

Islamic Definitions of Selected English Words in an English Dictionary: Students' Perspectives

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Abstract: Dictionaries are designed to meet the needs of their users. The presence of dictionaries that address the varieties of English reflects the diversity in language use. The purpose of this study is to investigate Muslim students' perspectives of the definitions of selected words in an English language dictionary. The study employs a qualitative method using document analysis and group discussions. The subjects are 21 Muslim postgraduate students pursuing Master degree in English language studies in an Islamic institution. The findings indicated that the students were aware that certain words have a different meaning in the Islamic context.

Key words: Islamisation • Muslim learners • Dictionary • Culture • ESL/EFL

INTRODUCTION

Dictionaries have been generally accepted as a source of reference for meanings of words. The authoritative status enjoyed by dictionaries is taken for granted and to some, "life would be impossible if the dictionary was not the final arbiter in our linguistic disputes" [1]. A trivial example is when a dictionary is used to determine the acceptability of a word in a game such as Scrabble [2]. This view which regards dictionaries as comprising words with specific meanings which are accurate and contain a complete account of a community's language is termed as lexicographic ideology [3].

Most experts agree that dictionaries should be compiled with the users' needs in mind. The presence of national dictionaries such as Macquarie Dictionary [4], Australian National Dictionary [5], Dictionary of New Zealand English [6], The Canadian Oxford Dictionary [7], Dictionary of English usage in South Africa [8] and Dictionary of Caribbean English usage [9] acknowledge the uniqueness and varieties of English. Dictionary of Bahamian English [10] for instance, contains over 5000

entries of words and expressions used in the Bahamas. Some of these words are not generally found in the standard variety of American and British English. The same applies to Macquarie Dictionary which aims to record the distinctiveness of Australian English [4]. It is contended that Australian English differs from other varieties of English due to the distinctive history of its people [5].

Dictionaries are not only based on the standard varieties but are also used for other purposes such as language for specific purposes dictionaries. The latter could be extended to dictionaries that cater to the beliefs of the users. The standard version may not be able address the specific connotations that a word carries to show the peculiarities of a particular culture or religion. Yet, this is the version that is commonly used especially in a second language context. The presence of words that carry different connotations from their beliefs has caused concern to some users. Some Muslim scholars, for example, pointed to the need for coming up with an English Language Dictionary for the Muslims to address this issue [11]. A renowned Muslim scholar, al-Attas (1978) gives an example of how justice is defined

differently from the western definition. To him, justice is “a harmonious condition or state of affairs whereby every entity or every being is in its right or proper place” [12] unlike the common dictionary definition which is “the fair treatment of people: laws based on the principles of justice” and “the quality of being fair and reasonable” [13](p.839). The common dictionary definition for the word *fair* is “treating everyone equally and according to the rules of the law” [13](p.548) and *equal* is “the same in size, quantity, value etc as sth else” [13](p.513). In Islam, justice does not necessarily entail the same in size, quantity or value. An example is the Islamic law of inheritance, when the deceased leaves behind children of both sexes, the daughter is entitled to a portion whilst the son is entitled to two portions of the inheritance [14] (An-Nisa:11).

Another word which has caused concern among the Muslims is Mecca. It is a sacred word to the Muslims but is given a different meaning by four dictionaries [15], which associated ‘mecca’ (usually with a small m) with a place that people like to visit as shown in the following sentences:

Oxford: A place that many people wish to visit, especially people with a shared interest: *This exhibition is a mecca for stamp collectors.*

Longman: A place that many people want to visit for a particular reason: *Florence is a mecca for students of Art History*

Cobuild: If you describe a place as a mecca or Mecca for a particular thing or activity, you mean that many people who are interested in it go there: *His Batley Variety Club became a mecca for high-class acts and mass audiences. Thailand has become a tourist mecca of Asia.*

Cambridge: A place to which many people are attracted: *Many young people look on Miami as a kind of Mecca...The shop is a mecca for good quality, reasonably priced clothes. This is a town that at one time was a mecca of tiny businesses.*

The connotation of this word suggests the attributes of *popular* and *place*. This reflects that the connotation of a word can be more widely used than its denotation among the users of the language.

Other examples where the connotations have been used as dictionary entries are the words *Bangkok* and *Indians*. This capital city of Thailand, Bangkok, was described by the Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture (1st edition) as a place that is often associated with prostitutes. Longman immediately revised the definition when the Thais protested to the offensive definition [15]. The same was done by a multimedia Spanish dictionary when the Indians objected to them being defined as savages.

Apart from the above, there may be other words with definitions that users may not agree to. This study is thus conducted to investigate dictionary users’ awareness of the differences in meaning as defined by the religious and spiritual beliefs and those defined by the common dictionaries. The study also seeks to find the alternative meaning to the selected words according to one of the beliefs which is Islam.

Methodology: The study was conducted qualitatively using document analysis and group discussions. The New Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary [13] or henceforth termed as [13] was analysed and evaluated for this purpose. In the Malaysian context, this dictionary is easily accessible and is thus commonly used by advanced learners.

Subject: The subjects were 21 Muslim postgraduate students comprising 3 males and 18 females pursuing their Master degree in English in an Islamic institution. They were doing a course on Islamisation of knowledge in English Language Teaching where they were trained to be critical when dealing with texts which are not in harmony with Islamic teachings. Islamisation of knowledge is one of the missions of the university which emphasises on the need for the students to be critical when dealing with western texts as some of the texts are not in line with Islamic principles [16].

Procedure

Phase One:

- The students were divided into seven groups of three students;
- They were asked to refer to [13];
- Each group was assigned to focus on words beginning with two or three different letters of the alphabet in the dictionary to avoid overlapping;

- They were required to identify and list the English words in the dictionary which were perceived not to be in line with the Islamic principles;
- They were required to refer to the *Qur'anic* verses [14], collections from *hadith* (sayings and actions by Prophet Muhammad *s.a.w.*) and Islamic books to justify why they felt the definitions of the chosen words in the English dictionary are not in line with the Islamic principles; and
- They were given one month to complete the task.

Phase Two:

- Each group presented its findings to the others to see whether they agreed with the suggestions;
- Words with definitions considered to be incongruent with the Islamic perspective but without sufficient evidence were omitted; and
- Words with definitions considered to be incongruent with the Islamic perspective with sufficient evidence were included for analysis.

Findings: The findings of the study indicated that the students were able to identify 23 words from [13] which they felt were not defined in line with the Islamic perspective. Justifications were given based on the *Qur'anic* verses, collections from *hadith* (sayings and actions by Prophet Muhammad *s.a.w.*) and Islamic books. Most of these words could be categorised under marriage, death and religion.

Marriage: Under the category of marriage, the definitions of seven words were identified as not in line with the Islamic teachings; namely, *alimony*, *dowry*, *bigamy*, *polygamy*, *intimacy*, *unfaithful* and *infidelity*. Group 1 found that in [13], the word *alimony* is defined as “the money that a court orders somebody to pay regularly to their former wife or husband when the marriage is ended” [13] (p. 37). They pointed out that in Islam, the money must be paid by the ex-husband to his ex-wife and not vice-versa, for a certain period of time. Two *Qur'anic* verses were quoted to support the point:

- O Prophet! When ye do divorce women, divorce them at their prescribed periods and count (accurately), their prescribed periods: And fear Allah your Lord: and turn them not out of their houses, nor shall they (themselves) leave, except in case they are

guilty of *some* open lewdness, those are limits set by Allah and any who transgresses the limits of Allah, does verily wrong his (own) soul: thou knowest not if perchance Allah will bring about thereafter some new situation (At-Talaq 65:1)

- O ye who believe! When ye marry believing women and then divorce them before ye have touched them, no period of *Iddat* have ye to count in respect of them: so give them a present. And set them free in a handsome manner” (Al-Ahzab 33:49)

The second word in this category is *dowry* which refers to “money and/or property that in some societies, a wife or her family must pay to her husband when they get married; Money and/or property that in some societies a husband must pay to his wife’s family when they get married” [13] (p.473). Group 2 pointed out that this definition cannot be applied to the Muslims because the word *dowry* or *mahr* in Arabic means payment that is imposed on the husband and not the wife’s family. *Mahr* is a gift or sum of money given by the husband to the wife in consideration of marriage” [17].

The third word is *bigamy* which means “a crime of marrying somebody when you are still legally married to somebody else” [13] (p. 137). In Islam, the students argued that it is not a crime for a man to marry more than one wife. It is lawful and in fact, he can marry up to four wives provided he has the means to do so. Group 1 highlighted verse An-Nisa (4:3) of the Qur’an to support their argument:

- Marry women of your choice, two or three or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or (a captive) that your right hands possess, that will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice

In relation to *bigamy* is *polygamy*. Similar to *bigamy*, the students pointed out that the word *polygamy* as defined in the dictionary is not in-line with the Islamic principles. In the dictionary, it is defined as “The practice or custom of having more than one wife or husband at the same time” [13] (p. 1163). In Islam, the students asserted that polygamy could only be practised by men and in fact, they are allowed to marry up to four wives, with the condition that they can be just to all the wives. Group 5 quoted the above Qur’anic verse (an-Nisa 4:3) to substantiate their point.

The definition of the fifth word was also found to be contrary to the Islamic teachings. The word *intimacy* which is defined as “the state of having a close relationship with somebody”, “A thing that a person says or does to somebody that they know very well”, “sexual activity, especially an act of sexual intercourse” [13] (p. 783). The students said that it is very important to note that in Islam, intimacy is only allowed between legally married couples. While Islam encourages intimacy in a marriage, it denounces intimacy between unmarried couples. Group 3 quoted Qur’anic verse (al-Isra:32), “And go not near to fornication; surely it is an indecency and an evil way” to make her point.

The sixth word in this category is *unfaithful* (to somebody). One of the definitions of this word is “having sex with somebody who is not your husband, wife or usual partner” [13] (p. 1610). Group 7 argued that this connotation of the word does not apply to the Muslims because the phrase “usual partner” denotes a relationship that has no matrimonial binds. They added that marriage is encouraged in Islam as stated in the Qur’anic verse (An-Noor: 32), “marry those among you who are single, or the virtuous ones among yourselves: male or female...” and to avoid adultery (an-Nisa’:24).

In relation to *unfaithful* is the word *infidelity* which is “The act of not being faithful to your wife, husband, partner, by having sex with somebody else” [13](p. 764). Similar to *unfaithful*, the students pointed out that no sexual activities should be committed other than with their spouse. Group 3 pointed out the punishment for committing adultery or *zina* as stated in the Qur’anic verse (an-Nur 24:2).

Death: Under the category of death, the definitions of two of the words were found to be different from its meaning from the Islamic perspective; namely, *death* and *martyr*. The word *death* is defined as “the end of life, the state of being dead; the permanent or destruction of something” [13] (p.392). The students emphasized that in Islam, although death is the end of life, it is not permanent. It is a mandatory transitional event between life before death and life after death. The Muslims believe that on Resurrection Day people will be judged on the deeds that they have done in this world. In other words life before death is the first stage of the journey to eternity. Group 2 quoted Qur’anic verse (al-Mumenuon: 99-100) to support their point:

Until When Death Comes to One of Them, He Says: O my Lord! Send me back (to life), in order that I may work righteousness in the things I neglected.”-“By no means! It is but a word he says.” Before them is a Partition till the Day they are raised up.

The second word in this category is *martyr* which is defined as “A person who suffers very much or is killed because of their religious or political beliefs” [13] (p. 724). The students unanimously agreed that a person who is killed because of his political belief is not a martyr in Islam. Group 5 quoted the following narration of the Prophet s.a.w. [18]:

It has been narrated on the authority of Abu Huraira (through another chain of transmitters) that the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) said: Whom do you consider to be a martyr among you? They (the Companions) said: Messenger of Allah, one who is slain in the way of Allah is a martyr. He said: Then (if this definition of a martyr) the martyrs of my *Umma* will be small in number. They asked: Messenger of Allah, who are they? He said: One who is slain in the way of Allah is a martyr; one who dies in the way of Allah is a martyr; one who dies of plague is a martyr; one who dies of cholera is a martyr.

Ibn Miqdam Said: I testify the truth of your father’s statement (with regard to this tradition) that the Holy Prophet (may peace be upon him) said: One who is drowned is a martyr.

In other words, the word *matyr* refers to those who die in the way of Allah and those who die suffering from certain sickness.

Religion: The definitions of eleven of the words were found to be disturbing to the students. These words are *ablution*, *Christ*, *crucifixion*, *duty*, *fast*, *fate*, *God*, *heaven*, *hell*, *miracles* and *prophet*.

The first word *ablution* is defined as “(Formal or humorous) the act of washing yourself” [13] (p.3). The students unanimously agreed that the definition does not capture the meaning of *wudhu* in Islam. Group 1 pointed out that in Islam, ablution is a prerequisite before one could perform his prayer. Although it involves washing specific parts of the body, it has to be done in a prescribed order. Beginning with washing one’s face, it has to be followed by washing one’s hands to the elbows, part of the head and feet to the ankles respectively. They quoted the Qur’anic verse (Al-Maidah: 6)

to substantiate their point which stated, “O ye who believe! when ye prepare for prayer, wash your faces and your hands (and arms) to the elbows; Rub your heads (with water); and (wash) your feet to the ankles...”.

Christ is the second word in this category. It is defined as “the man that Christians believe is the son of God and whose teachings the Christian religion is based” [13] (p.191). Group 1 pointed out that in Islam, Jesus is known as Isa and Muslims regard him highly as a prophet but not as a son of God based on the *Qur’anic* verses which stated, “Say: He is Allah, the One and Only, Allah, the Eternal, Absolute; he begets not, nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him” (al-Ikhlās: 1-5) and “They do blasphemy who say: “God is Christ the son of Maryam”. But said Christ: “O Children of Israel! Worship God, my Lord and your Lord” (al-Maidah: 72).

In relation to *Christ*, the students highlighted *crucifixion* which is defined in contrary to the Islamic teachings. *Crucifixion* is defined as “the death of Jesus Christ on the cross” [13] (p. 336). The students unanimously agreed that Prophet Isa did not die on the cross. He was betrayed by his own people, the Jews, who wanted him crucified and dead. They based their argument on the following *Qur’anic* verse (an-Nisa’:157-158):

- That they said (in boast), “We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Apostle of God”; - but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not: - Nay, God raises him up onto Himself and God is Exalted in Power, Wise.
- The word *duty* which is “something that you have to do because it is your moral or legal responsibility” [13] (p. 477) has also been highlighted by the students to be defined not in line with the Islamic perspective. Group 2 said that in Islam, *duty* is not just a moral or legal obligation; it is a religious one as stated in the Qur’anic verse (al-Maidah: 1) which means, “O ye who believe! Fulfill (all) obligations...”
- The students also pointed out that the definition of the word *fast* is different from the Islamic teaching. It is defined as “to eat little or no food for a period of time, especially for a religious or health reasons and a period during which you do not eat food, especially for religious or health reasons” [13] (p. 534). In Islam,

fasting does not only involve abstaining one from eating or drinking for a specific period of time but also abstaining from sexual activities with their own spouse. Group 2 quoted the following Qur’anic verse (al-Baqarah: 187) to substantiate their point which says, “permitted to you, on the nights of the fasts, is to approach your wives...eat and drink, until the white thread of dawn appear to you distinct from its black thread; then complete the fast till the night appears”.

- The word *fate* which is “the things, especially bad things that will happen or have happened to something and the power that is believed to control everything that happens and that cannot be stopped or changed” [13] (p.536) was also highlighted by the students. Group 2 pointed out that in Islam, *fate* does not only refer to bad things but also good things. Allah is the One who plans and decides people’s fate.

No misfortune can happen on earth or in your souls but is recorded in a decree before We bring it to existence. That is truly easy for Allah. In order that you may not despair over matters that pass you by, not exult over favours bestowed upon you. For Allah loves not any vainglorious boaster (al-Hadid: 22-23).

However, the students also asserted that in Islam, man must work hard as stated in the Qur’anic verses al-Najm: 39, “that man can have nothing but what he strives for” and al-Rad: 11, “...Verily never will God change the condition of a people until they change it themselves”.

The word *God* is defined as “(in especially Christian, Jewish and Muslim belief) the being which made the universe, the Earth and its people and is believed to have an effect on all things”, “a spirit or being believed to control some part of the universe or life and often worshipped for doing so, or a representative of this spirit or being” and “someone who is very important to you, who you admire very much and who strongly influences you” [13](p. 618). Based on the *Qur’anic* verses (al-Ikhlās: 1-4), Group 3 argued that God is not a “being” or a “spirit” but He is Allah, the One and Only Creator and Sustainer of the universe and nothing is comparable to Him. He is neither male nor female and He does not beget nor is He begotten. Only He should be worshipped. With reference to the third dictionary definition, they asserted that the term ‘God’ or ‘god’ is exclusive and must not to be extended to anyone or anything other than Allah. They added that to do so is sacrilegious.

The word *heaven* which is defined as “in some religions, the place, sometimes imagined to be in the sky, where God or the gods live and where good people are believed to go after they die, so that they can enjoy perfect happiness” [13] (p. 669) has also been highlighted by the students. Group 3 pointed out that to the Muslims, heaven is not an imagined place. It is real and a promise by Allah which can be seen in many verses in the Quran such as “...For the righteous are Gardens in nearness to their Lord...” (Ali Imran:15), “Their reward is with God: Gardens of Eternity...” (al-Bayyinah:8) and “Near the Lote-tree beyond which none may pass: Near it is the Garden of Abode” (al-Najm:14-15).

As in the definition of *heaven*, *hell* is also defined differently. It refers to “the place where some people are believed to go after death to be punished forever for the bad things they have done during their lives” [13] (p.672). Similar to *heaven*, the students argued that the phrase “are believed” seems to denote that *hell* as a punishment is not a certainty. They stated that hell is the promised abode and bottomless pit of torture, a place where Allah will fill with jinns and men – the unbelievers, the transgressors, the arrogant and the hypocrites. Their argument was based on the following *Qur’anic* verses “...I will fill Hell with jinns and men all together” (Hud:119) and “The disbelievers will be led to Hell in crowd...(To them) will be said: Enter ye the gates of Hell, to dwell herein: and evil is (this) abode of the arrogant!” (al-Zumar:71-72).

The definition of the word *miracle* which is “an unusual and mysterious event that is thought to have been caused by a god, or any surprising and unexpected event” [13] (p. 909) was also found to contradict the Islamic viewpoint. The phrase “a god” transgresses the belief in the Oneness of Allah. Where Islam is concerned, miracles are by the will of Allah and the prophets are instrumental in carrying out the miracles. Group 5 stated that there are many verses in the Quran which tell about the miracles of the prophets such as Prophet Isa’s ability to speak when he was still a baby (Maryam: 29-34) and Prophet Musa’s rod which was changed into a snake (al-Qasas: 31-32).

The word *prophet* has a significant meaning to Muslims and therefore it is important for the word to be defined in accordance with the Islamic principles. The dictionary defines it as “A person sent by God to teach the people and give them messages from God; prophet Muhammad who founded the religion of Islam, a person who claims to know what will happen in future” [13] (p. 210). Group 6 asserted that the words Prophet

Muhammad need to be corrected. It is defined as “The Arab prophet who founded the religion of Islam” [13] (p. 756). According to them Prophet Muhammad is the last Prophet for the Muslims. He was sent by Allah to be the mercy and the role model for all humanity. They emphasized the fact that Muhammad S.A.W was not the founder of Islam but a messenger of Allah. They highlighted that the word ‘founder’ means someone who establishes or sets up something. Hence, the word is only suitable to describe a person who initiates or starts a new idea, theory or institution. Furthermore, he did not claim to know what will happen in the future. The *Qur’anic* verse (Al-Baqarah 2: 42) which states “And cover not Truth with falsehood, nor conceal the Truth (i.e Muhammad SAW is the messenger of Allah and his qualities are written in your scriptures, the Taurat and the Injeel) when ye know (the truth)” was quoted to support their point.

Others: The students also pointed out other definitions which run contrary to the Muslim beliefs. This includes *mother nature* and the *missing link*. *Mother nature* is defined as “The natural world, when you consider it as a force that effects the world and human beings” [13] (p. 763). Group 5 pointed out that in Islam, it is Allah S.W.T who Creates all existence (including nature) and the only force that affects the world and human beings. Based on the *Qur’anic* verses (al-‘Araf: 54-58), they emphasized that Allah had explained in great detail the creation of earth (nature) and how He had given it to mankind so that they would use it wisely:

Your Guardian-Lord is Allah, Who created the heavens and the earth in six days and is firmly established on the throne (of authority): He draweth the night as a veil o’er the day, each seeking the other in rapid succession: He created the sun, the moon and the stars, (all) governed by laws under His command. Is it not His to create and to govern? Blessed be Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds... It is He Who sendeth the winds like heralds of glad tidings, going before His mercy: when they have carried the heavy-laden clouds, We drive them to a land that is dead, make rain to descend thereon and produce every kind of harvest therewith: thus shall We raise up the dead: perchance ye may remember. From the land that is clean and good, by the will of its Cherisher, springs up produce, (rich) after its kind: but from the land that is bad, springs up nothing but that which is niggardly: thus do we explain the signs by various (symbols) to those who are grateful” (al-‘Araf: 54-58)

While the phrase *missing link* is defined as “something, such as a piece of information, that is necessary to be able to understand a problem or to make something complete”, the *missing link* is “An animal that is similar to humans that was once thought to exist at that time that apes were developing into human beings” [13] (p. 751). Group 5 elaborated that the definition is related to the Darwinian Theory that says that human beings evolved from ape-like creatures and have reached the form we know today by the process of natural selection. The students pointed out that the Quran reaffirms the fact that our forefathers were created by Allah as a man and a woman and not apes, “O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes” (al-Hujurat 49:13).

CONCLUSION

Dictionaries that are based on a corpus do not necessarily address the needs of a particular community of language users. This study is one example where a commonly used dictionary is not extensive enough to cater to the diverse needs of its speakers. This does not mean that the users are not aware of the different connotations of the words in their own cultures or religious beliefs. To reduce the possibility of ambiguity and misinterpretation, a community may decide to compile a dictionary that can cater to their specific needs.

Note: The authors would like to thank the International Islamic University Malaysia for funding this research.

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