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CONTEXTUALIZATION AND THE BILINGUAL LEARNER'S DICTIONARY

Introduction

"Meaning is all that language is about" say Pyles and Algeo (1970:183), and Leech reiterates "The study of meaning in a wide sense is the study of all that is communicated by language" (Leech 1974:10). It is quite understandable, therefore, to see so many scholars who belong to diverse disciplines getting interested in it. Thus meaning has been tackled from different angles. Leech mentions seven types of meaning: 'denotative' (conceptual or congnitive), 'connotative', 'stylistic', 'affective', 'reflected', 'collocative' and 'thematic'. Most modern linguists, however, limit their study to 'denotative meaning'.

Lexicographers who compile dictionaries as all-round or multi-purpose reference books do not, like many theoretical linguists, confine themselves to denotative meaning because this would not be adequate for the general user. They, in fact, include other characteristics of language (phonological, graphical, grammatical etc.), in addition to aspects related to other types of meaning mentioned above, particularly connotative, stylistic, affective and collocative meanings.

Context

One of the most important characteristics which help us understand lexical items in sentences, passages, etc. is 'context' and, as we shall see later on, 'contextualization' has been considerably made use of in larger dictionaries in particular. What then, is 'context' and how far does it affect the meaning of a word?

In the first place, "the range of the term 'context' has been widened in several directions" (Ullmann 1970:49 and Richards 1936:32 ff.). It was used by Malinowsi (1923) and later by Firth (1957) to include the so-called 'context of situation', which "means in the first place the 'actual situation' in which an utterance occurs but also embraces the entire cultural background against which a speech-event has to be set" (Ullmann 1970:50). But "even the strictly 'verbal context' is no longer restricted to what immediately precedes and follows (the word) but may cover the whole passage, and sometimes the whole book, in which the word occurs" (ibid. p.49).

We will restrict ourselves here, however, to linguistic or verbal context, since the other aspects are not relevant to our discussion.

"The most extreme view ... sees the meaning of the word as wholly stateable in terms of the context in which it occurrred" (Palmer 1977:92). This view is associated with the notion of 'distribution' which was considered by the School of Structural Linguistics, and particularly by Zellig Harris, to be the main concern of linguistic analysis. However, this view has been

rejected for the less extreme view put forward by Firth that one knows a word by the company it keeps, or by what he called 'collocation'. But, as conceded by Firth himself, this cannot account for more than part of the meaning of a word. Thus although 'context' is crucial in determining word-meaning, many words standing by themselves can have meaning. "If words had no meaning outside context", says Ullmann, "it would be impossible to compile a dictionary" (op.cit. p.49); this means that 'context' is not the only way of defining words in dictionaries, although, as was mentioned earlier, it is commonly used especially in larger dictionaries.

A special type of context (which can be employed in dictionaries) is what is called 'restricted collocations' or RCs. These are defined by Aisenstadt "as combinations of two or more words used in one of their regular, non-idiomatic meanings, following certain structural patterns, and restricted in their commutability not only by grammatical and semantic valency (like the components of so-called free word-combinations), but also by usage". Examples: face the facts, face the truth, face the problem, face the circumstances, where the verb face has the meaning of 'recognize the existence of something'. "When used with this meaning, the verb commutes with a restricted number of nouns listed above" (Aisenstadt 1979:71).

Since it is quite clear that 'context' is so important for understanding the meanings of words when they are used in sentences, how can it be made use of in the compilation of dictionaries? O'Rourke (1974:66-82) gives several 'context-clues' which are conducive to the development of vocabulary. Some of these apply to dictionaries. The main 'external' context-clue he mentions is 'definition', and he counts seven different types of definition, three of which are employed by lexicographers, namely: formal definition, definition by description, and definition by synonym (or antonym). The other types of definition apply more to illustration of word-use in sentences, such as: exemplification, comparison and contrast, apposition and origin.

Among the 'internal' context clues the most important, according to O'Rourke, is the analysis of the word into roots, prefixes and suffixes - another technique used by lexicographers. He does not, however, say anything about contextualization through grammatical information. This, as will be shown later, is an important method of defining the meaning of a word with reference to its grammatical position and function in the sentence.

But the most important method of providing in a dictionary the necessary 'context' for a better understanding of a word and its use is, unquestionably, to give as many examples as is practically possible of the word 'in sentences' in which the lexical item is used in various senses. The use of 'full sentences' rather than phrases or sentence fragments is vital, because only in complete sentences can the grammatical information provided about the lexical item be of any use at all.

Let us now turn to a special bilingual learner's dictionary which I have been involved in with a British colleague for the last few years and which is now being printed by Longman of England and Librairie du Liban in Beirut. The dictionary is called THE ARAB

WORLD DICTIONARY: ENGLISH-ARABIC (AWD). What I intend to do in the next few pages is to describe this dictionary, show how it differs from all other English-Arabic dictionaries, and how contextualization and context-clues have been utilized in it.

THE ARAB WORLD DICTIONARY

It is crucial to state clearly here who the dictionary is addressed to and for what purpose(s) it is to be used; what its size is and why this size has been chosen; how the contents have been selected and on what basis; and how the defining vocabulary has been decided upon.

In the first instance, the dictionary is a bilingual (English-Arabic) or rather English/English/Arabic learner's dictionary; it is addressed to the Arab learner of English, particularly secondary school and university students in the Arab World, but also to adult learners of English in private language institutes. Secondary school learners in this part of the world are exposed during the six/seven/eight years of E.L.T. to the 2,000 most frequent and most active words in English (according to West's General Service List) at the elementary stage of the course, and to about 2,000 - 3,000 more at the later stages. What they actually retain differs from one student to another, but on average it does not exceed 50% of the total. The main reason for this loss of vocabulary is the fact that English is treated by the students as a school subject, rather than as a means of communication, since they do not have a very strong 'need' to use the foreign language in everyday life either in its spoken or written form.

The AWD contains about 15,000 headwords; this is considered by the compilers to be the number adequate for the users specified above. How this number has been arrived at is as follows. Most of the E.L.T. textbooks and supplementary readers used in the schools of most countries in the Arab World were thoroughly examined and their vocabulary counted. All these, together with West's G.S.L., were first entered into the AWD. This amounted to about 5,000 items. Next, Praninskas's list of items found to be essential for freshmen in English-medium universities (Praninskas 1972) was added in toto. Then more recent vocabulary counts were checked, especially for more recent political, economic, scientific and technical words which have become very common in mass-media and consequently in everyday language such as astronaut and robot etc. These were added to the list. The final list was brought up to about 15,000 by adding to it the more frequent words from Thorndike and Lorge's (1944) list of 30,000 words that had not yet been included.

Now why this number, and why not depend on one of the shorter monolingual English dictionaries such as O.U.P.'s ENGLISH-READER'S DICTIONARY (ERD) with its carefully selected 25,000 items? Several factors have combined to make the compilers reach their final decision.

In the first place the AWD is not only a 'reader's' dictionary; otherwise it could have employed the same format - which will be described in some detail later on. It is also meant to help the user 'write' and also 'speak' the langauge. It aspires to be the first pedagogic English-Arabic dictionary ever to be compiled. The

active vocabulary necessary for speech does not exceed the most common 2,000 words included in the G.S.L; in fact the very 'basic' vocabulary was brought down during the Second World War to a mere 800 items. For puposes of ordinary writing the list will be more, probably about 3,000. For reading purposes, however, more items, specially of passive vocabulary, are required. But in this respect, since most of the learners to which the dictionary is addressed are not expected to be able to read original, but mostly simplified texts, in addition to simple newspaper articles etc., several guides for simplifying original works were consulted by the compilers, probably the best being the Handbook to Longman's Structural Readers (1968) which, for the highest level of simplification only slighly short of the original, includes only 2,395 items; and the Guide to the Ladder Series with its 5,000 headwords. All these factors have combined to make the compilers believe that the number 15,000 would be more than adequate for the prospective user of the dictionary.

But another down-to-earth factor also had special impact on reaching that decision, namely the 'actual size' of the dictionary. Since it is not supposed to be a desk- or a library-dictionary, it should be portable; that is, the student should be able to actually carry it with him to school, and the learner to his centre of study or work. Experimenting with one of the letters, we found that the dictionary would contain more than a thousand medium-size pages for the 15,000 items dealt with in the new manner. More than that was thought to make the dictionary too unwieldy; even this size was thought to be too big, and it has been agreed with the publishers to use the thinnest kind of paper for printing. Final setting of the English letters proved that we were right; the actual number of pages amounted to 1,135.

The new format is to be looked upon as experimental at this stage. If it is widely accepted and found to be much more useful than the traditional type, a larger dictionary can in future be compiled along the same lines - in which case it would be a desk-dictionary.

The defining vocabulary of the English section of the AWD is all-important. As will be shown later on in this paper, such vocabulary, if not very strictly limited, may be a great obstacle to the process of understanding the definition, and consequently, the meaning of the item, particularly as far as foreign students are concerned. Thus in a learner's dictionary the limitation of such vocabulary is of utmost importance; otherwise the whole dictionary loses a great deal of its usefulness. In the AWD, therefore, special attention has been paid to this point, and the defining vocabulary was selected in accordance with the frequency counts mentioned above, so that the minimum of background words are required for defining each item, thus making it as easy as possible for the learner to draw utmost benefit from it.

Let us now proceed to examine the AWD in more detail and delineate some of its unique features.

Special features in the AWD

In the first place the AWD is the only English-Arabic dictionary which contains all the elements found in a large monolingual (i.e.

English/English) dictionary. These include the following:

(a) Guide to the pronunciation of every entry and often of the other derived or inflected forms, too.

(b) The part(s) of speech to which the headword and each of the derivatives belong, and the other relevant grammatical information such as whether the noun is 'count' or 'non-count', whether the verb is 'transitive' or 'intransitive', what the plural is if it is irregular, or what the past tense or past participle is, and so on.

Among the larger English-Arabic dictionaries only AL-MAWRID provides some, not all, of those elements (e.g. pronunciation, part of speech, tr./intr. verb); and among the shorter ones only the OXFORD ENGLISH-ARABIC READER'S DICTIONARY (OXEARD) offers several of these. Another large dictionary, AL-MANAR, gives the part of speech only, but none of the other elements. Elias's MODERN DICTIONARY (a large one) does not give even that.

(c) The English definition of each of the various meanings of the item. This is not found in any other English-Arabic dictionary at all.

(d) One or more uses of the English item in 'full sentences'.

Again this feature is not found in any of the other English-Arabic dictionaries, long or short. In fact this is not found in most English monolingual dictionaries except the very large desk/library editions. Recently a college-type English dictionary, namely LONGMAN DICTIONARY OF CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH (LDOCE) has included full sentences to show the use(s) of each entry.

However, in two of the English-Arabic dictionaries that are totally based on monolingual English dictionaries, namely: AL-MAWRID (based on WEBSTER'S NEW COLLEGIATE DICTIONARY), and the OXEARD mentioned above (based on ERD), we often find short 'phrases' (not sentences) to illustrate the various senses/uses of the item. This is particularly true in the case of idioms including phrasal verbs.

Contextualization of each sense of each item is thus achieved through the following:

(a) by definition, viz. (i) formally, i.e. the usual paraphrase-type commonly used in dictionaries; (ii) by means of one or more synonyms; (iii) by description.

(b) by giving all the relevant grammatical information necessary for placing the item in its proper position in the sentence. This includes such information as to whether a verb takes one or two objects, or one object and a complement, or an object and an adjective, or an object and an infinitive, etc.

(c) by giving one, two or more examples of each sense of the item 'in full sentences'. This is, naturally, the most helpful type of contextualization for the learner. Comparing the AWD (15,000 words) with OXEARD (25,000 words) in this respect, and looking at the entry make with its multitude of phrasal verb combinations, we find that there is one or more full-sentence example of each sense

of each combination of the verb in AWD wheras in OXEARD there are only four examples, and these are phrases, not sentences.

(d) by giving the necessary stylistic and cultural uses/senses of the item, e.g. whether the item is used formally, informally, colloquially, regionally, slang, taboo etc. This is helpful to the learner not only for understanding the connotation of the item when it occurs in a text, but for learning how to 'use' it himself when he has to.

(e) by giving a reasonable number of 'collocation restrictions' as recommended by Aisenstadt.

(f) finally, by giving the Arabic equivalent(s) of each of the numbered senses of the lexical item.

Another feature which is found only in some English monolingual dictionaries and hardly ever in any English-Arabic dictionary, but is included in the AWD is the fact that certain lexical items have slightly different senses when they collocate with other items. This is a very important feature, because quite often the collocation of the lexical item with other special types of items changes the Arabic equivalent considerably.

Another important feature of the AWD is that the English definitions are all given within a vocabularly of the most common 1,500 words in English. This is certainly not the case in the larger English monolingual dictionaries, but it is not the case in several small-size dictionaries like the ERD (25,000 items) either. As an illustration of this let us see how the word magic is defined in ERD.

E_1: magic ... (1) art of controlling events by the pretended use of supernatural forces
(2) the identification of a symbol with the things it stands for
(3) art of obtaining mysterious results by stage tricks
(4) mysterious quality.

All or most of the underlined words in these definitions would prove difficult for the secondary school/early university student in most countries of the Arab World, and consequently the definitions would prove useless. Compare this with the definition of the same word in AWD, which gives only three senses:

E_2: magic ... (1) the art of causing wonderful things to happen through unnatural powers (in stories), or through clever tricks
(2) an example of this
(3) a strange and beautiful charm: the magic of a starry sky

Finally, because of the special nature of the AWD it was found that the lay-out also has to be different from that employed in other bilingual English-Arabic dictionaries. In those, either the English item is given on the left, and all Arabic meanings are given on the right of the column (usually two columns in each page), and

when there is a shortage of space, the other meanings are started again from the beginning, i.e. from the right-hand side of the line; or the English items and their Arabic meanings are interspersed in the same column without beginning each new sense on a new line. This latter technique is employed in larger dictionaries in order to save space; but because English is written from left to right whereas Arabic is written the other way round, there is always a great deal of confusion confronting any user - not only the beginner or the learner.

The lay-out experimented with in this short dictionary makes things very easy for the user. The tradition of having two columns on each page is dispensed with, and now we have one column of English which includes all that has to be included there, just like any other monolingual dictionary. The various senses of each item are, however, very carefully numbered, and in the wide margin (or column) left for the Arabic meanings, the numbers are also given in Arabic and the various meanings inserted after those numbers. There is no room for confusion of any sort. In fact the rationale behind the new lay-out is to make the learner go through the whole process of finding the item in the dictionary, then looking into all the rest of the information given, grammatical and semantic, including the contexts in full-sentence examples, and trying to make an educated guess of the meaning of that item in that particular context before looking at the Arabic meaning. In this way it is hoped that such meaning will not be lost at once, as is often the case, but would linger longer than usual when we take into account the effort expended in finding it.

One important feature which is considered by O'Rourke as the major 'internal' context clue is absent from the AWD as well as from all other English-Arabic dictionaries. This is the analysis of the word into a root and a prefix and/or a suffix. This is justified by the fact that most of those roots, prefixes and suffixes mean nothing to the Arab learner of English at this early stage. They come from Anglo-Saxon, Latin or Greek origins, none of which are familiar to our students. The compilers, therefore, did not think that such information would be of any use in a small dictionary such as the AWD. But since these roots, prefixes and suffixes are usually introduced, taught and practised in English Departments at the University, we believe that their introduction into larger dictionaries would be of great value.

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