

Enough Said: The Problems of Obscurity and Cultural Reference in Learner's Dictionary Examples.

Abstrakt

Nowadays, most learner's dictionaries of English rely on real-life examples taken from large corpora, in preference to the skeletal examples of earlier publications. The use of real examples means taking sentences and phrases out of a wider context, which may raise problems of understanding. This context may be 'situational' or 'cultural'. The cultural context needs to be borne in mind by all lexicographers, whether they use real or invented examples. Facts, assumptions, and customs which the native speaker takes for granted may seem puzzling to the foreign learner. The lexicographer should seek to replace culturally opaque or misleading examples where possible. However, words and phrases based on literary allusions may be acceptable in a learner's dictionary, provided that their modern significance is explained in the entry.

The usefulness of real-language corpora for writing learner's dictionaries now seems to be beyond dispute. All four major learner's dictionaries – Cobuild, the Oxford Advanced Learner's, the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, and the Cambridge International Dictionary – all pride themselves on their access to large corpora, and the added value which this has brought to the latest editions of their dictionaries.

However, the advent of corpora does not mean that all the lexicographer's problems relating to examples have now been solved. He or she still has to choose those corpus citations which will be meaningful and useful to the target user.

Paradigmatic examples

One of the great skills of a previous phase of EFL lexicography – and still no doubt practised in many quarters today – was that of inventing examples which would enable learners to generate new, natural-sounding utterances of their own. Such examples, by definition, privileged the **paradigmatic** aspect of language. However, in their concern to be paradigmatic and to be applicable to as many particular instances of real language use as possible, such examples often took the form of an

abstract, skeletal framework which was far removed from any likely real-world utterance.

Such examples were evident in earlier editions (and some current editions) of the leading learner's dictionaries:

manifest (v): *manifest the truth of a statement* (OALD 4)

oblivious: *oblivious of one's surroundings* (OALD 4, 5)

collect: *collect oneself after a shock* (OALD 5)

commit: *commit oneself to a course of action* (OALD 5)

not: *It's a cat, not a dog. / It's not a cat, but a dog.* (LDOCE 2)

notional: *to give the object a notional price* (LDOCE 2)

negotiate: *to negotiate a sharp bend in one's car* (LDOCE 2)

Common conventions in this type of approach include:

- (a) the use of the verb in the infinitive or in some vague, unspecified form
- (b) the use of *one's* and *oneself*, which are relatively uncommon and high-level words
- (c) the use of the indefinite article with nouns where the use of words such as *the*, *this*, or a possessive would be more typical
- (d) the use of high-frequency or generic nouns denoting familiar every-day objects (eg, *cat*, *dog*, *book*, *object*), with the result that the utterance sounds banal.

Although one should not discount the usefulness of such examples for encoding purposes, they can be criticized as being abstract and unnatural.

Saying too much and saying too little

Most real-life utterances in any language form part of a longer text or discourse; that is, they enter into **syntagmatic** relationships. As Gwyneth Fox wrote in *Looking Up*:

Real-text examples...are not neat little isolated wholes. They carry a lot of loose ends – they follow on from what has been said and they lead in to what will be said. (Fox: 144)

In other words, for any real utterance, there is a context. Lexicographers who allow themselves the luxury of inventing examples often try to supply as much of this context, consciously or otherwise, within the

confines of the example itself. Fox goes on to detail the kind of artificialities and absurdities which this approach can result in:

'We'll try to salvage your leg', said the doctor to the trapped man. (Fox: 143)

The relationships between individual utterances and their surrounding context are just as much part of the fabric of a language as grammar, vocabulary, and syntax, and it is doing a disservice to learners simply to elide this problem for ease of presentation.

However, dealing with this context engenders problems of its own for the lexicographer who has accepted the discipline of using only real-life examples within a limited amount of available space. For a start, there is the question of deciding exactly what is meant by 'context'. I would make an important distinction here between the immediate 'situational' context of the example and the whole 'cultural' context which native speakers carry with them. This 'cultural' context can be subdivided into, on the one hand, general factual knowledge that is familiar to most native speakers of a language, but not to most non-native-speakers, and, on the other hand, the connotations of a particular word or phrase, reflecting the underlying attitudes and assumptions of the native speaker. Bullon makes a further distinction between different kinds of cultural connotation. He divides words that carry connotations into those that "that rely on a knowledge of the social customs and institutions of a country", and those such as *lion*, *rat*, and *sheep*, in their figurative senses, which "depend on a literary or biblical past which, although forgotten or unrealised by those who use them, persists in the everyday use of English" (Bullon: 28). I have presented these different types of context schematically in Figure 1.

Before moving onto 'cultural' contexts, I will first say a few words about 'situational' contexts. The use of real corpus examples may occasionally lead to infelicities where the unspoken situational context is so mysterious or untypical as to make the example sound ridiculous, even though the particular syntax pattern or collocate being highlighted may be valid in itself. The first three instances here are from the first edition of the Cobuild English Dictionary, and the fourth is from Harrap's Essential English Dictionary, which drew partly on the British National Corpus for its examples:

lean: *If I hold your legs, you can lean over and take a look at those holes down there.*

rupture: *My friend couldn't help, because he was ruptured.*

create (= shout angrily): *I never eat breakfast, although my dad creates like anything.*

variety: *Take two potatoes of the same variety and place one in the fridge.*

Of course, lexicographers who have the licence to invent examples or amend real corpus examples risk falling into a kind of opposite trap; they may fail to observe one element of Grice's 'maxim of quantity', namely "do not make your contribution more informative than is required" (quoted in Levinson: 101). The example mentioned earlier about a doctor salvaging a dead man's leg is an instance of this. Here are some further examples of this kind from learners' dictionaries:

1. **namesake:** *I often get letters for my namesake down the street; it's confusing that we're both called John Smith. (LDOCE2)*
2. **negative:** *I've had enough negative advice; it only tells me what not to do. (LDOCE2)*
3. **new:** *Her name is new to me; I've never heard of her before. (LDOCE2)*
4. **towel:** *Many public toilets no longer provide towels, but have machines which dry your hands. (CIDE)*
5. **champagne:** *True champagne comes only from one area of France, but sparkling wine from other places is often called champagne, too. (LDOCE2)*
6. **magician:** *Merlin was the magician in the stories of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. (CIDE)*
7. **Mace:** *Even though it's illegal in Britain, some women carry Mace with them at all times, in case they're attacked. (CIDE)*
8. **magic:** *Like most mothers, she always asks her small children 'What's the magic word?' when they haven't said 'please' or 'thank you'.*

Examples 1 to 4 overcompensate by defining the headword in the sentence as well as, or instead of, illustrating it. In sentences 1 to 3, the meaning should in theory be clear from the first half of the sentence alone. Examples 4 to 8 move into the territory of giving cultural information which sits unnaturally in a dictionary example. Number 4 is utterly banal and applicable to most parts of the world; it is difficult to imagine the circumstances in which it might actually be uttered. Numbers 5 and 6 give bald facts about particular aspects of European culture, while numbers 6 and 7 relate to British life and institutions.

In terms of Figure 1, examples 4 to 7 fall broadly into category 2(a), while number 8 is closer to category 2(b)i. The whole point of Bullon's argument is that such connotations rarely need to be made explicit for the benefit of native speakers, therefore it is misleading to include examples

of this kind in a learner's dictionary. The 'cultural' context is worth dwelling on in more detail, as the issues it raises are not specific to dictionaries that insist on the use of real, corpus-based examples.

The cultural context

Indeed, as soon as one starts to learn a language, one is obliged to engage with the culture that its native speakers inhabit. To take one instance, let us look at a pair of elementary phrases that many beginners of English learn from Day One. The Bank of English corpus lines for the strings *It+s+a+boy* and *It+s+a+girl* are presented in Figure 2. As most native speakers would have intuited, the lines overwhelmingly relate to the birth of a new baby, yet many new learners of English are presented with these sentences as if they were culturally empty, alongside such examples such as *It's a book*, *It's a table*, or even *It's a cat, not a dog*.

That is not to say that the problems of cultural reference are of relevance only to corpus-based lexicography. (In fact, there is a sense, as we shall see, in which these problems are less worrisome for the corpus lexicographer.) Nor do they arise exclusively in relation to examples. To see how cultural assumptions can feed through into dictionary entries, take a look at this definition for *circumcise* in the Cambridge International Dictionary:

To cut the protecting loose skin off a boy's penis or to cut away a girl's clitoris and the skin around it, for medical, traditional or religious reasons.

The male and female varieties of circumcision are combined in a single definition, thus carrying the suggestion that these are analogous operations. Opponents of female circumcision, in contrast, maintain that it amounts to mutilation and that the use of the word *circumcision* by its proponents is a deliberate attempt to make the practice more generally acceptable. This definition therefore serves, no doubt inadvertently, a very specific cultural agenda.

Examples can also, of course, also carry implicit cultural messages, some more serious than others in their implications. Here are a few varied instances that caught my eye:

1. **nonsense**: *Her speech was full of the usual nonsense about 'Victorian values'.* (LDOCE2)
2. **hold against**: *I don't hold it against him that he votes Conservative.* (OALD 4)
3. **politicize**: *Trade unions are becoming increasingly politicized.* (OALD 5)
4. **nude**: *...a nude party.* (LDOCE2)
5. **mainline**: *Several of her friends were mainlining heroin...Even young children were smoking crack or mainlining.* (CIDE)
6. **collusion**: *The police were acting in collusion with the drug traffickers.* (OALD 5)
7. **Indo-European**: *...Indo-European culture.* (OALD 5)
8. **style**: *I don't like opera; chamber music is more my style.* (OALD 4)
9. **grab**: *I thought we might go to the disco – how does that grab you?* (OALD 5)
10. **make**: *Champagne and caviar make a wonderful combination.* (CIDE)
11. **sable**: *The only furs I like are sable or mink.* (Cobuild 1)
12. **shell suit**: *...someone in a shell suit from Stirchley.* (Cobuild 2)

Numbers 1 and 2 depend for full comprehension on the user making allowances for the anti-Conservative point of view which is expressed in the examples. Yet these dictionaries were produced in the 1980s, when Conservative policies and attitudes generally held sway in Britain. There may well thus have been some loss of comprehensibility for users who were aware of or subscribed to these political trends. Example 3 likewise seems to be at odds with current political developments. Examples 4 to 6 present some interesting sidelights on British culture and society, while number 7 makes a dubious extrapolation from a philologically-based definition. (It is worth pointing out that the collocation *Indo-European culture* does not figure at all in The Bank of English, although this notion was a standby of a group of French right-wing philosophers in the 1980s.) Examples 8 to 10 seem to me to be impeccably Oxbridge. Note the modulation from the relatively formal to the vernacular in number 9. The implications of number 12 will be lost on all but the most culturally sensitive of non-native speakers, and it is perhaps best seen as a private joke among lexicographers which does not affect the overall comprehensibility of the entry.

Number 11 seems, at first sight, to fall into the same category as Number 10, passing off an aspect of the culture of the privileged few as a 'natural' example. But in the case of the Cobuild dictionary, the user who has taken the trouble to glance at the introduction will be aware that it is

rigorously corpus-based, and thus that the examples are taken wholly from pre-existing sources and are not simply the lexicographer's own inventions. Although there are admittedly problems of representativity in corpora, there is relatively little risk of a uniform cultural message emerging from the dictionary examples. The intelligent user will know in what spirit to take example 11 above. The more examples that are coined by lexicographers, however, the greater the risk of unconscious editorializing and cultural bias, given that many lexicographers come from broadly similar backgrounds and associate with other lexicographers. It is much easier to take examples 1 and 2 above, which predated the systematic use of corpora, as expressions of the lexicographers' own views.

Making cultural references meaningful

During the compilation of Cobuild 2, the editors – of whom I was one – took the view that irrelevant cultural connotations relating to factual information and social practices – categories 2(a) and 2(b)i in Figure 1 – needed to be filtered out when these were unlikely to be known to the average user and hampered understanding of the particular word or sense. Here are a few instances of examples that were edited out and replaced by alternative examples from The Bank of English:

1. **move:** *I think when Alex Ferguson bought Eric Cantona it was an inspired move.* (replaced by) *The one point cut in interest rates was a wise move.*
2. **bucket:** *...a bucket and spade holiday.* (replaced by) *The girls happily played in the sand and sea with buckets and spades.*
3. **firework:** *A resident of his neighbourhood had let off fireworks to celebrate Ceausescu's death.* (replaced by) *Berlin people drank champagne, set off fireworks and tooted their car horns.*

The rejected example 1 actually relates to football, though users could have been forgiven for thinking that slavery is alive and well in Britain. Example 2 relates to sense 1 of *bucket*, of which *spade* is an important collocate; the problem here is to convey both the collocate and the cultural reference without making the example too incomprehensible to the non-native speaker. With example 3, there was a concern to show that fireworks are used for celebration, yet to celebrate someone's death might seem mysterious to people who do not know who Ceausescu was.

The published example, though also referring to a particular historical event, links fireworks with other obvious signifiers of celebration.

Rather different criteria apply when we come to cultural connotations of a literary and Biblical kind – category 2(b)ii in Figure 1. There is no reason why examples relating to these should not be included in a learner's dictionary, with the proviso that the connoted meaning is somewhere made explicit, usually in the definition. For instance, Cobuild 2 contains perfectly usable entries for the figurative senses of *rat* and *sheep*, and also for idiomatic phrases such as *eat someone out of house and home*, *for goodness sake*, *in your mind's eye*, *slings and arrows*, and *wild goose chase*, which have their origins in Shakespeare.

Note that, for entries of this kind, it is not necessary to give chapter and verse for the source of the quotation, as long as the definition is adequate in itself. Interestingly, in some of its entries, the Cambridge International Dictionary adopts a diametrically opposed policy, giving text or film references for examples such as *The Magnificent Seven*, *A Fish called Wanda*, and *The Answer to the Great Question of Life, the Universe and Everything is Forty-Two* without ever explaining their meaning or significance to learners.

Conclusion: saying just enough

One final problem I would raise is when the meaning of the word or phrase depends precisely on the suggestion of shared or cultural knowledge that is not made explicit.

For instance, Cobuild 2 gives the following entry for the phrase *enough said*:

If you say **enough said**, you mean that what you have just said is sufficient to make a point clear, and that there is no need to say any more. *It's about a girl from Liverpool. Enough said... My husband is a jazz musician. Enough said.*

Here one is left with no other option but to give the user examples that he or she may find tantalizing or puzzling, while trusting that the meaning as a whole is grasped.

In a sense, this entry encapsulates the whole issue that I have been trying to grapple with in this paper. If the example contains too little information and context, it can appear too skeletal or mysterious to be of use to learners; if it contains too much, it can become overburdened and inauthentic-sounding. The art is to say enough, and no more. On that note, I think I have said enough, and it is time for others to have their say.

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