

Edwin A. Lovatt

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES IN A BILINGUAL COLLOQUIAL DICTIONARY

I intend to report in my paper about the dictionary of modern colloquial or slang French which my colleague René Héralil and I have been writing for the last eight years, entirely as a two-man undertaking, with some financial assistance, notably from the British Academy. I find it particularly apt that the organizers have placed my paper in the Learners' Dictionaries section since we began compiling our volume as a direct result of student need. The A-level French syllabuses have moved rapidly in recent years towards an emphasis on the spoken and the informal written language, while at the same time our expectation of students' general linguistic and cultural attainment has had to be lowered. So at a time when our students are seeking an ever-increasing sophistication in their communication in French, their capacity to achieve this has diminished.

Soon after René and I joined the staff of Leeds University French Department, we began what was, and we believe still is, the only academic course teaching slang French to a Final Year tutorial group. We quickly realized that not only were our students unprepared for handling what is in effect a 'second-level language', but that the source and reference books in this area were woefully inadequate for study in the mid-1970s. The principal dictionary, HARRAPS' FRENCH-ENGLISH DICTIONARY OF SLANG AND COLLOQUIALISMS, while admirable in its coverage for the time at which it was written, was becoming more and more out of date in its French and English terms. And so, with the excellent COLLINS/ROBERT FRENCH-ENGLISH DICTIONARY still some five years away from publication, we set about writing our own manual which has since grown to the fully-fledged 8,000 headword dictionary advertized on the leaflet distributed at this Conference.

Our whole approach has been consistent with the lexicological philosophy of Jacques Cellard, co-author of one of the most recent colloquial dictionaries, the DICTIONNAIRE DU FRANÇAIS NON-CONVENTIONNEL, when he wrote in his Chroniques du Langage in Le Monde that if language, and particularly informal language, cannot be studied with a sense of humour and fun, then it is not worth studying at all. Our students living in post-1968 France for their year abroad wanted to get more quickly to the heart of 'French as she is spoke' and they certainly did not want to plough through attested literary examples and definitions. We were finding more each year that pupils in schools received inadequate training and preparation in techniques and skills which they would need in order to interpret and situate correctly excerpts from popular literature taken out of context. Less still did they find the contexts and situations relevant to their own experience and needs. In elaborating our methodology we inevitably began by looking at traditional French lexicographical methods and the current debate between proponents of the descriptive and the prescriptive methods. It seemed clear to us that our task was to describe the living language in as complete a manner as possible, to interpret it for a foreign audience removed from the cultural and linguistic environment of which it was an

integral part.

The most obvious way in which to do this would have been the use of a recording machine - but since we ourselves were removed from the linguistic environment, except on an occasional basis, this clearly was not practical. In any case, as my colleague Henri Béjoint amongst others has shown through research 'on the ground', to use the live recorded voice to capture 'natural' (i.e. colloquial or familiar) speech terms and patterns is quite unrealistic since the subjects, by the very fact of having the machine in their presence, act unnaturally. We all know of the recent attempts by television crews to film a family acting naturally at home and the dramatic impact this brought to so-called family life!

At the other end of the scale come the attested literary examples and definitions I have just mentioned, but here too there are obvious drawbacks. Again the very fact that any snippets of conversation in a novel or work of literature are constructed to suit a character and a situation, means that the removal of these from their literary context would largely destroy their naturalness. In any case, many modern authors of colloquial French pride themselves on their idiosyncratic use of the language, several having even written their own explanatory glossary to accompany the literature. The use of attested written examples is further complicated by the speed with which many expressions age or vary in character over a period of decades. While we insist that the slang language in which we are interested ages much less rapidly than many critics seem to think, it is true that the sociological approach of authors alters quite quickly and this can alter the connotative and even the semantic value of a word.

As we went through the first years' preliminary research to find sources and techniques, it became clear to us that if we were to answer our students' needs, neither of these methods would do at all. We referred back to the comments of Jacques Cellard as he reviewed newly-published dictionaries in the 1970s and noted his approval of illustration by "synthetic sentences drawn from the linguist's personal experience". I realize that at this point my assertions run counter to Professor Sinclair's (1984) remarks on made-up examples, but for René and myself, accustomed as we already were to writing articles on a variety of para-linguistic topics, tapping our personal linguistic experience for the dictionary would be a direct continuation of the creative language process - and so was born the concept of the 'contextualized equivalent'. Cellard defines this method as pedagogically more valuable, easier to handle and closer to the average reader's expectation and capabilities than the literary quotation.

As I said earlier, these expectations and capabilities vary enormously, over a wider spectrum than was the case even twenty years ago, owing to the burgeoning choice of course materials and teaching aids at school level and we realized that while the traditional lexicographical labels, markers, register indicators and cross-references would suit a small number of readers, a majority seeking to interpret the informal language would prefer a simpler method of interpretation. Cellard speaks of the writing of a dictionary of the popular language as "un véritable parcours du combattant sous le feu de l'ennemi". Certainly the capturing of a

living slang is this difficult, but putting it across to foreign readers in their own ephemeral terms is even more difficult. It is more like trying to hit a target on a moving train when you are on a train going the other way! So, finally rejecting the adoption of a system of asterisks, daggers and stars and shunning the indefinable abbreviations obsc., vulg., and pop., we settled on the contextualized equivalent coming in three interlocking and self-defining parts and relying on the inherent interest of the reader which in a dictionary of this type can be more readily assumed than in an ordinary work.

Each headword is given three English equivalents, as is each phrase or clause involving the use of the word. These equivalents are always in descending order of colloquiality, with the first at the same level as the headword. The nature of the headword's colloquiality is conveyed, usually, by the use of inverted commas for the English equivalent. Our reason for adopting this device and using it extensively is that modern journalists, particularly in the headlines of the popular press, are very fond of it as an eye-catching and often suitably ambiguous trick to sell their product. Clearly, the dividing line between the spoken and the written popular language is being increasingly blurred by the media, and our dictionary is intended to capture this movement in French and put it into English. So our use of inverted commas acts as a warning, not so much to the English reader who we assume will be able to follow our creative slang style, but to the foreign reader who is using the dictionary to increase his own knowledge of colloquial English. This warning varies between "be careful, this word is very vulgar", and "we have created this word to transfer the flavour of the original French". Clearly, the reader is given as much responsibility as in any other dictionary for interpretation, but here it is his intuitive and learned linguistic 'base' we are seeking to tap rather than any formal or intellectual 'exterior' labelling ability.

The second of the three English equivalents is what would normally be termed 'familiar' or 'popular' - as we explain to our readers, a word they might use extensively if the psychological circumstances were right. For example, many words meaning 'head' have equivalents bean, bonce, head. The native English reader will immediately recognize that bean derives from a shape-image and is ambiguous as a colloquial term (Hiya, old bean!), whereas bonce has a comfortable, familiar ring to it, usable in family circles or on the stage of old music-halls. 'Money' is brass, loot, money - again; brass has an old-fashioned and less widely-used ring about it ("Where there's muck, there's brass") and is ambiguous out of context (the musical instrument? - or related to the adjective brassy?). Loot, on the other hand, is always something taken away to be used for nefarious purposes - and obtained, if not illegally, then certainly by 'underhand methods'!

Thirdly, we use a standard or technical term to convey the sense of the headword, so that if any doubt or ambiguity remains after the first and second, any reader can refer to a large standard English dictionary for a clear definition and description. Hopefully, a reader wishing to improve his use of non-conventional English (be he foreign or English!) will begin with the third equivalent and work back to the first, thereby obtaining a mini creative lesson in popular English, while enjoying the use of the book.

The reader's enjoyment (and therefore learning capacity) will be extended with the second part of the 'contextualized equivalent' - the French sentence. Here we have used "a real created slice of the living language" produced in the same creative spirit as the popular language we are illustrating and interpreting. We justify this method by its total naturalness, making up in linguistic spirit what it lacks in authority through not being drawn from a 'literary work' - but if our dictionary is inventive and published, then surely it has that same authority? The majority of these sentences are 'first person' based, but not placed within inverted commas unless true conversation is involved. We feel that many dictionaries, in seeking to define a word within the example, go overboard either in the length or in the fundamental falseness of the sentence. We, since our definition is cared for principally in the first part of the 'contextualized equivalent', use this second part as precisely as 'illustration' - showing sociolinguistic context and usage rather than definition.

The third part is the English translation of this French sentence. It seemed to us during our early researches that dictionary makers, especially of the colloquial language, assume a far greater capacity for interpretation of their own language on the part of readers than is generally the case. We kept clearly in mind our basic purpose of furnishing an interpretative text for English students whose linguistic abilities were based much more on a 'popular culture' of the 1960s and '70s than upon a 'bookish' culture of the previous hundred years. The result of this line of thinking was that we set out not to give an exact translation in every case, but to convey in English the spirit of the original French expression. Naturally, it is the function of any teacher of a foreign language to bring his students to this level of sophistication in their dealing with the language and its translation, and this is why I believe the method adopted in our dictionary will serve a useful pedagogic function.

I have dwelt at some length on the theory behind our methodology, now I feel you deserve some light relief by way of examples before I close! And I will start with a good example drawn from the popular modern culture I was mentioning a moment ago. Under bourrer, the expression "Je vais lui bourrer la gueule!" is interpreted "I'll put me thumb in his eye and dial a number!" - a famous saying on TV from one Richard Dunn as he was about to enter the boxing ring. Obviously, an illustration for gueule after our first equivalents of mush, dial, face, would be superfluous, but this French-English couplet conveys a high degree of sociolinguistic information while provoking a smile! "Il en fait un de ces plats" becomes the classic journalese "Phew, what a scorcher!" conveying the ritualistic nature of the complaint. "Il a baisé à la fatiguée" needs no further explaining after "He enjoyed a session of 'Aussie sex'!"

Sometimes the illustration is extended or replaced by a historical or geographical anecdote which serves to convey the same character of the original expression or to explain why and how it fulfils its sociolinguistic function in modern French. The colloquial meaning for tuile of 'nasty blow, unexpected setback' is illustrated with the story of how Pyrrhus, king of Epirus, was killed when entering the city of Argos triumphantly in 272 B.C.,

because a woman threw a roof-tile in her euphoria. A classical education can benefit even the most modern French schoolboy!

Finally, may I give an example of how we extend the concept of the illustrative example in a truly lexicographical manner. Under soupe we give among other expressions "être le dernier pour la soupe". In order to convey the full sense-value of "to miss out on something good, not necessarily through one's own fault but because of circumstances or personal defect", we tell a little story passed on by Professor Hope in our Department. When the army private complained to his sergeant that he rarely got a leave-pass, he was asked for his name. On replying "Wimpole, sir!", the hard-hearted sergeant, in the best spirit of our entry soupe replied: "If your name had been Arse-hole, Bum-hole or Cunt-hole, you'd have stood a chance, but being Wimpole, you're bound to always come last!"

As you can see, our whole purpose is to enliven the colloquial language for the reader and to help the English student of French to learn the real French of France with a minimum of difficulty and little chance of putting a foot wrong. When our volume is published, we intend that it will become a forum for our readers who will assist us as we use the advantages of modern technology to keep abreast of language developments and perhaps make a contribution to international understanding and the future of French studies in this country.

References

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Sinclair, J. (1984) "Lexicography as an academic subject" in this volume