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EFL DICTIONARIES: PAST ACHIEVEMENTS AND PRESENT NEEDS

Grammatical codes

A prominent trend in EFL lexicography over the past ten years has been towards the provision of more detailed and varied information for language production. Much of the increase has been grammatical, often in coded form - as in the LONGMAN DICTIONARY OF CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH (LDOCE) and the two volumes of the OXFORD DICTIONARY OF CURRENT IDIOMATIC ENGLISH (ODCIE). The use of grammatical codes is not in itself new, but capitalizes on the pioneering work of A.S. Hornby whose system of 'verb patterns', first introduced in 1942, was a stroke of the boldest originality. Having established what the patterns of verb complementation were to be, Hornby's problem was how to record the syntactic properties of individual dictionary entries in a succinct yet informative way. His solution was to encode this information at the point of entry, thus achieving economy, while at the same time providing an explicit tabular treatment in the Introduction, to which the codes could refer (cf. Cowie 1978).

The more recent developments which I have mentioned embody the same principles of encoding and explanatory key as the OXFORD ADVANCED LEARNER'S DICTIONARY OF CURRENT ENGLISH (ALD), but develop fresh and in some ways more complex systems of symbols in order to codify other syntactic features. Generally speaking, LDOCE has gone in for a more extensive treatment, codifying entries for additional classes of words (notably nouns and adjectives), while ODCIE tends towards treatment in depth, providing in the first volume a detailed account of passivization and nominalization. The achievement has been uneven. Herbst (1983) has drawn on a valency analysis of 555 English adjectives to show that pattern labels are given in only a small percentage of adjective entries in ALD and LDOCE (the level being slightly higher in LDOCE). Moreover of the various types of complement revealed by the analysis, only prepositional complements are treated at all adequately. I shall take up a related question later when I refer to the ellipsis of objects after certain classes of verbs.

Then there are critics of the grammatical codes themselves. One line of criticism is directed not so much at the use of codes as the form they take in individual cases. The second objection is more fundamental, and raises the wider question of whether information for language production - syntactic or otherwise - is of sufficient value to justify the space and effort devoted to it.

Let me first take criticisms of the form of certain codes. There is no doubt that the complexity of some coding systems and the often algebraic appearance of the symbols themselves is off-putting to many students, who in addition find the constant need to refer to explanatory tables time-consuming and irksome. One sympathizes with the student; and the lexicographer is bound to ask whether the use of self-explanatory labels, as opposed to arbitrary ones, would not

meet the needs of the user more satisfactorily. The solution might be to introduce at the point of entry such standard abbreviations as NP (noun phrase), PrepP (prepositional phrase), O (direct object), Comp (complement), and so on. These class and clause element labels are already widely used in pedagogic grammars, and their introduction into EFL dictionaries would parallel the inclusion of part-of-speech labels (n, adj, v, and so forth) in dictionaries of various kinds. Such a policy is undeniably attractive, though of limited applicability, as I shall try to show in a moment.

But first let us look at the advantages. Clearly, the use of standard labels can serve the same purpose as the codes I discussed earlier - that of referring the user to a full treatment of clause patterns, and so on, in the Introduction. Then again, the use of such familiar combinations as V + O, V + Comp, has a mnemonic value, encouraging quick memorization of patterns and reducing the need for constant toing and froing between entries and illustrative tables and charts. Users of the first volume of ODCIE (1975) will know that it has a scheme which is partly self-explanatory in the way I have suggested, while the second volume (1983) is almost entirely so. (Some of the combinations used, with explanations, are shown below.)

(1) [V + Comp] verb + complement pattern
[V + O] verb + direct object pattern
[V + O + Comp] verb + direct object + complement pattern
[V + IO + O] verb + indirect object + direct object pattern
[V + O + A] verb + direct object + adjunct pattern

All well and good; but applying the same principles to the design of a system for a general dictionary would meet insuperable obstacles. Compilers of specialized dictionaries - those which treat only part of a vocabulary - have space to play with; editors of general dictionaries must trade off descriptive elaboration at one point against comparable sacrifices elsewhere (cf. Cowie 1983). Seen in this light, encoded information has distinct merits, the chief being its extreme economy. I can illustrate the point by brief reference to LDOCE and ODCIE I. For purposes of encoding verb syntax, each uses combinations of letters and digits to represent syntactic variables. In the case of LDOCE these variables include functional positions or slots and the constituent classes - noun phrase, that-clause, and so on - which fulfil those functions. In both dictionaries small combinations of letters and digits can account succinctly for all the acceptable permutations of function and class. The saving can be illustrated by two examples from ODCIE I:

(2) [Bliii] vb.tr. + part. (O/NP final)
[B3] vb.tr. + part. + prep.

where the information following the bracketed codes would be an alternative and fuller specification of the syntactic properties of entry words. Codification in short can capture fine syntactic detail with great economy of means. The problem remains, however, of whether the advanced student needs such exhaustive specification in the first place. This brings me back to the more general criticism mentioned earlier.

Questions of the pedagogic relevance of information for production as compared with comprehension have been brought into sharper focus recently by the detailed and highly informative enquiry carried out by Henri Béjoint (1981) into the uses which one group of university students make of their monolingual EFL dictionaries. Béjoint's study revealed that his informants (122 undergraduate students of English at Lyon University) use their monolingual dictionaries primarily for decoding activities. They seldom refer to the coding systems for syntactic patterns and practically never look up entries for structural words. His sombre conclusion is that "lexicographers ... should be wary of embarking upon innovations to help students with their encoding activities" (1981:230).

These are on the face of it discouraging findings; but their bleakness can be tempered by the following reflections. In the first place Béjoint hesitates to draw any general conclusions from such a narrowly-based study: instead he points to the need for further investigations. At least two lines of enquiry suggest themselves. To date very little attempt has been made to teach dictionary reference skills in the context of the study activities which students are known to pursue. French and German university students compose and translate. It would be surprising, I think, if an increased take-up of encoding information did not result from training directed specifically to these activities.

Then again, we need to look at the ways in which dictionaries are used by learners - whether trained in dictionary use or not - whose study activities are significantly different from European students of English as an academic subject. This too could be a fruitful line of investigation.

Collocability of entries

Syntactic specification is of course only one of the design features on which EFL lexicographers have worked in recent years in the attempt to help users with problems of production. Another is the collocability of entry words - their tendency to co-occur with other words within particular grammatical constructions (cf. Cowie 1981). Here again, the present generation of EFL dictionary makers are building on sure foundations laid down by A.S. Hornby.

Let me begin with an example. The adverbs utterly and totally co-occur or collocate with the verb disagree, though heartily does not; and there is a good case for including the first pair in the entry for the verb. However, not all collocations are of equal interest to the foreign learner. Some words collocate within such broad limits ("He walked quickly/slowly/thoughtfully/sombrely") that the learner needs very little guidance in order to use them acceptably. In practice, compilers of general EFL dictionaries have followed two approaches to providing such guidance. One device, which is commonly adopted in monolingual dictionaries of all kinds, is to include in parentheses a number of general terms suggesting the range of particular words which can combine acceptably with the headword. In the example E_1 from the CONCISE OXFORD DICTIONARY (1982) the presence of power indicates that command, authority, mastery could collocate as direct objects of the headword confirm.

E_1: confirm v.t. establish more firmly (power, possession, person in possession); ...

This is a point, incidentally, that is little appreciated by students and teachers.

Another line of approach to the problem of indicating open or loose collocability is followed in general dictionaries for the foreign learner, such as the ALD or LDOCE. These dictionaries contain very many examples sentences and phrases, particularly in entries for high- or medium-frequency lexical items. In these examples the constituent words can often be treated as specimen open collocates of the entry word: the dictionary user can then use the examples as the basis for further acceptable choices.

However, collocability is a complex phenomenon, and in many cases the learner would be quite wrong to assume that he can freely substitute alternatives at various points in an example sentence. Often enough he is up against limited collocability - more or less arbitrary limitation upon choice - at one or more points. A well-known example is "pick a fight/quarrel/argument", where the foreign student could be forgiven for thinking that the synonymous but unacceptable scrap is a possible substitute for fight (or set-to for quarrel).

Representing limited collocability in general dictionaries usually leads to contraction of the actual range of choice. The collocability of entertain in its figurative sense of 'consider, contemplate' appears in ODCIE II as shown in E_2 below. In the ALD this is drastically cut back, as in E_3.

E_2: ... not entertain the idea, notion, suggestion, proposal, doubt, suspicion

E_3: ... entertain ideas/doubts

This is an unhappy solution, since in combination with the oblique it suggests over-restriction of choice. But there are a few courses open in a dictionary where pressure of space enforces extreme simplification.

A further problem is represented by expressions such as "foot the bill" and "curry favour", in which bill and favour (used in a perfectly familiar sense) are the only possible collocates of their respective verbs. Typographically they should perhaps be represented in the same way as idioms (i.e. in bold print), but several masquerade as ordinary collocations in the various available dictionaries.

New directions

One possible consequence of the lengthy gestation period of a major dictionary is that fundamental changes in linguistic theory or language teaching methodology may occur in the long interval between conception and the moment of delivery. The ground beneath the lexicographer's feet has shifted continuously throughout the 1970s. Attitudes to language have undergone profound changes, and a new consensus has emerged in language teaching. I should like here to single out two areas of development in linguistics and consider

their possible implication for dictionary-making. I shall focus first on the use of such devices as determiner reference and ellipsis in the construction of unified texts - on 'cohesion', that is, in the sense of Halliday and Hasan (1976) - and second on the principles which govern the appropriate use of expressions in real-life interaction - on some aspects of pragmatics.

One might think that dictionaries coming to fruition in the 1970s would be left behind by such developments. However, this is far from being the case. If one takes, as one aspect of cohesion, the use of the definite article to establish a link with a noun phrase in an earlier sentence, and asks how well the facts are dealt with in currently available dictionaries, one may be pleasantly surprised. The rules were in fact already set out in the second edition of the ALD (1963). Even better, the relevant entry contained a short continuous text in which the principles were lucidly illustrated:

E_4: the ... An old man and an old woman once lived in a small hut by a river near a forest. One day the old man left the hut and went into the forest to gather wood. The old woman went to the river to wash clothes. ...

In other respects, however, the treatment of cohesion is decidedly patchy. I am thinking particularly of the ellipsis of direct objects and of the conditions which determine their ellipsis. An example of direct object ellipsis is found in (3):

(3) I went to see the cricket. George was watching already.

Here the object of watch is deleted, and the deletion is made possible by the presence of a specific noun phrase, the cricket, in the immediately preceding context. Why should the treatment of ellipsis be needed in learners' dictionaries? The first reason is that there is a very real risk for some students of confusing ellipsis (or, to use an alternative term, contextual deletion) with so-called indefinite deletion (cf. Allerton 1975). Let me begin then by dealing briefly with indefinite deletion. According to Allerton, "indefinite deletion seems to apply to verbs whose activity may be viewed as self-sufficient without an object" (1975:215). Examples are paint, sew and study in (4).

(4) What did she do all afternoon?
She painted/sewed/studied.

In this exchange it is not expected that the listener should concern himself with a possible goal of the activity: the activity is seen as complete in itself.

The difference between indefinite and contextual deletion is revealed by various tests. First, verbs liable to the former can be used in answer to indefinite questions, though not verbs liable to contextual deletion. Compare (6) and (7) as possible answers to (5) below.

(5) What have the children been up to today?

(6) They've drawn/painted/read/crayonned.

(7) *They've watched/followed/visited.

Second, verbs which allow indefinite deletion also occur as gerunds in structures such as (8) in contrast with (9).

(8) They've done a bit of drawing/painting etc.

(9) *They've done some watching/following etc.

In contrast to indefinite deletion, contextual deletion "seems to apply particularly in the case of verbs where the meaning of the verb is somehow incomplete without mention of a PARTICULAR object" (Allerton 1975:214) - which is thus recovered as an antecendent from the text or else from the context of situation. In (3) above the deleted object is anaphorically related to a specific noun phrase, the cricket, as I have already suggested. In other examples, like (10), the referent is recoverable from the situation.

(10) I do not possess a television set myself and rarely have the opportunity to view (sc. programmes/television).

Verbs with contextually deletable objects include (besides watch and view) hear, answer, attend (a meeting) and accept. As we saw a moment ago, they do not provide convincing answers to questions in which the object is not already specified or strongly suggested. But where an antecedent is present, we have (11) or (12).

(11) We're calling a meeting. Are you going to attend?

(12) We're planning to get together again. I wonder if Bill will attend.

The picture is complicated by verbs which require an object of some kind, even though a relevant antecedent is present:

(13) Fred hates all-in wrestling but I love it.

(14) Fred loves all-in wrestling but I hate it/ can't stand it.

In other words, verbs such as love, hate and stand, while not susceptible to indefinite object deletion, do not allow contextual object deletion either.

Let me now give a second reason why object deletion needs more satisfactory treatment in our EFL dictionaries. This is that individual verbs vary considerably in their deletion characteristics, even when we limit our attention to the direct object. True, there is a tendency for semantically-related verbs to have the same deletion properties. Thus, 'creative' verbs such as paint, sculpt, sketch, draw, print typically allow indefinite object deletion, as do many verbs denoting sporting activity: row, scull, ride, hunt, bowl, field, pass. But there are differences within particular domains; field (in cricket, as in examples 15 and 16) is indefinite.

(15) It's our turn to field.

(16) He can't field but he can bowl.

(17) *He hit the ball straight at me but I couldn't field.

In the contrasting example (17), my own usage would require a pronoun (it) after field. In this respect field is unlike catch, which allows both indefinite and contextual deletion:

(18) I can't bowl but I can catch.
(indefinite deletion)

(19) Throw me another one and I'll try and catch.
(contextual deletion)

As these examples show, verbs that are not only members of the same set but actually close in meaning can have different deletion properties, and these can lead to errors of overgeneralization in the usage of foreign learners.

The picture becomes more complex, and so more likely to give rise to errors, once we take account of the polysemy of verbs in particular semantic groupings. This brings me to a third argument in favour of the lexicographical treatment of deletion. As we have already seen, verbs such as watch are liable to contextual deletion. Other verbs of perception behave similarly when functioning, say, as commands in a context where an object is already established:

(20) Now here's something you'll enjoy!
Watch/feel/touch/smell/taste!

But this is a case of directed conscious activity. When physical capacity or incapacity to perceive is involved, membership of the list changes and indefinite deletion is introduced, as in (21).

(21) He's well over ninety. He can't smell/taste/hear/see.

Finally, one's perceptions may be undirected, or not consciously focused, as in the event described in (22).

(22) Something whizzed by my head but I didn't
feel it/touch it/smell it/see it/hear it.

In this case neither kind of deletion is possible.

How is this information conveyed in the dictionaries currently available, and how could presentation be improved? Of the two kinds of deletion discussed, indefinite deletion is probably easier to treat, as the contrast between "He is painting" and "He is painting a portrait" traditionally regarded as involving separate intransitive and transitive uses of the same verb. The difference can be reflected in the use of distinct codes and this is the practice normally followed in both ALD and LDOCE. Separate examples would help to clarify the contrast, but these are less commonly provided.

The satisfactory treatment of ellipsis is more difficult. The problem for the learner is that (23), (24) and (25) are all possible

sentences, but that the third cannot normally be used unless an object has already been established in the linguistic or situational context.

(23) Don't attend the meeting.

(24) Don't attend it.

(25) Don't attend.

Clearly an intransitive code is not appropriate: the verb is essentially transitive. The incomplete nature of sentence (25) must be established, and this can best be done by supplying an antecendent context:

(26) It's not an important meeting: don't attend.

All the same, this is clearly one case which calls for special treatment by a teacher since natural examples of ellipsis do not always establish a clear textual antecendent.

I referred earlier to the growth of interest, throughout the 1970s, in the principles which control the appropriate use of sentences, as compared with the rules which govern their construction and sense (cf. Leech 1983). In the main, lexicography is concerned with meaning as a property of words and sentences in abstraction from the particular circumstances in which they are used. Should the lexicographer also take account of the illocutionary force which expressions can carry? For the most part this is an impossible task. As is well known, the acts which sentences of a given structural type are used to perform can differ very widely. Thus an imperative sentence can function as an invitation or prayer as well as a command (cf. Hartmann 1983).

The dictionary maker cannot concern himself with expressions whose pragmatic force varies from one context of utterance to another. What are of undoubted interest to him, however, are expressions which are pragmatically specialized in the sense that they have come to be associated with particular speech acts. An example given by Leech (1983:28) is the formula "Would you mind ...?" which has become specialized for use as a polite request.

Pragmatic specialization gives rise to a number of more or less distinct categories (cf. Coulmas 1979). One such category consists of well-known sayings or proverbs, of which many examples appear in the second volume of ODCIE. Sayings which have the grammatical form of declarative sentences are commonly used to make approving comments on timely or judicious action or to strengthen a recommendation to act. "A stitch in time saves nine" is one such expression, and "An apple a day keeps the doctor away" is another.

Another important category consists of stereotyped greetings: "The top of the morning", "The compliments of the season". Yet another comprises expressions which form part of a larger sentence, and contribute to its force, but at the same time serve to structure exchanges between speakers. They may refer back to an earlier statement or enquiry, say, or anticipate a following one, but in either case also indicate the speaker's attitude to his interlocutor

or his communication. The expression "if you must know", for example (primary stress on must) is added to a piece of information given to someone who has been asking for it inquisitively or tiresomely, as in the exchange (27).

(27) Where did you meet him?
If you must know, I met him on a number eleven bus.

An expression with a similar function, though in fact a complete sentence, is "You can say that again" (stress on that) which is used to indicate emphatic and often ironic agreement with the remarks of a previous speaker:

(28) MARY: I'm worried about Dad, Andy. He's gone to bits. Andy, it's serious!
ANDY: You can say that again!

For students new to this kind of information, detail of the kind I have given - stress, structural position and conditions of use - needs to be spelled out informally, and fully illustrated. Dictionary coverage of functional idioms is limited to a few specialized works and in general-purpose dictionaries must remain highly selective until we have developed simple and economic conventions for handling pragmatic features.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, EFL lexicography has strengthened its reputation for user-centred innovation, though the time taken to absorb, evaluate and apply linguistic developments has meant, for example, that the most impressive achievements in the treatment of syntax have come in a period of waning interest in the teaching of grammar. Then again, it is only recently that EFL lexicographers have begun to address a range of questions of a broadly contextual kind - whether our existing headword conventions can satisfactorily handle the many and varied cases in which word meanings are determined by restricted lexical contexts; whether the elucidation of meaning in entries for determiners and connectives calls for examples spanning several sentences; and what conventions need to be developed for representing the pragmatic force of conversational formulae. Whatever solutions are devised to these problems, it is sure that they will disturb still further our preoccupation with the word as the focus of lexicographical theory and practice.

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