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LANGUAGE LEARNING TECHNOLOGY REVIEW



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- Non scholae, sed vitae discimus -

THE CULTURALLY AUTHENTIC PICTORIAL LEXICON



Over the last few years the Culturally Authentic Pictorial Lexicon, CAPL (<http://capl.washjeff.edu>), has become an indispensable source for educators in need of authentic images for language learning. Started in 2003 by Michael Shaughnessy and Jason Parkhurst at Washington and Jefferson College, it was initially a collection of images presenting objects in a culturally authentic German context. It then morphed into an outstanding resource for teachers and learners in a variety of languages that uncompromisingly seeks to connect language, culture, and meaning by providing concrete, authentic, real-world depictions of words and concepts in other cultures. In its current state (May 2012) it provides about 14,250 images in distinct collections for 14 languages/cultures. It has received roughly 6 million page views over the past few years and currently experiences 10,000 unique visitors per month.

As CAPL's main editor Michael Shaughnessy points out, "Our world [is] rich in diversity, both linguistic and visual, and often the connection between word and image can be lost. As commercial globalization brings the world together through 'common products', we sometimes forget how our visual perception of the world affects our use of words and the meanings they convey." Toying with the concept of the Saussurean signifier and signified, and lifting it onto a meta- and multilinguistic level, he convincingly points out some simple and mundane questions to underscore the fact that visual perception is, indeed, culturally determined and visual cognition varies from culture to culture.

"Is a *house* really a *Haus*, is *pain* really *хлеб*, and when we see red cabbage, is it really red?" For members of the language teaching community, the lack of authenticity in mass-produced learning materials is an often discussed and criticized fact in their professional life. Stand-alone language learning software sets and publishers' materials—in an effort to keep the costs down—all too often make use of clip art and generic imagery in a "one size fits all (languages)" approach.

Compare this review of a German-language software package published in 2000: "The biggest complaint one could have about [XXX- *German*] stems from the fact that we are dealing here with a program that is part of a learning system offered in several languages. Thus, the program has the unfortunate tendency to employ culturally inauthentic materials a bit too frequently. Although narration, voice-overs, and audio examples always use native German speakers, still pictures and the video clips often rely on generic (i.e. American) footage. The picture for 'Haus' shows a suburban house with the sign 'Sold' in the window, the skyline depicting 'Stadt' looks much more like Chicago than Frankfurt or Hamburg, the 'Telefon' has American dial buttons, and the person herding cattle does not look like a German 'Bauer,' but very much like the Marlboro Man."

That this practice is still the common *modus operandi* for commercial operations can be seen in the following examples, taken from one of the best-selling language systems in the world:



The CAPL project ultimately seeks to counteract this practice by making available a collection of photographs that is meant to provide language teachers and learners throughout the world with authentic, localized images and it encourages sharing via a generous Creative Commons license.

How Might CAPL Be of Use?

Several well-conceived principles are at the core of CAPL and make it more applicable for the purposes of teaching and language acquisition than, for example, visual dictionaries like <http://www.infovisual.info>, <http://visual.merriam-webster.com>, <http://www.pdictionary.com>, and <http://www.bildwoerterbuch.com>.

Authenticity: All pictures in CAPL are authentic primary sources, carefully selected and taken from within the language specific context they are found in. However, these pictures are neither staged nor manipulated to suit; they are real-life depictions of cultural artifacts, everyday objects and moments captured in time.

Language Specificity: CAPL is unique in its setup since it does not merely consist of a collection of random street scenes and objects. Each picture is meant to represent a discrete dictionary entry of the source language and was taken with this

thought in mind. The editors took great care that an item has its origin in the source language. Translation thus becomes secondary to the source and sometimes may not officially exist according to standard lexicography. It is the image itself that creates meaning.



Objective Depiction: All objects depicted are easily understood without a caption. In fact, the CAPL database mostly contains pictorial representations of nouns. The editors espouse the view that “the subjectivity of a visual representation for adjectives such as ‘beautiful’ creates linguistic, political, racial, economic, philosophical problems that [we] would like to avoid.” See, for example, the entry for “seesaw/die Wippe” above. It is a typical German playground scene, the “Wippe” is made from wood, not from the recycled plastic materials one would find on the average contemporary American playground structure, the children at play are not described, or categorized elsewhere as “happy/fröhlich” (however, the image could be used as a prompt to conjure up ideas and to get students to talk about their own experience, childhood memories, clothing, social status, etc.).

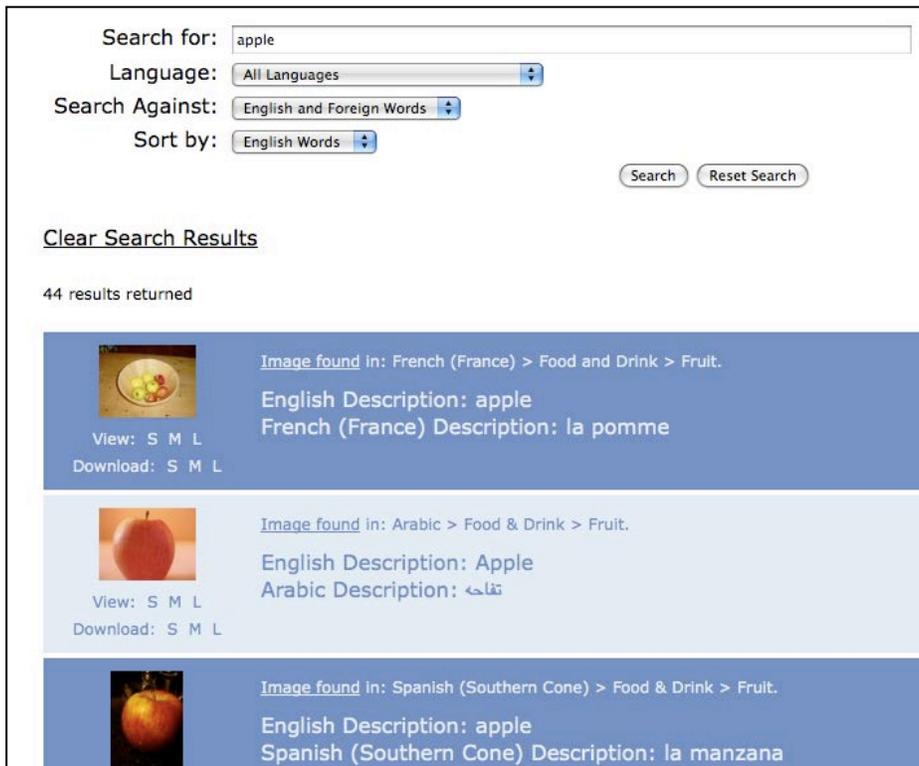
No Absolutes: The editors of CAPL do not claim that there can be one picture of a German “Markt” that wholly encompasses the *essence* of German “Market-ness.” A picture placed in context, however, can assist in an understanding of what a German market is and looks like, thus sometimes several entries for the same dictionary item will exist and add to a holistic understanding of the foreign culture.

How Do I Start Using CAPL?

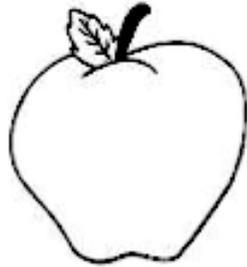
CAPL can be employed in a variety of ways and on different levels of language expertise. The database search engine is very intuitive and allows for retrieving images via word-entry against a variety of languages. Users can also simply browse the collection by language under different topics, for example French > City Life > Buildings and Places, or Spanish (Mexico) > Food and Drink > Grocery Store. Once a search item is entered the straightforward interface will display all entries to enable a quick browse-through in order to pick the ones most suitable for the

Waltje

purpose the user had in mind. It is noteworthy that all images can be displayed online in several sizes; at the same time they are available for royalty-free download to be used on posters, handouts or in presentation software in a variety of sizes and higher resolutions.



On the beginner's and intermediate level images from CAPL can be used to reinforce vocabulary acquisition, to make cultural comparisons, or to provide prompts for oral exercises. They might also come in very handy on the more advanced level to illustrate or explain literary allusions or to depict historical objects and figures. CAPL images are not generic (as, for example, an apple on a white background), but rather multi-layered. They contain other visual information, clues, and cultural associations, so that learners can talk about context, time, cost, location, availability, or they can discuss how these images differ or are similar to their home culture. Educators can use these authentic images to clarify what is meant by a certain concept or how something works in the target culture. The possibilities are not quite endless, but using authentic imagery will certainly prove more stimulating and versatile than clip-art.



The pictures in this database may be viewed, downloaded, linked, manipulated, copied, displayed, and redistributed free of charge for educational, non-commercial purposes. The website also offers a downloadable presentation on the development and philosophy behind CAPL which contains valuable ideas for the integration of CAPL images into foreign language teaching.

Currently CAPL contains images for the following languages and cultures: Arabic, Chinese, ESL (North American), French, German, Japanese, Russian, Ukrainian, and 4 localized dictionaries for Spanish (Central American & Caribbean, Mexican, Southern Cone, and Peninsular). CAPL is looking for help to expand into Portuguese (Brazil), Portuguese (Portugal), and Italian, but if there are experts in other areas not yet covered by CAPL, they are invited to contact Michael Shaughnessy via the website to discuss the possibilities of becoming a member of the CAPL curatorial team.

Since we have reached the end of my column, how about a nice cup of tea?



Please, take your pick: German, Arabic, Japanese, Russian – or do you really still prefer Clip-Art Tea?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jörg Waltje was Associate Professor of Modern Languages and the Director of the Language Resource Centers at Ohio University and at the University of Michigan. He is now the Director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) at the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU). His current interests include effective faculty development, the use of technology to further intercultural competencies, communicative strategies and the negotiation of meaning in humor and word play, and tinkering with new technologies for the continuous improvement of the teaching/learning experience in higher education. He can be contacted via email at jorg@waltje.com and he lives on the web at <http://www.waltje.com>.

ABOUT THE COLUMN

Language Learning Technology Review is a column that examines new and emerging technologies as they relate to language learning and teaching.