

Television as a source of material for English dictionaries

ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the usefulness of television as a source of material for English dictionaries. It describes a project in which 93 television programmes of various types were studied over a period of 51 hours in order to establish how well the CONCISE OXFORD DICTIONARY covers the vocabulary used in them. An analysis of the results showed that nearly every half-hour programme yielded at least 3 items of interest (the average being 5.5 items), and that for the editor of a dictionary such as the COD this material would be most valuable with regard to geographical labelling, regional and non-regional colloquialisms and slang, and new words. The television also proved to be a rich source of idioms, phrases, and specialist vocabulary.

Introduction and aims

This paper is the result of a project undertaken to find out (1) whether or not dictionaries of current English (specifically the CONCISE OXFORD DICTIONARY) adequately cover the vocabulary used in television programmes, and (2) whether the television should be regarded as a useful, or perhaps vital, source of material for the lexicographer. In relation to its first aim, this paper could be regarded as belonging to the subject group 'Dictionaries from the usefulness of television as a source, it is being submitted to the group 'The Dictionary-Making Process'.

Until recently, dictionaries drew their material almost exclusively from printed sources and it was generally considered unacceptable to record a word in a dictionary that had only been heard as opposed to read: it was deemed necessary to have tangible proof of usage in the form of verifiable quotations. Yet however desirable it is to have printed evidence, this need not, and should not, prevent the use of other important sources of which television may be one. Moreover, in the case of scripted programmes it may often be possible to gain access to the printed source if required, for example if seeking the earliest example in print of a new word for recording in a dictionary such as the OED.

In Britain at least, most people spend comparatively little time reading, and the words about which they may wish to consult a dictionary are most likely to have first entered their consciousness through other media, in particular television. Recent surveys carried

out for the RADIO TIMES show that watching television occupies a greater proportion of people's leisure time than any other activity, and even though most people claim to be watching less than they were a year ago, the average time spent per week is still seventeen hours. One might argue that twice this amount of time is spent at work, but then people at work are rarely exposed to the same variety of language, both as regards subject matter and register, as they are during an evening's viewing.

Even if, as is likely, much of what is heard on television does not register in people's minds if it is unfamiliar, and does not prompt the viewer to leap up and consult a dictionary, this does not alter the fact that one of the functions of a dictionary like the COD is to reflect the language in use at the current time. Television may on these grounds alone represent a useful source.

This survey sought, therefore, to answer questions such as the following: How well is the language encountered by over fifteen million people three times a week in Coronation Street reflected by the COD?; do our dictionaries record the Australian slang heard by more than ten million people five times a week in *Neighbours* and *Home and Away*? do they keep pace with the latest vocabulary of politics, war, and crime, as used in news and current affairs programmes?; and do they list the birds and animals described in television's most popular nature programmes? In addition, it sought to find out whether some types of programme are more fruitful than others in the search for items not recorded in our dictionaries, or whether all programmes yield roughly the same numbers. If, as one might expect, non-specialist programmes yield fewer items of interest than specialist programmes, are these, nevertheless, of greater interest because of their more general usage? Another question to be answered was how the material collected divided into (1) items not in the dictionary in question at all, and (2) in the dictionary but inadequately treated. Also of interest was the division of items into different parts of speech, into single words and phrases, and into words of standard English and non-standard English (dialect, slang, and colloquial).

Method

Initially it was envisaged that this project would concentrate on the ten most popular television programmes, each enjoying an audience of about ten to fifteen million, based on the 'Top 100' list published weekly in the journal BROADCAST. These, however, turned out to consist entirely of soap operas, situation comedies, and crime and hospital dramas and documentaries, and so it was decided to extend the survey to cover some more specialist programmes as well. There was no attempt to make the distribution 'scientific', whatever that may mean. In the end, the types of programmes studied were as follows: the most popular soap operas (21 hours), news and current affairs (8 hours), documentaries (7 hours), magazine/chat shows (4 hours), situation comedy (2 hours), nature (2 hours), cookery, gardening, crime, drama, game shows, comedy (7 hours altogether). In total this was 51 hours, consisting of 93 programmes, mostly lasting half-an-hour each. Half of these were shown in September 1991 and half in March 1992 and there was no significant difference in the numbers of items found on each occasion.

At the beginning of the project far too many words and expressions were recorded which then took considerable time to be checked in the COD. Very soon, however, it

became possible, without the risk of missing something, to be more selective about the items needing checking, and to check most of them in the course of the programme while still listening out for further items. This meant that within the time span of a programme most items of interest could be recorded and their particular significance noted. The important point to make here is that by using the eyes and ears simultaneously, more material can be sifted through than can be done simply by reading, in which process the eyes alone do the work.

The main practical problems of using the television as a source were the occasional difficulty of hearing an unfamiliar word and the problem of knowing how to spell it in order to record it and later check it in dictionaries and corpora. The use of a video recorder did not always resolve these problems.

Results

During the 51 hours of viewing, 488 different items of interest were collected. Many were heard more than once, bringing the average per half-hour programme to about 5.5. They fell into the following categories:

(1) *Words and phrases already in the COD but inadequately treated*

This was one of the most important results of the survey. Of the 488 items gathered, about 95 contributed information contradictory or complementary to that given by the COD. This was often with regard to geographical labelling, but the COD also omitted some important senses, and some parts of speech of certain words.

Geographical labelling is an area of notorious difficulty for the dictionary compiler, chiefly owing to a lack of readily available data and poor first-hand knowledge. The inclusion in the survey of two highly popular Australian soaps showed that many words and expressions labelled *US* or *esp. US* by the COD are also used in Australia. Examples are *blow one's stack*, *breeze* (something simple), *bust* (catch with drugs), *bummer*, *cool* (excellent), *get creamed*, *diner*, *get dumped on*, *freeloder*, *hang in there*, and *slowpoke*. Important senses not recorded by the COD but by no means rare are *awesome* (excellent), *catch* (see, as *I'll catch you later*), *fire up* (excite), *kick-start* (fig.), *laugh* (an amusing person), *lay off* (stop harassing), *line-up* (programme of entertainment), *mental* (excellent), *milker* (cow), *off* (unacceptable), *physio* (physiotherapy), *potato chip* (crisp), *rave* (a type of party), *semi* (semi-final), *sexy* (fashionable), *space* (privacy), *spunky* (sexually attractive), *tasty* (sexually attractive), *tight* (Mus.), *the Twelve* (the EC countries), *turkey* (idiot), and *well* + adj. (extremely). COD's verb *to slim* has nothing about its use with *down*, and *busk* does not include the idiom *busk it*. According to the COD, *gold-digger* in its figurative sense refers only to women, whereas in two different TV programmes it referred to men.

With regard to parts of speech, *expansionist*, *paternalist*, and *Zionist* are missing from the COD as adjectives, and *commute*, *mull*, and *shag* are missing as nouns. The common attributive uses of *fledgling* and *night-time* are overlooked, the adverbial uses of *good* and *great* are not noted, and *sugar* is missing as an exclamation. *Broker*, *handbrake*, and *tarmacadam* are not to be found as verbs and the absolute use of *screw up* is lacking. *Brood* and *extrude* are not given as transitive verbs, *exacerbate*, *gear up*, and *handle* are not included as

intransitive verbs, and the use of certain nouns as forms of address is ignored (e.g. *pussy-cat, tiger*).

Finally, some truncated forms are also missing, e.g. *agenda* (= hidden agenda), *bottom* (= bottom out), and, more importantly, *sort* (= sort out).

(2) Words and phrases not in the COD

These made up four-fifths of the material collected and fell into the following main categories, which are not always mutually exclusive but are useful as a rough means of dividing up the material. A few examples are given in each.

(a) Specialist, technical, and proprietary terms (about 100): *air traffic control, biodiversity, black bean, blue-winged kookaburra, bulk carrier ship, cardiopulmonary, Cellnet, chicken chasseur, corophium, finger food, free-associate, FTSE, Kalashnikov, Landrover, Lucozade, market share, ovariectomy, Parisian scoop, scud missile, ska music, wax-bean, yabby*.

(b) Regional words and expressions (i.e. Australian, American, and Northern English) (about 80, mostly slang and colloquialisms): *any road, back up, bludge, butt out, chuck (form of address), clarty, crack on to a person, daggy, dawk, dero, dobber, eh up!, fair dinkum, get one's own road, hang loose, mither, rack off, sleaze-bag, take-out food, tara, ute, yakka*.

(c) Idioms, phrases, similes, proverbs, and allusions (about 75): *blow away the cobwebs, cheap and cheerful, cherchez la femme, elbow grease, get the bullet, happy as a pig in muck, Inspector Cluso, nil desperandum, not hold one's breath, get the show on the road, too little too late, Twiggy*.

(d) (Non-regional) slang and colloquialisms (about 50): *brekky, Chrissie, cripes, firm up, for free, frit, Gramps, lib dem, pig-sick, plonker, pork pies (lies), prössie, rad, rubber johnnie, scrummy, take five, thermals, toe-rag, walkies, want out, washer-upper*.

(e) 'New' words and phrases (about 35, otherwise falling into categories (a), (d), or (f)): *Amerasian, animal liberation, Barbie doll, crisis management, cross over, deregulate, EMU, gob-smacked, microcar, Moldovan, motaball, opt-out, personal pension, ramraiding, ritual abuse, rockumentary, RSI, sexual harassment, talking pages, techno, thirty-something, videodating, virtual reality, wannabe*.

(f) 'Ordinary' words (about 60); many of these were compounded nouns: *Andalusian, battle-worn, bed-jacket, bomblet, candlelit, cotton bud, fleet-footed, hazard lights, heating engineer, homemaker, housing association, inner circle, job centre, minibar, mobile phone, multi-talented, night class, pay-out, renationalize, reseed, scrap man, sell-off, serious-minded, star-struck, sunscreen, underfunded, unhealable, upper sixth*.

Although items in all the above categories are of interest, those in categories (1) and (2d, e, and f) are perhaps the most important for a dictionary such as the COD, although some of the so-called 'specialist' terms ought to appear there too, as well as the most commonly heard regionalisms. The less common specialist terms and regionalisms and the idioms and phrases would be extremely useful material for consideration in the compilation of larger or specialist dictionaries. A full list of items studied appears at the end of this paper.

With reference to the questions posed in the Introduction to this paper, the following points can be made:

1. The language encountered in television's most popular soap operas is reflected by the COD only up to a point. This dictionary is especially weak on Australian slang and could also improve its coverage of British regionalisms and colloquialisms.

2. Our dictionaries are fairly good at keeping pace with the latest vocabulary of politics etc., as used in news and current affairs programmes, but still more could be done in this area. Apart from news programmes, the soaps and magazine programmes were especially useful sources of new vocabulary.

3. The birds and animals described in television's popular nature programmes are poorly represented in our small dictionaries, and even a dictionary such as the OED omits many of the compound names.

4. As far as determining which types of programme were most fruitful is concerned, the relatively small size of the survey prevented the drawing of highly accurate conclusions. However, some general trends were detected: news programmes, the Australian soap operas, and the American situation comedies were consistently rich sources of material missing from the COD, while the chat shows tended to yield little of interest as did some of the less specialist documentaries. The highly popular English soaps were erratic, but provided some useful English dialect material and were a source of many idioms. The 'new' words came mainly from news programmes, soaps, and one particular trendy magazine programme, while the 'ordinary' words arose in all types of programmes. Specialist terms not surprisingly turned up mainly in specialist programmes, and also in the news.

With regard to the relative interest of the specialist and ordinary terms noted, it can be said that for a dictionary such as the COD it is obviously more important to make sure that the coverage of ordinary words and usages is adequate, than to include all the specialist names of birds and animals. Therefore, some of the non-specialist programmes dealing with everyday life were the most useful.

As to the division of the material collected into different parts of speech, nouns and noun phrases far outweighed other categories, followed by idioms, phrasal verbs, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, and interjections.

Conclusion

The project described in this paper showed that television can be a valuable source of dictionary material, particularly with regard to regional terms, specialist vocabulary, and new words. Although regional terms and special vocabulary could be sought by the lexicographer in other reference books, the problem of selection is always great for the non-specialist. The sense of authenticity and level of significance of such words provided by hearing them used in context on the television is invaluable.

Words and phrases investigated

Note: Where an item was heard more than once, the number of times is noted in brackets.

afore (x 2), agenda (= hidden agenda), air traffic control, all in a day's work, all-party (*attrib.*), all's well that ends well, Amerasian, an apple never falls far from the tree, Andalusian (*adj.*), animal liberation, animal liberation front, anticonstitutional, any road (x 6), A-team, A-teamer, avoid like the plague, awesome (*slang*), back into (= walk into a trap etc.), back up (= go back and review), bacon (save one's), banana boat (*Milit.*), Barbie doll, bar-boy, barking mad, barrel-chested shelduck, bar-tailed godwit, battle-worn, bed-jacket, bed-wetter, beer and sandwiches, be in lumber (*slang*), be in with a chance, BIFU, biodiversity, birthing stool, black bean, black kite, black lion tamarin, blind snake, blow away the cobwebs (x 2), blow one's stack, bludge (= cadge), bludger (x 2), blue-winged kookaburra, bomblet, bond (*v.*, teeth), bottle-shop (= off licence), bottom (*v.* = bottom out), Bounty (chocolate bar), bread-basket, break it off (a relationship), breeze (something simple), brekky (= breakfast), broker (*v.*) (x 4), brood (*v.tr.*), bruv (= brother), bub (= baby), buffer zone, buggy (= baby buggy), bulk carrier ship, bummer, bush-land, bushwalk, busk it, bust (= catch with drugs), butt out (= not interfere) (x 2), campaign trail, candlelit, cap (*n.* = limit), cardiopulmonary, cat-and-mouse (*attrib.*), catch (= see, in 'I'll catch you later', = cheerio), Cellnet, Central Committee, change-over (= spare tyre), cheap and cheerful, cherchez la femme, Chetnik, chicken chasseur, Chrissie, chuck (x 2), clarty, come on heavy (= come on strong), come on strong, come on to a person (= flirt with, lure), come under the microscope, commute (*n.*), cool (= excellent), cool (= OK), cool up, corophium, cotton bud, crack on to a person (x 2), crash hot, cripes, crisis management, cross over (= change to a different style), cut someone off (emotionally), daggy (*fig.*), Danish (= Danish pastry), dawk (x 2), death camp, deck a person (= punish), demine, deregulate, dero, dig in, diner (= café), dirty old man, dobber (= tell-tale) (x 2), double or nothing, drag a thing out of a person, drop-in (= person who drops in), duck (= pop, in 'duck down to the shops' etc.) (x 4), dune grass, economic and monetary union, eh up!, elbow grease, electrical storm, EMU, European monetary union, exacerbate (*v. intr.*), exchange rate mechanism, expansionist (*adj.*), extrude (*v.tr.*), face a person down, fair cop, fair dinkum, fall of the turnip truck, fault line, F15 jet, finger food, fired up, firm up, fledgling (*attrib.*), fleet-footed, Florence Nightingale, flower (form of address), flunk out, for free (x 2), free-associate (*v.intr.*), freeloader, free run (= unimpeded attempt), freeze over (of a person), frit (= scared), front (= turn up), FTSE, fuzzy (in 'feel warm and fuzzy about ' a thing), gear up (*v. intr.*), General Secretary, get a shift on, get creamed, get dumped on, get into (as in 'what's got into her?'), get off on a thing (*slang*), get one's knickers in a knot, get one's own road, get the bullet, get the show on the road, get you!, G force, girlie, give a thing one's best shot, give up on a person, gobsmacked, gold-digger, golden-headed lion tamarin, golden lion tamarin, golden-rumped lion tamarin, gonad (= testicle), good (*adv.*) (x 4), good day! (= hello) (x 3), Goody Two-Shoes, go off one's brain for a thing, go public (= tell the public), go somewhere (as in 'it's not going anywhere'), Gramps, grand (= 1,000), great (*adv.*), great white egret, guilt trip, Gulag, gullery, gutted (in 'feel gutted'), Haganah, handbrake (*v.*), handle (*v. intr.*), handling (= way a car handles), hang in there (x 2), hang loose (= relax), hang out for; hang out with a person, happening (*attrib. adj.*) (x 2), happy as a pig in muck, have a person's guts for garters, have had a gut full of

something, have oneself a thing, have the bit between one's teeth, hazard lights, heating engineer, heckles and shekels (= one's belongings), hey ho!, Hezbollah (x 2), hike (in 'take a hike out of here'), hip-hop (*Mus.*), holiday village, holy cow!, home-maker, hot flash, (full) house! (in lotto), housing action trust, housing association (x 2), how are you going? (= how are you?), improv, in contempt (*Law*), information technologist, inner circle, Inspector Cluso, in waiting (= on duty), Irgun, item (= established couple), jaguar (a bomber), jammies (= pyjamas), job centre, job market, junior school, Kalashnikov, keep a lid on things, keeper (in 'not my sister's keeper'), kennelmaid, kicking (= excellent), kick-start (*fig., n. & v.*) (*v.* x 2), King Kong, Kiora, kiss of death, knackerman, knackers, knowledge is power, Kristallnacht, Landrover, landed highway, lathotomy, laugh (= an amusing person), laughing kookaburra, lay a person off (= make redundant), lay a thing on a person, lay off a person, leak out (*v.tr., fig.*), learner's licence (= driving licence), learner's test (= driving test), -led (in 'investment-led') (x 2), legs eleven, let a person in (= confide in), let the grass grow under one's feet, lib dem (= Liberal Democrat), lighten up (*v.tr.*), lighten up (*v.intr., = relax*) (x 2), like a dog with two tails, line-up (= programme of entertainment), lion tamarin, little egret, long-finned pilot whale, long time no see, look out for (= look after), Lucozade, make a move on a person (= make amorous advances), market share, Max Headroom, (make someone, or be, the) meat in the sandwich (x 2), med student, melon (on head of pilot whale), melt-down (*n., fig.*), Mensa, mental (= excellent), microcar, militia (= member of a militia), milker (= cow), minibar, mini-golf, mither, mobile phone, moby (= mobile shop), Moldovan, morale-boosting, Mori poll, motaball, mother of all ... (monsoons), move in on a person (= make amorous advances), move over (= die), MRI, MSG (monosodium glutamate), mull (a think), multi-talented, mythify, myth-making (*n.*), nail-bitingly, Nekkei, neurosurgeon, nice one!, night class, night-time (*adj.*), nil desperandum, Ninja turtles, Nintendo, not hold one's breath (x 2), no worries (= that's fine) (x 2), nursemaid (*v.*), off (= annoying, unacceptable), 100 share index, one-nighter, opt-out (*n.*), opt-out (*attrib.*), Outspan (orange), ovariectomy, overegg the pudding, overview (*v.*), overwork (pastry), pain in the butt, Palmach, Parisian scoop, paternalist (*adj.*), patrol boat, paybook, pay-out (*n.*), peace-keeping (*attrib.*) (x 2), pension fund, personal pension fund, personal pension plan, Phalangist (*adj.*), physio (= physiotherapy), pig-sick, pilot whale, pin one's colours to the mast, pink fit, placeman, plate-spinner, play-dough, play fast and loose, plonker, PMS, p.o.b., pork pies (= lies), positive thinking, potato chips, pothead (of a pilot whale), press the flesh, prossie (= prostitute), puffa jacket, pull one's head in, pull out the stops, pussy-cat (form of address), put a person out to pasture, put one over (on) a person (= deceive), put wheels in motion, Queen of Sheba, rack off (x 2), rad (= excellent), ramraiding, rave (= a specific type of party), reedbed, reed-marsh, remand prisoner, renationalize, reseed (*v.tr.*), retest (*n.*), right down the middle! (= honest!), right-on (*attrib.*), ritual abuse, road rules, rocket fire, rockumentary, RSI, rubber johnnie, run a thing by a person (x 2), run a thing past a person, sabre-tooth tiger, sacred kingfisher, scheme-hopper (= person who 'hops' from one training scheme to another), schmooze (*v.*), scrap man, screw up (*v.absol.*), scrummy, scrute (= an act of scrutinizing), Scud, 2), self-trained, sell-off (*n.*), semi (= semifinal), serious-minded, seven sisters, sexual harassment (x 2), sexy (= fashionable), shag (*n.*, coarse slang), short-finned pilot whale, short-sheet (*v.*), Shropshire blue, silver bullets (in 'I'm the one with silver bullets'), ska music, slave over a hot stove, sleaze-bag (term of abuse), sleaze-bucket (term of abuse), slim down, slothead (term of abuse), slowpoke,

sort (= sort out, resolve) (x 2), space (= privacy), special envoy, spring (*v.*, = discover in wrongdoing) (x 2), spunky (= sexually attractive), spyhop (*v.*), squish (= squish), star-struck, start over, St Christopher (medallion), stealth bomber, sticks and stones may break my bones ..., St John ambulance, stocktake (*v.tr.*), straw that breaks the camel's back, stress (*absol.*, = nag a person), suck (in 'it sucks', = it stinks), sugar!, sunscreen (x 2), Super Tuesday (x 2), take a trick, take five, take out (= take away (food)), take-out food, talk a thing through (x 2), talking pages, tara (x 2), tarmacadam (*v.*), tart about, tasty (= sexually attractive) (x 3), teary-eyed, techno (*Mus.*), test cricketer, Tet offensive, theatre (= operating theatre), the gloves are off, thermals (*n.pl.*), the Twelve (= EC countries), thirty-something (x 2), tiger (form of address) (x 2), tight (*adj.*, *Mus.*), time out (= time off), toe-rag, too little too late, top of the morning to you!, torture chamber, touch base, trifold, tumble (= detect, see through), turkey (= stupid person), turn round (= change the fortunes of), Twiggy, two fat ladies eighty-eight, underfunded, under-resourced, unhealable, up and rolling, up and running, upper sixth, ute (x 2), vehicle excise duty, videodating agency, virtual reality, wait on (= wait for), walkies (= a walk), walking disaster area, wandering palms, wannabe, want out, washer-upper, watch oneself (= look after oneself), Watergate, wax bean, weigh heavy, well (+ *adj.*, e.g. 'well weird') (x 2), whack (= beat, in 'you can't whack your own home'), whip out on, win a trick, Windy City, wrapped/rapt (x 4), yabby, yakka, you're all right (= thank you), Zionist (*adj.*).

KEYWORDS: television, Concise Oxford Dictionary, coverage by dictionaries, specialist terms, regional terms, Idioms and phrases, slang and colloquialisms, new words.