

## Making Room for the Compound Nouns in Small Monolingual English Dictionaries

Dr. Della Thompson

This paper makes a plea for a fuller coverage of compound nouns in small English dictionaries. This is not to say, however, that these words have been neglected over the years. On the contrary, their treatment has expanded, at least in proportion to the number of headwords included: for example, the first editions of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1911) and the *Pocket Oxford Dictionary* (1924) contained 23 and 13 compounds of *head* respectively, compared with nearly twice as many (45 and 22) in the seventh editions. Whether this increase is proportional to the increase in the number of new compounds coined would be difficult to determine, but it still shows an awareness among lexicographers of their importance.

However, when I came to revise the *Pocket Oxford Dictionary*, it seemed to me that one of its weaknesses lay in its coverage of compound nouns. For example, under *head*, I found the following words missing: *headband*, *headbutt*, *headcount*, *headhunter*, *headhunting*, *headrest*, *headscarf*, *headset*, and *head teacher*, all of which seemed worthy of inclusion in a dictionary the size of the *POD*. When I looked at other small dictionaries for English native speakers, I found similar omissions: *Collins Pocket Dictionary* also left out all these words, except *headhunter*, *headhunting*, and *head teacher*, while including *head-banger*, not in the *POD*; *Chambers Pocket Dictionary* revealed further discrepancies: it listed *headband*, *headhunting*, and *headset* but left out *headgear*, *headlamp*, *headshrinker*, *headstall*, and *headwaters*, all of which appear in the other two dictionaries, and gave *headpiece* as an extra word not appearing in the other two works: the *Longman Pocket English Dictionary* was different again, listing *headband*, *head-hunting*, *headrest*, and *headset*, while omitting *headbutt*, *headcount*, *headgear*, *headhunt*, *headlamp*, *headscarf*, and *headwaters*. These discrepancies can be shown more clearly in tabular form:

Coverage of Compounds of *head* in Pocket English Dictionaries

	<i>POD7</i>	<i>Collins Pocket</i>	<i>Chambers Pocket</i>	<i>Longman Pocket</i>
headband			X	X
head-banger		X		
headbutt				
headcount				
headgear	X	X		
headhunter		X		X
headhunting		X	X	X
headlamp	X	X		
headman	X			X
headpiece			X	X
headrest				X

Coverage of Compounds of *head* in Pocket English Dictionaries

	<i>POD7</i>	<i>Collins Pocket</i>	<i>Chambers Pocket</i>	<i>Longman Pocket</i>
headscarf				
headset			X	X
headshrinker	X	X		X
headstall	X	X		X
head teacher		X		
headwaters	X	X		
headword	X			X

Fifteen compound nouns on the list appear inconsistently in the four dictionaries looked at, while the remaining three appear in none of them. This compares with fifteen compounds of *head* not on the table but present in all four dictionaries: *headache*, *headboard*, *headdress*, *headland*, *headlight*, *headline*, *headmaster*, *headmistress*, *headphone*, *headquarters*, *headroom*, *head start*, *headstone*, and *headway*, and *headwind*. Only three words, *headbanger*, *headrest*, and *head teacher*, appear only in one dictionary, while nine appear in two and three in three of the four works.

I would argue that all these words, with the exception of *headpiece*, deserve to be included in the next edition of the *POD*.

When I compared these findings with a range of non-compound headwords, I did not find the same discrepancy in coverage between comparable dictionaries. In the range *hallucinate* to *hammer*, occupying one column of text, the differences between *POD7* and the *Collins Pocket* were minor: the *POD* included the headwords *halm* (variant of *haulm*), *halves* (plural of *half*) and *Hamitic*, while *Collins* included *halting* and *hamba*. The most striking difference between the two dictionaries in this range of text was again in the coverage of compound nouns: *Collins* included *hallway* and *halterneck*, both absent from the *POD*.

The coverage of compounds seems, therefore, to be an area of dictionary compilation which, like the coverage of minor senses, idioms, phrasal verbs, derivatives, and variants, is left largely to the discretion of the individual editor: if we were to examine any two dictionaries of similar size and scope we would find many variations in these other areas too. Many compound nouns, it seems, fall into the category of «marginal» vocabulary.

In order to try and discover whether different dictionaries had different policies for the inclusion of compound nouns, I studied the introductions of many of them, but found that most make no remarks at all about compounds. Two exceptions are the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. The *OED* in its first edition acknowledges the difficulty of determining which «combinations» are to be dealt with by the lexicographer, and divides them into three groups, one of undefined nested items, one of defined nested items, and one of items with full headword status. The undefined items are considered to be semantically «transparent». The *COD* does not mention compounds in its introduction until the sixth edition (1976) when it

merely states: «Limitations of space make it impossible to include every possible and legitimate derivative (e.g. compounds of obvious meaning such as *boiler-room...*)». The seventh edition repeats this statement but the eighth wisely falls silent again on the subject.

The *COD* (until the eighth edition), like the *OED* before it and every other dictionary I have consulted, did not consider *boiler-room* worthy of attention, because its meaning was «obvious». However, both dictionaries gave *engine-room* which was arguably no less obvious. One could also argue that *bedroom* and *bathroom* are also fairly obvious and yet it would be almost impossible to find a dictionary that did not contain them. I would suggest, therefore, that their inclusion is on the grounds of currency, and currency alone, rather than on the grounds of, say, productiveness or spelling. This brings me to what I think to be the most important reason for including a compound in a dictionary, which is the user's expectation that it should be there. A common everyday word such as *bathroom* must be in a dictionary, just as *kitchen* must be, whether it is semantically transparent or not. Surely, words such as *headband*, *headrest*, and *headscarf* also deserve a place, at least in a dictionary the size of the *POD*, for the same reason.

We all know that one of the main uses to which a dictionary is put is to check spelling, and that in connection with this hyphenation practice is a matter of interest and importance to users of all kinds. This is another good reason for including as many compounds as possible in dictionaries, especially in English dictionaries. In addition, the need to know simply whether a word «exists» or is a «real word» is often paramount among players of word-games such as Scrabble, and therefore dictionaries need to be explicit rather than implicit in the information they give.

What, then, are the ways in which space can be found to accommodate these perhaps underrepresented vocabulary items in a climate which is encouraging us to use up more space than ever before by denesting, using definite and indefinite articles in definitions, providing usage notes and grammatical information, and generally being more user-friendly? In my abstract I suggested three ways in which space might be saved, the first two of which turned out to be not such a good idea when examined more closely.

Firstly, I recommended the introduction into our smaller dictionaries of lists of undefined compounds of the *boiler-room* type, as was done in the *OED*, on the grounds that we consider this to be adequate treatment in the *POD* of *in-*, *un-*, *re-* and *over-* words, while Collins... *Pocket* uses it for words in *un-*, *re-*, *non-*, and *under-*. This method of saving space no longer seems advisable. Even the *OED*, which claims to list undefined compounds, in fact gives some guidance to their meaning. For example, before the list which includes *hair-clip*, *hair-conditioner*, *hair-cream*, and *hair-spray*, it gives what amounts to a definition which serves for the whole list: «for or for the use of the hair», and the list which includes *hair-dryer* and *hair-straightening* is prefaced by the definition «objective and objective genitive». Secondly, in the interests of user-friendliness, *in-*, *un-*, *re-*, and *over-* words will probably no longer be placed in lists at the bottom of the page in the next edition of the *POD* but will be individually defined as in the *COD*. It would, therefore, be a retrograde step to introduce new lists of undefined words. Thirdly, there are very few compound nouns whose precise meaning can be deduced from their elements. In this sense, they are unlike many words with prefixes such as *un-* and *re-*, whose meaning is clear from their elements.

My second suggestion for saving space was to omit some of the more common

idioms that we give at the moment, e.g. *keep (or lose) one's head*, on the grounds that they are generally understood by native speakers, do not present spelling problems, and are probably not automatically expected to be there. This suggestion fails really on the first of these reasons, that they are very common and therefore readily understood by native speakers. It is extremely difficult to make accurate assumptions as to what the user knows or does not know, and, besides, what we include in dictionaries is, at least at the moment, based on currency rather than rarity.

My third suggestion was that space could be saved by making definitions and examples shorter. On further examination, this proved to be the most fruitful method of shortening dictionary entries, with definitions turning out to be far more fruitful than examples. In order to see just how much space could be saved, I took a section of about 1½ pages of edited text in letter «B», from *back* to *backyard*, and set about reducing it as much as I could. Having done this, I analysed the different types of shortening which had taken place. Nine different types emerged, which are as follows:

(i) The use of shorter simpler words or a single word in place of a phrase, e.g.:

<b>back</b> v. 1a	<i>help with moral or financial support</i> ⇒ <i>give moral or financial support to</i>
<b>back down</b>	<i>withdraw one's claim or point of view</i> ⇒ <i>withdraw one's claim or argument.</i>
<b>back number</b>	<i>issue of a periodical earlier than the current one</i> ⇒ <i>out-of-date issue of a periodical</i>
<b>backgammon</b>	<i>game played on a board with pieces moved according to throws of the dice</i> ⇒ <i>board-game with pieces moved according to throws of the dice</i>
<b>backwash</b>	<i>receding waves created by the motion of a ship, etc.</i> ⇒ <i>receding waves made by a ship etc.</i>

(ii) The deletion of superfluous words, e.g.:

<b>back</b> v. 1b	<i>bet on the success of (a horse etc.)</i> ⇒ <i>bet on (a horse etc.)</i>
<b>backwash</b>	<i>receding waves created by the motion of a ship etc.</i> ⇒ <i>receding waves made by a ship etc.</i>

(iii) The deletion of uncommon or suspect elements, e.g.:

<b>back</b> n. 3a	<i>less active or visible or important part</i> ⇒ <i>less visible or important part</i>
-------------------	--

**backwater** place *or condition* remote from the centre of activity  
or thought ⇒  
place remote from the centre or activity of thought

**backstitch** *v* deleted as uncommon.

(iv) The deletion of superfluous phrases such as «applied to», «denoting», etc., e.g.:

**back-to-nature** *applied to a movement or enthusiast for* reversion to a simpler  
way of life ⇒  
seeking a simpler way of life.

**backstreet** *denoting illicit or illegal activity* ⇒  
illicit; illegal

(v) The deletion of synonyms or near synonyms, e.g.:

**back** *n.* 3b *side or part normally away from the spectator ...* ⇒  
part normally away from the spectator...

**get (or put) a person's back up** *annoy or anger a person* ⇒  
annoy a person

**back seat** *less prominent or important position or status* ⇒  
less prominent or important position

(vi) The deletion of tautologous words, e.g.:

**backlog** arrears of *uncompleted* work ⇒  
arrears of work.

(vii) Making overlong definitions shorter, even if some of the sense is lost, e.g.:

**backlist** publisher's list of books *published before the current season*  
*and still in print* ⇒  
publisher's list of books in print.

(viii) Avoiding redefining elements of simple words defined elsewhere, e.g.:

**backache** (*usu. prolonged*) pain in the back ⇒  
ache in the back.



(i) There should be a fuller coverage of compound nouns in our dictionaries because they are expected to be there, they are not always as transparent as we might imagine, and because they cause spelling difficulties. Even if we cannot include as many as we would like, it may be useful to examine all the possible entries in order to decide which ones are the most important. Perhaps there could be a greater consensus than is at present the case as to which of the words in the table of «head» words should be included in a small dictionary. The availability of large corpora from which concordances can readily be made should make this task much simpler and more efficient in the future.

(ii) If we want to maintain our policies of user-friendliness, the solution to the space problem is not to revert to the old methods of nesting, using the swung dash, etc., but to look at ways of saving space in definitions. We might also consider omitting pronunciations from our smaller English dictionaries for native speakers.