Body shots, Sorostitutes, and Fratagonia: Manipulating COBUILD's Formulaic Sentence Definitions to Treat Contemporary College Slang

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> **Body shot** body shots. A body shot is a drinking technique in which someone licks salt off a part of the body of a member of the opposite sex, takes a shot of tequila, and then sucks on the lime or lemon in the other person's mouth. *I remember when Jared and Meredith first met they were doing body shots downtown that night..* (from *DawgSpeak! The University of Georgia Slanguage Dictionary*, 2001)

Abstract

This article reports the dictionary making process, particularly the construction of definitions, for a dictionary of slang with 882 entries, all currently used by students at a state university in the US. COBUILD style sentence definitions were employed by the students who understood and manipulated the formulaic sentence patterns in order to take advantage of psychological distance, illustrate connotative meaning, and manage several levels of appropriateness for slang expressions. Pre-planning was essential for the semester-long project; out of 600 plus items of slang collected prior to the course, only 318 items were well attested in their usage. The students in this Lexicography course profited from the project for four reasons: (1) They learned new slang used by various groups on campus; (2) they learned "new" senses for "old" slang expressions; (3) they enjoyed the perceived elevation of their own slang with COBUILD's formulaic definitions using its "proper" language; and (4) they learned a great deal about the practice of lexicography in the process.

The Problem: A Paucity of Academic Courses on Lexicography in the US:

Academic courses at universities that are entirely focused on the subject of lexicography are difficult to find in the United States. The academic course, Lexicography, that the author taught in Georgia was the only such course offered in the entire United States in the 2000-01 academic year, according to an officer of the Dictionary Society of North America. This course had several major goals regarding lexicography: its history, its principles, salient issues in bilingual lexicography, and a project in monolingual English lexicography. This paper reports the completed project, *DawgSpeak*, a dictionary of English slang compiled, composed, and edited by the students. This is the first new course in the field of lexicography, following the elimination of such courses at Indiana State, the University of Illinois, and the University of Delaware, which were all related to retirements, according to a published survey of lexicography courses in the US (Gates 1996).

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The Enrollment Problem: Who Would Attend This Course?

Lexicography was taught as a semester long course at the University of Georgia, a state university with 32,000 students, in the spring semester, 2001. In a comprehensive university as large as the University of Georgia, students could reasonably be expected to enroll in various specialized courses, even one as replete with drudgery (!) and as esoteric as lexicography. The dictionary project, titled *DawgSpeak*, was written by a class of 20 enrolled students, which had both native Georgians (14) and other southeasterners (4), and two students from Asia.[1] The class of 12 females and 8 males was mainly an undergraduate class with 14 students who were 19-21 years of age and 6 graduate students who were in their mid-20's. The class constructed the definitions and examples using the most up-to-date techniques: ordering definitions by their frequency of use on campus, defining all of the expressions with complete sentences, and matching each example sentence to each full sentence definition in the manner of COBUILD entries to precisely illustrate the nuance of the word in context. This was accomplished with "an inventory of strategies that look remarkably similar to ordinary English prose." (Hanks 1987:117)

The Harmless Drudge Problem: The Boredom of Feckless Youth

The professors who were interested in this course knew when it was approved [2] that we wanted to have the class learn about the processes of dictionary construction by actually working on a substantive dictionary project. The knowledge that this author felt they should learn included the techniques of defining lexical items, the use of corpora for the compilation of the entry words and for the selection of examples, the inclusion of etymology, and the consideration of the usefulness of grammar and pronunciation notation. After the author learned that the course would be mainly populated by undergraduates, whose interests are typically youthful and contemporary, I decided to choose slang as the focus of the dictionary project. This proved to be a well founded and educationally sound choice, and relates to the subhead above, "boredom of feckless youth," which refers to the lack of focus and the short attention span of the MTV generation.

Using their own slang as the source for the entry words did wonders in terms of their motivation and interest level. Three factors raised their attention level as a class. First, they learned new lexicon, new slang terms that they did not know, from other groups on campus that they did not belong to, such as fraternities, sororities, and rappers (and not only African-Americans, but also white rappers, too). Three examples taken from the 882 entries that illustrate these sources are *fratagonia, sorostitute*, and *mackdaddy*, respectively.

> **Fratagonia**. If someone says they are wearing fratagonia, then they are referring to a term given to the clothing brand Patagonia due to its overwhelming use by members of fraternities. *Jerry appeared sporting his fratagonia outfit.*
>
> **Sorostitute** sorostitutes A sorostitute is a sorority member that acts in a less than proper sexual manner. *The dress code for a sorostitute requires tight black pants and a low cut v-neck.*

> **Mackdaddy** When you call someone the mackdaddy of some activity, you mean he is able to do it better than almost anyone else could. *Brian is the mackdaddy of slang.*

Second, they learned that some words, previously thought to have one clear meaning, actually had as many as five meanings among the various social groups on campus. For example, "bitch," was thought by some students to have one basic meaning referring to a female who is disliked, but actual use on campus delineated the entry for the noun into five meanings, in addition to the verb, 'bitch.' These five, given below, are ordered by frequency of use on campus, according to the students in class.

> **Bitch**. bitches 1 If you call a girl a bitch, you mean that you do not like her or the way she acts. It is a term of abuse. *That bitch has been flirting with my boyfriend all night.* 2 If a boy calls a girl his bitch, he means that she is his girlfriend. *John said, "Don't worry. My bitch will clean up the apartment before the party."* 3 If you call something a bitch, you mean that it is extremely unpleasant or disagreeable. *That test was such a bitch.* 4   Bitch is sometimes used as a term of address between friends. *John said, "Yo, bitch, whassup?!"* 5 If a girl calls her boyfriend her bitch, then he does what she tells him to do. *Look at my bitch wash my car.*

> **Bitch,** bitching, bitches, bitched. 1 When someone bitches, they curse or complain about something. *I had to break up with my last boyfriend because all he did was bitch and moan.*

The third motivational factor was the elevation of slang from the students' point of view. This elevation in formality occurred, according to the students, with the standardization and formality of the formulaic sentence definitions that they learned from classroom practice sessions and from an article (Hanks 1987) describing sentence definitions and the other advances in COBUILD. This was a humorous experience for them, and it increased their motivation to compile and define even more slang expressions.

Preplanning for the Lexicography Course

Since an actual dictionary project takes years and years, even decades, for some dictionaries, and the class would have only 15 weeks from January through April, I knew that the students would need a head start on the lexicon, the entry word list. Thus, in the fall semester, 2000, in my *Introduction to the English Language* course, an historical treatment of English in all its varieties, I asked the 33 students in that class to collect at least 20 words each that they thought were slang, especially local college slang. Out of this collection of nearly 600 items, we were able to glean 318 well attested lexical items. This entry word list was used to jumpstart the compiling and writing process in January, 2001. The students in the Lexicography class collected an additional 442 items, which were supplemented with 122

lexical items from a first year essay writing class. Thus, the dictionary, *"Dawg speak! The University of Georgia Slanguage Dictionary,"* has 882 entry words defined and exemplified, many with run-ons containing colloquial expressions using the slang item. An example of this, the entry for *mack*, both verb and noun, follows:

> **Mack** macks macked macking. 1 If a guy macks on a girl, he flirts with her to the point of embarrassing himself. *Jimmy was trying to mack on two girls at once!* 2 if someone macks something that means they are stealing something. *He macked 4 CD's from the music store.* 3 If someone gets their mack on someone, that means he or she is having sex with that person. *I was all getting my macks on with her.* [3] (Note the classification of this phrasal verb as a verb.)

> **Mack** macks If you call someone a mack, you mean they are a ladies' man. *"I love the ladies and they love me right back. Now who's the Mack?"* Ice T.

The Use of COBUILD Style Sentence Definitions to Create a Sense of Distance

The COBUILD style sentence definitions gave the students choices that were used to create a sense of distance for the reader. This distance is related to the notion of psychological distance in the Acculturation Model, a theory of second language acquisition (Schumann 1978). The need to create psychological distance for the reader is often necessary when defining slang because the terms are occasionally offensive and often pejorative in nature. These choices, which the students made good use of, were especially valuable for pejorative expressions, such as the following:

> **Ghetto bootie** ghetto booties If a girl has a ghetto bootie, then she has a large rear end. *Lee always dated girls with a ghetto bootie.*

The less preferred option for this, using the sentence definition format, is "if *you* have a ghetto bootie, then *you* have a large rear end." This would have been inappropriate and offensive to a number of readers. In the guidelines given by Hanks, he notes: "For actions that are the object of social disapproval, even mild disapproval, the variation 'If someone...' instead of 'If you...' was occasionally used." (Hanks 1987:126) The appropriate choice was also made by the students in the definition for *"heater,"* in the following:

> **Heater** If someone has to take a heater, then they need to defecate. *I went into the women's restroom accidentally at the baseball game and took a heater.*

In these two examples, the use of *you* was not preferred, due to the sensitive nature of the slang expression. In this definition, we can also see the manner in which selectional restrictions are easily illustrated, in this case with *take a heater* in the entry and *took a heater* in the example. For less offensive terms, the pronoun *'you'* was preferred, as in the following:

> **Marinating** If you are marinating, you are at home drinking, unless there is something else to do. This originates from cooking meat. You let meat marinate in something before you cook it. *We were marinating at Todd's apartment.*[4]

The use of a very offensive pejorative called for a formula that put more psychological distance between the reader and the meaning. This called for the use of 'someone' and 'they,' following Hanks' guideline noted above. An example follows:

> **Scrump** scrumps If someone scrumps, then they are having sex. *Did you guys scrump last night?* (NB: The student definers determined that the *–ing* and *–ed* forms did not exist.)

In these entries, the indefinite pronoun 'someone' followed by the pronoun 'they' was generally used if the subject of the entry could be of either sex. If the subject was gender-specific, then the terms 'female' or 'male/guy' were preferred, as in the following:

> **Skanky** If a female is called skanky, she is someone who dresses and acts in a less than proper manner. *Jennifer is so skanky; she has been pawing over Bill and Jeff all night.*

For certain pejoratives, the frequency of use and familiarity with the offensive term led the students to collocate the phrase, 'if you call' with the noun 'female' and the pronoun 'they' in the sentence formula. This occurred with the pejorative term *hoe*:

> **Hoe** hoes (also **ho, hizo**) If you call a female a hoe, then you are saying that they are a slut or that they act in a slutty manner. *That girl talking with my boyfriend is such a hoe.*

The students argued for this use of 'female' and the use of the phrase 'if you call' because the use of *hoe* (from whore) is relatively frequent among the young women in this university, nearly as frequent as the use of *bitch*; however, it is much more negative than *bitch*. Note that the entry for *bitch* in section 3 begins, 'If you call a girl a bitch,' rather than 'call a female.' This illustrates the apparently shared sense that, even though *hoe* is relatively frequent, it has lost none of its shock value. The lexicographical point is that a set number of sentence formulas with several personal pronoun and indefinite pronoun options provides students with enough freedom of choice to accurately portray the sense of the word and its level of appropriateness in their social groups. To sum up, the advantage of the COBUILD

style sentence definitions.is that the definers of the entry words, in this case college students, have an array of choices, which allows them to consider how intimate or distant the sense should appropriately be from the reader of the definition. Hanks highlights this notion as integral to the success of COBUILD at explaining entries:

> The basis of choice has its roots in the notion of typicality…
> when we ask how the word is typically used, rather than
> how it might possibly be used, we can generally discover a
> relatively small number of distinct patterns, which may be
> used as a basis for explanations…. (Hanks 1987: 121)

Conclusion

This class project was a notable success and received a remarkable amount of attention from the media in the US, as evidenced by an article on *DawgSpeak* in the highly respected journal, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and a good number of local newspapers, among them, the *Athens Banner Herald*, the *Macon Telegraph*, the *Columbus Enquirer Ledger*, *The Red and Black*, and a lengthier, illustrated article in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. The author's live interview about *DawgSpeak* on the AP (Associated Press) Radio Network on May 4, 2001 was broadcast the evening of the 4th and on Saturday, the 5th nationwide. The spotlight from the press constitutes far more attention than any other class project in the university in recent memory. This course, Lexicography, is one step in the process of replacing the courses terminated during the 1990's in the US, as noted by Gates (1997). If plans go according to schedule, the University of Georgia will offer this course each and every year for the foreseeable future. The students in the lexicography project, *DawgSpeak*, learned a great deal about lexicography during the course of the project and it is easy to foresee the continuation of this success.

End Notes

1. The two Asian students, one Thai and one Korean, did not write sentence definitions; however, they wrote the pronunciation section on "Y'all," and "you all," which provides advice to Americans who are not from the South on how to pronounce this important Southern expression. Some students in class considered this to be an ironic twist of sorts.

2. New courses are not taken lightly by multiply layered administrations in the US. It takes 12 to 18 months to get a new course proposal approved at the University of Georgia. This lexicography course was proposed in 1999 and went through an extensive review process. After 18 months it was included in the course catalog at UGA. Two years after the initial writing of the course proposal, Lexicography was taught for the first time ever at the University of Georgia.

3. The expression, *"get their mack on"* is a phrasal verb and is a formulaic expression. It is analogous to *"get your drink on,"* (have a drink) and *"get your grub on"* (eat some food), which were also discovered in the course of this dictionary project at the University of Georgia. These expressions are preceded by a line from the soul music of the 1960's, *"get your groove on,"* which is still alive among college students today. The entire expression functions as a verb.

4. This also, incidentally, illustrates the level of culinary knowledge of the 19 year old female who wrote this definition. She felt the need to inform others her age about the origin of the term.

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