

Thoughts on Example Sentences

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Where should one get example sentences for a dictionary? First of all, let me state my conviction that example sentences are essential. I am working on a dictionary of Jarawara, a South American Indian language, and it is my goal to have an unelicited example sentence for each meaning of each word.¹ Without example sentences, there is no objective way I can defend what the meanings in the dictionary represent, and there is also no way the reader can evaluate what I have done.

I have used the qualification “unelicited”—what does that mean? It means, first of all, that the examples do not come from my own head. I speak Jarawara, but Jarawara is not my mother tongue, so I don’t have native intuitions. South American Indian languages are very different from European languages, and it is very dangerous for a linguist to rely on his or her intuitions or memory.

Another thing that unelicited means is that I did not get an example sentence by asking, “How do you say X?” When I ask such a question, I have some (artificial) context in my head, but how do I know what the context is in the speaker’s head? There is no real-world context to serve as a check. Also, the fact that the original is coming from a second language may affect the grammaticality and/or the naturalness of the result.

This is why example sentences should not come from Bible translations, or any other translated material, for that matter. Translated material is elicited material, that’s what elicited means. And it does not matter if the translator is a mother tongue speaker. I am all for mother tongue speakers doing translations—they have huge advantages over other tongue translators. But the source text is from outside the culture, it did not originate with a mother tongue speaker. So it is not a good source of examples for a dictionary (or for a grammar, either). And again, depending on the skill of the translator, the translation may be ungrammatical and/or unnatural.

Coming back to the original question, what are good sources for examples? In my text database in Toolbox, I have several kinds of records. Most are stories of various kinds transcribed from sound recordings, including both traditional tales and personal experience accounts, along with a lesser number of texts of other types such as procedural texts and songs. Other records are stories which were composed and written by Jarawaras. They are the same basic types as the transcribed stories, but were written originally and were not oral. Another group of records consist of several

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¹ Since this article was first released in unpublished form (2006), the Jarawara dictionary has appeared at the SIL-Brazil site, in Portuguese and English versions.

thousand isolated utterances which I have written down as I have heard them over the years. I always carry slips of paper and a pen, and whenever I hear some new word or affix or construction, I write the sentence down. These sentences are an invaluable source of information for the dictionary and for grammatical analysis. In my recent Ph.D. thesis (Vogel 2003), about 57 percent of the examples were from these sentences, as opposed to 43 percent from stories, whereas the stories make up 2/3 of my interlinearized data.

I have another record in Toolbox where I keep elicited examples. These will not be used in the dictionary. I use elicitation mostly to get information on paradigms. For example, I often take a sentence from an unelicited text and ask a Jarawara to change the subject from masculine to feminine, to see what the other form of a particular suffix is. That is very different from asking, "How do you say X?" or making up a sentence and saying, "Can you say Y?"

In the end, there will undoubtedly be some nouns for which I will not feel the need to have example sentences, such as the different varieties of manioc. And there will probably be a residue of nouns that speakers will have to illustrate with example sentences. This is not too bad, since the meanings are coming originally from their heads. But still, someone saying they *could* say X is not the same as if someone actually *did* say it in a real communication situation. (I recognize, of course, that people sometimes make mistakes in the things they say, so there is occasionally an unelicited sentence that should not be used as an example.)

You may have gathered by now that what I am talking about is much more than how to get example sentences for a dictionary. I am talking about how to learn and analyze a language. Don't rely on your intuitions or your memory or on answers to elicitation questions. Rely on the written and/or recorded record of things people actually said in real communication situations.

Reference

Vogel, Alan R. 2003. *Jarawara Verb Classes*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh. Available online at <http://www.sil.org/americas/brasil/PUBLICNS/LING/JAVerb.pdf> (accessed August 12, 2008). ■