Chapter 6: Mijbil the Otter

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Exercise 6.1 — Oral Comprehension Check 1 (Page 83)

Q1 What 'experiment' did Maxwell think Camusfearna would be suitable for?

SOLUTION

Early in 1956, when Maxwell was travelling in Southern Iraq, it crossed his mind that he would like to keep an otter instead of a dog.

He felt that Camusfearna, which was "ringed by water a stone's throw from its door," would be "an eminently suitable spot for this experiment" — the experiment of keeping an otter as a pet.

Answer: Maxwell thought Camusfearna, ringed by water, would be a suitable spot for the experiment of keeping an otter instead of a dog.

Q2 Why does he go to Basra? How long does he wait there, and why?

SOLUTION

Maxwell went to Basra, to the Consulate-General, to collect and answer his mail from Europe.

His friend's mail had arrived but his own had not, so he had to wait. He cabled England, then tried to telephone, but the call had to be booked twenty-four hours in advance; the line was out of order one day, the exchange was closed for a religious holiday the next, and there was a breakdown on the third day.

His mail finally arrived five days after his friend left — so he waited for about a week (roughly five days more) at Basra.

Answer: He goes to Basra to collect his mail; he waits about a week because of telephone breakdowns and the delayed arrival of his mail.

Q3 How does he get the otter? Does he like it? Pick out the words that tell you this.

SOLUTION

Maxwell got the otter when he was carrying his mail to his bedroom to read. There he found two Arabs squatting on the floor, beside a sack that squirmed from time to time. They handed him a note from his friend that said, "Here is your otter..."

Yes, Maxwell liked the otter very much. His deep attachment is shown by phrases such as "a phase of my life that has not yet ended," "a thraldom to otters, an otter fixation," and "an otter fixation that I have since found to be shared by most other people, who have ever owned one."

Answer: He gets the otter delivered by two Arabs in a sack; he likes it deeply, shown by words like 'thraldom to otters' and 'an otter fixation'.

Q4 Why was the otter named 'Maxwell's otter'?

SOLUTION

Maxwell's otter, which he called Mijbil, belonged to a race that was previously unknown to science.

When zoologists studied it, they christened (named) it Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli, or Maxwell's otter, after Maxwell himself — because it was a new sub-species that he had brought to their notice.

Answer: Because Mijbil belonged to a race previously unknown to science, zoologists named the new sub-species Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli, or Maxwell's otter.

Q5 Tick the right answer. In the beginning, the otter was (a) aloof and indifferent (b) friendly (c) hostile.

SOLUTION

For the first twenty-four hours Mijbil was neither hostile nor friendly; he was simply aloof and indifferent, choosing to sleep on the floor as far from Maxwell's bed as

possible.

So the correct answer is: aloof and indifferent.

Answer: Aloof and indifferent.

Q6 What happened when Maxwell took Mijbil to the bathroom? What did it do two days after that?

SOLUTION

When Maxwell took Mijbil to the bathroom, the otter went wild with joy in the water for half an hour — plunging and rolling in it, shooting up and down the length of the bathtub underwater, and making enough slosh and splash for a hippo.

Two days later, Mijbil escaped from the bedroom and ran to the bathroom. Maxwell found him fumbling at the chromium taps with his paws, and in less than a minute the otter had turned a tap far enough to produce a trickle of water, and soon achieved the full flow.

Answer: In the bathroom Mij went wild with joy in the water; two days later he escaped and cleverly turned on the bathroom tap himself.

Exercise 6.2 — Oral Comprehension Check 2 (Page 86)

Q1 How was Mij to be transported to England?

SOLUTION

The British airline to London would not fly animals, so Maxwell booked a flight to Paris on another airline, and from there to London.

That airline insisted that Mij should be packed into a box not more than eighteen inches square, to be carried on the floor at Maxwell's feet.

Answer: Mij was to be flown to Paris and then London, packed in a box not more than eighteen inches square, kept at Maxwell's feet.

Q2 What did Mij do to the box?

SOLUTION

An hour before the flight, Maxwell put Mij into the box to get it used to it and left for a hurried meal.

When he returned, there was blood trickled and dried around the airholes and chinks of the lid. Mij had torn the lining of the box to shreds and, exhausted and blood-spattered, whimpered and caught at Maxwell's leg.

Answer: Mij tore the lining of the box to shreds, injuring himself so that he was blood-spattered and exhausted.

Q3 Why did Maxwell put the otter back in the box? How do you think he felt when he did this?

SOLUTION

Maxwell removed the last of the torn lining so that there were no cutting edges left. By then it was just ten minutes until the flight time and the airport was five miles away, so he had no choice but to put the miserable Mij back into the box, holding down the lid with his hand.

He must have felt very sad, worried and helpless — he calls Mij "miserable" and clearly disliked shutting the injured otter back in the box, but he had no other option because of the shortage of time.

Answer: He put Mij back because there was no time before the flight; he probably felt sad, anxious and helpless doing it.

Q4 Why does Maxwell say the airhostess was "the very queen of her kind"?

SOLUTION

The air hostess was extremely kind and understanding. She agreed to keep Mij's parcel of fish in a cool place, and when Maxwell confided in her about the events of the last half hour, she suggested that he might prefer to have his pet on his knee rather than in the box.

Maxwell was so grateful for her sympathy and helpfulness that he retained "the most profound admiration" for her and called her "the very queen of her kind."

Answer: Because she was exceptionally kind and helpful — she let him keep Mij on his knee and helped him, earning his deep admiration.

Q5 What happened when the box was opened?

SOLUTION

When the box was opened on the aircraft, Mij was out of it in a flash and disappeared at high speed down the aircraft.

There were squawks and shrieks, and a woman stood up on her seat screaming "A rat! A rat!" Maxwell dived for Mij's tail as it disappeared beneath a portly Indian, missed, and found his face covered in curry.

The air hostess then helped, and after a while Mij came back on his own — with a distressed chitter of recognition, he bounded on to Maxwell's knee and began to nuzzle his face and neck.

Answer: Mij shot out of the box and ran down the aircraft, causing panic, before returning to nuzzle Maxwell.

Exercise 6.3 — Oral Comprehension Check 3 (Page 88)

Q1 What game had Mij invented?

SOLUTION

Mij invented a game with the ping-pong ball. A suitcase Maxwell had taken to Iraq had been damaged on the journey home, so its lid, when closed, remained at a slope from one end to the other.

Mij discovered that if he placed the ball on the high end, it would run down the length of the suitcase. He would dash to the other end to ambush its arrival, hide and crouch to spring up and grab it by surprise, then trot off with it to the high end once more.

Answer: Mij invented a game of rolling a ping-pong ball down the sloping lid of a damaged suitcase and ambushing it at the other end.

Q2 What are 'compulsive habits'? What does Maxwell say are the compulsive habits of (i) school children (ii) Mij?

SOLUTION

'Compulsive habits' are habits that are impossible to control — things one feels driven to do again and again, like a ritual.

(i) School children: on their way to and from school, they must place their feet squarely on the centre of each paving block, touch every seventh upright of the iron railings, or pass to the outside of every second lamp post.

(ii) Mij: on his way home (but never on his way out), Mij would tug Maxwell to a low wall opposite a primary school, jump on to it, and gallop the full length of its thirty yards, to the distraction of the pupils and staff.

Answer: Compulsive habits are uncontrollable, ritual-like habits; children step on paving blocks and touch railings, while Mij galloped along a low wall on his way home.

Q3 What group of animals do otters belong to?

SOLUTION

Otters belong to a comparatively small group of animals called Mustellines.

This group is shared by the badger, mongoose, weasel, stoat, mink and others.

Answer: Otters belong to a small group of animals called Mustellines, which also includes the badger, mongoose, weasel, stoat and mink.

Q4 What guesses did the Londoners make about what Mij was?

SOLUTION

The Londoners could not recognise an otter and made a wide variety of wrong guesses.

They guessed Mij to be 'a baby seal', 'a squirrel', 'a walrus', 'a hippo', 'a beaver', 'a bear cub', 'a leopard' (one that had changed its spots) and even 'a brontosaur'. A labourer digging in the street also demanded, "Here, Mister — what is that supposed to be?"

Answer: They guessed Mij was a seal, squirrel, walrus, hippo, beaver, bear cub, leopard, and even a brontosaur — anything but an otter.

Exercise 6.4 — Thinking about the Text

Q1 What things does Mij do which tell you that he is an intelligent, friendly and fun-loving animal who needs love?

SOLUTION

Intelligent: Mij learned to turn on the bathroom tap himself; he invented his own game with the ping-pong ball on the sloping suitcase lid; and he developed his own compulsive habits like galloping along the low wall.

Friendly and needing love: he soon followed Maxwell without a lead and came when called; he slept in the crook of Maxwell's knees; and after escaping in the aeroplane he returned to nuzzle Maxwell's face and neck with a distressed chitter of recognition.

Fun-loving: he went wild with joy in the bathwater, spent most of his time in play, juggled marbles on his belly, and dribbled a rubber ball round the room like a four-footed soccer player.

Answer: He turns on taps and invents games (intelligent), follows and nuzzles Maxwell (friendly, needing love), and plays constantly with balls and marbles (fun-loving).

Q2 What are some of the things we come to know about otters from this text?

SOLUTION

From the text we learn that otters are found in large numbers in the marshes near Basra in Iraq and are often tamed by the Arabs.

They belong to a small group of animals called Mustellines, along with the badger, mongoose, weasel, stoat and mink.

Otters love water — every drop of water must be extended and spread about; they overturn bowls and splash about. They are highly playful and intelligent, juggling objects on their backs, and can form strong attachments to humans.

Answer: Otters live in marshes and can be tamed; they belong to the Mustellines; they love water intensely and are very playful, intelligent and affectionate.

Q3 Why is Mij's species now known to the world as Maxwell's otter?

SOLUTION

Mij belonged to a race of otter that was previously unknown to science.

Because Maxwell brought this new sub-species to the notice of zoologists, they christened it Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli, or Maxwell's otter, in his honour.

Answer: Because Mij was a previously unknown sub-species, and zoologists named it Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli — Maxwell's otter — after him.

Q4 Maxwell in the story speaks for the otter, Mij. He tells us what the otter feels and thinks on different occasions. Given below are some things the otter does. Complete the column on the right to say what Maxwell says about what Mij feels and thinks: (a) plunges, rolls in the water and makes the water splosh and splash; (b) screws the tap in the wrong way; (c) nuzzles Maxwell's face and neck in the aeroplane.

SOLUTION

(a) Plunges, rolls in the water and makes it splosh and splash: Mij feels wild joy and delight — water must be kept on the move and made to do things; when static it is wasted and provoking.

(b) Screws the tap in the wrong way: Mij feels irritation and disappointment at the tap's failure to cooperate, chittering with annoyance.

(c) Nuzzles Maxwell's face and neck in the aeroplane: Mij feels recognition, relief, affection and welcome on finding Maxwell again after his escape.

Answer: In water Mij feels joyful; at the tap he feels irritated and disappointed; nuzzling Maxwell he feels affection, relief and recognition.

Q5 Read the story and find the sentences where Maxwell describes his pet otter. Then choose and arrange your sentences to illustrate those statements below that you think are true: (i) makes Mij seem almost human, like a small boy; (ii) shows that he is often irritated with what Mij does; (iii) shows that he is often surprised by what Mij does; (iv) of Mij's antics is comical; (v) shows that he observes the antics of Mij very carefully; (vi) shows that he thinks Mij is a very ordinary otter; (vii) shows that he thinks the otter is very unusual.

SOLUTION

(i) Almost human, like a small boy — TRUE: Mij dribbling the ball "like a four-footed soccer player" and developing "compulsive habits" like children who step on paving blocks show him as almost human.

(iii) Often surprised — TRUE: "I watched, amazed" when Mij turned on the tap, and Maxwell's surprise at the variety of guesses about what Mij was.

(iv) Comical — TRUE: Mij galloping along the low wall to the "hopeless distraction" of pupils and staff, and the aeroplane scene where Maxwell's face is "covered in curry", are comical.

(v) Observes very carefully — TRUE: the detailed descriptions of how Mij juggles marbles on his belly and invents the ping-pong game show careful observation.

(vii) Thinks the otter is very unusual — TRUE: Mij is "of a race previously unknown to science" and Maxwell speaks of "an otter fixation".

Statements (ii) 'often irritated' and (vi) 'a very ordinary otter' are NOT true — Maxwell is affectionate rather than irritated, and clearly finds Mij extraordinary.

Answer: Statements (i), (iii), (iv), (v) and (vii) are true; (ii) and (vi) are not, since Maxwell is affectionate and finds Mij extraordinary.

Exercise 6.5 — Thinking about Language

Q1 Describing a Repeated Action in the Past. From the table, make as many correct sentences as you can using 'would' and/or 'used to', as appropriate: Emperor Akbar / Every evening we / Fifty years ago, very few people / Till the 1980s, Shanghai / My uncle — be fond of musical evenings / take long walks on the beach / own cars / have very dirty streets / spend his holidays by the sea.

SOLUTION

'Would' and 'used to' both describe repeated actions in the past, but only 'used to' can describe past states or situations (so not with verbs like be, have, own).

State/situation verbs — use only 'used to':
Emperor Akbar used to be fond of musical evenings.
Fifty years ago, very few people used to own cars.
Till the 1980s, Shanghai used to have very dirty streets.

Action verbs — 'would' or 'used to' both work:
Every evening we would (used to) take long walks on the beach.
My uncle would (used to) spend his holidays by the sea.

Answer: Use 'used to' for states (Akbar was fond of music; people owned cars; Shanghai had dirty streets) and either 'would' or 'used to' for actions (we took walks; my uncle spent holidays by the sea).

Q2 Noun Modifiers. Look at these examples from the text, and say whether the modifiers (in italics) are nouns, proper nouns, or adjective plus noun: (i) an otter fixation (ii) the iron railings (iii) the Tigris marshes (iv) the London streets (v) soft velvet fur (vi) a four-footed soccer player.

SOLUTION

(i) an otter fixation — noun (otter modifies fixation).
(ii) the iron railings — noun (iron modifies railings).
(iii) the Tigris marshes — proper noun (Tigris is a proper noun).
(iv) the London streets — proper noun (London is a proper noun).
(v) soft velvet fur — adjective plus noun (soft is an adjective, velvet is a noun).
(vi) a four-footed soccer player — adjective plus noun (four-footed is an adjective, soccer is a noun).

Answer: (i) noun; (ii) noun; (iii) proper noun; (iv) proper noun; (v) adjective + noun; (vi) adjective + noun.

Q3 Quantities. Match the words on the left with a word on the right (some may go with more than one): (i) a portion of (ii) a pool of (iii) flakes of (iv) a huge heap of (v) a gust of (vi) little drops of (vii) a piece of (viii) a pot of — blood, cotton, stones, gold, fried fish, snow, water, wind.

SOLUTION

(i) a portion of fried fish
(ii) a pool of blood / a pool of water
(iii) flakes of snow / flakes of cotton
(iv) a huge heap of stones
(v) a gust of wind
(vi) little drops of blood / little drops of water
(vii) a piece of gold / a piece of stone
(viii) a pot of gold

Answer: Sample matches: a portion of fried fish, a pool of blood/water, flakes of snow, a huge heap of stones, a gust of wind, little drops of water, a piece of gold, a pot of gold.

Q4 Use 'a bit of / a piece of / a bunch of / a cloud of / a lump of' with the italicised nouns in the following sentences. The first has been done for you as an example: (i) My teacher gave me some advice. → My teacher gave me a bit of advice. (ii) Can you give me some clay, please. (iii) The information you gave was very useful. (iv) Because of these factories, smoke hangs over the city. (v) Two stones rubbed together can produce sparks of fire. (vi) He gave me some flowers on my birthday.

SOLUTION

(ii) Can you give me a lump of clay, please.
(iii) The piece of information you gave was very useful. (also: a bit of information)
(iv) Because of these factories, a cloud of smoke hangs over the city.
(v) Two stones rubbed together can produce a shower/spark of fire. (best fit here: a bit of fire; the natural phrase is 'sparks of fire')
(vi) He gave me a bunch of flowers on my birthday.

Answer: (ii) a lump of clay; (iii) a piece/bit of information; (iv) a cloud of smoke; (v) a bit of fire; (vi) a bunch of flowers.

Exercise 6.6 — Thinking about the Poem — Fog

Q1 (i) What does Sandburg think the fog is like? (ii) How does the fog come? (iii) What does 'it' in the third line refer to? (iv) Does the poet actually say that the fog is like a cat? Find three things that tell us that the fog is like a cat.

SOLUTION

(i) Sandburg thinks the fog is like a cat.

(ii) The fog comes silently and softly, "on little cat feet" — quietly, the way a cat moves.

(iii) 'It' in the third line refers to the fog.

(iv) No, the poet does not directly say the fog is like a cat; he suggests it through comparison. Three cat-like things: (1) it comes "on little cat feet"; (2) it "sits looking over harbour and city on silent haunches", the way a cat sits on its haunches; (3) it "then moves on", just as a cat quietly gets up and walks away.

Answer: Sandburg thinks the fog is like a cat; it comes silently on little cat feet, sits on its haunches looking over the city, and then moves on.

Q2 You know that a metaphor compares two things by transferring a feature of one thing to the other. (i) Find metaphors for the following words and complete the table, and say how they are alike (the first is done for you — Storm: tiger, pounces over the fields, growls): Train, Fire, School, Home. (ii) Think about a storm... Write a poem about the storm comparing it with an animal.

SOLUTION

(i) Sample metaphors, with how they are alike:
Storm — tiger: pounces over the fields, growls (given).
Train — snake: winds/slithers along the tracks and hisses as it moves.
Fire — dragon: breathes and spreads flames, devours everything in its path.
School — beehive: full of busy, buzzing activity, everyone working together.
Home — nest: a warm, safe shelter where the family rests and is protected.

(ii) This part asks you to write your own poem comparing a storm to an animal (for example, a raging bull or a roaring lion that charges, thunders and then falls calm). It is a creative writing task with no single fixed answer.

Answer: Sample metaphors: train = snake (slithers, hisses), fire = dragon (breathes flames, devours), school = beehive (busy, buzzing), home = nest (warm, safe shelter).

Q3 Does this poem have a rhyme scheme? Poetry that does not have an obvious rhythm or rhyme is called 'free verse'.

SOLUTION

No, the poem 'Fog' does not have a rhyme scheme. The line endings do not rhyme with one another.

It also has no fixed, regular rhythm. Poetry like this, without an obvious rhythm or rhyme, is called free verse — so 'Fog' is an example of free verse.

Answer: No, the poem has no rhyme scheme or regular rhythm; it is written in free verse.