

Issues and Variables in Learner's Dictionaries

Julian Bamford

This paper examines English-language monolingual dictionaries produced for learners of English as a foreign language. These dictionaries are categorized in terms of their physical size, the number of headwords included, and the level of the learners for which they are intended. The entries in three learner's dictionaries—the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, and the *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary*—are examined for style and content. Based on this comparison, research questions are raised, mainly concerning student attitudes to different entry types. New features for inclusion in the entries of learner's dictionaries are proposed, and an example is given of a style of entry designed to be of maximum utility to learners.

Introduction

While increasing in number and sophistication, English monolingual learner's dictionaries are still in a process of development. As yet, relatively few publishers market them, and new dictionaries and editions are often very different from their predecessors.

Certain shortcomings are immediately apparent in current learner's dictionaries. They cater primarily to more advanced students; certainly, many of the definitions and example sentences cannot be fully understood by lower-level students. An informal survey of Bunkyo Women's College students, for example, revealed that most consider monolingual learner's dictionaries to be incomprehensible, and that they rarely or never consult them (see also Thompson, 1987, p. 284). Learner's dictionaries contain various grammatical codes that studies have shown few users learn or understand (West, 1987, p. 62). Another problem is that monolingual dictionaries are, by definition, of no use to the student who needs the L2 (second language) equivalent of an L1 (native language) word. In sum, while learner's dictionaries can rarely be faulted as dictionaries, I believe they leave much to be desired in terms of helping language learners, particularly less advanced ones.

After discussing the different types and levels of learner's dictionaries, this paper explores some of the variables in their entries. It also proposes several new features that could be included in the dictionaries to make them more useful to learners. The paper concludes with an example of a style of dictionary entry based on meaning rather than grammatical category that aims to better serve learners of all levels.

Types of Learner Dictionary

Size and Coverage

Learner's dictionaries may be categorized by their physical size and coverage (that is, the number of headwords—separate entries—they contain), and/or the level of student for which they are intended. In terms of size, there are three broad types of learner's dictionary: the desk, the portable and the pocket.

The desk dictionaries are represented by the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* covering 57,000 words, the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* covering 56,000, and the *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary*. This latter claims to cover 70,000 words but Standop (1988) estimates that *COBUILD's* coverage is "noticeably smaller" than that of its two rivals, partly because "many derivations and inflected forms are given as lemmata" (p. 385).

Another broad category is the portable dictionary. Portables are a little over half the size of the desk dictionaries both physically and in coverage. They include the *Collins COBUILD Student's Dictionary* (35,000 words), the *Longman Dictionary of American English* (38,000), the *Longman Active Study Dictionary* (38,000), and the *Oxford Student's Dictionary* (40,000). Collins also publishes the *COBUILD Essential English Dictionary* (45,000) which "keeps all the main features of the original *COBUILD* dictionary, but... concentrates them into a smaller space" (Sinclair, 1988, p. iv). The *Essential* may be designed as a more affordable version of a desk dictionary, or be aimed, as Machi & Horowitz (1990) suggest, at "less advanced learners" (p. 105). With too narrow a coverage for a desk dictionary, and being too large to be easily portable, the *Essential* currently sits on a shelf of its own.

The final category is the pocket dictionary. These vary in size of coverage, but are all more or less physically pocket-sized. The *Longman Handy Learner's Dictionary* (28,000), *Longman New Pocket English Dictionary* (10,000) and *Oxford Learner's Pocket Dictionary* (17,000) are three examples.

The size of pocket dictionaries also results in their being set apart from larger-sized dictionaries in the use to which they are put. While desk and portable dictionaries are intended for both encoding (composition) and decoding (understanding), pocket dictionaries are designed for decoding only, and thus have fewer grammar codes and example sentences. This is notwithstanding West's (1987) statement that the *Oxford Learner's Pocket Dictionary* "sets out to be an encoding as well as a decoding dictionary, resulting in wider treatment of fewer items" (p. 74). The *Oxford Learner's Pocket* coverage is, in fact, similar to other pocket dictionaries. So is the style of entry, with few of the grammar codes or example phrases and sentences that are the primary ways dictionaries help users to encode.

Student Level

Another important way of categorizing learner's dictionaries is in terms of language level, or the proficiency of the students for whom the dictionaries are intended. Here, publishers are sometimes reticent: the *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary*, the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1st edition)(henceforth *LDOCE1*) and the *Longman Dictionary of American English*, for example, all avoid reference to level, beyond stating that they are intended for learners of English, which presumably implies all learners of English. On the other hand, the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* is unequivocally titled, while the *Longman Active Study Dictionary* (the British English original of the *Longman Dictionary of American English*) and the *Oxford Student's Dictionary* state that they are for intermediate learners.

I suspect that many teachers share my unexamined assumption prior to writing this paper: that monolingual learner's dictionaries are all similar. It sometimes seems that publishers intentionally promote such an attitude. In spite of the clear statement in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2nd edition)(henceforth *LDOCE2*) that it "has been produced specifically to serve the linguistic needs of advanced students" (*LDOCE2*, p. F9), Longman omits any reference to this intended audience in their current dictionary catalogue (1991, p. 2). This would be unthinkable in the case of a language textbook. Indeed, common sense dictates that foreign language textbook catalogs make note of the target level of the books they list.

In the same way that recent language textbooks contain more "authentic" (that is, unadapted for language study) material, learner's desk dictionaries are also tending to use authentic example sentences. This is pushing the desk dictionaries further into the advanced category. The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* is one case to point. *LDOCE2* abandons *LDOCE1*'s adherence to a 2000-word defining vocabulary in the example sentences "in order to achieve greater authenticity" (Heath, 1988, p. 315).

Another reason why desk dictionaries are becoming more advanced in level is a significant increase in the precision—and thus complexity—of definitions. The newest addition to the desk dictionary category, the *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary*, has subdivisions of meaning that even native speaker's desk dictionaries do not find it necessary to include. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, for example, defines the noun "damage" as "loss or harm resulting from injury to person, property, or reputation" (p. 323). *COBUILD*, on the other hand, gives this definition two subdivisions. "Damage is 2.1 physical harm that is caused to something, especially harm that stops it working properly or makes it look less good... 2.2 a harmful effect that something has on a particular thing" (pp. 353-354). This same trend toward complexity can also be seen in the two editions of the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. While *LDOCE1* defined "damage" simply as "harm" (p. 277), *LDOCE2* expands this to "the process of spoiling the condition or quality of some-

thing and the harm or loss that results" (p. 258).

Publishers state that portable dictionaries are suitable for intermediate students, probably because the more concise entries are considered easier to understand. Ruse (1988) challenges this assumption. Noting that "most dictionaries prepared for this level are simply shortened versions of more advanced ones," she states that experience "has shown me that intermediate-level students need *more* help with their English than advanced-level students, not less" (p. F3, emphasis in original). There are other questionable assumptions behind the publisher's equation of portable with intermediate: don't intermediate learners need to look up the less common words excluded from the portables? Don't advanced learners need a portable-sized dictionary?

Unlike advanced-level desk dictionaries and intermediate-level portable dictionaries, pocket dictionaries are produced for both advanced (*Longman Handy Learner's Dictionary* and *Oxford Learner's Pocket Dictionary*) and intermediate students (*Longman New Pocket English Dictionary*).

Dictionaries for elementary-level students have also been produced, although they are usually written for adolescents, for example, the *Oxford Elementary Student's Dictionary* (10,000 words) and the *Longman Elementary Dictionary* (2,000 words). These are portable-sized and have simple definitions: "to damage" is "to break or hurt something" in the *Oxford Elementary Student's Dictionary* (p. 58). These dictionaries also use simple example sentences, large print and lots of pictures, but they have a coverage that is extremely narrow in an age of increasing use of authentic texts in elementary-level textbooks. Also, unlike the higher-level dictionaries, there is no inclusion of American English variations.

To round out this survey of dictionary types, mention must be made of the desk dictionaries produced for native speakers, for example, *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (160,000 words). Entries are less detailed and there are fewer example sentences, resulting in more concise and, as a result, sometimes more comprehensible entries than in learner's desk dictionaries, despite less control of vocabulary (compare the *Webster's* and *LDOCE2* definitions of "damage" above, for example). Advanced learners sometimes turn to these dictionaries because of their greater coverage.

There are several general research questions suggested by the above survey. Is there a need for learner's dictionaries that have greater coverage than the current maximum of 55,000-60,000 words? Can intermediate learners understand the definitions in the present portables, or should a smaller defining vocabulary be used? What coverage is desirable in intermediate and elementary-level dictionaries? Is larger print (as in the *Longman Dictionary of American English*) desirable in intermediate-level dictionaries? Is there a demand for elementary, intermediate, and advanced-level dictionaries of all sizes? Is there a need for a dictionary which includes both (a) detailed decoding and encoding information for words that learners will likely use in writing and speech, and (b) simple decoding information for words

suitable for the learner's passive vocabulary?

Variables in the Content and Style of Entries

The three major learner's desk dictionaries—*Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary* (C), *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (L), and *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (O)—differ in large and small ways in terms of entry content and style. These differences are detailed below. The variations found among the dictionaries in turn suggest questions of student attitude that could be investigated.

Layout: There is a separate column for some information (C); all information is in the same column (L; O). Do students have a preference for one or other of these forms?

Headword: There are dots showing where a word can be divided (L; O); there are no dots (C). Do the dots make words more difficult to read? Do students need the divisions (especially as word processors become widespread)?

Words that are usually capitalized are capitalized in the headword (C; O); they are not capitalized (L). Is it better to capitalize words usually capitalized, or to indicate them with "usu. cap." as in L?

Noun and verb forms of the same word are subsumed under a single headword (C); the different grammatical forms are given separate entries (L; O).

Verb and adjective forms: All are written in full (C); only the irregular forms are written in full (L; O). Do learners prefer to have regular forms written in full?

Illustrations: There are some (L; O); there are none (C). L, O and other COBUILD dictionaries have different degrees of ethnocentricity and racial bias in their illustrations. Studies show that learners prefer entries with illustrations (West, 1987, p. 63; Machi & Horowitz, 1990, p. 107). Do learners feel that the more illustrations the better, as in, for example the *Longman Elementary Dictionary*? Are illustrations preferred on the page with the entry, or grouped by topic or situation? Should full-page illustrations be at the back of the book, or alphabetically arranged within the body of the dictionary?

Synonyms and superordinates: They are specifically included (C); there are none indicated (L; O). C places them in the separate column. Are they useful listed separately as in C, or can they just be part of the definition?

Definitions: They are written in full sentences (C); they are standard dictionary-type words and phrases (L; O). Do students like definitions in full sentences, or the more concise standard type of definition?

They are written within a defining vocabulary (L); they are written using simple words (C; O). If students prefer a defining vocabulary (MacFarquar, 1985 (quoted in Machi & Horowitz); Machi & Horowitz, 1990), why don't publishers other than Longman use them? Do the students for whom a dictionary is intended know the defining vocabulary, or must steps be taken to ensure they know it?

They are written with a bias toward conciseness (L; O); they include detailed shades of sub-meaning (C). Do students find the finer shades of meaning in C helpful, or is simplicity better?

Examples: In all three dictionaries, they are used both to support and clarify the definition, and to illustrate usage. Are these two functions always compatible?

Possible New Features in Learner's Dictionaries

Several features not found in current learner's dictionaries have been suggested by scholars, or are found in some ordinary dictionaries.

Spaces could be inserted between each entry, as in the *Heinemann English Dictionary* (henceforth *HED*), for ease of entry location.

The IPA symbols could be replaced or supplemented by simpler codeless analogy and rhyming to indicate pronunciation, as in the *HED*. Beginning learners would not have enough knowledge of English pronunciation to understand this, but high beginners could quickly get used to this system. IPA is learned by most but not all Japanese. Although it is forgotten by some, the IPA is familiar and useful for a large number of Japanese learners. In other markets, however, the inclusion of IPA would depend on how many learners are familiar with it.

Collocations could replace grammar codes. For example, uncountable nouns could be indicated by writing "some" before the noun; an optional preposition could be placed in parentheses after a noun. If parts of speech are indicated, "adjective," "adverb," and "preposition" could be written in full, as in the *HED*, instead of the abbreviations "n," "adj," and so on.

Detailed examples of collocation could replace many of the example sentences in current dictionaries as aids to encoding. The *BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English* contains this kind of information.

There could be reduced coverage of easy and basic words, such as "a," "the," "of," "sing," and "house," at least in portable and pocket dictionaries. Standop (1988) also questions the utility of the detailed entries for these words in the *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary*.

There could be an indication of how common or important a word is, perhaps based on three or four levels, keyed to examinations (for example, 1 = Basic/Cambridge First Certificate; 2 = Cambridge Certificate of Proficiency/TOEFL; 3 = Advanced). Bilingual dictionaries for Japanese students of English currently indicate words on Education Ministry required lists with asterisks. In addition, some dictionaries, for example, *Kenkyusha's Lighthouse English-Japanese Dictionary*, also print the headwords for these required words in larger type. Words in the defining vocabulary (if there is one) could also be indicated, as is already done in the *Longman New Pocket Dictionary* and *Longman New Junior Dictionary*.

An L1 index could be added to allow learners to locate the L2 equivalent(s) of L1

words. This is done, for example, in the *Longman English Dictionary for Portuguese Speakers* (1983) (Thompson, 1987, p. 285). Not all words need be included in such an index. The *Kenkyusha Japanese-English Learner's Dictionary*, for example, has an L1 list of 1000 words which is a tenth of the dictionary's coverage. This index takes up a mere 7 pages.

L1 glossing of definitions, L1 translations of examples, and L1 usage notes could be added (Thompson, 1987, p. 285).

The etymology of some words could be included as a memory aid (Ilson, 1983), as is done in the *HED*.

"A," "B," "C" index marks could be included on the edge of the pages. This is common practice in bilingual school dictionaries in Japan.

A Sample Entry for an Intermediate-level Dictionary

Compared to those in current learner's dictionaries, the following entry attempts to be of greater utility and simplicity to learners. It incorporates many of the suggestions made in the section above.

DAMAGE/dæmɪdʒ/say **dammij**/ = harm; break or hurt; loss in value, usefulness or attractiveness (損害).

to damage s/t: *It you work too hard, you will damage your health.*

some damage (to s/t): *My car hit a wall but there wasn't much damage.*

s/t is damaging (to s/t): *Smoking can be damaging to your health.*

s/t is damaged: *a damaged book.*

other uses

1. to damage (s/t badly)
2. easily; badly damaged
3. to cause/do damage (to s/t)
4. to suffer (こうむる); repair/undo damage
5. great/serious; lasting/permanent; light/slight; widespread damage
6. fire; flood damage (= damage caused by fire)
7. damage from the fire
8. damage to: *Was there much damage to the car? The damage done to the house was serious.*

damages (law) = money that must be paid for causing damage: *The newspaper was ordered to pay damages to the movie star for printing an untrue story about him. He received \$10,000 (in) damages.*

brain damage = damage to one's brain

"The damage is done." = the harmful effects cannot be stopped

"What's the damage?" (informal) = How much do we have to pay?

The following is an explanation of the above entry. The headword is capitalized and in extra large type to indicate it is one of the words in the defining vocabulary. Other basic headwords could be in extra large type but not be capitalized, for example. TOEFL/CCP-level words could have an asterisk before the headword. All other words could have no special marking. No grammar part of speech is indicated, as the word is considered primarily as an expression of meaning. This takes further the COBUILD innovation of including all the different parts of speech under one headword.

Pronunciation is given in IPA and by rhyming analogy, with the stressed syllable in bold print. This example is taken from the *HED*.

The definition is indicated by an "=" sign, and it is written in the smallest possible defining vocabulary. (Defining vocabularies created to date include Michael West's 1490-word *Minimum Adequate Vocabulary* (1960), the 2000-word vocabulary in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1978, revised 1987), and the 1600 defining words of the *Longman New Pocket English Dictionary* (1984). The brevity and clarity of the definition is considered more important than its accuracy if there has to be a trade off. The definition does not indicate a particular grammatical part of speech. Instead it conveys the essence of the meaning of the word, regardless of how that word might be realized grammatically. An L1 gloss for the core meaning of the word is given. The definition here is based on those in the *Oxford Elementary Learner's Dictionary of English*, the *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary*, and the *Longman Dictionary of American English*.

The main grammatical usages are indicated in bold print with an example of each following in italics after a colon. Grammatical categories are not stated: instead they are indicated by the placement of the word in the bold phrases. In this case, "damage" is shown as having four main grammatical realizations: as a transitive verb, as an uncountable noun followed by the optional preposition "to," as an adjective also with the optional preposition, and as an adjectival past participle. The non-appearance of an adverb indicates that the adverbial usage is uncommon. The simplest possible example phrases and sentences are specially concocted to support and clarify the definition. "Something" is abbreviated to "s/t" for ease of reading and to save space. Other abbreviations could be "s/o" (= someone) and "s/w" (= somewhere). These can all be considered conventions rather than codes, and they could be listed together with examples of the pronunciation rhyming and analogy system on one page at the beginning of the dictionary.

The "other uses" section contains further principle patterns of use, and other lexical collocations that fall within the defining vocabulary. If an important collocation that is outside the defining vocabulary is included, it could be glossed in L1. The different patterns and collocations are listed, with a numeral preceding each for ease

of reading. Meanings are glossed in parentheses where necessary, as in 6 here. This glossing could be in L1 if the meaning is unclear. Examples in italics are added to clarify patterns where necessary, as in 8. The collocations in this entry are based on the ones in *The BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English*. As its purpose is to assist in encoding, this whole section would not be included for words more suitable for the learner's passive vocabulary. Nor would it be included in dictionaries designed solely for decoding, such as pocket dictionaries.

Idiomatic, specialized, and frozen or semi-frozen usages have a separate sub-section, with the words or phrases in bold print followed by information on range where appropriate and a definition following an "=" sign. Examples are included in italics following a colon where appropriate. In this example, "damages" is given sub-section treatment rather than being a separate headword. This reflects the consideration of meaning before grammar: "damages" is considered a specialized usage that follows from the core meaning of "damage;" Its different grammatical behavior, presumably a reason for its being given separate headword status in *LDOCE2* and the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of English*, is of less consequence. The example, "The damage is done" is taken from the *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary*, and the definition of "damages" is based on the one in the *Longman Dictionary of American English*.

The etymological derivation could be listed at the end of the entry in brackets. It is not listed in this case, as it is circular—Word origin: *damnum* (Latin) = damage—but that etymological information, found in the *HED*, would be useful under the word "damn". This section could also include words from the same family if it is clearer than the etymological root, and if the information might aid memorization, for example, this entry after the word "hollow": Word family: s/t **hollow** has a *hole* in it. Another option is to include helpful tricks for memorization and/or correct spelling, for example, this entry after the word "Mississippi": Spelling hint: say "m, i double s, i double s, i double p, i"; or this entry after the word "peninsula": Memory hint: a *peninsula* is shaped like a *pen*.

There would be an illustration (as culturally and racially unspecific as possible) if it clarifies the meaning. *LDOCE2* has an excellent and detailed illustration of "damage" that groups words like "deface," "cut," "break," and "corrode" into sub-categories of damage (p. 258).

Summary

This paper has attempted to clarify the differences among existing learner's dictionaries, draw attention to some of the perceived shortcomings of these dictionaries, and to suggest modifications in entry style that would make the dictionaries more useful to learners.

Perhaps the authors of learner's dictionaries have seen their task as falling within

the grand tradition of dictionary compilation. The overall suggestion in this paper is that learners dictionaries be based less on the conventions of dictionary making than on the needs of language learners. If this is done, learner's dictionaries are likely to become a much more varied, lively and useful genre of book than at present.

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