

CONTEXT, CONCORDANCE, AND WHAT NEXT? SUGGESTIONS FOR COMPUTER-ASSISTED TEACHING OF READING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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A few months ago, while I was reading *Newsweek*, I came across the following passage about Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defence for President Bush senior, way back in 1989:

Cheney was given a slide show on [...] the sequence of strikes planned in a nuclear war. Each strike was represented by a red dot. [...] Cheney watched, dumbstruck, as the red dots metastasized across the Soviet Union.

I am sure that an average intermediate learner reading this text will be baffled by the word *metastasized*. What can he or she do? Their teacher will probably tell them – as usual – to work the meaning out from the context. But there is very little context; and on top of that the word is used here metaphorically. I would like to suggest that this is a typical situation in which students can be helped by a good computer program - the kind of program that I am now going to outline.

As early as in 1990 Chris Tribble and Glyn Jones published a book called *Concordances in the Classroom*. In the book they mostly talk about the use of concordances for teaching grammar - or, rather, lexicogrammar. However, on page 36 they write about vocabulary:

The ability to deduce the meaning of unfamiliar words by means of contextual clues is a great asset in language learning. It enables learners to cope with texts which would otherwise prove far too difficult, and to expand their vocabulary in the process. Teachers frequently, and rightly, exhort learners to ‘work it out from the context’ when they encounter new vocabulary, rather than relying completely on the dictionary.

Unfortunately, this is not always possible. The context in which a new word is found does not necessarily contain sufficient information for even a native speaker to deduce its meaning. Concordance output, however, by presenting several contexts of the same word simultaneously, greatly increases the chances of success, while making the process of deduction an intriguing problem-solving task.

It seems to me that this idea could be used as the foundation for a program for teaching reading in a foreign language to learners at an intermediate level. Let me say at the outset that constructing this kind of program would entail both a good deal of programming work, and

considerable expense – the latter because it would be necessary to purchase the right to use a language database (for example, the British National Corpus), as well as two dictionaries: a monolingual and a bilingual one. Still, I am convinced that the results would justify both the work and the expense.

Let me now outline the program. Let us suppose that a student - a member of a course of Business English at an intermediate level - reads an economics text off the computer screen. She comes across the following sentence:

Priority of training: when an investor opens a franchise, he is given the opportunity to acquire specialist skills through a training course covering all aspects of the business from personnel management to administration and from procurement to marketing.

The word *franchise* is new to the student, so she highlights it and presses one of the function keys to call up a KWIC concordance for the word (the acronym KWIC stands for ‘Key Word In Context’). The example below is based upon the British National Corpus - in its demonstration version (another possibility is using the Collins Cobuild Bank of English, or one of many other corpora listed on the British National Corpus page).

<p>1 y himself in 1918. An extension of the franchise. 2 tial to set a financial qualification for the franchise 3 stribution of seats and a widening of the franchise, 4 franchise, then, and get it, obviously that franchise 5 be met by firms applying for a legal aid franchise, 6 be met by firms applying for a legal aid franchise, 7 franchise became at all democratic. The franchise 8 n concerning women and children, from franchise 9 began to develop. The widening of the franchise 10 feasibility studies, development of the franchise 11 franchisor, quality control, training and franchise 12 0 solutions from the 770 found... The franchise 13 te sector consortium er if if they get the franchise 14 to the transferee. No, if they bid for the franchise, 15 e best improving their returns from that franchise 16 entity can be found, say in the case of a franchise, 17 on -- including the introduction of a franchise 18 would make losses. By extending the franchise 19 on the basis of universal non-racial adult franchise. 20 ell, half a century or a century before the franchise 21 s required for the ScotRail operating franchise 22 solicitors' practices, whether seeking a franchise 23 solicitors' practices, whether seeking a franchise 24 ould have tempted Slampacker to open a franchise 25 extension of the franchise. Sale of the franchise</p>	<p>Sale of the franchise may no that would give the vote to "d began to develop. The wide runs for the period, and by the but they will apply to all solicit but they will apply to all solicit fee will determine the point D reform to divorce law. The St extended the input of citizens I package and recruitment of fra support, and management and a was eventually widened as a re and make clear that that's on t then, and get it, obviously that and I'm quite sure they'll succe where none of the employees, system. It was confirmed last and redistributing seats, the 18 The question which is perhaps became at all democratic. Th -- one of the first due to be or not. The Standards will for or not. Another example is fr on his head). This being the may not always be easy. Ter</p>
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Even a cursory examination of the concordance leads to the conclusion that the word *franchise* has at least two meanings. One is illustrated by quotations number 1, 4, 5 & 6 (this is actually the same line printed twice), 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 21, 22, 23, 24 and 25. The other meaning is exemplified by quotations number 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 18, 19 and 20. Number 12 is

unclear. Working out the two meanings of the word *franchise*, however, may still be difficult for our student, because she may decide that the concordance does not supply enough context for her needs. There are two possible remedies for that.

One is to use a concordance program which allows for the ‘more left’ and ‘more right’ options - that is, the possibility of scrolling the text rightwards and leftwards, to expose more context. The other possibility is using a concordance program which throws up whole sentences. Here is an example - also based on the British National Corpus. The program presents 50 sentences with the word *franchise*, out of which I am only quoting the first 13 (that is, the content of the first page).

Results of your search

Your query was

f r a n c h i s e

Here is a random selection of 50 solutions from the 770 found...

A0E 438 Will broadcasting survive the new franchise arrangements?

A11 1081 Euston, the first to open in July 1986, included ‘Le Croissant Shop’, a franchise business that at once complements and rivals Traveller’s Fare

A30 636 He added that special incentives should perhaps apply to the top 10 managers, whose performances will be crucial in retaining the franchise.

A55 12 In recent weeks it sold one Ford franchise for £8m and bought another for £6m.

A55 112 Shareholders will end up with a highly leveraged vehicle – which is fine if the group is going to thrive and win its franchise, but dangerous if either the group’s stream of advertising revenue or its franchise is under threat.

A96 560 For at a conference in London, Russian space scientists awarded a British company the first foreign franchise to sell pictures from their most powerful orbiting cameras.

A96 687 Almost 60 Tories have signed two early day motions calling for quality to be as important as money in franchise allocation.

AJ2 334 Mr Jarvis, who spent £40m expanding the chain on the Continent in recent years, said the decision followed Whitbread’s inability to negotiate a new exit clause in the franchise agreement which would have given it more protection.

APP 748 The NILP pledged an extension of the city boundary and the extension of the local government franchise to all citizens over the age of twenty-one, the abolition of the company vote, the realignment of electoral boundaries and the allocation of houses ‘solely on the basis of need’.

B06 623 It does not mean, however, that he should not exercise his franchise and vote as he wishes at local government elections, but he should not be a party man, otherwise his advice might be regarded as being tainted and the council as a whole, in the end, would cease to have confidence in his advice.

B2U 377 However, they may give another business a licence, or franchise, to sell that product or use the name, in return for a percentage of the takings (a royalty).

BNH 398 The ITV licensee lost its franchise to Carlton TV last year, and will hand over the reins to the London weekday franchise on December 31.

C8R 444 A series of extensions, starting with the Great Reform Act in 1832 through a series of extensions in Victorian times, the extension of the franchise to women after the First World War and then to all persons, first over 21, later over 18, have changed the picture and the nature of Parliament radically.

The format is not as convenient as that of the KWIC concordance, but fuller contexts make it much easier to work out the meaning – or rather, meanings - of the word. Please note that the third quotation from the bottom, the one with the code number **B2U 377** (identifying the source text in the British National Corpus), actually amounts to a definition of the word *franchise* in the meaning our student is interested in.

Let us assume, however, that our student is still in the dark. She is confused by quotations exemplifying two different meanings of *franchise*, and can't work out what the word means in the sentence in which she found it, and which I quoted at the beginning. What can she do?

The obvious answer is, consult a dictionary – a monolingual, English-English dictionary, to begin with. Yet it would be better perhaps if she didn't have to leave the computer screen, in order to look the word up in a paper dictionary. The alternative solution is a dictionary on the hard disc of the computer. Our student simply presses another function key and calls up a dictionary entry for *franchise* – for example, from Longman's or from Hornby's dictionary:

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 3rd edition, 1995

Franchise¹ /fɹɑːnʃaɪz/ *n* **1** [C] permission to sell a company's goods or service, that is given or sold to a business person: *a Benetton franchise* **2** [U] the legal right to vote in your country's elections: *universal franchise* **franchise**² *v* [T] to give or sell a franchise to someone

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English, 6th edition, 2000

Franchise /fɹɑːnʃaɪz/ *noun, verb*
 # *noun* **1**. [C, U] formal permission given by a company to sb who wants to sell its goods or services in a particular area; formal permission given by a government to sb who wants to operate a public service as a business; *a franchise agreement/company* ◦ *a catering/rail franchise* ◦ *In the reorganization Southern Television lost their franchise* ◦ *to operate a business under franchise*. **2** [C] a business or service run under franchise: *They operate franchises in London and Paris*

◦ *a burger franchise* **3** [U] (*formal*) the right to vote in a country's elections: *universal adult franchise* – see also ENFRANCHISE
 # *verb* [VN] [usually passive] to give or sell a franchise (1) to sb: *Catering has been franchised (out) to a private company.* ◦ *franchised restaurants* ►
fran-chi-sing *noun* [U]

This ought, surely, to be enough. Suppose, however, that the student still does not know what *franchise* means, or that she wants to translate the text into Polish (her native language) and cannot think of the Polish equivalent of the word. Her ultimate resource is a bilingual, English-Polish dictionary. Ah - but here trouble begins: a really good comprehensive English-Polish dictionary does not exist yet. Here is a selection of entries from five dictionaries, both large and small.

<p>Tomasz Wyżynski <i>The Compact English-Polish Dictionary.</i> Świat Książki, 1999</p>	<p>franchise /φρθvτΣαιζ/ <i>n.</i> 1. (<i>right to vote</i>) bierne prawo wyborcze 2. (<i>licence</i>) koncesja, licencja</p>
<p><i>Podręczny słownik angielsko-polski i polsko-angielski,</i> Jacek Fisiak et al., Longman 1999</p>	<p>franchise /φρθvτΣαιζ/ <i>n.</i> 1[C] koncesja 2 [U] prawo wyborcze</p>
<p><i>Collins English-Polish Dictionary,</i> Jacek Fisiak ed.. BGW, 1996</p>	<p>franchise /φρθvτΣαιζ/ <i>n.</i> (<i>POL</i>) prawo <i>nt</i> wyborcze; (<i>COMM</i>) franszyza <i>f</i> (<i>koncesja na autoryzowaną dystrybucję</i>)</p>
<p>Tadeusz Piotrowski, Zygmunt Saloni, <i>New English-Polish & Polish-English Dictionary.</i> Editions Spotkania (no date)</p>	<p>franchise /φρθvτΣαιζ/ 1. Prawo wyborcze 2. licencja, koncesja, zezwolenie</p>
<p>Jan Stanisławski <i>The Great English-Polish Dictionary</i> (8th ed.). Wiedza Powszechna, 1983</p>	<p>franchise /φρθvτΣαιζ/ <i>s.</i> 1. przywilej 2. <i>am</i> koncesja 3. prawa obywatelskie 4. prawo wyborcze</p>

It turns out there is, actually, no Polish word for *franchise* in the meaning our student is interested in; however, a survey of the translations suggested in the dictionaries will certainly be of help.

For the benefit of those readers who know Polish I append a brief discussion of the entries. The Fisiak-Collins dictionary suggests ‘franszyza’. This sounds strange. The word does not figure in Dunaj’s dictionary of contemporary Polish (1996), while Szymczak’s dictionary (7th edition, 1992) defines ‘franszyza’ as <zastrzeżone przez zakład ubezpieczeń ograniczenie sumy odszkodowań ubezpieczonego>. Thus, no points to Fisiak-Collins. Longman’s pocket dictionary (by Fisiak et al.) is too laconic: ‘koncesja’ is a wider concept than *franchise*. Stanisławski is misleading, both in translating *franchise* as ‘przywilej’, and in annotating the meaning ‘koncesja’ as American. Wyżyński, and Piotrowski-cum-Saloni come out best; but Wyżyński makes a mistake in his explanation of the other meaning of *franchise*: it isn’t ‘bierne prawo wyborcze’, only ‘czynne prawo wyborcze’!

The program I have just outlined can also work when the user reads a paper book. The program should make it possible for him or her to type the problem word in, and then proceed as above.

So much for using concordances as part of a program for teaching reading. However, concordance programs can also be used for practising vocabulary (with intermediate learners) – by drawing the learners’ attention to typical collocations of words. The teacher can call up the KWIC concordance of a word from the text her students have been studying, then tell the program (a concordance program, or a word processor) to delete the central word, and ask the students to guess what it is, using the contexts – like this:

* capital easier. Q If you had to _____	in one short sentence : why PLC?’ w
* ible with him in hospital you can _____	step by step what is happening. Ma
* less strange if you are there to _____	what is happening in words he unde
*ible and comprehensible; they can _____	, or show to children what they do
*s fall in pregnancy rate has been _____	ed by the greater use of contracept
*surroundings show, and nothing is _____	ed. It is also about a period of re

As you can see from the first example, the task may turn out to be quite difficult. To help the students, we can supply three or four words, out of which only one fits all the contexts – like this:

*capital easier. Q If you had to _____	in one short sentence : why PLC?’ w
* ible with him in hospital you can _____	step by step what is happening. Ma
* less strange if you are there to _____	what is happening in words he unde
*ible and comprehensible; they can _____	, or show to children what they do
*s fall in pregnancy rate has been _____	ed by the greater use of contracept
* surroundings show, and nothing is _____	ed. It is also about a period of re
	a. clarify
	b. describe
	c. explain

d. imagine

- or like this:

*sham & Brighton. Follow A23 north	_____	Gatwick until roundabout. Take fir
*ustice, remembering Job, softened	_____	him, although he still carefully
*irit level he saw the man advance	_____	him. He stepped backwards, his he
*she turned and came some way back	_____	me, admonishing, shaking her finger
*miles an hour and we were coming	_____	the bottom and on the ... at the bo
*ques from TSB you could win £400	_____	the cost of your holiday. Ask at you
*han him; so I took off, was going	_____	the finish, but er going in the air
*es. When you see a vehicle coming	_____	you, or the driver behind you wants

a. at
b. from
c. to
d. towards

Another possibility is to supply the second letter of the word required:

*t is many ways - in London - an	_____	and a tolerant society. <Interviewer
*ng. If the green light is showing,	_____	both gates or fully raise both barrier
*in and Ireland. Think of it as an	_____	door. A door into the world of books
*doors, the doors of his mind flew	_____	one after another, like living inside
*distance shown below. But on the	_____	road, in good conditions, a gap of o
* our side lights on as well. Do not	_____	the doors nearest to the carriageway
*new purpose-built Service Centre	_____	day and night, is the ideal answer
*concentration, his mouth slightly	_____	. At other times he simply sat still

__p__

- and then the last letter:

__p__n

That should be enough – we hope. If it is not, we can always supply the first letter as well; and then the whole word.

The same procedures can, of course, be used also for testing the knowledge of vocabulary.

The program I have outlined should not be difficult to write, but – as I pointed out at the beginning - would be expensive: installing a corpus, a concordance program and at least one monolingual and one bilingual dictionary would be costly. If, however, we wish to have an efficient program for teaching reading in the self-access centres of our schools, the expense seems worth incurring.

And what about the word *metastase*? Well, let us hope that for our hypothetical student communication will be complete even without this ominous lexical item – either in its literal or its metaphorical meaning.

Acknowledgement

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