Which Is to Be Master—V

Reuben Hersh

There are lots of missing words in English. Take “striction” and “struction” and “scription.” What do they mean? They’re missing! That means, available! Open for anyone with a good idea to grab!

We’ve got “constriction” and “construction” and “con-
scription”. “Inscription” and “instruction” are here, but
where’s “instriction”? Where are “rescription” and “restruc-
tion”? “Prescription” is taken already, but not “prestriction”
or “prestruction”.

Credit J.S. Peirce with grabbing “abduction” to go along
with “induction” and “deduction”. Nobody else followed
his lead to make “abduction” a household word, but at
least you will find it in any study of the philosophy of J.S.
Peirce. Where are the crowds who could be following his
example? (Never mind Mozart’s Abduction from the Sera-
glio, that non-philosophical kind of abduction is beside the
point!!)

Mathematicians use each other’s names to label new
mathematical gadgets, and then there’s also the French
method, giving us “adèles” and “idèles”. How much better
to go to Latin roots with interchangeable prefixes—so
available, straightforward, and flexible! Just think of all the

Photo by Stan Sherer.

fascinating concepts that could be referred to as obstriction
and obscription. I could go on and on...

*[This is surely non-controversial—indeed it is proversial.—
Ch.D.]*

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This series was inspired, of course, by Humpty Dumpty’s “The question is which is to be master, that’s all.” Thus for mathematicians, does our terminology rule us, or are we free to decide on our terminology? Earlier notes in the series, by Chandler Davis and Ian Stewart, were in *Math. Intelligencer* vol. 14, no. 2, 51; vol. 15, no. 1, 15; vol. 15, no. 2, 26; vol. 18, no. 2, 37. The series has been dormant, and we welcome this contribution as a way to revive it.