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Master Thesis

**ENGLISH MONOLINGUAL
LEARNERS' DICTIONARIES:
STRUCTURE AND USE**

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ABSTRACT

One of the main purposes of pedagogical lexicography is to provide learners with specific dictionaries which can fulfil their needs better than any dictionary intended for native speakers. Before making any further comment about English pedagogical lexicography, however, it is important to explain what I exactly mean by 'English monolingual learners' dictionaries'.

Dictionaries intended for the learners of English, in fact, can be of two different kinds, in the same way in which learners can be divided into different categories: on the one hand, we have English children, whose mother tongue is English itself, who need monolingual dictionaries with certain features; on the other hand, we have speakers of other languages, who study English as a foreign language and need monolingual dictionaries with different features. Since my thesis focuses on English as a foreign language, such restriction will be implicit whenever I refer to foreign learners simply as 'learners'.

It should also be reminded that compiling bilingual dictionaries, such as English-Italian and Italian-English dictionaries, is also object of pedagogical lexicography, in so far as they are generally used by foreign learners. A brief comparison between bilingual and monolingual dictionaries may represent a particularly interesting way to highlight the main features of the latter.

There is one obvious and fundamental thing that distinguishes a monolingual dictionary from a bilingual one, i.e. the use of one single ('mono-') language instead of two ('bi-'), which is variously reflected in the structure of the dictionary itself.

As far as the explanation of the meaning of a word is concerned, for instance, monolingual learners' dictionaries provide a definition in the target language; in bilinguals, on the other hand, we find either an English equivalent or an equivalent in the user's native language. This leads to another important difference between the two types of dictionaries: monolinguals consist of a single list of words, whereas in bilingual dictionaries two different lists of words are generally given in two separate sections (for example, English-foreign language and foreign language-English).

As far as the selection of headwords is concerned, monolingual learners' dictionaries need not cover the whole vocabulary of a language, this being the aim of general dictionaries. The approach of bilinguals, on the other hand, may vary from the few thousand items treated in a beginners' dictionary to the full coverage of the vocabulary of a language.

In monolingual learners' dictionaries, examples of how a certain word should be used and metalinguistic information are obviously written in the target language. In bilinguals, on the other hand, examples given in the target language should always be accompanied by a translation. As far as metalinguistic information is concerned, it should be given in the native language of the user who needs it. Thus, if we take the entry for 'villa' in the Italian-English section of a bilingual, the Italian users "need to be sure of picking the correct English equivalent for the particular type of villa they have in mind" (Atkins 1985:20); two different meanings of 'villa' could then be distinguished: 'casa di campagna', translated '(country-)house' or 'villa', and 'casa unifamiliare di lusso', translated '(town-)house', as in the example proposed by Atkins.

It is worth mentioning another important difference between bilingual and monolingual dictionaries, i.e. their origins. The origins of bilinguals, in fact, can be traced back at least to the 15th and 16th centuries, while the 'Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary', which is considered the first monolingual learners' dictionary, was published in Japan in 1942.

After the Second World War, it was reprinted by ‘Oxford University Press’ and was published in 1948 as ‘A Learner’s Dictionary of Current English’. The second edition was published in 1963 with a slightly different title: ‘The Advanced Learners’ Dictionary of Current English’ (Mc Arthur 1989:59). The main features of the first generation of learners’ dictionaries are alphabetic ordering, short compact entries, phonetic transcriptions, grammatical information, short definitions, examples of use and idioms (McArthur 1989:59).

In 1978, after existing for more than thirty years without a serious rival, the learners’ dictionary published by the ‘OUP’¹ was suddenly faced with a competitor, the ‘Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English’. The most important innovations introduced by Longman can be summarized in the use of a restricted defining vocabulary (consisting of around two thousand words) and of simpler grammar codes.

1987 was an equally important year for English pedagogical lexicography: not only the second edition of the ‘Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English’ was published, but also the first edition of the ‘Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary’.

From the point of view of ‘user-friendliness’, the most important innovations introduced by the dictionary published by Collins are the ‘extra-column’ and the use of whole sentence definitions, which are more similar to the way in which common people speak when asked to explain the meaning of a word. What is even more important to be mentioned, however, is the fact that for the first time an enormous computer data bank was employed, i.e. the ‘COLLINS Birmingham University International Language Database’, commonly known as ‘COBUILD’, which was made up of about twenty million words.

The third and last year which has to be mentioned in the history of English pedagogical lexicography is 1995, when the three dictionaries I will compare were published: the fifth edition of the ‘Oxford Advanced Learner’s

¹ To be precise, it was the “Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary”, fourth edition (1974).

Dictionary' (henceforth referred to as the OALD), the third edition of the 'Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English' (henceforth referred to as the LDOCE) and the second edition of the 'Collins COBUILD English Dictionary' (henceforth, simply COBUILD).

The most important feature shared by all these dictionaries is the extensive use of very large computerized corpora. The COBUILD, in particular, has maintained its strong link with the COBUILD corpus, now called 'The Bank of English' (Herbst 1996:322-323). In the inside back cover of the LDOCE, the 'Longman Corpus Network' is mentioned, which is made up of different corpora, such as the 'Longman Lancaster English Language Corpus', the 'British National Corpus', the 'Longman Learner's Corpus' and the 'Longman Spoken American Corpus'. In the 'Preface' to the OALD, explicit reference to the 'British National Corpus' is also made: "For the first time we have at our disposal the British National Corpus, a massive and carefully balanced computer data bank of modern written and spoken English" (OALD:vi).

As pointed out by Herbst (1996:322), "it is difficult to ascertain to precisely what uses the different corpora have been put"; nevertheless, it is possible to make some general observations.

The areas in which computer data banks are most useful are those concerning the selection of the items which will be listed in the dictionary and the identification, and subsequent ordering, of the different meanings of a word. The written and oral texts contained in corpora are also used as a bank from which authentic example sentences can be taken, in order to illustrate the meaning and usage of words. The employment of computer data banks allows for the collection of more precise information about the most frequent syntactic patterns according to which words occur and their most typical collocations. Finally, both in the LDOCE (through alphanumerical codes) and in the COBUILD (through black diamonds), information about the frequency with which words occur in the English language is provided on the basis of computational evidences.

When comparing dictionaries, and learners' dictionaries in particular, considerable weight has to be given to the access structure of the information provided. One of the aspects contributing both to fast access and easy interpretability of the information is the overall structure of the page.

The pages of the OALD, the LDOCE and the COBUILD, like most dictionaries, are made up of two columns, in which the headwords are listed alphabetically. The COBUILD actually differs from the other dictionaries due to the presence of a special column, the so-called 'extra-column', in which various kinds of information are grouped together, such as parts of speech, syntactic patterns, synonyms and frequency indicators consisting of black diamonds².

At first sight, however, the structure of the page in the LDOCE seems clearer than in the OALD and the COBUILD. This may be due to the larger print, but we should also consider, as Bogaards (1996:288-289) points out, that in the LDOCE meanings and special uses are more easily identifiable thanks to a great variety of typefaces.

As far as the access structure of dictionaries is concerned, attention must be paid to the difference between homonymy and polysemy, two aspects which highlight the asymmetry that is typical of the linguistic sign (Zöfgen 1989:779).

From the lexicographical point of view, there are different ways in which to decide when one word can be considered as having two or more meanings (polysemy), and in which cases two or more words, though identical in form, must be distinguished (homonymy). In the LDOCE, this decision is always taken on the basis of grammar, such as the grammatical categories to which they belong. The verb 'push' and the noun 'push', for instance, are treated like two different words, since they belong to different grammatical classes, and are presented as two separate headwords, distinguished by small numbers (see "**push**¹" and "**push**²").

² The LDOCE also gives information about frequency (through alphanumerical codes and graphs), whereas the OALD does not.

In the OALD, as a general rule, terms identical in form but different from a grammatical point of view are also treated as homonyms, but in some cases one is considered a zero-derivative and therefore presented as a sub-entry of the other (see 'highlight', 'hike', 'hinge' and 'hint'). It also happens that two identical nouns are distinguished on the basis of semantics; see, for instance, "**vice**¹", defined in terms of evil action or bad behaviour, and "**vice**²", referred to as a tool.

The COBUILD differs considerably from the other two dictionaries, since it is characterized by a particular approach, defined by Herbst (1996:348) as 'purely orthographic': all words that are spelt in the same way are considered as one word and all their meanings are grouped in a single entry. This means, for instance, that there is no neat distinction between the noun 'push' and the verb 'push', but only one polysemic word³. The greatest advantage of this approach is that it does not require the user to know all the different grammatical categories, but it may be a waste of time for those who already know them and are only interested in the meanings of the verb, or of the noun.

I have discussed how homonymy is treated, however polysemic words in dictionaries are actually more than homonyms. As Zöfgen (1989:780) puts it, polysemy is treated by grouping all the meanings of a word in one entry. For 'contain', for instance, we find in the OALD and in the LDOCE respectively three and four different meanings, numbered and written one after the other. In the COBUILD the system is similar, but each new meaning is at the beginning of a new line, which gives more prominence to the distinction.

In entries with many definitions the LDOCE also provides some help to find the right meaning through the inclusion of 'signposts', i.e. synonyms or short definitions written in capital letters before the explanation. 'Signposts' in

³ Some distinctions between homonyms may be found in the dictionary (see at "second", or at "net"), but they are quite rare and are therefore to be interpreted as exceptions to the general rule.

the LDOCE are very useful but are unfortunately not given before the definitions corresponding to idiomatic expressions.

In some cases, when the entry is particularly long (see, for instance, the entry for the verb 'touch'), not only 'signposts' but also groups of similar meanings are given to speed up the search: for each group there is a heading written in capital letters and all the headings are listed in the 'menu' at the beginning of the entry. As far as very long entries are concerned, OALD's policy of grouping related meanings in paragraphs is similar, but the headings are given less prominence, since they are not written in capitals.

When comparing dictionaries it is very important to take into account the ways in which prefixes and suffixes are presented, since knowing their meanings may help to understand words which are not in the dictionary. Prefixes and suffixes, however, because of their word generating potential, are even more important from the point of view of language production. As far as grammatical information is concerned, affixes are treated, like all other headwords, through the indication of the category to which they belong: "*pref*" or "*suff*" in the OALD, "*prefix*" or "*suffix*" in the LDOCE, "PREFIX" or "SUFFIX" in the COBUILD⁴.

A dictionary which aims to help the learner with language production, however, must also provide information about the parts of speech with which a particular suffix combines and the grammatical class to which the resulting word belongs. This is what happens in the OALD, where we find this information in brackets (under '-ment', for instance, we read "with *vs* forming *ns*"), and in the COBUILD, where the information is embodied in the definition and therefore can be understood more easily (the definition for '-ness', for example, begins as follows: "**-ness** is added to adjectives to form nouns which [...]"). In the LDOCE, on the other hand, we can find what Stein (1985:40) calls 'the

⁴ In the OALD, there is a third class of affixes: elements of Latin or Greek origin, like 'bio-' and '-meter', regarded simply as prefixes and suffixes in the other dictionaries, are referred to as 'combining forms'. The same expression, 'combining form', is used in the COBUILD for words like '-eyed' and '-leafed', which are joined with other words to form compounds.

grammatical function or functions' of the suffixes, but not the parts of speech with which each suffix can combine (both under 'ment' and under '-ness', for instance, we read: "*suffix* [in nouns]").

As far as prefixes are concerned, the three dictionaries are less systematic. The OALD provides information about the parts of speech with which each prefix combines (see 'anti-'), whereas the COBUILD, as a general rule, gives information about the classes to which the resulting words belong (see 'hyper-'), but sometimes, for instance with 'semi-', we can find more precise indications whereas other times no part of speech is mentioned besides "prefix". In the LDOCE we often find only "*prefix*", without further indication (see 'ante-', 'anti-', 'con-', semi-' and 'hyper-').

In most cases, derivatives in the OALD are listed alphabetically in the entry for the root, after the symbol "?". When they differ from the root, so that the morphological or semantical link between the root and the derivative is hardly recognisable, they are treated like all other headwords. As a general rule, however, the derivatives which are listed under the root are also provided with a definition (for example, see 'fresher' under 'fresh' or 'partly' under 'part'). "The most obvious [...] drawback of this principle is that words no longer appear in a consistent alphabetical order" (Herbst 1996:351), but the morphological links between the roots and the derivatives are clearly shown.

The LDOCE and the COBUILD differ from the OALD because most derivatives receive main entry status headings (see 'fresher', 'partly', 'walker', etc.) and are listed in alphabetical order between two other headwords. In the LDOCE, only the derivatives whose meaning is given by the meaning of the root plus the meaning of the suffix are shown at the end of the entry for the root, without a definition (see, for instance, 'freshness' under 'fresh'). Similarly, in the COBUILD, derivatives formed with common suffixes and not involving a change in meaning are given at the entry for the root, after the symbol "⚭".

What distinguishes the COBUILD from the LDOCE is that, when the root is a polysemic word, derivatives are not given at the end of the entry, but

after the definition (or definitions) to which they correspond; 'slowly', for instance, is given under meanings one and three of the entry for 'slow'. In this way, it is possible to treat the meaning of the derivatives satisfactorily and, at the same time, save space otherwise occupied by definitions; the main drawback of this system is that some derivatives have many meanings: if the entry for the root is very long, "it may require longish search operations to identify all the possible meanings of a derivative" (Herbst 1996:351).

As regards compounds, the way in which they are treated is very similar to that of derivatives: in the OALD, for instance, compounds which are not written as one word are listed after the symbol "†", near the end of the entry for the first word they are composed of. In the LDOCE and in the COBUILD, on the other hand, compounds are treated like ordinary words.

Any English dictionary intended for non-native speakers should provide the phonetic transcription of each word listed in the dictionary, since English is not characterized by a one-to-one correspondence between sounds and graphic symbols. The three learners' dictionaries I am comparing use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), but instead of phonetic transcriptions, in which each sound is represented by a different symbol, they provide so-called 'broad transcriptions', in which the one-to-one correspondence is between symbols and phonemes. As a general rule, only one transcription is given but sometimes American English differs from British English and in such cases both pronunciations are recorded.

As far as the transcription of accentual patterns is concerned, the OALD and the LDOCE follow the IPA system, which means that primary stress is represented by the symbol " ' " (which is put before the stressed syllable) and secondary stress by the symbol "?". In the COBUILD, on the other hand, stressed syllables are simply underlined: in this way the accentual pattern of a word is easy to understand, but the distinction between primary and secondary stress becomes more problematic.

The way in which grammar is treated in dictionaries cannot be as explicit as it is in grammar books but is useful nonetheless, since dictionaries focus on irregular aspects of the language, unlike grammar books, which explain primarily grammar rules.

Like most other dictionaries, learners' dictionaries tell you the grammatical class to which every word belongs. In the case of nouns, we find the abbreviation "*n*" (written in capital letters in the COBUILD), but irregular inflections are also shown (see for instance the entry for 'tooth'). When the plural is not formed according to the general rule, i.e. adding '-s', but there are no changes in the root (as in the case of the word 'potato'), the OALD simply gives the ending that has to be added ('-oes'), whereas the LDOCE and the COBUILD give the whole word ('potatoes')⁵.

As far as nouns are concerned, learners' dictionaries should always specify if they are countable or uncountable, since these two groups of nouns behave differently from a syntactic point of view and learners cannot be expected to know in advance whether a noun is countable or not. This is what happens in the LDOCE and in the COBUILD, whereas the OALD provides this information in a less explicit way: "Countable nouns are the most common type of noun. If they have only one meaning, or if all their meanings are countable, they are just marked *n*" (OALD:B1).

Adjectives are simply indicated as "*adj*" in the OALD and in the LDOCE, whereas in the COBUILD they are divided in two different groups: graded adjectives ("ADJ-GRADED") and ungraded adjectives ("ADJ"). Irregular comparative and superlative forms are obviously shown in all three dictionaries, but the LDOCE and the COBUILD also give comparatives and superlatives formed according to the general rule.

In learners' dictionaries syntactic information regarding adjectives is also required since some adjectives (or some adjectives used with certain

⁵ It is worth noting that the COBUILD always shows the plural form of nouns, even when the general rule is followed.

meanings) are always predicative and some other always attributive and learners cannot be expected to know this in advance. Adjectives such as 'asleep' are marked "[pred]" in the OALD, while the first and third meanings of 'modern' are marked as "[attrib]". In the LDOCE, the same type of information is given in easier terms, less precise from a linguistic point of view but more likely to be understood by learners: we read "[not before noun]" for 'asleep' and "[only before noun]" for 'modern' (meaning one and four). In the COBUILD the only possible pattern is given in the extra-column: "v-link ADJ" for 'asleep' and "ADJ n" for meaning one and four of 'modern'. This system is very clear but the restrictions with which these adjectives can be used are not given enough prominence.

Many of the most common English verbs form the past tense and the past participle without following the general rule of adding '-ed' to the infinitive and in such cases simple abbreviations indicating the part of speech are not enough. The OALD and LDOCE, in fact, show all the irregular forms (see, for instance, the entry for 'eat'). The same happens in the COBUILD where we also find the third person of the present and the '-ing form' and, what is more, this information is also given for all the regular verbs (see 'work').

The traditional distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs is maintained in the LDOCE, while it is not present in the other two dictionaries, as it is not considered to be of great help to the learners (Herbst 1996:331).

In the COBUILD, however, many other classes of verbs are distinguished, such as linking verbs ("V-LINK"), which are marked as "[linking verb]" in the LDOCE. All three dictionaries have two important classes of verbs in common: auxiliary verbs and modal verbs. It should be noted, however, that in the COBUILD a special category referred to as 'phrasal modal' ("PHR-MODAL") is created to mark expressions such as 'be able to', 'ought to', 'be supposed to', etc.

As far as phrasal verbs are concerned, most problems are caused by those who are transitive, since learners cannot predict if they are separable or not.

In the OALD and in the LDOCE, inseparable phrasal verbs are simply shown with the object following the particle, as this is the only possible construction. Separable verbs, on the other hand, are treated differently in the two dictionaries. In the OALD we find the object between the verb and the particle; as explained in the dictionary itself (OALD:A3), this is a hint to the fact that both constructions are possible. The information provided in the LDOCE is more explicit: the same structure is given, but a bidirectional arrow is added between the object and the particle to show that they are interchangeable.

In the COBUILD, the object is not shown, but in the extra-column all possible patterns are recorded: if the verb is inseparable we find only “VPn”, if the verb is separable we find “VPn” and “Also VnP”.

The COBUILD’s policy of dividing the most important grammatical classes into secondary categories is completely different from LDOCE’s policy of keeping the number of subclasses low. This can be seen, for instance, in the case of adverbs; in the LDOCE the abbreviation “*adv*” is used for all adverbs, while in the COBUILD adverbs are divided into six groups: “ADV” is used for ungraded adverbs as opposed to “ADV-GRADED”, in addition we have comparative, superlative and indefinite adverbs together with broad negative adverbs. The OALD, where actual adverbs are distinguished from adverbial particles, is a compromise.

The same can be said for pronouns; in the LDOCE all pronouns are simply referred to as such, whereas in the COBUILD we find more than ten subclasses of pronouns, some of which appear in the OALD too (see, for instance, possessive, relative, reflexive, indefinite and emphatic pronouns). In the COBUILD, we have even three different classes of conjunctions: subordinating, co-ordinating and negative co-ordinating conjunctions.

Grammatical information such as parts of speech and morphological information such as irregular forms are most certainly very important in dictionaries, however syntactic information is equally important to help learners with language production. This idea must have characterized the history of

learners' dictionaries from the very beginning, since the use of specific codes to give syntactic information relating to verbs is considered one of the most peculiar features of the first edition of the 'Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary' (1948).

The system consists of more than fifty codes, each representing a single construction, and its main drawback is that it is almost impossible to learn the meaning of each code by heart. Codes, such as [VP1], [VP2], [VP18A], [VP18B], [VP18C], etc.⁶, are in fact "neither transparent nor mnemotechnically organized" (Herbst 1996:329).

In the grammatical coding system introduced by the 'Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English' in 1978, we also find combinations of letters and numbers; in this case, however, each letter and number have their own meanings, which remain the same in the different combinations. As Herbst (1996:329) puts it, this system is mnemotechnically organized since the meanings of the letters can easily be remembered ([C] means 'countable'⁷, [U] means 'uncountable', [P] means 'plural', [L] means 'linking verb', [D] means 'ditransitive', etc.), but it is not transparent since the meanings of the letters and those of the numbers (for instance, [2] means 'followed by bare infinitive') are not immediately obvious to the user (Herbst 1996:329).

Transparent coding systems were introduced in the late eighties, with the first edition of the COBUILD and the publication of the second edition of the LDOCE, later followed by the OALD. The use of codes is actually avoided in favour of sequences of words and grammatical abbreviations to represent the different patterns. We see, for instance, "+to-v" or "+to-INF" in order to show that a verb cannot be followed by a bare infinitive.

Similarly, in the last editions of the OALD, the LDOCE and the COBUILD (i.e. the three dictionaries I am comparing) only transparent coding

⁶ For a detailed description of the meaning of these codes, see Lemmens and Wekker (1986).

⁷ This coding system, unlike the one used in the OALD, provides information about nouns and adjectives too.

systems are used, for example, to show the complementation patterns of verbs, adjectives and nouns, which can be either obligatory (like ‘to flooding’ in “The road is liable to flooding”) or optional (like ‘to the scholar’ in “The manuscript is accessible to the scholar”)⁸.

As Herbst (1984a:3) points out, a distinction must be made between optional complements, which should be included in dictionaries, and peripheral elements, which can be omitted. When an adjective, a noun or a verb is followed by a complement, the choice of the preposition depends on the adjective (“alcoholic drinks are not available to people under eighteen”), the noun or the verb; when it is followed by a peripheral element, on the other hand, the choice of preposition depends on the noun of the prepositional phrase (“Alcoholic drinks are not available on the boat”).

In the LDOCE, both obligatory and optional complements are shown: after the definition for ‘liable’ we find “[+ **to**]” and with ‘available’ we also find “[+ **to**]”. The problem with this is that no distinction is made between the two different types of complements.

In the OALD, on the other hand, optional complements are given in brackets, like “(?**to sth**)” with ‘accessible’, while obligatory complements are not (with ‘liable’, for instance, we find: “?**to sth**”). The same system is also used for nouns and verbs, as can be seen with ‘introduction’: as far as meaning two and three are concerned, the preposition ‘to’ is optional and is given in brackets, while it is not optional when ‘introduction’ means “a person’s first experience of sth” (meaning four) and therefore we find “?**to sth**”.

In the COBUILD, complementation patterns are given in the extra-column: with ‘liable’ we find “v-link ADJ *to* n” and with ‘accessible’ we find “oft ADJ *to* N”, where ‘oft’ shows that the pattern is not obligatory. Similarly, with one of the meanings of ‘listen’, two patterns are given (simply “V” and “V *to* n”) to show that the complementation pattern is optional.

⁸ Examples are taken from Herbst (1984a).

Learners of English can find a lot of useful information in dictionaries, but most of the time they consult dictionaries to find the meaning of words, as was clearly revealed in the results of the survey I made among the students in foreign languages at the University of Trento.

As Ilson (1986; 1987) points out, four different techniques are available to lexicographers to deal with meaning: definition, illustration, exemplification and discussion. Definition is certainly the most widely used explanatory technique but, to be precise, standard definition should be distinguished from ‘folk’ definition.

Standard definitions, which have been used in dictionaries for centuries, present the defined word followed by its definition with the verb ‘means’ implied; as Ilson (1986:218) puts it, “Definiendum [means] Definition”. The main property of standard definitions is substitutability, which means that a word in a sentence can theoretically be substituted by its definition without changing the meaning of the sentence. This is very useful from the point of view of comprehension because learners who find a new word in a passage can substitute it mentally with its definition and make the sentence more comprehensible. When producing sentences in a foreign language, this property cannot be exploited without running the risk of producing unnatural sentences.

‘Folk’ definitions seem explanations given by common people when asked about the meaning of a word and they had not been used in lexicography until the first edition of COBUILD was published in 1987.

“Definitions are so to speak ‘oralised’ [...]. The question is whether they become more comprehensible in the process. There is much to be said against this” (Hausmann and Gorbahn 1989:47). Some definitions, for instance are difficult in themselves and it is not enough to ‘oralise’ them to make them easier. Moreover, in the dictionary, definitions must inevitably be written; when reading long definitions, their core may pass unnoticed, while it would have been emphasized by the speaker through intonation.

The main advantage of such definitions is that they can also be used as models when producing sentences in a foreign language, in so far as the definition of a word is at the same time an exemplification of how that word can be used. Secondly, whole-sentence definitions are a powerful means to give collocational information; in the definition for ‘inset’ (“Something that is **inset** with a decoration or piece of material has the decoration or material inside it”), for instance, we find a very frequent collocation, i.e. ‘inset with a decoration’.

Since “it is difficult to say anything definitive about which type of definition is most profitable for L2 learners” (Bogaards 1996:293) the best solution may be represented by a combination of both types within a dictionary: standard definitions may be used when they allow for the simplification of things and full sentences may be used when exemplification of use is required. In some ways, this approach has been adopted by the LDOCE, where some whole-sentence definitions can be found among standard definitions.

In any case, from a lexical point of view, both ‘folk’ and standard definitions must be accessible to learners of English as a foreign language, which means that they should avoid all difficult terms. The idea of a controlled defining vocabulary was first applied by the LDOCE (first edition) in 1978 and it has turned out to be a great success, as it is proved by the fact that controlled vocabularies are used in the more recent editions of the LDOCE, the OALD and the COBUILD.

The ‘Longman Defining Vocabulary’ consists of about two thousand words which can be used for definitions according to certain rules (LDOCE:B16) and the defining vocabulary used in the OALD consists of approximately three thousand five hundred words, which can also be used under certain conditions⁹. Both OALD and LDOCE list all these words (see ‘Appendix 10’ in the OALD and pages B17-22 in the LDOCE), whereas the COBUILD is less explicit: it only

⁹ It should be noted that in both dictionaries words not belonging to the defining vocabularies can be used when it is necessary to define words accurately. These ‘outsiders’ are generally marked as cross-references (i.e. they are written in capital letters).

tells us, in fact, that most words used in definitions are amongst the 2500 commonest words of English (COBUILD:xviii).

Illustration is often used to explain meaning in monolingual dictionaries intended both for native speakers and learners. With general monolingual dictionaries, however, illustrations are used for unfamiliar and technical words (Nesi 1989:126-127), whereas in learners' dictionaries illustrations tend to refer to common words; in the OALD and in the LDOCE, for instance, many illustrations are given to learners to remind them of objects or concepts they already know in their native language¹⁰.

According to Ilson (1986:214), illustrations may be divided in three main groups: pictures of individual items, group illustrations and composite illustrations. Pictures of individual items are single images (see 'fountain' in the OALD), or series of images (see 'scarf' in the LDOCE), which illustrate the meaning of a single word. Group and composite illustrations, on the other hand, are different means to illustrate two or more words together. In group illustrations we find pictures of related items, such as different types of containers (for instance, a tube and a barrel) under 'container' in the LDOCE. A composite illustration is a single picture representing a composite whole with labelled parts (see, for instance, 'body' in the LDOCE or 'jacket' in the OALD).

Compared to pictures of individual items, group and composite illustrations have the advantage of being useful to understand the meaning of words but also when producing sentences in a foreign language. To make an example, a learner who wants to write or speak about knees but does not know the right English word, can find it in the composite illustration given under 'body'. Moreover, in this way, many other new words can be learned, such as 'ankle' and 'elbow'.

As far as specific grammatical classes are concerned, it can be noted that only nouns are traditionally illustrated; in the OALD, in fact, we find very

¹⁰ The COBUILD is not mentioned because it is not illustrated.

few pictures of verbs and adjectives. In the LDOCE, on the other hand, many verbs and adjectives, but also some adverbs and prepositions, are represented graphically, which is an important innovation.

Exemplification of use (as opposed to exemplification of referent) is one of the most important explicatory techniques in monolingual dictionaries, both for native speakers and for learners. First of all, examples are a necessary supplement to definitions “not only when individual meanings need further clarification but also when two or more related senses need to be distinguished” (Cowie 1989:60). Secondly, example sentences can help learners to produce correct sentences. From a grammatical point of view, again, they are a useful supplement to the coded information which is normally provided in learners’ dictionaries (see, for instance, the entry for ‘translate’ in the OALD, where the pattern “Vnpr” is clearly exemplified in *“translate an article into Dutch”*). From a lexical point of view, important collocational information can be given through examples (under ‘palpable’ in the LDOCE, for instance, we find *“a palpable lie”* and *“an almost palpable atmosphere of mistrust”*).

All the different functions of examples are widely acknowledged but it is much more difficult to agree on how examples can fulfil learners’ needs. In pedagogical lexicography, examples had always been invented by lexicographers until authentic sentences were used in the first edition of the COBUILD: invented examples were considered unnatural, while citations could be taken as proof of the fact that the definition of a word reflects the way in which speakers of English actually use it.

The innovation was valued positively by some critics, but others criticized the examples of the COBUILD because of their excessive complexity. The main problem was that the use of citations could not guarantee finding suitable sentences for each item listed in the dictionary. Nowadays, lexicographers have larger corpora at their disposal so that they are more likely to find good examples.

In the COBUILD citations are generally reported word for word (only occasionally they may have been slightly modified); in the OALD and in the LDOCE citations have also been introduced, but the practice of providing invented examples has not been abandoned either. From a lexical point of view, examples in the COBUILD are consequently more difficult than those in the OALD and in the LDOCE, as it is proved by the number of ‘outsiders’, i.e. words not belonging to the defining vocabulary, contained in the sentences (Bogaards 1996:298).

The fourth and last explanatory technique mentioned by Ilson is discussion. It is not used as frequently as definition or exemplification but there are some words, mainly among articles, prepositions and conjunctions, whose meaning can hardly be defined. The meaning of the word ‘but’, as it is used in “But that’s wonderful”, for instance, is not defined in any of the dictionaries I am comparing; each of them simply discusses it.

Most sentences used in learners’ dictionaries to discuss meaning begin in similar ways: “used to express/show/indicate...”, “used when indicating/expressing/mentioning...”¹¹ or simply “showing/indicating...”. As Ilson (1987) points out, ‘discussions’ should be kept typographically separate from definitions, but this only happens in the OALD where they are put in brackets.

As far as explanatory techniques are concerned, discussion of two or more terms also exists as is proved by the usage notes provided both in the OALD and the LDOCE, but not in the COBUILD. Usage notes in learners’ dictionaries are most often used to explain grammatical points (see note under ‘say’ in the OALD), to specify differences between American and British English (see note under ‘hire’ in the LDOCE) or to make comparisons between words with similar or related meanings, such as ‘steal’ and ‘rob’. Usage notes are very useful, most of all, because through them it is possible to define semantical

¹¹ In the COBUILD these expressions are given a more personal touch; we find, for instance “You use ... to/when you...”

and grammatical connections between words which must be listed in different places within alphabetically ordered dictionaries.

It should be noted that other aspects, not considered in our discussion about explanatory techniques, play an important part in determining the meaning of a word; I am referring, in particular, to what can be called ‘social meaning’.

All these aspects are traditionally treated in dictionaries through labels which mark certain words or certain meanings of polysemic words. The most important labels used in the OALD and in the LDOCE are “formal”, “informal” and “slang”; in the LDOCE we also find “poetic”, “literary”, “old-fashioned” (compare “dated” in the OALD) “old use” (compare “archaic” in the OALD), etc. The OALD is particularly rich of attitudinal labels, such as “approving”, which can also be found in the LDOCE, “derogatory”, “ironic”, “offensive” and “sexist”. Both in the OALD and in the LDOCE, labels are written in italics and are given before the definition. In the OALD abbreviations are generally used, whereas the tendency in the LDOCE is towards explicitness and abbreviations are avoided.

In the COBUILD this kind of information is not kept separate from the definition, but it is part of the definition itself. For instance, we can find an introductory specification, such as “In informal English...”, or a note at the end of the definition, as in the case of ‘odyssey’: “An Odyssey is a long exciting journey [...]; a literary word”. In this way, information can be given more explicitly, but more space is used and, in the end, we find almost the same expressions used in the other dictionaries: “poetic”, “literary”, “old-fashioned”, “offensive”, etc.

The real problem is that there is no agreement about the use of these labels. Herbst (1996:342), for instance, analysed the entries listed between ‘deb’ and ‘decipher’ in four learners’ dictionaries. He then pointed out that more than forty headwords are marked at least in one dictionary, but more than twenty are marked only in one dictionary; only one word, ‘deceased’, is marked either “formal” or “legal”/“law” in the OALD, in the LDOCE and in the COBUILD.

Idioms and collocations must also be included in dictionaries, especially in dictionaries intended for foreign learners, since the meaning of idioms and the most typical collocations of a word are not predictable.

On the one hand, idiomatic expressions and collocations share a common important feature, i.e. the fact of being made up of semantically related words; on the other hand, they are intrinsically different. As Cowie (1981:224) points out, the difference between them can be explained in terms of substitutability: in collocations, at least one element can be substituted without changing the meaning of the other element or elements, whereas idioms are fixed structures and no element can ever be substituted.

In the OALD, all idiomatic expressions defined in the same entry are listed in a specific section headed **IDM**". Since they consist of two or more words, it may be difficult for learners to find them in a dictionary. To avoid such problems, they are listed alphabetically under the first 'full' word¹² (OALD:A6), with the only exceptions explained on pages A6 and A7. To help learners find idioms when they do not exactly know where they start, moreover, cross-references are given at the entries for all 'full' words appearing in the expression.

In the LDOCE, there is no specific section for idiomatic expressions; as a general rule, they are treated as separate meanings. In this way, an idiom can be easily found even without recognizing its idiomatic character but, on the other hand, those who are consciously looking for an idiomatic expression may have to read a whole entry, rather than just a specific section. In the LDOCE idioms are given more prominence than in the OALD, since they are treated as all other meanings of a word, but, at the same time, the number of meanings distinguished within an entry can become too high.

As a general rule, idioms are placed "under the first main word in a phrase (that is, not at words like *the*, *to*, *something*, or *be*)" (LDOCE:xv), but sometimes we find them under the second or third word, as it happens with

¹² 'Full' words are nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, as opposed to grammatical words, such as articles and prepositions (OALD:A6).

'break the news to', which is defined under 'news'. Like the OALD, the LDOCE usually provides cross-references in the entry for each main word of the idiom; sometimes, however, no cross-reference is given, which should not happen, especially when idioms are not listed according to the general rule.

As far as the COBUILD is concerned, idiomatic expressions are also given the same prominence as all other meanings of a word, but the COBUILD, unlike the LDOCE, lists all idioms at the end of the entry, so that it is not necessary to read through the whole entry to find an idiom. Moreover, we also find a lot of grammatical information about idiomatic expressions: first of all, they are marked in the extra-column as "PHRASE" and, secondly, syntactic patterns are usually provided (see, for instance, the pattern "usu PHR after V", provided for 'open house' and exemplified in the following sentence: "*He used to keep open house on Sundays*").

In the COBUILD, however, it is difficult to predict where an idiom could be found, since no explicit policy is mentioned in the introductory guide. Though "there seems to be a preference for giving the definition under the second (or last?) element" (Bogaards 1996:286), as in the case of 'open house' defined under 'house', many other idioms are treated under the first element (see, for example, 'jobs for the boys'). In the COBUILD too, however, as in the OALD and in the LDOCE, cross-references are usually provided to help learners find idioms.

As far as collocations are concerned, Benson (1985:61-62) points out that they should be divided in two different groups: firstly, we have grammatical collocations, that is combinations of dominant words (such as noun, verbs and adjectives) and grammatical words (such as prepositions), which have already been discussed, and secondly, we have lexical collocations, which are made up of at least two lexical components. To be more precise, we find three main types of lexical collocations: adjective + noun collocations, such as 'burning ambition' or

‘pure chance’, noun + verb collocations, such as ‘blood circulates’ or ‘blood flows’ and, finally, verb + noun collocations, such as ‘commit murder’ or ‘pay attention’.

Lexical collocations, unlike free combinations such as ‘destroy a house’ or ‘destroy a bridge’, should be included in learners’ dictionaries because they are often unpredictable and arbitrary combinations of words.

The system used in the OALD to show collocations is simply based on example sentences: among the various examples provided for a certain word, it is possible to find one or more examples containing a collocation of that word, written in bold type and sometimes followed by a short definition in brackets (see, for instance, “*He **burst into tears** (ie began to cry)*” under “tear²”). Collocations considered less important are also shown in examples, but are not highlighted (see, for instance, ‘beyond belief’ under ‘beyond’).

In the LDOCE, much more prominence is given to collocational information: for each collocation, we first find the symbol “?” and then the collocation itself, written in bold type and followed by a short definition, or an example or both (see, for instance, “? **burst into tears** (=suddenly start crying) *Bridget burst into tears and ran out*”, at ‘tear¹’)¹³.

In the COBUILD, collocations are presented in a less schematic and more direct way than in the OALD and in the LDOCE: thanks to the use of whole-sentence definitions, it is possible to provide collocational information within the definitions (see, for instance, meaning seven: “If you **fight** your way to a place [...]” and meaning ten “If you **fight** an election [...]” of ‘fight’). The most frequent collocations are also emphasized through bold print, which can be seen at ‘count’ (meaning eleven): “If you **keep count** of a number of things, you note or keep a record of how many have occurred”.

¹³ In some cases, collocations are even treated as independent meanings, perhaps because they are considered particularly important (consider, for example, sense two of ‘fulfil’: “**2 fulfil a need** to provide something that someone needs”).

Collocations or ‘restricted collocations’, often referred to as RCs, “occur in patterns with a number of interchangeable constituents” (Aisenstadt 1979:71) as can be seen in the following example:

face {
the facts
the truth
the problem
the circumstances

Learners’ dictionaries not only provide information about single collocations, but also about RC patterns. In the OALD and in the LDOCE, the same systems employed with single collocations are also used to show RCs patterns. The sole difference is that a slash (“/”) is introduced to show alternation; it is placed between words that can be substituted by other words belonging to the same pattern. In the OALD, for instance, the RC pattern “*arrive at/come to/make/reach/take a decision*” is given as an example of the use of ‘decide’, while in the LDOCE we find two different RC patterns: “**make/take a decision**” and “**come to/reach a decision**”, both followed by a short definition.

As already noted, the systematic use of whole-sentence definitions in the COBUILD allows for more direct collocational information, in so far as it becomes part of the definition itself; in this way, moreover, there is no need to introduce new symbols, as can be seen, for example, under “face²” (meaning five): “If you face the truth, a fact or a problem, [...]”.

As far as the presentation of collocations in dictionaries is concerned, the amount of information provided is as important as the systems used. For this reason, it is interesting to take a look at the result of a comparison made by Herbst (1996:336-337) with regard to a sample of twenty-one collocations. There are no big differences among the three learners’ dictionaries I am comparing: five collocations cannot be found in any dictionary; thirteen collocations can be found in the LDOCE and the COBUILD and fourteen in the OALD.

Kernerman clearly underlines the fact that “there is dire need for research in the behaviour and habits of users of learners’ dictionaries”. In fact, compilers of dictionaries cannot really understand the needs of users, unless they have a great amount of information at their disposal.

Because of the great importance of empirical data concerning the use of dictionaries, I decided to provide my analysis of learners’ dictionaries with a survey among people who actually use them. On the basis of two questionnaires which had already been used by Hartmann (1999) and by Béjoint (1981), I prepared a new one consisting of thirty-four questions and distributed it among students of foreign languages at the University of Trento in spring 1999. As a result, 118 students filled in the questionnaire.

The questionnaires are absolutely anonymous, but students were asked to give their age and other information about themselves, so that I could gather some data about the people I was surveying. Most of them were women aged between 19 and 24. Apart from some exceptions speaking German and “ladino”, they generally speak Italian as native-language and study two foreign languages: the great majority study either English or German, if not both; among other languages studied at University, we find Spanish, French and Russian.

The first set of questions (from one to eight) concerns general aspects of dictionary use. In this regard, it is worth noting that most students began to use dictionary very early, i.e. at primary school; however, they bought their first dictionary averagely a bit later.

All students possess at least one monolingual dictionary and 97,5 % also possess at least one bilingual dictionary. Synonym dictionaries and encyclopedias are also widespread among students, whereas less than 10% possess an electronic dictionary. On average, each student possesses between eight and nine different dictionaries, which is a very high number (note that less than 7% of language students possess less than five dictionaries).

Students were asked which dictionary they used most frequently (question 5): more than 70% answered it was a bilingual dictionary. They were

then asked to give certain pieces of information about that dictionary without checking in the dictionary itself¹⁴. As expected, the dominant colour or colours in the cover are most easily remembered by students, immediately followed by the name of the publisher and by the title. Only few student, on the other hand, could provide more technical information, such as the name of the editor(s) and the number of entries.

The last time they have bought a dictionary, many students chose on their own (about 47%) and many others on the advice of their teachers (about 46%), whereas advice given by relatives and friends and advertisement do not generally play an important role. On the basis of the answers given to question number eight (“What is your priority when you buy a new dictionary?”), I worked out a list, on the top of which we find “its relevance to my needs”; in the second place we find the number of words, followed by the number of examples and by the reputation of the publisher. Two other factors are considered averagely much less important: whether a dictionary have a reasonable price and whether it is convenient to carry about.

As far as general monolingual dictionaries for native speaker are concerned, it has been found that about 40% of students in foreign languages do not use the appendices usually provided at the end of the dictionary. Those who consult them are mainly interested in the meaning of abbreviations and in irregular verbs. Similarly, introductory notes are ignored by the majority of students; more than 30% find them easy, while about 10% are of the opposite mind, nevertheless can manage with them.

The great majority of the students who filled in the questionnaire use general dictionaries while studying at home; many students also consult dictionaries during exams and sometimes while studying in a library. As far as specific activities are concerned, it should be noted that dictionaries are needed when reading textbooks and working on written assignments and translations.

¹⁴ Unfortunately, we cannot be sure that they didn't look for such information in the dictionary, since some of them filled in the questionnaire at home.

Few students, on the other hand, consult dictionaries for entertainment activities, such as reading novels, newspapers and magazines, or doing cross-words.

The survey among the students of the University of Trento has proved the truthfulness of a common opinion, i.e. the fact that the first function of general monolingual dictionaries is to explain the meaning of words, but students often use dictionaries also to find synonyms of a word and to check the correct spelling of a word. Much less frequently dictionary are consulted to find example sentences, pronunciation, etymological, grammatical and encyclopedic information. According to the students, it's more difficult to find information about technical terms and common words used in special contexts than about idioms and common words.

As expected, most students said that sometimes they consult a dictionary without being able to find the information they need; what has to be underlined, is that it happens "often" to around 10% of them. Most students, however, think that the main cause of these difficulties is that the dictionary does not provide such information: around 60% "blame the dictionary rather than themselves for any shortcomings in the look-up process" (Hartmann 1999:44); less than 20% refer to their own lack of dictionary skills and knowledge.

As expected, students in foreign languages are aware of the usefulness of dictionaries, especially as far as improvements in written production are concerned. It has to be noted, however, that students consider dictionaries more useful to improve their oral performances than their ability to read.

As far as the teaching of dictionary use is concerned, less than 24% of students answered that they have never been taught to use a dictionary, whereas around 75% have been taught at least "a little"; in this regard, however, more precise information is needed (such as when they received such training, whether at primary or secondary school, or at university) in order to say anything definitive. What is certain is that they are conscious of the importance of the teaching of dictionary use: around 60% answered that it is very important for students in foreign languages.

The last set of questions focuses on learners' dictionaries, which are largely widespread among students: about 97% possess at least one learners' dictionary (more than 20% possess two and 8,5% possess even three or more). Most students have a German monolingual dictionary (77 subjects) or an English monolingual dictionary (63 subjects).

When asked why they chose that dictionary (or those dictionaries), the most frequent answer is that they bought it on the advice of a teacher. More than 90% of students are satisfied with their monolingual dictionary/dictionaries: more than 50% are more satisfied with their monolingual than with their bilingual. If this is true, one could wonder why they use bilingual dictionaries more often (see question five). A tentative answer may be the following: information provided in monolingual dictionaries is generally satisfactory, but the use of monolingual dictionaries requires more efforts. Those who are not completely satisfied with their monolingual dictionaries, express different opinions: according to some of them (about 8%) it is too detailed, according to the others (10,5%) it is too simplified.

As far as the frequency of use is concerned, half students use a learners' dictionary at least once a week, but many others (around 30%) do it less frequently. It should also be noted the low percentage (around 15%) of students who consult learners dictionaries at least once a day. This situation differs a lot from the results obtained in France by Béjoint (1981), i.e. 40% of daily use and 52% of weekly use.

As far as the kinds of information most often searched for in learners' dictionaries, we find meaning on the top of the list, as had already been noted when speaking about general monolingual dictionaries. In this case, however, examples are on the second place (and not on the fourth as before), followed by synonyms and grammatical information. Sometimes, but not so frequently, students look for correct spelling and pronunciation. Curiously enough, they look for correct spelling more often in their native language than in foreign languages.

Answers given by university students reveal that monolingual dictionaries are most often used for translations and written compositions. More in general, as expected, they are more often consulted while working on a written assignment, than in oral speech. If we take into consideration the distinction between encoding and decoding activities, however, the results are less clear. As far as translation and oral activities are concerned, learners' dictionaries are more often used for decoding; on the other hand, they are more often used for written production than for written comprehension, which is positively surprising.

On the first place of the list of the words which are more frequently looked for in learners' dictionaries, we find common words, followed by idioms, prepositions and compounds. The fact that common words and prepositions, which typically cause difficulty when encoding, are on the top of the list clearly indicates, again, that learners' dictionaries are very often used for language production. On the bottom of the list, on the other hand, technical terms, abbreviations and proper names are placed, which typically cause difficulty when encoding.

As expected, examples sentences are considered very useful by the great majority of students (more than 90%). The same is also true for synonyms and such high percentage "of students using synonyms is important for lexicographers to note, especially since this is not usually a developed feature of British monolingual dictionaries" (Béjoint 1981:218).

As far as illustrations are concerned, only about 33% of students usually look at them¹⁵, which is very disappointing since illustration as an explicatory technique has made a lot of progress in recent years and pictures in dictionaries are not only useful when decoding, but also when encoding.

When asked whether they could remember any occasion in which they did not find what they were looking for, more than 35% answered they did not. Among those who answered "yes", the biggest groups said that the definition was

¹⁵ It should be noted, however, that some students may have answered that they do not look at pictures simply because the dictionaries they possess do not provide any pictures.

not satisfactory and that a certain word was missing. Few people mentioned too long entries (9,5%), incomprehensible coding (9,5%) and unsatisfactory syntactic guidance (4,3%).

Among the students who filled in the questionnaire, 108 study English at university: most of them (77,8% to be precise) possess at least an English monolingual learners' dictionary, but the percentage of those who do not, 22,2 % is also very high if compared with the percentage of 4% reported by Béjoint (1981:214). What is positive, is the fact that only 2,4% of owners of English learners' dictionaries are not satisfied with their dictionaries, whereas Béjoint (1981:217) obtained a higher percentage (10%).

As far as single English learners' dictionaries are concerned, the "Collins COBUILD English Dictionary" is possessed by 33,3% of students of English, the "Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary" by about 28% and the "Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English" by about 10%.

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