

Learners' Dictionaries and culture-bound meaning for Zulu students*

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Lyons (1981:249) points out that, as the needs, interests and customs of one society differ from those of another, 'languages will tend to differ one from another in their grammatical and lexical structure'. Lyons goes on to say that 'this implies that a language will not provide a lexeme denoting any object or class of objects which the society using the language never has occasion to refer to'. This is why a non-native student, such as the Zulu student, does not distinguish between a Western ball and a dance, and why *ilokwe* refers to a dress and a gown alike. Thus it is thus important that the learner's dictionary explain the culture-bound meaning of words such as these to the non-native student.

In *Northanger Abbey* reference is also made to *cravats* and *millinery*. Both words have a culture-bound meaning as they are associated with Western forms of dress. *Cravat* is defined as follows:

* Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE), Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (OALD) and Chambers Universal Learners' Dictionary (CULD).

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LDOCE:

a piece of material loosely folded and worn around the neck by men

OALD:

piece of linen, lace, etc. loosely folded and worn as a necktie

CULD:

a kind of scarf worn instead of a tie round the neck:

He wore a silk cravat tucked inside his shirt

Although most of the younger generation of Western men do not wear cravats today, cravats were very fashionable for many years and a number of older Western men still wear them today. The definition in the LDOCE is the most accurate as the Zulu reader is told that the cravat is made from material and worn around the neck by men. The OALD's definition does not specify that a cravat is worn by men only and the use of the nouns 'lace' and 'necktie' obviously refers to the earliest type of cravat. Today's cravats are made from polyester and are worn on informal occasions when men do not wish to wear a tie, but do not want to look too casual. The definition in the CULD, although more helpful than the one in OALD, is still not as good as the LDOCE's definition. The CULD tells the reader that a cravat is worn instead of a tie (thus implying that it is worn by men), but the words 'a kind of scarf' are a little confusing as a cravat does not look like a scarf at all. A scarf is normally worn by women only and can be tied in various ways around the neck, whereas a cravat is pre-folded in specific way and fastened around the neck.

A cravat is essentially a Western article of dress, therefore the Zulu language has no equivalent for it and describes it as 'isikhafu esikade sisetshenziswa ngabesilia' which literally means that it is a kind of scarf that was once worn by men. As mentioned above, it is actually inaccurate to compare a cravat to a scarf. The misinterpretation has arisen because a cravat is an article that has been created by Western fashion. Not only is the more rural Zulu student unfamiliar with the article, but the Zulu language also has no lexeme to denote clothing which Zulu men do not wear.

A similar situation arises when it comes to the comprehension of the word *millinery*. The wearing of hats has always been part of Western women's fashion. The art of hat-making is thus part of Western culture. Unlike the definitions of *cravat* in the OALD and the CULD which can be misinterpreted by a non-native learner, the definition of *millinery* in the learner's dictionary should create no problems for a Zulu student in spite of the fact that millinery is not part of the Zulu culture.

LDOCE:

the articles made or sold by a MILLINER

OALD:

(the business of making and selling) women's hats, with lace, ribbons, etc.

CULD:

(a term used esp. in shops) the goods made or sold by milliners:
We sell more millinery in the summer than in the winter.

In both the LDOCE and the CULD there is a reference to *milliner* in the definitions. If students look up the meaning of *milliner* in the LDOCE they will find it defined as: 'a person who makes and/or sells women's hats and ornamental additions to them'. In the CULD *milliner* is defined as 'a person who makes and/or sells women's hats'.

In spite of the cross-reference to *milliner*, the culture-bound meaning of *millinery* should be clearly understood by non-native students.

The definition of a word such as *butler*, although expressed in simple terms, can also be misinterpreted by a Zulu learner:

LDOCE:

the chief male servant of a house

OALD:

head manservant (in charge of the wine-cellar, pantry, valuables, etc.)

CULD:

the head male servant of a household: *Very few households can afford a butler nowadays.*

All three definitions explain that a butler is a male servant in a household. The Zulu student is familiar with the term *servant*, and can thus easily be under the impression that the position that a butler holds is similar to that of the average type of domestic servant found in homes. What the dictionary does not tell the learner is that the majority of the butlers are white men and that, although they are employed by the owner of the house, the position butlers hold is far superior to that of an ordinary domestic servant. The butler does not do any strenuous manual work, this he usually delegates to the other domestic servants. Such a superior position is indicated by the adjectives *chief* (LDOCE) and *head* (OALD and CULD) in the definitions, but the Zulu learner who does not know what a butler is will not be aware of what this superiority implies. The employment of a butler is a Western custom and it is normally only the wealthy class who can afford butlers. The Zulu learner who misinterprets the definition of *butler* does so because a culture-bound word like this will not have the same connotations for the Zulu learner as they do for the Western student. Moreover, the reference to *servant* in the definitions can - understandably result in a misinterpretation of the position and duties of a butler.

Henry Tilney is surprised to hear that Catherine does not 'keep a journal'. The word *journal* (in this context) is an out-dated term, but the non-native learner who looks up the word in the LDOCE and CULD, is told that a journal is a *diary*. It is the definition of this contemporary term that will be evaluated now:

LDOCE:

(a book containing) a daily record of events in a person's life: *Mary keeps (= writes) a diary*

OALD:

(book for) daily record of events, thoughts, etc: *keep a...*

CULD:

a (small book containing a) record of daily happenings: *The explorer kept a diary of his adventures*

The Zulu student who is unfamiliar with the Western custom of keeping a private diary, may not realize that there are two types of diaries. The most common type is the diary in which businessmen, teachers, students, etc. note or record important events or appointments that must be attended. Zulu students are completely familiar with this kind of diary and refer to it as 'okwenzekayo okulotshwé phansi izinsuku zonke'.

However, the diary that Henry refers to is a more 'personal' type of diary (as indicated by the LDOCE), in which young Western girls not only record daily events, but also chronicle their hopes, disappointments, pleasant experiences, and so on. Of the three definitions, the one in the OALD is the most relevant as it states that it is a daily record of events and *thoughts* ('thoughts' are not normally recorded in the more common 'monthly planner' type of diary). The definition in the CULD gives no indication that a diary can also be a record of one's personal life. However, the example in the CULD does imply that the diary kept by the explorer records his personal experiences.

Despite the use of words such as *personal* (LDOCE) and *thoughts* (OALD) in the definitions, there is no guarantee that a Zulu learner will fully comprehend the culture-bound meaning of this particular type of diary as it refers to a custom that is popular among young Western girls.

In chapter 26 Henry tells Catherine that he cannot 'in decency fail attending the club'. Although the Zulu students know what a club is, the type of club that Henry refers to has a definite culture-bound meaning:

LDOCE:

a society of people who join together for a certain purpose, esp. sport or amusement: *a working-men's club/a cricket club*

OALD:

society of persons who subscribe money to provide themselves with sport, social entertainment, or any other shared activity sometimes in their own grounds, buildings, etc. where meals and bedrooms are available

CULD:

a number of people meeting for study, pleasure, games, etc: *She's in the local tennis club*

The type of club that Henry refers to is very different from the type of sports club that most of the Zulu students are familiar with. Henry's club is exclusive, a fraternity that men in the upper circles of Western society belong to. Membership of these clubs is limited and selective.

The definition in the LDOCE describes the average type of club, such as a sports club. This is verified by the reference to the fact that people go to the club for a specific 'purpose', such as for 'sport' (for example, cricket). The reference to 'a working-men's club' is more relevant, but does not explain the exclusiveness of these clubs to a non-native learner. No mention is made of the fact that the members usually have to pay a subscription fee.

Although the OALD's definition does mention that the club members have to 'subscribe money', the members of these men's clubs do not meet for 'sport or social entertainment'. Most of the men are successful businessmen who have been invited to join one of

these clubs, and very often many important business deals are settled between businessmen who have met through being members of the club.

Like the LDOCE and OALD, the CULD's definition also refers to the average type of sports club such as a 'tennis club'. The Zulu learner who consults his learner's dictionary will not understand why Henry places so much importance on attending his club if he does not understand the culture-bound meaning of this particular type of club. Only after coming to know, understand, and appreciate something of the target culture will the non-native learner realize the importance of culture-bound references like these and will he begin to recognize some of the values and behaviour patterns of the target culture.

Appearances

The cultural difference I discuss in this section is not the result of a difference that has been *created* by the members of a particular society. As mentioned earlier, there is a close relationship between language and culture and each language reflects those distinctions that are important in its culture. English has lexicalized a large variety of words to describe certain Western characteristics and features. One such word is the adjective *lank*.

Catherine's hair is described as being dark and *lank*. Long, straight dark hair can be beautiful if it is clean and in good condition, but *lank* hair obviously lacks body and lustre. The Zulu student will not automatically appreciate this and will have to rely on his learner's dictionary to supply him with the necessary information regarding the adjective *lank*:

LDOCE:

(of hair) straight and lifeless

OALD:

(of hair) straight and lying limp or flat

CULD:

long, straight and not springy

The inclusion of the adjective *lifeless* in the LDOCE's definition is very accurate and descriptive. The OALD's definition includes the adjective *limp*, which may not be very informative to many Zulu learners. If the learner looks up the meaning of *limp* ('not stiff or firm; lacking strength') he will begin to realize that Catherine's hair lacked body. Western women are very hair-conscious and the negative connotations attached to the adjective *lank* by Western women are unknown to the Zulu whose hair has a completely different texture to that of Western women. *Lank* is not an adjective that will ever be used to describe a Zulu woman's hair. It is thus important that the adjectives used in the definitions should be well-known and descriptive, such as the inclusion of the adjective *lifeless* in the LDOCE's definition.

The definition in the CULD is uninformative. There is very little difference between 'straight' and 'not springy'. All that the Zulu learner will know is that *lank* hair is long and straight. There is no indication that the hair is lifeless, dull and probably unattractive.

To interpret Jane Austen's initial description of Catherine correctly, it is essential that a non-Western reader like a Zulu student grasp the negative connotations of Catherine's appearance. For the Zulu student the intuitive link between an English culture-bound word and a concept is missing, and according to Wierzbicka (1985:5) 'a full definition is the only way of ensuring true understanding of the cultural universe encoded in the language's lexicon'. Of the three dictionaries, the definitions in the LDOCE are the clearest and will help the Zulu student to realize that, according to Western standards, Catherine was not a very attractive young lady.

There are several other culture-bound entries that could be evaluated in a similar way and that could be misinterpreted by a non-native learner. These will be referred to very briefly. *Tapestry* is a form of embroidery that is very common among Western women

and not normally done by Zulu women. A *decanter* is a Western article used for holding liquor and is something that is rarely used by a Zulu person. Finally, the verb *bow* has a culture-bound meaning as when, in chapter 30, Henry gives Catherine's sister 'a *bow* of acknowledgement'. This is a polite action that is common among Western men. The majority of the Zulu students may well be unaware of the connotations associated with this verb as this type of acknowledgement is not characteristic of Zulu men.

CONCLUSION

Non-native students, like the Zulu students, are often confronted with culture-bound words they need to clarify before they can continue with the text they are working on. Since there is no constant verbal interaction between the Unisa student and the lecturer, it is imperative that the learner's dictionary define the culture-bound meaning clearly and unambiguously.

Of the three learners' dictionaries evaluated in this article the LDOCE is the most helpful and informative. The CULD is the least suitable for a non-native learner. In fact some of the definitions in the CULD can be misinterpreted by the learner (cf *abbey, cravat, club, lank*). The CULD makes extensive use of explanatory examples, but unfortunately many of the examples are of limited value since they are too culture-bound for a non-native learner (cf *lord, baron, duke*). On the whole the CULD is more suitable for native speakers than it is for non-native speakers.

The OALD is better than the CULD, but some of its definitions could be more informative to ensure complete comprehension (cf *ball, gown, cravat*). On the whole, however, many of the definitions are helpful and clear, and make it as easy as possible for the learner to infer the most likely meaning of the word (cf *abbey, millinery, butler, diary, club*).

The learner's dictionary that should be prescribed for non-native students who require information on special aspects of words is the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. The definitions include the most important information (cf *abbey, lord, duke, cra-*

vat, gown, lank), are written in simple language, and usually give the learner sufficient immediate information to enable him to surmise the correct meaning of the culture-bound word. Unfortunately, there are instances where misinterpretation can still occur (cf *diary*, and *club*). A dictionary such as the LDOCE should enable the Zulu learner to comprehend the meaning of most of the culture-bound words he looks up and is thus an invaluable aid to the comprehension and production of utterances in English.

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