


Re-: An Errant Glossary, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 15 (Berlin: ICI Berlin, 2019), pp. vii–xv

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Preface

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Preface

In the realm of ‘theory’ — the discourse traversing academic departments and negotiating their interdisciplinary commerce —, much of the heavy lifting is done by prefix. The claim holds true, or so it may seem, for modern cultural formations in general: At some point in the nineteenth century, the Catholic church developed its habit of seeing in inconvenient aspects of modernization mere returns of ancient heresies, denouncing, for example, secular life as ‘neo-pelagianism’. The prefix ‘neo-’ migrated beyond apologetics and drove much of the industrially enhanced historicist differentiation of ‘styles’ in architecture and visual culture (‘neogothic’ being the most prominent), spreading through many cultural realms well into philosophy (‘neokantianism’, ‘neohegelianism’, etc.).¹ The twentieth century added the no less emblematic prefixes ‘anti-’, ‘trans-’, and very soon also ‘post-’ as the ultimate marker of the quintessentially modern belief in historical acceleration.²

1 The term ‘neokantianism’ can be dated to 1875, whereas ‘neoplatonism’ emerged in German eighteenth-century histories of philosophy, by way of a slow and intricate contraction from ‘newer platonians (Neuere Platoniker)’: See Helmut Holzhey, ‘Neukantianismus’ and Helmut Meinhardt, ‘Neuplatonismus’, in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. by Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer, and Gottfried Gabriel, 13 vols (Basel: Schwabe, 1971–2007), VI (1984), pp. 747–54, 754–56.

2 The OED dates the first occurrence of ‘post-Impressionist’ and ‘post-Impressionism’ to 1910, *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000–) <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 3 January 2018].

Yet the work of theory seems to avail itself of more refined or better camouflaged prefixes, less explicitly denoting a position, historical or otherwise, and marked by operational pervasiveness rather than thematic exposition. In these prefixations, the latinate stratum of the English lexicon is heavily favoured; and latinate prefixes in particular — such as ‘de-’ and ‘re-’ — boast a morphological fecundity that allows them to colonize non-latin parts of the lexicon as well, pleasantly tingeing scholarly discourses with the latinate hue of learnedness.

Critics have begun to pay attention to the different valences these subtler prefixes bring into play in a rather underhanded fashion. Thus, Rita Felski, in her 2015 manifesto *The Limits of Critique*, switches into italics to describe a veritable war of prefixes:

*We shortchange the significance of art by focusing on the ‘de’ prefix (its power to demystify, destabilize, denaturalize) at the expense of the ‘re’ prefix: its ability to recontextualize, reconfigure, or recharge perception.*³

The exclamation is remarkable not just because what is being advocated for so vigorously is nothing more than a two-letter prefix, but for the way in which it mobilizes the ambiguity of the possessive pronoun ‘its’ to drain the supposed ‘significance of art’ into the antagonism of ‘powerful’ prefixes, detaining the detrimental ‘de-’ in brackets, wholeheartedly embracing the benign ‘re-’ with a colon. Felski’s poignant question — what’s in a prefix? — casts itself as a

3 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 17. Felski’s book has been widely discussed. See, for example, the eight responses collected in ‘On Rita Felski’s *The Limits of Critique*’, *PMLA*, 132.2 (March 2017), pp. 331–83, as well as Felski’s response to them: ‘Response’, *ibid.*, pp. 384–91.

synthesis of her masterful snapshot of current theorizing, anchored in a nuanced appreciation of the impact affect theory has had in many overlapping fields, but in particular in queer theory (which, in turn, assumed a vehicular function in the affective turns of various disciplines). Her observations that the prefix ‘de-’, while engendering formidably complex readings, reduces the valuable possibilities of art and politics to their ‘againstness’ and ‘resistance’ and that it frequently feigns a kind of surgical precision, a neutral negativity, are indeed compelling. Yet they also risk veiling their own detachments and the inherently unstable proximity of ‘repair’ and re-doubled negativity, which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s seminal essay playfully evokes in its subtitle ‘You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You.’⁴ Somewhat vexingly, Felski’s ‘suspicions’ about the use of the ‘de-’ prefix proves indeed more illuminating than her confidence in the power of ‘re-’ to conclusively depart from the routines of ‘critical idioms’, the paralyzing stance of a hermeneutics of suspicion, the probing pointlessness of close reading, or the reflexes of ideology critique. The burden is considerable: for Felski — but she is far from alone in this — ‘re-’ will not only reorient the humanities, but bridge the divide between the scholarly treatment of art and the layperson’s appreciation, and the even more worrying rift between theory and activism within feminism and queer movements.

In a subsequent publication, a stunning essay collec-

4 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You’, in Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 123–51. See Heather Love, ‘Truth and Consequences: On Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading’, *Criticism*, 52.2 (Spring 2010), pp. 235–41, for a distinctly un-Manichaean reading of Sedgwick’s essay.

tion entitled *Critique and Postcritique*, Felski and her co-editor Elizabeth Anker toned down the celebration of 're-', settling, at the very outset of their introduction, on a very even-handed re-word, though it is still being played against the chosen prefix of theories past:

We are currently in the midst of a recalibration of thought and practice whose consequences are difficult to predict. There is little doubt that debates about the merits of critique are very much in the air and that the intellectual or political payoff of interrogating, demystifying, and defamiliarizing is no longer quite so self-evident.⁵

The very circumspect introduction acknowledges the 'complex temporality' of the totemistic 'post-' suspended in the volume's title and generated by the attempt to look for a 'postcritique' that would avoid both being uncritical, but also sliding back into critique by engaging in a 'critique of critique.'⁶ The difference between 'recalibration' and the meatier 're-' words heralded in the earlier publication signals the richness of 're-', its indeed quite unpredictable, at times positively erratic behaviour. The same, of course, could be said about 'de-', even if it may have been favoured in the past, as Felski astutely observes, because it seemed to offer a clear orientation, a clear pathway to negation. The two prefixes as well as their relation have indeed always been more complicated. Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's play of 'deterritorialization' and 'reterritorialization', for example, is non-dialectic and non-antagonistic, yet gives the 're-' little chance to shine

5 Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski, 'Introduction', in *Critique and Postcritique*, ed. by Anker and Felski (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 1–28 (p. 1).

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 2.

even if the 'de-' is encompassed by other re-words, such as Deleuze's understanding of repetition; and anyone who wanted to relate Jacques Derrida's 'deconstruction' to 'reconstruction' immediately revealed themselves to be a retrograde ignoramus.⁷

This is indeed the zone where the subtle fixations of prefixation tangle with the Eurocentring totems of peri-odization, 'neo-', 'post-', and 'anti-', all of which are preceded by the strange anachronizing gyrations of that modern master-re-signifier 'renaissance'.⁸ And conversely, the story of 'de-' would have to be tracked back, at least, to Max Weber's definition of modernity as a 'disenchantment (Entzauberung)', which in turn was designed to shift away from Karl Marx's 'Entfremdung (alienation, or, literally and vexingly, de-alienation)'. Indeed, not only does Weber's term resonate in Felski's critique 'demystification', but her trenchant critique of 'de-' words strictly aligns with a grotesque de-lirium of Carl Schmitt's:

All de-theologisations, de-politicisations, de-juridifications, de-ideologisations, de-historicisations, or any other series of de-prefixed entities [Ent-Entungen] tending towards a tabula rasa are nullified. The *tabula rasa* de-tabularises itself and is erased with its *tabula*.⁹

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- 7 Adrian Parr, 'Deterritorialization/Reterritorialization' and 'Repetition', in *The Deleuze Dictionary*, revised edn, ed. by Parr (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 69–72 and 225–26. Jacques Derrida, 'Letter to a Japanese Friend', trans. by David Wood and Andrew Benjamin, in *Derrida, Psyché: Inventions of the Other II*, ed. by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 1–6.
- 8 The full 'anachronic' potential of the renaissance is unlocked dazzlingly in Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).
- 9 Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie II: Die Legende von der Erledigung jeder Politischen Theologie* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1970), p. 124,

It should thus be clear that the prefix ‘re-’ should be pitched against ‘de-’ only with the greatest care and without smoothing over its rifts or gathering its folds, and without hoisting a prefix into the dubious realm of the concept.¹⁰ Felski’s and Anker’s ‘recalibration’ exercises this care, taking distance from anything like a *restitutio ad integrum*.¹¹ Yet the careful withdrawal into a recalibrative use of the prefix still does not acknowledge the plurivectorial tension that constitutes ‘re-’, a tension that renders ‘re-’ inescapably multistable, suited indeed for de/constituting wholes and bringing out their errant underpinnings.¹² That the divergences of language and logic can be traced perhaps at the level of the former’s morphology, perhaps even more instructively than in the no less uneasy relation between syntax and predication, has been pointed out by Willard Van Orman Quine, in his terse essay on ‘Prefixes’:

in English as *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of Any Political Theology*, trans. and introduced by Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), p. 128.

- 10 A fascinating suggestion by Edgar Morin redeemed not only by its totalizing abandon, but also by its entangling of prefixations with conceptual, ‘de-’-related tensions between physics and biology, opposing ‘re-’ to linear, mechanical determination and embedding it in the irreversible time of entropic decomposition. Cf. ‘RE: From Prefix to Paradigm’, *World Futures*, 61 (2005), pp. 254–67 (p. 255): ‘[W]e must think of RE not as a prefix but as a paradigmatic concept that informs all our thinking.’
- 11 As difficult as it may be to resist the lure of a title such as Robert Coyle, *‘RE’: God’s Favorite Prefix* (Montgomery, AL: E-BookTime, 2013).
- 12 Alluding here to a series of ICI Publications is not to suggest that there is anything linear, let alone necessary, in the sequence of ICI projects and publications. Cf. *Tension/Spannung*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2010), *Multistable Figures: On the Critical Potentials of Ir/Reversible Aspect-Seeing*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2014), *De/Constituting Wholes: Towards Partiality Without Parts*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati and Christoph F. E. Holzhey (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2017).

Our prefix re- [...] is Latin in origin and double in meaning. It can mean ‘again’, as in recreate and reiterate, and it can mean ‘back’, as in rebound. The full form is red-, and the d is kept before vowels; thus redeem (red plus emere, ‘buy back’) and reintegrate. In French the two senses tend to be distinguished by the vowel: re- for ‘again’ and ré- for ‘back’. This could help us remember which words have re- and which ré-, but regrettably it is not dependable.¹³

Lack of dependability means something very different to logicians and to linguists, and the latter would no doubt add that Quine is mistaken in thinking that even the ‘re-’s of his English examples had the same vowels — the ‘re-’s of English vary, at least phonetically, between /ri/, /rɪ/, and /rə/, and /re/. A morphological segmentation of ‘refer’, ‘defer’, for example, while it may lead to interesting etymological speculations, violates the Saussurian requirement according to which the minimal linguistic sign has to be an arbitrary, yet constant union of sound and meaning.¹⁴

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- 13 Willard Van Orman Quine, ‘Prefixes’, in Quine, *Quiddities: An Intermittently Philosophical Dictionary* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 162–65 (p. 164). One of the words in which ‘re-’ signifies not a repetition but a rebounding is ‘reaction’. Jean Starobinski, *Action and Reaction: The Life and Adventures of a Couple*, trans. by Sophie Hawkes (New York: Zone Books, 2003) presents a stunning history of the meteoric rise of ‘reaction’ from Newton’s third law to political semantics and psychoanalysis. This history should be registered as a tectonic shift in the varied landscape of ‘re-’prefixation.
- 14 Sergio Scalise and Emiliano Guevara, ‘The Lexical Approach to Word-Formation and the Notion of the Lexicon’, in *Handbook of Word-Formation*, ed. by Pavol Štekauer and Rochelle Lieber (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), pp. 147–87 (p. 157). The problem of ‘bound morphs’ was recognized by ancient and medieval grammarians and indeed discussed in connection with the prefix ‘re-’. See Vivien Law, ‘The Middle Ages’, in *Morphologie / Morphology: Ein internationales Handbuch zur Flexion und Wortbildung / An International Handbook on Inflection and Word-Formation*, ed. by Geert Booij, Christian Lehmann, and Joachim Mugdan, 2 vols (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2000–2004), 1 (2000), pp. 76–90 (pp. 83–84).

The layered realm of logical and linguistic complications, thus, calls for an exploration — this is the very wager of this glossary — that acknowledges the synchronically as well as diachronically errant constitution of unbounded languages.

The contributors of the present volume encountered the prefix ‘re-’ not through the work of one of its champions but rather through a series of serendipitous — and hence, of course, potentially ‘symptomatic’ — accidents and convergences. All the authors were members of a research group assembled at the ICI Berlin in 2016 in order to pursue a common two-year project entitled ‘ERRANS, in Time’. While their individual projects related to the idea of an errant dimension within time and among non-synchronizable temporal experiences, their approaches, anchored in radically different disciplinary and other traditions, had not been chosen to harmonize with one another. Nonetheless, very early on, the prefix ‘re-’ emerged in several of the individual and collaborative projects and subsequently in some of the public events organized by the ICI Fellows, from a conference on repetition in medieval culture entitled ‘The Shape of Return’¹⁵ to an engagement with ‘reenactment’ as a crucial strategy of contemporary art production.¹⁶

In the Fall of 2017, the research group presented its reflections in a public workshop adhering to a set of strict

15 ‘The Shape of Return: Progress, Process, and Repetition in Medieval Culture’, organized by Francesco Giusti and Daniel Reeve, ICI Berlin, 29–30 September 2017 <<https://www.ici-berlin.org/events/the-shape-of-return/>> [accessed 3 January 2019].

16 ‘Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Art and Theory’, organized by Cristina Baldacci, Clio Nicastro, and Arianna Sforzini, ICI Berlin, 16–17 November 2017 <<https://www.ici-berlin.org/events/over-and-over/>> [accessed 3 January 2019].

rules: Each participant was to give two ten-minute presentations, each dealing with a single 're-'word, one in a morning session, the other in the afternoon. The great success of the workshop inspired the idea of the current volume, which translates a sequential event into the spatial distribution of a glossary of 're-'words, far from comprehensive and proceeding not from fixed ideas about a definite meaning, let alone inherent virtue of the prefix. It registers the irreducibly plural constitutions and effects of 're-'words in order to trace the complex temporal logic folded into many of them. This requires also a return to older modes of theorizing, which, despite their 'de'-saturated terminologies, have been redescribed as efforts to emancipate repetition and reiteration from sameness — thereby sourcing ERRANS in time. The endeavour is deliberately collective, instigating a swarm-like exploration of very different segments and crevices of a very much erratically constituted stock of 're-'words. As such, it invites non-linear and transversal readings, but also future extensions, contestations, and re-distributions.

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