

Lexiculture and the EFL Dictionary

Anthony P. Cowie

As Jean Pruvost has argued convincingly in this stimulating account of Robert Galisson's pioneering work on 'lexiculture', cultural aspects of meaning are a neglected element in standard dictionaries, and a much-needed one in dictionaries intended for foreign learners of a language. Less progress has admittedly been made among English-speaking than French-speaking scholars in elaborating a theory of lexiculture – an exception being Gabriele Stein's invaluable article on 'EFL dictionaries: meaning, culture and illustrations' in *Better Words* (Exeter, 2002). Yet, some noteworthy advances have been made since the early 1990s in this area, and specifically in the development of the so-called 'EFL cultural dictionary'. We now have the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English, Encyclopedic Edition* (1992) and the *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture* (1992, 2e 1998), each based on the immediately preceding edition of the standard EFL work.

In both dictionaries, there are notes on various aspects of English culture. For example, in the *Oxford Encyclopedic*, there are ninety-four special articles dealing with 'class', 'crime', 'food', 'gardens', 'the royal family', and so on. These topics are generally treated at some length, and with

countless amused comments in the press and many cartoons. His aristocratic style contrasted effectively with the "poor man's piano".

To sum up, one can provide a lexicultural definition of *accordéon* by recalling the essential lexicultural features of the word, defining in this way what Galisson called its "shared cultural content". Thus, the accordion is for all French people synonymous with a popular instrument, and dancing to accordion music. It is also associated with the image of Yvette Horner, and for 75% of the informants with Giscard d'Estaing. Yet, when examined more closely, these essential features of the lexicultural definition of the word *accordéon* are almost always absent from our dictionaries. The definition of the word therefore lacks all that gives it its deepest resonance.

From time to time, though rarely, one of these lexicultural features is, of course, recaptured in the example that follows the definition. But this is very far from being indicated systematically and Yvette Horner or Giscard d'Estaing are of course never cited, although their names are immediately associated with the accordion in the minds of French people. It goes without saying that limiting an entry to a semantic definition of the word is incomplete. Not to indicate in fact the lexicultural aspects can leave a terrible gap, especially for the non-native speaker, who needs to decipher the allusions, the implicit references of a word encountered in conversation, in a newspaper, in a novel, etc.

Not all the words used in a linguistic community for which the lexicographer is the legitimate analyst necessarily carry a common cultural load; and yet, when we look at them more closely, adding a lexicultural definition is essential for many. To give just a few more examples, a word such as *muguet* (lily of the valley) is in France bound to be associated with May 1, Labour Day, for which this flower actually represents the symbol. It is sold on this day and no other: to buy a lily of the valley on May 15 or April 15 makes no sense for a French person. In any case, it would not be on sale at the florist's... Also, to define the lily of the valley as "lilac with small white flowers giving off a sweet and pleasant smell" is indeed very interesting – here we are in the world of "learned culture" – but not to add in an example or in an encyclopedic expansion that we are concerned with a symbolic flower sold on May 1 in the streets, in all the shops, in the metro, etc, is to overlook the heart of the matter. The lexicultural component must

be mentioned here to avoid presenting the reader of the dictionary with a definition of the word that is very far from complete.

In the same way and to give a final example, the word *écureuil* (squirrel) is defined in France as in other countries as an "arboreal (= tree-dwelling) rodent with fur ... and a bushy tail, feeding mostly on seeds and fruit". But, it is quite right that most French lexicographers specify, in the manner of the *Petit Larousse illustré*, that its fur is "generally reddish (in France)", 95% of the French population ignoring in fact that a squirrel can have grey fur. But then come elements that are not found in our dictionaries but that also form part of the lexicultural component of the word for a French person. First, without being unduly anthropomorphic, it is important to say that the squirrel is the object of much affection among French people. We are always happy to catch sight of one in the garden; it is a symbol of liveliness and grace. However, for my friends in Québec, and in more and more countries, the image is reversed: it appears dangerous, and comparable almost to the rat, which causes so much damage in people's attics. This lexicultural feature should thus be specified. Finally, and above all, for the French, the squirrel represents the symbol of savings because it has been chosen as the extremely popular emblem of "la Caisse d'épargne" (the Savings Bank). There is hardly a young French person who has not received the gift of a savings account booklet bearing this image.

So, a politician taking part in an election campaign who was to declare today: "I am not the type to play the accordion; I would rather offer you a sprig of lily of the valley and talk to you about real work, and awaken in you the dormant squirrel and its piggy bank", will be understood by all Frenchmen. However, no dictionary would enable a foreigner to understand that message. And if in the twenty-second century the Savings Bank no longer exists, May 1 is no longer celebrated, and Giscard d'Estaing's accordion is forgotten, there will no longer be anyone able to translate this message, and no dictionary will be able to help.

2.3. Some lexicographic and dictionary perspectives

2.3.1. The lexicultural anchorage points

Essentially, in the fields that interest us – *lexicographie* (theoretical lexicography) and *dictionnaire* (practical dictionary-making) – it is words listed as dictionary entries that are our primary concern in lexiculture. If we are aiming not to obscure the lexicultural dimension in dictionaries,

it is in fact those words that are to be treated first. Other lexical elements, often positioned in the body of entries, are nevertheless to be taken account of, as they too show themselves to be privileged bearers of the “shared cultural content”, the lexiculture.

Over and above the words which comprise the entry-list, one will note first of all those longer expressions that have been delexicalized, unfrozen and reshaped, called by Robert Galisson “verbocultural palimpsests”. They include, for example, the titles of films and novels, and famous pieces of poetry, which everyone in a given linguistic community knows and which, by changing a word, can be re-utilized to create an amusing or eloquent effect. Such is the case with “My kingdom for a horse!”, the famous exclamation of Richard III, which could be ironically transformed into “My kingdom for a good book!” Now here, few dictionaries give guidance: the expressions that serve as moulds are not really listed. In the domain of lexicography, there is a lack of research based on large corpora that would enable us to determine the frequencies of use – to identify for instance what are, over a decade, the lexicalized expressions that are most often taken up and reshaped to create a new effect.

“Verbocultural palimpsests” clearly belong to lexiculture and one can appreciate how difficult it is for the lexicographer cum dictionary-maker to find precise criteria for recording them. A paralyzing concern with clearly defined objectivity and with the permanence of what is recorded leads one to be very cautious in this area, which is nevertheless perfectly linguistic. The French in fact are constantly resorting to these devices: everybody is aware that a famous song or the title of a film that has been very successful in France can be memorized by an entire linguistic community in the space of a few decades and, by being “unfrozen”, serve as a model for other formulas. A French singer, Alain Souchon, has for example launched the expression “Allô, Maman, bobo” (Hey, Mum, it hurts), “bobo” being baby-talk for “it hurts”. Such a well-known expression has often served as a matrix for numerous captions in newspapers, articles, and so on. “Allô, Maman, canicule...” (Hey, Mum, it’s a real scorcher...) can appear in the press whenever the weather is scorching hot. In the same way, “The fabulous destiny of Amélie Poulain”, the title of a highly successful film, serves as a mould for numerous other expressions. Readers will have noticed that since September 2002 there have been dozens of titles

promoting this or that character, or this or that product, after the pattern of “the fabulous destiny of...x, y or z”.

The phenomenon is not new, all linguists have noted its development, and in nearly all languages this process of linguistic creativity is actually very active. One must admit that there is really no dictionary reflecting all this. However, for some of these expressions, it would be good if they were to appear in a “lexical” dictionary, since their lexicultural nature is shared by an entire linguistic community. Thus, the French expression “Métro, boulot, dodo” (Metro, work, sleep), illustrating one of the tiring and restrictive aspects of Parisian life for people who daily travel to work there, has undeniably served as a mould for over twenty years for numerous other expressions, e.g. “Métro, boulot, promo” as a headline in *Le Point* of 8 August 2003, p.15. Although it is generally not listed in dictionaries, the expression “Métro, boulot, dodo”, because of its frequency of repetition, surely deserves to appear there, as it has, so to speak, entered the language.

Also eminently lexicultural are proverbs, which, in different languages, do not always have equivalents, or convey different images. It is known for example that the English expression “if pigs had wings (they might fly)” corresponds in French to another amusing image “when hens have teeth”, and that here there are a number of images clearly susceptible to various reshapings: “when chickens have teeth”, “when hens have no cockerel”, etc. But it should be acknowledged here that, as a rule, dictionaries devote a good deal of space to proverbs. We notice for instance that, in the *Petit Larousse illustré*, they enjoy a special place in the pink pages that separate the part devoted to the language from that devoted to proper names. Very sensibly, too, since the beginning of the 21st century, *Larousse* have also added in the same place historical phrases such as “Rally around my white plumes”, or “Paris is well worth a mass”, uttered by Henry IV, or again “After us the flood” attributed to Louis XV, all historical phrases well known as means of saying, respectively, “follow me, in honour”, “one should know how to make concessions”, or also “let’s think about ourselves first”. This is taking effectively into account a part of the lexiculture.

Another domain is represented by the brand names that are increasingly in evidence in all the languages of countries where consumption is high. A certain number of brand names can become common nouns that dictionaries cannot

▶ a wealth of lexicultural detail, such as for example guidance on how to order a pint of bitter beer! Here and there, too, one finds very precise information about the use of various routine formulae. For example, under ‘conventions’, the reader is told when he or she should use ‘please’, ‘excuse me’, ‘how do you do?’ and ‘that’s all right’.

Other places in the *Oxford Encyclopedic* in which cultural detail appears are the ‘mini-notes’: “short extra paragraphs giving information on the special connotations these words have for native speakers of English.” Consider some of the detail for ‘tea’ – suggesting parallels with the small details of everyday life which clearly fascinate Galisson: ‘Tea also suggests comfort and warmth, and sitting down with “a nice cup of tea” is a common response to problems and worries.’

Corresponding, in the Longman work, to Oxford’s mini-notes are a large number of so-called ‘cultural notes’. These deal with a wide range of topics, including religion, popular superstitions and social stereotypes, and are well set out for quick reference and learning purposes.

A noteworthy feature of the Longman dictionary is the space given over to cultural illustrations. Several pictures (e.g. the one for ‘yuppie, or Young Upwardly-Mobile Professional’) reflect in an entertaining way the connotative details appearing in the definition, which include: ‘In Britain, yuppies are seen as young people who earn a lot of

▶ money without necessarily working very hard, usu. on the financial markets in the city.'

Less than a hundred mini-notes, and about the same number of special articles – and this is just to speak of the *Oxford Encyclopedic* – do not amount to a great deal in a dictionary of 93,000 entries. However, the two dictionaries represent a notable step forward, both in identifying words and phrases of cultural interest and in devising effective methods of presenting them to the advanced learner. None the less, English-language dictionaries still have much to learn from the type of systematic exploration of culturally-rich items to be found in the research of Robert Galisson.

● Anthony P. Cowie has vast experience and expertise in teaching English as a foreign language, particularly in Nigeria, as a specialist with the British Council, and as a Lecturer at Leeds University. He has been involved in six ELT dictionary projects, including editorship of the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (4e) and joint compilation of the *Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English* in two volumes, and was Director of the OUP Lexical Research Unit at Leeds. He was later appointed Reader in Lexicography at Leeds University, and now serves on the Editorial Board of the *New OED*. He was until recently Editor of the *International Journal of Lexicography* and is author of *English Dictionaries for Foreign Learners – a History* (Oxford 1999).
a.p.cowie@btinternet.com

avoid treating, such as, in French, for example, *frigidaire* for a refrigerator, *mobylette* for a moped, *bottin* for a telephone directory, etc. Now, a good number of brands become associated with slogans that everyone knows, and they in a certain way pass into the language, being picked up with a wink by speakers who are used to hearing them. "Because I'm worth it", associated with a pretty actress and a brand of hair lotion is recognized by every French person, as is the expression, "It moves...", indicating that something is very strong, by reference to a brand of mustard for which it is the slogan. The addition of the word "grandmother" to "make good coffee", because of a pleasant advertisement that links the product to the reassuring grandma image, is also currently familiar in France. Now, these are facts about the language, with a lifespan exceeding a decade in some cases, which no dictionary takes note of – except for the one compiled by Robert Galisson, which is unfortunately difficult to obtain, the *Dictionnaire des noms de marque* (Dictionary of brand names), published by the CNRS (National Centre for Scientific Research, 1998). It goes without saying that we need to consider seriously whether certain of these items should be included in the general-purpose dictionary.

Indeed, everything that at the level of discourse arises from the common culture, and is integrated into it by the entire linguistic community – which does not hesitate to use it, whether by adapting it or employing it as is – deserves, in one way or another, to be included in the dictionary.

2.3.2. Dictionaries with a lexicultural dimension?

Reflexes for the lexicographer to develop: investigation and oral corpus

Here one enters the experimental domain, and it may well be the case that the first step should be to transform in part the attitudes and practices of the lexicographer. Actually, the lexicographer can be characterized in general by the linguistic and philological competence he or she has acquired in training and by the working experience accumulated year by year. He or she puts this knowledge and this experience at the service of the community in order to compile entries based upon a close observation of the language. To do this, he or she has recourse to a corpus which, most often, is written and consists of texts drawn from works of literature, from the general and specialized press, and most recently, from the Internet. This corpus serves above all to provide the lexical documentation which enables

one to pin-point good examples as well as possible new meanings and neologisms.

But if as lexicographers we wish to introduce a lexicultural dimension into our entries, we need to "listen" more than we do today to the radio, "watch and listen to" the television, by all means follow cultural developments, the learned culture, but also and especially popular, everyday culture. Thus, songs, films and advertisements should form an integral part of the corpora. To take just one domain that is eminently lexicultural, that of the popular song. In France we need to take account in our dictionaries of phrases that have become well-established in the collective memory for many decades: "Auprès de mon arbre (Near my tree)", "Une jolie fleur dans une peau de vache" (A pretty flower in the hide of a cow) for Brassens, "C'est un jardin extraordinaire" (It's an extraordinary garden) for Trenet, "Les portes du pénitencier" (The prison gates), "Qu'est-ce qu'elle a, ma gueule?" (What's wrong with my face?), "Allumez le feu" (Light the fire) for Hallyday, "Laisse béton (tomber)" (Drop it), "Mon beauf (beau-frère)" (My brother-in-law), "C'est la mer qui fait l'homme" (It's the sea that makes the man) for Renaud, etc.

It is important then to note down as one goes along, with a watchful eye, everything that happens by way of lexiculture establishing itself in the minds of a linguistic community. The impact of current affairs, of cultural life, of advertising, should then be assessed in terms of the deep impression it makes on each person; statistical investigations will be needed to evaluate this impact. And, just as neologisms of form and meaning are always difficult to record with certainty as to their lifespan in the language, so lexicultural features, once they are identified, should be followed attentively for as long as they survive. Some will disappear quite quickly, but others will gain cultural permanence: the lexicographer needs to be an attentive and eclectic observer.

The truth is that practically no lexicultural features are introduced today into our dictionaries; they are present only in a random, patchy and subjective manner. Precise investigations, with constant reference to the oral corpus and daily attentiveness to the common culture, such are the new attitudes that should be added to those of the observer of the language in action. Let us admit it: here is a new task that demands much effort and that, if it is to take concrete form in dictionaries, requires also new methods.