A number of "language" matters that students of English as a second language need to learn about are not treated in textbooks at all. Many of these are partly linguistic in nature and partly non-linguistic, involving other aspects of culture. One such matter is the cliche. For the native speaker of any language, a cliche is an expression which has lost its original freshness and force through repeated use and familiarity. The native speaker does not need to "learn" cliches or practice using them. The student learning a foreign language, however, should seek to master cliches just as he seeks to master the structural patterns and vocabulary of the language--learning the commonly used forms and everyday expressions before he attempts to go on to more exceptional usages. Presented here is a fill-in-the-blank exercise in word association with samples of pairs with "and" ("husband and wife"); pairs with "or" ("same or different"); triplets with "and" ("red, white, and blue"); similes with "as" ("blind as a bat"); and similes with "like" ("growls like a bear"). (AMM)
QUITE A NUMBER of "language" matters that students of English as a second language need to learn about are not treated in textbooks at all. Many of these are partly linguistic in nature and partly non-linguistic, that is, "cultural"—involving other aspects of culture. Actually, hardly anything in the language-learning situation can be said to be purely linguistic, divorced completely from the "cultural" side. Most of the time there seems to be simply a stronger tendency in one direction or the other—more toward the linguistic on the one hand or more toward the "cultural" on the other; but sometimes these matters appear to lie pretty much on "middle ground."

One such matter I've been occupied with recently is our habit of associating pairs and groups of words together in clichés. We usually think of the following, for example, in sets of two: salt and pepper, cup and saucer, bread and butter, hands and feet, doors and windows; sink or swim, sooner or later, heads or tails. If we give a native speaker of American English the first member of the set, he will ordinarily respond with the second. Not long ago some of my colleagues and I made a list of over 200 of these pairs. Sets of three are fairly common, too, but not as numerous as the pairs: food, clothing, and shelter; hop, skip, and jump; stop, look, and listen; good, bad, or indifferent; beg, borrow, or steal. Here, the first two automatically evoke the third. These pairs and triplets appear to have a fixed order, however: as a rule, left and . . . will evoke right, whereas right and . . . will evoke wrong.

Another pairing device is the simile, with the word as or like: light as a feather, fit as a fiddle, happy as a lark, fresh as a daisy; kicks like a mule, sleep like a log, grows like a weed, cries like a baby. Many of these and many of the previously mentioned pairs have what we might call a "tight" association; they are universal, so to speak—used consistently throughout the entire United States. Others have a "looser" association; they vary geographically and also, perhaps, socially. Black as . . ., for example, may evoke night or coal or pitch. A situational variation also occurs in some instances: eats like . . ., depending on the situation, may evoke a horse or a bird or even some other heavy or light eater.

It's my guess that relatively few students of English (or teachers, either) realize how extensive our use of pairs
and triplets in these ways actually is. To show a little more of this proliferation, I’m noting below some additional examples of each type (sets of two and three). But rather than give a straight list of items as they seem most natural to me or to someone else, I ask you to complete them yourself by filling in the blanks. Then you can check your responses with those given at the end of this article. If you are a native speaker of American English or have spent many years in the United States, your responses and the ones given will match very well—perhaps exactly. On the other hand, if you are a non-native speaker and your contact with Americans has been somewhat limited, your response and those given will probably not match very well.

This is an exercise in word association, not idea association—an exercise on how Americans put words (and sometimes phrases) together by twos and threes without conscious thought. The term “co-occurrence” has come into fairly general use during the past decade; it applies to sentence elements that occur together. The items presented here are all co-occurrences in American clichés, the co-occurrence range in each case being extremely limited.

Pairs with AND

Example: husband and wife

1. comb and 
2. shoes and 
3. tables and 
4. stop and 
5. top and 
6. arms and 
7. up and 
8. heel and 
9. in and 
10. thunder and 
11. thick and 
12. chills and 
13. needle and 
14. cops and 
15. north and 
16. fact and 
17. lost and 
18. sticks and 
19. duke and 
20. fame and 
21. cowboys and 
22. Greeks and 
23. straight and 
24. ladies and 
25. prose and 
26. far and 
27. safe and 
28. before and 
29. off and 
30. various and 
31. brothers and 
32. sweetness and 
33. silver and 
34. hit and 
35. pure and 
36. aches and 
37. forgive and 
38. judge and 
39. supply and 
40. do's and 

Pairs with OR

Example: same or different

41. more or 
42. trick or 
43. win or 
44. rain or 
45. double or 
46. better or 
47. this or 
48. heaven or 
49. friend or 
50. truth or 

Triplets

Example: red, white, and blue

51. knife, fork, and 
52. tall, dark, and 
53. love, honor, and 
54. eat, drink, and 
55. blood, sweat, and 
56. how, when, and 
57. morning, noon, and 
58. healthy, wealthy, and 
59. friends, Romans, and 
60. on land, on sea, and 
61. ready, willing, and 
62. solid, liquid, or 
63. lost, strayed, or 
64. win, lose, or 

Similes with AS

Example: blind as a bat

65. busy as 
66. cheap as 
67. sick as 
68. nutty as 
69. cool as 
70. stubborn as 
71. flat as 
72. slippery as 
73. hairy as
Similes with LIKE
Example: growls like a bear
85. roars like
86. shuts up like
87. drinks like
88. cracks like
89. spins like
90. laughs like
91. goes out like
92. shakes like
93. climbs like
94. leaps like
95. cuts like
96. multiplies like
97. bounces like
98. barks like
99. sells like
100. sticks (adheres) like

For the native speaker of any language, a cliché is an expression that, through repeated use and familiarity, has lost its original freshness and force. The native speaker does not need to “learn” clichés or practice using them.

In fact, the careful user of the language, seeking to bring more impact and originality to his speech or writing, must seek new similes, new pairings or contrasts, in order to catch the attention of his audience. The student learning a foreign language, however, should seek to master clichés just as he seeks to master the structural patterns and vocabulary of the language—learning the commonly used forms and everyday expressions before he attempts to go on to more exceptional usages.

Typical native-speaker responses: 1 brush 2 socks 3 chairs 4 go 5 bottom 6 legs 7 down 8 toe 9 out 10 lightning 11 thin 12 fever 13 thread 14 robbers 15 south 16 fiction 17 found 18 stones 19 duchess 20 fortune 21 Indians 22 Romans 23 narrow 24 gentlemen 25 poetry 26 wide (near) 27 sound 28 after 29 on 30 sundry 31 sisters 32 light 33 gold 34 run 35 simple 36 pairs 37 forget 38 jury 39 demand 40 don’t’s 41 less 42 treat 43 lose 44 shine 45 nothing 46 worse 47 that 48 hell 49 foe (enemy) 50 consequences 51 spoon 52 handsome 53 obey (cherish) 54 be merry 55 tears 56 where 57 night 58 wise 59 countrymen 60 in the air 61 able 62 gas 63 stolen 64 draw 65 a bee 66 dirt 67 a dog 68 a fruitcake 69 a cucumber 70 a mule 71 a pancake 72 an eel 73 an ape 74 a bone 75 an arrow 76 a board 77 a judge 78 the hills (Methuselah) 79 hen’s teeth 80 a jaybird (a new-born babe) 81 pie 82 nails (a rock) 83 a razor (a tack) 84 lead 85 a lion 86 a clam 87 a fish 88 a whip 89 a top 90 a monkey 91 a hyena 92 a light 93 a leaf 94 a frog 95 a knife 96 rabbits 97 a ball 98 a dog 99 hotcakes 100 glue

“Fallout” from the Moon Trip
The stamp pictured here (in slightly enlarged form), which was issued in Washington, D.C., on September 9, 1969, is unique in the world of philately: The master die that produced the oversize commemorative stamp made a preliminary trip to the moon with astronauts Armstrong, Aldrin, and Collins. In addition, an envelope bearing a “die proof” of the stamp went along on the Apollo 11—and was canceled by the astronauts on July 20, 1969, the day of the landing on the moon! This unique “first-day cover” is now part of a moon-landing exhibit that is touring the United States. The blue, yellow, and black stamp, with lettering in blue and red, measures 2 inches by 1 ¼ inches—making it about 50% larger than the standard USA stamp. Issued in quantity for regular domestic air-mail use, this 10¢ stamp will carry a letter weighing up to one ounce anywhere within the 3,615,211 square miles of the United States—which includes the trans-Pacific mail flights to Alaska and Hawaii.