” We give it a try with *eat*, and suddenly the long list of common synonyms for this verb begins to arrange itself systematically on the page (see fig. 4). Several aspects of this system are immediately noticeable to us. First, discussion is central to the process. Is *snack* more formal or informal, or is it in the middle? Do *devour* and *gobble* carry a negative charge? If so, which is more negative, and why? And which is more formal? As we talk about our understandings of these words, we are forced to explain our contextual understandings to one another—when and where and under what conditions we have heard or seen these words used—and make a case for why they belong in one space rather than another. Meaning becomes socially constructed, less about a dictionary definition

FIGURE 4. Matrix for *Eat*



and more about our shared understanding and pool of experience. Personal certainty about what a word connotes slowly gives way to a contextual consensus.

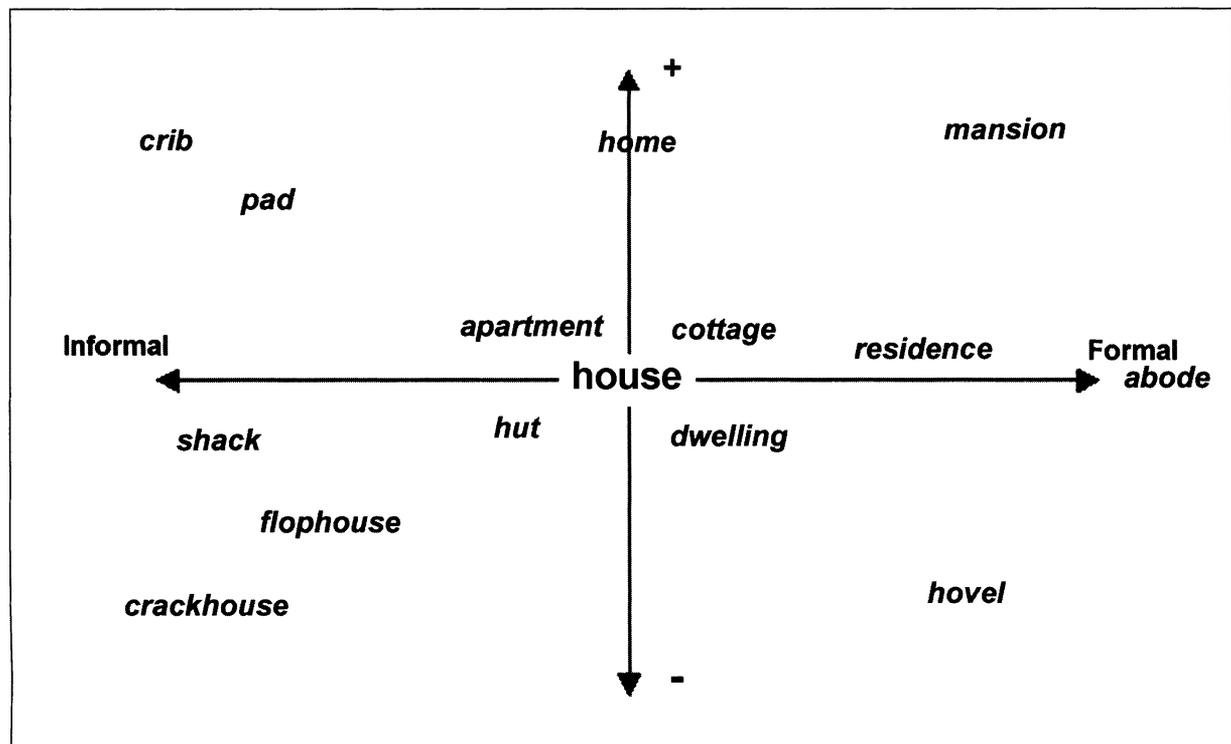
We also become aware that concepts have certain definitional limits. For instance, does *absorb* warrant a spot on the *eat* matrix? It can be argued that *absorb* is sometimes a synonym of *eat*, perhaps when the subject is how amoebas or Venus flytraps obtain nutrition. But then again, there seems to be a point at which such “almost synonyms” edge into the matrices of neighboring concepts. If so, we might imagine *take in* as another base concept with its own matrix of synonyms, of which *absorb*, *digest*, and *swallow* are members.

We continue experimenting with this graphical organizer, trying out nouns, adjectives, adverbs, exclamations. We have the most luck beginning with a common concept that carries little inherent register or charge. In contrast, starting with a base word that already carries some obvious connotation—*pretty*, for example—presents more of a challenge. Are there words that are synonyms of *pretty* that have negative connotations? We come up with a few candidates (*gaudy*, *garish*) but they feel problematic.

During our weekend conference we continue thinking about how we might use such a word matrix, and on our drive back we continue the discussion, trying out new words in this system and looking for nuances. We decide to incorporate the diagram into our classes in the next few weeks to get student feedback on the system. Darren provides groups of preservice secondary English teachers with a base word around which to develop word maps on poster paper, after which they present their conclusions to one another. Jessica creates a similar group project for her English language arts sixth graders. She finds it particularly helpful to continually question her students as they grapple with synonyms. *Are you trying to attract someone or gross them out? Are you trying to make someone feel comfortable or make them uneasy? Are you using official-sounding language or slang?* Students are noticeably engaged by these activities and eager to talk about their rationale for placing certain words. Not surprisingly, through the process they discover possibilities for how this visual representation might be elaborated to generate more meaning.

Consider a synonym matrix for the noun *house* (see fig. 5). There is much revealed in this

FIGURE 5. Matrix for *House*



visualization that can help students see the appropriateness of choosing a particular word over another to fit a context. Conversations might explore the categorical connotations of kinds of houses (*mansions, cottages, apartments*) as well as more general terms (*abode, pad*), exercises similar to Allen's concept of "linear arrays" through which students explore degrees between extremely opposite terms (such as *freezing* and *boiling*) with words that indicate subtle gradations: *cold, cool, tepid, warm, hot*, and so forth (52).

And yet, even as they are presented above, the words appear somewhat static, locked into their matrix positions once we have agreed on their general coordinates. We know, however, that the meanings of words can change in different contexts as well as over time. Is there a way we can represent this?

The term *crib* provides an interesting example. A little student investigation reveals at least three uses of this word, all with a meaning related to "housing" something. There's the current slang use for someone's home (as in the reality TV show *MTV Cribs*), along with the common meaning of a baby's bed with enclosed sides. Another use originates in farming and can mean a cattle stall or a grain bin (as in *corn crib*). Can we represent how these meanings have changed on the matrix and, in doing so, discuss some of the implications? (See fig. 6.)

Arguably, we can envision a gradual shift in both charge and register for *crib* over time. The use that originated in farm utility now also suggests the cozier notion of a baby's home. Consider the biblical story of Jesus in the manger: The baby Jesus slept in a box from which cattle ate grain (a

*crib*). Modern hip-hop-influenced usage has transformed the meaning of *crib* even further, dropping the infant associations while expanding the sense of familiarity, safety, and comfort. If students can imagine words as not simply occupying slots of permanent meaning but instead evolving over time and governed by context, they are engaging in higher level thinking about what words mean and can do.

Our class discussions yielded other opportunities as well. For instance, what if we add the prefix "Mc" to the word *mansion*? Does this change its meaning? (See fig. 7.) With the addition of a two-letter prefix—a prefix loaded with cultural significance—the meaning of *mansion* shifts in an extreme way, from positive to negative and from formal to snidely casual. Too often, prefixes and suffixes are taught in a rote fashion from a long, disassociated list. Here, however, the impact of two additional letters becomes evident and the protean nature of language is to some extent demystified. The contrast between these two words naturally raises questions, leading students toward a discussion of the origin of this prefix as well as its connotations and uses. This is a vocabulary conversation based in real, everyday language rather than on obscure lists from a study guide, a discussion immediately relevant to their lives: What's the difference between a "job" and a "McJob," and which one would they rather have in the future?

## Looking Ahead

A few years ago, the pop group Black Eyed Peas achieved chart success and ubiquitous radio airplay

FIGURE 6. Evolution of *Crib*

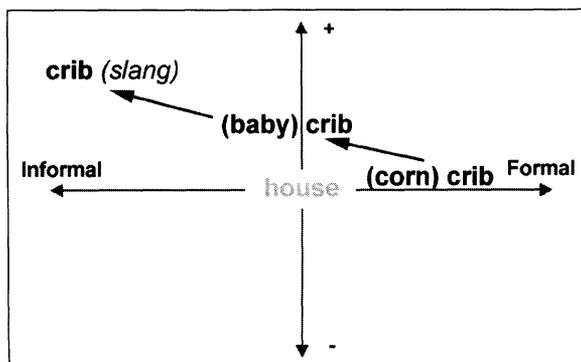
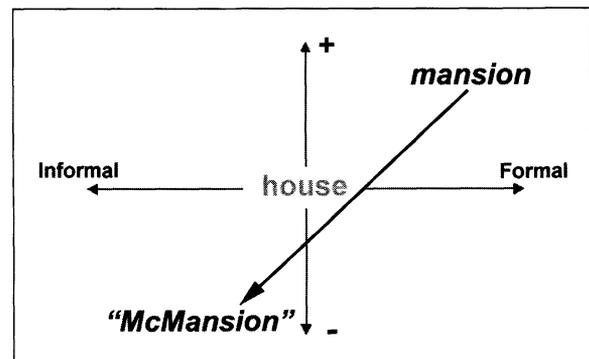


FIGURE 7. Addition of *Mc* Prefix



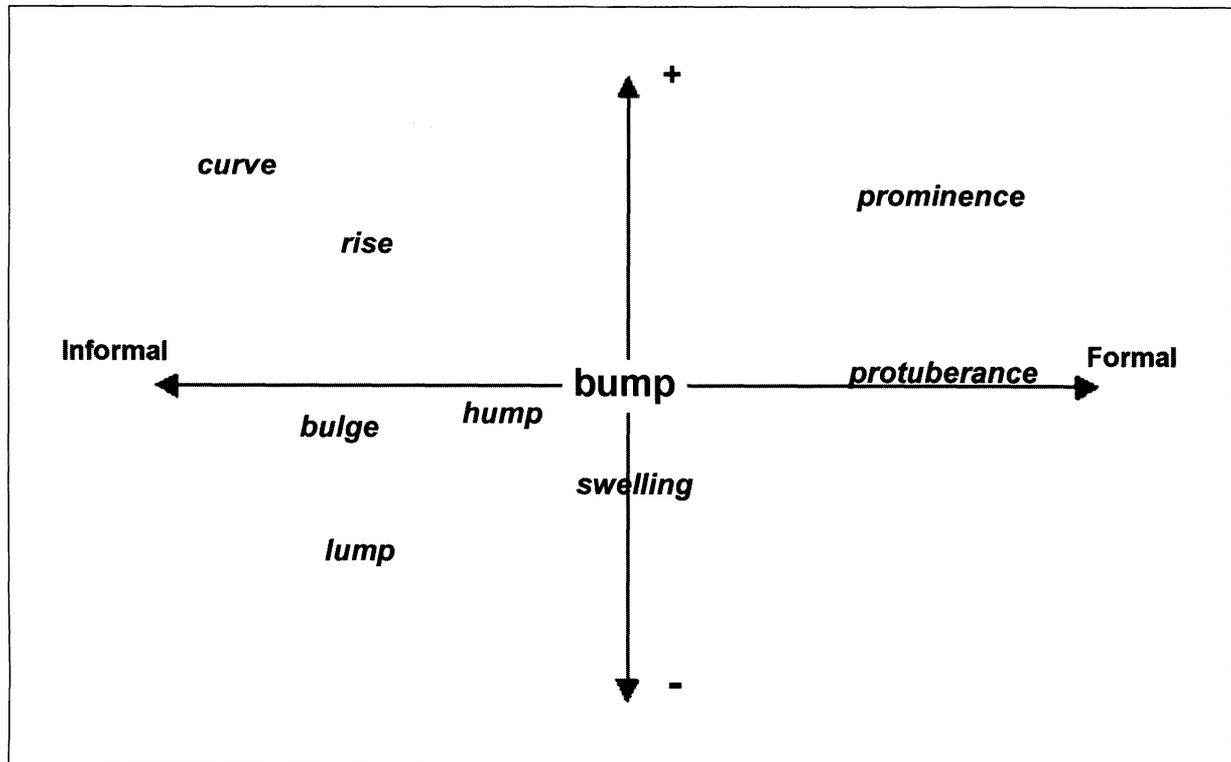
with a song titled “My Humps.” Both of us were puzzled and put off by the song’s lyrics; the “humps” refer to parts of the female anatomy, which are also represented in the line “my lovely lady lumps.” As English teachers we were immediately sensitive to the peculiar word choice at work here. Mapped around a central concept, the source of our angst is illuminated (see fig. 8). For us, both *bump* and *lump* have slightly negative connotations. *Bump* calls to mind camels and Quasimodo; *lumps* on one’s body are sometimes caused by getting punched, or worse, they are a possible sign of cancer. The conflict between connotative and denotative meanings in the song created a dissonance for us, though as listeners we were operating from a particular context that may not be the same for others.

Our contextual language experience adds another layer of complexity to understanding connotation. The value of asking students to construct this kind of map lies not in reaching some ultimate definitional taxonomy (say, in which *bump* and *lump* are definitively labeled negative) but in revealing the

often unconsidered byways that connect words in a wider web, which in turn shifts and evolves with time, use, and circumstance. There may well be ways to map words with other variables in service of deeper understanding. For instance, we have considered a possible z-axis for this matrix that would render another level of subtlety within a three-dimensional space. What would this new axis represent? Some possibilities include a historical spectrum (from *archaic* to *modern*), a regional/cultural shift (such as *American English* to *British English* or *rural* to *urban*), or an axis that moves from *literal* to *figurative* usage. The possibilities here are many.

Like any map or tool, this one has its limitations, and we are still exploring the merits and drawbacks of this metaphor. Placing words at coordinates may imply a mathematical certainty of meaning; beyond matrices, Jessica likes the idea of a spherical space in which synonyms—like electrons around nuclei—vibrate, shift, and are shared. (Thinkmap’s “Visual Thesaurus” at <http://www.visualthesaurus.com> employs a similar schema.)

FIGURE 8. Matrix for *Bump*



Discussing these visualizations, we try to keep in mind Ann E. Berthoff's caveat about schematic organizers: that such devices can be overly emphasized to the extent that we lose sight of their larger purpose (76). The destination of these exercises with words is not that students learn how to accurately pigeonhole terms, but that they instead develop a more subtle and fluent comprehension of language options as demonstrated through their writing and speaking.

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#### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

When working with their students on synonyms and synonym maps, Crovitz and Miller discuss the role of denotation and connotation. In "She Did What? Revising for Connotation," students examine the simple sentence "She walked into the room." Students act out ways that "she" might enter the room, revising the sentence to increase the specificity of "walked" and explore connotation. Students follow this demonstration by selecting words with powerful connotations for their writing. [http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson\\_view.asp?id=80](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=80)

## EJ 75 Years Ago

### Standards Must Acknowledge That Language Is a Living Organism

It is the A B C of linguistic science to know that language is a social product; that its creation, preservation, and change are matters resting upon social utility, not of selected individuals, but of the whole group. Second, that "the language" is the speech of the people and that the standards of use and correctness must be based upon the spoken language; its written form, and particularly the "literary" form, is a highly limited and conventionalized segment of the language. And third that language is a living, growing organism in a constant state of flux, so that any standards set for it must be constantly modified compromises between the drag of tradition and the forward pull of change.

Robert C. Pooley. "Grammar and Usage in Composition Textbooks." *EJ* 22.1 (1933): 16–20.