VOCABULARY EXPLANATION BY PARAPHRASE IN CONTEXT

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0. *Introduction*

Discussions of vocabulary teaching commonly mention a conventional range of ways of explaining meanings of words: by demonstration, by translation, and by the use of synonyms or dictionary-like paraphrases within the same language. However, there exist other less conventional ways which are rarely discussed, but are nevertheless useful. Amongst these an important type I should like to focus on consists of various kind of paraphrase which depart significantly from the conventional pattern of vocabulary paraphrase.

To give an initial idea of what I have in mind, let us assume a teacher has to explain the meaning of the word *reservation* which has been met by a learner in the context

(1) They had reservations about seeing her.

Now compare the following explanations:

(2) A reservation is a private doubt in one's mind.
(3) If you have reservations about doing something, that means you are not sure it is a good idea to do it.

Here (2) makes use of a conventional paraphrase — *private doubt in one's mind* — which is equated with the unknown — *reservation*. This sort of paraphrase is normal in dictionaries and those coursebooks that attempt to explain new words as they crop up. It observes, amongst other things, the traditional restrictions that such a paraphrase should consist of a form of words grammatically and semantically equivalent to the unknown word in isolation from the

linguistic context it may have appeared in. Hence, in theory, it is substitutable for the unknown in particular contexts, including the one here:

(4) They had private doubts in their minds about seeing her.

On the other hand, (3), though clearly explaining the unknown word in some sense by a paraphrase, does so without observing these restrictions: the unknown is not treated in isolation in the first clause and it is not possible to extract from the second clause any sequence of words that equates with or is substitutable for *reservation* on its own. Instead a sequence of words (here a clause) containing the unknown is, as a whole, paraphrased by a semantically and grammatically equivalent sequence without the unknown: the unknown word is paraphrased 'in context' and the paraphrase is 'non-substitutable'. These two properties are, strictly, distinct, since it is also possible to paraphrase an unknown word in context, but with a substitutable expression e.g.

(5) If one has reservations about doing something, that means one has private doubts in one's mind about doing it.

In fact, any conventional paraphrase may appear in the 'in context' format, but not, of course, vice-versa. Hereafter I shall refer to the (3) **or** (5) type of paraphrase, on which I wish to elaborate, as **CP** (contextual paraphrase or paraphrase in context) — in contrast with the conventional (2) type — **IP** (isolational paraphrase or paraphrase in isolation).

CPs come in a variety of patterns of explanatory sentence. I shall do no more here than point out four common patterns that may be of most use to the teacher. They are as follows (with the convention that the unknown item being explained is written in capitals):

(a) Equivalent phrases linked with *be*
　　e.g. (6) **TO DEFER** something is to delay doing it.
　　　　(7) A **VERSATILE** tool is one with many uses.

(b) Equivalent quoted sequences linked with *mean*
　　e.g. (8) 'He **DEFERRED** it' means 'he delayed doing it.'
　　　　(9) 'The tool was **VERSATILE**' means 'The tool had many uses.'

(c) Introduced with *someone/something*/generic noun, plus a relative clause, not linked with *be*
　　e.g. (10) Someone who **DEFERS** something delays doing it.
　　　　(11) A tool that is **VERSATILE** has many uses.

(The equivalence here is between the predicate of the relative clause and that of the main clause; usually there exists a more explicit corresponding (a) equivalent

e.g. (12) Someone who **DEFERS** something is someone who delays doing it.

and with adjectives often an equivalent without the relative clause

e.g. (13) A **VERSATILE** tool has many uses.).

(d) Equivalent clauses, linked by *if/when*
　　e.g. (14) If/when one **DEFERS** something, (that means) one delays doing it.
　　or (15) One **DEFERS** something if/when one delays doing it.
　　　　(16) If a tool is **VERSATILE**, it has many uses.
　　or (17) A tool is **VERSATILE** if it has many uses.

Of these, I think (d) is the most generally useful for pedagogical purposes in that it allows whole clauses to be equated (unlike (a) or (c)) and these may be in very general or specific terms, as required (unlike (b)). The value of dealing in whole clauses will emerge primarily from 2.1.2 below, and the need for general as well as specific forms of statement from 2.3.2.

1. *Current use of 'Paraphrase in Context'*

At the moment, CP is only used sporadically in dictionaries, most often when an example sentence containing a set phrase is paraphrased either as a whole or, more often, in part. E.g. Procter (1978) explains one sense of *of note* by a conventional IP, *of public knowledge*, followed by

(18) His religious opinions are a matter of (some) note (=something known (rather widely)).

This is clearly an example sentence, the part of which that contains the unknown being paraphrased and so providing a CP for *of note*. Fully articulated, the dictionary is saying, more or less:

(19) A matter **OF** some **NOTE** is something known rather widely.

So also, the second sense of *notice* is explained by a synonym, *attention*, followed by several examples, one of which runs

(20) Don't take any notice of (=pay any attention to) what he says.

Sometimes what masquerades as a part of an example sentence in fact merely restates another part containing the unknown and so is virtually a CP of the unknown. So, in the same dictionary, the third sense of *deny* is exemplified by

(21) He denied his children nothing and gave them everything they wanted.

Here the second clause is effectively a paraphrase of the first: the entry could equally have run

(22) He denied his children nothing (=gave them everything they wanted).

Clearly this is on the borderline between explanation by some form of overt paraphrase and explanation simply by placing the unknown in a suggestive context and allowing the meaning to be guessed 'inferenced') from that context: this last is a further unconventional explanation type, which I shall not pursue here.

What emerges clearly from the above is that dictionaries normally use CP only in an ancillary way. They stick firmly to conventional IP (or synonyms) as the main means of explanation. Parnwell (1966) is the only dictionary I know using CP as the primary means of explanation: e.g. *reputation* is explained solely by

(23) The Yale University Press has a high reputation (everybody thinks well of it) for the quality of the books that it prints and publishes.

Clearly dictionary-makers (even in the more progressive field of learners' dictionaries) still feel largely bound by the traditional rule about substitutability in isolation, and it is probably their influence that has led to the neglect of CP more generally.

In fact CP is rarely used in EFL coursebooks, though a notable recent exception is Yorkey et al. (1978) from which several examples used in this paper are taken. How far it is used by teachers in impromptu explanation would be an interesting topic for empirical investigation: CP explanations are certainly used by native speakers as part of their repertoire of 'folk-definition' types, but formal education, including teacher training, tends to outlaw the unconventional means of explaining meaning. Hence teachers might well feel (mistakenly) that they are not giving 'proper' explanations if they use CP or the like, and try to avoid them. We can relate this matter to the distinction one may reasonably draw between the explanation of a word's meaning and its definition. The latter term might reasonably be reserved for paraphrases following certain strict formal and semantic criteria (which not even all IPs would meet); however, teachers and most dictionaries are in the business of explaining meaning rather than defining it in any restricted sense. Once this is clearly understood, there is no need for teachers or learners' dictionary writers to feel obliged to exclude any explanatory technique because it does not follow a traditionally prescribed pattern: the only consideration should be that it works effectively.[1]

2. Arguments for 'Paraphrase in Context'

It will be apparent from what has been said so far that I believe CP explanations of vocabulary items should be more widely exploited. In order to justify this view I shall evaluate the CP model in relation to three principles relevant to good paraphrase explanations in general: contextual congruence, ease, and generality.[2]

2.1. Contextual Congruence

A paraphrase explanation must accommodate the links that the unknown item has with its linguistic context, and one of the main factors in favour of CP is that, precisely because of its contextual nature, it deals especially well with context-related aspects of vocabulary items. We may distinguish at least three (not totally distinct) ways in which vocabulary items may be, to a greater or lesser extent, necessarily bound up with the verbal contexts in which they occur. The more they are so bound up, the less natural it is to isolate them for explanation and the less likely it is that an IP (or synonym) will really be equivalent to an unknown item in every respect even though it is presented as such. For many vocabulary items an IP is only substitutable in isolation at the cost of riding roughshod over the links the unknown has with linguistic context.

2.1.1. Polysemy

Many vocabulary items occurring in elementary and intermediate teaching have more than one distinguishable meaning, only one of which will be relevant on a particular occasion when the item is met or used. It is often (especially in reading) the verbal context that makes clear which meaning is involved. Thus while *sofa* has only one everyday English sense, and so is not in this respect context-linked, *reservation*, for example, has several ,including the one illustrated in (1) and the quite different one made clear by the context in the following sentence:

(24) She was very concerned about the Paiutes who lived on a reservation near her home.

For such a word, it makes little sense pedagogically to ask or describe what it means without in some way bringing in the context which shows which meaning is the one in question. It is for this reason that it is often stressed that vocabulary should be taught and learnt in context.

Now if an IP is used, this context does not appear overtly in the explana-

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[1] The discussion here centres on CP in relation to comprehension. For a discussion of CP in relation to information on lexical relations in dictionaries, geared more to aid the learner's productive competence, see Scholfield (1979).

[2] For more detail on these three principles in relation to IP and pedagogical issues, see Scholfield (1980), respectively sections (i) an d (v), (ii), (iii) and (iv).

tory sentence. If a learner asks *What's a reservation?* the teacher has to ascertain from the context where the learner has met the word, what sense is involved, and, when he responds

(25) A RESERVATION is an area of land set aside for N. American
     Indians to live on,

both he and the learner must realise that, despite appearances, the word *reservation* in general is not being explained, only its sense in the context where it has been met, which has to be borne in mind by both of them throughout the process of explanation. IP can only overcome this lack of congruence, and then only covertly, if a paraphrase (or synonym) can be found that equates with a polysemous unknown over all its senses: such equivalents are rare — I can think of none for *reservation*, but *profound*, it could be argued, can be explained successfully by *deep* in any of the senses of the former (though the reverse is not true).

If, on the other hand, a relevant piece of the context where the word was met is included in the explanation, the context-restricted nature of the meaning equivalence is more transparent. In the example, it is obviously the fact that people are *living on* the reservation (and indeed that it is a kind of American Indian — Paiutes — that are so doing) that identifies the sense: one cannot live on a reservation in any of the other senses of *reservation*. So the teacher might say, e.g.

(26) If a Paiute lives on a RESERVATION, that means he lives in an area
     of land set aside for N. American Indians.

Here, the CP has the benefit for the teacher that having to echo the context where the word has been met forces him to acertain what this context in fact was. He cannot be slack and, asked what *reservation* means, simply give the first meaning that comes into his head. Also he is less likely to let the explanation wander away from the required sense while he is explaining than if the relevant context is simply held in his mind. From the learner's point of view also there is reinforcement of the association of the particular meaning with a particular kind of context. There is less possibility that he may carry away the misconception that *reservation* always means what it does here.

Another example would be, say, *foul* explained in one sense by IP, stripped of discriminating context:

(27) 'FOUL' means 'rather stormy',

versus by CP explanation

(28) FOUL weather is rather stormy weather

with explicit sense discrimination. Here we may compare the common way such contextual information is added to a dictionary entry to help distinguish senses:

(29) FOUL: (of weather) rather stormy.

This could be verbalised in conjunction with an IP, in a form of words like

(30) Applied to weather, 'FOUL' means 'rather stormy'

but I think the CP is more direct, since it explains *foul* related to *weather* in a format reflecting the way we actually use the words, rather than extracting them and talking about them in an explicitly metalinguistic way.

2.1.2. Complementation and Collocation

Many vocabulary items (in specific senses) either require or are very commonly used with various complements. While *genuflect* and *geologist* are quite normal without complements, this is not true of many verbs and some nouns and adjectives; for example *inherit*, *goad* (v), *husband*, *buff* 'expert', *fond*. We can test this by using the required item, preferably predicatively, in a simple sentence frame:

(31) John is a geologist

and

(32) We all genuflected

are complete sentences but

(33) ? That inhibits effectively
(34) ? The boss goaded
(35) ? Fred is a husband
(36) ? George is a buff
(37) ? They are fond

all seem somewhat incomplete: they need complements either present, or reconstructable from what has been said earlier or from extralinguistic clues:

(38) That inhibits rust effectively.
(39) The boss goaded the men into action.
(40) Fred is Mary's husband.
(41) George is a cinema buff.
(42) They are fond of the children.

Furthermore, many items that do not always need complements have them as a common option and will often be met used with them e.g. *happy*, *fact*, *flinch* in

(43) He felt very happy (about it).

(44) The fact (that he had sold it) amazed us.

(45) He flinched (from going further).

This, then, constitutes a further way in which vocabulary items may be bound up with context — they may require (or favour) the use of various objects, prepositional constructions etc. with them and this requirement is closely linked with their meaning (it often distinguishes senses of words, cf 2.1.1). Going along closely with this is the fact that items often impose part of their meaning on whatever other items fill the subject and complement positions they are in construction with ('collocation/selection restrictions'). Thus, though anything perhaps can be the subject of *goad* in the sense illustrated above, the object must be a word for a person (or interpretable as such), and a non-stative verb in the gerund form (or related noun) is the normal object of the preposition *into* (one cannot goad a table, nor goad someone into being old or resembling someone else). This appears particularly clearly if pronouns are used to fill the necessary slots: if we read

(46) They goaded them into it

we know that while *they* could refer to people, events, ideas etc., *them* must refer to people and *it* normally to some action. (Of course a different statement would have to be made for the physical sense of *goad*, as in

(47) The farmer goaded the pigs into the shed).

It follows from all this that while items whose meanings are not elaborately bound up in these ways with their context (and are not polysemous), like *genuflect* or *geologist*, can be quite reasonably captured by IP, the many that are cannot be very naturally treated in this way because IP excludes any explicit consideration of these contextual factors of meaning. And this arises from the nature of language — it is not something that skill in formulating IPs can readily overcome. Consider the following synonym and IP explanations a teacher might offer for *goad*:

(48) 'GOAD' means 'urge'.

(49) 'GOAD' means 'cause to do something by continual annoyance'. Both leave the contextual links of *goad* largely inexplicit, relying on the supposed equivalence in this respect of the IP or synonym with the unknown. How successful is this? In (48) *urge* is close to *goad* in the complements and collocation it takes in the relevant sense (all of which the learner has to be already familiar with): one *does* urge people into action just as one goads them into action (though perhaps the infinitive without *into* is commoner with *urge* than *goad*). However *urge* is not a particularly close equivalent of *goad* as far as the non-contextual ('inherent') aspects of its meaning go (there is more to goading

than just urging). We may compare (50) where the inherent meaning is better explained but the contextual aspects under consideration here less so: the construction with *into*, normal with *goad*, is not possible for the IP at all, and part of what is normally collocational information about the complement of *goad*, viz. *to do something*, is introduced as part of the supposedly substitutable IP.

In fact, it is generally the case with IP explanations of words like this that the learner either gets an inadequate gloss (49) or (in 50) has to perform various adjustments himself even to square the paraphrase with the unknown for comprehension purposes. (As a guide to productive use of *goad*, the information provided is even more unsatisfactory). Even if the context where *goad* had occurred was fairly straightforward — e.g.

(50) The protests goaded the government into building more schools

the learner has to perform what I have elsewhere (Scholfield 1980) referred to as a 'matching' process between the elements of the IP and this context. He cannot just insert *caused to do something by continued annoyance* in the place of *goaded* — he must identify *to do something* with *into building more schools* and he must spot the ellipted object of *cause* in the paraphrase (really *cause somebody to...*) and associate this with *the government*. Only then can he interpret the original sentence correctly:

(51) The protests caused the government to build more schools by continual annoyance.

Of course this matching is further complicated if the learner has encountered the unknown in a sentence where the basic order and juxtaposition of subject, verb and complements has been changed by various grammatical processes: e.g.

(52) What was he goaded into?

or

(53) The previous government, who had found themselves goaded into all kinds of undesirable actions, finally tried to pass a law.

Here he has to pick out the subject and complements of *goad* from the sentence and match them with the paraphrase, where they appear in quite a different order.

Considerably less artificial and more transparent to the learner, surely, is an explanation like

(54) If someone GOADS a person into doing something, that means he gets the person to do by it continually annoying him.

Here the unknown is set in a simple clause exemplifying the general pattern of its complementation and collocation; this clause as a whole is then paraphrased in such a way that the complements in the paraphrase can easily be linked to those in the first clause, by anaphoric devices and the fact that the main elements come in the same order in both clauses: *someone — he*; *goads — gets*; *a person — the person*; *into doing something — to do it*. Thus what has to be interpreted by the learner hearing an IP ((49) above) is here made explicit. Similarly, compare, related to the occurrence in

(55) He was certainly fond of her,

fond explained by IP:

(56) 'FOND' means 'having a great liking for

versus by CP

(57) 'He was certainly FOND of her' means 'he certainly liked her a lot'

or, in a more general form

(58) If people are FOND of you, that means they like you a lot.

2.1.3. Part of Speech, etc.

We must not forget that vocabulary items also belong to major part of speech classes, and this constitutes a further way in which they are bound to their verbal context, since the defining characteristics of these classes are essentially contextual. An adjective, for example, is an item that can occur in certain grammatical constructions (e.g. complementing verbs like *seem*, pre-modifying nouns) and that, in most cases, can be accompanied by *more*, *most* or the *-er, -est* inflection (we may stretch the idea of context to include inflections, since they are external to the lexical part of a word). Furthermore, the major part of speech classes have subclasses defined by more restricted positional, inflectional and suchlike behaviour: e.g. adjectives that are only predicative (e.g. *asleep*) or do not compare (e.g. *unique*). (Complementation possibilities, already discussed, form another basis for subclassification, especially of verbs).

Now in IP or synonym explanations, the unknown is, of course, isolated from any context which would show its part of speech subclass: this is left to be conveyed by the grammatical equivalence supposedly maintained between the IP and the unknown. (Dictionaries, of course, can supplement this with separate indications by a coding system). Where it is possible to find IP equivalents with identical grammatical behaviour to that of the unknown word (e.g. with many nouns), this works reasonably well. If *pundit* is explained by

(59) A PUNDIT is a person who knows a great deal about a particular subject,

there is reasonable equivalence (both are nominal and countable). Hence the paraphrase would be substitutable, with some clumsiness, wherever *pundit* had been met.

However, language often just does not have available an equivalent that is both semantically close to the unknown *and* identical in part of speech subclass. Consider *manned* explained by

(60) 'MANNED' means 'having men on board',

where the paraphrase, strictly, can hardly occupy *any* of the positions in sentences that the unknown can: try substituting it direct in contexts like

(61) A manned spacecraft,
(62) The ship appeared not fully manned.

There are some general principles here that the learner must master even for comprehension purposes, e.g. that IPs of adjectives often have a rather different distribution (superficially, at least). Widdowson (1978:84) discusses *porous* in similar vein.

It is surely more explicit if we use CP:

(63) If a spacecraft is MANNED, that means it has men on board

or

(64) If a ship is not fully MANNED, that means it doesn't have as many men on board as it should.

The part of speech 'skew' is here shown clearly by the contrasting context in the two clauses — there is no longer a suggestion of substitutability where it does not really exist. This most often arises for adjectives in English, but can occur with other parts of speech: e.g. in

(65) SCAFFOLDING is a framework of poles put up round a building so that work can be done on it above ground level

there is no equivalence of countability, cf. CP

(66) When you put up SCAFFOLDING round a house, you put up a framework of poles so that the house can be worked on above ground level

where the inequivalence is explicit. Though the non-equivalence here would cause slight inconvenience for comprehension, its unpredictableness

(compared with the *manned* example) makes it very important for correct production use of *scaffolding*.

2.2. Ease

The explanation should be easier to understand than the item being explained. This is not always possible to achieve in IP, in cases where the language simply does not have simpler words available or where a paraphrase in simpler words can only be made with a contorted syntactic construction. CP can, in some such cases at least, provide easier alternatives simply because its greater flexibility allows a range of words and constructions to be used in the explanation that are not available to the IP format because they cannot easily be worked into any form of words that is even crudely substitutable for the unknown. E.g. a simple way of explaining the sense of *please* in

(67) The gift pleased her a great deal

would be by using the verb *like*, but in the conventional format this can only be done clumsily at best:

(68) 'PLEASE' means 'be liked by'.

Compare the more straightforward

(69) If something PLEASES me, that means I like it.

So also compare *size* explained as *degree of bigness* (which borders on unacceptability as English) with

(70) If I ask the SIZE of something, I am asking how big that thing is.

Again, explaining *empty*, compare the conventional IP

(71) 'EMPTY' means 'containing nothing''

)where *contain* is, perhaps, as hard as *empty*) with

(72) When a box is EMPTY, there is nothing in it.

The latter is, of course, longer, but uses simple words in simple constructions.

By these means a wider range of lexical relationships than usual can be exploited in explanation. One can go beyond the conventional use of hyponymy (*rose* explained by reference to *flower*) or antonymy (*hot* explained by reference to *cold*), both of which involve words in a close paradigmatic relationship within the same part of speech: rather one can make use of converse pairs such as *like — please, buy — sell* which contrast in terms of which participant in the activity of the verb forms the subject, and one can more readily use semantic

relationships that cut across the parts of speech (e.g. explain *size* by reference to *big, blow* by reference to *hit*, etc.).

It is worth noting here that in conventional dictionaries the attempt to obtain substitutability combined with the need for ease has led to the development of a sort of 'dictionary-ese' or special variety of English found in dictionary IPs, mildly differentiated from everyday English by unusually frequent use of certain words and turns of phrase, like those forming the first part of each IP in these examples:

(73) lunar: of or pertaining to the moon.
(74) resolution: quality of being resolute.
(75) divine: of, from or like a god.
(76) smell: that one of the five senses special to the nose.
(77) sale: an act of selling.
(78) rhetorician: one who is skilled in rhetoric.
(79) pippin: any of several kinds of apple.
(80) desiccate: make or become dry.

These expressions are often not so much easy as vague and indirect. They would clash stylistically with the context in which the unknown word had been met and often appear clumsy. Instead of emulating such paraphrases, the teacher would do better to use CP equivalents where possible and so keep stylistic uniformity. Put another way, he should keep the metalanguage (or language of the explanatory paraphrase) the same as the object language (or language material being explained) as far as possible. E.g.

(81) Acting with RESOLUTION is doing something in a resolute way.

or

(82) If your RESOLUTION leaves you that means you no longer feel determined about something.
(83) If a dog uses its sense of SMELL to find something, that means it uses its nose.
(84) A LUNAR landing is a landing on the moon.

or

(85) When a spaceship is in LUNAR orbit, that means it is circling round the moon.

In each case the context chosen for the CP would be related to the context where the learner has met the relevant word. The result is, of course, more longwinded and, often, more specific than an IP equivalent but, I believe, this is more than compensated for by greater directness and naturalness stylistically. Alternatively, the teacher must spend time on showing the learner how to exploit conventional dictionary-ese.

However, the CP format certainly does not **guarantee** an easier paraphrase: consider, for example, this explanation of one of the secondary senses of *touch* (n.):

(86) If you keep in TOUCH with someone, that means you maintain communication with them.

Here *maintain* and *communication* for many learners would be no easier to understand than the unknown meaning of *touch*. Also, in the end, no method of explanation within the same language can escape the fact that some vocabulary items are so elementary as to admit of no explanation in simpler terms.

2.3. Breadth and Narrowness

The explanation should be neither broader nor narrower in meaning than the item being explained (in the relevant sense). It is this principle, I think, that provides least ammunition in favour of CP, and possibly some against unless care is taken in formulation. We must consider the principle first in the same way it arises for IPs, and second in the way it arises for the contextual elements that are included in CPs, in so far as these can be separated out.

2.3.1. Inherent

Let us first consider the explanation of the unknown itself. It is not always easy to formulate IPs for any given unknown item (in a specific sense) that are neither broader not narrower than the unknown: however, there are pedagogical circumstances where it is allowable to make things easier for the learner by giving inexact equivalences which nevertheless fit the context where the word has been met (see Scholfield 1980, for further discussion)[3] All this is also true of CPs, with the further point that some CP explanatory patterns seem positively to encourage departures from exact semantic equivalence, unless the teacher is especially wary. This is particularly true of the *if/when* pattern which is in other respects perhaps the best one for the teacher. In other words, the pattern is frequently used for purposes other than the quasi-definitional one we are interested in, and these other uses must be carefully distinguished. Consider, for example,

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[3] Widdowson (1978: 82—87) also discusses this point, distinguishing explanations giving 'signification' (i.e., in my terms, neither overbroad nor overnarrow, but of dictionary-like generality) from those giving 'value' (i. e. strictly too broad or too narrow, but adequate to explain the word as used in a particular text). As he points out, 'value' explanations (whether synonym, IP or CP) will usually be easier (cf. 2.2) and syntactically more substitutable (cf. 2.1.2—3). However, he seems to associate CP *only* with 'value' explanation and does not treat it, as I have done in this paper, as capable of explaining 'signification'.

(87) If you DROP something, then it falls.
(88) When a machine has BROKEN DOWN, it doesn't work.

Here in both cases the second clause contains a necessary implication of the first, but omits other necessary implications which would be needed for full semantic equivalence, hence these explanations are too broad. We can see this by reversing the contents of the two clauses:

(89) You DROP something if it falls.

or

(90) If something falls, you DROP it.
(91) A machine has BROKEN DOWN when it does not work.

or

(92) When a machine does not work, it has BROKEN DOWN.

(89) and (90) sound odd and it is immediately apparent that things can fall without being dropped; in (91) and (92) also, though less obviously, it is possible to see that the implication no longer holds because machines can fail to work for other reasons than that they have broken down (e.g. they may have run out of fuel). If the clauses were fully equivalent, the implication would work both ways.

Consider now
(93) If I DROP a cup, it breaks.
(94) If it RAINS, then we get wet.

Here the second clause is not only not fully equivalent to the first (as reversal would show) but it is not even a necessary implication and so is not, strictly, essential to the explanation of the unknown at all. We can see this by the possibility of readily introducing words such as *usually, often, not always*, into the second clause.

(95) If I DROP a cup, it usually breaks

is a reasonable thing to say, but

(96) If I DROP a cup, it usually falls

is not, because if you drop something it must *always* fall. A more satisfactory explanation of *drop* would run

(97) If I DROP a cup, I let it fall (and it may break).

In the pattern where the unknown is not in the *if* clause, there is more danger of overnarrow explanations than overbroad ones. E.g.

(98) You are being IDEALISTIC if you think that everything in the world is perfect.

Here reversal of clause contents shows up the shortcoming:

(99) If you are being IDEALISTIC, you think that everything in the world is perfect.

This does not follow so obviously, because one can be idealistic about other (more specific) things than *everything in the world*: this explanation fines down the meaning of *idealistic* too narrowly by including as necessary elements in the CP factors which are not necessary ('non-criterial'). This is signalled by the possibility of making the non-criteriality overt:

(100) If you are being IDEALISTIC you may/don't necessarily think that everything in the world is perfect.

2.3.2. Contextual

I turn now to the more contextual side of the CP format — the part which remains more or less constant between the clauses/phrases involved (disregarding substitution of anaphoric words like *it*). Here there is the possibility of quite a range of alternatives differing widely in breadth, depending on how many main constituents there are in the context used — e.g.

(101) If John INHERITED £1000 from his aunt that means he received £1000 from her when she died.
(102) If John INHERITS £1000 from his aunt.................
(103) If someone INHERITS £1000 from their aunt...
(104) If someone INHERITS money from a relative...
(105) If someone INHERITS something from someone...

At one end of the scale we have specific noun phrases and a specific tense of the verb: as already mentioned, these could be taken by a teacher directly from the context where the learner has met the item. At the other end of the scale the verb is in the present simple (timeless sense) and the noun phrases generalised to the limit of what the collocation/selection restriction of the verb allows. So also compare

(106) If George had RESERVATIONS about going to New York, that means he was not sure it was a good idea to go to New York.

with

(107) If one has RESERVATIONS about doing something, that means one is not sure it is a good idea to do it.

If we consider only the extremes, clearly the more specific form is more concrete and immediate from the comprehension point of view, especially if it is related to the context where the word has already been met; on the other hand, it gives only a specific example (hopefully a typical one) of the sort of contexts the word can be used in, from which the learner would have to generalise. By contrast, the general form is less immediate for comprehension (it requires some 'matching' by the user (2.1.2)) and can get confusing if too many *someones* and *somethings* are involved; however it does, perhaps, provide a better production guide to the learner, in that it can be made to show explicitly the collocational limits of a word (in the particular sense being treated, of course) — e.g. *people* have reservations about *doing* things. A dictionary, which has to explain a word's meaning without any knowledge of the specific context where it has been met or may be used might do well to stick to the more general form of statement, but it remains true that the most contextually general CP is still not as general as a genuine IP that really is substitutable, because a CP can only reflect the complementation etc. of a word in one basic form of the clause pattern: the learner may have to convert it for a passive, question, etc. sentence.

A further point may be made: learners are unlikely to mistake contextually maximally specific CP explanations for something more than they are. In (101) above, learners are unlikely to assume that *inherit* can *only* take *John* as subject and *£1000* as object, etc.: the specificness is not misleading. The generalised form and some of the intermediate ones may not always be so self-evident. If the learner hears (104) he might well conclude (wrongly) that this is a fully general statement, since it contains general terms like *someone* and *money*. Yet, in reality, of course, one does not only inherit *money* from *relatives* but also houses, umbrellas, etc., from friends, etc.,. Hence intermediate forms of contextual statement between specific and general are perhaps to be avoided. Obviously an *overbroad* contextual specification would be harmful from the production point of view also. E.g. in

(107) When you give someone a RECIPE for something you give them instructions how to make it

something/it is too broad (since this specification would allow one to speak of a recipe for a model aeroplane, for example). One must replace *it* with *something to eat* (or *make* with *cook*) to get closer to the usage of *recipe*. For the same reason we would prefer

(108) A swelling on your body that is BENIGN does you no harm

to

(109) Something that is BENIGN does you no harm.

3. *Conclusion*

As an incidental point, what I have said about CPs within the L_2 could be closely paralleled when considering explanation of L_2 items by translation into the L_1: translation equivalents, whether single words or not, often differ from what they are translating in polysemy, complementation, etc., etc. which non-contextual forms of explanation do not bring out. There are obvious inadequacies if, for the Italian learning English, *like* is explained as *piacere* (different subject and complement) or *grapes* as *uva* (different noun subclass), or if, for the Englishman learning French, *soif* is explained merely as *thirst* (it often corresponds to *thirsty*), or *temps* as *time* (different polysemy). Teachers will easily recognise that *like* would be better explained by

(110) 'I LIKE London' means 'Mi piace Londra', and *soif* by

(111) 'Avoir SOIF' means 'to be thirsty'.

On similar grounds, a form of explanation such as the following might have value, though certainly more inconventional:

(112) If someone a SOIF, that means he or she is thirsty.

These kinds of equivalence are well-known to translators under labels such as 'unbounded translation' (Catford 1965:25). Compare also the notion of 'circulocution' (Blum and Levenston 1978).

To conclude, conventional paraphrases exhibit certain limitations which arise, quite simply, from the nature of language. They treat vocabulary items as if they were all naturally isolable from context and as if the vocabulary of a language is naturally structured to provide paraphrases (or synonyms) equivalent to these isolated single items. In reality, of course, this is not the case and the gap that therefore exists between the fiction that conventional paraphrases maintain and the realities of language requires considerable hidden skill from teacher and learner to be bridged. Paraphrases in context, on the other hand, abandon the well-established but linguistically and psychologically naive view that single words (plus certain set phrases) are the natural units of meaning: though requiring some care in formulation, especially in the area of generality (2.3), they are usually much more natural and explicit both for comprehension and as an aid to future production.

Now, one may argue that advanced students will, in the end, need to master the skill of using conventional paraphrases in order to use existing dictionaries. However, I hope I have succeeded in showing that, at a more intermediate level perhaps, there is a valuable place for the kinds of contextualised paraphrases I have described. Indeed they could form a useful stepping stone between

explanation by demonstration or translation at the elementary level, and explanation by dictionary-like means at a more advanced stage. Teachers should not feel hidebound by convention, but make themselves fluent in these more communicatively real and immediate means of explaining meaning; intermediate dictionaries, also, might well extend the use of this format.

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