

C2.1 – MTSL

(Week 4)

USING REFERENCE WORKS

TASK 1: THE LIMITS OF DICTIONARY DEFINITIONS



Text 1: *Read the following text and then refer to Worksheet 1, below.*

The way dictionary writers arrive at definitions is merely the systematization of the way we all learn the meanings of words, beginning at infancy and continuing for the rest of our lives. Let us say that we have never heard the word "oboe" before, and we overhear a conversation in which the following sentences occur:

He used to be the best **oboe** player in town...Whenever they came to that **oboe** part in the third movement, he used to get very excited...I saw him one day at the music shop, buying a new reed for his **oboe**...He never liked to play the clarinet after he started playing the **oboe**. He said it wasn't as much fun, because it was too easy.

Although the word may be unfamiliar, its meaning becomes clear to us as we listen. After hearing the first sentence, we know that an "oboe" is "played", so that it must be either a game or a musical instrument. With the second sentence, the possibility of its being a game is eliminated. With each succeeding sentence, the possibilities as to what an "oboe" may be are narrowed down until we get a fairly clear idea of what is meant. This is how we learn from *verbal context*, arriving at a workable definition by understanding one word in relation to the others with which it appears.

But even independently of this, we learn by *physical and social context*. Let us say that we are playing golf and that we have hit the ball in a certain way with certain unfortunate results, so that our companion says to us, "That's a bad *slice*." He repeats this remark every time our ball fails to go straight. If we are reasonably bright, we learn in a very short time to say, when it happens again, "That's a bad slice." On one occasion, however, our friend says to us, "That's not a *slice* this time; that's a *hook*." In this case we consider what has happened, and we wonder what is different about the last stroke from those previous. As soon as we make the distinction, we have added still another word to our vocabulary. The result is that after nine holes of golf, we can use both these words accurately — and perhaps several others as well, such as "divot," "number five iron," "approach shot," *without ever having been told what they mean*. Indeed we may play golf for years without ever being able to give a dictionary definition of "to slice": "To strike (the ball) so that the face of

the club draws inward across the face of the ball, causing it to curve toward the right in flight (with a right-handed player)" (*Webster's New International Dictionary*). But even without being able to give such a definition, we would still be able to use the word accurately whenever the occasion arose.

We learn the meanings of practically all our words (which are, it will be remembered, merely complicated noises), not from dictionaries, not from definitions, but from hearing these noises as they accompany actual situations in life and learning to associate certain noises with certain situations. Even as dogs learn to recognize "words", as for example by hearing "biscuit" at the same time as an actual biscuit is held before their noses, so do we all learn to interpret language by being aware of the happenings that accompany the noises people make at us — by being aware, in short, of contexts.

The "definitions" given by little children in school show clearly how they associate words with situations. They almost always define in terms of physical and social contexts: "Punishment is when you have been bad and you have to sit on the stairs for time out." "Newspapers are what the paperboy brings." These are good definitions. The main reason that they cannot be used in dictionaries is that they are *too* specific; it would be impossible to list the myriads of situations in which every word has been used. For this reason, dictionaries give definitions on a high level of abstraction, that is, with particular references left out for the sake of conciseness. This is another reason why it is a great mistake to regard dictionary definitions as telling us all about a word.

 **Worksheet 1:**

1. Restate the main ideas of the text in no more than two sentences.
2. In light of what the text says about dictionary definitions, what can you imagine about the ability of dictionaries to communicate connotations?
3. Make a few notes on the connotations that may be associated with the words listed below, and the physical, social or verbal contexts with which you associate them. (The first one has been done for you as an example.)
 - a) **cruel:** *dictator, torture, prison, punishment, children's behavior toward weaker children, hunters and animals, slavery, husbands and wives in bad marriages, child abuse*

b) immigrant: _____

c) guilt: _____

d) freedom: _____

e) Hispanic: _____

f) addict: _____

g) abuse: _____

h) government: _____

i) holiday: _____

4. Now, look up the words in both a bilingual and a monolingual English dictionary. Compare the information contained in the dictionary definitions with your own thoughts.

Worksheet 2:

In the following sentences, a series of common English exclamations are featured in bold script. Consider how you might translate into your own language each of the exclamations in the contexts shown. Then compare your translations with the definitions you find in a bilingual dictionary.

1. “**YIPPEE!**” the children cried when the teacher announced there would be no test that day.

your translation: _____

dictionary translation: _____

2. “**WHEW!**” she exclaimed, wiping the sweat from her brow after a 45-minute aerobics class.

your translation: _____

dictionary translation: _____

3. Getting up from her chair, Denise accidentally knocked over her coffee mug. “**DAMN IT!**” she screamed, staring at the ruined pages of her dissertation.

your translation: _____

dictionary translation: _____

4. “**JEEZ**, Mom, you never let me do anything!” Nancy whined when her mother refused to give her permission to have her nose pierced.

your translation: _____

dictionary translation: _____

Worksheet 3:

Look up the following words in both a bilingual dictionary and a monolingual dictionary. Next, based on the definitions you have found, try to assign each of the words to one of the contexts provided.

wound up

scurry

scamper

worked up

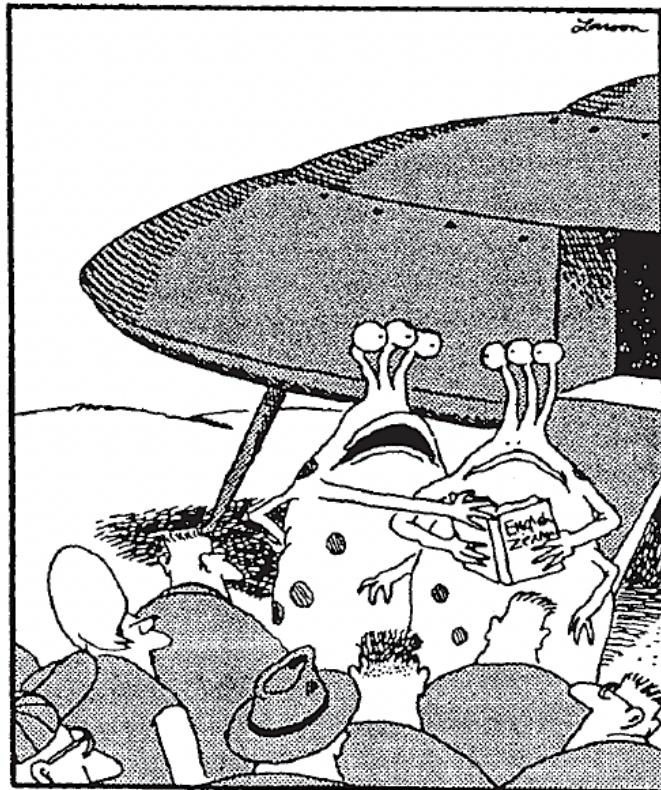
hectic

nerve-racking

rustle

swish

- 1) cockroaches running across the floor when the light is turned on
- 2) how you would feel if you caught your boyfriend/girlfriend sleeping with someone else
- 3) how you might feel just before taking an important exam
- 4) children playing in the garden
- 5) the bride’s silk dress as she walks down the aisle of the church
- 6) dry leaves when the wind blows through them
- 7) the airport of a large city on July 31
- 8) trying to get through the airport of a large city with two large, heavy suitcases on the first day of summer holidays



"Take me to your stove? ... You idiot!
Give me that book!"

© Gary Larson, *The Far Side Cartoons*

TASK 2: USING REFERENCE WORKS



Text 2: Read the following text before going on to worksheets 1-6, below.

OCEANS APART

IT'S NOT JUST THE VOCABULARY THAT SEPARATES BRITONS AND AMERICANS. IT'S HOW EACH LOOKS AT LIFE.
by Jane Walmsley

1. George Bernard Shaw said it best, though many have said it badly ever since. America and Britain are two nations divided by a common language. Between us is a **Great Philosophical and Cultural Divide**, which is obscured by the familiar **lingo**. Our respective heads of government may **burble on** about "common bonds" and "special

relationships" but the truth is that, in this day and age, British thinking and American thinking are light-years apart. We cherish widely different values and aspirations, and have developed separate habits of mind. Only the names remain the same...and there's some doubt about those. In some ways, a camel and a porpoise have more in common.

2. That's the bad news. But, dedicated travelers and internationalists, take heart. The *good* news is that, with no language barrier to overcome, you've a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to penetrate a foreign mind. So, if you've been perplexed by the transatlantic psycho-gap, and feel that your holidays (or business dealings) will be enhanced if only you can **bridge** it, then here's a guide to basic British and American thinking.
3. The single most important thing to know about Americans — the attitude that *truly* distinguishes them from the British, and explains much superficially odd behavior — is that *Americans think that death is optional*. They may not admit it, and will probably laugh if it's suggested; but it's a state of mind .. a kind of national leitmotiv if you like — that colors everything they do. "I'm Gonna Live Forever" is the **unofficial national anthem**. There's a nagging suspicion that you can delay death (or—who knows—avoid it altogether) if you really try. This explains the common preoccupation with health, aerobics, prune juice, plastic surgery and education.
4. The idea is that you're given one life to live, and it's up to you to get it right. You should:
 - use the time to maximize individual potential (have a **nose job**, get a college degree) so as to ensure the highest-quality life possible
 - take care of your body so it will last. If an extended life span — or even immortality — proves possible, at least you're ready.
5. That's the secret of America's fundamental optimism; but it's not as cheery as it sounds. It imposes on the individual a whole range of duties and responsibilities. Your life is in your own hands...and the quality of that life as well. You owe it to yourself to be beautiful, clever, skinny, successful, and healthy. If you fail, it's because you're not trying hard enough...(you didn't jog regularly, you should've eaten more bran). Death becomes your fault.
6. British thinking on the subject is fundamentally different, and accounts for the yawning gulf in national attitudes. Brits **keep a weather eye on the Sword of Damocles**, suspended above their heads. Lives are to be lived with a certain detachment, and a sense of distance preserved. One **rolls with the punches**. It's fruitless to try to take control, **bad form** to get too involved, arrogant and self-important to attempt to **outwit** destiny.
7. Events must be allowed to run their natural course. Stay **cool**, and never be seen to try too hard (Americans are so intense!) since anyone with half a brain should recognize the central absurdity of existence and accept the inevitable. Success — if it's to count — must appear effortless. Since nothing matters very much anyway, think twice before making important sacrifices. Never run for a bus. Never skip tea.

8. What do Americans instinctively revere more than wealth, beauty, or Häagen-Dazs? Newness. Meet an American for the first time, and he's likely to greet you with, "So, what's new?" He wants more than a general progress report. One small part of him means it literally, expecting an answer like, "Well, I've got a new **Chevy/lover/food processor.**" In America, *new is good*. Americans are the world's greatest believers in progress. Life gets better all the time — or should. They expect a seventy-year crescendo, starting at not-so-hot and rising to terrific.
9. Nothing will convince a True American (even an elderly one) that "things were better 'way back when.'" They point in evidence at the history of modern medicine: once there was **smallpox**, now there isn't. Old things can be treated with a certain irreverence, since something better is always just around the corner. America is still new — still warm and gently throbbing — and so are the most desirable things in it. Over much of the country new property attracts a higher price than old, new shopping malls **snatch** customers from "old" haunts as soon as they cut the ribbon on the parking lot. New products are greeted with enthusiasm, since advanced versions always include "improvements." No point in clinging grimly to the past, or we'd never have traded gramophones for color TVs or headaches for aspirin.
10. The British, on the other hand, are sure that life — and the simple passage of time — does *not* presuppose progress. At best, there are large flat areas. There's little proof that things get better, and a great deal of evidence to suggest the opposite. Look at architecture: Victorians built better houses than we do. Look at sportsmanship: it was fairer play before they invented steroids. Look at **AIDS**. That's new.
11. True Brits **loathe** newness and display a profound fear of change. They see modern life as increasingly uncertain, events as **random**, and "untried" ideas as undesirable. Even small changes can cause Brit-trauma, with the nation shaken to its roots at suggestions that traditional red phone boxes be painted yellow. Far better to preserve the status quo, to hope that custom and ritual will somehow counter the capriciousness of fate. (Britain is the heartland of "We've Always Done it This Way.") Conclusion: Change nothing unless forced. Remember that God usually gets it right the first time.
12. America's motto has nothing to do with "**E Pluribus Unum**"; it is "Never Forget You've Got a Choice." Choice —lots of it — is as dear to the American heart as newness. The point about choice is to exercise it as much as possible. That's why **Yanks** *elect* so many people: presidents, governors, judges, senators, congressmen and dogcatchers.
13. Americans never commit themselves to anything for life. Leaders you can't change — like monarchs — make them nervous. They reserve the right to review decisions periodically; anything less is an attack on personal freedom, and reminds them of Communism. They even get **edgy** when fruit they like is out of season. Nowhere do people view restrictions with more alarm. They mistrust package holidays and long-term investments. Contracts of employment must contain appropriate "get out" clauses. They plan vacations and shop for Christmas at the last minute, and make final

decisions only when they've considered all possible choices. They conduct business by phone, and avoid committing anything to paper. They don't even like restaurants with set menus. The right to substitute a tossed salad for french fries is enshrined in the constitution. Americans like to live life *à la carte*.

14. Brit-brains are more at ease when the range of personal choice is strictly limited. (This is reflected in the retail industry, where dresses come in four sizes, shoes in one width, and ice cream in three flavors.) Too many options only confuse people and encourage them to behave in a **greedy** and selfish way. It's part of human nature to be happier when our horizons are limited, someone else is in charge, and we know what's expected of us. That's why monarchs are so useful, and the class system survives. It's also why we enjoyed such widespread national contentment during the Second World War. All you had to know was how many coupons were left in your ration book. All appearances to the contrary, **the heat was off**.
15. Since then, argument goes, **it's been downhill all the way**. More options and higher expectations have spawned the "me" generation, which doesn't understand the relationship between virtue and restriction. It'll end in tears or *anarchy* (which is British for "unlimited choice")
16. For Americans, choice is the same thing as freedom, which is the same thing as money, and that's the real secret of the national fondness for cash. It's not that Americans are by nature greedier or more acquisitive than their European counterparts. They're no fonder of their dishwashers and microwaves than the British of their color TVs, no happier with their automatic orange-juicers and garbage compactors in Houston than a Liverpool housewife with a sandwich-maker. Nor do Pennsylvania steelworkers push harder for wage settlements than Yorkshire miners. It's just that Americans admire money more openly. They see it as a measure of success, and the final guarantee of personal choice. In short, Money is Power — and power is a good thing. Lack of power makes you a **schlepp**. Money is a **hedge** against schlepphood.
17. Furthermore, **you can take it with you** — or if you've got enough you may not have to go. Cash gives room to maneuver. If it turns out that death is optional, — or science comes up with a commercial miracle — your dollars guarantee that you won't be ignored. Money buys the best — and the best is your birthright.
18. How different is British opinion on the subject! The public stance of the middle-to-upper classes is to **pooh-pooh** money. ("not my first priority") and instead to speak passionately of "the quality of life." By this, Brits mean things spiritual or cultural, which — they maintain — have nothing to do with hard cash. The price of theater tickets notwithstanding.
19. The theory is that money can't buy taste, or style, or a sense of priorities — which are things you're born with. (Wealthy people are born with more than poor ones.) Your spending habits are seen as a reflection of breeding and the quality of your mind, and allow others to make judgments about your background and personal style. Haggling

about money is okay for miners and steelworkers, but everyone else should concern himself with duty to the wider community or loyalty to employers. It is the custom of the wealthiest Brits (captains of industry and/or royalty) to periodically remind the masses of the virtues of self-denial and restraint. This is called ***noblesse obligé***.

20. The single-minded pursuit of ready cash is simply vulgar, and undermines the human spirit. Of course, you've got to have money — because penury is unbecoming and gets in the way. But enough is enough. After all — you can't take it with you. Americans never understand that.
21. Ever since the day when New England patriots, disguised as Mohawk Indians, dumped chests of taxed British tea into Boston Harbor, the gulf between the two countries has been in part a battle of "me-think" vs. "we think". For an American, individual liberty is next to godliness, and he considers that his first duty and obligation is to **look out for Number One**.
22. "*Moi* — I come first." **Miss Piggy** said it, and **touched a chord** deep in the hearts of her countrymen. This belief follows on from "I'm gonna live forever," because it stands to reason that you've got to take care of yourself if you're going to last. If each person concentrates on attaining his "personal best" — and achieves inner fulfillment — we will have created a better society.
23. Without knowing it, most Yanks support the ideas of **Adam Smith**, the economist who advanced the theory that the individual working in his own interests leads ultimately to the greatest good of the state. A strong society is merely the sum of strong parts. It's often said that America is the heartland of individualism...and this is what people mean. You protect your own interests by making choices — lots of them. If you've acquired money — which gives you more **leverage** — then so much the better. It is no accident that Frank Sinatra scored a monster hit with "I Did it My Way". Frankie understands "me-think."
24. But this type of thinking does not **sit easily with** Brits. It strikes them as selfish, and a bit brutal. Whether they vote **Tory or Labour**, they've spent years living under various permutations of socialist government. This has created different habits of mind, and softened the collective rhetoric. "*Moi*—I come first!" **sticks in the throat**. Brits of most persuasions are happiest talking about "self-reliance" and "the common good," which reminds them of the War, the Crown and the **BBC** in no particular order. This has a great deal of social credibility, but — paradoxically — often turns out to mean "my right to do what's best for me, and hope that your requirements don't get in the way."
25. Culturally, socially, psychologically and literally, Brits form orderly queues. They like to keep things nice and cozy. Fundamental to "we-think" is the dread of inciting a contest. Brits are by nature reluctant to **throw down the gauntlet**; and "I come first" is a challenge to others — notification of battle. Strong stuff, where there are winners and losers, and the weak **go to the wall**. Once the gloves are off, no one can predict the outcome.

26. This carries with it the risk of change, bloodletting, and general social turbulence. "We-think" creates the impression of a kind, more caring society, where rich and poor alike are cushioned against the harsh realities of **unbridled** competition. One can't win by much, or lose by much. So goes the Brit-myth.

27. And finally ...The Meaning of Life. Brits have a great and easy capacity for contentment, and do not, as a rule, drive themselves nuts. What's really important in life is nature ... the "rural idyll." Even (or especially) for Londoners, life's apogee is a move to the countryside. A **compost heap** is the ultimate expression of your understanding of "the quality of life". Your own crop of carrots testifies to the fact that you are free, and **beholden** to no man. In fact, Brit-man is born with a unique, atavistic reflex hitherto unrecorded by medical science: from birth, he has the ability to grasp a garden trowel.

28. Americans, for all their affluence and the distractions it can bring, know what really counts. ICE CREAM. More than allegiance to the flag, or to **Johnny Carson** or the microchip, it's mocha-chip (and peppermint crunch) that binds that nation together. Ice cream is the Great Leveler... the fixed point in an otherwise mobile society, guaranteed to give pleasure to all. Americans will drive 100 miles for the ultimate cone. Don't ask why. The **Great American Dream** pales into insignificance beside the Great American Cream.

 **Worksheet 4:**

In text 2 (above) a number of words and expressions have been highlighted in bold type. Using the reference works available to you in the library, look for information regarding these words and expressions as requested below

(Note: You will need to use not only monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, but also other sources such as idiomatic dictionaries, dictionaries of English and American culture, encyclopedias and internet.)

1. Who was (is):

- George Bernard Shaw?

- Adam Smith?

- Miss Piggy?

- Johnny Carson?

2. What is:

- a Chevy?

- a food processor?

- a compost heap?

 **Worksheet 5:**

Briefly define the following words and expressions and identify the part of speech they represent as used in text 2. State whether the words are generally used in standard or colloquial English. Indicate if any of the words are foreign or archaic, and if any are favored by American or British speakers. (Numbers in parentheses refer to location, by paragraph, of words in the text.)

- 1. lingo (1)**
- 2. burble on (1)**
- 3. bridge (1)**
- 4. nose job (4)**
- 5. bad form (6)**
- 6. cool (7)**
- 7. schlepp (16)**
- 8. hedge (16)**
- 9. pooh-pooh (18)**
- 10. unbridled (26)**
- 11. beholden (27)**

 **Worksheet 6:**

Find as many synonyms as you can for each of the following words as they are used in text 2. (Numbers in parentheses refer to the paragraph location of the words in the text.)

1. **cherish** (1)

2. **skinny** (5)

3. **fruitless** (6)

4. **snatch** (9)

5. **random** (11)

6. **loathe** (11)

7. **edgy** (13)

8. **greedy** (14)

 **Worksheet 7:**

Locate the cultural, geographical and historical information requested below.

1. Paragraph 21 refers to New England patriots disguised as Mohawk Indians dumping chests of taxed British tea into Boston Harbor. Explain this historical reference, and its significance with regard to Anglo-American relations. Also, say which states make up the New England area today.

2. Paragraph 3 refers to the unofficial American national anthem. What is the *official* national anthem of the U.S.? Explain its history (author of lyrics, year that it was adapted as the national anthem).

3. What are the possible origins of the term "Yank" (par. 12)?

4. Define the general political tendencies (conservative or liberal) of the Tory and Labour parties in the U.K. (see paragraph 24).

 **Worksheet 8:**

Briefly define or explain the following expressions.

1. keep a weather eye on (6)
2. Sword of Damocles (6)
3. roll with the punches (6)
4. look out for Number One (21)
5. It's been downhill all the way (15)
6. throw down the gauntlet (25)
7. go to the wall (25)
8. not-so-hot (8)
9. à la carte (13)
10. touch a chord (22)
11. stick in the throat (24)
12. *noblesse obligé* (19)
13. E Pluribus Unum (12)