

THE RELATION OF DEFINITIONS TO THEIR CONTEXTUAL BASIS†

ALLEN WALKER READ*

WHEN LEXICOGRAPHERS DEFINE words, they must wrestle with the problem of dealing with the great diversity of contexts. They are bound to be basically data-oriented, but they immediately get into abstractions when they begin to fashion definitions. The notion that "a meaning" is an independent entity has been fostered by popular speech; but lexicographers know better.

When theorists talk about "univocal words," they are talking nonsense. A word that has been used more than once cannot possibly be univocal. A philosopher can make the assumption (and turn it into an assertion) that he is using a particular word "univocally," but for the real world of discourse, he is stating an impossibility. I think we must take literally Leonard Bloomfield's dictum that "every utterance of a speech-form involves a minute semantic innovation." (1) Trenchant statements of this very point have been made by Eugene Nida, Kenneth Pike, Charles Hockett, and others. (2)

The ideal dictionary thus would have a definition for every one of its citations. When the late Charles C. Fries, back in the 1930s, brought out a sample stretch of editing of the *Early Modern English Dictionary*, this is virtually what he did, but perhaps his practice could be attributed to the early stages of his work. The notion that every citation deserves its own definition, even if true theoretically, is not practical, and we are faced with dictionary-making in the real world.

* Allen Walker Read, Professor Emeritus of English at Columbia University, contributed an article on sociolinguistics to our issue of Spring, 1982.

† This paper was given before the Dictionary Society of North America, at its biennial meeting, June 12, 1981, held at Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio, and is reprinted by permission from its *Proceedings*.

The procedure is somewhat simplified by the fact that the citations tend to fall into what may be called "contextual clusters." I hesitate to call these clusters "meanings," because the word *meaning* has been subject to such muddled controversy. I strongly support the position of the logician Willard Quine, who has said that we should "continue to turn our backs on the supposititious entities called meanings." (3)

When I was editing the words beginning with BL- for the *Dictionary of American English* at the University of Chicago, I found that the citations for the word *blanket* fell into certain definite clusters. One set concerned the use of blankets by Indians as an article of dress. This was important, because it was the basis for the phrase "Blanket Indian," which was used throughout the nineteenth century to describe a type that resisted the inroads of white civilization. Therefore I set up a so-called "meaning," with a rich set of quotations, under the rubric, "A blanket belonging to an Indian, and usually worn as a garment." Another set of quotations dealt with mining for gold in the early West, and these I put under the heading, "A coarse blanket used to catch the gold dust in gold-washing apparatus."

For this I was bitterly attacked by M.M. Mathews, a fellow assistant editor, in a publication of the English Institute. He declared: "The fact that a blanket belongs to an Indian who uses it in a somewhat unorthodox manner does not have the slightest effect on the meaning of the word *blanket*." (4) I maintain, on the contrary, that such uses do have an effect on meaning. (5)

Making such distinctions is valuable in a historical dictionary, where various facets of American culture are being laid out. However, they need not be carried over into small-sized dictionaries for popular use. In any case, it is clear that I belong to the school of thought that Sol Saporta has called, "the extreme contextualist position." (6)

To what extent is a dictionary-maker actually dependent on a collection of citations? This topic has been the subject of controversy. A provocative statement of the problem has been made by Laurence Urdang, a seasoned and perceptive lexicographer, in a memorandum that he sent me in 1976. I have his permission to present it to you, as follows:

When you consider the extremely sparse citational evidence available to the lexicographer in comparison with the extraordinarily large number of examples of utterances (*oral* as well as written), you begin to see why I consider citations to be statistically inadequate for virtually any purpose. That is not to say that they aren't "useful," but they are generally useful chiefly to the person who knows the language *and how it works*.

Notwithstanding Ed Gates's tenet (expressed in private correspondence to me) that citations are the very soul of lexicography and suggesting that any lexicographer worth his salt can write a definition of a word based solely on a handful of citations, it can be demonstrated that such an exercise is, in fact, futile.

Citations are handy and dandy, but they don't provide sufficient info on language (except as *examples*) to make them worthwhile for the lexicographer. If they were available in sufficient profusion, perhaps they might; but they aren't.

I find myself sympathetic to Edward Gates's point of view, that "citations are the very soul of lexicography." They make the difference between sound scholarship and unsound scholarship.

It must be conceded, of course, that any knowledge of language is the result of an experience with contexts, informally acquired. An attentive listener or reader may be more skillful in dealing with the language than someone else who may have assembled much written or oral evidence.

In the present paper, the example that I wish to dwell on, and to develop, is the word *consummation*, together with its verb, *to consummate*. It presents a special problem because the concrete situations that *consummation* refers to are so very diverse. In one cluster of citations, a marriage is "consummated" by the performance of a ritualistic ceremony by a minister or priest, and in another, the marriage is consummated by the having of sexual intercourse. Now is the lexicographer to find some generalization that will put these two sets of citations under the same "definition"? Here the life-situation, reflected in a "collocation," to use J.R. Firth's useful term, has outstanding importance.

The ambiguity of the verb *to consummate* was first brought into discussion, so far as I can find, by Richard Grant White in April, 1868, in the popular journal *The Galaxy*. He was contributing a series of essays on language, and in one entitled "Some Misused Words, and One Not Misused," he presented the following passage:

Consummate. — Of all the queer uses of big words which are creeping into vogue, the use of this word, both in speech and in the newspapers, to express the performance of the marriage ceremony, is the queerest. For instance, I heard a gentleman gravely say to two ladies and another gentleman, "The marriage was consummated at Paris last April." Now, consummation is necessary to a complete marriage; but it is not usually talked about openly in general society. The gentleman meant that the ceremony took place at Paris. (7)

Two years later, in 1870, Richard Grant White collected these essays into a book entitled *Words and Their Uses*. (8) As many people of the

time accepted him as a "linguistic dictator," his comment on *consummate* probably had a strong influence.

The subject continued to attract attention, for the little journal *Our Language* in 1892, in its issue for May, had this comment: "Suffice it to say here that it is not the officiating minister who 'consummates' a marriage. The phrase will be avoided by those who do not wish to give their conversation a decidedly physiological and legal cast." (9)

Another approach to the problem was furnished by a Japanese commentator. In his book '*King's English*' or '*President's English*'?, published at Kobe in 1933, Satoshi Ichiya wrote as follows:

The verb "to consummate" furnishes an instance of a remarkable difference of usage as observed in England and the United States. In England the "consummation of marriage," an expression to be heard only in law courts or to be found in the newspaper accounts of divorce or other similar cases, means only one thing, and that is that the marriage was completed by accepted conjugal relations. On the other hand, most Americans would not attach such a meaning to the expression at all, because in the United States such a phrase would be generally understood to mean that marriage was completed with the usual religious ceremonies, including a wedding breakfast. (10)

Whether this difference in usage exists between the two countries is an open question. In collecting material over many years, I have not been able to validate it. Rather, there seems to be divided usage in both countries.

In England, for instance, the official known as the King's Messenger recounted the following incident. A certain British consul, in frantic haste, sent a telegram to Whitehall, reading, "May I marriage between British subject and enemy subject?", in his anxiety leaving out a word. The decoder of the telegram, a Peer of the Realm, recognizing that a word was necessary, interpolated *consummate*, so that it read, "May I consummate marriage . . ." This was interpreted as an attempt to revive the *jus primae noctis* and brought a dignified rebuke on his head. The noble lord was so horrified that he was barely persuaded from resigning forthwith. Even as an Englishman, he had used the ceremonial sense of the word. (11)

As to American evidence, the following comes from a decision of the Judge Advocate General of the Army on October 14, 1942: "The question of the validity of marriages by proxy, telephone or formal contract is governed by the laws of the respective states. For this reason the Judge Advocate General cannot properly undertake to advise as to the manner of consummating such a marriage or its validity." (12)

Some years ago the editors of the *New Yorker* magazine waged a

campaign against the alleged American sense. In the Waynesboro, Virginia, *News-Virginian*, in 1945, they found the following report: "The couple were married about a year ago while Captain Coburn was stationed in England. The bride was an ocean away in Virginia and the marriage was consummated over wires." This was reprinted then under the heading, "Neatest Trick of the Week." (13)

Again, the same magazine reprinted this press release put out by the F.C.C.: "The Federal Communications Commission has advised a Florida inquirer that there is nothing in the law governing radio communications to prevent two licensed amateur stations being utilized to consummate a wedding ceremony between a couple separated by the Pacific Ocean." The magazine's comment on this was: "Nothing in the law, but an awful lot in Nature." (14)

This would seem to be a definite attempt on the part of the magazine to re-enforce the physiological sense, which the editors appear to regard as the only one possible. This is a case of Gresham's Law applied to verbal usage, that a sensational sense drives out the bland. And yet the ever-present cliché, "a consummation devoutly to be wished" (from *Hamlet*, III. i), tends to keep the bland sense in high repute.

Further evidence for divided usage comes from judges' opinions in the law courts. For instance, the majority opinion of the Supreme Court of Georgia, in the September term, 1939, had the following statement:

Since no formalities are now required to be performed in the execution of a marriage contract, we think consummation is brought about either by the obtaining of a license to marry and the performance of a ceremony by a minister or other person authorized to join persons in matrimony, or by an actual agreement, in words of the present tense, to be man and wife, with the intention of thereby and thereupon assuming the relationship. (15)

But the presiding justice in the same case disagreed with his colleagues, and was bitter in issuing this dissenting opinion:

Under such ruling a man being at one place in this State and a woman being at another and distant place, who had never seen each other, could by private exchange of letters or telegrams, or even by telephone or radio conversation, by mere agreement effect a valid marriage, thereby creating the relation of husband and wife though they might never afterward see each other or cohabit as man and wife. (16)

Some influence on courts both of England and of America has come from the old maxim of Roman civil law: "*Consensus, non concubitas, faciat matrimonium.*" This is reflected in an opinion handed down by the Supreme Court of California as long ago as 1889:

The mere fact that partners who have agreed to become husband and wife thereafter have sexual intercourse is not sufficient, of itself, to show a consummation of the marriage, or that they have assumed towards each other marital rights, duties, and obligations. . . . Cohabitation is a "living together as husband and wife," and will amount to a consummation or mutual assumption of marital rights, duties, and obligations, but sexual intercourse in the manner usual with man and mistress, and without living together as husband and wife, will not amount to such consummation. (17)

A curious case arose in New Jersey in 1929 in which the two collocations of *consummation* came into conflict with each other. An unmarried woman became pregnant and then the couple were married, but separated before the birth of their child. They then asked the court for an annulment on the ground that it was an unconsummated marriage. However, the judge's decision was as follows: "This marriage must, in the circumstances, be regarded as a consummated marriage, although sexual intercourse took place before, and not after, the ceremony." (18)

What bearing does this background of usage have on the dictionary treatments of the word *consummation*? How do we expect dictionaries to treat such a complicated matter? The historical dictionaries offer a profusion of quotations. The *Middle English Dictionary* from the University of Michigan provides us with the earliest citation for *consummation*, one of about 1400, in a manuscript dated about 1425. In a translation from the New Testament (*Romans*, Chapt. 6, verse 19), the word has the general sense, adopted from its Latin source, of "attainment, achievement," although the sexual content of the quotation is heavy. Slightly modernized in word-form, the verse reads: "Give ye now your members to serve to righteousness in to sanctification, that is, in to consummation of goode." (19) St. Paul, in his well-known opposition to sensuality, was giving advice, in my own succinct translation: "Heretofore you have used your genitals for uncleanness and iniquity; hereafter you should use them for the consummation of righteous living."

The *OED* material is copious. The basic sense of the verb to *consummate* is given as, "To bring to completion or full accomplishment," with the first quotation, interestingly enough, from a dictionary, Palsgrave's *Lesclarcissement* of 1530, reading: "I consummate, I make a full ende of a thyng, *je consume*."

Then the second sense in the *OED* is "To complete *marriage* by sexual intercourse," with a first quotation of 1540, from an *Act of Parliament* under Henry VIII. This reads: "Your maieste . . . maie . . . contract and consummat matrimonie wyth any woman." The second quotation is of 1709, from a *Tatler* essay by Sir Richard Steele,

reading: "Prince Nassau . . . consummated on the 26th of the last Month his Marriage with the beauteous Princess of Hesse-Cassel." To my mind, neither of these quotations is really definitive, for they could equally well apply to a ceremony or to "consensus." Were not the definers making an unsupportable assumption, going beyond their evidence?

The ideal quotation actually "forces" the acceptance of a particular sense. I have several that do just that:

1941 Somerset Maugham *Hour Before Dawn* (p. 252) She had sought to avoid the consummation of their marriage until the time came when she was prepared to acknowledge it and she had only yielded when he threatened, half jokingly and half angrily, to produce the marriage certificate to his family there and then.

1956 Harold Nicolson in *London Observer* (11 Nov. 12/4) When eventually he married a girl of youth and beauty he was forbidden by Harris ever to consummate the marriage.

1977 Letter-writer in *Playboy* (Jan. 54/2) A tribe in New Guinea called the Dani . . . put off consummating marriage for two years after the ceremony.

1977 James A. Wechsler in *New York Post* (10 Nov. 39/4) The target of such gossip [Mayor-elect Edward Koch] is damned unless he appears at an altar in Macy's window. Then there would still be those skeptically noting that the consummation of the marriage had not been publicly performed.

1978 Cynthia Fagen in *New York Post* (31 Oct. 21/3) Mrs. James Earl Ray . . . married Ray during a quiet ceremony of only jailers, lawyers and a few relatives. Although she is unable to consummate the marriage, Mrs. Ray said that most of the time when she visits the prison . . . they mainly hold hands and kiss.

1979 Janet Maslin in *New York Times* (20 July, Part C, 8/1) Just as they are about to consummate the marriage . . . a telegram arrives. It advises the bridegroom to open a certain bureau drawer, in which he will find a letter from his father revealing the bad news, but the drawer is jammed. So he calls for a hammer and chisel. "The bridegroom needs a hammer and chisel!" everybody cries. The movie's jokes tend to be very broad.

1981 Richard Rhodes in *Playboy* (May 216/2) Although the newlyweds spent three nights in Las Vegas, Dorothy [Stratten] later confided to a girlfriend that they didn't consummate their marriage until two weeks after the ceremony.

1981 Gore Vidal *Creation* (p. 210) That night our marriage was agreeably consummated. I was pleased. She was pleased. Presumably the Vedic Gods were pleased, for nine months later my first son was born.

A popular, well-made dictionary such as the *Random House*, gives two senses for *to consummate*: "1. to bring to completion or perfection," and "2. to complete (a marriage) by sexual intercourse." I feel that it is deficient in not recording the strong current of usage, even supported by the law courts, that refers to the ceremony as constituting consummation. Are the current dictionaries bowing to the strictures of Richard Grant White, the *New Yorker* editors, and other guides to "proper" usage?

A full dictionary would have to take into account certain extensions in sense. Stemming from the consummation of a marriage is the consummation of a rape. Thus the columnist Harriet Van Horne, in the *New York Post* of 1977, reporting an episode in the TV show, "All in the Family," states: "That the rape is not — what shall we say? — fully consummated, is the only concession to possible squeamishness among the home folks." (20)

Another journalist uses the curious extension of consummating a divorce. This would seem to spring from the application to a ceremony. As Earl Wilson wrote in the *New York Post*: "June Allyson left . . . several performances ago to fly to Hollywood to 'consummate' her divorce from Glenn Maxwell." (21)

When the extended sense refers to corporations, the sexual content is attenuated. Take this statement in a New York weekly: "An entente between Sovfracht and the Onassis shipping interests, consummated in every sense of the word, would probably benefit the Greeks much more than the Russians." (22) One must surely query the phrase, "in every sense of the word."

There are further quirks in the usage of *consummate* that any dictionary can scarcely be expected to catch. One such turned up in an English court of law in 1945. One judge, who had a strong hostility to birth control devices, handed down the decision that when the man uses a condom or the woman a vaginal cap, consummation of a marriage does not take place. Full penetration was no longer considered sufficient. He apparently did not take into account the remarkable results that flow from his decision. One of his critics listed three of them:

(1) The indulgence in such sterile intercourse by married persons outside marriage is not adultery, e.g. a new defence to divorce proceedings is available.

(2) Such familiarity would not be unchastity, e.g. to stop a war-widow receiving a pension, or to terminate a right to maintenance.

(3) A loophole to marriage by mutual consent is available if one party has refused to discard contraception. (23)

Such an aberrant decision must surely have been over-ruled, but I have not had opportunity to follow the case. We may as well bypass the problem of consummation in the homosexual or trans-sexual marriage.

Recent scientific advances may play havoc with the meaning of the word *consummation*. I refer to a report in the *New York Times* of May 12, 1981: "For the first time an American woman has become pregnant following the insertion into her womb of an embryo that had been fertilized in a glass dish by sperm from her husband, it was announced yesterday in Norfolk, Va." (24)

Now I ask you: did "consummation" take place in that glass dish? Must a lexicographer deal with that problem? Ah, I hope not. The complexities and anfractuositities of daily life will no doubt always keep a step ahead of the lexicographer.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Leonard Bloomfield, *Language* (N.Y., 1933), p. 407.
2. Such statements are collected in my study, "Approaches to Lexicography and Semantics," in *Current Trends in Linguistics*, T.A. Sebeok, ed. Vol. X (The Hague, 1973), p. 167.
3. Willard V. Quine, "The Problem of Meaning in Linguistics," in *The Structure of Language*, Fodor and Katz, eds. (Englewood, N.J., 1961), p. 22.
4. M.M. Mathews, "Problems Encountered in the Preparation of a Dictionary of American Words and Meanings," in *English Institute Essays* (N.Y., 1948), pp. 85-86. I think we should take seriously the entry in John Russell Bartlett's *Dictionary of Americanisms* (2nd ed.: N.Y., 1859), p. 34: "*Blanket*. A term used distinctively for the clothing of an Indian. To say of one's father or mother that they 'wore the blanket,' implies that they were but half civilized Indians. Western."
5. It is disheartening to realize that such insensitiveness to contexts may have run through the entire editing of M.M. Mathews's *Dictionary of Americanisms* (1951), although he felt forced to include sub-entries for *blanket Indian* and *blanket tribe*.
6. Sol Saporta, *Psycholinguistics: a Book of Readings* (N.Y., 1961), p. 283.
7. Richard Grant White, in *The Galaxy*, V (April, 1868), p. 494.
8. *Words and Their Uses* (N.Y., 1870), p. 102.
9. *Our Language*, May, 1892, p. 11.
10. Satoshi Ichiya, 'King's English' or 'President's English'? (Kobe, Japan, 1933), pp. 30-31.
11. G.P. Antrobus, *King's Messenger* (London, 1940), p. 96.
12. *Bulletin of the Judge Advocate General of the Army* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1943), I, No. 5, p. 265.
13. *New Yorker*, November 17, 1945, p. 29, col. 3.
14. *Ibid.*, April 3, 1948, p. 30, col. 3.
15. Lefkoff v. Sicro, 189 *Georgia Reports* 565 (1939).
16. *Ibid.*, p. 580.
17. Sharon v. Sharon, 22 *Pacific* 27 (1889).
18. Caruso v. Caruso, 104 *New Jersey Eq.* 588-94 (1929), quot., p. 592.

19. In the King James version of 1611, the text reads: ". . . for as yee haue yeelded your members seruants to vncleannesse and to iniquitie, vnto iniquitie: euen so now yeelde your members seruants to righteousnesse, vnto holinesse." The version in the *Good News Bible* (N.Y.: American Bible Society, 1976), p. 208, is: "At one time you surrendered yourselves entirely as slaves to impurity and wickedness for wicked purposes. In the same way you must now surrender yourselves entirely as slaves of righteousness for holy purposes."
20. Harriet Van Horne, in *New York Post*, October 15, 1977, p. 26, col. 1.
21. Earl Wilson, in *New York Post*, March 13, 1970, p. 82, col. 3.
22. Alexander Cockburn, in the *Village Voice* (N.Y.), August 7, 1978, p. 26, col. 2.
23. A. Appelbe, in the *New Statesman and Nation* (London), August 11, 1945, p. 93, col. 2.
24. *New York Times*, May 12, 1981, Part C, p. 1, col. 1. See also the further announcement of the birth of the baby, *ibid.*, December 29, 1981, Part C, p. 1, cols. 5-6.