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Really spoilt for choice? Fixed expressions in learners' dictionaries of English[1]

Abstract

The relevance of 'chunks' in language use and learning has become a commonplace of ELT today. How successful are the new or revised learners' dictionaries of English in dealing with groups of words, set phrases or fixed expressions? 90 representative items from a range of phraseological types are selected. Each dictionary is checked with respect to its coverage of the items. User-friendliness, accessibility and breadth of coverage are assessed. The paper compares and assesses the four competitors.

Keywords: idioms, phraseology, learners' dictionaries, English, dictionary use

1. Fixed expressions, idiomaticity and phraseology make waves

Users of language(s) quite clearly employ groups of words, set phrases or fixed expressions. This is especially true of spoken usage. But it can equally be attested to by examining written texts (see Howarth 1996 and Fernando 1996). Different word combinations (some fixed, others variable) recur: restricted collocations, idiomatic phrases, sentence stems, pragmatic idioms etc. The relevance of chunks in language use and learning has become a commonplace of ELT today (Henry 1996); the focus on lexis and the negation of the necessary bifurcation of lexis and grammar in applied linguistics in general is practically 'second nature' judging by the professional literature of the past five or so years (Hunston et al. 1997). Béjoint (1994: 209–226) has provided an excellent overview of this focusing on idiomaticity and its ramifications for lexicography in English language dictionaries.

Henry (1996: 297) claims that "idiomatic formulaic speech is at the very centre of second language acquisition". We can agree with Carter and McCarthy (1995: 307) who argue for an extension of "what is assumed to be the core of the language". We would want to go further and include pivotal items in the cultural meshing of language to the outside world: idioms, metaphors, proverbial idioms, catch phrases and pragmatic expressions. Alexander (1978/79) delineated a number of categories of what can be called 'fixed expressions'. This term subsumes 'phraseological units' such as Gläser (1983) discusses. Advanced students encounter difficulties in assimilating these items. Phraseology, hitherto a sub-branch of lexis, has come to take up a central position in English language studies. There are numerous theoretical reasons, why academic and scholarly shifts internal to linguistics and language studies have taken place. As adumbrated above there are also many practical and applied innovations in ESP, computer applications, language learning activities, and shifts in teaching methodology in general which have come to privilege the role played by fixed expressions and phraseological units.

2. Phraseology as a framework for learning and teaching English

It can be argued that phraseology functions, in two senses, as a framework for learning and teaching English. Firstly, in a formal analytical sense, language is lexis; the lexical approach presides here. In this context the full implication of what Sinclair (1991: 110ff.) calls "the idiom-principle" is relevant. Here the quantitatively larger and yet perceptually smaller role of collocation should not be overlooked (see Bahns (1996) for an exhaustive analysis of dictionaries from this angle). Secondly, we can view language through the 'frame' of phraseology in a more holistic sense. This entails both the contextualization of language and the psycholinguistic chunking process, which are both very important in learning terms. On this view language has no ontological existence outside of context. In this framework phraseological units are "cultural units" as well as formal, linguistic units: phraseological chunks carry meaning in every sense of the word – affective, as well as conceptual, cultural as well as grammatical.

Teaching programmes will need to take such factors into consideration. Likewise, the utility of helpful dictionaries in cataloguing and explicating these items for learners, teachers and materials writers is self-evident. So, the still basic question remains. How is phraseology, how are fixed expressions, served by reference works, lexicography and learners' dictionaries of English in particular?

3. Criterial features of phraseological units and fixed expressions

The terminological pluralism in use to delimit these units may be a problem for learners. In the dictionaries under review we find the terms "phrase" and "idiom" in use. Despite their variability these phraseological units can be shown to manifest similarities. Three clusters of features shared by fixed expressions appear to be criterial: (1) 'idiomaticity', (2) socio-cultural markedness, and (3) certain items manifest pragmatic properties (Moon 1992). These criteria can help to map this 'fuzzy' domain. Whether they can be lexicographically represented and catalogued is one of the questions this study sets out to answer (see also Alexander 1978/9, 1984 and 1992).

It is clear that learners of differing mother tongues will tend to have specific difficulties with phraseological units in relation to their own languages. At the same time, various types of fixed expressions continue to present problems for learners of English in general. Multi-word items come in many shapes and sizes: irreversible binomials, idiomatic phrases with many a turn and expressions that help to organize speech or discourse. The nine categories for this study were chosen to enable a replication of the Alexander (1992) analysis. The categories with examples are as follows:

1. Phrasal verbs: *rip off*
2. Irreversible binomials: *swings and roundabouts*
3. Tournures: *put one's foot in it*
4. Catch phrases and slogans: *Read my lips – no new taxes*
5. Proverbs, gnomic expressions: *every cloud has a silver lining*
6. Pragmatic idioms, gambits: *No way!*
7. Animal metaphors: *horses for courses*
8. Idiomatic similes: *as sick as a dog*

9. Allusion and allusive idioms: *Tom, Dick and Harry*

The taxonomy drawn up by Alexander (1978/9, 1984 and 1987) is useful in breaking down some of the common "idioms" (see Cowie and Mackin 1975 and Cowie et al. 1983) into more isolatable and recognizable subcategories (1-3). The focus on categories (4-6) reflects the continued need to 'explain' socio-culturally and particularly pragmatically coloured items for foreign learners. The cultural element is a major feature of the last three categories (7-9). As mentioned, the author is aware of the growing awareness that 'chunking' begins with collocational co-occurrences of items in English, what Sinclair (1991) calls the 'idiom principle'. It is nonetheless the case that it is to dictionaries that students turn (almost intuitively) for information on more proto-typically idiomatic phrases. The taxonomy given above has demonstrated its usefulness in focusing on what are perhaps the more traditional and prominent (because more colourful!) of phraseological units – idioms and related expressions. Hence dictionaries still need to be assessed for their abilities to cope with the kinds of idiomatic units selected above.

4. Phraseology in recent learners' dictionaries of English

The four dictionaries we shall be checking are listed below. They have already been subjected to profound and critical reviews. Their phraseological aspects have also been touched upon. Bogaards (1996: 285ff.) comments intriguingly: "To my knowledge, nothing is known about the sensibility of foreign learners to the fixed or idiomatic status of word combinations they come across without knowing their meaning". This comes in a section in which he has been discussing findability for receptive purposes in general. Bogaards refrains from defining what "constitutes a fixed expression". As he states, it is the case "that the learner has to decide on the word where he may find the explanation he needs". This is a point we cover below. This author can fully concur, too, when he usefully comments: "The presentations of multi-word expressions in the four dictionaries differ considerably".

Dictionaries of English for Advanced Learners

Crowther, Jonathan (ed.) (1995). *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*. Oxford University Press, Oxford. [OALD5]
Procter, Paul (ed.) (1995). *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. [CIDE]
Sinclair, John McH. (ed.) (1995). *COBUILD English Dictionary*. HarperCollins, London. [COBUILD2]
Summers, Delia (ed.) (1995). *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. Longman, London. [LDOCE3]

One can agree in principle with Herbst's judgement of the dictionaries' treatment of collocations and phrases (1996: 335): "All four dictionaries show great awareness of the importance of prefabricated elements in language". He singles out COBUILD2 for separate praise, saying "with its sentence definitions" that it "alone pays due attention to the idiomatic character of language in an excellent and unsurpassed manner" (1996: 336). Certainly the praise is due when it refers to the treatment of phrases such as *pretty well* and *pretty much*. But its coverage of "idioms" is less convincing, as this study shows.

Bogaards finds CIDE's treatment of the placement of phrasal verbs a real problem. This author, too, is surprised that the tournure *go down the tubes* cannot be found at the entry for *go*. CIDE has introduced an innovation in the form of a "Phrase Index", where it is listed together with a cross-reference. However, the smallness of the print raises a large question mark with regard to legibility. The Phrase Index is nonetheless certainly to be recommended as a bold step.

In OALD5 "idioms are defined at the entry for the first 'full' word (. . .) that they contain". The phraseologist finds considerable improvement in signposting of relevant phraseological units for the user, starting with the labels listed opposite the inside cover. Welcome additions to the array are (catch phrase) and (saying). The user also gets information in the "Key to dictionary entries" about the symbols IDM and PHR V. But perhaps one of the most welcome innovations is the help given in the Study pages A2–3 and A6–7. Collocations and idioms are treated here. Both the collocation and idiom definitions are non-technical and user-friendly. In separate entries phrasal verbs are marked PHR V and listed separately after idioms. For delexical verbs like *go* this is good practice, although it requires time and 'self-training' to get used to this.

According to Bogaards "COBUILD has not explicitly formulated any policy for the placement of multi-word expressions but there seems to be a preference for giving the definition under the second (or the last?) element". Referring to COBUILD1, Béjoint (1994: 225) claimed: "The defining technique [...] is the only existing technique that does some justice to the idiomaticity of language". He holds that it is of use for both decoding and encoding purposes. COBUILD2 maintains the innovation. The policy of avoiding the term "idiom" is continued. The term "phrase", however, receives a much improved definition over COBUILD1: "Phrases are groups of words which are used together with little variation and which have a meaning of their own, e.g. They are reluctant to *upset the apple-cart*".

LDOCE3 states in the introduction that "[p]hrases and idioms are usually listed under the first main word", with a cross-reference note to the entries of other main words. In the introduction the editor selectively focuses attention on four problems facing teachers and advanced learners of English. Admirably she treats "Phrases and collocations" as one of these. The other three rubrics represent innovations over LDOCE2, also: fast access, spoken English and frequency. In the "Guide to the Dictionary" it is a welcome sign to find that "Phrases and idioms" likewise figure as a separate heading.

5. Results of the spot check

There follows a spot-check for all four dictionaries in which 10 items from each of the nine categories delineated above were randomly selected. This procedure at least has the virtue of providing an objective yardstick by which the four dictionaries can be judged.

Table 1 (See Appendix) summarizes the results of the search for the items in each of the four dictionaries. In absolute figures CIDE comes out on top with 76 of the 90 items located, followed by LDOCE3 with 70, OALD5 with 65 and COBUILD2 with 52. The average score is thus 65.75 (=73%). By comparison, when the previous editions of the then three contenders were searched for analogous but different items (Alexander 1992), their average score rate

was 61.2%. Thus in general we find a 12 point improvement. This time the best score turns out to be CIDE, which is 12 points above the current average in percentage terms.

The tournure category (a multi-word unit with at least three lexemes) always presents a problem. Do we look up the item at the verb or at the accompanying noun phrase? Table 1, section 3, contains an indication of where the items searched were located. Item 24 *eat humble pie* manifests the greatest variation in figuring at both *eat* and *humble* (LDOCE3), at *humble* in COBUILD2 and at *eat* for CIDE. OALD5 has it at *eat* with a cross reference back to *eat* at *humble*. LDOCE3 has *call it a day* at *call* and at *day* with a cross reference to CALL (27). Unfortunately the correct meaning number should be 22! All four dictionaries thus have at least seven out of ten items. LDOCE3 gets a full house, CIDE nine and OALD5 eight.

By contrast, as in the 1992 study, the catch phrases do badly in all except the newcomer CIDE, which has 60% coverage! This is most gratifying indeed. It proves that it can be done, at least. Indeed these blanket figures and averages generally underscore the feel a phraseologist has when analysing CIDE. As a look at Table 2 shows (See Appendix), in six of the categories CIDE comes first, second in two and last in only one!

All four dictionaries fared well in categories 1–3, as in the 1992 study. It is the categories 4–6 where the differences of coverage vary greatly. This reflects the results of the previous study too. As mentioned, CIDE with six of the 10 catch phrases is the great exception. In the proverbs category COBUILD2 only manages five out of ten. And the pragmatic idiom category manifests a spread from 3 (COBUILD 2), 4 (OALD5) to 6 (LDOCE3) and 7 (CIDE). The relatively poor to middling score on category 8 'idiomatic similes' may have had something to do with the sample checked; items 76, 77 and 78 may well be archaic.

6. Conclusions

It is not easy to decide whether this spot check provides definitive evidence for preferring one dictionary to the other for fixed expression coverage. Since learners' dictionaries are multi-purpose reference works this is not usually an issue for the average user. In other areas the dictionaries have strengths that this brief study will not undermine. For the teacher interested in phraseological units it seems clear nonetheless that CIDE is a reference work that is hard to beat when it comes to allusions and quotations from politics, popular music and cinema which have slipped into the latticework of the current lexis. Naturally it is a moot point how many of such items are likely to stay the course until the next edition. But the decisive inclusion of this socio-cultural and encyclopaedic information has marked out a niche for the newcomer in addition to its other innovations such as false friend tables and the like.

7. Note

[1]   *spoilt for choice* was found in CIDE (at *spoil*, in boldface in an example), COBUILD2 (meaning 7 at *spoil*, with variant *spoiled*), LDOCE3 (at *spoiled*) and OALD5 (at *spoil*).

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Items checked according to dictionary

Key to symbols used:
  √ = found
  Ø = not found
  ? = related term
  IDM = idiom
  s = saying
  sp = spoken
  p = pragmatics

Dictionaries checked	LDOCE3	OALD5	COBUILD2	CIDE
1 PHRASAL VERBS	10/10	9/10	10/10	10/10
1 come by	√	√	√	√
2 fall in with	√	√	√	√
3 get on with	√	√	√	√
4 look over	√	√	√	√
5 mug up on	√	√ PHR	√	√
6 pick up on	√	Ø	√	√
7 put down (=kill)	√	√	√	√
8 see through	√	√	√	√
9 take in	√	√	√	√
10 turn in	√	√	√	√

Dictionaries checked	LDOCE3	OALD5	COBUILD2	CIDE
2 IRREVERSIBLE BINOMIALS	10/10	10/10	10/10	9/10
11 blood and thunder	√	√	√	Ø
12 bubble and squeak	√	√	√	√
13 flesh and blood	√	√ IDM	√	√
14 hammer and tongs	√	√ IDM	√v	√
15 hook, line and sinker	√	√	√	√
16 kith and kin	√	√ IDM	√	√
17 null and void	√	√ IDM	√	√
18 rough and ready	√	√	√	√
19 snakes and ladders	√	√	√	√
20 spick and span	√	√ IDM	√	√

Dictionaries checked	LDOCE3	OALD5	COBUILD2	CIDE
3 TOURNURES	10/10	8/10	7/10	9/10
21 ask for the moon	(@moon)	Ø	Ø	Ø
22 be a pain in the neck	(@pain)	√ IDM	√	√
23 call it a day	(@call+)	√	(@call)	√
24 eat humble pie	(@eat+)	√	(@humble)	(@eat)
25 flog a dead horse	(@flog+)	√ IDM	√	√
26 get down to brass tacks	(@brass)	(@brass)	(@brass)	√
27 keep up with the Joneses	(@keep up)	(@keep, J)	Ø	(@keep)
28 live the life of Riley	(@R., lead)	Ø	Ø	(@life)
29 put two and two together	(@two)	(@two)	(@two)	(@two)
30 take the bull by the horns	(@bull)	√	(@bull)	(@bull)

Dictionaries checked	LDOCE3	OALD5	COBUILD2	CIDE
4 CATCH PHRASES	3/10	1/10	0/10	6/10
31 Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin.	Ø	Ø	Ø	√
32 Beam me up, Scottie.	Ø	Ø	?	√
33 Go ahead – make my day.	Ø	Ø	Ø	√
34 That's just the way the cookie crumbles.	√	√	Ø	Ø
35 It's the best thing since sliced bread.	√	Ø	Ø	(@best)
36 Just suck it and see.	Ø	Ø	Ø	Ø
37 May the force be with you!	Ø	Ø	Ø	√
38 No more Mr Nice Guy.	(@guy)	Ø	Ø	Ø
39 What a way to run a country!	Ø	Ø	Ø	Ø
40 Who loves ya, baby?	Ø	Ø	Ø	Ø

Dictionaries checked	LDOCE3	OALD5	COBUILD2	CIDE
5 PROVERBS	9/10	9/10	5/10	10/10
41 Birds of a feather flock together.	√?	√ s	√?	√ s
42 Too many cooks spoil the broth.	√	√ IDM	Ø	√ s
43 Curiosity killed the cat.	√	√ IDM, s	√ p	√ s
44 Early to bed, early to rise ...	Ø	Ø	Ø	√ s
45 Familiarity breeds contempt.	√	√ IDM, s	√	√ s
46 In for a penny, in for a pound.	√ BrE	√ Brit	Ø	√ s
47 The proof of the pudding is in the eating.	√	√ s	√	√ s
48 A rolling stone gathers no moss.	√	√?	Ø	√ s
49 Still waters run deep.	√	√ s	Ø	√ s
50 Waste not, want not.	√ sp	√	√	√ s

Dictionaries checked	LDOCE3	OALD5	COBUILD2	CIDE
6 PRAGMATIC IDIOMS	6/10	4/10	3/10	7/10
51 Bottoms up!	√ sp	√	√	√ CO
52 For a kick off ...	Ø	Ø	Ø	Ø
53 Hold your horses.	√ sp	√	Ø	√
54 Let's be realistic.	Ø	Ø	Ø	Ø
55 Long time no see.	√ sp	√	Ø	√
56 My lords, ladies and gentlemen.	Ø	Ø	Ø	Ø
57 Speaking. (said on telephone)	Ø	Ø	Ø	√
58 There you go.	√	Ø	√	√
59 Ups-a-daisy!	√ (oops)	Ø	Ø	√ (oops)
60 You're welcome!	√	√ IDM	√	

Dictionaries checked	LDOCE3	OALD5	COBUILD2	CIDE
7 ANIMAL METAPHORS	8/10	10/10	5/10	10/10
61 This is a fine kettle of fish	√	√	√	√
62 to let the cat out of the bag	√	√	√	√
63 to go on a wild goose chase	√	√	√	√
64 to have other fish to fry	√	√	Ø	√
65 a dog's breakfast	√	√	√	√
66 the cat's whiskers	Ø	√	Ø	√
67 a snake in the grass	√	√ IDM	Ø	√
68 a dog in the manger	√	√ IDM	Ø	√
69 as the crow flies	√	√ IDM	√	√
70 to go by Shank's pony	Ø	√	Ø	√

Dictionaries checked	LDOCE3	OALD5	COBUILD2	CIDE
8 IDIOMATIC SIMILES	4/10	5/10	3/10	6/10
71 like a bull in a china shop	√	√ IDM	√ p	√
72 as cool as a cucumber	√	√ IDM	√	√
73 as like as two peas	Ø	Ø	Ø	√
74 as mad as a march hare	Ø	(@hatter)	Ø	(@hatter)
75 as old as the hills	Ø	√	Ø	√
76 as rich as Croesus	Ø	Ø	Ø	Ø
77 as wise as an owl	Ø	Ø	Ø	Ø
78 as poor as a churchmouse	Ø	Ø	Ø	Ø
79 as silent as the grave	√	Ø	Ø	Ø
80 like a ton of bricks	√	√	√	√

Dictionaries checked	LDOCE3	OALD5	COBUILD2	CIDE
9 ALLUSIVE IDIOMS	10/10	9/10	9/10	9/10
81 to be in the pink	√	√ IDM	√	√
82 an albatross around one's neck	√	√	√	√
83 the devil's advocate	√	√	√	√
84 the grass roots	√	√	√	√
85 jobs for the boys	√	√	√	√
86 a Dutch treat	√ AmE	Ø	Ø	Ø
87 one's pound of flesh	√	√	√	√
88 sold down the river	√	√	√	√
89 sour grapes	√	√ s	√	√
90 white elephant	√	√	√	√
TOTALS	70/90	65/90	52/90	76/90

Table 2: Summary of findings

Dictionaries checked	LDOCE3	OALD5	COBUILD2	CIDE
CATEGORY				
1 Phrasal verbs	100%	90%	100%	100%
2 Irreversibles	100%	100%	100%	90%
3 Tournures	100%	80%	70%	90%
4 Catch phrases	30%	10%	0%	60%
5 Proverbs	90%	90%	50%	100%
6 Pragmatic idioms	60%	40%	30%	70%
7 Animal metaphors	80 %	100%	50%	100%
8 Idiomatic similes	40%	50%	30%	60%
9 Allusive idioms	100%	90%	90%	90%
	LDOCE3	OALD 5	COBUILD2	CIDE
% items found	77.77%	72.22%	57.77%	84.44%