

English Affirmation of Reality

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The OED, Oxford English Dictionary¹, when dealing with synonyms, carefully distinguishes and records two meanings, the strict and the broad:

Synonym - 1. Strictly, a word having the same sense as another (in the same language); but more usually, either or any of two or more words (in the same language) having the same general sense, but possessing each of them meanings which are not shared by the other or others, or having different shades of meaning or implications appropriate to different contexts: e.g. serpent, snake; ship, vessel etc.

As a matter of fact, although synonyms mean the same thing, often they are not interchangeable, because it so happens that each one accentuates a particular aspect of the significance of reality as implied. Thus, for example, each one of the following words: “home”, “house”, “residence” and “domicile” has its own emphasis, nevertheless all refer to a same property at such number, at such street. If such property is the place where coziness of family intimacy is enjoyed, “home” is the better word; when it comes to legal matters, “domicile” is spoken; and for the usual meaning of living; “residence”, whereas “house” is more generic and inclusive of more meanings.

Certainly there are contexts in which these synonyms can be substituted one for the other without great semantic loss, but there are also situations in which they are irreplaceable: it cannot be said, for example, “domicile, sweet domicile”, nor the city collects property tax on the home.

The English language is very rich of expressions to describe the reality of a situation, such as: a matter of fact, actually, indeed, of course, etc. Though being synonyms and in many cases, interchangeable, each one of them has its history and a more appropriate usage.

As a matter of fact

“As a matter of fact” is an expression which denotes only the facts regardless of opinions, desires and emotions². Beyond interpretations and ideologies, “as a

¹ Cd-ROM: *OED* 2nd. ed. on CD-ROM, 1994. From this point on cited simply as OED.

² As long as self emotions be a distinguishing fact, like in the song “As a matter of fact”, by Natalie Cole: *Matter of fact (ooh, as a matter of fact) / I love you (oh, as a matter of fact) / And I love that you love me back / As a matter of fact (ooh, as a matter, a matter)*.

matter of fact” refers only and particularly to facts with the same relentless coldness with which a computer selects its moves when playing chess.

The OED entry for “as a matter of fact” says:

What pertains to the sphere of fact as opposed to opinion, probability, or inference; also, something which is of the nature of a fact. Phrases, as a matter of fact, in matter of fact: in point of fact, really.

Matter, in this case, the OED itself reminds, under sense 16, is: “nearly equivalent to ‘things’, ‘something’”. It concerns, therefore, to a reference the facts (matter of fact) beyond any other interference: its usage would be shown in sentences like: “many Americans wouldn’t accept it, but as a matter of fact the most popular sport in the world is soccer” or “as a matter of fact, for the greater majority of countries, the word ‘football’ refers to soccer and not to American football”. Or for the right wing’s despair: “as a matter of fact no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq.”

The factual reference of the expression becomes clearer in the judiciary, where great, historical discussions took place about the jury competence, until, since the middle of the XIX century, its role became restricted to matters of fact, leaving “matters of law” to the judge incumbency. Hence the definition, always according to OED:

That portion of a subject of judicial inquiry which is concerned with the truth or falsehood of alleged facts; a particular question or issue that is of this nature: opposed to matter of law.

To better understand the difference between matter of facts and matter of law, let us consider for example, a recent case (Sept. ’08), that raised great interest in Brazil, as reported in “O Globo”:

Thief warns police about child found in car

Published in 9/18/08 at 00:14 am

Marcelo Barbosa – special for “O Globo”; “Zero Hora”

Porto Alegre – after stealing a car around 2 am this Wednesday in Passo Fundo, north of Rio Grand do Sul State, a thief noticed a child sleeping in the backseat, and called the police to inform where he would leave off the car. The 1983 blue Monza was found with a five year old boy still sleeping. The child was taken to the police station together with his mom and her companion who were found at a downtown bar. The State Tutelage Council was contacted.

On calling the police, the thief said he was revolted with the parents’ disregard and negligence towards the kid. And he threatened: I stole a car with a boy in it, I didn’t see him. Send a police car out to get the kid and tell the s.o.b of his father not to do it again. Tell the man that the next time I find this car with the kid in it, I’ll kill him – said the non-conformed thief to the cop on duty.

(Source: <http://oglobo.globo.com/pais/mat/2008/09>)

Putting aside the interesting sociological aspects of this case (the thief receiving sympathy from the public and even from the police woman who is investigating this case), the matter of fact is if the couple, responsible for the child, in fact, left him alone for a long time at dawn, and the matter of law is whether this case amounts or not judicially, technically, to delict of negligence. Matter of facts is that the thief did not want to retain the car; matter of law is, in this case, whether there was or not a delict, etc.

In this sense, the OED mentions in its quotes, a sentence by Hooker, in *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie*, 1594:

If it be admitted that in matter of fact there is some credite to be giuen to the testimonie of man, but not in matter of opinion and iudgement.

Actually

On the other hand, “actually” comes from the classical Aristotelian distinction between act and potency. Potency and act are basic and intuitive notions, so fundamental that they escape definition. Precisely one of the great contributions Aristotle made to the history of philosophy was to teach that there are divers modes of being; that being is not univocal (nor equivocal), but analogous. Potency and act are two modes of being: potency is, in a way, a weak mode; act, strong. Act is what most appropriately is. Act is what is real, factual, already realized (the temporal aspect accentuated by the Portuguese word “atualmente”). It is on this Aristotelian sense of reality that the English language says “actually” to indicate that something is really, in fact. On the other hand potency is that which may come to be real (in act), but in fact it is not; a seed may (is in potency of) come to be (in act) a tree; whereas a rock may not.

The OED entry reads:

Actually - In act or fact; as opposed to possibly, potentially, theoretically, ideally; really, in reality.

And gives examples of the XVII century:

1775 J. Harris Philos. Arrangem. (1841) 365 Every substance that actually is, by actually being that thing, actually is not any other. A piece of brass, for example, actually is not an oak.

1782 Priestley Matter & Spirit I. Pref. 15, I would have every man write as he actually feels.

Actually refers to profound reality, besides appearances and thus says A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami, founder of the Hare Krishna movement:

Action in Krishna Consciousness is inaction, whereas a person doing nothing materially may appear to be inaction to others, but actually he is doing something for Krishna
(<http://religion.krishna.org/Letters/2000/07/L00017.html>, accessed in 09-24-08)

“Actually” refers to the reality of facts opposed to its potential. When we say that Brazilian soccer has everything to win an Olympic gold medal, such as many high talented young players, tradition, experience, etc., but actually it has never won this award. Or as we read in a motion picture blog:

In Bloodsport [“O Grande Dragão Branco”], Van Damme is Frank Dux, a boxer of enormous potential but actually a nobody in the martial arts arena.
(<http://www.nst.com.my/blogs/fillips/316>, accessed in 09-24-08)

In these cases, if we were to substitute actually for matter of fact, we would lose a reference to the opposite potency/act.

Of course

If actually originally accentuates reality in opposition to possibility, the certainty contained in “of course” comes from the custom, from the usual, from the expected, from what is normal and current (etymological sense of “course”). For example, two people go in a car out for lunch scheduled with a third person, J. Gilberto. Realizing they are a few minutes late, one of the two expresses his worry and is calmed down by the other: “Don’ t worry, we’ ll get there before Gilberto”. “Are you sure?” “Of course. I’ ve known him for years, he’ s always late at least a half an hour”

Again, the OED and its quotes:

Of course. Belonging to the ordinary procedure, custom, or way of the world; customary; natural, to be expected.
1580 Lyly Euphues (Arb.) 93 The friendship between man and man as it is common so is it of course.
1709 Steele Tatler No. 109 33 Their Congratulations and Condoleances are equally Words of Course.
1795 Jemima II. 87 You profess a wish to oblige me, said Rosina; if only words of course, I beg you will spare my ear.
1818 Cruise Digest (ed 2) II. 88 A case in which this right is supported, as a thing of course.

Then:

Of course. *In ordinary or due course, according to the customary order, as a natural result. † of common course: ordinarily, as an every-day occurrence.*

1542 Udall Erasm. Apoph. 53 a, *Of course and custom.*

1657 Heylin *Ecclesia Vindicata* ii. 472 *That not once or twice, but of common course.*

And:

Of course. *In qualification of the whole clause or sentence: naturally, as will be expected in the circumstances; for obvious reasons, obviously. (Sometimes used as an emphatic affirmative reply.)*

1823 J. D. Hunter *Captiv. N. Amer.* 39 *She made some very particular inquiries about my people, which, of course, I was unable to answer.*

1838 Dickens *O. Twist* xxxiv. 266 *You will tell her I am here?..Of course.*

Indeed and other forms

“Indeed” is a derivative from deed (in deed, till c. 1600 generally written in two words or even in a stronger form: in very deed), that which was done/fact³, or according to OED: “Deed - *That which is done, acted, or performed by an intelligent or responsible agent; an act*”. *Quotations:*

1601 Shakes. Jul. C. iii. ii. 216 *They that haue done this Deede, are honourable.*

1667 Milton P.L. xi. 256 *And one bad act with many deeds well done Mayst cover.*

1809-10 Coleridge *Friend* ix. (1887) 37 *What are noble deeds but noble truths realized?*

1875 Jowett *Plato* (ed. 2) V. 52 *Their deeds did not agree with their words.*

“Deed” is the fact, “indeed” is in fact, truly, really. Its usage corresponds, more or less, to Portuguese “de fato”. In the OED quotes it is seen that indeed is of very old usage (and is also used a lot in the King James Bible):

1. In actual fact, in reality, in truth; really, truly, assuredly, positively.

c1330 R. Brunne *Chron. Wace* (Rolls) *That was the firste wassail in dede.*

1430-40 Lydg. *Bochas* ix. iii. (MS. Bodl. 263) 408/2 *In al his book, he had afforn nat seen A mor woful creature, in dede.*

1526 Tindale *Luke* xxiv. 34 *The lorde is risen in dede and hath apered to Simon.*

1610 Shakes. *Temp.* i. ii. 96 *My trust which had indeede no limit.*

2. In reality, in real nature or essence, opposed to what is merely external or apparent.

³ Also in originated senses, like that of the “great accomplishments”, “made of might”, “Acts of the Apostles” etc.

1526 Pilgr. Perf. (W. de W. 1531) 143 Rather make it seeme lesse
incomparably than it is in dede.
a1568 R. Ascham Scholem. Pref. (Arb.) 18 The Scholehouse should be in
deede, as it is called by name, the house of playe and pleasure.
1692 E. Walker Epictetus' Mor. v, That which I see, Is not indeed that which
it seems to be.

As in other languages, there still are many other forms of affirmation of reality or certainty, like: really, surely, naturally, certainly, absolutely, in truth, etc ... which will not be the object of this study. Some of these expressions of affirmation of reality, such as the case of indeed, may have other usages in the language, in the form of intensive emphasis (“it is very cold indeed”, “was indeed grateful”, “it is really cold”, “really grateful”); or interjection that expresses surprise, doubt or irony; etc.

The great quantity and variety of usage (at times subtle) of these forms seem to indicate a correspondence to a deep human longing: that of reaching the truth with sureness (not perchance, sure derives from Latin *securus*), discover reality and apply it as foundation of some one's life. But, at the same time, the fact is that this same profusion appears to also indicate a fragility of this intent...