

ESP — THE CASE OF ENGLISH FOR STUDENTS OF SOCIOLOGY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF COIMBRA

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In 1988, when the Economics Faculty of the University of Coimbra admitted students for the first time to the newly created degree-course in Sociology, I was approached by Professor Boaventura de Sousa Santos and asked if I would be interested in teaching a course to help students develop their reading skills in English. This was clearly to be a service course with a very limited set of objectives. I accepted the challenge and since then have been involved in teaching and developing course materials. My contribution here today is a brief description of some of my experiences and the course aims and methodology used in the teaching of English for a highly specific purpose, reading texts in the social sciences, and, I should like to emphasize, for very specific learners.

BACKGROUND — THE COURSE AND THE STUDENTS

Initially, the five-year program required students to complete two annual courses of a foreign language, at least one of which was English¹, but as a result of recent changes to the structure of the degree-program, all students are now required to do two years of English in their four-year course of studies. (These two annual courses are currently taught by Kathleen Hart and myself). Although English is compulsory, grades for the two courses are not considered in calculation of the final average. In each of the two annual courses students receive approximately 45-50 hours of instruction in classes of 25-30 students. As these numbers may suggest, this is not much time to develop proficiency in reading a foreign language, especially in a technical discipline which students who have English as a first-language often find to be written in a «foreign idiom.» The English term «sociologese» is often employed to refer disparagingly to the style of language associated with the discipline².

¹ By default, students did two years of English since there were no other languages offered.

² In *Words in Time*, Geoffrey Hughes approvingly cites George Steiner, saying: «Time has certainly vindicated the judgment of George Steiner in 1961: 'Much of present sociology is illiterate. It is conceived in a jargon of vehement obscurity'» (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1988, p. 231). It should be noted that sociologists themselves have been aware of this. The late C. Wright Mills famously lamented it and urged that practitioners of the craft avoid it. See *The Sociological Imagination* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1959) which was published two years before Steiner's criticism. The American sociologist Howard Becker has written a book, *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1986), that shows how this can be done.

Although it is difficult to generalize very much about the students admitted to the program due to the newness of the course and what appears to be its evolving image to prospective students, as well as the highly anecdotal, unscientific nature of our sampling³, several features⁴ turn up on the questionnaires we give them at the beginning of each year. Most important for our purposes is that, like probably all of their cohort entering university, there are virtually none who are absolute beginners in English, and, furthermore, due to the recent and current penetration of English into Portugal via the mass media they all will have heard quite a lot of English before they come to university. Eight years ago, of the 30 students admitted, only one had fewer than three years of English, and 55% responded that they had studied English for at least five years. Of the 41 first-year students last year who responded (out of about 50 admitted), none said that they had never studied English; seven had studied English for three years; while the remaining 34 had all studied English for at least 5 years, with 22 having studied for seven or more years⁵. As this suggests, the classes consist of students with a wide range of abilities.

COURSE MATERIAL

Faced with the prospects of putting a new course together at short notice, I felt lucky to come across *Reading Skills for the Social Sciences*, by Louann Haarman, Patrick Leech, and Janet Murray, which seemed to be exactly what I was looking for. In the first two years when I followed the same group of students through their two years of English, I used it and supplemented it with material from *Language for Economics* by RR Jordan and FI Nixon as well as material from newspapers and magazines. I was fairly satisfied with the emphasis on reading skills, to which I added a bit of listening comprehension and written production of numbers, since I realized that most of the students had never mastered the basic differences between Portuguese and English-language conventions for thousands, millions, decimals, etc., and since numbers played such a large part in their early coursework at the university. I was rather less satisfied with the content, which did not contain enough sociology, and with the concessions made to methodology since both books were primarily oriented to ESL students pursuing degree courses in the UK. As a result of my experience, I realized that I could exploit the fact that Portuguese and English, especially the scientific registers, share a massive common vocabulary of cognates derived from Latin and Greek⁶, not to mention the fact that although the basic

³ All students who attend class are asked to fill out a questionnaire asking them about their experiences with English, other foreign languages they have studied, what dictionaries they have, their reasons for studying sociology, and their reasons for studying at Coimbra.

⁴ Over the past eight years, students increasingly seem to respond that they want to use their training to help people solve their personal, often psychological, problems. Eight years ago, none of the students who responded listed such aspirations, while last year ten of the thirty six responses listed some variation of the theme «help people». (This may be due to the changing first-choice preferences of those admitted. Initially, more than 50% responded that they were studying sociology because they did not get into law, while of the ten responses last year which indicated that sociology was not the first choice five explicitly listed psychology as their first choice, three did not list a first choice, one gave law, and one gave journalism). One final change that I am not sure quite what to make of is that in the very first group to go through the program, males constituted over 50% of those in the class, while in last year's class, they were just over 14% of the students who responded.

⁵ The exact figures are as follows: 3 years—7; 5 years—8; 6 years—4; 7 years—12; 8 years—7; 10 years—1; twelve years—1; and 13 years—1.

⁶ It is a commonplace that academic discourse and the language of science are primarily derived from Latin and Greek. To the extent that this is true, the problems facing students of English for academic purposes, especially for reading texts in their discipline will be pretty much the same across the various disciplines. That this is probably

wordstock of English derives from Germanic sources, the «cosmopolitan variety»⁷ attributed to English has largely been Europe-based and consists primarily of Greek and Latin or Romance borrowings. My response was to adopt a more «hands-on» approach to students' exposure to authentic sociological texts reflecting several genres and styles (including a textbook, journal article, excerpts from a book, etc.) and we have subsequently assigned the following texts (supplemented with newspaper and magazine articles based on student interest) in English 1 and English 2.

English 1

Anthony Giddens, *Sociology* (Cambridge, England, Polity Press, 1989).

Chapter 1 «Sociology: Problems and Perspectives»

Chapter 3 «Socialization and the Life-Cycle»

Chapter 18 «Population, Health and Ageing»

English 2

Howard Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York, The Free Press, 1973).

Chapter 1 «Outsiders»

Chapter 2 «Kinds of Deviance»

Chapter 3 «Becoming a Marihuana User»

Chapter 4 «Marihuana Use and Social Control»

Norbert Elias, "Introduction — A Theoretical Essay on Established and Outsider Relations", in *The Established and the Outsiders*, 2nd Edition, by Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson (London, Sage, 1994) pp. xv-lii.

Anthony Giddens, *Sociology* (Cambridge, England, Polity Press, 1989).

Chapter 22 «The Development of Sociological Theory»

Sonia Weidner Maluf, «Witches and Witchcraft: A Study About Representations of Female Power on Santa Catarina Island», *International Sociology* (Vol. 7, No. 2, June 1992) pp. 225-234.

Bryan S. Turner, «The Two Faces of Sociology: Global or National», *Theory, Culture & Society* (Vol. 7, 1990) pp. 343-358.

not the case, especially in the cases of engineering and some of the more practical disciplines, is suggested by Charles Barber's observation, «The engineering industries in particular tend to use existing morphemes, and one common habit is the coining of new compound verbs by back-formation, for example *to case-harden*, *to centre-drill*...» in *The English Language: A Historical Introduction* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993) p. 266.

⁷ This expression has gained currency largely through the influence of Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, p. 9) which has gone through four editions (the latest issued in 1994) over 60 years and is often considered the standard work on the subject.

As the relative size of the two years' reading lists suggests, reading in the first year is much more intensive than in the second year. In designing the tasks and exercises that we set for each of the texts, we have tried to analyze the types of vocabulary that will impede students' comprehension. In the first year, students are given exercises that require them to identify and interpret several types of function words, most of which derive from the above-mentioned Germanic core of English. Although words of Anglo-Saxon origin constitute less than 15 % of the vocabulary found in a college dictionary of English⁸, their importance for comprehension of spoken and written English is immense, since they comprise over 80% of the most frequently used thousand words⁹, and since they convey a great deal of the grammatical information essential for an understanding of virtually any English sentence.

GRAMMAR AND VOCABULARY IN THE FIRST YEAR ¹⁰

function words

- modals
- adverbials¹¹
 - subjuncts
 - conjuncts
 - disjuncts
- pronouns and demonstratives
- prepositional and adverbial particles

lexical words

- compounds
- phrasal verbs
- false friends

Typical exercises require students to analyze what specific modals indicate, i.e., possibility, ability, etc.; what adverbials indicate: result, reformulation, concession, etc.; to locate the referents of pronouns and demonstratives; to identify parts of speech in order to determine a word's function in a sentence; to decide whether particles have literal or figurative meaning; to recognize and work out the meaning of compounds; and to recognize and make a list of false friends. Class discussion is based on the exercises and the meaning of the texts.

⁸ Howard Jackson analyzed a random sample selected from the *Longman Concise English Dictionary* in which 13% of the words are ultimately derived from Old English. The results are reported in *Words and Their Meaning* (London, Longman, 1988, p. 21). This figure is probably roughly representative of the language as a whole, although specific letters of the alphabet will show quite large variations from this average.

⁹ Joseph M. Williams, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 4), and Joseph M. Williams, *The Origins of the English Language: a Social & Linguistic History* (New York, The Free Press, 1975, p. 21).

¹⁰ See Appendix 1 for more detailed examples of exercises.

¹¹ These are often referred to as connectors or conjunctions, and in our classes we often refer to them as such to make life simpler for the students. Here, I am following the terminology of Quirk et. al. in *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English language*, by Randolph Quirk et. al. (London, Longman, 1985) pp. 504-653.

CLASSROOM PRACTICE

Classes are conducted in English in both years, but students are free to use Portuguese if they wish. In the second year classes focus on finding answers to comprehension questions that accompany each text, working on vocabulary problems, discussing the ideas in the texts, and a bit of translation for those who want it.

ASSESSMENT

In the first year, tests are based on sociology texts and require the same type of analysis and answers that the exercises require, and in addition there is a short section of questions requiring a true/false answer and a justification of the answer. In the second year, students may choose from several types of assessment. Exams consist of true/false questions that require justification, and students may answer in English or Portuguese. Students who wish to work on translation may be assessed by a combination of examination and the submission of translations of passages designed to practice the range of types of vocabulary highlighted below.

VOCABULARY IN THE SECOND YEAR

Work in the second year follows on from these exercises and adds more work on vocabulary, in particular, work on the following types of potentially troublesome vocabulary:¹²

- function words
- false friends
- compound words
- idioms
- slang
- jargon
- Latin and Greek abbreviations
- theory-laden terms

Most of these are self-explanatory, but I would like to illustrate and comment on several and on the extent to which they may be specifically difficult for students reading sociology. Slang and very colloquial idioms are likely to be encountered in journalism and texts based on data from interviews, and, thus, my experience suggests that it may be more of a problem to students in the social sciences than to students of medicine, engineering, or the physical sciences, for example. Technical vocabulary or **Jargon** is what academic disciplines thrive on, and sociology is notorious (in the English sense of the term) for its reliance on jargon, as noted on page 2 above. To the extent that these are derived from Latin or Greek, students may know the Portuguese cognates and thus not have any problems with the words. There are, however, numerous concepts employed in sociology that derive from the influence of the Germanic forebears of sociology and that have been translated into English in a mixture of Romance or Latinate with Germanic elements, such as the *cunning of reason*. These have a greater potential for interfering with comprehension of a text, and it does seem to help students to be alerted to their existence. Even when the technical terms are cognate, however, and this applies to what I am calling **theory-laden words** (as the term may suggest) as well, in many cases, when the technical vocabulary of sociology employs everyday

¹² See Appendix 2 for more detailed examples of exercises.

words, they often have somewhat different meanings and often radically different connotations than when they are employed in everyday contexts. Several examples may help clarify what type of problem they pose. The words *bureaucracy* and *bureaucratization* and their Portuguese cognates are commonly associated with the painful, irritating red-tape that «government by people in offices» generates. In sociology, however, the term was introduced by Weber to indicate what he took to be one of the most salient features of modern life. As used by sociologists, it is usually purged of negative connotations (and clearly Weber wanted his jargon to be free of such associations), and the phenomenon it refers to may actually be accompanied by many positive effects. Another example is the term *master-status*, which is used in one current of contemporary American sociology, and has nothing to do with mastery and slavery or with a type of high status (as students often imagine), but refers instead to a status or label which is more important for the way people are perceived than any other label that may be applied to them. For example, the status Black in American society was and still is in many cases a master status, in that a Black physician is likely to be identified as a Black first and a physician second.

Finally, the term *civil society* and its Portuguese cognate will also probably be understood (to a greater or lesser degree) by the non-specialist, but students will need to be quite careful not to import their own ideas of what constitutes civil society into what they read, since the meaning of the term varies depending upon which social philosopher or theorist one is reading: for Cicero civil society is not the same thing that it is for Locke, and its meaning changes once again in the thought of Hegel and Marx.

At this point the distinction between teaching a service course that aims at helping students learn to read English and actually teaching them sociology has started to break down. Perhaps it would be more accurate to refer to this in broader terms, acknowledging that much of higher learning consists of learning the history of the jargon of a discipline. In its most generalized form it will be familiar to students and teachers of literature as the phenomenon of semantic change manifest in, for example, the case of the meaning of *humour* or the *humours* in medieval and Renaissance texts¹³.

I would like to mention one final source of potential difficulty that students have with academic reading in a foreign language, and this may be more acute for students of sociology than for students of other disciplines. I diagnose it as deriving from strategies «good» students have developed in their study of foreign languages and perhaps from students' experiences with communicative practice in which they are encouraged to express their opinions. To take the second of these first, to the extent that students have opinions and are good at expressing them in Portuguese or English, they may be starting with a liability when they come to study Sociology and are faced with its canons of argumentation and proof. In addition, to the extent that the results of sociological research are often in conflict with common sense¹⁴ students who are good at figuring out the meaning of a text by using their common sense are more likely to misconstrue what they read. I think that like many teachers of foreign languages, I have often tried to encourage my students

¹³ In *Studies in Words* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1967), CS Lewis traces the history and cognate forms of a number «English» words such as, *nature*, *sad*, *free*, *sense*, and *life*. Raymond Williams'

Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society (London, Fontana, 1976), which is probably more familiar to contemporary students of English Literature than Lewis' study, is a Marxian analysis that traces the «cultural transformation» of more than one hundred English words.

¹⁴ I am deliberately over-simplifying here in several different respects. As Anthony Giddens says in *Sociology* (Oxford, Polity, 1989) p. 14, «Sociological findings both *disturb* and *contribute to* our **common-sense** beliefs about ourselves and others» [emphases in original]. In addition, a great deal of contemporary sociological theory conceives of itself as perhaps the most recent in the series of epistemological breaks with common sense that might be called the development of «scientific» thinking. The title of a standard text for Portuguese students of sociology is adequately revealing: «A Ruptura com o Senso Commun nas Ciências Sociais.» by Augusto Santos Silva, in AS Silva and JM Pinto (org.), *Metodologia das Ciências Sociais* (Porto, Afrontamento, 1987) pp. 29-53.

to «use their common sense», when they are faced with an unknown word or a difficult passage, but my experience with sociology texts has often led me to urge my sociology students to do just the opposite. An example may clarify what I mean. It often comes up when we read in the area of labeling-theory and the sociology of deviance. The title of Thomas Szasz's book, *The Myth of Mental Illness*¹⁵, serves to illustrate this. Virtually no student has any problem with the English at least up to *illness*, and many will immediately realize that the Portuguese word is *doença*. Nonetheless, they find it inconceivable that the existence of «mental illness» and the concept are controversial or are going to be called into question.

CONCLUSION

Students usually do the English courses in their first two years of study at the university. During these years, we informally poll students to see to what extent they think the texts and methods help them with what they are required to read in other courses, but we have yet to do this systematically. Contacts with students in their third and fourth years of study have provided a bit of feedback, but again I cannot offer any solidly-based conclusions about the effectiveness of the course¹⁶.

Current ESP in Portuguese tertiary education covers many specializations and has quite diverse and specific goals. I hope that some of you may find these methods provocative and helpful if you are teaching with the aim of improving reading comprehension of technical texts, but, as I have indicated above, my experience suggests that beyond a certain point the line between teaching ESP and teaching the technical disciplines themselves may not be very clear.

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¹⁵ Thomas Szasz, *The Myth of Mental Illness* (New York, Paul B Hoeber, Inc., 1961).

¹⁶ The most recent data I have is based on the results of Coimbra graduates in the English test given to candidates for this year's *Mestrado* in Sociology at the Economics Faculty: of the forty four candidates for this year's program thirteen were graduates of Coimbra, and, in the English test that I set, seven placed in the top fifteen marks. I admit that I have no idea what to make of this bit of data, since there are too many uncontrolled variables and not enough data to even attempt any multivariate analysis.

Appendix 1

The following are the instructions given to students in English 1.

You should follow the procedure below whenever you read an English text!

- 1 Underline all phrasal verbs and compound words.
- 2 Circle all connectors.
- 3 Put brackets around all pronouns.
- 4 Draw slanted lines through all modal verbs.
- 5 Write down all new or unfamiliar vocabulary in your notebook.

Read the opening paragraphs of chapter 1, «Sociology: Problems and Perspectives» (p 7 line 1-p 8 line 4) paying attention to the unfamiliar words. Find the English word(s) in the text for the following Portuguese term(s): (cw = compound word pv = phrasal verb)

fascinante	antepassados (cw)
formar	inundado
prova	perturbante
acontecer (pv)	assalto (cw)
comovente	estender-se

To what do the following pronouns refer?

- How did this (page 7 line 7)
- from *those* (line 8)
- These* questions (line 9)
- It* is a dazzling (line 13)
- its* subject-matter (line 13)
- its* nature (page 8 line 4)

Go through the passage again and circle all the connectors. To which category does each belong (AND-OR-BUT)?

There are three modals in the passage. Give the line on which each occurs and the idea that each expresses (i.e., probability/possibility, obligation/necessity, certainty, condition, ability, etc.).

Underline the Portuguese word(s) which is/are most appropriate in the context of the passage.

hazard (page 8 line 28) s acaso, sorte; perigo, risco, jogo de azar; determinado jogo de dados; jogada no bilhar, que faz entrar uma das bolas na ventanilha; acidente de terreno, no golfe; (Irl) estação de carros de praça

broad (page 9 line 1) a largo, amplo, extenso; claro; principal, nítido; grosseiro, rústico de sotaque bem marcado; tolerante

The following section deals with crime and punishment (page 9 line 33 - p 11 line 29). There are many words here which will be new to you. Try to read the text for basic information without worrying about each word.

What is Giddens' attitude toward this 18th century form of execution? Find the words that indicate his attitude.

Decide whether the following statements are true or false and justify your answer with information from the text.

- 1 The condemned man was found guilty of regicide.
- 2 The man's arms and legs were torn from his body.
- 3 Hanging took a long time to carry out.

Appendix 2

BACKGROUND TO VOCABULARY AND TRANSLATION EXERCISES

I have included a number of comprehension questions and translation exercises to accompany the several texts we will be reading in this part of the course. In many cases, to do the translations you will need to refer to a dictionary or to several dictionaries. In some cases, an English to Portuguese (bilingual) dictionary may be more helpful than an English to English (monolingual, learner's) dictionary, but in many cases an English to English dictionary may be the only place you will be able to find the information needed to understand a word or phrase. Bilingual dictionaries often list several or even many possible translations of an English word, and it is often difficult to decide which translation is most appropriate. In these cases, your only recourse will be to consult a monolingual dictionary. Both the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* and the *Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary* are recommended for this.

As in the first part of the course, I call your attention to some of the different types of words that you may have trouble with:

function words—conjunctions, adverbs, etc.
 compounds of several words including phrasal verbs
 technical terms including foreign words borrowed into English
 slang and informal or colloquial words
 false friends.

The following exercises are intended to give you some practice in figuring out the meaning of new words, using dictionaries or interpreting information in dictionaries.

- 1) Consider the word *stage* in the following two expressions:

At this stage of our knowledge about AIDS...

The struggle for the distribution of resources holds the center of the stage....

The Porto Editora *Dicionário de Inglês Português* lists the following words under the entry for *stage*. Decide which if any are appropriate in the two sentences:

estrado, plataforma pouco elevada, tablado, palco, ribalta, teatro, carreira dramática, cena, local da acção, cavalete, andaine, prancha, jornada, estação de muda, estalagem, hospedaria, pousada, distância entre duas estações de muda, diligência, mala-posta, estádio, fase, período, platina de microscópio.

- 2) Consider the following expression in the context of prison and convicts:

The prisoner said he hadn't done anything and that his conviction was a bum rap.

Can you figure this out from the context?

- In order to figure this out using a dictionary, it helps to know that *bum* here is an adjective (since it can also be a noun or a verb) and that *rap* is a noun (since it can also be a verb).

Porto Editora gives the following:

under *bum* (a[djective]) — *mau, sem valor, que não presta para nada*; to give a bum steer (c[alão])—*aconselhar mal, orientar mal*

under *rap* — (several translations and several phrases including)
 to take the rap—*ser censurado*.

- 3) For *dope fiend*, under the entry for *dope*, Porto Editora gives *morfinómano*. Under *dope*, Longman gives *marijuana* and under *fiend* — *someone very keen on something*. In the context of Becker's study of marijuana users, how might you translate the term?
- 4) In the first chapter of *Outsiders*, Becker says that the word *outsider* is a «double-barreled» term. Which of the following best translates «barrel» in this context, *casco, barril, barrica, cano de espingarda*?
- 5) Consider the following words. Try to think of Portuguese words that are similar. Look up the words in a dictionary and decide if they are false friends.

enforce a law
violate of a law
 their best *attire*
 they caught the *culprit*
 it was hidden behind a *veil* of secrecy
 we kept a *tally* to see who committed the most fouls
launch an attack
 laws *encrusted* with tradition

- 6) Try to figure out the following compounds or idioms. Use a dictionary to check yourself.

Blue Laws
 full-blown
 layman
 left-handed
 a mixed bag
 a yardstick

take for granted
 bid farewell
 corn stalk = stalk of corn
 framework
 background
 pecking order

- 7) The following foreign words appear in the texts we will be considering. Try to decide which of them are also used in Portuguese and look them up in a dictionary. What do they mean?

demos
homo clausus
mutatis mutandis
pars pro toto
sub rosa
sui generis
vis a vis

- 8) The following are technical terms or erudite terms. Do they exist in Portuguese? Try to define them in everyday words.

agoraphobia
acrophobia
exogamy
endogamy
shibboleth
stigmatise
protean
norm-abiding
libidinal
ego
super-ego
affect restraint

BACKGROUND

to *The Established and the Outsiders* by Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson

We will be reading the first chapter of the book entitled «Introduction: A Theoretical Essay on Established and Outsider Relations». This essay was written by Elias in 1976 and appears in the 1994 re-issue of the book which was originally published 1965. In the original, Elias and Scotson analyzed a community they called Winston Parva, which was one part of a suburban village (which they called Winston Magna) in the Midlands of England. The residents of Winston Parva were relative newcomers to the village and were regarded by the older residents as «outsiders». Winston Parva was separated from the rest of a village by a railroad line. They analyzed the village along lines which the villagers recognized and distinguished three zones. Zone one was a middle-class residential zone; zone two had working-class housing and most of the village's factories. Both of these zones were home to the «established» families in the community — those whose families had been there for several generations (from the 1880's when the first houses were built there). Zone three was also working-class, but its residents were newcomers to the village, since its houses were built in the 1930's.

Questions (pages xv-xx)

- 1) What is the original literal meaning of «aristocracy»? (p xv)
- 2) What is the original meaning of «villein»? (xv)
- 3) How did the people in the two parts of Winston Parva differ? (xvii and xxi)
- 4) How does Elias explain the fact that the one group had more power than the other? (xviii)
- 5) What other factors can create power differentials? (xviii)
- 6) How does an established group see itself? How does it see an outsider group? (xix)
- 7) Explain why Elias wants to distinguish between group stigmatization and individual prejudice. (xx)

Translation

- A) Translate the last paragraph on page xv and the top of xvi.
- B) Translate the first paragraph on page xvi.
- C) Translate the last paragraph on page xvii and the top of xviii.