**BOY, GIRL, MAN, WOMAN IN LONGMAN DICTIONARY OF CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH (1978-1995)**

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**Introduction**

In the present contribution, we find it relevant to ask the question of to what extent, if at all, the shift of focus in theoretical linguistics from language as a system of arbitrary signs (as in formalism, structuralism, generativism) to language as a symbol of human experience (as in functionalism, cognitivism) can already be detected on the grounds of teaching English as a foreign language. Our example derives from the lexicographic practice and involves the four of the so-called relation nouns, *boy, girl, man, woman*. In our understanding, the way these four have been presented in the first three editions of *LDCE* (1978-1995)[[1]](#footnote-1) illustrates a new approach to how words can be explicated in a pedagogical dictionary. This new approach could come with complementing the mere semantic exposition of the word (as when we assume that language is a system) with the values that are inherently cognitive, symbolic, metaphorical, experiential, and subjective (as when we assume that language is a symbol).

**Examination**

And, thus, the way *LDCE* (1978) defines *boy, girl, man, woman* is nearly exclusively based on the parameters that can show up only if the four words are treated as a closed system of mutually-defining oppositions.[[2]](#footnote-2) (See Table 1.)

Table 1. *Boy, girl, man, woman* in *LDCE* (examples deleted)*.*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | *LDCE* (1978, 1st ed.) | *LDCE* (1987, 2nd ed.) | *LDCE* (1995, 3rd ed.) |
| *boy* | a young male person | a young male person | a male child or young man |
| *girl* | a young female person | a young female person | a female child |
| *man* | a fully-grown human male | an adult human male | an adult male human |
| *woman* | a fully-grown human female | a fully-grown human female | an adult female person |

What we discover behind the symmetry of these definitions is an interplay of the three distinctive features: humanity (human vs. non-human), age (young vs. fully-grown), and sex (male vs. female). The schematicity is so regular that instead of descriptive definitions, we would in fact do with some tabular representation as below:

Table 2. Distinctive features behind *boy, girl, man, woman* in *LDCE* (1978, 1st ed.).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Humanity | Age | Sex |
| boy | + | - | + |
| girl | + | - | - |
| man | + | + | + |
| woman | + | + | - |

Yet, we do notice some non-systemic irregularity once we ask the question why it is that for the items of the first pair the defining word is *person*, while the items of the other pair are defined with *human*. Is this supposed to mean that *boy* or *girl* is a person, but not a human being, while *man* and *woman* can well be human beings, but neither is a person? Meticulously built as it may seem, the system proves shaky even more when we get to know the definitions of *person*, according to which a person is “a human being considered as having a character of his own or her own, or as being different from all others”. The *LDCE* makers evidently believe that boys and girls can happily be ascribed with this characteristic, but men and women are, presumably, too mature, or just too old, to be found of any distinctive character.

In the 2nd edition of the dictionary (1987), we find one modification: *man* is no longer ‘a fully-grown human male’, but ‘an adult human male’. (See Table 1.) Yet, this is still the definition that *man* all the same owes to the systemic relations it contracts with the remaining elements of the system. And, thus, what brings *man* to *woman* is the parameter of age; what makes the difference between the two is the criterion of sex. If, in turn, sex is what puts *man* on a par with *boy*, it is precisely that which distinguishes *man* from *girl*. Finally, in relation to both *boy* and *girl*, *man* is categorized contradistinctively in terms of age.

However, the mentioned modification is not as tenuous or insignificant as it may seem. At first glance it appears to be a kind of an insignificant intra-systemic operation that facilitates a better operation of the system. This could be so indeed were it not for the fact that ‘adult’ and ‘fully-grown’ cannot by any means be considered interchangeable within the boundaries of the alleged system such as the dictionary under investigation. Just to the contrary. (See Table 3.)

Table 3. Adult and fully-grown in LDCE (examples if available).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | *LDCE* (1978, 1st ed.) | *LDCE* (1987, 2nd ed.) | *LDCE* (1995, 3rd ed.) |
| *adult* | (n+adj): a fully grown person or animal, esp. a person over an age stated by law, usu. 18 or 21 | (n): a fully grown person or animal, esp. a person over an age stated by law, usu. 18 or 21:  *This film is for adults only.* | (adj): fully grown or developed: an adult lion |
| (adj): fully grown: *an adult lion* |
| *fully-grown* | (=*full-grown*): (esp. of an animal, plant, or (*tech*) person) completely developed; that is not going to get any large:  *A full-grown elephant can weigh over 6,000 kilograms.* | (=*full-grown*): (esp. of an animal, plant, or (*tech*) person) completely developed; that is not going to grow any large:  *A full-grown elephant can weigh over 6,000 kilograms.* | (> full grown): A full-grown animal, plant, or person has developed to their full size and will not grow any bigger:  A full-grown male elephant may weigh 2,000 pounds. |

As it projects in Table 3, *adult* is defined sociometrically, that is in terms of the age as constrained by law, whereas the definition of *fully*-*grown* is clearly physicalist, that is given in terms of the body as determined by natural development. In other words, the picture of the world which the *LDCE* editors seem to import is that the male adulthood is absolute, guaranteed, and objective because it comes with a certain age, whereas the female adulthood is relative and conditional, because it remains a function of one’s subjective perception of the development of the female body.

Still in other words, for a man, coming of age is culturally (socially) conditioned, whereas for a woman it is a derivative of the forces of nature. There is no better evidence that this must be so than the illustrative sentences given for both entries. The definition of *adult* goes with an example given from the world of humans, whereas *fully*-*grown* takes us to the world of animals. What we learn about the world from the former is that there are films exclusively for mature [adult] people. The message behind the latter is that a mature [fully-grown] elephant can weigh up to 6000 kilos. (Even if we allow for the example the *adult* adjective is illustrated with, *an adult lion*, the resulting contrast between the elephant and the lion welcomes so divergent associations that this could be a topic in itself.)

There may be numerous reasons why we may not like this way of defining *man* and *woman*. For example, we may want to question whether it makes any sense at all to present *woman* in such a way as to bring into its definition an image of an elephant weighing 6 tons. Isn’t it a bit repulsive to match women with the biggest and heaviest animals on earth? We may equally question defining *man* in such terms as to build an association with films for adults? Isn’t it a bit of exaggeration to suggest that all that men can think of, or indulge in, is sex and violence? Furthermore, is it true that a film that is by definition open to an adult man on account of his age can be shown to a woman only after she has reached her maximal body dimensions? Is it true that unlike women, men by definition are “not growing any larger” once they reach 18 or 21 years of age? Is pregnancy part of “growing any larger”, or not? Is a pregnant woman a mature woman at all if she can be shown to be actually “growing larger”?

Whatever the questions and objections we may have, one thing is firmly established: in its 2nd edition, *LDCE* presents the 4 items under consideration here no longer on the basis of systemic autonomy. All the questions provoked here are the questions of the symbols of a given speaking community (or rather: of a given lexicographer), of the epistemological sense (or rather: non-sense) of human experience, of why the cognitive associations a given culture builds, fosters, and fossilizes in the minds of its subjects are marked by imbalance, prejudice, sexism, etc.

Further and still better evidence of the from-system-to-symbol departure can be clearly seen in the 3rd edition of *LDCE* (1995). (See Table 1.) In the first place, let us hasten to notice that *man* and *woman* are both ‘adult’ again now (as they are in the 1st edition). Yet, even if the error of the 2nd edition had not been corrected, it would now seem to be an innocent slip of the tongue in comparison with the human/person distinction we find in the definition of *man* and *woman*. Namely, *woman* is a person, but *man* is human. This should not be much of a surprise as long as we remember that for the *LDCE* makers personhood goes with having one’s “own particular character” and „being different from all others”. If so, woman denotes some body blessed with, or, perhaps, cursed by, a character, some *body* (remember that *woman* is defined physically) so original and unique that, in fact, “different from all others”. We find it tempting to ask who these “all others”, the default reference point for diagnosing the difference, can possible be and we have a feeling that they are men.

Yet, the best example of symbolization and a complete crumbling of the system must be seen in an allegedly systemic opposition of male/female, as evidenced in Table 4. All the three editions of the dictionary distinguish *male* and *female* as both nouns (n) and adjectives (adj), yet while in the first two editions an attempt is made to maintain some illusion of systemic regularity and symmetry, the 3rd edition is an open violation of systemic considerations.

## Table 4. Male and female in LDCE (examples deleted).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | *LDCE* 1978 (1st ed.) | *LDCE* 1987 (2nd ed.) | *LDCE* 1995 (3rd ed.) |
| *female* (n) | a female person or animal | a female person or animal | a person or animal that belongs to the sex that can have babies or produce eggs |
| *male* (n) | a male person or animal | a male person or animal: | a male animal |
| *female* (adj) | of the sex that gives birth to young | of the sex that gives birth to young | belonging to the sex that can have babies or produce eggs |
| *male* (adj) | of the sex that does not give birth to young | of the sex that does not give birth to young | belonging to the sex that cannot have babies |

While we may appreciate the perfect symmetry of binary oppositions in the first two editions, all we find in the 3rd edition is irregularity and lack of balance, if not chaos. This seems to be most striking in the case of the pair of adjectives. *Female* refers to that sex that can have babies or produce eggs, whereas *male* denotes the sex that cannot have babies. Nevertheless, the intended contrastive way of construing the definitions of these two adjectives, *female* and *male*, is open to contemplating the possibility that even if the male sex is deprived of a privilege of having babies, males can perhaps produce eggs at least. Namely, the “produce eggs” part of the *female* definition is not overtly negated in the definition of *male*, as if this was purposefully left to ambiguous interpretations. If, by a stroke of a good luck, we anyway happen to think that - contrary to the suggestion of the dictionary - male sex cannot by any means lay eggs (as much as males cannot have babies), our presupposition has nothing to do with the system of lexical oppositions, but comes with our extra-linguistic knowledge of the world.

Finally, notice that there is yet another non-systemic lexicographic operation behind the *male*/*female* definitions. This time, a fair amount of one’s experience and knowledge or, alternatively, if you prefer, inexperience and ignorance, we clearly see in the way the *male*/*female* nouns are given. What cannot possibly escape our attention is a very sharp contrast between the extended and generous definition of *female* and exceptionally economical definition of *male*. *Female* refers to an animal as well as a person, both capable of having babies or producing eggs, but *male* is an animal and can only be an animal. If there is anything else at all that can puzzle us in the way *LDCE* construes its definitions is that the picture of the world projected unto us by its makers is, surprisingly enough, neither unfamiliar nor alien to us. More than this, the world of the projected animal masculinity (=manhood) and personable and personalized femininity (=womanhood) strangely resembles, if not just accords with, our own everyday experience.

**Conclusion**

In what precedes, our point is exclusively linguistic and has much to do with the necessity of anchoring language analysis, advanced learner’s dictionary making included, in the fact, as Mithun (2003, p. 572) concludes, “languages are shaped in significant ways by the physiological, cognitive, and contextual circumstances surrounding their use”. In other words, human language is structured by our bodily experience of the world and, as such, remains vulnerable to bodily filters like age, sex, class, perception, space, or time.

Here is how Coupland and Gwyn remind us of this obvious fact that it is humans, not structures, that generate meaning:

Social science discovered ‘embodiment’ late in the twentieth century. (…) At its most general, the argument was that social and cultural life is invested with meaning and value by regular symbolic representations. (…) The perspective breathed new life into social analysis, which was trapped in several dualistic assumptions. One of these was that cognitive and behavioural dimensions of experience should be radically separated. (…) Another was the structure-agency dualism, where a presupposed structural model of social life seemed to leave little scope for human agency at all. (Coupland and Gwyn, 2003, p. 1)

Indeed, what we find behind the three subsequent editions of *LDCE* is a growing and irresistible tendency to make more and more room for, precisely, “human agency”, to open the closed, self-regulating and self-defining system of binary lexical oppositions in favour of experientially delimited and cognitively driven considerations. These include (i) giving expression to the speakers’ subjective awareness, (ii) recording their relative cognitive tensions, (iii) demystifying symbols of their experience. Next to the semantic definition of the word, a learner of English finds in the dictionary a huge dose of encyclopaedia, which is the world knowledge as reflected in the language. Because it is human experience that shapes language (and not the other way round), the knowledge we find in language is what human experience can actually be - unbalanced, unstable, dynamic, vague, loaded with prejudice, and marked with asymmetry. Even if we assume McConnell-Ginet’s (2002, p. 149) position that

the cognitive structure underlying the concept a (content) word labels is less like a definition or a prototype than like a theory (or family of theories) in which that concept plays a key role

we anyway must not forget that words function as social labels and as such they draw “on social stereotypes, moral attitudes, old connotations and future possibilities – in short, ideologies of various kinds” (Wong *et al*., 2002, p. 6). Indeed, human experience is so much stained with the subjectivity of the one who verbalizes it that any attempt at objectivising that experience, e.g. in the form of an autonomous lexical system, can only prove futile and superfluous.

**References**

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**Summary**

One of the radical changes that have taken place in theoreticallinguistics over the last 3 decades or so has led to a rejection of the conception of language seen exclusively as an independent and autonomous systemof signs/symbols. The questions then arise of (i) whether a similar from-system-to-symbol tendency can be identified on the grounds of appliedlinguistics, (ii) what would be the symptoms of that change in the way English as a foreign language is expected to be exposed and taught, and, most specifically, (iii) how this turn could be reflected in dictionary makers’ attempts at defining words for EFL purposes. By means of attempting to answer these questions, we analyze the way selected lexical entries are presented in the three subsequent editions of *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (*LDCE* 1978, 1987, 1995).

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1. It is only because of the lack of space that we limit our material to the first three editions of *LDCE*. Any follow-up analysis of how *boy, girl, man, woman* are defined in the 4th (2006) and the 5th (2014) editions can equally be rewarding and informative. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Our analysis involves exclusively the first senses given for each of the entries, which is those senses that are supposed to allow the learner to make primary and most immediate identifications. Equally revealing would be an analysis of the four entries as wholes, i.e. in terms of both the extent (scope) and the order (hierarchy) of the senses that they are ascribed to. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)