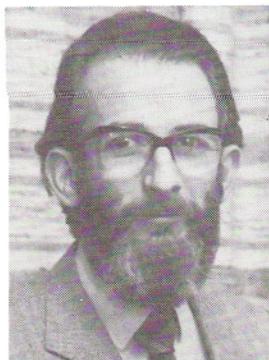


Having it up to here – the asymmetrical lexicon

DAVID CRYSTAL



IT ALL began with a very simple, innocent question – the worst kind of question, when it comes to matters of English usage. ‘What,’ asked a listener to the English language slot in Radio 5’s *Five Aside*, ‘should I say at the end of a meal, when I’m asked by my host whether I want any more food? I’m never comfortable saying *I’m full*, even when surrounded by polite apologetic phrases.’ I agreed and began listening. Within a few days I had heard several unconscious attempts to avoid this phrase, ranging from the mildly abrupt (*I’ve had enough*) to the effete (*sated*, *replete*) and mock-serious (*suffisant*). I asked a group of foreign students what they would say. They went away and consulted Roget. One came back with a winner: *I’ve had it up to here*, he suggested!

If we do take a short stroll through Roget, we don’t get much help. The language seems starved of words to talk about a full stomach. On the other hand, there seems to be a surfeit of words to talk about an empty stomach – such as *starved*, *famished* and *ravenous*. There is even a word for slightly hungry (*peckish*) – but nothing for slightly full. We can distinguish between being empty of food (*hungry*) and being empty of drink (*thirsty*, *parched*), but not between being full of food and full of drink (unless we go in for the vocabulary of drunkenness, of course). There are idioms for being empty (*hungry as a hunter*, *empty as a drum*, *I could eat a horse*) – but for being full? (Test. Complete: *I’m as full as a —?*)

What is the language up to? What is going on? How widespread are these lexical asymmetries? I do not know the answer to the first two questions, but I am beginning to suspect that the answer to the third is ‘very’. This came as something of a surprise. Like many people, I have been brought up on a diet of linguistic symmetry. I remember my anto-

nym exercises in school: X is the opposite of Y, Y is the opposite of X. Some time later I learned about hyponyms, too: X is a kind of Y, Y includes instances of X. I learned about parts and wholes: X is a part of Y, Y contains part X. The impression which emerges is of an organised, balanced binary linguistic universe. Prince? Princess. Buy? Sell. Pavement? Sidewalk.

That is not it, at all. That is not what it’s like, at all. There are vast areas of vocabulary where the eternal lexicographer’s hand seems to have slipped while doling out words, so that one side of the lexical scales is heavily weighed down and the other side left bare. Consider, for example, the vast discrepancy between words and expressions under the heading of ‘Health’ and those under the heading of ‘Ill Health’. In my edition of Roget, the former category attracts 52 lines, whereas the latter has 303. Admittedly, large numbers of the latter are the names of various diseases, but if we exclude these and look only at the descriptive words and phrases, the discrepancy stands. Under adjective: ‘Health’ 24 lines, ‘Ill Health’ 57 lines.

When we start to analyse the situation in more detail, though, some interesting facts emerge. There are indeed far more single-word lexical items descriptive of feelings of ill health (*sickly*, *weak*, *peaky*, *queasy*, *poorly*, *seedy*, *bilious*, *indisposed*, *groggy*, *grotty*, *queer*, *ailing* . . .) than of good health (*blooming*, *sound*, *fit*, *well*, *fine* . . .). On the other hand,

there are far more figurative phrases for good health than for ill health. Under the latter I've found only *out of sorts, under the weather, off colour, below par, a degree under, and green around the gills*. Under the former there are *full of beans bursting with health, hale and hearty, fighting fit, A one, in good/peak/tip-top condition, in the pink, in good nick/shape/heart, in fine fettle/form/trim/feather, sound in wind and limb, sound as a bell, fit as a fiddle, strong as a horse, fresh as a daisy/April, and on the up (and up)*. Are there no conventional similes for ill health at all, comparable to *fit as a fiddle*? I'm ill as a —? (Yes, I know there's *sick as a parrot*.)

Even if we look at the more ingenious expressions from literary sources, the situation is the same. An excellent source book here is Elyse and Mike Sommer, *Similes Dictionary* (Gale Research Company, 1988). Under 'Health', we have two dozen entries including *sound as a bell* (Shakespeare), *fit and taut as a fiddle* (R.L. Stephenson), *fit as a bull moose* (Roosevelt), *fit as a flea* (Henry James), *healthy as a steer* (Thomas Zigal), *sound as a nut* (Mazo de la Roche), and several more. Look up 'Illness', by contrast, and there are less than a dozen entries, none relating to how we feel.

What have the poets been up to? Why no fund of similes for ill health? Maybe the answer is simple. If you're feeling fine, you'll be writing, and creative, and you'll think up all kinds of ways to express your feelings. If you're under the weather, the last thing you want to do is — as Dylan Thomas says in *A Visit to America* — 'write another lousy word', let alone think up a brilliant figure of speech which exactly captures your condition. For most of us, in order to write well, we must be well. Maybe this explains our everyday figurative creativity for health expressions, too?

Lexical voyages are always interesting, and raise all kinds of issues to do with the human condition. For to ask the question 'Why?' about any of the above is at once to be

involved in considerations which, in the days of the first anthropological linguists, were brought under the heading of 'Language, Thought and Reality'. People are certainly very ready to proceed from observations of lexical imbalance to conclusions about the way we live and think about the world. Much of the discussion of sexist language, for example, has been fuelled by observed discrepancies between male and female vocabulary (such as the claim that there are ten times as many words in English for sexually promiscuous women as there are for sexually promiscuous men). But not many areas of lexical asymmetry have such a straightforward social explanation.

We might jump to immediate explanations for certain asymmetries. I can understand why people need to talk about ill health rather than good health. I can also see why expressions for 'Drunkness' should be more (three times more, in fact) than for 'Sobriety', and four times as many for 'Marriage' compared with 'Celibacy', or for 'Bad Person' compared with 'Good Person'. But from what we know of humanity, why should there be twice as many expressions for 'Friendship' as for 'Enmity', or twice as many for 'Preparation' compared with 'Nonpreparation'? Why are there twice as many expressions for 'Heat' compared with 'Cold'. And why are there three times as many expressions for 'Redness' compared with 'Greenness'? Any thesaurus will raise many such imponderables.

There have been few linguistically informed studies of the relationship between linguistic and cultural history. (A fascinating exception is Geoffrey Hughes, *Words in Time*, Blackwell 1988 — a social history of English vocabulary, as his sub-title puts it.) My feeling is that there is a lexical goldmine here, awaiting exploration. In the meantime, I offer the hunt for semantic asymmetries to *ET* readers as a way of whiling away a wet weekend. □