

The Treatment of Figurative Meanings in the English Learner's Dictionaries (OALD, LDOCE, CC and CIDE)

Abstract

In this article I deal with the problem of how non-literal uses of words are treated in the four British learner's dictionaries. I will focus on the practical problem of how dictionaries define the literal and non-literal senses many words may have, how these are shown to be related under the entries and how – if at all –, therefore, the (non-native) language learner is made aware of the semantic enrichment this relation provides words with frequent, and therefore lexicalised, figurative senses.

1. Introduction

In the case of numerous figuratively used words the non-figurative sense is still synchronically relevant, enriching the figurative use with a 'by-way-of-speaking' dimension. Literal senses, even when much less often used, are essential for a full understanding as long as evidence from corpora proves that this sense is still present. It is, especially for foreign learners, of paramount importance to know how certain senses are related to other senses. This will give them a much firmer grasp of the meaning, the structure and inner workings of the English vocabulary. Thus, a word like *flak* loses much of its force and colour in the CC treatment, where it is defined as 'severe criticism' only (the literal sense is absent), so that the link between *flak* and *flak jacket* is therefore totally fortuitous. Also, syntactic and idiomatic behaviour may seem erratic and puzzling: if you are not made clearly aware of what *quagmire* literally means you will have difficulty understanding exactly why you can 'drown' or 'sink into' a quagmire of legal entanglements. I will try to find some solutions to these problems which do not turn learner's dictionaries into etymological dictionaries or put the strategy of easy and accessible definitions at risk.

2. The treatment of figurative uses in the learner's dictionaries

The difference between literal and figurative senses is usually a case of *metaphor*, in its various manifestations: 'stabilized figurative senses' (Zgusta 1971: 59), which have become part of the present *system*. When the link with the original non-figurative meaning is lost, it is no longer any use to speak of metaphor. We might then, in a somewhat different sense from Zgusta, speak of *transference* and *transferred meanings*. Many literal meanings are still 'dominant' (Zgusta 1971:64–6): 'the dominant sense is the one which is the first to be thought of by the majority of the speakers of a language if presented with the word in isolation..' (p. 64). Below I will study current practice in the learner's dictionaries in the area under discussion. I will argue that foreign learners' grasp of meaning will be enhanced by what could be called an awareness of *synchronic etymology*: the realisation that meanings may be related to other, more basic meanings. Dictionary practice that may seem to hamper learners in acquiring such an awareness will be critically examined.

3. The order of the definitions and their consequences

The first difference that strikes the eye is the *order* of the sense definitions. Since all four dictionaries are corpus-based and their order of presentation seems to be frequency-based (the most frequent sense first) one would expect them to agree in this respect most of the time. Yet, this is far from being the case. Thus, *benchmark* in CIDE has lit/fig order, but LDOCE has fig/lit; *crusade* is lit/fig in LDOCE and OALD, but fig/lit in CC and many more examples could be given. Now the question is what the effects on the user may be of the two possible orders, i.e. lit/fig or fig/lit. From a general point of view, offering the figurative sense first will tend to create a strong impression that this is the most 'important' meaning. This is no doubt true if frequency is considered the only defining factor of 'important'. Yet no amount of frequency-based arguments will convince me that *Mecca*, for example, is first and foremost 'a place that many people want to visit for a particular reason' (LDOCE). It seems to me that the dominant, and therefore most important, meaning is something more like 'place where Muhammad, founder of Islam, was born and therefore holy place of pilgrimage for Muslims'. It is especially the (place of) pilgrimage part that most people will know, and it is exactly this that gives figurative *mecca* its characteristic semantic content: it is a place to which people 'flock' – as if on pilgrimage – to do or watch something that is considered so important that it fills people with a sense

of awe or perhaps even some degree of holiness; the place is moreover (pretended to be) unique. Had the literal definition come first, the idea of uniqueness and holiness might have percolated down into and linger on in the following (vague) figurative description. From a more specific viewpoint let us consider the following real case. OALD defines *mainspring* as '1 the most important part of or reason for sth ... 2 the principal spring ... of a clock or watch'. The figurative definition lacks the idea that a 'mainspring' makes people 'tick' as it were and things happen, just as a literal spring makes the clockwork run. Especially weak in this respect are therefore the words 'part of'. In the example *Small companies are the mainspring of the British economy* the idea is expressed (by means of a figure of speech) that such companies make the British economy 'run' and not that they are merely 'an important part of' (my emphasis) the economy. This example could be multiplied with many others in the four dictionaries under discussion.

4. Weakening the link between literal and figurative

Especially CIDE distinguishes itself by frequently putting the literal and figurative senses under separate headwords. Though this may be no more than a ploy to enable users to get at the right meaning as quickly as possible, the effect is dissociation of related senses. Two cases in which this has happened are *shrimp* ANIMAL / PERSON and *stifle* NO AIR / PREVENT HAPPENING. This procedure is slightly surprising in the light of the fact that CIDE has quite often found excellent solutions elsewhere for presenting figurative meanings. In fact, in many other respects I consider CIDE the dictionary that has come up with the best solutions for the problem discussed in this article.

5. Transference and metaphorical opacity

I will here briefly follow up the remark about transference made earlier. There can be no doubt that the procedures criticised in the preceding sections suggest more dissociation, and therefore a greater development towards transference, than is really necessary. Obviously, in cases of real transference like *crane* (where the link with the bird is now no longer present) this assumption of transference is justified. However, whenever the literal meaning is still there and the figurative meaning has not yet developed independently to such an extent that no metaphorical relation can be discerned anymore, the meanings should be presented in lit/fig

order to prevent the inculcation of incorrect meanings in learners' minds. As it is, foreign learners are already at a severe disadvantage, which makes the prevention of this metaphorical opacity all the more urgent. More generally, I suspect that especially with multi-word expressions all four dictionaries often leave the learner totally in the dark with regard to what expressions 'really' mean (cf. for example, *pull out all the stops*). In the case of this idiom no dictionary explicitly links this expression with the musical gadget called *stop*.

6. The definitions themselves

In this section I will have a closer look at some formal aspects of the definitions of the various senses themselves. Brevity requires that I restrict myself to CIDE, which for example does not always strictly separate the two meanings by means of its layout (in CIDE a raised dot). Thus, *morass* is defined as follows: 'an area of soft wet ground in which it is easy to get stuck, or (*fig.*) something that is extremely complicated and difficult to deal with and makes advance almost impossible'. In a way, this is an excellent method, since the link between the literal meaning and the derived figurative one is now impossible to ignore. An almost identical effect is realised by the words 'An X is also...', as in *mirage* 'an image, produced by very hot air, of something which seems to be far away but does not really exist ... • A mirage is also a hope or desire that has no chance of being achieved (example sentence)'. CIDE has distinguished itself by another ploy worth noting here: quite frequently there is no definition as such of figurative meanings but only, after the literal sense description plus example(s), the label (*fig*) followed by an example sentence containing an explanation – not a definition! – of the particular use in this particular sentence. An example is *wrong-foot*: '°*The company was completely wrong-footed by the dollar's sudden recovery* (=They were unprepared for it)'. By so doing CIDE frequently manages to avoid the tricky problem of having to compose general and separate definitions of figurative meanings, which are by their very nature often so hard to pinpoint, while simultaneously giving concrete suggestions about some of their uses. When necessary, CIDE even provides more than one figurative example sentence, as under *eclipse* n., where not only *eclipse of* is illustrated (and explained) but also *go into eclipse*. After *unravel* CIDE provides three figurative illustrations, glossed respectively as 'solved', 'discover' and 'destroyed'. These rather different interpretations of the figurative uses clearly demonstrate the usefulness of the CIDE procedure, which obviates the need for what may

prove to be elusive detailed figurative definitions. The above methods, together with the fact that in all cases the figurative meanings are dealt with *after* the literal, are in my view strengths of CIDE. The other learners' dictionaries have not been as clever as CIDE, yet they too frequently offer solutions worth remembering (I will apply some of them below).

7. Some practical proposals and conclusions

Here I am going to suggest some definition formats for a selected number of examples, after which my final conclusions will be presented. The formats will be inspired by my observations of procedures in the four learners' dictionaries. For the (literal) definitions I to some extent lean on those dictionaries. Though I will try to be as brief as possible, this is not my first concern, which is writing tentative model sense definitions which make the synchronic most literal meaning the basis for the non-literal, derived and more general uses and applications. Meanings should be clearly shown to be related, for this will greatly improve and enhance the understanding of all meanings. The word *figurative* itself need not be used, as there are other and more direct ways to suggest that a word has metaphorical applications: generally I have tried to build such indications into the definitions themselves. The first word that I will attempt is *defuse*:

DEFUSE: When someone defuses a bomb, they take away or destroy the device (the FUSE) that makes it explode. (*illustrative example(s)*). When someone defuses situations or sentiments that are viewed as dangerous ('explosive'), such as *criticism, disputes, danger, threats, arguments, anger*, it means that they take away the immediate cause of the danger. (*illustrative example(s)*).

Remarks: I have tried to make the figurative definition run parallel – both syntactically and lexically – with the literal, so that the reader cannot escape the comparisons (as the basis of the metaphor): 'bomb' ↔ 'situations or sentiments that are viewed as dangerous ('explosive')' and 'the device (the FUSE) that makes it explode' ↔ 'the immediate cause of the danger'. Further, the list of collocates serves to give some idea of the dangerous situations and sentiments that may be defused. Also note the words 'viewed as', which are a signal of the metaphorical character of the non-literal meaning. For the sake of available space I refrain from giving examples for this, and the following model definitions, though I

feel that examples à la CIDE, with highlighted collocates, would be the most useful.

MORASS: (slightly literary) an area of soft and very wet ground into which people or animals may fall. A morass is very difficult to get through, or out of again, because it sucks objects down. (*illustrative examples with collocates like 'fall into, sink into, be sucked into, be bogged down in, stumble into, struggle out of' etc.*). MORASS is nowadays often used for any difficult situation people find it very hard to escape from. (*illustrative examples with collocates like the above, and including 'thrash about in, sink into, wade through' etc.*)

Remarks: the opposition 'slightly literary' ↔ 'nowadays often' is intended to indicate frequency and character of usage. The somewhat lengthy literal description is necessary to suggest the full complexity of figurative use and makes the description of that use itself shorter. I have again tried to stress the metaphor by means of parallelism ('get through, or out of again' ↔ 'escape from').

COSMETIC: the adjective *cosmetic* has to do with the substance people, esp. women, put on the body, esp. the face, to make it look more beautiful than it really is (see COSMETICS): *cosmetic cream*; COSMETIC is, more generally, used in connection with any treatment to make people look more beautiful: *cosmetic surgery*; COSMETIC is also used to describe changes in things or measures that are intended to improve their outward appearance only without changing them themselves. (*illustrative examples*).

Remarks: this definition highlights much more clearly not only the superficiality but also the make-believe character of *cosmetic* ('to make it look more beautiful than it is in reality').

GOBSMACKED: when you are gobsmacked, you are utterly surprised and speechless, as if you had been 'smacked' (= 'hit with the hand', see SMACK) over your 'gob' (= a rude word for 'mouth', see GOB).

Remarks: I have here tried to provide the learner with a synchronic picture, as it were, of the make-up of this word. By so doing I have made its intended impact and force more transparent.

CRUMPET: a small round breadlike cake, with holes in one side, eaten hot with butter; in British sexist language it is also used to refer to an attractive woman, seen as a sex object only, as if to be devoured. (*illustrative examples*).

Remarks: my aim here was, to be precise, to bring more clearly into focus the particular character of this sexist word by stressing the aspect of consumption, and hence dehumanisation, in the figurative application. In my opinion, the description as '(sexually) attractive woman' is much too bland, even when the warning is added that it is 'offensive'. Its separate entry status in CIDE makes matters even worse.

Though all the above definitions are capable of improvement, and should in some cases perhaps be whittled down somewhat in size, they do adequately meet the main aim I set out to achieve: the non-literal descriptions are clearly presented as such so that the links with the basic, literal, senses never snap. Obviously, not all possible aspects of non-literal uses are capable of being described in the definitions themselves, that is why it is so important to choose the illustrative examples well. I believe that in this way learners will be alerted much better to the subtle shades of meaning of many non-literal uses than current practice allows them. Dictionary-makers, especially of learner's dictionaries, should rethink their policy in this respect. They should be more aware of the fact that learners are not equipped with the inside knowledge they themselves may take for granted, so that they will inevitably fail to notice certain shades of meaning or implications. Incidentally, definitions written in a controlled defining vocabulary are frequently bland enough as it is. Not clearly pointing out links between meanings can only compound the problem.

References

Dictionaries

CC = *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary* (2nd ed., 1995)

CIDE = *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (1995)

LDOCE = *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (3rd ed., 1995)

OALD = *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, New Edition* (1995)

Other references

Zgusta, Ladislav 1971: *Manual of Lexicography*; The Hague/Paris.