THE CROISSANT-BACON PHENOMENON:
Prototypical vocabulary and cross-cultural implications for
the selection of lexical items in pedagogical resources

Dissertation Defense by Sarah-Kay Hurst
Ph.D. Candidate in French Linguistics

The teaching and learning of vocabulary are especially pertinent questions for
foreign language pedagogy (Bogaards, 1994; Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008;
Schmitt, 2010; Nation, 2013), and a judicious selection of words for pedagogical
materials merits reflection. This dissertation considers sixteen core categories such
as “Breakfast foods and beverages” and “Professions, jobs, and trades,” comparing
Hexagonal French and American English to determine to what extent category
construction is cultural.

Since lexical items for such core categories are indispensable for the domains they
characterize, yet do not rank highly on frequency lists, these words are best
unearthed using notions from Prototype Theory (some category members are more
central than others, see Rosch, 1978; Geeraerts, 2010) and Lexical Availability (some
words are infrequent yet essential and easily come to mind when needed, see
Gougenheim et al., 1967; Rodriguez, 2006). This study, deploying prototypicality
and availability, solicits the enumeration of typical words for core categories to
compare the intuitions of one hundred native speakers of Hexagonal French and
American English. The results of this spontaneous recall task are then compared
with items included in U.S. university textbooks and bilingual dictionaries.

The results reveal that the most salient and prototypical items are often quite
different in the two languages, highlighting items that are especially pertinent for
the target (L2) culture (emphasizing target culture appropriateness) and the
native (L1) culture (underscoring personal interests and tenets of prominent
communicative approaches, see Brandl, 2008; Richards & Rogers, 2014). Presenting
this vocabulary using strategies such as Venn diagrams that encourage active
exploration of differences in category construction may enhance awareness and
serve as a springboard for cultural discovery. Thus, this study proffers suggestions
for the treatment of core categories in pedagogical resources and promotes an
empirical rather than intuitive approach to questions of vocabulary selection,
presentation, and cultural exploration.

If you would like to attend, please contact the chair, Dr. Kevin Rottet, at
kroett@indiana.edu.