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SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT DICTIONARIES, NATIVE SPEAKERS AND AMERICAN ENGLISH USAGE

Users of dictionaries often impute more authority to dictionary entries than lexicographers would themselves claim. A case in point is the reliability of the various labels which a lexicographer uses to inform the reader that a word or an expression has a special (i. e. non-obvious) meaning or a restricted usage. Such labels include the nouns *argot, cant, colloquialism, euphemism, idiom, jargon, metaphor, regionalism, slang, taboo, vulgarism;* and the adjectives *archaic, colloquial, dialectal, figurative, idiomatic, illiterate, informal, nonstandard, obsolete, regional, substandard, taboo, vulgar.*

In a dictionary of the English language the word "brother" will have no usage label attached when it has the meaning of "male sibling"; when, however, "brother" is used to express surprise or disappointment, as in the common expression "Oh brother!," it might be followed by the label *slang.*[1] The verb "kick" is unlabeled in its meaning "to strike with a motion of the foot" and the noun "bucket" is also unlabeled in its meaning of "a cylindrical container with a flat bottom used for holding water, etc." But under both entries we might find the expression "to kick the bucket (i. e. to die)" labeled *slang.* Thus, a dictionary might offer the user two slang expressions but would not tell him, indeed could not, that one expression ("Brother!") is current slang and may safely be used, while the other expression ("to kick the bucket") is dated and, if used, will make the user seem old-fashioned.

This problem of inexact labeling stems from the fact that good dictionaries are years in the making and, once published, are then used for many additional years without substantial change. The lexicographer or his specialist on usage will attach labels according to his own *Sprachgefühl* but can hardly give any guarantee that a lebel will be valid even at the date of publication. Slang by its very nature is ephemeral and subject to rapid obsolescence. Another problem lies in the lack of precision of the labels themselves: what one dictionary-maker will label *slang,* another will call *colloquial* and yet another might label *informal.*[2] In this article I shall use the adjective *idio-*

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[1] It is curious that a number of American idiomatic expressions stem from words denoting males. Besides "brother," the words "man" and "boy" are used as interjections; e. g. "Man, did I have a great time last night!"; "Oh boy, just look at that dessert!" American English does not have the equivalent of the Italian "Mamma mia!"

[2] The meaning of these usage labels becomes even more imprecise in translation. "Slang" is rendered into Croatian by *šatrovački; lingo; argo,* while "slangword" is translated as žargonizam (p. 888, Vol. II, Rikard Simeon, *Enciklopedijski rječnik lingvističkih naziva,* Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 1969). To my (non-native) eye those four Croatian terms seem to cover a very wide area of meaning.

matic as a cover term for all the labels (e. g. *idiomatic, slang, substandard,* etc.) which are used to characterize current language usage; thus, the labels *archaic* and *obsolete* are not under consideration here. This general, inclusive meaning of *idiomatic* appears in utterances such as "He does not yet have an idiomatic command of the language."

Each generation has its distinctive inventory of idiomatic words and expressions. In a metaphorical sense each generation *is* a "dictionary" whose entries are noted, accepted or rejected by a succeeding or a preceding generation. Children at an early stage receive words and expressions from their parents; at a later stage, sometime in elementary school and certainly in secondary school, children become more receptive to language influences from their playmates and schoolmates. At this second stage it seems that the children now function linguistically as part of a separate generation and are much less dependent on their parents as language sources. The children may not only accept or reject parental words and expressions but they themselves now serve as sources of new idiomatic expressions for their parents. Communication across generations shows obvious differences in usage; most of us remember the interest we had, as small children, in listening to the speech of our grandparents. There is, in fact, a mutual attraction (other than kinship) between grandparents and grandchildren. The grandparents are charmed by the simple, uncluttered speech of the children who in turn are fascinated by the colorful and idiomatic speech of the grandparents. It could be hypothesized that speech change (specifically in the lexical inventory) is facilitated or inhibited by social situations involving contact between the grandparents and grandchildren. For example, Russian parents entrust much of the care of their small children to grandparents, particularly to *babushka;* one might speculate that this daily contact in the early years of the child is a conservative force in passing on "Granny's" idiomatic expressions directly to the child.

Let me illustrate this generational exchange (or rejection) of idiomatic speech by three anecdotes. The first involves a family at dinner. Mother is describing a reception she attended that day and remarks, "Linda Crawford was there and did she ever put on the dog!" One of the children looks up and asks, "Mother, do you mean Mrs. Crawford had a live dog on her shoulders?" The parents laugh while the children look confused. Thereupon the parents explain that the expression "to put on the dog" means to be pretentious or, in the case of Linda Crawford, over-dressed.

The second story concerns two children, a boy and his younger sister. The boy, in describing the predicament of a friend, says, "I certainly wouldn't want to be in his shoes." His sister asks, "Why, what size are his shoes?" The brother laughs, then explains that the expression "to be in somebody's shoes" means to be in the same situation, in this case a difficult one.

The third vignette differs in that it is the older participant in a conversation who is puzzled by an expression used by the younger speaker. A university student is talking on the telephone to his father and says, "I had so much work last week that I had to clone my roommate's lab report." "What do you mean by 'clone'," asks the father. "Oh," the son replies, "that means I copied it exactly."

In the first anecdote the expression "to put on the dog" was offered by members of one generation to members of a younger generation and will continue for a time to be offered, but it seems fated to be rejected in American English usage. The expression in the second story, "to be in someone's shoes," seems to be accepted by the younger generation and will probably continue to live; indeed it is the sort of graphic expression which could be created spontaneously in any generation. The third expression "to clone (i. e. to copy)," is a jocular extension of the bioengineering term "clone (i. e. an exact genetic copy)"; if scientists continue to bedazzle the public with the genetic duplication involved in cloning, then the extended meaning ("any kind of copy") might also take root in English usage. In similar fashion the very useful English verb, "to galvanize (i. e. to stimulate, to excite)," emerged two centuries ago from the laboratory of the Italian physiologist, Dr. Luigi Galvani.

The life span of idiomatic expressions is unpredictable since some of them live for centuries, others perish in one decade while others shed their distinctiveness and become neutral terms. "Booze," meaning "alcoholic beverages," has been in use for several centuries and seems strong enough to last for the foreseeable future. On the other hand it is somewhat difficult to read and appreciate the short stories of O. Henry (William S. Porter, 1862—1910), who was enormously popular in the first decades of this century; his stories are full of the idiomatic expressions of his time. With some effort we can understand that his sentence "And then my lamps fall on another party present..." means "And then my eyes fall on another person present..." but we quickly lose interest in interpreting such dated expressions. An idiomatic term such as "to rap" in the sense of "to discuss" arose in the 1960's and became popular very quickly but now is practically extinct. How idiomatic terms can become neutral over time is shown in this exchange between a grandmother and her grandson. Grandmother says, "Now, Johnny, there are two words I don't want you to use. One is 'lousy' and the other is 'swell'." To which the agreeable Johnny responds, "O. K., Grandma, what are the words?" Thus, for Johnny the words "lousy" (meaning "very bad") and "swel" (meaning "very good") are neutral words, though they still have an offensive connotation for his grandmother.

One word which has changed dramatically in recent years is "gay." From the Norman Conquest (1066 A. D.) until very recently this adjective has had the primary meaning of "merry, joyful." Now, at least in the United States, "gay" designates a homosexual, and the word is both adjective and noun; e. g. "He's gay"; "San Francisco is known for its large population of gays." This new meaning causes a problem for the older generation accustomed to the earlier meaning of "gay"; now such cliches as "a gay social season," "young and gay," have to be avoided. *Gay* also serves as a surname and as a first name for women; e. g. John Gay; Gay Martin. Formerly, a person with such a name could approach a group of people and say, "Hi, I'm Gay"; now that has to be changed to "Hi, I'm John Gay/Gay Martin."[3]

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[3] Personal names, however, are hardy in that they can withstand the taint of a homonymous common noun with an undesirable meaning; e. g. "John" continues to be a popular first name for men even though "john" has two idiomatic (specifically: vulgar) meanings: "toilet," and "a prostitute's client." Any American telephone book will yield surnames which compete with common nouns of undesirable meaning, e. g. Boob (cf. boob, "a stupid person"), Boozer (cf. boozer, "an alcoholic"), Crook (cf. crook, "a criminal"), Hooker (cf. hooker, "a prostitute"), etc. On the other hand a Yugoslav male with the first name Jerko may experience embarrassment in the United States because of the name's similarity (in English pronunciation) to "jerk (i. e. a repulsive person, *mangup*)."

Thus, the centuries-old meaning of "gay (i. e. merry, joyful)" has been pushed into a special (i. e. idiomatic) status by the current, widespread use of "gay" to designate homosexuals. This new sexual meaning will now affect our appreciation of literary texts where "gay" was used in the earlier meaning; e. g. "a poet could not but be gay..." (William Wordsworth, 1805).

One colorful idiomatic expression, of too recent a vintage to be in most dictionaries, is the special use of the verb, "to rip off," and its newly created noun, "rip-off (/ripoff)" The neutral meaning of the verb is illustrated in the sentence, "He ripped the paper off the wall." The idiomatic meaning of the verb is "to steal, to make off with" while the noun means "theft" or "excessive charge"; e. g. "Someone ripped off (i. e. stole) my lunch"; "That movie is a real rip-off (i. e. too expensive)."

The preposition "into" is now used extensively in the idiomatic meaning of "interested in, concerned with, active in." An American feminist recently complained about the difficulty of organizing American women, saying "Women in our society are very much into security and stability." Other examples are "I'm into Zen Buddhism," or "He's into cross-country skiing" or "She's into French cooking," or "Young Americans are into ecology."[4]

If dictionaries are not able to tell us precisely when and where idiomatic expressions are to be used, we may, of course, turn to the native speaker for help. And not get it. There is no question about the great value of the native speaker in demonstrating the sounds, forms, and arrangements of the elements of his language, but the average native speaker is almost totally unaware of classifications of usage. He will know from his days in school that it is *bad* to say "ain' t" instead of "is not" or "isn' t." He will also know vaguely about regional differences: that, for example, a Southerner will use an expression like "a good old boy (i. e. a trustworthy Southern man)" or that a New Yorker might incorporate into his speech Yiddish words such as "to schlep" in the meaning of "to transport or to carry with difficulty."[5] But, in general, the native speaker controls a lexicon specific to his generation, region, and station in life and, functioning in that lexical cocoon, he has little awareness of nuances of usage.

It is, of course, possible for a linguist or language teacher to deduce the status of an idiomatic expression by questioning the native speaker. If the native speaker says, for example, "You better ride herd on that situation," one can simply ask "What do you mean by that?" The answer might be a repetition of the expression: "Oh, you know, ride herd." Additional questions might elicit the idiomatic meaning "to watch carefully, to monitor" as an extension of what was originally the cowboy expression "to ride herd (literally: to ride a horse in taking care of a herd of cattle)." But generally a native speaker does not have ability to distinguish idiomatic expressions from non-idiomatic expressions.

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[4] A cartoon in *The New Yorker* (Aug. 6, 1979) shows a huge sign by the side of a major highway; the sign reads YOU ARE NOW INTO CALIFORNIA. The "into" here, instead of the expected "in," provides a humorous note since California is often viewed as the source for bizarre and unrestrained life-styles.

[5] The Mayor of New York City, Edward Koch, is reported to have said (I am quoting from memory), "Why should the city keep a limousine just to schlep the Queen of England back and forth to the airport?"

The native speaker does, however, react in his own way to the use of idiomatic expressions. He *knows*, though he might not be able to articulate his knowledge, which expressions are "old-fashioned (i. e. belonging to an older generation)," which are "acceptable (i. e. for his generation)" and which are "novel (usually those created by the younger generation)." If a foreigner, in speaking English to the native speaker, uses the expression "That's a lot of moonshine (i. e. a lot of nonsense)," the native speaker will be charmed if he knows the expression but will also be amused, since that expression is used in the United States only by elderly people who remember the making of "moonshine (i. e. illegal alcohol)" during the time of Prohibition in the 1930's. But usually he would not tell the foreigner about that reaction; the politeness of a native speaker is well known as a learning obstacle to non--native students of his language.

Language usage is extraordinarily varied. One has only to listen attentively at any family reunion to observe the wealth of idiomatic expressions being used. If one were to record in writing such a conversational flow without identifying the speakers, it would not be difficult for a reader from outside the family to specify the generations (old, middle, young) simply on the basis of the idiomatic expressions used. At a luncheon recently my companions and I were discussing the situation in a foreign country. One colleague said, "That country is really going down the drain"; a moment or so later the same thought was repeated in the observation "Joe's right, that country is going down the tube." Both expressions mean "to be in extreme difficulty, to face extinction" though "tube" by itself also means a TV set as in "Nothing to do, let's see what's on the tube." But back to the luncheon conversation: a third speaker asked "Say, is that president playing with a full deck?," meaning "Does that country's president have full possession of his mental faculties?"; playing cards with less than a full deck (of cards) is obviously not an intelligent thing to do and so the expression applied to people has the idiomatic meaning noted above. Though the age spread among my three companions was only about 15 years, the three expressions used correlated with the age differences: "to go down the drain" was used by the oldest, "to go down the tube" by one somewhat younger, and "to play with a full deck" by the youngest.

Because dictionaries and native speakers are thus not always reliable in describing idiomatic usage, the best advice in approaching the idiomatic expressions of another language is that offered by a common U. S. road sign: PROCEED WITH CAUTION. In some cases, particularly those involving taboo expressions, one might accept the message of another road sign: PROCEED AT YOUR OWN RISK. A non-native speaker of English might acquire the British expression "to knock up" as in the query of a hotel clerk, "When shall I knock you up in the morning?," meaning "When shall I awaken (literally: knock on your door) you in the morning?" In the United States the use of this expression, especially when addressed to a woman, might have unpleasant results, since in the U. S. "to knock up" is a crude expression for "to make a woman pregnant." The reverse would be true for "bloody", which just means "covered with blood" in American English but which has a vulgar connotation in British English.

Though the learner of English should exercise caution in adding idiomatic expressions to his inventory, he should indeed make an effort to go beyond the bland formulations of the average language textbook; e. g. "Hello, my name is John. What is your name? Shall we go to a restaurant for something to eat?" Those sentences are perfectly acceptable, though in conversation Americans would say something like "Hi, my name' s John. What's yours? How about a bite to eat?" In examining beginning textbooks of English in other countries, I am always struck by the absence of the homely word "hi." Each weekday morning, as I walk to the university, I pass a stream of small children going to elementary school. To those, who do not seem too shy, I will say "hello" or "good morning." Rarely do I get back a "hello" or a "good morning" but almost always the response is "hi." In the United States "hi" is the first greeting learned and the one most widely used in conversation; "hello" is used for the telephone and for more formal occasions, e. g. "Hello, I am your new instructor."

For the student of American English the most reliable models for current speech are the newscasters on national radio and television; indeed their speech has been called "network English." In particular, "anchormen (i. e. principal newscasters)" on the national television networks (CBS, NBC, ABC) present a nice blend of standard American English intermixed with idiomatic expressions presumed to be acceptable to their audiences. It has been said that television news is a "conspiracy to make us all talk like Walter Cronkite." Cronkite is a middle-aged, avuncular man who conveys the evening news in soothing tones to his audience of millions of listeners; in a similar mold are newscasters like John Chancellor (NBC) and Frank Reynolds (ABC). Americans prefer to hear the catastrophic news from such patriarchal figures; women, popular as newscasters in some countries, are used sparingly in the United States. Thus, when one hears one of these anchormen intone a sentence like. "The latest price rise for petroleum is a real rip-off", one can be sure that the term "rip-off," barely a decade old, is now understood from one end of the country to the other.

Language usage does correlate with other social phenomena, e. g. styles of dress; one does not wear old clothes and use profane language at a university faculty meeting, whereas such clothing and language might be appropriate for men on a hunting trip. The correlation is only approximate, however, and native speakers differ in their selection of idiomatic words and expressions for particular social settings. It is, thus, much more difficult for the non-native who must not only evaluate the foreign speech setting but also assure himself that his acquired idiomatic expressions are still in fashion. Difficult but eminently worth the effort because English (or any other language) achieves power, color, and, on occasion, beauty only through the interplay of its neutral lexical items with those imaginative words and phrases I have referred to as idiomatic. Unidiomatic language is "textbook" language, tasteless and unappetizing — it is the unadorned "apple pie" in the American folk saying: "Apple pie without cheese is like a hug without a squeeze."[6]

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[6] I am grateful to my colleagues, Professors Ronald E. Buckalew, Wilma R. Ebbitt and Theodore E. Kiffer, for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.