

Taking Care of the Sense

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Introduction

In this paper, I want to discuss some of the reasons why I, as a linguist, find *LDOCE4* an example of exemplary dictionary practice. I leave it to members of the editorial team to explore the properties of the dictionary in detail. My approach is rather different. I want to look at some aspects of the underlying theory - why it is so important to incorporate a dictionary into our core task, of language teaching. All too often, a dictionary is seen as something completely separate from the rest of the language - a book on a shelf that you refer to, from time to time, just when you want to check a word. It is much more important than that, and it is important for your students to know why.

I should first explain why I am here at all. I have been a member of the Longman advisory committee on lexicography, Linglex, for about 30 years, and have been involved - at a distance - in the planning and production of several dozen of their dictionaries. It has been a splendid experience, for it has been an exercise in real hands-on applied linguistics - seeing linguistic principles put into practice. As a result, I routinely use dictionaries from the Longman stable as my first-stop desk-dictionaries - including *LDOCE4*. You might think it odd for a native-speaker to be using an EFL dictionary as a desk dictionary. Not at all. In my job I often have to think out the best way of defining a word, get at the core features of a definition, see how one word contrasts in meaning with another, or reflect on the extent to which a word has an American as opposed to a British use. Dictionaries exist as a remedy for failed intuitions, and there is no difference between you and me, in these respects. The family of dictionaries which *LDOCE4* represents has long provided me with the kind of help I need.

By mentioning the word 'theory', I hope I have not put you off. If you prefer, replace this by a term such as 'rationale' or 'explanation'. I want to explain why I see dictionaries as being at the very heart of our business. A dictionary, if it is a good dictionary, is - or should be - at the centre of the language teaching/learning exercise. It is not something on the edge of our work, a 'peripheral', like a computer printer. A dictionary is the one entity whose be-all and end-all is to focus on what our professionalism is all about: the business of learning how to mean and how to understand meaning in others. To continue the computing metaphor, a dictionary is the central processing unit of sense.

Sense is one of those subjects which binds the EFL profession together. Teachers regularly find themselves using such notions as 'talking and writing sense', referring to something as 'not making sense', drawing attention to 'hard words', dealing with the notion of 'comprehension', asking 'do you understand ...?', and having their students read 'for meaning'. *Sense* is the driving force behind almost everything we do, in the world of language. We try to make sense of everything, and refuse to say that something is 'non-sense', except as a last resort. We read a sentence in a newspaper article which doesn't make sense, and conclude that there must be a misprint. We read a poem which does not make immediate sense, and conclude that we need to work at it: given enough effort, it will yield its sense up, we believe. And, given that effort, people can and do make sense of even the most impenetrable of utterances.

We seem to have an innate drive to make sense of the language being used around us, and we might therefore be tempted to sympathize with the Lewis Carroll dictum, 'Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves' (*Alice in Wonderland*, Ch. 9). It is unfortunately not as simple as that, as anyone knows who has had experience of marking written work, where we may find errors of spelling, punctuation, and grammar in an otherwise imaginative story. But the emphasis is undoubtedly correct. *Sense* is at the centre of the student's concerns, at every age and every level. It is at the centre of the teacher's concerns too. And this means we must be able to locate it, organize it, grade it, and teach it. And to my mind, there is nothing more unsettling, after nearly a century of research into language teaching, than the realization that we do not yet know how to do any of these things well. We have made dramatic progress in so many areas of EFL in the last few decades. We now know a lot about the factors governing language learning, the constraints on communicative use, and the structural grading involved in phonology and grammar. All these areas have been thoughtfully and searchingly probed - but *sense*, the subject-matter of semantics, is a Cinderella, by comparison.

Focusing on vocabulary

The problem with investigating sense is that it enters into all areas of language. It is, to begin with, inherent in vocabulary. We can change the sense of a sentence simply by changing a word within it: *I see the starship* vs. *I see the alien*. So much is obvious. Just as obviously, we can change the sense by changing its grammatical structure: *I see the alien* vs. *The alien sees me*. Less obviously we can change the sense by changing the sound of the sentence

(e.g. the intonation): *The alien is friendly, isn't it!* vs. *The alien is friendly, isn't it?* Even less obviously, we can change the sense by changing the spelling: *This is a really big issue* vs. *This is a Really Big Issue*, or *Look - a tea shop* vs. *Look - a tea shoppe*. And of course we can change the sense by changing the way we expect a discourse to work: *Can you tell me the time? It's 3 o'clock* vs. the less cooperative *Can you tell me the time? I can*. But of all of these, it is vocabulary which most people immediately associate with the notion of sense. Words and their meanings. If we think of language as a mountain to be climbed, then grammar is the foundation on which the language rests, and most of the mass of the mountain is taken up with vocabulary - or the *lexicon*, as it is often called (thus providing us with the convenient adjective *lexical*). We have a few dozen sounds to learn, a few hundred sound combinations, a couple of thousand grammatical constructions, but tens of thousands of units of vocabulary. So the heart of any semantic approach must lie here.

But vocabulary within sentences, always. It is the interaction between words and sentence structure which actually conveys our 'sense of sense'. Words by themselves do not actually 'make sense'. Only when they are used within a sentence do they 'make sense'. That is what sentences are for. Sentences exist to enable us to 'make sense'. That is why sentence study is the foundation of grammar. Dictionaries, of course, tend to give the opposite impression. Indeed, if we do not know the meaning of a word, we say to ourselves that we will 'look it up in a dictionary'. But it is easy to show that a word, by itself, has no sense - or maybe it is that it has too much sense. A brief experiment can demonstrate this. If the sense of a word is self-evident from the word alone, then it will be possible for people to say what I mean as soon as they see the following word:

TABLE

But they cannot interpret this utterance yet. They do not know whether I mean the item of furniture, or a graphic display in a book, or some of the other eight senses in *LDOCE4*. 'Put the word into a sentence and then we will know', they will ask. And that is precisely the point. *I am sitting on a table. There's a misprint in the table*. It is the sentence which provides the context within which it is possible for a word to make sense. And that is why it is essential for dictionaries to provide several real, clear, sentence-based examples to show this happening - notice, several, real *and* clear - criteria which are often difficult to satisfy at the same time. The bank of examples in *LDOCE4* is one of its most important features, for this reason.

The chief reason that sense, and vocabulary, has received so little systematic attention is that everyone thinks they know what it is. What is the point in analysing something if it is obvious? As a consequence, vocabulary is left to fend for itself. So, traditionally in foreign language teaching textbooks, for example, there will be a section or chapter dealing with a carefully graded point of grammar, and associated with that chapter will be a collection of 'vocabulary' items to be learned. But often, no attention will have been paid to motivating or grading that set of items. From my bookshelves I pull down at random a language-teaching text, and open it at random, and find the following list of words to be learned at the end of a particular lesson: *grandmother, attentive, foreign, handkerchief, smooth, pure, tasty, tired, grass ...* and so on - a list which, from a semantic point of view, is equally random. It is not difficult to see the reasoning: the difficult things to be learned are the sounds and the grammar. To get these right, we need words - to pronounce and to fit into sentence patterns - but that is their only function. Vocabulary can be taken for granted. It is not a priority. In any case - so the traditional approach suggests - there is so much of it that it can't be taught in a systematic way. Or maybe the best way to pick it up is in relation to the subject-matter of what we happen to be talking about or reading. It can, in short, be left to chance. Vocabulary is the bulk of the language mountain, and yet we are being given no tools to climb it. That all seems very wrong to me.

From words to lexical items

So, how do we get to grips with vocabulary? The answer is: in exactly the same way as we would any other area of language. In spelling, we identify the basic units, the letters, and plot the patterns into which they fall. In pronunciation, we do the same thing, but for sounds rather than letters. In grammar, we do the same thing, only we talk about sentence constructions. And so it has to be with vocabulary. What are the basic units of vocabulary, the units of sense, and into what patterns do they fall? We must first identify them before we can list them, grade them, teach them, assess them.

But when we raise the question of how we identify units of sense, things start to get interesting. This is where Old World becomes New World, Ptolemy becomes Copernicus. In my opinion, the move to thinking of vocabulary as 'units of sense' - variously called *lexical units, lexical items, or lexemes* - is the most difficult conceptual leap anyone working with the traditional view of language will ever have to make. The problem is that the semantic approach asks us to give up one of the most dearly held concepts in language, one we have known as long as we can remember, and one I have used so far throughout this paper without comment - the concept of *word*. Give up, I mean, in relation to the study of vocabulary. Of course, we can carry on using this notion when we are studying grammar, or pronunciation, or spelling. It is a very useful notion in such areas. We can talk about 'word order' in sentences, and the way 'words are spelled', and where the 'stress in a word' falls, and so on. But when we want to talk about sense, the concept of 'word' suddenly starts to fall apart. Here is an example to bring the point home.

How many words are there in this sentence?

Mary heard that a new type of washing machine had been invented in New Zealand.

Most people answer this question by treating a word as a graphic unit - something with spaces on either side. If we do this, we will answer 15. Does it therefore follow that there are 15 units of sense? 15 units where it would be possible to say 'X means such-and-such'? Plainly not. There are some words which seem to have no sense at all. It is not easy to say what *that* means or what *a* means. Some of the words seem more to do with the grammar than with the vocabulary, as can be seen if the sentence were printed thus:

--- *that* a --- *of* --- *has been* --- *in* ---.

There is no sense here. The sense seems to be chiefly located in the other words, and indeed we would get the gist of the sentence if I were to print it thus:

Mary heard invented new type washing machine New Zealand.

So let us concentrate on these.

The problem is easy to show, less easy to solve. Is *New Zealand* a unit of sense? Obviously it is. It is a single name which happens to be made up of two words. It really ought to be printed *Newzealand* - as it sounds. We do not pronounce it as two separate words. Nor do we split it up and say *I've just been to New, you know, Zealand*. It is a single lexical unit. A unit of sense. And the same applies to *washing machine*, whose existence as a single sense-unit is actually often represented in writing by adding a hyphen: *washing-machine*. At one level there is no real difference between *washing-machine* and *New-Zealand*. They are both units of sense. 'What does *washing machine* mean?' an alien might ask. I could tell it. 'What does *New Zealand* mean?' Likewise. At another level, of course, they are very different. *New Zealand* is a proper name; *washing machine* is a common noun. Proper names are not very useful as a guide to semantic learning. How much English does a student know if he/she knows only *Mary*, *London*, and the like? Not a lot. If proper names are an indicator of linguist proficiency, then I am a fluent French speaker because I have learned to say *Paris*, *Nice*, *Bordeaux*, and *François Truffaut*.

So, from a vocabulary point of view, there are really only five units of linguistic sense in this sentence - five lexical items. Five places where a learner could begin to impress people with a more 'adventurous' choice of words:

...*heard that an original type of washing machine had been devised* ...

- or, of course, depress them by doing the opposite:

...*heard that a new sort of thing had been made* ...

The fact that the sentence has 15 orthographic words is neither here nor there. Indeed, we can increase the number of words without altering the sense of this sentence

It was Mary who had heard that they had invented a new type of washing machine in New Zealand.

19. Or decrease them:

Mary heard they'd invented a new type of washing machine in New Zealand.

13. The number of words, it seems, isn't critical.

So before we can even begin to work with vocabulary, we need to bear in mind the two basic don'ts.

• DON'T BE DISTRACTED BY THE GRAMMAR

All words contribute to the sense of a sentence, but only some are a part of vocabulary. Several words - the so-called *grammatical words* - are there only to make the sentence work grammatically. That means we mustn't be distracted by pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, auxiliary verbs, determiners, or the forms of the verb *be* when it is being used as a linking verb (as in *John is a doctor*). Some other words are there only to make the discourse work properly, and these should be ignored too: the reaction noises (such as *mhm*) and emotional noises (such as *coo*). None of this is part of vocabulary, in the sense in which the curriculum uses the term. Vocabulary there deals only with the units that are full of sense (the 'content words') - the nouns, main verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. These are the lexical items.

This is straightforward enough - but there are two caveats. First, we need to beware words which have two uses - one grammatical, one lexical.

I have seen your new bike.

Have is an auxiliary verb, with no separate meaning.

I have a new bike.

Have is a lexical item, meaning 'own' or 'possess'. There are several such words waiting to catch out the unwary linguistic traveller.

Secondly, we need to ignore the way in which the grammar makes changes in the structure of a word.

Consider *take*, *takes*, *taking*, *took*, *taken*. Has a child learned five different lexical items here? Obviously not. They are five different word-shapes, but we would usually say that these are five 'forms of the same word' - five forms (or variants) of a single lexical item, *take*. Similarly, we would say that *cat* and *cats* are two forms of the same item, *cat*, and *big*, *bigger* and *biggest* are three forms of the one item, *big*. This all seems obvious, but there are traps again. Beware the irregular forms: *good*, *better*, *best* are three forms of the one item, *good*.

• DON'T BE DISTRACTED BY THE WRITING SYSTEM

In identifying units of sense, we have to forget a great deal of what we have learned about the way words are written down. The writing system simply cannot be trusted. It is no guide, as we have seen with *washing machine*. The same lexical item can often be written as two separate words, or as two hyphenated words, or without a space or hyphen: *flower pot*, *flower-pot*, *flowerpot*. It is the same lexical item, whichever way it is written. And it is just a *single* lexical item, whichever way it is written. In any vocabulary count, a child would score one for this, not two. All compound words in the language present this problem.

But once we start thinking of word-sequences in terms of the sense they express, rather than the spaces within them, we open the floodgates. There are thousands of word-sequences in the language which actually act as single sense-units. Consider all the *multi-word verbs* (called *phrasal verbs* in *LDOCE4*), such as:

come in, go into, pass out, come up with, look forward to

One clue that they are units of sense (apart from any grammatical reasons) is that we can often find a single word with the same or very similar meaning:

enter, investigate, faint, devise, anticipate

Or consider such *multi-word prepositions* as *in aid of* or *in view of*. These are the same. They ought always to be mentally hyphenated. They are, in a sense, idioms, and indeed all the idioms of the language have to be thought of afresh, when we start thinking of vocabulary from a semantic point of view. The traditional definition of an idiom is a group of words whose meaning cannot be derived from the meaning of the constituent parts: *kick the bucket*, meaning 'die' cannot be arrived at by adding up the meanings of *kick* and *bucket*. *Kick the bucket* may have three words, but it is a single unit of sense. All idioms are single units of sense.

Teaching vocabulary

What are the implications of all this for the teaching of vocabulary, whether in relation to listening, speaking, reading or writing? What would a lexical syllabus look like? I take it that the main aim of such a syllabus would be to provide routes which would foster vocabulary in the student. We are entering a brave new world here, so all steps must be tentative, and my examples in this paper are merely illustrative. But there are certain pathways which are likely to provide insights.

A recurrent theme is that of *choice* between alternative words or meanings, and this is very sensible, for indeed the whole of meaning in language is grounded on the notion of contrast - of choosing between alternative forms. In speech and writing, *pin* contrasts with *bin*, both in sound and in spelling; in grammar, *cat* contrasts with *cats*, *you can swim* contrasts with *can you swim*; and it is the same in vocabulary, except that here there are tens of thousands more contrasts than operate at the other levels of language. It is for this reason that we need to bring in the notion of *structure* as soon as possible: to give us a means of seeing some pattern among the lexical items.

Structure is present from the beginning of language learning. When we acquire a new lexical item, we do not simply tack it on to the end of a list of already-learned items. Rather, the new item has to find its place within the lexicon we have already acquired. Let us imagine we encounter the item *sponsorship* for the first time: this becomes part of the set of items we already have for types of money-giving, such as *donation, award, grant, fee, endowment, gift, scholarship, honorarium, subsidy, and annuity*. It does not become part of the items we already know for types of fruit or types of vehicle. And in joining the relevant set, it has to elbow its way in: we may have to change our mind about the sense of other items already there. 'They're offering us a sponsorship', we might say, then learn that what we have been offered is really a *donation*, because of the different tax implications, and thereafter the meaning of *donation* is narrower for us than it was before we learned *sponsorship*. When we learn a new lexeme, we always make at least two gains in precision, not one.

Increasing the range of vocabulary inevitably increases precision, as long as the acquisition of the new item is properly integrated into the existing lexicon, and this requires that we recognize the crucial role of structure. Structure here means *semantic* structure: the way the senses of lexical items relate to each other. Lexical items are bound together by a network of sense relations in what is usually called a *semantic field*. Learning a new item is a matter of showing how it fits into this field. And this is how it is from the very outset of lexical learning. *There dog*, says the child, pointing to a cat. *No darling*, says the mother, *that's a cat, not a dog*. But few mothers would stop there. *Cats go miaow, dogs go woof*, one might say. Another might draw attention to the differences in shape, or touch, or size. And when other animals come into view, yet other distinguishing features will be mentioned - whether they can be eaten, whether they live on the farm, or in the jungle, whether they are dangerous.

To learn a set of lexical items is to learn the features which distinguish or relate the items, thereby building up primitive *definitions*: 'a cow is a thing that goes moo, gives milk, lives on a farm', and so on. Later, children learn the name of the semantic field that cows are part of: *animals*. And gradually they learn how to define: 'an X is a Y which has the features A,B,C...' It isn't done all at once. To build up a solid definition can take years, and mistakes can be made along the way. For a long time, one of my children misunderstood the word *factory*. 'It's a place where you make things', she had been told. So the kitchen, for example, she would call a factory. This was so cute that we kept it going as family slang for ages. Only in school did she learn the bitter truth - that factories involve mass

production for selling - and we got thoroughly told off for our persisting domestic usage when she eventually found out.

Is a semantic field the same as the notion of *word family*, which is sometimes used in ELT? It is one kind of word family, certainly. *Donation, gift, sponsorship*, and so on is certainly a word family, in one sense. But the term *word family* is used in other ways which are very different, so I don't use this term myself. For example, here is a different kind of word family: *ancient castle - beautiful princess - wicked witch - seven dwarfs ...* This is a selection of items chosen according to topic, or story. They do not comprise a semantic field: rather, the story is made up of a sequence of items selected from many semantic fields. *Ancient* comes from the field of age; *castle* comes from the field of buildings; *beautiful* comes from the field of (let us call it) physical attributes, *seven* comes from the field of numerical quantity, and so on. We could even tell this story replacing the salient items by their category labels: 'Once upon a time, there was a certain type of royal person with a certain physical attribute who lived in a certain type of building of a certain age ...' Our skill in using vocabulary can then be judged by just how well we can choose items to fit these categories: 'there was a beautiful princess who lived in an ancient castle ...' is presumably going to be rated higher than 'there was a nice person who lived in an old building'.

We can draw several conclusions from these examples, which are full of implications for lexical teaching, and full of implications for your choice of dictionary. To make better lexical choices, students need to have an array of items available, so that they can see the contrasts between them. It is like supermarkets: in the town where I live, the local store has limited choice, so many people travel out of town to a place where there is more choice. But note that if there is too much choice people get confused. They ask 'what's the difference?'. They find they need to consult consumer magazines. It is the same with language. The consumer magazines are there, telling us exactly what all the differences are: they are called dictionaries. Dictionaries are the most important intermediary (or, to be fashionable, interface) between the developing lexical intuition of the student and the target lexical world of the language. If the dictionary is well structured, it gives the student a basis for choice. That is why the coloured sense headings in *LDOCE4* are such a crucial part of the whole design. They save an immense amount of time when you are trying to find the sense you want; and the summary information they contain in the coloured heading enables you to see what the crucial contrasts are. Under TABLE, for example, we find:

FURNITURE as in *the dining-room table*

SPORT/GAME as in *snooker table*

LIST as in *table of contents*

MATHS as in *multiplication table*

GROUP as in *keeping the table amused*

This leads to another principle: when we choose an item from all the ones belonging to a semantic field we are trying to find the best one to suit what we are wanting to express, and this presupposes that we can tell the difference between them. Telling the difference - identifying what two items have in common and what makes them different - is what we call a *definition*. A lexical syllabus usually does give guidance about definitions, and about how lexical items are related in meaning to each other. Two types of sense-relation are often mentioned: *synonyms* and *antonyms*. That's the good news. The bad news is that these are the two least useful types of sense-relation.

- Synonyms are not very useful because they are so unusual. In fact it may be impossible to find in a language two words with exactly the same meaning. Why should a language waste its resources in this way? Invariably there is some difference - regional use (*tap* vs *faucet*), stylistic level (*house* vs *domicile*), and so on. Two items may be synonymous in one sentence (*a nice range/selection/choice of furniture*) but not in another (*a mountain range*, but not *a mountain selection* or *choice*). Items may seem the same on first encounter (*kingly, royal, regal*), but on closer examination display many individual nuances (we say *royal mail*, not *kingly/regal mail*; the queen looks very *regal* not *kingly*).

- And antonyms are also unusual. Most of the lexical items in the language do not have opposites. There are indeed several types of oppositeness, such as *big* vs *small*, *single* vs *married*, and *employer* vs *employee*. But most items are not like this. What is the opposite of *furniture, oboe, compete, Tuesday, however, horizon, fax*? Knowing about opposites is important, but it tells only a tiny part of the lexical story of a language.

Far more important are the sense-relations of *hyponymy* and *incompatibility* - impressive names for everyday notions. When introducing students to a new lexical item, we would automatically use both. *What's a pterodactyl?* Answer: *It's a kind of dinosaur, but it can fly*, or, more succinctly, *It's a flying dinosaur*. *A pterodactyl is a kind of dinosaur* is an example of hyponymy: the relationship of inclusion. 'An X is a kind of Y'. It is the basic principle of dictionary definition. *Flying* tells us in what respect this particular dinosaur is different from ('is incompatible with') others. A more everyday example would be *clarinet*, which is a type of woodwind instrument: it is incompatible with the other woodwind instruments - *oboe, bassoon, flute*, etc. If pressed, we could define the exact features which make these instruments incompatible - their size, tone, how they are played, and so on. That would be to go into their definitions.

In the real, psycholinguistic world, a definition is not learned all at once; it is learned bit by bit, by adding features of meaning to the account. We must not expect total accuracy first time. To say that *a factory is a place*

where you make things is actually a half-truth. To be precise it is 'a building or group of buildings in which goods are produced in large quantities, using machines' (*LDOCE4*) Half-truths are best, if we want people to learn. We build up to the total reality gradually, as need requires. In many cases, we stop well short of reality.

Of course, the best semantic explanations give more information than the bare minimum about a new lexical item, showing how it relates to other items within a semantic field. What does *engrossing* mean? All four of the sense-relations discussed so far can be helpful (I quote some real responses):

hyponymy: 'it's a kind of feeling ...'

incompatibility: 'it's like when you're interested in something, only more so ...'

synonymy: 'it means fascinating, gripping, enthralling ...'

antonymy: 'it's when you're not bored ...'

The *LDOCE4* definition runs: 'if something engrosses you, it interests you so much that you do not notice anything else', bringing together aspects of all four structural relations.

As a teaching procedure it is also possible to work the other way round, presenting a set of defining attributes and seeing whether the student is aware of the lexical item which best captures them. For example, the *LDOCE4* definition of *walk* is: 'to move forward by putting one foot in front of the other'. What can we do with this, to develop a student's sense of the English semantic system? The first thing is to identify the attributes which make up the sense. There are three: 'move', 'forward direction', 'foot in front of other'. Each of these can now be contrasted to point in the direction of other lexemes:

- move - there is one contrast with 'not move' (*stop*), and others by varying speed or manner:
'to move very quickly, by moving your legs more quickly than when you walk' - *run*
'to move very quickly, especially because you need to be somewhere very soon' - *rush*
'to move by jumping on one foot' - *hop*
- forwards - the contrasts are all with direction - sideways, backwards, upwards, etc
'to move up, down, or across something using your feet and hands, especially when this is difficult to do' - *climb*
'to walk or move unsteadily from side to side as if you are going to fall over' - *totter*
- on foot - the contrasts here include movement on the ground or in some other medium, or adding another attribute (another part of the body, or another feature of foot-movement, such as the sound it makes)
'to move yourself through water using your arms and legs' - *swim*
'to move along on your hands and knees with your body close to the ground' - *crawl*
'to walk very slowly and noisily, without lifting your feet off the ground' - *shuffle*

If we want, we can start playing with this approach, finding concepts for which there is no lexical item in the English language at all. For instance, there seems to be no single lexical item to express the notion of 'hurried movement backwards with one foot always on the ground'. Maybe that's a good thing.

Definitions are the most important aspect of a dictionary. No matter how good a dictionary's coverage is, if the definitions are poor, the book is useless. This is one of the little-noticed by-products of having a defining vocabulary, such as we find in *LDOCE4*. When lexicographers limit the number of items to appear in a definition, they are forced to make repeated use of the same items, and that highlights the contrasts in meaning between semantically related words. You see the difference more quickly and assimilate it more efficiently.

Other directions

This paper has not been a complete account of the semantic approach to vocabulary. I have not gone into the way vocabulary interacts with grammar - for example, using prefixes and suffixes as elements of word-building (*nation*, *national*, *nationality*, *nationalism*, *nationalize*, *nationalization*, *denationalize*, *renationalize*, *international*, *multinational*, *supernation*, *antinationalization* ...) - one of the major means of building a large vocabulary. I have not gone into the way in which we use context to select a sense: we know, for example, that *mouse* in the context of computing is different from the other use of *mouse*. And, indeed, the whole gamut of contextual factors which affect our choice of words (such as regional background, formality, occupation, cultural origin, aesthetic properties) also need to be explored. Nor have I examined the vocabulary from a historical point of view. For me, these are side issues, dependent on progress being made in the central task: the handling of semantic structure.

Sorting out the world of vocabulary is a task which urgently deserves the attention of everyone professionally involved with words. Within language study, it is actually one of the more attractive tasks. Unlike pronunciation, there is no problem of training ourselves to cope with subtle differences of sound. Unlike grammar, it is not encumbered by vast amounts of off-putting technical terminology. The chief barrier is the cognitive leap we have to make when we begin to think semantically, but once we have done that there is very little new conceptual apparatus to be acquired. Sorting out vocabulary, however, is a mountain of a task which demands the involvement of many people, if it is to be scaled. No one person could ever hope to handle it, as no less a person than Dr Johnson - the author of the first big dictionary to be published by Longman - was forced to recognize. That is why

we need good dictionaries, run by good editorial teams, that help us to see further by letting us stand on their shoulders. It is the best way I know to really take care of the sense.