

# Style and Usage Labels in Learner's Dictionaries: Ways of Optimization

Irina V. FEDOROVA

Moscow State University, Russia  
Krasnoarmeyskaya str. 21-13  
Moscow, Russia, 125319  
ivfedorova@mail.ru

## Abstract

The present paper investigates the use of style and usage labels in modern monolingual learner's English dictionaries. The main purpose of the paper is to show that there is no consistency in the labeling policy in MLDs that results in misleading the user of the dictionary. Special emphasis is made on the ways of optimizing the process of labeling.

## 1 Introduction

Learner's lexicography is the most interesting and innovative branch which first of all is associated with the rapid development of British monolingual learner's dictionaries (MLDs) that coincides with the growth of the English-as-a-foreign-language industry [Jackson, 2002].

In spite of their diversity all 5 MLDs<sup>1</sup> available to Russian learners of English are based on the same principles underlying learner's lexicography, i.e. common core vocabulary, clear definitions, phonetic and grammar information, lexical and phraseological combinability information (collocations and examples), style and usage labels. In this paper we will focus on the use of style and usage labels in MLDs and see how to systematize and optimize them.

## 2 The Use of Style and Usage Labels in Modern MLDs

### 2.1 Style and Usage Labels in Different MLDs: the State of Art

Style and usage labels are of great importance to users in general and to the learners of the foreign language in particular, because these markers provide them with specific information on restrictions of the word usage thus preventing learners from making potential mistakes. But the problem is that label names are different in different MLDs. The analysis of the lists of style and usage labels in the 5 MLDs shows that we could single out a very limited group of labels which have common content and form and can be found in most MLDs mentioned above, e.g. *(in)fml/ (in)formal*, *approv(ing)*, *dated*, *sl(ang)*.

But even in this case there are some differences in presenting similar labels. Some MLDs such as OALD and CIDE, for example, prefer short forms, e.g. *(in)fml*, *sl.*, others (LDOCE, COBUILD, MED) stand for using full forms that is pedagogically more correct.

Moreover, there is no consistency on this aspect even in one and the same dictionary. In CIDE, for example, both full and short forms of labels are used: e.g. *fml*, *humorous*, *infml*, *Irish Eng.*, *law*, etc.

There are also a number of labels singled out in the course of our analysis that mean the same but have different forms in different dictionaries.

E.g. *sl(ang)* **OALD**, **LDOCE**, **CIDE** = *very informal* **MED**  
*dated* **OALD**, **COBUILD**, **CIDE** = *old-fashioned* **MED**, **LDOCE**  
*humorous* **LDOCE**, **CIDE**, **MED** = *jocular* **OALD**

This inconsistency may be accounted for by the lexicographers' desire to further develop the system of labels and make it better like it happens in the case of replacing the label *jocular*, which is used only in the first MLD (OALD), with the *humorous* label. This change is perfectly justified because *humorous* in modern/ present day English is semantically equal to *jocular* which is marked with the *formal* label in MED. Another example of improving the existing system of labels is the introduction of a new label, i.e. *very informal* by MED instead of the traditional label *slang*. We are going to focus on it in greater detail below.

But if we compare *old fashioned* and *dated* which both used to mark words that are not in active use any longer we can see that they are both frequently used by dictionary compilers. *Dated* occurs in three dictionaries (OALD, COBUILD, CIDE) whereas *old-fashioned* is used only in two (LDOCE, MED). It can be accounted for by the fact that though they mean the same (Cf. their definitions) the word *old-fashioned* can have a wider sphere of application. It can be referred to various things such as methods, attitudes, machines. Therefore, it is semantically overloaded. The word *dated* sounds more traditional when we use it referring to different styles. The example given in the entry **dated** in MED to illustrate the usage of this word proves it.

E.g. **dated** no longer modern or fashionable. These styles are beginning to look dated.

**old-fashioned** no longer modern or fashionable.

But the label used in MED is not *dated* but *old-fashioned*. In our opinion the dictionary makers have taken into account that according to the word frequency markers given in this dictionary **old-fashioned** is more widely used and consequently it is more familiar to the learner of English and thus more understandable.

In addition to the two groups of labels described above, there are a great number of labels typical of only one dictionary because each dictionary has its own criteria of marking words with style and usage labels according to which the lexicographers work out a system of labels in each dictionary. For example, only in OALD there are such labels as *ironic*, *rhet*, *sexist*, *arch*. The marker *arch* has much in common with the label *dated* that is also used in OALD but the first one according to its definitions is stronger and it is used to emphasize that the marked word is old and no longer in use, e.g.

**dated** aerodrome, beatnik, gramophone

**arch** ere, fealty, handmaiden

## 2.2 Different Systems of Labels in Different MLDs

There are some MLDs where the dictionary compilers have made an attempt to present labels as a system, i.e. LDOCE, CIDE and MED.

In LDOCE labels are grouped according to four categories of words:

words used only or mainly in one region, e.g. *AmE, AustrE, BrE, ScotE*;

words used in English but which are borrowed from another language and still regarded as foreign words, e.g. *French, German, Latin*

words used in a particular situation or showing a particular attitude, e.g. *approving, (in)formal, humorous*

words used in a particular context or type of language, e.g. *biblical, law, literary, slang*;

The latter covers most of the labels in this MLD but they seem to be put in the same group at random. This group contains the *dialect* marker though it sounds more reasonable, in our opinion, to include it into the first group where we have regional labels. Such markers from the last group as *slang* and *taboo* which are related to very informal usage are usually associated with showing formality/ informality in other dictionaries.

In CIDE there is a special language portrait<sup>2</sup> explaining the use of labels in the dictionary where the criteria for marking words with labels are formulated. According to these criteria the labels are topically grouped. The best elaborated group of labels is that of labels showing **formality/ informality**. The labels within the group are arranged according to the descending scale *fml – infml – slang – taboo*.

It should be mentioned in this connection that CIDE is the only dictionary that differentiates between *taboo* and *not standard* markers by employing the latter for words or short forms used in very informal spoken English, and not considered correct by most speakers: e.g. *gimme = give me; ain't = are not, is not, are not. (Is Terry here? He ain't coming into work today).*

The system of labels in MED is not so detailed and well developed and that is why there is no special group of labels denoting different degrees of formality. But within the group including **style and attitude** labels there are a number of labels referring to different degrees of formality. Moreover, the dictionary compilers develop this group of labels further by introducing such new labels as *very formal* and *very informal*; the latter according to its dictionary makers corresponds to *sl(ang)* in other dictionaries.

	MED	CIDE	LDOCE
<b>barf</b>	<i>very informal</i>	<i>esp. Am. slang</i>	<i>informal</i>
<b>blag</b>	<i>very informal</i>	—	<i>Br. E. slang</i>
<b>bonce</b>	<i>very informal</i>	—	<i>slang</i>
<b>crappy</b>	<i>very informal</i>	<i>slightly taboo slang</i>	<i>spoken slang</i>
<b>dude</b>	<i>very informal</i>	<i>esp. Am. informal</i>	<i>slang esp. Am. E.</i>
<b>git</b>	<i>very informal</i>	<i>Br. slang</i>	<i>Br. E. slang</i>
<b>nobble</b>	<i>very informal</i>	<i>Br. &amp; Aus. slang</i>	<i>Br. E. informal</i>
<b>poxy</b>	<i>very informal</i>	<i>Br. informal</i>	<i>Br. E. slang</i>
<b>puke</b>	<i>very informal</i>	<i>slang</i>	<i>informal</i>
<b>sicko</b>	<i>very informal</i>	<i>slang</i>	<i>slang esp. Am. E.</i>
<b>spliff</b>	<i>very informal</i>	<i>slang</i>	—

Table 1: Labeling of very informal words in different learner’s dictionaries

The analysis of the table shows that there is no consistency here either. Only about 30 per cent words in the table marked with the *very formal* label MED have the *slang* label in the dictionaries under discussion (*crappy, git, sicko*). All others are either included in only one of the dictionaries (*blag, bonce, spliff*) or have the *slang* label in one of them while being marked with the *informal* label in the other one (*barf, dude, nobble poxy, puke*).

A new approach to labeling based on using labels of the same root, i.e. *very formal – formal – informal – very informal* helps not only to simplify the dictionary metalanguage and thus catch the meaning of the label quickly and easily but also to systematize them by arranging the labels according to the descending scale. Compared with a similar scale given in CIDE we can see some difference which reflects the drastic changes in the English language for the past ten years.

The language is constantly developing and the language norm is changing as well. It is becoming vague and unstable. As a result such strict labels as *taboo* or *not standard* have disappeared making the system of labels more flexible. A number of taboo words given below as examples prove a growing tendency.

	OALD	CIDE	MED
<b>Arse</b>	<i>taboo</i>	<i>slightly taboo, slang</i>	<i>BrE impolite</i>
<b>Bloody</b>	<i>taboo</i>	<i>slang</i>	<i>BrE impolite</i>
<b>Shit</b>	<i>taboo</i>	<i>taboo slang</i>	<i>impolite</i>
<b>Gamma</b>	---	<i>not standard</i>	<i>informal</i>
<b>ain’t</b>	<i>not standard, jocular</i>	<i>not standard</i>	<i>spoken</i>

Table 2: The flexibility of labeling in learner’s dictionaries

The words marked in OALD with a warning sign which means taboo have *slightly taboo* or *slang* labels in CIDE but MED goes further and labels all of them with a new *impolite* marker which sounds more liberal and reflects recent developments in language and

society [Béjoint 1994]. Thus it is up to the user to decide to be either polite or impolite while using such a word.

The comparative analysis of the systems of labels in different MLDs enables us to conclude that there is no consistency in the labeling policy that results in misleading the user of the dictionary. It is quite obvious that it is absolutely necessary to optimize the process of labeling. The question is what to do and in which way?

### 3 Ways of Optimization

#### 3.1 Systematization

First of all it would be reasonable to systematize all the labels under discussion. Taking into account what has already been done in this direction in the latest editions of MLDs [Cowie 2002] we find it possible to single out the following main categories according to which most of usage and style labels can be grouped, i.e.

- register
- currency
- the speaker's attitude
- a specific field or subject
- a regional variety of the language

As for the category of register it has been introduced to indicate social varieties through such labels as *formal*, *informal*, *slang*, etc. The approach to systematizing such labels within this group offered by the MED compilers can be regarded as a universal one, i.e. *very formal*, *formal*, *informal*, *very informal*.

It should be noted in this connection that the category of register is wider and covers not only variation of a social kind. If, for example, the vocabulary which is used in speech rather than in writing is marked with the *spoken* label, then this label should have its opposite, i.e. the *written* label for the vocabulary that is preferable in writing. But it doesn't always happen.

The *literary* label sounds ambiguous because according to the definition of the word itself, it means '*relating to the kind of words that are used only in stories or poems and not in normal writing or speech*'. But as a label it is used in MED to mark words which are '*old (bold is mine – I.F.) but still used in some kinds of creative writing*', As a result the word **behold** which is marked with the *literary* label in MED is provided with the *esp. old use* label in CIDE to emphasize that it is in no longer use. We believe that the *literary* label should be used to mark words and phrases which according to the definition given in CIDE's Language Portrait on labels '*are mainly used in literature, (for example in a novel or a play) or when writing in a literary way*'.

As regards the category of currency which relates to the date of use it is important to include the *old use* label to separate words used before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but rare now, from *old-fashioned* words which are no longer in current use but used by some older people, e.g.

*old use melancholia, fealty, handmaiden*

*old-fashioned wireless, lolly (=money), forenoon, gramophone*

The group of labels showing the speaker's attitude, opinion or feelings includes such labels as

<i>approving</i>	<i>cosy, cool-headed, easy-going</i>
<i>disapproving</i>	<i>pedantic, narcissistic, pompous</i>
<i>humorous</i>	<i>clodhoppers, muggings, crackpot</i>
<i>impolite</i>	<i>arse, bloody, shit</i>
<i>offensive</i>	<i>nigger, yid, wog</i>

Table 3: Labeling of words for the speaker’s attitude

Due to scientific and technical progress the number of words marked with different labels indicating a specific field or subject in general MLDs is permanently increasing. And this group is becoming more and more sophisticated. Besides such generic labels in this group as *science* and *technical* there are a great number of specific labels, e.g.: *business, computing, legal/ law, linguistics, medical, etc.*

	<b>LDOCE</b>	<b>CIDE</b>	<b>MED</b>
<b>buyout</b>	<i>no label</i>	<i>(in business)<sup>3</sup></i>	<i>business</i>
<b>capitation</b>	<i>no label</i>	<i>specialized</i>	<i>business</i>
<b>pecuniary</b>	<i>formal</i>	<i>fml</i>	<i>business</i>
<b>refinance</b>	---	---	<i>business</i>
	<b>LDOCE</b>	<b>CIDE</b>	<b>MED</b>
<b>attributive</b>	<i>no label</i>	<i>specialized</i>	<i>linguistics</i>
<b>conjugation</b>	<i>technical</i>	<i>specialized</i>	<i>linguistics</i>
<b>declension</b>	<i>technical</i>	---	<i>linguistics</i>
<b>lexicology</b>	<i>technical</i>	---	<i>linguistics</i>
<b>morpheme</b>	<i>technical</i>	<i>specialized</i>	<i>linguistics</i>
<b>transitive</b>	<i>technical</i>	<i>specialized</i>	<i>linguistics</i>
<b>byte</b>	<i>technical</i>	<i>specialized</i>	<i>computing</i>
<b>clickable</b>	---	---	<i>computing</i>
<b>firmware</b>	<i>technical</i>	---	<i>computing</i>
<b>motherboard</b>	<i>technical</i>	<i>specialized</i>	<i>computing</i>
<b>spam</b>	<i>technical</i>	---	<i>computing</i>
<b>webcam</b>	---	---	<i>computing</i>

Table 4: Labeling of scientific terms in different learner’s dictionaries

It is worth mentioning here that in MED there are 160 headwords with the *business* label, 186 – with the *linguistics* one and 197 – with the *computing* label. It proves that computing being a rather new field is becoming part and parcel of our life and now it is impossible to imagine any learner’s dictionary without its basic terms. Thus, such words as *clickable* and *webcam* which have not been registered in the learner’s dictionaries beforehand are included into MED.

As for the group of markers showing different regional varieties of English these labels are applied to words or phrases which are most frequently used by people in a

particular country or region. The spread of English as a means of international communication all over the world has resulted in developing a number of regional varieties.

If in former editions of MLDs mostly two main varieties, i.e. *AmE* and *BrE*, could be found now there is a tendency to present different those including varieties typical of Asian and African regions. Thus there exist such regional labels as *Indian*, *New Zealand*, *East African*, *South African* and *West African* in MED.

<i>Indian</i>	<i>achcha, bhai, chunni, gur, lungi, punkah</i>
<i>New Zealand</i>	<i>pakeha, scroggin, wahine</i>
<i>South African</i>	<i>baas, bakkie, dagga, fundi, kaross, stompie</i>
<i>West African</i>	<i>griot, mallam, pickin, been-to</i>

Table 5: New regional labels in MED

Summing up we may conclude that the groups of labels under discussion do not cover a great variety of labels used in MLDs but a systematic approach enables lexicographers at least to systematize the main style and usage labels which are of great help to the user.

### 3.2. Detailing

Another way of optimizing labels, i.e. detailing, is closely connected with what has been described above, when we have additional regional labels to specify the main ones.

E.g. → Irish (*colleen, craic, lough, shebeen*)

Br.E | → Scottish (*bain, laird, lass, kirk, pawky*)

Am.E → Canadian (*joe job, treaty Indian, water bomber*)

One more example of detailing is the use of the word *mainly* (MED) or *especially* (LDOCE) before *Am.E* that means that the words labeled in such a way are more common in American English but also used in British English, e.g. *alumnus, highball, homemaker, mobster, movie, rooster, tote*.

It should be mentioned that the word *mainly* in MED is not only used within this regional label but is also combined with such labels as *journalism, literary* and *spoken*, e.g.

*mainly journalism* *eatery, lawmaker*

*mainly literary* *amongst, fortell, gambol, merciful*

*mainly spoken* *archy, hombre, hooray, grotty, twiddly*.

Such a detailed approach gives users additional information about the word usage that helps them to use it properly.

## 4 Conclusion

It should be mentioned in conclusion that we have made an attempt to describe some ways of optimizing style and usage labels used in MLDs by focusing on two of them, i.e. systematizing and detailing. We realize that the process of optimization is not restricted to the two ways mentioned above. It is only the beginning and a lot should be done in order to carefully elaborate the detailed system of style and usage labels and make it universal at least

for MLDs. We hope that further research in this field will contribute to dictionary making process in general and the development of MLDs in particular.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Here are four monolingual learner's dictionaries which are available in Russia:

- Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 6-ed (OUP), 2000
- Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 3-ed, 1995
- Cambridge International Dictionary of English, CIDE (CUP), 1995
- COBUILD Dictionary of English Language, 3-ed, 2002
- Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners, 2002

<sup>2</sup> See Language Portrait LABELS IN THE DICTIONARY in CIDE. Page 790.

<sup>3</sup> It is not a label but a part of the definition of the word.

### **References**

- Béjoint, H.** 1994. *Tradition and Innovation in Modern English Dictionaries*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Cowie, A.P.** 2002. *English Dictionaries for Foreign Learners. A History*. Oxford
- Jackson, H.** 2002. *Lexicography. An Introduction*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Norri, J.** 1996. 'Regional Labels in Some British and American Dictionaries'. *International Journal of Lexicography* 9.1: 1-29.
- Norri, J.** 2000. 'Labelling of Derogatory Words in Dictionaries'. *International Journal of Lexicography* 13.2: 71-106.