

After dark

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Abstract

Shining some light on two popular sayings in the domestic environment.

1 Introduction

Much ‘sensible’ advice is to be found across the cultures against the dangers of the night, but this is rarely accompanied by rational explanations. In this ‘after dark’ game we are called to solve a couple of mysteries from the domestic environment.

2 The Wardrobe Conundrum

My auntie used to say that ‘it was bad luck to open the wardrobe in the evening’. Although this called for obedience at the time, it made no sense: was that a whim, a superstition, or was there a reason behind it?

Later on, at school, I learned two facts related with this ‘mystery’: (a) moths love to eat woollen items (of which my auntie had plenty), and (b) moths are nocturnal insects. Putting the two together, an explanation was formed — Figure 1.

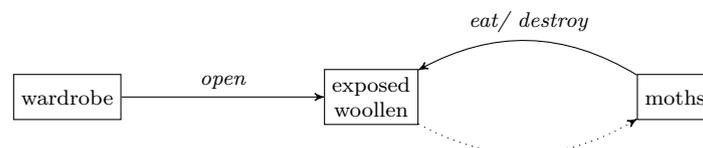


FIGURE 1 The ‘wardrobe conundrum’ demystified — at least in one way

3 The Ungual Prohibition

My mother used to say that it was ‘bad luck to clip our nails in the evening’ — yet another domestic mystery to be explained. This time the formulation of the explanation came mainly from tracing the history of the saying, as well as from practice.

In fact, my mother was issuing a command that had originated from her mother, and was never questioned. When my mother was a child, homes had no good lighting — either candles or low-power lamps. Performing such a precise task in low light involves some physical risks, and raises practical issues of cleaning up after oneself — Figure 2.

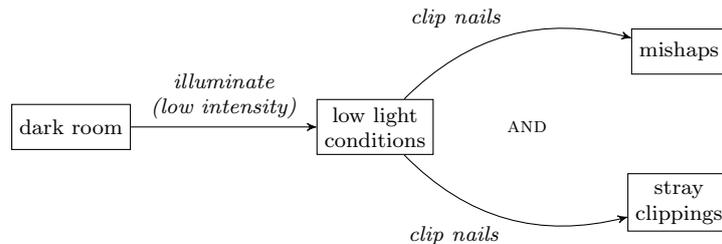


FIGURE 2 The ‘nocturnal nail clipping prohibition’ demystified — at least in one way

4 Discussion

It is concise and handy to know the practical rules: ‘do this’, or ‘don’t do that’. However, one does not gain understanding of the ‘why’ or ‘how’ unless one questions or challenges these rules, with the due respect.

Cultures become rich and flexible when knowledge and understanding co-exist with their concise expressions, for easy memorisation and reference. When knowledge is obscured, for some reason, we must bring it back — and retrieving it properly is a difficult task.

5 Continuation

The demystification of the two domestic adages is not authoritative, but tentative. Other people may come up with their own versions, and it would be interesting to see more plausible explanations. As times change, maybe new advice can be formulated in both full-explanation and concise forms, and it would be nice to — somehow — always keep the two together.

References

Perdicoulis, A. (2011) Application manual for the ‘Systems Thinking’ book. *Systems Planner*, 2.

