

‘Offensive’ items, and less offensive alternatives, in English monolingual learners’ dictionaries

Stephen Coffey

Dipartimento di Anglistica, Università di Pisa

This paper discusses lexical items which have been labelled as ‘impolite’, ‘offensive’ or ‘rude’ in monolingual learners’ dictionaries (MLDs). Such items may be grouped into three broad categories. Firstly, there is lexis which relates to the human body and its functions (e.g. knockers, dick, to crap, to screw). Secondly, there are items which refer to people and which are potentially insulting (e.g. bitch, dago, midget, queer). Thirdly, there are words and phrases, with a variety of meanings, which have in common the fact that they make use of the potentially rude words referring to the human body. Examples are to ball something up, not to give a shit, fucking, a piss artist and work your arse off.

The precise aim of the paper is to draw attention to the fact that, wherever possible, learners should be provided with less offensive alternatives to the potentially offensive lexis.

In order to assess the current situation in MLDs, a study was carried out on over 200 such lexical items in recent editions of five dictionaries. The main conclusions reached were that in many cases learners are not being provided with alternative lexis, or else that the alternatives suggested are somewhat banal in nature. It is also proposed that in some cases a contextualized example of a lexical item could be rewritten in order to show learners what a less offensive version of the example would look like.

1. Introduction

Some lexical items described in English monolingual learners’ dictionaries (MLDs) have a usage label which indicates that they are to some degree ‘offensive’, or at least may sometimes be considered to be so. Such labelling is both part of language description and, given the nature of the dictionaries, a warning to learners that the items should be used with care, or not used at all. In this paper I look at the feasibility of providing learners with socially more acceptable alternatives to the items which may offend, and describe the current situation in a number of dictionaries. Most findings are generalized; the article is not intended to be a cross-dictionary comparison.

2. The dictionaries examined and their usage labels

The dictionaries examined in this study are recent editions of the five leading corpus-informed MLDs. They are:

Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 3rd ed. (hereafter CALD3)

Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner’s English Dictionary, 5th ed. (COB5)

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 4th ed. (LDOCE4)

Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners, 2nd ed. (MEDAL2)

Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 7th ed. (OALD7)

These dictionaries differ from one another with regard to the labels they use to indicate offensiveness. The labels used, together with their descriptions and any eventual examples, are shown in Table 1.¹

¹ I am not directly concerned in this study with the question of how successful and coherent the labelling systems are, but I would mention the fact that labels placed only generically at the beginning of entries, as sometimes happens, may easily be overlooked by the dictionary user. For further discussion of this topic, see van der Meer (2008).

DICTIONARY	LABEL/S	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE/S
CALD3	OFFENSIVE	very rude and likely to offend people	
COB5	OFFENSIVE	likely to offend people, or to insult them; words labelled OFFENSIVE should therefore usually be avoided	<i>cripple</i>
	VERY OFFENSIVE	highly likely to offend people, or to insult them; words labelled VERY OFFENSIVE should be avoided	<i>wog</i>
	RUDE	used mainly to describe words which could be considered taboo by some people; words labelled RUDE should therefore usually be avoided	<i>bloody</i>
	VERY RUDE	used mainly to describe words which most people consider taboo; words labelled VERY RUDE should be avoided	<i>fuck</i>
LDOCE4	NOT POLITE	a word or phrase that is considered rude, and that might offend some people	
	TABOO	a word that should not be used because it is very rude or offensive	
MEDAL2	IMPOLITE	not taboo but will certainly offend some people	
	OFFENSIVE	extremely rude and likely to cause offence	
OALD7	OFFENSIVE	OFFENSIVE expressions are used by some people to address or refer to people in a way that is very insulting, especially in connection with their race, religion, sex or disabilities. You should not use these words.	<i>half-caste, slut</i>
	TABOO	TABOO expressions are likely to be thought by many people to be obscene or shocking. You should not use them.	<i>bloody, shit</i>

Table 1. Labels for offensive items in monolingual learners' dictionaries

As can be seen, CALD3 has the simplest system, having just one all-embracing label. LDOCE4 and MEDAL2, though using different labels, appear to be very similar, each differentiating between two levels of offensiveness. OALD7 also has two labels, but in this case the difference between the labels appears to be more one of communicative function than degree of offensiveness. Having said this, however, analysis of entries shows that this is not always the case. For example, on the basis of the label description I would have expected *chink*, *dago* and *yid* to be labelled as OFFENSIVE, whereas they are in fact labelled as TABOO. COB5 has four labels, differentiating both between communicative function and between degree of offensiveness.

Analysis carried out in the present study suggests that in the four dictionaries which employ more than one 'offensive' label, the labels are almost always mutually exclusive. The only exception is OALD7, where a few items are labelled as both TABOO and OFFENSIVE (e.g. *midget*).²

² The word 'offensive' is used in this paragraph (and elsewhere) in a generic sense, covering the various labels mentioned. When I am referring specifically to the label tagged 'offensive', then the latter will be in small capitals: OFFENSIVE.

2.1. 'Inoffensive' usage labels

Also of some relevance to the present study is the fact that one dictionary, CALD3, has a usage label of the opposite kind; that is, it points out that some lexical items have been judged to be more polite than other options available. The label and its explanation are as follows:

POLITE WORD/EXPRESSION: a polite way of referring to something that has other ruder names.

Thirty entries have this label. An example of relevance to the theme of the present article is the exclamation *Sugar!*, described in the following way:

'POLITE WORD FOR *shit*, used when something annoying happens: *Oh sugar, I've just spilt coffee all down my jacket!*'.

Most of the entries, however, are not of this type, relating, rather, to words which would not normally be considered as offensive. An example is the word *toilet* in the following entry for *cloakroom*: 'UK POLITE WORD FOR 'toilet', especially one in a public building: *I went to the cloakroom in the first interval*'.

3. Retrieving items from the dictionaries

In order to assemble a representative sample of potentially offensive lexis, the following methodology was employed. First, the complete set of OFFENSIVE items in CALD3 was retrieved from the CD-ROM version of the dictionary. This was done by applying the appropriate USAGE filter within ADVANCED SEARCH. CALD3 and MEDAL2 both have this facility, and of the two CALD3 was chosen since it allows the user to directly retrieve the relevant *entries* (in their entirety) rather than just the headwords. The total number of items with the OFFENSIVE label in CALD3 is 317.

Following this, a cross-check was carried out for the same items in the other four dictionaries. If a given item was not found in any other dictionary, or else was present but not given a similar usage label, then it was excluded from the sample. This happened, for example, in the case of the exclamation *Arse!*, which was not found elsewhere, and the noun *bummer*, which in the other dictionaries 'only' had the label INFORMAL. Items were also excluded when dictionaries concurred that they were not typically used in British English. This was done in order to simplify the process of deciding, for the purposes of the present study, which less offensive alternatives (if any) might usefully be included in the dictionaries.

In a few cases, items were added to the CALD3 list. An example of this is the verb *fart*, labelled as 'very informal' in CALD3, but offensive, to some degree, in the other four dictionaries. Another addition were phrasal verbs incorporating the word *fuck*. Surprisingly, these do not have an 'offensive' label either in the CALD3 print dictionary or on the CD-ROM. It is true that they are subsumed under the headword **fuck** (in the print dictionary), which does have a label, but the usual policy in CALD3 is to label all separate sub-entries as well.

The sample thus arrived at consisted of 232 items.

The number of items present in each dictionary, as well as the number which are given an offensive label of some sort, may be seen in Table 2. Since CALD3 was the starting point for analysis, it naturally has the highest number of items, and for this reason the figures are in italics. Of interest is the big difference between COB5 and the other four dictionaries.³

	CALD3	COB5	LDOCE4	MEDAL2	OALD7
items present	223	121	213	208	215
'offensive' labels	220	107	177	198	184

Table 2. Lexical items with 'offensive' labels in the sample

The figures presented in Table 2 do not tell the whole story for the sample (irrespective of the point made in note 3). This is because there are lexical entries which have no 'offensive' label, but which make reference to offensiveness or rudeness in the *definition*. Clearly, this is an area where dictionaries need to be more coherent. An example from LDOCE4 is the entry for the adjective *retarded*, (without a label), for which the definition reads: 'less mentally developed than other people of the same age. Many people think that this use is *rude and offensive*' (my italics). For the purposes of the present study, I have considered only entries which do have labels.

4. The nature of the offensive items

Table 3 gives a rough indication of the semantic content or communicative function of the items in the sample. Lexical items have been grouped together whenever there were at least three similar items, and the resulting groups have then been placed under three general headings.

	Aspects of meaning / function	Examples	Number of items
	POTENTIALLY RUDE NAMES FOR THE HUMAN BODY AND ITS FUNCTIONS		
1	parts of the body	<i>balls, knockers</i>	18
2	going to the toilet	<i>crap, to shit</i>	13
3	sexual activity	<i>to fuck, a stiffy</i>	21
	WORDS IMPLYING THE (PERCEIVED) DIVERSITY / INFERIORITY OF PEOPLE		
4	race, nationality, religion	<i>dago, nigger, yid</i>	30
5	illness, handicap	<i>midget, vegetable</i>	8
6	sexual inclinations / habits	<i>queer, to screw around</i>	15
7	general insults	<i>cow, cretin, bitch, scumbag</i>	8
	OTHER SINGLE-WORD / PHRASAL USES	Examples	

³ The figures in Table 2 represent the order of magnitude rather than being absolutely precise. This is because it was necessary to make adjustments to individual dictionary data, since dictionaries do not always agree on which items constitute separate lexical units. One dictionary's 'lexical unit' may be split into two senses, or two forms, in another dictionary, each with its own 'offensive' label.

	OF ITEMS FROM CATEGORIES 1, 2, 3		
8	general insults	<i>turd, bugger, bastard, prick</i>	17
9	more specific insults	<i>smart ass, shit stirrer</i>	3
10	nonsense / lies	<i>bullshit, bollocks</i>	5
11	low quality / damage	<i>balls-up, crappy</i>	13
12	(doing) very little or nothing	<i>piss about, bugger all</i>	8
13	ease / difficulty	<i>piece of piss, bugger</i>	4
14	ability / inability	<i>not know your arse from your elbow, piss artist</i>	3
15	not caring about	<i>not give a shit, Bugger the...</i>	6
16	emphatic 'effing' words	<i>frigging, sodding</i>	3
17	interpersonal relations	<i>get a bollicking, piss-take</i>	11
18	'Eff off!'	<i>Piss off!, Sod off!</i>	5
19	other exclamations	<i>Bollocks!, Sod this for a lark!</i>	12
20	drinking alcohol	<i>pissed, piss-up</i>	6
21	other items incorporating lexis from categories 1, 2 or 3	<i>shit hot, get off your arse</i>	23

Table 3. The meaning / function of 'offensive' words in MLDs

The first of these broad sections relates to the human body and its functions. Here, as well as potentially offensive language (e.g. the use of *knockers* instead of *breasts*), there are also areas of *meaning* which are to some extent taboo. For example, the subject of 'human sex organs' is potentially more offensive than 'breasts', and whether one chooses the word *dick* (labelled as 'offensive' in all five dictionaries) or the word *penis* (no label) may be much less relevant than whether or not the situation allows one to talk freely about the concept.

The second broad section embraces items which refer to people and which are potentially insulting, either as regards specific traits (e.g. *dago, midget, queer*) or else more generally (e.g. *cow*).

The third broad section brings together many different meanings, most of which are easily perceived of as being negative in some way. At a formal level, almost all the lexical items in this section have in common the fact that they make use of potentially rude words referring, in their core meaning, to the human body and its functions (and which are therefore among the items in groups 1, 2 and 3). To these have been added derived lexis such as *frigging* and *eff off*, as well as the words *bastard* and *sod*.⁴

In terms of meaning alone, items in group 8 could be merged with those in group 7. The final group in this section (21) is a mixture of items which are fairly disparate in nature.

With regard to the *type* of offensiveness, we can distinguish broadly between three areas: (i) lexis which is directly offensive to people (e.g. *nigger, queer*), (ii) areas of meaning which are to some extent taboo (e.g. 'oral sex', 'human excrement'), and

⁴ *Frigging* and *eff off*, though less offensive than the items on which they are based (*fucking, fuck off*), are nonetheless recorded in dictionaries as being 'offensive'. In their original meanings, *bastard* and *sod* (short for *Sodomite*) would have been placed in the second broad section (perceived diversity / inferiority); they are not there since *bastard* (in its original meaning) is not given an offensive label, and *sod* (original meaning) is not recorded in the MLDs.

(iii) 'strong' language which needs to be toned down (e.g. *He's made a real balls-up of this; It was pissing down out there*).

For further discussion of offensive language from a lexicographical point of view, see Schutz (2002), van der Meer (2008) and Veisbergs (2000). For some corpus-based analysis, see Coffey (2003), McEnery et al (2000), McEnery and Xiao (2004) and Stenström (1991). For detailed general discussion of offensive language, see Allan & Burridge (1991, 2006), Davis (1989) and Hughes (1991).

5. Current coverage of less offensive alternatives, and suggestions for improvement

5.1. The type and extent of current coverage

Of the five dictionaries examined, the one which goes farthest towards *explicitly* indicating less offensive alternatives is OALD7. It does so through the use of 'HELP' notes, of which there are 25 in the entries analysed. An example is at the entry **bugger about / around**, where a note informs the reader that: 'A more polite, informal way of saying this is *mess about* (BrE) or *mess around* (NAmE, BrE)'. A second example is at the entry for the verb **fart**:

(taboo, slang) [v] to let air from the bowels come out through the anus, especially when it happens loudly ► HELP NOTE A more polite way of expressing this is 'to break wind'.

MEDAL2 has just two notes of this sort in the sample examined, while the other dictionaries have none.

MEDAL2 also has 13 boxes which discuss either 'Words that may cause offence' or 'Words that avoid giving offence'. Just three of these are relevant to the 'offensive' items I have analysed, and may be found at the entries for *black*, *disabled* and *gay*. These do not, however, discuss very many lexical items. For example, at the entry for **black** (in relation to skin colour), advice is given regarding the use of the adjective *black*, the noun *black* and the phrases *African Caribbean* and *African American*.⁵

The much more usual way in which a learner might find a less offensive item is through an indication of synonymy or through a word or short phrase which 'defines' the offensive headword. Some examples are the following:

CALD3 **pissed** UK OFFENSIVE drunk *I can't remember - I was pissed at the time*.

COB5 **dick** A man's **dick** is his penis (INFORMAL, VERY RUDE)

LDOCE4 **fart** NOT POLITE to make air come out of your BOWELS = **break wind**

OALD7 **sod all** (BrE, TABOO, SLANG) a phrase that some people find offensive, used to mean 'none at all' or 'nothing at all'.

In the above explanations, the learner can easily find the alternative items *drunk*, *penis*, *break wind* and *none at all*, which, although it is not explicitly stated, may be presumed

⁵ The other MEDAL2 boxes of this type relate to lexis which could cause some offence in certain situations, either because of delicate subjects (e.g. 'death') or because they are not politically correct (e.g. the use of *English* instead of *Welsh*).

to be less offensive than their respective headwords (and none of which, at their own entries, are indicated as being in any way offensive).⁶

It is difficult to be precise about the number of entries of the type just exemplified. This is because there is necessarily a certain amount of subjectivity in deciding what should count as an *unstated* indication of a less offensive item. Sometimes the latter is a little too hidden in the definition. Generally speaking, however, it is clear from analysis that many entries do not include alternatives, or else there are better alternatives which have not been indicated. Just to give a few examples: there are no alternatives suggested for many of the insulting words in groups 7 and 8 (e.g. *arsehole*, *bastard*, *bitch*, *bugger*, *cretin*, *prick*); nor are alternatives given for verbs meaning ‘have sex’ (*bang*, *fuck*, *get your rocks off*, *hump*, *knock off*, *roger*, *shag*, *screw*), unless one includes the ubiquitous defining phrase ‘have sex (with)’; the alternative *break wind* (for *fart*) is suggested in only two out of five dictionaries; and only one dictionary out of three includes alternatives for the phrases *give sb a bollocking* and *get a bollocking*.⁷

5.2. A further lexicographical option: alternatives for contextualized examples

The entry for the noun *shit* in OALD7 includes the following definition and example:

1. solid waste matter from the bowels. SYN excrement: *a pile of dog shit on the path*. HELP NOTE A more polite way to express this example would be ‘a pile of dog dirt’.

Here, in addition to the ‘synonym’ *excrement*, an alternative has been given for a contextualized example of the headword. This was the only such example I came across during analysis, but it is a strategy which could be usefully employed in relation to a number of other offensive lexical items.

In the above example, the usefulness of the strategem depends on the fact that there has been no entry-level differentiation between human and other forms of excrement. It is the specific collocation ‘dog shit’ which is replaceable with ‘dog dirt’ (and in the same way ‘pigeon droppings’ is a politer way of saying ‘pigeon shit’).

Contextualized alternative examples would also be useful in cases where a less offensive item belongs to a different part of speech category or differs from the point of view of phraseology. An example is the adjective *buggered*, meaning ‘broken’ or ‘ruined’ (adjectives used in the MLD definitions). Dictionary examples all relate to machines (photocopier, television, washing machine). Examples are: *The television’s buggered, but I can’t afford to get it mended*, and *The photocopier’s buggered again*. Some alternatives which suggest themselves (in addition to the word *broken*) are: *The*

⁶ In the case of the example with *break wind*, there is an indication of a synonymic relation (=), and elsewhere the abbreviation SYN can be found with the same function. When dealing with the relationship between OFFENSIVE ↔ INOFFENSIVE pairs of items, I think it would be preferable not to use such symbols. The equation ‘*fart = break wind*’ may be compared with that of ‘*bugger off = sod off*’ (COB5), which is a valid equation.

⁷ With regard to the general coverage of less offensive ‘synonyms’, it might be expected that the learner would be offered more help in *thesauruses* rather than *dictionaries*. However, this is not the case. Quite a number of the offensive items are not included in the fully-fledged thesauruses (LLA and OxSyn - see References), and thesaural searches on the CD-ROM versions of CALD3 and MEDAL2 produce, in most cases, semantic fields which are too broad in nature to be of much benefit, or else consist of *only* offensive items.

television's not working ... and *The photocopier's out of action again*. The alternatives 'not working' and 'out of action' are clearer if they are introduced into the examples.

A second example is the phrase 'I'm buggered if ...', which has, as an important part of its communicative role, the function of emphasizing (a function associated with various offensive words). In MEDAL2 the phrase is broken down into two different uses, each with an example:

- 1) used for emphasizing that you do not know something: *I'm buggered if I know what she sees in him.*
- 2) used for emphasizing that you will not do something: *I'm buggered if I'm listening to him any more.*

These examples could be paraphrased in various ways: 1) *I've no idea at all what she sees in him;* 2a) *I'm certainly not listening to him any more.* 2b) *I tell you one thing: I'm not going to listen to him any more.*

Not all offensive items in the dictionaries are currently accompanied by contextualized examples, though I think they should be (perhaps with the exception of particularly taboo areas of meaning). Some which have no examples are *a piece of piss*, *to screw*, *not give a fuck*, *shit-faced*, *piss artist*, and *arse licker*. Looking in more detail at the first of these examples, *a piece of piss* is present in three dictionaries and is defined in very simple fashion ('to be very easy to do'; 'something that is extremely easy to do'; 'a thing that is very easy to do'). Such definitions do not give very interesting lexical alternatives to the learner; other possibilities which spring to mind, and which could be incorporated into contextualized examples, are *dead easy*, *a cinch*, and *a piece of cake*.

5.3. Degrees of formality

Lexical items labelled as 'offensive' are presumably also 'informal' (though only occasionally are both types of label given). When presenting the reader with a less offensive alternative, the ideal situation would be that the alternative retain a degree of informality. Sometimes this is not possible, since an informal lexicalised equivalent does not exist. Some of the items in groups 4, 5 and 6 (Table 3) do not seem to offer much choice: they are either standard, neutral words, or else they are judged to be offensive. This is the case, for example, of words of nationality, such as the offensive *frog* and neutral *Frenchman*, *the French*, etc. (Even here, though, informality could be shown in contextualized inoffensive examples by using phrases such as 'French guy'). 'Homosexuality' is another area where you either use one of the neutral words available (*homosexual*, *gay*, *lesbian*) or you are being offensive (*bent*, *dyke*, *fairy*, *pansy*, *puff*, *queer*).

For some lexical items, some or all MLDs already provide informal alternatives. For example, with regard to group 10 (NONSENSE / LIES), the dictionaries generally agree on words such as *nonsense* and *rubbish* as alternatives to items such as *balls* and *bullshit* (*cobblers* is another possibility). And the previously mentioned phrases *to give sb a bollocking* and *to get a bollocking* are given informal alternatives in OALD7, where a 'HELP NOTE' explains that: 'There are more polite ways to express this, for example *to give sb / to get a rocket*, or *to tear a strip off sb*'.

In many cases, however, in some or all dictionaries, informal equivalents are missing: lexis provided (either within definitions or as an explicit alternative) is either somewhat formal or technical, or else is very ‘ordinary’ in nature. For example, in three dictionaries the verb *to piss* has just the ‘defining’ alternatives *to urinate* or *to pass urine*; only in the other two dictionaries can we find alternative lexis such as *to pee*, *to wee*, and *to go to the bathroom* (or *loo*). Table 4 shows further examples, where none of the dictionaries offer very interesting alternatives.

OFFENSIVE ITEM	EXPLANATORY LEXIS CURRENTLY USED IN MLDS	OTHER POSSIBLE (INFORMAL) LEXIS & PHRASEOLOGY
to get on sb’s tits	to annoy someone (a lot)	to get on sb’s nerves to drive sb crazy ‘You’re really bugging me’, etc
pissed off	(very) angry, annoyed, disappointed, unhappy	cheesed off, hacked off, fed up
shagged (out)	very/extremely tired	knackered, worn out, whacked
pissed	drunk	plastered, sloshed, blotto
to be pissing down	to be raining very heavily / very hard	to be pouring down / lashing down / bucketing down
cock, dick, knob, prick, tool	penis	willy
to scare sb shitless, scare the shit out of sb	to frighten sb very much, etc	to scare the pants off sb, to scare the life out of sb

Table 4. Examples of possible informal alternatives in British English

5.4. Degrees of offensiveness

Naturally, not all ‘offensive’ items are offensive to the same degree, and from a broad lexicographical perspective, this fact is of relevance above all to a dictionary’s labelling system (e.g. OFFENSIVE vs VERY OFFENSIVE). However, the degree of offensiveness is also of relevance to comparisons made between some individual lexical items. One of the most obvious examples is the word pair *fucking* ↔ *effing*. Three dictionaries label the latter as ‘offensive’, and in a fourth the definition begins ‘an offensive word ...’. At the same time, three dictionaries point out that the word is used so as to avoid the ruder word *fucking*. This example shows that one could, at the entry for an offensive word, indicate a *less offensive* (rather than inoffensive) alternative. In this specific case, none of the MLDS mention the word *effing* at the entry for *fucking*.

There are quite a number of other words with the same emphatic function as *effing* and *fucking*, and which could be considered when looking for less offensive alternatives. Examples are *frigging* and *sodding* (both in the sample analysed), and *bloody*, *bleeding*, *blinking* and *damn/ed*.

Two other lexical groups of this sort, this time phraseological in nature, are: *couldn’t give a fuck / shit / sod / damn / monkey’s / toss*, and *fuck all / bugger all / sod all / damn all*.

Some of the examples above introduce the notion of euphemistic, derived words: *fucking* has given rise to both *effing* and *frigging*. In the same way, *blinking* and *bleeding* are based on *bloody*. This type of relationship is one which is not exploited

very well by MLDs. Where the relationship is recognized, the original, more offensive word is mentioned at the entry for the politer word but not vice versa. For example, two MLDs mention *shit* at the entry for *sugar* (already mentioned in section 2.1), but the reverse does not happen.

5.5. Generalizing

Some lexis from the general area of meaning THE HUMAN BODY AND ITS FUNCTIONS could be rendered less offensive through the use of more general words or of euphemisms. A definition in LDOCE4 reads: ‘the sex organs - used when you want to avoid naming them directly’, but none of the MLDs mention the phrase in question (*private parts*) at the entries for the relative ‘offensive’ words. Another euphemistic phrase of this type is *nether regions*.

There are also more general words which could be used to avoid naming his or her ‘you know what’. Examples are *whatsit*, *doodah*, *thingy* and, of course, *you know what*. These could be usefully placed within less offensive contextualized examples.

A rather different use of ‘general’ words relates to one of the uses of *bastard* and *sod* (which are themselves general words in this case). The use is that illustrated by the following dictionary examples: ‘He’s gone straight to the top, the lucky bastard’; ‘You poor bastard!’; ‘The poor sod’s wife left him’. Some less offensive general words are suggested by OALD7 in its entry for *sod*, which reads as follows: ‘used with an adjective to refer to a person, especially a man: ‘The poor old sod got the sack yesterday.’ ‘You lucky sod!’ HELP NOTE: You can use words like *man*, *boy*, *devil* or *thing* instead.’

5.6 Retaining phraseological structure

In the examples given so far, there are various cases where phraseological parallelism exists between the offensive item and one of the less offensive alternatives. Examples are: *piece of piss* → *piece of cake*, *get a bollocking* → *get a rocket*, *get on sb’s tits* → *get on sb’s nerves*, *scare the shit out of sb* → *scare the life out of sb*, *pissed off* → *cheesed off*, *to be pissing down* → *to be pouring down*, and *couldn’t give a fuck* → *couldn’t give a damn*. Where such pairings exist, it would be very useful for dictionaries to take advantage. It would simplify any eventual suggestions for alternatives within contextualized examples, and it may well help retention on the part of the learner. Some further examples are: *bugger* (etc) *about* → *mess about*, *take the piss* → *take the mickey*, *lick sb’s arse* → *lick sb’s boots* and *be on the piss* → *be on the booze*.

5.7. Offensive items which are difficult to replace

In section 5.3, I discussed offensive lexis for which it is difficult to find an inoffensive *informal* equivalent (e.g. *frog*, *dago*). There is also offensive lexis for which it is difficult to find *any* lexicalized alternative, at least without losing some of the intrinsic meaning. Examples of this are *queen* and *nancy boy*, both meaning more or less the same thing. The former is defined in MEDAL2 in the following way: ‘an offensive word for a gay man who the speaker thinks behaves like a woman’. The opposite meaning applies to *bull dyke*, defined by CALD3 as ‘a lesbian who is very like a man in appearance and behaviour’. This, again, is difficult to substitute, unless one uses the more generic *lesbian*. A fourth example, again from the field of ‘sexuality’, is *prick-teaser*, defined by OALD7 as: ‘an offensive word used to describe a woman who makes a man think she will have sex with him when she will not’.

Even some semantically very simple items can cause problems. The words *dwarf* and *midget*, according to the dictionaries, are both now considered to be potentially offensive. But what are the alternatives? The only MLD definition which includes a lexical alternative is that of *midget* in MEDAL2, which indicates the (politically correct) term ‘person of restricted growth’, but this seems very formal. Interestingly, at its entry for *dwarf* OALD7 states that: ‘There is no word that is generally considered more acceptable’. This was the only statement of this kind that I came across in the course of analysis.

5.8. Extended notes

As mentioned in section 5.1, MEDAL2 has a note at the entry for *black* entitled ‘Words that avoid giving offence: *black*’. Extended notes of this sort could be used to discuss together closely related words which either belong to taboo areas of meaning or else are not politically correct for some other reason. Reference to ‘race’ is one such area, though dictionary policy may prefer not to bring together, and therefore highlight, offensive words from this semantic field (e.g. *coon*, *nigger*, *spade*, *wog*). This could be obviated by having cross-references from the individual entries and including in the general language note only politically correct items and ‘offensive’ words which are not too strong (e.g. the nouns *black* and *negro*).

The ‘private parts’ of the human body could also be treated in the same way, with various suggestions and comparison coming together in one place.

6. Concluding remarks

The type of lexical item discussed in this paper, although comprising only a small minority of the entries in learners’ dictionaries, need to be given careful attention. Since they *could* cause offence, then it is fitting that learners be shown ways of avoiding the items in question, especially through the use of comparable, informal lexis. At present this happens only to a limited degree.

In addition to helping dictionary users in very specific learning situations, the explicit comparison of offensive and inoffensive (or less offensive) items should also help to strengthen the learners’ general awareness of register, that is, of appropriacy and selection. The direct association of like vocabulary may also help the learner to remember new lexis; this is especially true where formally comparable phraseological items are concerned.

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