Phraseology and early English dictionaries: the growth of tradition

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Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which idioms and other phraseological items were treated in English dictionaries, from their first appearances in the 16th century up until the publication of Johnson's *Dictionary* of 1755. In particular, it observes a continuity of tradition in the case of bilingual dictionaries, stretching from earliest times to the present day, which shows keen awareness of the phraseological structure of English and of the languages with which it is being paired. In contrast, it observes a discontinuity between pre-Johnsonian monolingual dictionaries and their growing awareness of phraseological phenomena, and many post-Johnsonian dictionaries which have tended towards more atomistic notions of the word and fixedness of items.

1 Introduction

If we look at corpora of English, we find overwhelming evidence for the rich, repeated phraseological patterning of many words and many meanings. These patterns underscore similarities between quite different words, or underscore differences between meanings of quite similar words. Corpora also show that phrasal items such as idioms — institutionalized, metaphorical or non-compositional multi-word items — are often variable and unstable[1]. However, many traditional English dictionaries for native speakers have represented words atomistically, misleadingly giving the impression that words exist independently of each other, in isolation of their co-texts and with isolatable meanings[2]. In contrast, EFL dictionaries and larger bilingual dictionaries show words, or at least frequent complex words, in their phraseological contexts, by detailing their grammar and collocations or by translating them within phrases[3]. As far as idioms in English dictionaries are concerned, the current situation is that some specialist, mainly corpus-based or citation-based, dictionaries of idioms and proverbs demonstrate the variability and instability of items, but most general dictionaries do not.

This paper looks at the ways in which phraseology has been treated in early English dictionaries, focussing particularly on idioms and on the phraseological patterns associated with individual words and meanings, and considering how much current English lexicographical practice owes to dictionary tradition as it has grown up over time. The paper has in part grown out of observations that the hugely influential and important *Oxford English Dictionary* [4] repeatedly demonstrates and comments on the instability of idioms, proverbs, and other fixed phrases, and on the collocational and colligational patterns in which words occur with particular meanings. The *OED* has had an effect in many areas of twentieth-century lexicography, but this recognition of and insight into phraseology does not seem to have been replicated in later dictionaries of general English for native speakers, except in very minor ways. What tradition did the *OED* depart from or fail to establish, that its example was overridden by its successors, imitators, and derivatives? In the literature dealing with the history of lexicography, there are only hints

and passing remarks about phraseology to shed light on this question. To answer it, we need to go back and examine the oldest English dictionaries themselves: monolingual and bilingual dictionaries and specialist dictionaries of proverbs and cant[5].

2 Early monolingual dictionaries

In England, the earliest monolingual lexicographical works were wordlists, intended as guides to spelling — and hence encoding. They concentrated on potentially problematic words, and so naturally gave rise to the 'hard words' tradition: dictionaries that only dealt with difficult, unfamiliar, and rare words, rather than common and core vocabulary items, and hence decoding. Compound lexical items, mainly nouns, were admitted as headwords, but idioms and other phraseological items were not.

We can see this in Mulcaster's spelling dictionary, *Elementarie* (1582), which includes a number of compound items as headwords, for example *as soon as, at-once, hurlieburlie, legier dumain,* and *tainterhooks*. Of these, the first two can be considered fixed phrases in modern English; the second two are now usually spelled fused or hyphenated; and the last now occurs only in the fixed phrase *on tenterhooks*. Mulcaster's awareness of their morphology is shown by his occasional use of metalinguistic labels such as *compos.* or *comp.*

Coote's *The English Schoole-maister* (1596) lists around 1400 hard words, and almost no compounds: the fused form *legerdemaine* is a rare exception. However, headwords are glossed, and many of the explanations are expressed in 'colloquial' language which sometimes includes compounds, fixed phrases, or phrasal verbs. For example:

appropriat — make his owne
congregate — gather together
effusion — pouring forth
gospell — glad tidings
to incense — to stirre up
legerdemaine — light handedness

Cawdrey's *A Table Alphabeticall of Hard Learned Words* (1604) is generally considered to be the first 'real' English dictionary, with around 3000 headwords. As with Coote — or perhaps because of Coote — the principal evidence for phraseology that it contains are the relatively unmarked multi-word items used in definitions. This reinforces a formality divide between the hard words which need explanation and the colloquialisms which provide that explanation:

distended — stretched out, or out of ioynt
domesticall — at home
durable — long lasting
hyperbolicall — beyond all credite, or likelihoode of truth
social, or *sociable* —fellowe like, one that will keepe company, or one with whom a man may easily keepe company
viewe — behold, marke, or confide, or looke upon

Bullokar's *English Expositour* (1616) continues the tradition, additionally including a number of compound 'hard words' such as *Fire-drake, Fistike nuts, Golden number, Graines of Paradise*, and *Iacobs' staffe*. He also, for the first time that I have found, uses a classic metaphorical idiom to facilitate a definition:

Hysteron proteron — A Greeke terme, sometime used in derision of that which is spoken or done preposterously or quite contrary. We call it in English, The carte before the horse.

This in itself became part of dictionary convention and the common heritage of definition language. Blount's *Glossographia* of 1656 includes in its definition of *hysteron proteron*: 'The common phrase is; The cart before the horse'.

3   Early bilingual dictionaries

In contrast, bilingual English dictionaries of the sixteenth century onwards paid attention from the outset to phraseology of all kinds, and demonstrated an awareness of the anisomorphism of languages and of lexical items. In this respect, we can trace a direct line of descent over 500 years, from those early works to today's complex translators' dictionaries.

Palsgrave's *Lesclarcissement de la Langue Françoyse* (1530) was the first real English–French dictionary to appear. It is unidirectional, providing French equivalents for English, and was intended for English people learning French: hence encoding. Stein (1986) and Habenicht (1963) both comment on its wealth of colloquialisms and its awareness of phraseological patterning and idiomaticity. Items are glossed in contexts, as whole clauses — in the same way, today's larger bilingual dictionaries include glossed sample contexts for most items. Examples in Palsgrave include:

I Stryke one with my hand or with a wepyn — Ie frappe... *Tell me who hath strykyn the* — Di moy qui ta frappé. *Stryke for cock[es] body* — Chargez de par dieu. *Stryke him and spare him nat* — Chargez sus luy et ne lespergnez pas.

I Haue the upper hande of any thynge — Ie suis au dessus, iay esté au dessus, estre au dessus... *We haue the vpper hande of our enemyes* — Nous somes au dessus de noz ennemys.

I Watche I forbeare from slepe — Ie resueille. *He yt watcheth al nyght & slepeth all daye/ is mete to catche a purse by the way* — Celluy qui resueille toute la nuyct et se dort toute iour est bien propice de coquester vne bource par le chemyn.

This feature in Palsgrave can be traced in the coverage and use of phraseology in other sixteenth century bilingual dictionaries. These are also unidirectional, but this time from the foreign language into English: they are therefore primarily decoding dictionaries. However, this does not affect the extent of the coverage of phraseologies. Examples include Salesbury's Welsh–English dictionary (1547), Thomas' Latin–English dictionary (1587), and Hollyband's French–English dictionary (*c.* 1593). Florio's Italian–English dictionary, *A Worlde of Wordes* (1598) deals with delexical (semantically depleted) verbs, as well as fixed phrases of all kinds:

ad una ad una — together..., at once...
ad ógni módo — by any means
da ógni bánda — from all sides
dáre il cuóre — to give one's heart
dáre nelle mani — to fall into one's hands
render paner per fogáccia — to give bread for cake, to give as good as one brings

The tradition was firmly established by 1611, when Cotgrave's *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* appeared: another L2–L1, unidirectional, decoding dictionary. Almost any page of this rich dictionary provides many examples: see, for example, Figure 1, page 511. Cotgrave's standard organizational principle of simplex headwords, followed by compounds, followed by idioms and fixed phrases, demonstrates awareness of the differences between these kinds of multi-word item, and is largely the conventional format which dictionaries use today. At a period when monolingual dictionaries really only offered a place to phraseology in the language of the definitions, for ease of decoding, bilinguals recognized phraseology in all places.

4   Specialist dictionaries

Another type of dictionary deals only with certain kinds of language, such as cant or slang, or proverbs. Proverbs have had a long and respectable history lexicographically: in many cultures proverbs were collected and written down as repositories of wisdom and recommendations for living. There were collections in Old English, and Caxton's first dated book was *The Dictes and Sayenges of the Phylosophers* (1477), a translation into English of a French collection of 1400. Heywood's *A Dialogue of Proverbs*, first published in 1546 but running to several editions, draws on these traditions. These collections reinforce the tradition that proverbs deserve recording — but also the tradition that they are separate from the mainstream lexicon. They come to be considered colloquialisms, later vulgarisms: not 'hard words', although nowadays their very rarity and arcaneness would put them in the 'hard words' category. Lexicographically, they become marginalized, and we can see early evidence for a notion that some kinds of lexical item are more 'worthy' than others, which, I suggest, spread to other kinds of colloquialism and multi-word item such as idioms. Proverbs are excluded from and disregarded by monolingual lexicography until the early part of the eighteenth century. The slang dictionaries of Grose, Farmer and Henley, and Partridge are inheritors of these notions of 'worthiness' and 'separateness': so that it becomes intellectually respectable to segregate such items. Significantly, bilingual dictionaries from the very beginning included proverbs as natural, organic parts of the lexicons that they were describing.

5   Developments in monolingual dictionaries

The focus of monolingual English dictionaries in the later seventeenth century continued to be on hard words, but there were also signs of a more context-oriented approach to the lexicon. For example, Blount in 1656 deals with *halycon or halyconian daies* under the headword *halycon*,

Figure 1: A page from Cotgrave's *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues*   511

and records *haile to you / all haile to you*, with the gloss 'all health to you'. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Kersey's *A New English Dictionary* of (1702) extended the notion of the wordlist to include common items and technical terms, although only difficult words were explained; he also contextualized as appropriate, hence: *Bacon, as a flitch of bacon* and *A Flitch, or side of bacon*. Kersey's much larger *Dictionarium Anglo-Britannicum* (1708) included many compound headwords, phrasal items, and senses with both phraseological and semantic restrictions:

[*sv* Deliverance] To Wage Deliverance
To Demean one's self
To Draw, to pull, or pull out, to trace with a Pencil, &c. A ship is said *To draw* so much water, according to the Number of Feet she sinks into it.

[*sv* Grant] A thing is said *To lye in Grant*, which cannot be assign'd without an instrument or deed.
Karl-cat
Kaw for breath 'to fetch one's breath with much difficulty'
Keel-rope
Keeper of the Privy Seal
Keep your loof
Keep her to
Key of a river or haven 'a Place where Ships ride, and are as it were lock'd in'

However, it is Bailey's dictionaries which really mark a change in thinking about the lexicon and about what dictionaries should treat. Proverbs are included — and discussed — for the first time in a monolingual dictionary in his *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* (1721). Bailey seems to have been ambivalent about proverbs: they were omitted from the first edition of his *Dictionarium Britannicum* (1730) but many were reinstated in later editions. There is a wealth of phraseological information, in the phrasal tradition of bilingual dictionaries; prepositional phrases and other kinds of fixed phrases are shown; definitions give information about valency and show selection restrictions; and words are contextualized for explanations and sense descriptions. These characteristics can be seen in the following, taken from the 1742 edition of *Dictionarium Britannicum*:

HAND ('body part')
HAND ('falcon')
HAND ('dressage')
Spear HAND
Bridle HAND
To keep a Horse upon the HAND
To rest well upon the HAND (...said of a HORSE that never refuses, but always obeys and answers the effects of the hand)
To yield the HAND

To KEN, to know, to spy out at some distance.
Within KEN, within Sight or View.

KENKS — doublings in a Cable or Rope, when it does not run smooth...

To make KENKS [*Sea Phrase*] is said of a Rope that makes turns, and [does] not run clever in the Blocks and Pullies.

To KENNEL *a Fox*, a Fox is said to kennel when he lies close in his HOLE.

Bailey here is in direct line of descent from bilingual lexicographers such as Cotgrave, and his monolingual treatment of phraseology foreshadows the kind of treatment that phraseology will receive in twentieth-century British learners' dictionaries, in the tradition established by Palmer and Hornby. His dictionaries seem to synthesize all three types of early English dictionaries, to formalize a comprehensive view of the lexicon, and to consolidate the praxis that has evolved.

6   Johnson

Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) has come to be regarded as a landmark in English lexicography for many reasons: in particular, the breadth and depth of its coverage, and its basis in (literary) evidence. One of Johnson's many innovations was the recognition and treatment of phrasal verbs, so that entries for simplex verbs such as *get* and *take* were followed by detailed accounts of the meanings of those verbs when in combination with particles such as *up* and *out*: this is discussed by Osselton (1986). There are inconsistencies in the way phrasal verbs are treated by Johnson, as he worked through the alphabet, but nevertheless he largely succeeded in identifying and recording their existence, and describing their meanings and uses. Present-day lexicography still affords phrasal verbs much better treatment than idioms and other kinds of fixed phrase, even where they are of roughly comparable frequencies in the lexicon.

However, his treatment of other phraseologies is much more sporadic and inconsistent. Idioms and fixed phrases very occasionally appear as headwords in their own right (*cat in the pan, dance the hay*): more typically, they are glossed as phrases or simply appear silently, without comment, as examples.

[*sv* Black]
6 *Black and Blue* — The colour of a bruise; a stripe.

[*sv* Butter]
Words *butter* no parsnips

[*sv* Hand]
22 Reach; nearness: as, *at hand*, within reach, near, approaching...
42 HAND *over head* — Negligently, rashly...
43 HAND *to* HAND
44 HAND *in* HAND
45 HAND *in* HAND
46 HAND *to mouth* — As want requires...
47 *To bear in* HAND — To keep in expectation...
48 *To be* HAND *and glove* — To be intimate and familiar; to suit one another.

[*sv* Pot]
5 *to go to* POT — To be destroyed or devoured. A low phrase.

[*sv* Water]

3 *The mouth* WATERS — The man longs; there is a vehement desire. From dogs who drop their slaver when they see meat which they cannot get.

4 *To hold* WATER — To be sound, to be tight. From a vessel that will not leak.

But examples like these are comparatively infrequent. More often, and unlike Bailey, Johnson treats words and meanings as isolates, atomistically, without cueing them into phraseological contexts — although the contexts are sometimes there in the supporting citations. In this respect, Johnson's substitutable definitions, that is definitions which can be substituted for the definienda, can be seen as Leibnitzian throwbacks to traditional formulae and formats, influenced by the practices and strategies of glossary-making. (Similarly, it can be argued that although Johnson includes informal and slang terms, his comments dismissing them as 'low words' and so on hark back to the tradition in early monolingual dictionaries of concentrating on the more formal, complex, elitist lexis characteristic of the 'educated', while marginalizing vernacular and colloquial vocabulary items.) Johnson's dictionary was hugely influential in many ways, but it seems to mark a new divergence of traditions inherited from monolingual and bilingual dictionaries which had been converging in the lexicography of Bailey. This leads to a curious discontinuity, and arguably regression and reaction, rather than progress and further innovation. A century later, the *OED* was driven by its much broader, more extensive citation base and by a broader acceptance of kinds of lexical item: what Tony Cowie (personal communication) describes as a 'more scientific, tolerant spirit'. But in spite of its eminence and in spite of its careful recognition of phraseology, it did not, it seems, succeed in counteracting Johnsonian convention here.

7 Conclusion

To summarize: bilingual English dictionaries have a long tradition of attention to phraseology of all kinds, and of adeptness with describing target languages and observing their patternings. Early monolingual English dictionaries set out to do little more than give advice on the spellings or meanings of hard words, while at the same time contemporary attitudes to language excluded certain kinds of phraseological item from serious consideration as entries in the lexicon.

Later monolinguals set out to describe and inventorize the lexicon, and therefore began to address the issue of phraseology and to embrace more: by the time of Bailey's work, we can see an apparent synthesis of different lexicographical approaches and conventions. Johnson established a tradition of excellent coverage of phrasal verbs that has persisted in general monolingual English dictionaries; however, his policies and judgements seem also to have led to a lack of lexicographical interest in and attention to other kinds of fixed phrase and phraseology.

The *OED*, with its rich descriptivism, connects more with Bailey's approach. In spite of this, the majority of succeeding dictionaries seem to have followed Johnson, and to underrepresent phraseology, collocation, and context, leading to a false impression of word meaning, while enforcing a sharp distinction between simplex and complex forms — single-word headwords versus frozen multi-words — which is also false. As the most recent monolingual dictionaries

continue to re-examine practices, they will further reclaim the traditions which, humblingly, bilingual English dictionaries knew all about nearly 500 years ago.

Notes

[1] See Moon (1998: 26ff and 120ff) for further discussions of this.

[2] There are, of course, several reasons why this may happen, not least because of space and time constraints in dictionary-making and a wish to simplify complexities and subtleties in order to define items more succinctly.

[3] See Cowie (1999) for a description and discussion of the evolution of EFL dictionaries, including detailed examination of their attention to phraseology.

[4] The first edition of the *OED* was published over the period 1884–1928; the third edition is currently in preparation. See the web site at http://www.oed.com.

[4] An excellent web site with searchable versions of many early dictionaries can be found at http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/english/emed/patterweb.html.

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