

# The Treatment of Connotation in Learners' Dictionaries

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the way in which many words carry a considerable weight of connotation, and to see how these aspects are dealt with in dictionaries that are designed specifically for the foreign learner.

Firstly, we need to decide what we mean by connotation. Iordanskaja and Mel'čuk (1984) offer a lengthy discussion of the word, so I do not propose to spend a great deal of time debating its various possible interpretations. For the purposes of this paper, I use the word connotation to refer to those associations of a word which a native speaker is aware of but which a non-native speaker, i.e. the learner, cannot guess at because these associations are culture-bound and cannot be conveyed by means of a standard dictionary definition. Nor, indeed, can these associations be deemed to be covered in a single word translation from one language to another. For example, to translate the English 'caviar' into the Russian *ikra* tells a Russian speaker *what* caviar is, but does no more. We shall return to this word later.

It is often the case that connotatively weighted words appear, on the surface, to have perfectly straightforward meanings and to pose relatively few problems to the lexicographer who attempts to write conventional dictionary definitions for them. After selection of a genus word, the differentiae can be quickly assembled, woven into a definition which distinguishes the item from its co-hyponyms, and the lexicographer's most pressing task becomes the next word on the list. In a native speaker dictionary, one aim is to provide precise information about the boundaries of meaning, but in a learners' dictionary, the purpose of the differentiae is not so much to provide a technically or scientifically precise definition, but to provide sufficient identifying features for the learner to be able to recognise the item in question. Thus, CED defines *car* as

a self-propelled road vehicle designed to carry passengers, esp one with four wheels that is powered by an internal-combustion engine.

CCELD, by contrast, says:

A car is a road vehicle that usually has four wheels and is powered by an engine. Cars need a driver and usually have room for three or four passengers.

Significantly, the learners' dictionary sees no need to refer to the internal-combustion engine. For the purposes of a precise definition, it is important to mention the kind of engine involved, but the learner will probably know what a car is already and needs simply to be able to identify the correspondence between the English lexeme *car* and the real world object.

While the car may have its place in the cultural history of the twentieth century, it is nonetheless a universal object, and is cited here as an example of a 'neutral' word which requires no further description from a lexicographer. However, when it comes to culture-specific terms, the lexicographer needs to be rather more subjective in the selection of what to put into the definition. While a native speaker diction-

ary can take for granted the fact that its readers will be only too aware of the associations of some words, the learners' dictionary cannot make this assumption; rather it must make the opposite assumption, that the user is completely unaware of these associations, and act accordingly. It is these associations, and the way in which they are, or are not, conveyed in learners' dictionaries that I wish to examine.

Take the word 'darts' for example. Standard dictionary entries for *darts* tend to comprise the semantic elements: **game, indoors, board or target, 3 missiles**. But if you ask any English person what they associate with darts, they will as likely as not tell you that it is a game played in pubs by fat men who drink a lot. Where is the dictionary that conveys this connotation?

To take another example, is a paperback book really just a book with a paper cover, or is there more to it than that? How, for example, can the non-native speaker decode the utterance: "I'm waiting for it to come out in paperback"? In Britain, and I suspect in the United States, there is a tradition that books, especially novels, are first published in hardback form, and are later published in paperback form if the initial sales indicate that there is a likelihood of making a healthy profit from a paperback edition. I am not sure if the same applies in, say, France, where it is quite normal for novels to be published in paperback form from the outset. To understand the utterance "I'm waiting for it to come out in paperback", you need to know more than the simple fact that it is a book with a soft cover, but the learners' dictionary is unlikely to provide this information.

It could be argued that this kind of extralinguistic information does not really belong in a dictionary definition. But the learner who consults a dictionary to decode a text is unlikely to be perturbed by extralinguistic information such as this if it can elucidate what might otherwise be incomprehensible, or at best opaque uses. And of course, it is not just for decoding that this kind of information is helpful. A learner who has access to such information while composing a text can avoid some of the pitfalls which await those who use a seemingly straightforward word, unaware of its connotations and the effect they might have on the eventual reader.

**Darts** and **paperback** are just two examples of words that are culture-specific in the sense that they rely on a knowledge of the social customs and institutions of a country, in this case, Great Britain. Anyone who has taught English as a foreign language, (or indeed, any other language as a foreign language) will be aware that there is more to explaining vocabulary than simply saying what a word 'means'. In many cases, the teacher has to fill the gap and provide the information that is missing from the dictionary entry.

There is another kind of connotatively weighted word, which depends less on the present-day culture and state of British society than on literary and biblical allusion. Words such as 'lion', which has the connotation of courage, 'rat', a likely deserter of a tricky situation, 'sheep', a blind, unquestioning follower, and so on. Many of these items have acquired characteristics and attributes which lend themselves to extensive use in simile, metaphor, and idiom. In many cases, they depend on a literary or biblical past which, although forgotten or unrealised by those who use them, persists in the everyday use of English.

The connotations of these words get dragged forward into metaphor or simile in a way that is not always comprehensible to the non-native speaker. Native speakers are brought up alongside these connotations, which often ossify into fixed expressions such as 'brave as a lion', 'as a lamb to the slaughter', 'like rats leaving a sinking

ship', and so on. Much of what I am going on to say will apply equally to these words, but for the purposes of this paper, I shall restrict the discussion to those words whose connotations are more firmly rooted in present-day culture and society. Before going on to look at some dictionary treatments, it is worth citing Ayto's (1983) plea for the provision of connotative information in dictionaries:

To take an extreme case relating to connotation, the foreign learner of English is much less likely than the native speaker to be aware of all the nuances of connotation that surround an English word, so one has all the more duty to make them explicit for him.

There are three strategies employed in learners' dictionaries to convey connotative information about a particular item.

### 1. Conveying the information in a single definition

Consider these definitions of the word *caviar* offered by three learners' dictionaries:

pickled roe (eggs) of the sturgeon or certain other large fish. (OALD)

the very expensive ROE (=salted eggs) of various large fish, esp., the STURGEON, eaten as food. (LDOCE)

the salted eggs of a fish called the sturgeon, eaten as a delicacy especially at the beginning of a meal. (CCELD)

Does any of these definitions really adequately convey the connotations (for British English) that caviar is considered an upper-class food, eaten by 'ordinary' folk only on the most special of occasions, or that it symbolises a luxurious, hedonistic, and perhaps materialistic lifestyle?

Although technically accurate, the first definition does not even hint at the connotations of the word. Indeed, it is only just discernible that caviar is something you can eat, and the learner who does not know the word 'pickled' will even miss this much. In the third definition, some implicit information is carried by the word 'delicacy', though this seems a rather high level of lexis for a learners' dictionary. In the normal run of events, the constituents of these definitions follow the broad pattern of linguistic analysis outlined by Ayto (1983). That is to say, there is a genus word, or superordinate, supported by a number of differentiae.

However, LDOCE's definition contains as its first ingredient the notion of expense. In the terms described in Ayto's paper, the notion of expense is an extralinguistic feature, referring rather to the real world than to any linguistic analysis. Yet I would argue that this is in fact a crucial piece of information which, while not telling the whole story, gives some idea of the native speaker's associations for the word *caviar*.

Briefly, to give another example of this kind of word, consider the following three entries for *champagne*:

(kinds of) white sparkling (because charged with gas) French wine. (OALD)

an expensive (French) white wine containing a lot of BUBBLES, usu. drunk on special occasions: *True champagne comes only from one area of France, but sparkling wine from other places is often called champagne too. a champagne reception (= at which champagne is served)* (LDOCE)

an expensive French white wine that has a lot of bubbles in it. EG *Willie poured himself another glass of champagne.* (CCELD)

Once again, only one of the three definitions makes more than a cursory attempt to convey some of the associations of the word. Champagne, like caviar, is expensive and associated with a wealthy or upper-class way of life. It is drunk at weddings, christenings and at other special occasions. A learner who is not familiar with either champagne or British culture needs to know that it falls into a very different category from, say, beer or table wine.

Ayto (1983) claimed that semantic analysis is only a starting point. He went on to say:

If usefulness and usability of definitions are always in the forefront of the lexicographer's mind, as I believe they should be, he must be able to move beyond this starting point, and transcend, or even break, the rules in order to compose definitions that communicate, and are not merely dumb monuments to arcane speculations.

What the non-native speaker needs is a dictionary which has as one of its principles of analysis and exposition: 'what will a native speaker associate with this word', as well as 'where does a strict linguistic or semantic analysis lead to'?

This kind of treatment, holding the extralinguistic connotative features in the same definition as the 'literal' sense could be suitable also for the 'lion' kind of word. Urdang (1979) refers to the 'hence' kind of statement, now sadly out of fashion, but useful for pointing the reader in the direction of those features or attributes of a word that are most likely to be carried forward into idiom or metaphor.

## 2. Example and gloss

Consider this entry for the headword *lads* in LDOCE:

BrE infml a group of men that one knows and likes: *He spends every evening at the pub with the lads. (= his group of male friends) The lads (= my/our team) played brilliantly this afternoon. Jeff's one of the lads. (= a loyal member of the group)*

In this instance, the definition conveys only some of the essential ingredients, and the lexicographer relies on the three glosses to add further information. What is worrying about the definition is the use of 'one'. Surely, in this sense, we should say that the group of men know and like each other, rather than that they are known

and liked by someone outside the group. But there is a risk that the learner will be uncertain or confused by the fact that each example has its own gloss, and might be tempted to ask how many meanings are being covered here. The second example and gloss, for example, seem to me to be a separate sense.

CCELD offers:

People sometimes use the **lads** to refer to a group of young men who do a lot of things together, like going to pubs and playing football, and who share the same attitudes and interests; an informal use. EG *He just wants to be one of the lads.*

CCELD makes some attempt to convey the connotations within the definition, and without relying on the example to reinforce or add to the explanation. Even so, the fact remains that this definition is not necessarily illuminating for the learner who does not know about pubs and football.

The use of the register label 'informal' in these definitions is a point I shall return to later.

Both these entries are actually separate from the more literal sense of the word, and so fall into the next category as well, but they are dealt with here for the purposes of examining the strategy of example and gloss.

### 3. Having a special sense which contrasts with the 'core' meaning of the word

OALD, in its entry for 'suburb' says that 'suburban' means 'of or in a ~'. Their second definition then elaborates:

(derog) having the good qualities of neither town nor country people; narrow in interests and outlook.

CCELD also have two categories, only with the order reversed on grounds of frequency:

1) If you describe something as **suburban**, you mean that it has qualities associated with life in a suburb. You usually mean that it is dull, conventional, and lacks change or excitement. EG . . . *a suburban lifestyle.*

2) **Suburban** is also used to describe something which relates to a suburb. EG . . . *suburban areas.*

This seems to be a useful solution to the problem, allowing the lexicographer to concentrate on the connotation of the word in isolation and avoiding the risk of confusing the learner with a double-barrelled definition. However, this solution depends on the fact that the connotation has become fixed in the language, in the way that many metaphors have. But is it really true in this case? It seems to me that there are two distinct uses of the word 'lad' as exemplified in the previous section. The distinction is all the more apparent in the dominance of the plural form for the use under consideration here, added to the fact that the collocational patterns are

different in each of the senses. In the case of *suburban*, the same utterance might be connotatively loaded in one set of circumstances, and neutral in another set. The relative weight of the connotative features depend on such factors as the speaker's knowledge of the hearer or the hearer's knowledge of the speaker, and so on. This leads on to an area which dictionaries cannot really cope with except on a superficial level. So, the problem remains: how does the learner know which category a given utterance falls into? At least the examples are distinguishable; one in the 'denotational' sense, and one in the 'connotative' sense. In the LDOCE entry below, the learner is left to decide for himself or herself which examples carry the connotation and which don't. Obviously, the context, and the presuppositions that the hearer or reader has about the speaker or writer will influence the interpretation put on the item in question, but sadly dictionaries cannot afford the space in which to provide more than the briefest amount of context.

LDOCE, then, combines the two senses in one entry:

*adj often derog* of, for, or in the suburbs, esp. as considered uninteresting or unimaginative: *a suburban railway suburban streets with houses all the same suburban life suburban attitudes.*

In parallel with the three strategies outlined above is the use of register labels in an attempt to imply connotation. At best, this is over subtle, and at worst it can be quite misleading. (I might be doing everyone an injustice here; after all, register and connotation are two different things, but it does seem that the lexicographer sometimes relies on the register label to imply what is not made explicit in the explanation.) For instance the LDOCE entry for *lads* uses the register label *informal*. The same label occurs in the entry at *wellington* when giving the alternative possibility *welly*. Now, I could well imagine the Princess of Wales telling her young son to put his wellies on, but the prospect of her referring to Prince Charles as 'one of the lads' (a loyal member of the group) is remote, to say the least. Similarly, the *often derog* label at *suburban* is not as helpful as one might suppose. Which examples are the 'derog' ones? Under what circumstances would you use the word in a derogatory way? If I think railways are fascinating, how can I talk about railways which run through the outskirts of London without worrying about whether I am being derogatory or not?

Before writing a definition, the lexicographer usually asks a few questions about the referent, such as 'what is it made of?', and 'what sort of shape is it?', and 'what is it used for?' But, as the case of *caviar* showed, we are likely to miss certain aspects which would be of great help to a non-native speaker in decoding what a native speaker will actually associate with the word. We need to ask a few more questions which, in some cases, will lead on to an awareness of these associations. And in those cases, the possibility for enhancing the quality of information for the (often baffled) non-native speaker is one which should be pursued.

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