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# "Deep as a Giant" : An Experiment in Children's Language (1938)

Claudia Lewis

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# The Bank Street Thinkers

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Foundational Knowledge to  
Support our Roots and Wings



# “Deep as a Giant”

## An Experiment in Children’s Language

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Claudia Lewis (1938)

*Four- and five-year-olds think that water can be “deep as a giant,” that some things are “slow as you grow up” and others as “quiet as you cut cotton.” Delightful, imaginative concepts which give sparkle to living.*

Elizabeth, five years old, stood looking at the large boat she had built of boxes and blocks in our school play yard. “The water around my boat is deep as a giant,” she said.

This concept of deepness surprised me. I realized that if I had been called upon at that moment to describe the water around her boat, I probably should have said, “Deep as anything.”

When we went in from the play yard to our classroom, I told the whole group of children—about eight of them—what Elizabeth had said, and suggested that they all think of some other deep things. “We might write the deepest story in the world,” I said. “What is the deepest thing in the world: Deep as... “

“Deep as sand down in the ocean.”... “Deep as dirt under the ground.”... “Deep as from the sky down!”

These, and many more, the children poured out, shouted out, with zest and delight. And so began a year-long experiment on my part, a game on the part of the children—a game of playing in this way with our concepts, our speech, for the fun of it.

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One day I stopped a child who had just said, “Oh, it’s easy as pumpkin pie!” and asked him and the others to think of what was *really* easy. It was hard for me to jot down fast enough the thirty or so easiest things in the world that came tumbling out of their mouths, ranging from “Easy as drinking water,” and “Easy as wind blows paper all around the sky,” to this epitome of ease: “Easy as when you wash your face in the morning, your cheeks get red.”

The next step was to concentrate on the difficult things. First came: “Hard as catching a train when you come up late and it’s just leaving.”... “Hard as to break your hand.”... “Hard as to cut your hair like a barber.” Then these four lines followed inevitably one upon the other:

*Hard as to hear when you’re deaf,  
Hard as to see when you’re blind,  
Hard as to talk when you’re dumb,  
Hard as to walk when you have a broken leg.*

Again, we tried to think of what was fast and what was slow. To a five-year-old a wink apparently is not the quickest thing in the world, nor is a snail the slowest! But fire burning paper is fast, and an electric fan is fast, and so is a fireman sliding down a pole. One clear-visioned little girl said simply and casually, “Fast as you see yourself in the mirror.”

When we turned to the slow things, we found: “Slow as your new teeth come in.”... “Slow as clocks.”... “Slow as you grow up.”... and this last, which is so painfully slow that even I find it hard to conceive of: “Slow as one man building a bridge.”

“Flat as fishes,” “Flat as a button,” and “flat as a necktie,” came as welcome variations of the well-worn pancake.

But what seemed to please us all the most was the Quiet Story. The children recurred to this again and again, spontaneously offering more suggestions from day to day. Not one among them mentioned that a mouse was quiet. Instead, they said: “Quiet as you close your eyes.”... “Quiet as sunshine comes out.”... “Quiet as a thermometer goes up.”... “The sky moves very soft and the whole world.”... “Quiet as you cut cotton.” And it was Elizabeth who startled me again with, “Quiet as a splinter comes in.”

I didn’t always ask for these more or less abstract concepts. One day, during a heavy snowstorm when the flakes were coming down crisscross, as I should say, I asked the children to look out and tell me how the snow was falling. Martin saw his analogy right away: “The snow looks like darn-ing,” he said. Another child looked for a while, then said, “I feel like *I’m* going around and around in a circle.” Cynthia puzzled me for an instant, so unaccustomed were my adult eyes to such fresh ways of seeing: “The snowflakes go like a kitten’s tongue.”

Another time we were watching our pet white mouse: “His nose looks like a little church, a sharp little church with the point up.”... “His tail looks like pink linen.”

Once when we had turtles in our room, I asked the children to tell me the difference between

turtles and people. To help them organize their thoughts I gave them a pattern, a form, beginning: "Turtles have eyes, just like people, only... " They carried it on: "Only their eyes are small as bugs." We went on:

*Turtles have mouths, just like people,  
Only their mouths are as small as my fingernail.*

*Turtles have heads, just like people,  
Only they have stripes and we don't.  
They don't have hair.  
The stripes are their hair!*

I have said nothing of another angle of the language game of ours, concerned with the rhythm and sound of words. It seems to be as natural for children this age to coin their own words, especially words representing sounds, as it is for them to see the analogy between the snow and the kitten's tongue. "Hear them shattle, shattle," said Betty, speaking of the familiar clinking of the milkman's bottles in the bottle carrier.

To give the children opportunities for using this talent for hearing has been a part of my experiment. These words of their own coinage seem to come when the things they are talking about are brought vividly before them - when the children are looking, listening, touching, or when they are vividly remembering sights and sounds.

One windy day we wrote a windy story. It was relief and a joy to all of us to get away finally from an interminable series of "The wind blows this," and "The wind blows that," to "Sometimes the wind goes *bumbling* over like a wave," and "The wind blows papers fruffle, fruffle, fruffle."

As with sounds, so it is with rhythms. When I helped the children recall clearly, with all its noises and motion, the steam shovel we had seen, I found that we could get some of its ponderous swing in our speech:

*My big dipper moves  
Down to the dirt,  
Then swings around,  
Around in a circle.*

We could make a word picture of our hungry, nibbling pet mice, a picture that gives the quick little rhythm of the movements:

*Shake, shake and nibble, nibble,  
Wiggle, wiggle tail,  
Wiggle, wiggle nose,*

*Wiggle, wiggle ears,  
Down and up and down and up, little feet,  
And all around the cage they go,  
And nibble up again.*

To conclude, perhaps I could do no better than to quote Ann's reply, when I asked her how we might bring our train story to an end. Said she abruptly, "Caboose! It's ended!"