CLICHÉ: A Definition

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Abstract

In attempting to define the term cliché three stages have to be considered: first, there is the level provided by encyclopaedias and dictionaries; second, there is the level supplied by different authors in different years; and finally, there is the analysis of the proposals pointed out in the first and secondary material, leading to a personal definition of what is a cliché. In order to reach this final definition, it is necessary to analyse elements at all levels.

Key-words: cliché, idiom, figures of speech, stereotype expression.

1. Introduction

Most people think they know what a cliché is, and yet there is no great agreement as to its definition and its usage. Although most scholars agree as to what is a cliché, still they evaluate it differently. Thus grammarians and linguists are constantly in the process of studying and trying to find definitions and newer applications for clichés.

2. Encyclopaedias and Dictionaries

The ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA presents a wide and liberal interpretation of the term; that is, a cliché is included as part of the figure of speech. The Encyclopaedia defines the term thus: "(...) through constant use, many metaphors (e.g. "wooden-headed", "he flared up", "he's a wolf", "she's a cat", "their mother has nerves of steel") and similes (e.g. "as warm as toast", "as fierce as a lion", "as white as a sheet") have become clichés and rather than performing their proper function as figure of speech [they] may indicate some poverty of language in the person using them." [1]

In addition to the explanation of the term cliché - included in figures of speech - the ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA also calls our attention to the fact that clichés are used in formal or informal language, and spoken and written language; they are found in sophisticated literary language, in primitive literature, non-literary writings, in the talk of children and illiterates, greeting-card rhymes, Christmas and party cracker mottoes, advertising slogans, newspaper and magazine headlines (titles), the captions of cartoons, the mottoes of families and institutions, proverbs, etc., [2]

Dictionaries, on the other hand, are limited to the definition itself. Both British and American dictionaries project similar views, though the latter mentioned seem to pay a closer attention to what clichés are.

The British approach is objective: the LONGMAN ENGLISH LARROUSE defines cliché, simply as "a trite or hackneyed expression or idea" [3], while the OXFORD ADVANCED LEARNER'S DICTIONARY OF CURRENT ENGLISH defines the term thus: "cliché - idea or expression that has been too much used and [is] now out-dated; stereotyped phrase." [4] According to these definitions, clichés have been superseded, and are practically dead.

American sources, in turn, register the term thus: "cliché is a French word meaning a stereotype block and is used in English to describe those phrases (there are thousands of them),

originally idioms, metaphors, proverbs, or brief quotations, which overuse and, sometimes, changing circumstances have rendered meaningless. Many of them just fill out the vacancies of thought and speech. A man goes to say 'far'and he says 'far and wide'. Speech is a difficult thing. We spend more time learning to talk than anything else we do. It is an effort, an unceasing effort. There is strong resistance in us to it and the inertia which this resistance sets up is probably the chief cause of our use of **clichés**." [5]

The **HERITAGE ILLUSTRATED DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE** [6], **WEBSTER'S THIRD NEW INTERNATIONAL DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE** [7], and **A DICTIONARY OF LITERARY TERMS** [8] agree, when they define **cliché** as **a)** a trite, stereotyped phrase, over-used expressions or idea, which is lifeless; **b)** a hackneyed theme, plot, or situation in fiction or drama; an overworked idea or its expression in music or one of the other arts. Here **cliché** is not just present in the language (that is, everyday conversation and writing) itself, but in other sources.

Finally, the definition included in **DICIONÁRIO DE LINGUÍSTICA** says: "Em estilística, chama-se **cliché** toda expressão rebuscada que constitui um desvio de estilo em relação à norma e que se acha vulgarizado pelo emprego bastante frequente que já lhe foi dado." [9] This definition reinforces previous statements from foreign sources, but adds the notion of "high flown expression."

3. Linguists and Grammarians

At the second level, definitions from several authors will be considered in groups ranging from traditional to more recent definitions; they will be listed according to chronology first, and to the position they take next, as they are either in favour of or against the use of **clichés**.

Still in the twenties, **LOGAN PEARSALL SMITH** (1925) was one of the first linguists to acknowledge the value of **clichés**, and to see them as an element of enrichment difficult to trace; he referred to the **cliché** as an "idiom", and describes it thus:

"'Idiom' is sometimes used, in English as in French, to describe the form of speech peculiar to a people or nation. We also use 'idiom' for the meaning expressed by the French word **idiotisme**, that is to say, those forms of expression, of grammatical construction, or of phrasing, which are peculiar to a language, and approved by its usage, although the meanings they convey are often different from their grammatical or logical signification." [10]

As is suggested here, for **LOGAN PEARSALL SMITH**, 'idiom' implies **cliché**. He furthermore says that 'idiom' either comes from the **Bible** as in such the expressions: - Apples of Sodom; - loaves and fishes; - milk and honey; - daily bread; - a crown of glory; - the chosen people; - the good Samaritan; - the shadow of death; - the prodigal son; - pride goes before a fall; - to turn the other cheek; - the promised land; - no man can serve two masters; - forbidden fruit; - the eleventh hour; - with clean hands; - to take someone's name in vain; - to cast the first stone; or from **Shakespeare**'s plays, the richest literary source of English idioms: - to wear one's heart on one's sleeve; - to eat out of a house and home; - to give pause to; - every inch a king; - neither rhyme nor reason; - a tower of strength; - the beginning of the end; - to the heart's content; - ocular proof; - a foregone conclusion; - to win golden opinions; and still from other famous English writers such as **Milton, Chaucer, Lamb, Dryden, Addison, Swift, Pope, Keats, Dickens**, to mention just a few.

Next, **LOGAN PEARSALL SMITH** mentions groups of words assembled as:

a) **phrasal collocations or doublets**: - to cut and run; - down and out; - far and away; - fear and trembling; - free and easy; - heart and soul; - well and good; - odds and ends; - out and away; - a man and a brother; - over and above;
b) **repetition of the same word**: - again and again; - more and more; - on and on; - one by one; - over and over; - to turn and turn again; - round and round;
c) **alliteration**: - bag and baggage; - then and there; - slow and sure; - part and parcel; - at

sixes and sevens;

d) **rhyme**: - art and part; - by hook or by crook; - out and about; - wear and tear; - high and dry;
e) **contrast of two alternatives**: - for love or money; - more or less; - neither here nor there; - now or never; - sooner or later; - to stand or fall; - to kill or cure;
f) **two alternatives to make inclusive phrases**: - here and there; - first and last; - to right and left; - time and again; - ups and downs; - between wind and water;
g) **habitual comparisons**: - as good as gold; - as large as life; - as hard as nails; - as like two peas; - as steady as a rock; - as old as the hills; - as safe as houses; - as sound as a bell; - as thick as thieves;
h) **proverbs and proverbial phrases**: - better late than never; - a friend in need is a friend indeed; - he laughs best who laughs last; - necessity knows no law; - seeing is believing; - two heads are better than one; - where there's a will there is a way; - while there is life there is hope;
i) **habitual phrases**: - when all is said and done; - if the worst comes to the worst; - all right; - how do you do; - you are right; - of course;
j) **ellipses**: - last night, this week (they tend to lose their prepositions); - no doubt, no wonder, murder will out (the verb is omitted); - at best, at least (the definite article drops out);
k) **obsolete, archaic and poetic words**: - a pig in a poke; - by rote; - to and fro; - might and main; - for the sake of.

In addition, **LOGAN PEARSALL SMITH** mentions special terms referring to specific professions such as:

a) **speech of sailors**: - to touch bottom; - to drop the pilot; - to clear the decks; - to sink or swim; - all at sea; - in deep water; - in low water; - on the rocks; - to go with or against the stream;
b) **speech of soldiers**: - to lay down one's arms; - to dig oneself in ; - to sell the pass; - shoulder to shoulder; - a false alarm.

Finally, he mentions references to:

a) **animals**: **dog** (- to have a bone to pick with; - a bone of contention); **horse** (- to give a leg up; - out of hand; - you can take a horse to the water, but you cannot make him drink; - to put the cart before the horse); **cattle** (- to take the bull by the horns; - to herd together); **cats** (- to have nine lives; - all cats are grey in the dark); **sheep** (- to look sheepish; - to follow like sheep; - a black sheep); **swine** (- to bring one's pigs to the wrong market; - please the pigs); **birds** (- one swallow does not make a summer; - a little bird told me; - to kill two birds with one stone); **snails, worms and insects** (- to go at a snail's pace; - the worm will turn; - to break a butterfly on the wheel);
b) **woods and trees**: - to be out of the wood; - hearts of oak; - not to be able to see the woods for the trees;
c) **weather**: wind, rain clouds, the sun, the moon, the stars (- to clear the air; - to be born under a lucky star; - to have a place in the sun; - to know which way the wind blows; - rain or shine; - to be in the clouds; - to be under a cloud; - something in the wind; - to cry for the moon; - once in a blue moon);
d) **open-air scenes and objects**: - to show the way; - as deaf as a poet; - to go downhill; - to be in a hole; - to be on thorns; - as steady as a rock;
e) **farming**: - to let the grass grow under one's feet; - to make hay while the sun shines;
f) **fruit and vegetables garden**: - the apple of discord; - stolen fruit; - as cool as a cucumber; - as like as two peas; - to pick and choose;
g) **flower garden**: - a bed of roses; - a rose between two thorns; - no rose without a thorn;
h) **houses and buildings**: - to open the door to; - to be at home in; - walls have ears; - to show the door to;
i) **furniture of the house and household occupations**: - as a man makes his bed so he must lie on it; - to get up on the wrong side of the bed; - to wash one's dirty linen in public; - new brooms sweep clean;
j) **kitchen**: - to keep the pot boiling; - to have a finger in the pie; to cook some one a goose for him; - in hot water; - no smoke without a fire; - to burn one's fingers; - to throw cold water on;

k) **food and eating**: - to drop like a hot potato; - to cry over spilt milk; - one's daily bread; - to take the cake;

l) **from the implement of sewing, from pinning and stitching and mending**: - to be as sharp as a needle; - to be on pins and needles; - to be at a loose end; - to lose the thread of;

m) **popular sports**: **pugilism** (- to knock out); **cricket** (- to catch out); **billiards** (- to put onside); **football** (- to have the ball at one's feet); **cards** (- to put one's cards on the table; - to have the game in one's hand); **chess** (- to make a good or bad move);

n) **business**: - to hold the balance; - into the bargain;

o) **coins and metals**: - to pay some one back in his own coin; - a penny for your thoughts; - to the touch.

LOGAN PEARSALL SMITH also includes expressions coming from **foreign sources**: **Greek** (- the golden age; - echoes from Homer - on the razor's edge); **Latin** (- persona non grata); **French** (- Rire sous cape - to laugh in one's sleeve; - Faire fausse route - to take the wrong turning); **German** (- Das Blaue von Himmel lügen - to forswear the blue of the sky, or to swear that black is white); **Italian** (- E sparito il merlo - the blackbird is flown, or the chance is gone); **Spanish** (- A lo hecho, pecho - one's breast to the accomplished fact, or we must take the best of what is done). [11]

LOGAN PEARSALL SMITH's study of 'idiom' is certainly a landmark in the study of **clichés**, for he is, as far as we know, the first linguistic authority to indicate the noble origin of **clichés**, and to suggest that linguistic repetition may well transform a commonplace and everyday word, in short an 'idiom, into a **cliché**.

Other authors followed suit: from the twenties on to our times, well-known grammarians and linguists such as **HOGREFE** (1947) [12], **GILLESPIE** (1949) [13], **TREBLE & VALLINS** (1950) [14], **LEECH** (1969) [15]; **BLACK** (1969) [16], **WATKINS** (1974) [17], **SKWIRE** (1976) [18], have added their personal contribution to the study of **clichés**; in general they consider **cliché** a trite word or phrase that is so often used that it has lost its original and suggestive level; thus it is an indication of prefabricated language which is sometimes inevitable and is always questionable. In most cases they take a negative approach to **clichés**.

The list may be extended further to include other grammarians, such as **LEGGET** (1960) who claims that "a trite expression, sometimes called a **cliché**, a stereotyped, or hackneyed phrase, is an expression that has been worn out by constant use" (...) "words in themselves are never trite they are only used tritely. We cannot avoid trite expressions entirely, for they sometimes describe a situation accurately. But the writer who burdens his language with **clichés** runs the risk of being regarded as a trite thinker." [19].

Quite a distinct definition is given by **HALL** (1973) in **Writing Well**. He cites , "a phrase becomes a formula or a cliché not just because it is used so commonly, but because it prevents feeling", (...) and he also mentions that a psychiatrist described **clichés** as the "the lies we tell ourselves, that we want to hear (...) the lie was internal, the lie of using language to avoid difficult reality, the lie of euphemism." [20] Finally, there is **MACRORIE** (1978) [21] who emphasizes the difficulty of deciding at what point **cliché** becomes overused and offensive.

RIFFATERRE (1973,1982) in turn, once stated:

"o **cliché** pode ser batido sem deixar de ser eficaz. Não se deve confundir banalidade com desgaste. Se fosse desgastado, o **cliché** perderia tanto sua clientela como seus inimigos, o que não é o caso. Ele não passa despercebido, pelo contrário, chama sempre a atenção sobre si." [22]

More recently, **TODD & HANDCOCK** (1986) pointed out that we can also recognize **clichés** in **single words or morphemes** (nice; situation; wise); **nicknames** (John Bull - U.K.; Uncle Sam - U.S.A); **formulas** (as far as I can see; mark my words; to be perfectly frank); **assonances** (free and easy), as well as they can be useful in **propaganda**. [23]

It is evident from the examples given by LOGAN PEARSALL SMITH (1925) to TODD

& HANDCOCK (1986) , that many though not all of the words they include as typically idiomatic are to be found in the context of everyday interaction (e.g. "I'm off", "How's it going?", "How are things?", "see you 'later'", "take care", "I'm fed up with...", "take a nap", "put (someone's feet up", "pop round", and so on); so they form a natural part of everyday spoken and written discourse. Some of the examples they use are old-fashioned, and there is an important element of fashion in **cliché**. Some are not widely used or are used relatively rarely. Some **clichés** are also register specific, and the examples **LOGAN PEARSALL SMITH** gives of soldiers' and sailors' talk are exactly that. It is important to remember though that every day most of the people have access to at least one specialized register; therefore, **clichés** or idioms (particularly these concerned with work), are an ordinary part of the way people speak and/ or write.

This basic fact is reflected on the language used by magazines and newspapers. Most people read either newspapers and magazines, listen to the radio, or watch television, and these activities also expose them to a large usage of **clichés** or **idioms**. A brief look at two or three pages of a quality British newspaper (The Guardian, December 5, 1988) will reveal the following **clichés**, part of headlines, titles to articles, or simply captions: "EEC splits hit unity timetable", "to have the upper hand", "military upheaval", "headline sensation", "flight of capital", "job training gives private", "buyers put their cash on the line" among others, too numerous to register here.

This is clear evidence that in any conversation **clichés** have become a stylistic device inherent to our everyday life; because the **clichés** have been so often repeated, they have become only too familiar, and, as a consequence, they have become both trivial and conventional. In order to render them interesting again, they have to be reinvested with their original strength, through a clever use of different elements; if a poet claims that his lady's beauty **is like a rose**, he is using a **cliché**, or if he refers to dying **as passing into heaven** he is also using a **cliché**; the one way to revive the construction would be to suggest that his lady's beauty is **like a rose that once was**; or that dying, in that case, was passing into **hell and beyond**. In both cases new elements would be introduced, creating an effect altogether unexpected and full of surprise.

Clichés have their roots in tradition - the Bible, Shakespeare, or well-known proverbs, but they may then bloom into surprise - the unexpected is added, to revive interest in an old and trite expression, leaving, at the same time, room for a new interpretation; **the rose that once was** is a suggestion of past beauty, while **passing into hell and beyond** is ambiguous, to say the least; the character was so evil that hell was its proper destination, or passing through it, it could still find its own way to heaven.

4. Personal Definition

Thus **clichés** may come from innumerable sources and may be put to good service, if they are to be considered from a positive perspective. **Clichés** have become a constant source of investigation in more recent years; but so far, as far as we know, there has been no discussion of the use of **clichés** in novels, considering the different points of view expressed either by grammarians and linguists and the definitions just quoted from dictionaries.

At this point, there is the need to sum up the term **cliché** as part of the French verb "clicher", which means "to mould or cast". **Clichés** come from a noble origin - either from the Bible or from Shakespeare - and they are objectionable most of the times; we believe then, that the most exact definition of **cliché** is: **a combination of words ready-made**, specifically: it describes any expression that was once 'fresh' and good, but has become stereotyped, and too familiar through repetition.

5. Conclusion

Clichés are in no way **crystal-clear**. The product of people from **all walks of life**, they become popular, go **hand in hand** with usage, **fall into decline and oblivion** to the end – **ay, there's the rub** – where all mortals do, in **no man's land** and **everyman's share**, either in **cursed earth** or in the **graveyard of thought**, **R.I.P**.

One may count at least ten expressions that may be considered **clichés**; their original beauty has been replaced by repetitive patterns that may render the passage dull, if not offensive, to the readers' eyes and ears. Considering, however, that the wear and tear of words may render them meaningless in the long run, every word in the language is, potentially, a candidate to become a **cliché** in due time. To determine the exact point in which a word ceases to be itself and becomes a **cliché**, that is, of all tasks, the most hopeless. The motive is, in itself, evident: that specific point lies somewhere in the future and the unknown; and yet, man has always been fascinated by the future and the unknown. This attraction, most of the time, is mixed with fear about the complexity of the unknown and man's inability to foresee what is to follow.

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[9] **DUBOIS**, Jean et alii. **Dicionário de linguística**. São Paulo, Cultrix, 1978, p.112. **Free translation of the text**: In Stylistics, **cliché** is the term attributed to every high-flown expression which constitutes a stylistic device in relation to the general rule; it becomes only too vulgar by its excessive use.

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[11] For further information see **LOGAN PEARSALL SMITH**, op. cit., pp.167-278.

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The free translation of RIFFATERRE is: (...) "the **cliché** can be overused without losing its effectiveness. If it were overworked, the **cliché** would lose both its followers and its enemies, and such is not the case. It does not pass unprovided for; on the other hand, it always calls attention to itself."

[23] **TODD**, Loretto & **HANDCOCK**, Ian. **International English usage**. London, Croom Helm Ltda., 1986, pp. 113-115.