

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

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INTRODUCTION

Words, Forms, Lexemes

The term 'word' has been defined by Lyons (1981:18) as being 'any sequence of letters which, in normal typographical practice, is bound on either side by a space'. Lyons (1984:101) states that *sing*, *sings*, *sang* and *sung* are different *forms* of the same word, viz., 'sing'. When the 'word' 'sing' is talked about in this sense, Bauer (1984:11) claims that 'it refers not to the particular shape that a word has on a particular occasion, but to all the possible shapes that the word can have. For this sense of "word" the term *lexeme* will be used'. The word-forms *sing*, *sings*, *singing*, *sang* and *sung* are thus all subsumed under the lexeme, or vocabulary-word, 'sing', and they are described by Lyons (1984:101) as being its *inflectional forms*.

* Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English and Chambers Universal Learners' Dictionary.
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Sing is also the *citation form* of the lexeme 'sing'. Bauer (1984:12) describes the citation form of a lexeme as being 'the word-form from the inflectional paradigm of the lexeme which is used when a lexeme is entered in a standard dictionary'.

Meaning

According to Lyons (1984:136) 'Meanings are ideas or concepts, which can be transferred from the mind of the speaker to the mind of the hearer by embodying them, as it were, in the forms of one language or another'.

Connotation

An important aspect of lexical (i.e. word) meaning is connotation which refers to associated features. Lyons (1984:150) states that 'the frequent use of a word or phrase in one range of contexts rather than another tends to create a set of associations between that word or phrase and whatever is distinctive about its typical contexts of occurrence. For example, there are differences of connotation, over and above their difference of descriptive meaning, between *church* and *chapel* in England and Wales'.

Denotation

Another aspect of lexical meaning is the denotation of a lexeme.

This is described by Lyons (1981:207) as being 'the relationship that holds between that lexeme and persons, things, places, properties, processes and activities external to the language-system'. Lyons (1984:152) illustrates this by means of the following example: "cow" denotes a class of entities which is the proper subclass of the class of entities denoted by "animal".

Culture-specificity of vocabulary

Some words have a *culture-bound meaning* and denote concepts that are peculiar to a particular culture (e.g. *bobby*, *chaperon* and *communism*.) The word 'culture' has several related senses. Lyons

(1981:302), for example, describes culture as being 'socially acquired knowledge i.e. ... the knowledge that someone has by virtue of his being a member of a particular society'. Many linguists, such as Loveday (1982) and Wilkins (1972), have often alluded to the fact that there is a close relationship between the vocabulary or lexicon of language and the cultural environment in which it is embedded. Tomaszczyk (1983:43) claims that 'language, above all through its lexicon, reflects the particular and always unique way of life of its speakers', for example the word Thanksgiving (in America). He goes on to say that there are 'degrees of culture-specificity, some items being more culture-bound than others'. Wierzbicka (1985:585) agrees that 'not all English words are equally language-specific and culture-specific'. She points out that 'the simpler a concept is the less culture-dependent it is going to be, and the wider the range of languages is going to be in which it has been lexicalized. For example, complex concepts such as "baptize", "excommunicate" or "vote" are highly culture-dependent, and the range of languages in which they have been lexicalized is relatively narrow. But concepts such as "say", "want", "good" and "bad" are relatively, if not absolutely, culture-free (... in the sense that most, if not all, cultures seem to rely on the concepts "good" and "bad"). Consequently, the range of languages that have separate words for concepts such as "say", "want", "good" and "bad" is very wide indeed'.

It is the culture-specific words that often create problems for the learner and result in misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication. The question that now arises is to establish how much help a learner's dictionary gives the Zulu learner of English when it comes to the comprehension of culture-bound lexical items.

A learner's dictionary

A learner's dictionary has been designed for the student, like the Zulu student for example, who is learning English as a second language [ESL]. Landau (1984:29) states that most learners' dictionaries, in contrast to the average monolingual dictionary, are designed in such a way that they help the foreign learner 'to produce utterances in English, not just to comprehend them'.

These learners' dictionaries thus 'have an essentially pedagogical purpose'. The aim of the learner's dictionary is to provide comprehensive information in as simple a form as possible. Kirkpatrick (1987:vi) states that in a learner's dictionary such as *Chambers Universal Learners' Dictionary* (CULD) the 'simply-worded definitions', 'the clear and uncomplicated pronunciation scheme' and 'the helpful grammatical information' have been provided at individual entries in such a way that the definitions are easy to understand.

Learners' dictionaries list most of the words, compound words and idiomatic expressions that the learner is likely to come across in everyday English speech or in literature. However, this article focuses attention on culture-specific words only and the relative success achieved in the representation of *culture-bound meaning* for Zulu students in the following three dictionaries:

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

EVALUATION OF CULTURE-BOUND MEANING

For the Zulu learner, the learner's dictionary is often the only reference book available, and as Tomaszczyk (1983:4) points out, 'it is the only reference aid when culture-bound vocabulary specific to the source language is involved'. One of the problems that faces the Zulu learner is that of language and culture contrast.

Culture-bound words in literature

Literature requires an understanding of the background culture from which it derives. Most writers assume that their intended readers exist in their own societies and will thus largely share their cultural knowledge. The native-speaking reader who has the same cultural background as the writer will readily comprehend the associations intended and will have an advantage over a reader from a different culture, such as the Zulu reader.

At a university such as Unisa, the students come from a wide variety of culturally different backgrounds. Many of the Black students, the Zulu students among them, live in modern Black townships and have adopted a Western lifestyle. In cases such as these, the cultural differences between the White students and the Zulu students have decreased. However, many of the Zulu students live in rural areas and still lead a more traditional life. Among societies of greatly differing socio-economic structures, intercultural differences become very obvious when members of one culture study a language of another culture. The more rural Zulu student thus encounters interpretation problems when he comes across culture-bound words in English literature. To illustrate this problem, the culture-bound words discussed in this article have been selected from *Northanger Abbey*, one of the prescribed books for English I. The Zulu student who studies through Unisa is dependent on his learner's dictionary to furnish him with the relevant culture-bound information so that he can interpret the text or poem he is studying correctly. I shall now attempt to evaluate the relative success achieved by three learners' dictionaries in representing culture-bound meaning.

The Title

One of the first culture-bound words that the Zulu learner will encounter is in the title itself - *Abbey*. This word has been defined as follows:

LDOCE

- (1) a building in which Christian men (MONKS) or women (NUNS) live shut away from other people and work as a group for God;

MONASTERY or CONVENT... (3) [C often cap, as part of a name] a large church or house that was once such a building.

OALD

- (1) building(s) in which men (MONKS) or women (NUNS) live as a community in the service of God... (3) church or house which was once an ~ or part of an ~.

CULD

- (1) The building(s) in which a Christian (usu. Roman Catholic) group of monks or nuns lives. (2) the church now or formerly belonging to it : *Westminster Abbey*.

In the context of the novel, the third definition [def. 3] in the LDOCE and the OALD is the relevant one, since the Abbey that Catherine visits has become the home of the Tilney family. However, for a complete understanding of the words '...was once such a building' (LDOCE) and '...was once an ~' (OALD) the student also has to read def. 1 where the word *abbey* has been fully defined. In both the LDOCE and the OALD there are cross-references to the words *monks* and *nuns* in def. 1, but the learner is given enough immediate information to enable him to surmise, at least approximately, the meanings of *monks* and *nuns*. What is important, however, is the fact that in def. 3 the student is told that an abbey can also be used as an ordinary *house*, as this is the relevant meaning of the 'Abbey' referred to in *Northanger Abbey*.

In contrast to the LDOCE and the OALD, the two definitions in the CULD give the learner no indication that an abbey which is no longer used as a church, convent or monastery can also be used as a house. The words in def. 2 'the church now or formerly belonging to it' are not informative enough and the Zulu learner who consults the CULD only may still feel uncertain about the specific meaning of the Abbey referred to in his prescribed book. Nor does the example 'Westminster Abbey' help the learner since Westminster Abbey is used as a church and not a house.

In Zulu there is no equivalent for the Western word *abbey* and 'isigodlo sabafungele ubumpohlo' is used to refer to unmarried men or to unmarried soldiers of Shaka's iziMpohlo regiment. The idea of monks (= unmarried) living in a monastery is regarded as a

Western custom and is thus not lexicalized in Zulu. Zulu students are also likely to be unfamiliar with the custom of converting an old church into a home. The Zulu learner is thus dependent on English learners' dictionaries such as the LDOCE and the OALD to supply him with the relevant information in order to correctly interpret the meaning of the 'abbey' in *Northanger Abbey*.

Social customs

Loveday (1982:36) reports that there is 'a close relationship between the vocabulary or lexicon of a language and the cultural environment in which it evolves and in which it is embedded'. In any given society some things are more important than others, and each society has a wide variety of vocabulary for discussing things that are important to it. For example, English has a wider selection of vocabulary than Zulu has to denote social ranks.

In *Northanger Abbey* reference is made to the following titles: *lord*, *baron* and *duke*. Lyons (1984:319) states that there is a correlation between social structure and vocabulary. Titles, names and other terms of address are culture-dependent and are characteristic of the social structure and social norms of a particular society. English people, especially in Britain, are very aware of the hierarchy involved in titled ranks. In the learners' dictionaries, *lord*, *baron* and *duke* have been defined as follows:

LDOCE

- lord* : a nobleman of high rank
baron : (in Britain) (title of) a nobleman with the lowest rank in the House of Lords
duke : (the title of) a nobleman of the highest rank outside the Royal Family

OALD

- lord* : peer, nobleman
baron : (in GB) nobleman, lowest rank of Peer (called Lord)
duke : nobleman of high rank (next below a prince)

CULD

- lord* : (sometimes with cap) in the UK etc. a nobleman or man of rank : *He has been made a lord; the House of Lords*
- baron* : (with cap. in titles) in Britain, (the status of) a nobleman next in rank below a viscount : *He was made a baron; Baron Scott of Sidcup*
- duke* : (with cap in titles) a nobleman of the highest rank: *Her daughter has married a duke; the Duke of Gloucester*

Of the three definitions given above, those that appear in the LDOCE are the clearest. The reference to 'the House of Lords' in the definition of *baron* might be meaningless to most of the Zulu students, but the words 'a nobleman with the lowest rank...' will make the student realize that a baron is at the bottom of the hierarchy of a certain group of noblemen. The definitions of *lord* and *duke* should present no problem to a non-native speaker as he is told that both a lord and a duke are noblemen, but that the latter holds a higher rank as he is just below a member of the royal family in importance.

The definition of *lord* in the OALD includes the noun *peer* which might be unknown to most Zulu students, but the reference to 'nobleman' in the same definition is an indication that a lord is highly ranked in English society. The definition of *baron* also includes a reference to 'Peer', which has been defined in the OALD as: '(in GB) member of one of the degrees of nobility, e.g. duke, marquis, earl, viscount, baron'. Although the Zulu student will be unfamiliar with the ranks referred to in the definition of *Peer*, he should be able to judge from the order of ranks given that although a baron holds a high rank, he has the lowest rank among the members of a specific group of noblemen. In contrast to *baron* the definition of *duke* in the OALD is perfectly clear and the importance of this rank 'next below a prince' will be obvious to a non-native student such as the Zulu student.

The definitions in the CULD are fairly straightforward and, apart from the lexical meanings of the lexemes, they also reflect the culture-bound meanings of the ranks denoted by these lexemes. The CULD makes extensive use of examples, but some of these illustrative examples are themselves culture-bound and of limited value to a non-native student. The CULD's definition of *lord* is very informative and the Zulu student is told that in countries like the UK a lord is a person who has a rank, but (as in the LDOCE entry) the culture-bound reference to the 'House of Lords' will be meaningless to most Zulu students. In the definition of *baron* reference is made to a 'viscount'. Although the meaning of viscount may be unknown to the student, he is given enough immediate information in the definition ('nobleman' and 'next in rank below') to surmise that although a baron is a man of rank, there are other noblemen who have a higher social status than a baron. Unfortunately, the example of 'Baron Scott of Sidcup' is too culture-bound to be meaningful to many of the readers. Similarly, the CULD's definition of *duke* successfully describes the significance of this rank, but the example 'the Duke of Gloucester' will be uninformative to many Zulu students.

It becomes obvious that the complexities of the hierarchy of the various titles in English can be very confusing to a Zulu student. The various ranks have all been lexicalised in English, each rank having its own place of importance in an English society. There are not as many different ranks in Zulu society and the word *inkosi* covers a much broader spectrum than the single English lexeme *lord*, for example. In Zulu *inkosi* is used for king, paramount chief, chief, lord or sir and is also used as a term of respect for royalty or for a person in high governmental authority.

A culture-bound difference between two languages, like the reference to titles mentioned above, is a culture-bound difference that has been created by the people in each society. Differences like this also become apparent when one compares certain habits, or forms of dress in different societies.

When Catherine arrives in Bath she attends her first ball and gets a new gown for the occasion. To an English-speaking student, the word *ball* conjures up images of an orchestra, ladies in long evening gowns, and men in evening suits. The Zulu student who has never attended a Western ball will be dependent on his learner's dictionary to furnish him with the necessary information:

LDOCE:

a large formal occasion for social dancing

OALD:

a social gathering for dancing, with an organized programme, and (often) special entertainment

CULD:

a formal dance : *a ball at a palace.*

The LDOCE's definition tells the reader that a ball is a 'formal occasion' where people dance. Wilkins (1972:123) states that 'the learner of a foreign language can hardly expect that words will have the same connotations for him as they do for native speakers'. The English-speaking student knows that not all 'formal' dances are balls and a ball has a very specific culture-bound connotation, viz., long, stylish evening dresses, dress suits, elegance, etc. The Zulu student who has never attended a ball and who reads this definition will thus only know that it is a formal occasion, and cannot be blamed for mistakenly thinking that the occasion referred to is the same as a 'formal' matric dance or end-of-year dance that he might have attended. In reality, there is a vast difference between a ball and a dance.

The definition in the OALD is even less informative than that of the LDOCE. There is no indication that the 'gathering' referred to is a formal occasion where formal evening dress must be worn. The reference to 'an organized programme' and to 'special entertainment' is equally misleading and the Zulu student may be left wondering what the 'programme' or 'entertainment' is that is mentioned in the definition (a type of concert?). The definition in the

OALD does not succeed in explaining, clearly and unambiguously, the culture-bound meaning of a Western ball to a non-native learner.

Like the LDOCE, the definition in the CULD includes the adjective *formal*, which helps the non-native learner to realize that the dance referred to is more special and less casual than the majority of the dances one normally attends. However, the adjective *formal* is also a culture-bound concept and the connotations that it has for an English-speaking student will differ considerably from the connotations that it has for the Zulu student.

The major problem with a culture-bound word such as *ball* is that, despite the inclusion of the accurate adjective *formal* in the definition, there is no guarantee that a non-native reader will interpret the definition correctly because, as Lyons (1984:308) points out, concepts such as these are culture-bound and 'depend for their understanding upon socially transmitted knowledge, both practical and propositional, and vary considerably from culture to culture'. The Zulu student who has never attended a Western *ball* will not interpret the definitions correctly. In Zulu the word *umdanso*, which literally means 'European dance', is used to refer to a *dance* and a *ball* and, as mentioned earlier, in an English society a dance and a ball are not synonymous; English has two separate words to refer to these two forms of dance.

When Catherine and Mrs Allen go to the balls in Bath, they wear gowns. Like *ball*, the definition of gown can be problematic for the Zulu student:

LDOCE:

a long dress, esp. one worn on formal occasions: *an evening gown*

OALD:

woman's dress, esp. one for special occasions: *a ball-/night-*

CULD:

(formal) a woman's dress, esp. one of high quality for dances, parties etc: *The princess wore a satin gown*

In Zulu the word *ilokwe* is used to refer to a skirt, a woman's garment, a dress and a gown. Unlike English, there is no separate word for a *gown*. It is thus important that an English learner's dictionary furnish the Zulu student with the relevant information so that he can understand that in an English society a dress and a gown are not necessarily the same. Of the three definitions, the one in the LDOCE is the most explicit. The learner is told that it is a 'long dress' worn on 'formal occasions'. Although no mention is made of a ball, the learner is given sufficient information to realize that a gown is worn for special occasions only. The example 'an evening gown' is equally helpful as the learner now knows that a 'long' gown is worn to a 'formal' 'evening' occasion and will thus not be worn to a gathering held in the day time, even if it is a very smart affair.

The definition in the OALD could be a little confusing to a non-native learner. In the definition itself no mention is made of the fact that a gown is normally a long dress and not all 'dresses' worn for 'special occasions' (e.g. a cocktail party, a graduation) are *gowns*. Fortunately, the first example in the OALD, 'a ball-gown', is very helpful, and the student should realize that the 'special occasion' referred to can be a ball and that the type of dress referred to is an elegant evening gown. However, the Zulu student who does not know what a ball is will also not know what a ball-gown actually looks like.

The definition of *gown* in the CULD also makes no mention of the fact that a gown is usually a long dress. However, the words 'of high quality' do indicate that a gown is obviously an expensive, elegant type of dress. This is verified by the adjective *satin* in the example that follows. However, the inclusion of the word *parties* can be misleading since a *gown* is not normally worn to a *party*, even if it is a fairly formal affair. It is difficult for a non-native learner to understand the etiquette and importance attached

to the correct form of dress in another culture. Therefore, it is essential that learner's dictionaries convey culture-bound meaning as clearly as possible to the non-native learner.

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