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Dictionary examples: friends or foes?

Abstract: My purpose in this paper is to consider illustrative phraseology in monolingual learners' dictionaries of English published in Great Britain. Specifically I wish to point to those features of dictionary examples which may, from a pedagogical point of view, have undesirable consequences.

Every word is a complex interplay of what is already part and parcel of the language and what can be created on the spur of the moment. Dictionaries must both foresee those aspects of usage which may cause difficulties for the foreign student and also provide signposts to tell him how the word should be used in speech.

Even a cursory glance at a dictionary entry will reveal that it contains a vast amount of information about the word's semantics, its construction patterns, stylistic connotation and pragmatic value. The information is encoded in the word's definition and an elaborate system of labels. These are important and valuable achievements of lexicography. But one can hardly deny that it is the examples which are for many students the most significant source of information about the semantic potential of the word, its typical contexts and grammatical patterns.

Lexicographers still argue about which examples – authentic or invented – are preferable (Cowie 1989, 196-209). The debate, however, is artificial because authentic sentences taken in isolation may sound awkward, whereas invented ones may adequately illustrate the word's meaning. The distinction therefore, should be drawn not between authentic and specially concocted contexts but between what can be described as philological and illustrative kinds of phraseology (Ter-Pogosjan 1979). Let me dwell on this opposition at greater length.

As is well known, the common lexicographic practice is the use of naturally occuring contexts at the early stages of compiling learners' dictionary. These contexts (word-combinations and sentences) can be described as "philological phraseology". The adjective "philological" specifies the fact that collected phrases have already become part and parcel of the philological thesaurus of the given language.

Having established the semantic structure of the word, the lexicographer concentrates on "illustrative phraseology," that is, word-combinations and sentences used in the dictionary entry to show how the word actually functions in speech. At this stage the prescriptive approach dominates over the descriptive one; the lexicographer strives to choose or make up examples which would meet the user's difficulties.

It should be emphasised that the difference between "philological" and "illustrative" kind of phraseology is purely functional: there are no phrases which could be regarded as belonging solely (or exclusively) to the former or the latter. They can all be used as

philological material and presented as proof of the actual existence of the word (or its different meanings), a proof of the word's actually being part of the word-stock of the language in question.

At the same time we must admit that in historical dictionaries, authentic contexts are used as illustrations of the word's semantics. But if what we are after is a demonstration of the word's functioning in a learners' dictionary, then illustrative phraseology should be unambiguous and stylistically neutral, it should be made to give the foreign user of the dictionary as clear an idea as possible of the way in which he can use the word in his own speech.

It is appropriate at this stage to have a look at those phrases which are considered to be illustrative in three monolingual learners' dictionaries of English, namely Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of current English (OALD), Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDCE), Collins COBUILD Essential English Dictionary (COBUILD).

From the very outset it becomes clear that to use these dictionaries to the best advantage, one should posses a considerable amount of background knowledge because illustrative word-combinations and sentences abound in sociolinguistic information. The user should be an expert in science, literature and music ("Einstein was a mathematical *genius.*" OALD; "I *myself* feel that Muriel Spark is very uderrated." COBUILD; "Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky each wrote several famous *ballets.*"LDCE), know geography and history ("They've got a small farm in Devon." – "hat *sounds* nice..."COBUILD; "William Pitt *the elder* was a British prime minister and so was his son, William Pitt the younger."LDCE), be interested in politics ("What has Britain *gained* by being a member of the EC?" COBUILD), and have at least an idea of English way of life ("Signs with three *balls* hang outside pawnbroker's shops." OALD; "*Similarly,* savings certificates should be registered with the Post Office." COBUILD).

Of course, all the examples given above are natural sentences which reflect the life of the English language. But it is obvious that in identifying the contexts needed for describing the meaning and connotations of the illustrated words, we have to go far beyond the example chosen by the lexicographer. Indeed, the sentence "Sheremetyevo, the *gateway* to Moscow" (COBUID) can only puzzle the user unless he knows that Sheremetyevo is an international airport in Moscow; the sentence "(The part of) Othello was *played* by Olivier."(IDCE) will "ring a bell" only for somebody who has at least heard about Sir Lawrence Olivier's talent; and the connotations of the phrase "honeymooning in the Bahamas" (LDCE) will be clear only to those who have the necessary background knowledge of the resort in the Bahamas.

The user begins to wonder what has been done by the man who is called "a *disgrace* to the Italians" ("You're a disgrace to the Italians." COBUILD), and what makes people think that "The Middle East has been the *cockpit* of modern history." (LDCE).

True, complete sentences used as examples, together with definitions and labels can give a fuller picture of the word's meaning and connotation (Bullon 1990, 27-33). If, however, they are overloaded with irrelevant extralinguistic information, they are hardly illustrating (Magidova 1985, 87-106). It could be suggested that sociolinguistically determined sentences should be included in learners' dictionaries because the student of English must be aware of the social customs and institutions of English speaking countries. But for this purpose there exist dictionaries of cultural literacy, furthermore if this extralinguistic information is essential for decoding the word's meaning and connota-

tion, it should be specially commented on. Most of the time, sentences containing this kind of information can only baffle the user.

Thus, for example, when a few second-year students of the economics faculty of Moscow University were asked to look up the word "foundation" in monolingual dictionaries of English in order to understand its difference from "fund", because both words have the same Russian equivalent, they wrote out the following examples:

"The Gulbenkian Foundation gives money to help artists."LDCE;
"the Ford Foundation" OALD;
"the National Foundation for Educational Research" COBUILD.

For at least 20 minutes the students could not concentrate on the semantics of "foundation", which is clearly defined in all the three dictionaries, because they were trying to "decode" its illustrative phraseology. First, the students discussed the pronunciation of the adjective "Gulbenkian", then they wanted to learn more about this particular foundation. The name of Ford, which was, of course, familiar, evoked some automobile associations, and only the third example did not cause any discussions.

It follows that philological phraseology should not be indiscriminately used to serve as illustrations. The philological phrase may be in common use, but it can either puzzle the user because of the abundance of irrelevant sociolinguistic information or sound funny (because of its stylistic colouring) when used by a foreigner.

If we view the learners' dictionary as a language-learning resource we should take into account 1) the interaction of colligation and collocation, 2) repetition and predictability of the word's context, and 3) stylistic and sociolinguistic connotativeness of the illustrated word. To illustrate these principles I should like to concentrate on the entries of the adjective "fine" in the three dictionaries, and suggest a possible way of presenting its illustrative phraseology.

The nominative meaning of this adjective "beautiful, enjoyable, very good" is illutrated in the following way:

LDCE: a fine house/musician/wine/view; It's a fine example of its kind. I've never seen a finer animal. This painting is really very fine. He's an expert at getting the children ready for school; he's got it down to a fine art.
OALD: a fine view; We had a fine holiday in Switzerland, (ironic) This is a fine mess we're in!
COBUILD: From the top there is a fine view...; it is, I believe, the finest English painting of its time.

We should begin by distinguishing the philological material and those phrases which can be generalized and presented in a more comfortable for the user way. Thus, for example, the set expression "to get smth down to a fine art" and the ironic phrase "this is a fine mess we're in'" cannot be extended and can hardly be recommended for active language usage of a foreigner. It should be noted in passing that the specific character of these expressions is signalled by their non-neutral prosodic arrangement which may cause problems for the learner (Minaeva 1986, 67-78).

As far as other illustrations are concerned they are not restricted in their use and the only problem is how to generalize them. Here are some suggestions as to what this part of the "fine entry" could look like:

fine + noun denoting a) an observable area (view, landscape, valley, etc.), b) clothing (hat, shoes, uniform, etc.), c) (a part of) day or season (day, morning, spring, autumn), d) a sound (voice, tune, piece of music, etc.), e) a piece of art (painting, picture, etc.)
fine + /common/ noun denoting a) a person (boy, chap, woman, etc.), b) profession (musician, architect, teacher, lawyer, etc.).

Most learners turn to dictionaries to establish the main meanings of the word to be able to use it correctly in speech of their own. The part of the "fine entry" adduced above consists of the colligation *fine + noun* and a number of collocations which enable the lexicographer to keep to more general concepts. The user can easily extend each pattern. Rationally organized type of collocations make it possible to predict the contexts in which the word can occur in speech and avoid stylistically inappropriate expressions.

To conclude, choosing and creating illustrative phrases with the foreign learner in mind are no easy tasks. If it is assumed that these phrases are "fool-proof", they ought not be restricted to special (or professional) situations, they should also be as free as possible from sociolinguistic connotations. The lexicographer should never forget that the illustrative phrase is, as a rule, viewed by the learner as a model to be followed.

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