



Australasian  
Association  
of Writing  
Programs

# TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

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## *Pondering displacement: Does it strike a familiar chord?*

### Abstract:

Considering how all places can host displacement, either figuratively or literally, it comes as a natural thought that the opposite must hold equally true: displacement can take place anywhere in the world, even in our most familiar places. Building on Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarisation whereby creativity is unlocked the minute we change our perception of the surrounding physical reality, my aim is to show how displacement works for me the minute I change my perception of familiar places; the minute I tune into shifting away from familiar harmony. And because my most recent academic pursuits have led me as far as riding the waves of "coercive harmony", I am keenly aware of Shklovsky's perception of disharmony surviving in parallel harmonious contexts as I look into how a semblance of truth in situ may be retweaked to fall into a resonant pattern out of situ. Drawing on my father's words, "why should I want to travel out of the bounds of my estate when I need a lifetime to get familiar with everything contained within", I would like to bring in my modified assertion, "why should I ponder displacement when I have not yet had the life experience of defamiliarising everything around me to expose as inspirational stimuli".

### Biographical note:

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### Keywords:

Defamiliarisation, displacement, harmony, disharmony, Shklovsky

## Introduction

In Greek primary school, introduction to essay writing – Think and Write – is more like a call to engage in thinking before writing or in writing while thinking, so that the creative flow is facilitated as the composition of ideas takes its written form (Βακάλη et al., 2014). This paper uncovers the process underlying the maturation of thinking into writing depending not so much on the course of time as on the perception of change in the writer’s place. Drawing on my own experience as a thinker, I still remember when I first asked my high school teacher to grant me some answering time before verbalising what was toiling in my mind. He simply remarked in fluent Latin: “cogitas, ergo es” as if echoing my uncertainty and urging me to overcome it with determination. Far from stepping into the Cartesian logic of examining to what extent lack of certainty threatens our subjectivity or drawing dividing lines between mind and body just to indulge Descartes’ detractors (Urban, 2018), what follows is an attempt to phenomenologically resituate myself among physical objects while sorting out life’s mental triggers. In view of what lies ahead, I pledge to try my best as much here as there, against or despite pondering displacement. Just like Shklovsky (1917) recommends the rearrangement of images through poetic thought to enhance “perceptive effort” for the accomplishment of a different-than-usual impression, my parallel concern is to pause out of thinking in terms of object images “within categories” in favour of the creation of a new impression. For the sake of a viable re-placement solution, it is worth trying to piece together what looks unmatchable. For the sake of my own re-placement as a writer, it is worth trying to match thoughts to words.

The aim of this paper is to address the interface between thinking and writing through defamiliarisation and refamiliarisation as interdependent processes taking place anytime and anywhere. In the meantime, the mere fact that these processes though mentally triggered become practically obstructed in the long run by automatised familiar emotion is significant progress. That being so, this paper addresses the friction at the interface between thinking and writing caused by the interconnection between familiar harmony and disharmony. If “habituation” renders everything “automatic” (Shklovsky, 1917) thus guiding perception down to familiar alleys, there must be some way to think out of the habitual, if for no other reason than to disharmonise our alleys of thinking. Hence, the compelling question: Who or what is responsible in a writer’s life for rendering everything familiar while making resistance to habituation so difficult to accomplish? And more to the point: How does a writer go about making everything strange, to be perceived anew, to be written under new light, to be read from a different perspective? Miall and Kuiken’s (1994) line of thought dictates uniting the writer’s and the reader’s voices into making sense of the strange and recasting it as new in a process of “refamiliarisation”. But, in this line of thought how do the thinker’s and writer’s voices fit in the general specification pattern of defamiliarising to refamiliarise? And is it an incontestable truth that refamiliarisation represents the unavoidable result of defamiliarisation to be ultimately effectuated by any reader at will?

As a reader of my own writing during pandemic times, I would like to make a reference to a poem I wrote while pondering my place as a thinker who vacillates between thinking and giving voice to thoughts. To this day, every time I read the words of the poem titled “No Writing

Voice to the Thinking Noise”, what I meant to convey through this dilemma remains a mystery as, with any attempt at interpreting it, meaning relocates itself:

No more writing voice to the thinking noise.  
 The lingering dilemma is not mine to dissolve.  
 Until words reconcile with thoughts  
 I will be my own judge of what I leave unsaid. (Ypsilanti, 2021)

In more ways than one, this paper fosters the idea of withholding what need not be expressed in words because the very thought of the resulting implications would have the opposite effect to that intended. Inspired by Shklovsky (1917) who comments on how people revel in speaking about everything declaring possession, I cannot help thinking how all of us, like modern Columbuses, tend to take possession of things through words (Seed, 1992). So, does defamiliarisation guarantee durability that will stand the test of time against the ephemeral will to possess? On the same note, is it possible to possess in thought what has been divested of its familiar use? Eagleton (1996, p. 85) seems to find it feasible when he confirms Jakobson’s view about the “poetic” in that “the sign is dislocated from its object” and allowed “a certain independence as an object of value in itself”.

“I feel and think that everything around me looks old, almost useless to me”, remarked one of my colleagues at work after separating from her husband. I construe her utterance as signalling the outgrowing of the old, the need to create space for the emergence of the new as her endurance through fluctuations in repressing and liberating independent thought through deeds has outgrown her, too. In repressing because the coercive nexus between usefulness and uselessness cannot be broken. In liberating because, once broken, “things within categories” may acquire new meaning. On repressed words and deeds, recourse to poetic thought gives away this natural outgrowth:

“Words that give away forlorn hopes are, indeed,  
 ornaments of a life that was, but is no longer meant to be”,  
 pinpointed I, the curator with an intuition deemed deed-free. (Ypsilanti, 2021)

Bell et al. (2005, p. 150) explore how the home as familiar space can be defamiliarised to host new meaning, i.e., by “creating space for critical reflection and thereby for opening up new possibilities for the design of domestic technologies.” This feels like an opportune moment to encapsulate the (counter)purpose of this paper in an alternative title: Defamiliarising things around the house with a view to repossessing them after re-settlement in the familiar space. Even though, admittedly, whether this produces harmony or disharmony depends entirely on reframing things in a different light. And because I have already boasted of my curation skills, I feel prone to say, “why should I ponder displacement when I have not yet had the life experience of defamiliarising everything around me to expose as inspirational stimuli.”

What follows is a short overview of the theoretical evolution of the term “defamiliarisation” over time while the mental triggers of the stem word bring to bear a comprehensive understanding of the familiar versus unfamiliar standards guiding the writer’s life. Then, the

concepts of displacement and re-placement are clarified to set the scene for the ensuing personal account that raises accountability issues among people and things with a view to reassigning values and functions in meaningful contexts, viz. family spaces. Hopefully, a short discussion on how refamiliarisation may be the antidote to coercive harmony will reveal why:

to write is to act  
 that is my comprehension.  
 I would again fall into the trap  
 of the thinker's bad perception  
 were it not for my father's farsighted words  
 that thoughts are misguided inventions  
 to blind the daily vision of those discontent with their reflections. (Unpublished poem)

### **Defamiliarisation**

I was an undergraduate student at the Department of English Studies when I first came across the term “defamiliarisation” in the context of my third-year compulsory course “Introduction to Literary Theory and Criticism.” The introduction of the term is clearly owed to Shklovsky who cultivated its dimensions within the context of Russian Formalism. Known as a core representative of formalists for building upon their main premise that the “human content ... possessed no literary significance in itself, but merely provided a context for the functioning of literary devices” (Selden and Widdowson, 1993, pp. 27-28), Shklovsky (1917) introduced the idea of deviating from the norms of practical language by focusing on its aesthetic effect. It is this deviation that has been known as “defamiliarisation” or “ostranenie” since then. In his attempt to explain how the “technique of art is to make objects unfamiliar” he went as far as to claim that “art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important...” (Shklovsky, 1917, p. 2). And if a shift in perception is so difficult to achieve, it suffices to achieve a shift in the “presentation of a perception” (Selden and Widdowson, 1993, pp. 33). In fact, the idea of coming up with new ways of presenting a perception in one’s literary work is part of “laying bare” one’s technique, that is slowing down to present how technique informs structure and content throughout (Selden and Widdowson, 1993).

A literature search on how defamiliarisation has been academically interpreted reveals different perspectives on the performance of its functions. In most cases, the idea of presenting an out-of-the-ordinary view of an object, an idea, a method, a space, etc. by experimenting with how our language engages and interacts with our thinking is used as some kind of trump card to allow retrospective claims on originality of either thought or experience. A further development of defamiliarisation is what Mukařovský has termed “foregrounding” in the context of the Prague Linguistic Circle (1926). In an attempt to multiply the aesthetic effect of language, Mukařovský (1936/1970) has insisted upon its uncategorised functionality believing that “the same object can possess several functions” (Selden and Widdowson, 1993, p. 43). Key to this shapeshifted functionality is its inevitable relevance and connection to wider society concerns. According to Miall and Kuiken (1994, p. 390) “in literature the purpose of foregrounding is to disrupt everyday communication” by disrupting everyday perception while presenting the

object with intentional aesthetic charge to be rediscovered and reinterpreted by the reader (Selden and Widdowson, 1993).

What is particularly striking when it comes to defining and redefining defamiliarisation through its associative links to other concepts (e.g., Brecht’s alienation effect, Derrida’s *différance*) is the fact that everything gets down to shifting perspectives and displacing perception (Bitterman, 2021) to juggle with the reader’s thoughts. And because all these shifts, which are ultimately filtered through the reader’s perception, have a blurring effect on motivation while in the quest for differentiation, Crawford (1984) emphasises Shklovsky’s vested interest in the “agency of writing” for preserving the relationship between past and present perception. In other words, the importance of safeguarding memory as a functional link between artfulness and original, viz. unprocessed, everyday thought cannot be neglected especially when it comes to deriving inspiration from objects in our field of daily vision. Even if this link is deliberately omitted as Foucault would probably argue which is so often the case with historical writing in order to leave space for speculation, substantiated or not (Goldstein, 1984).

Within this field of Foucauldian “rarity” (Goldstein, 1984), the itinerary of an object’s perception starts from its familiar placement and finishes with its defamiliarised displacement only to be replaced and, finally, refamiliarised through writing. On the way to the finish line, it would seem that thinking through ways of making memory functional against all “artfulness” odds is the writer’s best bet.

### **My Dis-placement, My Re-placement**

The first time I came across the term “displacement” was during my first semester in the context of the compulsory course “Introduction to Linguistics”. As this was my first-ever contact with Linguistics, Yule’s (1985) coursebook *The Study of Language* became my recurring point of reference for terms and notions at times not graspable at once. Therefore, going back to the section on the properties of language has helped me rekindle my memory of the definition of displacement as first encountered and registered in my mental lexicon. What has remained as a trace in my memory of displacement in this context is the bees’ unique ability to communicate about their place of interest which would be the location of nectar. Their human-like ability to retain the memory of the location of the key-object to their survival has always fascinated me and has often found me wondering whether human language can contain the memory of so many key-objects without missing out on the information of key-locations.

Next thing I recall about the mechanisms of memory formation and maintenance comes from my personal experience of object fixedness in my familiar space, somehow reminiscent of Jakobson’s (1935/1981) notion of the “dominant” as the main focus of art capable of transforming the surrounding components. Having never rationalised my uneasiness about being surrounded by objects of non-choice, I had never really considered negotiating object dominance to find out whether uneasiness might be substituted with contentment. Not until I read the rubric of my first creative writing assignment that required focusing on the “sensory detail” of three “dominant” objects in my house to evoke emotional response by “showing and

telling” at the same time (Burroway, 2003). So, this is how I came to think and write about my most loathed objects in my house whose very presence created the kind of disharmony that was supposed to be traced back to harmony. Of course, the reverse might hold true as well.

Once again, Shklovsky (1917) is responsible for providing the inspiration for the interplay between harmony and disharmony running parallel to “usual perception” surviving in unchallenged “harmonious contexts” and “new perception” levelling up in unsettling “disharmony”. More specifically, he prompts a better understanding of “transferring the usual perception of an object into the sphere of new perception” by pointing out that “perception of disharmony in a harmonious context is important in parallelism” (Shklovsky, 1917, p. 5). But, before I copy/paste an extract of my own truth-based parallelism from the abovementioned assignment, let me make a quick reference to my first encounter with the paradoxes of the term “coercive harmony” (Eltringham, 2021) as a distance learning student of the undergraduate course “Intercultural studies: Conflict and communication” offered by Karlstad University. Paradoxically, then, the very term used to pinpoint how embracing a harmony model prevents conflict while discouraging legitimate confrontation, especially in the case of marginalised groups, was all it took to realise that harmony had to be challenged against a backdrop of disharmony for the purposes of “semantic modification” (Shklovsky, 1917). But, in my individual case, challenging harmony had entailed going through the channels of memory for the purposes of “refamiliarisation”. What follows is a disambiguation of the connection between a coercive mindset and defamiliarisation as a stepwise process of lodging, dislodging and relodging objects. A few minor tweaks here and there and the connection can be brought home to any writer. The following extract comes from a short story I submitted as course work for “Creative Writing I” at Malmö University in 2020:

Sometimes the model of domestic harmony lapses into an inactive state for reasons which may not be easily comprehensible by other people. Although material things are not supposed to be the quintessence of happiness, I confess to finding it impossible to achieve harmony with three objects in conspicuous positions in my house. Three objects which were given as gifts by my mother-in-law. Three gifts whose origin and presence I despise. Three objects which I have trouble moving from their strategic positions because they come from family.

A black hookah from her only trip to Turkey on the central shelf of the glass cabinet, a factory-made wall tapestry from her luxurious apartment in Athens now hanging on the central wall of the living room and a threadbare apron which she used to wear while dragging her feet to finish her innumerable household chores on top of my well-ironed hand towels in my kitchen drawers. It is not like I have not tried to remove them numerous times with the hidden agenda to replace them with objects of my taste. Truth be told, I have already found their replacement counterparts, but I feel hesitant about bringing them to the fore as they happen to be objects coming from the other side. My own mother’s side. Hers who is an Asia Minor Catastrophe descendant.

In my mind, the hookah, the tapestry and the apron are at war with my mother’s rusty iron old single key unlocking her reminiscence of her native house in Çeşme

Peninsula, her framed strawberry filet crochet on which she spent a whole eye-ful month to complete as part of my dowry and her embroidered apron which I bought for her from San Gimignano during our last family trip to Italy so that she can wear it every time she finds herself saddled with our housework and childcare responsibilities. My predicament is not so much a matter of space as it is of an imminent peril to my personal morals because acknowledgement of one person's daily drudgery in the service of another should be both prioritised and evinced. (Extract from unpublished short story)

Now, seeing things more clearly in retrospect, I understand that the pending feelings about moving or removing “loathed” objects in favour of “cherished” objects are connected to images, familiar images that, on top of everything else, are conditioned by and conditional upon thoughts. And thus, having activated a vicious circle of parallelisms where images trigger thoughts and thoughts repress images for the sake of camouflaged harmony, I feel more ready than ever to declare a ceasefire, subordinating it to conformability with unavoidable disharmony. Or, as Shklovsky (1917, p. 6) would have it, make allowances for the object to “linger” so that it can be “perceived not in its extension in space, but so to speak, in its continuity”. For this continuity feeling answerable as some sort of gatekeeper tasked with the responsibility of guarding against memory distortion, I am left with one and only option: that of re-gaining possession of objects so that I can take the lead of how they are perceived both in real-time and in continuous time.

Jordan (2019) explains how Carver (1981), who advocates for the use of “commonplace things and objects” in short fiction, creates the “charged object” to generate the kind of emotional response that comes from revisiting the memory of an object's image. Transferring responsibility to the reader sounds like a real load off my mind as I approach the conclusion that “nostalgic reminiscence” (Jordan, 2019) is more of an individual, and less of a collective, load to carry when it comes to salvaging memory through re-possession. In this sense, I feel almost free to reflect as both a writer and a reader because my emotional release and my emotional response merge into a single thing, a single trigger whose rightful owner is, simply put, me. But, if reminiscing about what has been rightfully mine to begin with endorses me as an owner of both the object and the reflections that its memory inspires in my mind, would that not render me equally capable of answering the following question:

### **What or who strikes a familiar chord?**

Not too long ago, early July it was, when my family of four went on a trip abroad on account of an academic conference on life-writing (Ypsilanti, 2023). I was to be the presenter of a paper on how creative writing and academic writing fuel each other in times of crisis using myself as a site of enquiry. It is not as if I have not often pondered a possible answer to the question what five items I would ask for had I found myself in the position of being a cast away in a deserted island. However, since my laptop would not be a viable option I never went as far as figuring out the rest. Obviously, I could not even begin to imagine how I would fare if required to travel away from home but still in need of my domestic academic equipment. Thankfully, on this occasion bringing along my laptop was a viable option, so there I was holding on to it tightly

as if for dear life throughout the entire journey. Well, lucky for me, the presence of one familiar object was all it took to transform an unfamiliar environment while its defamiliarised use was what I activated to observe while transcending the boundaries of its habitual abode. Because granting writing voice to my registered thoughts during my first-ever on-site presentation had meant defamiliarising the acts of thinking and writing through speech. Namely, through refamiliarisation.

In more ways than one, displacement as in leaving behind familiarity with the known to rehearse familiarity with the unknown had entailed exposing my written thoughts in speech, hence defamiliarising my set ways to experiment with a different form of expression. As it turned out rearranging things in my mind to disengage from “habitual perception” involved a lot more than clinging to my laptop, albeit rearranging things around my laptop while venturing something new involved less effort than I had anticipated. To be more specific, it involved less “perceptive effort” (Shklovsky, 1917), at least on my part. Because things fell automatically into place, finding their *raison d’être*. As I was manually handling my PowerPoint slides, thoughts materialised as manageable objects in the same way that everyday life materials had served my husband’s experimental thought on the day he ventured his first demonstration experiment for Scientix TV (European Schoolnet, 2022). In the same way he made water’s boiling point below the familiar 100 degrees Celsius possible simply by changing pressure with the help of a plastic syringe and a rubber cup, I experimented with the effect of spoken words on my audience. And, if Shklovsky’s (1917) *ostranenie* involved slowing down perception as a means to enhancing it, I had only a quarter of an hour at my disposal to enhance it by “speeding up” the messages I intended to get across.

Experiencing displacement could be another way of saying that while on the lookout for an exhilarating way to reconcile words and thoughts, independently of context, I hit that perfect middle ground, where relocating my key objects to alter the signified brought about release from my firm grasp on the symbolic significance of unuttered things. At the same time, practicing defamiliarisation from the standpoint of the displaced won me the advantage of regulating the shared experience effects of an object’s artfulness. Through re-placement though, because contrary to Shklovsky’s (1917, p. 1) conviction that “the object is not important...”, I would like to pay due tribute to both the object of my thoughts and the subjective experience of releasing it to whom it may concern. So, let me move on to the next question: Who is it that strikes a familiar chord? Family would be my wild guess because everything familiar seems connected to how family assigns meaning to objects independently of locations. Family would be, because their eager ears embraced my spoken words while I was fumbling with the mouse to reorientate myself. Therefore, my popping in and out of defamiliarisation processes is owed to them as without their all-presence no alternative point of reference would have made experimentation with difference in form and effect neither possible nor of any real use.

Going back to Jordan’s (2019) identification of Carver’s (1980) “charged object” in the short story, “A Serious Talk”, I would like to draw attention to how I perceive the analogy between Carver’s “pumpkin” and my laptop as “commonplace” objects that have been dislodged from



their original location for defamiliarisation purposes. Therefore, if Carver's discarded "pumpkin" has been charged with family disharmony attributable to the estranged father on a Christmas Day at home, my laptop could be charged with familiar harmony attributable to all the members of my family on a special occasion away from home. Therefore, if both objects contain a significant emotional charge, release and response are all about triggering and letting go of the associated memory to be owned and re-owned in the course of time.

### Conclusion

By way of conclusion, first I would like to set right a piece of tactfully omitted information. That the laptop I used as a tool for refamiliarising an alienated environment was not the one I usually work at, but a smaller-size one I had never used before. So basically, the familiar object was as much a newbie as I was, viz. an unfamiliar object, whose perception though, coinciding as it did with the conceptual and functional use of any laptop was enough to put my mind at ease. Even if the arrangements on its desktop reflected the unscripted uneasiness. So practically, defamiliarisation began long before my voice blended thoughts into words, long before words triggered only to resign, immediately after, meaningfulness to the audience's better judgment. How perceptive of Eagleton (1996) to foresee an important implication of defamiliarisation in that only after generalising the perception of the object image may its longer-term adaptability to any framework be made possible.

A second remark to make on how defamiliarisation may work for me in a new setting is closely linked to "laying bare" my thought processes from drafting to speaking the truth of my subjective experience. That and investing in how the perception of key-objects resonate under different circumstances especially when more resonance is provided to the "writing voice" by calming down the "thinking noise". Therefore, physical objects can function as inspirational stimuli once defamiliarised through thought, through writing, through voice. Therefore, displacement may be even regarded as pointless to the mind of certain people as my father who at a very old age is still trying to perceive what lies within his range of daily vision in the light of developing, and then generalising thought.

Finally, let me ponder the possibility of re-placement in relation to objects and ideas that have been first defamiliarised and then refamiliarised to serve inspirational causes that are still in progress. And while pondering the pros and cons of reclaiming harmony, may I offer some piece of advice in the form of emphasis through ellipsis, through omission: why not perceive anew the old, to loath and to cherish from this day forward... Unless, of course, the story's plot is abruptly "bared" of its "life-like" quality, thus stripped of "motivation" and "naturalization", rendering the whole process of "semantic modification" too resistant to overcome (Selden and Widdowson, 1993). In that case, pondering displacement may resurface, on a less familiar note, memory of key-locations retained or not.

Kester (2013, p. 8) revisits Shklovsky's idea of "laying bare" one's technique as an act of disrupting normal perception that acquires meaning only in the hypothetical presence of an eager co-participant whose "particular awareness of the parameters of agency and affect"

facilitates the purpose of the writer. In more ways than one, I have built upon my family's eagerness to keep up with my writer's voice regardless of place. In more ways than one, I have managed to transcend the boundaries between place and time only because they have consented in acting as co-participants in a plot with a tie-back ending. At the same time, only because normalcy has been implied as a pre-given condition have I been able to lead us back to refamiliarisation. Well, all things considered, the unaddressed question is still hanging over me: Does craving for displacement strike a familiar chord?

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