Advocating an EFL Dictionary for Compulsory Purchase

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1 Introduction

This essay advocates an EFL (English as a foreign language) dictionary for students visiting the English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC) at UMIST. It restricts itself to monolingual dictionaries for the advanced learner from the start, because this tends to serve most of the targeted students. It is divided into two parts, the first taking into consideration some of the most important general properties of adequate EFL dictionaries, whilst the second part fleshes out the genuine characteristics of the dictionary recommended, viz. the Oxford Advanced Learner's

Dictionary (Hornby, 1995).

2 General considerations

The general overview of properties of EFL dictionaries presented in this section is dependent on a distinction made between the overall and the internal organization of a dictionary, i.e. between macro- and microstructure.

2.1 Macrostructure

The macrostructure of a dictionary mirrors considerations about the relative arrangement of dictionary entries, i.e. how and by which criteria the entries are ordered. Discussing this question firstly brings us across another very essential concept: reference functions.

2.1.1 Reference functions

Two reference functions can be separated: 1. the interpretative or receptive and 2. the productive function. EFL learners only needing to understand and read English require the former function, speaking and writing is in turn productive use of language and hence of a dictionary as well.

Both functions are pulling the rope of the arrangement of entries into opposite directions. Whereas the interpretative function emphasizes the ease of access of dictionary entries[1], the productive function demands a high degree of clustering of derivations, idioms, compounds and so on around simple headwords[2], to illustrate relations between primitive and derived lexemes. It is a crucial task to allow for ease of access by clearly separating headwords which seem to be 'distinctive enough', still keeping lexemes which 'belong together' clustered around their primitive origins (to encourage productive use). Note that both expressions are deliberately quoted—they are not clearly defined and it is up to the skill of the lexicographers to find an apt compromise.

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[1] It is assumed here that suitable EFL dictionaries use alphabetical, word-by-word ordering.
[2] Headwords are often referred to as 'lexemes' in lexicography, and we will espouse this as well.

2.1.2 Size and subsidiary information

Concerning size, again a good compromise is to be found to mediate two polar positions: While an EFL dictionary should have as many entries as possible to prevent it from showing 'gaps', the more entries it has the more awkward is their lookup.

The role of subsidiary information should also be acknowledged. Most dictionaries provide the user with supplementary pages about grammar, culture or history. They usually only constitute a small part of the dictionary yet can help English learners to understand the language more exhaustively.

2.2 Microstructure

When pondering over the microstructure of a serviceable EFL dictionary two questions have to be answered: 1. which words are to be included and 2. how are they to be included into the dictionary.

2.2.1 Which words to include

It is commonly assumed that "even advanced students have great difficulty in understanding, and particular difficulty in using high-frequency words" (Cowie, 1983). Hence, a high degree of attention should be directed to addressing this issue. High-frequency words are characterized by often being 'linguistically rich' in contrast to their 'linguistically barren' low-frequency counterparts. The latter is also referred to as encyclopaedic, the former as lexical or semantic information. Low-frequency words like 'lexicography' (at least in real life) or 'granary' mostly bear almost matching, singular definitions across many languages and are thus quite easy to learn. In opposition to this, high-frequency words like 'pull' pose more trouble for EFL learners by having multiple meanings (i.e. they are polysemous) and by entering into a variety of idiomatic combinations.

2.2.2   How to include them

As hinted at above, the words from the high-frequency category (e.g. 'run' or 'pull') should receive special treatment in form of entries bearing all kinds of information needed to cover their linguistic variety. A key feature for accomplishing this task is a high degree of exemplification, i.e. extensive use of examples.

To guide the user through these large entries an apt dictionary should utilise typeface styles (e.g. boldface, italics). For example, subsenses should clearly be separated therewith from definitions or examples. Also, if idioms or examples like 'pick somebody to pieces' allow internal variations, these should be made clear (e.g. by using slashes: 'pick/pull/tear somebody to pieces'). A special verb coding can also meliorate the access to different meanings, and another device employed to deliver auxiliary information is the use of cross-references to related lexemes, e.g. synonyms, antonyms (contrasted words) or related words.

2.2.3   Commonplace data

Commonplace additions to dictionary entries should cover spelling and pronunciation, including variants. Pronunciation can be given either by utilising a custom symbol alphabet or by using the widely accepted IPA symbols. However it would be advisable to use the IPA symbols. Customly devised alphabets fall short when they have to be used by learners of different language origins because they usually apply ordinary letters (pronounced differently in different languages). Other data includes making use of graphical illustrations for certain headwords, part of speech, and other labels (expressing a particular attitude or usage restrictions).

3   A specific dictionary

After outlining general considerations about EFL dictionaries above, this section argues that the OALD meets all the criteria set up and is thence the one recommended for purchase. The course of this section roughly runs in parallel with the previous section. The starting point again is the

dictionary macrostructure.

3.1 The OALD macrostructure

In Section 2 we reasoned that a serviceable EFL dictionary must cater for both the interpretative and the productive reference functions. The OALD already reflects these considerations in the preface, by claiming that it "strives to satisfy the same basic needs of foreign students, namely to develop their receptive *and* productive skills".

This endeavour is reflected throughout the dictionary. Ease of access is ensured by clearly separating distinctive lexemes as separate headwords. For instance, the lexeme 'pulpit' is a free-standing headword from the lexeme 'pulp', since the senses of these two lexemes are not related (although they look like having the same stem). On the other hand, the productive function is mirrored in listing the related lexeme 'pulpy' as a roll-on (within the entry) of the 'pulp'-headword.

3.1.1 OALD size and subsidiary information

The OALD is a mediocre 1428 pages in one volume in a handy format, and it does not lack any important words. This is one consequence of the use of the BNC (British National Corpus), a massive computer databank of modern written and spoken English (see also Sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2), which was employed for the first time in the 1995 revision.

The OALD bears a couple of subsidiary information add-ons: 'Language study pages', 'Maps and geographical information', 'Cultural information' and ten appendices (e.g. about 'Irregular verbs'), all helping the learner to understand the language more entirely.

3.2 The OALD microstructure

This subsection is again following the same path as its predecessor in the 'General considerations'-section.

3.2.1 Which words are included

As mentioned above, the OALD editors employed the British National Corpus (BNC) for the 1995 revision. It was used to "determine the relative frequency of words and their meanings" and "identify new words and co-occurences of words". Thus, the corpus information was applied to discriminate high- from low-frequency words and therefore aided the editors to focus on the former. Additionally, new words could be identified and included into the revised OALD, whereas archaic words could be dropped, and with them the size of the dictionary.

3.2.2 How they are included

High frequency vocabulary is duly treated in the OALD. This special treatment is achieved by the application of several instruments:

1. A high degree of exemplification (illustrative examples based on the BNC) is employed.

2. Boldface, italics and special symbols are used to guide the user through the entries. For instance, the OALD puts special signs in front of derivatives, and idioms as well as phrasal verb(s) are put into separate sections of an entry.

3. Variations are made clear by the use of slashes ('pick/pull/tear sb to pieces')

4. Cross-references are given to synonyms, antonyms and related words.

5. 'Notes on usage' accompany several high-frequency words (e.g. 'pull').

6. A core defining vocabulary (3500 words) is utilised.

In addition, the OALD uses an abstract grammatical coding explained in the front matter and in the 'Language study pages'. By repeating parts of these codes on the bottom of each page, information is made maximally explicit and useful for the user. The OALD verb coding treats subsenses requiring a prepositional noun phrase ([Vnpr]) different from the ones requiring a direct object ([Vnp]), improving their access.

3.2.3 OALD commonplace data

Coming with the above, the OALD also possesses all the data commonplace to dictionaries in general. This includes the coverage of different spelling and pronunciation variants (in particular British and American English), thereby making use of the established IPA symbol table (pronunciation). To boot, graphical illustrations help to grasp certain word meanings and related vocabulary (e.g. 'pull' and 'drag') and part of speech labels are employed as well as labels expressing attitudes or restrictions on the use of words.

4 Conclusion

This essay started out with outlining general prerequisites on EFL dictionaries in Section 2, followed by Section 3 showing that all these requirements are met by the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. Hence, we recommend the OALD for compulsory purchase by the students attending the ELTC at UMIST.

References

Cowie, A. (1983), English dictionaries for the foreign learner, *in* R. Hartmann, ed., 'Lexicography: Principles and Practice', Academic Press, London, pp. 135–144.

Hornby, A. S. (1995), *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, fifth edn, Oxford University Press, Oxford.