‘Quality’ problems

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How the polysemous nature of the word *quality* can cause problems for readers of articles on quality assurance in higher education

SCHOLARLY literature on quality assurance in higher education will always run the risk of confusing or repelling non-specialist readers. That is inevitable since, by its nature, such literature often uses technical jargon in dealing with abstract concepts. Yet, a further and more fundamental problem exists, one that may not always be recognized by writers in the field: namely, that the word *quality* itself has different senses, combines with other words, with unusual semantic effects, and can function both as a noun and an adjective. These factors combine to increase the possibility that general readers may misconstrue key points in texts about quality.

The aims of this article are three-fold: (1) to look closely at the senses and functions of the word *quality*; (2) to illustrate these with reference to the British National Corpus (BNC); and to highlight the need for writers of published work on quality assurance to use *quality* with care and greater language awareness, so as to minimize avoidable miscommunication. (Examples from the BNC are preceded by a reference number such as EFX1204. Sources of other examples are given in the text.)

On the various senses of *quality*

Even if all other factors are disregarded, it is evident that writers on quality assurance find it difficult to agree completely on what *quality* means, whether in the context of higher education or elsewhere, although there is a tendency to stress ‘fitness for purpose’ as a short-hand definition. Writers, thinkers, and practitioners arrive at differing definitions of the term, for, as Harboe-Ree & Pernat (2004) note, *quality* is multi-dimensional and its exact nature is contested. Hence, it could be argued that writers on quality must strive to express themselves with particular clarity, so as to support readers adequately towards valid interpretations of their texts.

There are two dimensions to this responsibility to ‘lay’ readers: first, taking care that, in published work, appropriate glosses for the word *quality* are offered; second, being constantly aware that shifts in the grammatical class and semantic value of *quality* have the potential to cause uncertainty or misinterpretation.

It has been stated above that certain characteristics of the word *quality* can lead to misunderstanding on the part of lay readers of texts on quality assurance. Because of this it is essential to provide a sketch of the semantics of *quality* illustrated with examples. This will be followed by an attempt to demonstrate how the word *quality* has the potential to cause misunderstanding or perplexity when used in the context of ‘quality assurance’.

Lay readers of articles on quality assurance in higher education approach such specialist texts with an understanding of *quality* that is conditioned by, or amounts to, an awareness of the word’s semantic properties in general texts. Hence, it is appropriate to start by looking at general dictionary entries for *quality*. Most dictionaries list several senses for *quality* as a noun and one sense as an adjective (or modifier). Thus, the first five noun senses in the *Collins Dictionary of the English Language* (*CDEL*, 1979:1194) are:

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Noun

1 A distinguishing characteristic, property or attribute
2 The basic character or nature of something
3 A trait or feature of personality
4 A degree or standard of excellence, especially a high standard
5 High social status or the distinction associated with it

It is probably inevitable (and perhaps desirable) that the senses of a word identified and listed in dictionaries show some overlap. The reader might care to consider which of the five senses exemplified above is illustrated in each of the following examples:

1 EFX 1204: 'Visitors noted a quality of cosy impersonality about the new flat.' (sense 1 or 2?)
2 George S. Patton: 'The most vital quality a soldier can possess is self-confidence.' (sense 1 or 3?)
3 HWX 1843: 'Excepting "Take Me Away", a more upfront raver, and the brassy "Just To Be With You", these grooves have a lazy quality, smooth and understated.' (sense 1, 2 or 3?)

An example of sense 4 would be:

4 CBF 13240: '[The yacht] Britannia is used during the Queen's visits abroad in the hope that its 39-year-old Clyde-built quality will impress export customers.'

Sense 5 is less relevant to the present article, as are the further senses 6, 7 and 8 listed in *CDEL*, which relate to the noun *quality* as used in the specialist fields of music, logic and phonetics. However sense 9 – as a modifier – is relevant here: 'having or showing excellence or superiority: *a quality product*.'

Examples of quality as a modifier are:

5 HJ3 1855: 'You can only dictate the game if you're getting quality ball.'

6 K3C 1779: 'St Mary's is a good school providing quality education.'

These examples are of premodification, but *quality* also frequently appears in *of*-phrases acting as postmodifiers (See Quirk & Greenbaum 1973: 389 for further discussion of such *of*-phrases in postmodification):

7 FPY 1246: 'Some writing is of high *quality* and may well find a place in the permanent repertoire of a wider public.'

8 FTU 781: 'Embroidery and lace products are of high *quality*, and Swiss chocolates need no recommendation.'

The phrase *of high quality* occurs 184 times in the free-access sector of the British National Corpus (BNC). On the other hand, the following *of*-phrases, with negative denotation, occur there much less frequently or not at all:

of poor quality	4
of low quality	1
of bad quality	0

The postmodifier *of quality* also occurs, as in:

9 EB3 1746: 'This [sic] classics such as Tom Brown's Last Match and Dickens's Dingley Dell v All Muggleton are spread before a fresh generation, as are essays on legendary players by writers *of quality*.' [Here, the word *This* should presumably read *Thus*.]

However, although the phrase of *quality* occurs 759 times in the free-access section of the BNC, it is difficult to put a figure on how many times it functions as a postmodifer. In a random sample of 50 of the 759, relatively few seem to be postmodifiers. There are many instances of the type:

10 AB4 1587 'reeks of quality'
11 AR5 645 'the purchase of quality puppies'
12 BOP 712 'a few years of quality fish'

These clearly do not entail postmodification. Instead, as with the last two quoted extracts, many examples involve *CDEL*'s sense 9, noted above.

This concludes a brief and neutral summary of the senses of 'quality'. It is now necessary to examine how the word's semantic and collocational properties can occasionally give rise to uncertainty in readers.

How can problems arise for the reader?

Broadly, there are three facets of the word *quality* that contribute to difficulties for readers. These are: *quality* as a diachronic, potentially gradable entity versus *quality* as a synchronic, non-graded entity; the nature of the relationship between *quality* and *excellence*; and the fact that *quality* can function both as a noun and a modifier. These three matters will be dealt with in turn.

There is a crucial difference between the

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terms *quality assurance* and *quality enhancement* or *quality improvement*. In the first case, where quality is to be checked and safeguarded, it is a synchronic and static entity. The QA specialist is interested in whether or not, at a given moment in time, an institution or part of an institution has produced performance that matches up to a predetermined definition of *quality*. In the second case there is an intent to improve performance over a period of time. Here quality becomes a diachronic and dynamic entity. There is a clear distinction between *quality* as a static entity predetermined by the specialist or the institution, and *quality* as a dynamic entity determined through observation.

The fact that *quality* can be both 'static and predetermined' and 'dynamic and not predetermined' relates also to the second difficulty: the nature of the relationship between quality and excellence. Let us return to sense 4 in the *CED*. Here it is stated that the noun *quality* can denote *a degree or standard of excellence* but *especially a high standard*. Isn't *a high standard of excellence a tautology*? Do we ever speak or write of a *low standard of dreadfulness*? If *quality* denotes *a high standard of excellence* in itself then why do we find in the free access area of BNC that the phrase *of high quality* occurs 184 times as compared to 50 times for the phrases *of poor/low/bad quality*? Wouldn't one expect that a word that 'especially' denotes 'a high standard of excellence' would rarely, if at all, be modified by adjectives such as *high*? The fact that such questions can be asked at all is testimony to the unusual, shifting semantic value of *quality*.

Finally in phrases such as *quality management* and *total quality management* the lay reader is uncertain as to whether to understand that the management in question is of high quality (sense 9) or that the quality is being managed, as for example in:

13 K5H 4618 'Its secret is quite simple; it has a clear strategy, effectively implemented by a quality management team.'

Here, the word *quality* can be understood either as modifying the compound noun *management team* or as a noun contributing to a noun phrase meaning *a team for managing quality*. For a reader who has little background in management, there are few intrinsic grounds for preferring one interpretation rather than the other.

It should be clear from the foregoing that the word *quality* has certain unusual semantic characteristics. Of course, it is an example of a polysemous word: that is, it can be used in various different but related senses. For example, the word *head* often denotes a part of the body, but it has related senses as in *head of an organization*, *head of a nail*, and *head of the table*. In the same way, the senses of *quality* (1–9, *CED*) clearly show relation and overlap. However, this paper has tried to show that *quality* is a particularly slippery word capable of escaping precise interpretation in context.

How can such quality problems best be avoided?

The word *quality*, as we have seen, has several distinct and even slightly contradictory senses, and can function as an adjective as well as a noun. Writers need therefore to be aware of the problems that can arise for their readers if care is not taken to safeguard against misunderstanding. Standard devices can be used by writers to minimize the risks of confusion or perplexity. For example, footnotes or endnotes can be used to clarify exactly what is meant at specific points in a text. For the specialist in quality assurance this might seem pedantic or wholly unnecessary, but non-specialist readers trying to get to grips with highly abstract arguments would be more effectively supported towards valid interpretations.

When the matter is carefully considered, not only is the nature of quality in education a matter of debate and dispute, but also the very word *quality* is a token whose value is not always readily apparent. ■

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