Meaning and Morphological and Syntactic Information in Learners' Dictionaries: Do Learners' Dictionaries Really Meet Learners' Expectations?

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Abstract

Learners' dictionaries are supposed to be user-friendly and comprehensive reference books for non-native learners. It is, therefore, generally expected that learners' dictionaries should not only present precise and easily comprehensible definitions but also provide morphological and syntactic information about individual words not deducible from general rules of grammar. This paper explores how renowned learners' dictionaries deal with this and how successfully they meet such expectations.

Introduction

Learners' dictionaries are aimed at non-native learners of English; in other words, learners who do not use English as their native language. This means that their knowledge of vocabulary is somewhat limited. Thus, this fact makes the native speaker lexicographers or compilers become aware that they have to display various intricacies of headwords in definitions and/or examples that should be as simple, but, at the same time, as precise as possible (Lemmens and Wekker, 1991). As a result, it is suggested that learners' dictionaries, with the aim of being used as reference tools, should contain information not only on the meaning of words but also on their use in contexts. Moreover, they

should be compiled in such a way that by consulting an entry, the users know exactly what a particular headword means as well as how and when it is used. Lemmens and Wekker (1991) point out that this requirement cannot be restricted to meaning, but it should be extended to include other aspects of the language like grammar. To emphasize this point, Al-Kasimi (1977) and Jackson (1986) also propose that learners' dictionaries should provide non-native learners with all the information they need without referring them to the handbook of grammar since grammar and lexis are considered complementary parts of the overall description of a language.

The investigation

Scope of interest

To find out how the lexicographers of learners' dictionaries deal with the expectations discussed earlier, I am going to examine the latest editions of four well-known and widely used learners' dictionaries: (1) the Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner's Dictionary, or Cobuild (2003); (2) the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, or LDCE (2003); (3) the Macmillan English Dictionary, or MED (2002); and (4) the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English, or OALDCE (2005).

In this paper, the areas of meaning, morphology, in particular, inflections, and syntactic operation are discussed. As for syntactic operation, the emphasis is placed on parts of speech or word classes and the syntactic patterns of verbs.

(1) Meaning

In the light of meaning, it is generally expected that learners' dictionaries should provide precise and comprehensive definitions so that the learners can understand the words and also assimilate them for possible future use (Summers, 1988). In this respect, Amritavalli (1999) also warns that definitions in learners' dictionaries should not be more difficult than the words they define, and that they should not pose problems of comprehension.

As far as meaning is concerned, the four learners' dictionaries have something in common; namely, they deal with word meanings by using explanation and exemplification. Also, all of them intend to explain the meaning of a word in clear simple language so that the users will not have difficulty in understanding. In so doing, the Cobuild makes use of the 2500 commonest words of English. Similarly, the MED employs a carefully selected 'defining' vocabulary of 2500 words. The LDCE uses the 2000-word Longman Defining Vocabulary to define all the words and meanings in the dictionary, while the OALDCE makes use of the Oxford 3000, a restricted list of words which is a custom-made for defining purposes.

Unlike the LDCE, the MED and the OALDCE, which define a word using phrases, the Cobuild employs a unique style to present the meaning of a word; that is, all the definitions are written in full sentences, using vocabulary and grammatical structures that occur naturally with the word being explained. According to Summers (1988), the Cobuild's definition style is a development of the so-called *'folk definition,'* the sort of definition people might give to someone asking them directly what a word means. For instance, *bacon* /be͟ɪkən/ **Bacon** is salted or smoked meat which comes from the back or sides of a pig.

Let's consider the definitions of the word *'different,'* one of the most basic words in English taken from these four dictionaries.

The Cobuild   –   1   If two people or things are **different**, they are not like each other in one or more ways.

                  2   You use **different** to indicate that you are talking about two or more separate and distinct things of the same kind.

The LDCE   –   1   not like something or someone else, or not like before; |≠| **similar**

                  2   [only before noun] used to talk about two or more separate things of the same basic kind; |=| **various**

                  3   [only before noun] another

                  4   *spoken* unusual, often in a way that you do not like

The MED	–	1	not the same as another person or thing, or not the same as before
		2	[only before noun] different things are separate things of the same kind
		3	unusual and not like other things of the same kind
The OALDCE	–	1	~(from/to/than sb/sth) not the same as sb/sth; not like sb/sth else... OPP SIMILAR
		2	[only before noun] separate and individual
		3	[not usually before noun] (*informal*) unusual; not like other people or things

From the definitions shown above, it can be seen that the ones provided by the LDCE, the MED and the OALDCE are easier to understand, whereas the ones presented by the Cobuild might be unnecessarily space-consuming and time-consuming, especially when the users want to know the meaning of '*different*' very quickly. Besides, weak students might find it more difficult to understand the meaning of this word because they need to struggle with decoding some complex structures used in the definitions like '*if-clauses*' or '*conditionals.*' To support my argument here, Amritavalli (1999) also voices that the Cobuild dictionary is not a learners' dictionary at all due to the complex language used in its definitions. In his point of view, it is more suitable for English teachers and those who are word-learning addicts.

As regards words with many different meanings, these four dictionaries prove to be very helpful to the users. The Cobuild and the MED give a menu at the top to help the users get the general meaning of a word or find the specific meaning very quickly without reading the whole entry from the beginning. The LDCE also employs signposts to help guide the users to the meaning they want. Similarly, the OALDCE provides the users with short cuts which show the context or general meaning of a word. They seem to have different criteria to decide which word should be presented with such helpful guides, however. For example, the LDCE, the MED and the OALDCE provide meaning guides for the word '*receive,*' but the Cobuild does not. On the contrary, the

users will find a menu for the word '*still*' in the Cobuild, but not in the LDCE, the MED or the OALDCE.

In conclusion, the LDCE, the MED and the OALDCE present the meanings or definitions of words in the typical style, i.e. using phrases, whereas the Cobuild employs a unique style of presenting its definitions in full sentences. Despite several negative remarks, the Cobuild still asserts that this style is easier to understand because it reflects the way in which words or meanings are naturally used by native speakers (Cobuild). In respect of words with various meanings, these four dictionaries help the users by providing them with a menu or short cut to quickly get the general meaning of a word they need.

(2) Inflections

Inflections are the changes made in the form of a word according to how it is used in a sentence. Jackson (1986) points out that only suffixes realize grammatical meanings or functions. Strictly speaking, most words form their inflections according to regular grammatical rules. For instance, most singular nouns need suffixes '-s' or, sometimes, '-es' to make the plural, and verbs usually end in '*ed*' or '*d*' when they are used in the past tense and the past participle forms. However, this kind of information is considered as the basic knowledge of grammatical rules widely found in grammar books; therefore, such information does not have to be repeated again and again. Instead, it is necessary that dictionary entries provide irregular forms; in other words, forms that do not follow the general rules of grammar since such items are likely to cause problems (Lemmens and Wekker, 1991).

Let's consider the examples of the following verbs and nouns, and see how the four dictionaries deal with them.

1. **eat (v) [first meaning]**

The Cobuild
– (**eats, eating, ate, eaten**) ⌐1¬ When you **eat** something, you put it into your mouth, chew it, and swallow it.

The LDCE
– *v past tense* **ate** /et, eɪt $ eɪt/ *past participle* **eaten** /'i:tn/

1 FOOD [I,T] to put food in your mouth and chew and swallow it

The MED
– (*past tense* **ate** /et, eɪt/; *past participle* **eaten** /'i:tn/) verb [I/T] ★★★ to put food into your mouth and swallow it

The OALDCE
– *verb* (**ate** /et; *especially NAmE* eɪt/, **eaten** /'i:tn/)

1 to put food in your mouth, chew it and swallow it

2. **wait (v) [first meaning]**

The Cobuild
– (**waits, waiting, waited**) ⌐1¬ When you **wait for** something or someone, you spend some time doing very little, because you cannot act until that thing happens or that person arrives.

The LDCE
– **1** ⌐NOT GO/START STH¬ [I] to stay somewhere or not do something until something else happens, someone arrives etc

The MED
– **1** to stay in one place because you expect or hope that something will happen

The OALDCE
– ▪ *verb* **1** ~ (**for sb/sth**) to stay where you are or delay doing sth until sb/sth comes or sth happens

3. **goose (n) [first meaning]**

The Cobuild
– (**geese**) ⌐1¬ A **goose** is a large bird that has a long neck and webbed feet.

The LDCE
– *n plural* **geese** /gi:s/ **1 a)** [C] a bird that is like a duck but is larger and makes loud noises

| The MED | – (plural **geese** /giːs/) noun **1** [C/U] a large white or grey bird with a long beak called a **bill** |
| The OALDCE | ■ *noun* (*pl.* **geese** /giːs/) **1** [C] a bird like a large DUCK with a long neck |

4. bus (n)

| The Cobuild | – (**buses**; **busses**; **bussing**; **bussed**) |

> ✓ The plural form of the noun is **buses**. The third person singular of the verb is **busses**. American English uses the spellings **buses**, **busing**, **bused** for the verb.

	–	**1**	A **bus** is a large motor vehicle which carries passengers from one place to another. Buses drive along particular routes, and you have to pay to travel in them.
The LDCE	– n *plural* **buses** also **busses** *especially AmE* [C] **1** a large vehicle that people pay to travel on
The MED	– noun [C] ★★★ **1** a large road vehicle with a lot of seats that you pay to travel on, especially one that takes you fairly short distances and stops frequently
The OALDCE	– ■ *noun* (*pl.* **buses**, *US* also **busses**) **1** a large road vehicle that carries passengers, especially one that travels along a fixed route and stops regularly to let people get on and off

From the examples given, these four learners' dictionaries provide the users with irregular forms of verb and noun inflections. Noticeably, the Cobuild, the LDCE and the OALDCE also give general grammatical rules which are supposedly known; for instance, a noun '*bus*' needs '*es*' to form the plural, while the MED ignores such information.

Like verbs and nouns, adjectives can also be inflected in terms of the comparative and superlative forms. According to the general rules of grammar, adjectives with one syllable take the inflectional suffixes '-er' and '-est,' e.g. *small–smaller–smallest*, whereas those with two syllables may take '*more*' and '*most,*' or the inflectional suffixes '-er' and '-est,' such as *careful–more careful–most careful, and easy–easier–easiest*. Adjectives with three syllables always take '*more*' and '*most,*' e.g. *beautiful–more beautiful–most beautiful*.   Still, there are a small number of irregular forms like *good–better–best*.

It is found that in the Cobuild, the LDCE and the OALDCE all the one-syllable adjectives which take the inflectional suffixes '-er' and '-est,' including those with irregular forms, are marked, e.g. *sweet–sweeter–sweetest*, while all the three-syllable adjectives are not marked. As for the two-syllable adjectives, these three dictionaries simply place emphasis on those ending in '*y,*' such as *angry–angrier–angriest* and *easy–easier–easiest*; however, they are not consistent with other two-syllable adjectives.

Let's look at some examples below.

two-syllable adjectives	The Cobuild	The LDCE	The MED	The OALDCE
1. careful	*✗	✗	✗	✗
2. narrow	*✓	✗	✗	✓
3. quiet	✓	✓	✗	✓
4. shallow	✓	✓	✗	✓
5. silent	✗	✗	✗	✗

Note: *✓ = found, *✗ = not found

From the examples given, the Cobuild and the OALDCE seem to do best in the case of two-syllable adjectives. Surprisingly, the MED fails to provide inflectional forms of two-syllable adjectives. Instead, it only focuses on the adjectives with irregular forms such as *bad–worse–worst* and *far–farther/further–farthest/furthest*.   However, in the MED several cases of regular

inflections do appear in the examples of unmarked adjectives. To illustrate this point, let's look at the following examples.

> – *Even the most careful proofreader will miss the occasional error. / People should be more careful about the things they say. (p. 204)*

> – *The easiest way to get to Hertford is on the train. (p. 439)*

Apparently, these examples can cause problems to the users, in particular weak students, as the headwords, '*careful*' and '*easy*,' do not match with the inflectional forms appearing in the examples.

In brief, the Cobuild, the LDCE, the MED and the OALDCE seem to do well with regard to noun and verb inflections. However, in respect of adjective inflections, the MED does not do well when compared with the other three dictionaries since it fails to provide the users with sufficient information on regular forms of adjective inflections. Moreover, some examples provided in the MED can be confusing and thus cause problems of understanding to the users.

(3) Parts of speech or word classes

Jackson (1986) proposes that part of the information that the dictionary users expect to gain from the dictionary entries for a lexical item is how to use that item; besides, this information on use must include a specification of the syntactic operation of the lexical item–how it fits as an individual item into the general syntactic patterns of the language.

The LDCE, the MED, and the OALDCE indicate the word-class label of each lexical item after the pronunciation, while the Cobuild provides this information in an extra column at the right side of the entry (See the example from the word '*lack*' given). According to Jackson (1986), there are two main reasons why it is important for the dictionary users to know the word class or part of speech to which an item belongs.

To begin with, the word-class label is an instruction about the kinds of inflections that are appropriate to each lexical item.

For instance, the label *'noun'* implies the possibility of a *'plural'* and a *'possessive'* inflection. In fact, not all nouns do inflect in these ways in actual usage, e.g. *lack* – not inflecting for the plural although it is a singular count noun; as a result, learners' dictionaries are expected to provide the users with this relevant information. Moreover, as many lexical items can belong to more than one word class, such information should be included in the dictionaries as well.

Let's consider the example of the word *'lack'*.

The Cobuild	
lack /læk/ (**lacks, lacking, lacked**) ⃞1 If there is a **lack of** something, there is not enough of it or it does not exist at all.□ *Despite his lack of experience, he got the job... The charges were dropped for lack of evidence... There is a lack of people wanting to start up new businesses.* ⃞2 If you say that someone or something **lacks** a particular quality or that a particular quality **is lacking** in them, you mean that they do not have any or enough of it. □ *He lacked the judgment and political acumen for the post of chairman...Certain vital information is lacking in the report.* ⃞3 ➡ See also **lacking**. ⃞4 If you say there is **no lack of** something, you are emphasizing that there is a great deal of it. □ *He said there was no lack of things for them to talk about.*	◆◆◇ N-UNCOUNT: also a N, usu N *of* n VERB V n V **PHRASE:** **PHR n,** **usu v-link PHR,** **v PHR** emphasiss

The LDCE

lack¹ │S3│ │W2│ /læk/ *n* [singular, U] when there is not enough of something, or none of it; │=│ **shortage**

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a complete/total lack of sth

an apparent lack of sth

for lack of sth (= because something is not present or does not exist)

a distinct/marked lack of sth

no lack of sth (= plenty of something)

a relative/comparative lack of sth

no lack of sth (= plenty of something)

[+ **of**] *new parents suffering from lack of sleep* | *Too many teachers are treated with a lack of respect.* | *comments based on a **total lack of** information* | *Does their **apparent lack** of progress mean they are not doing their job properly?* | *tours that are cancelled **for lack of** bookings* | *There was **no lack of** willing helpers.* | *health problems linked to poor diet and a **relative lack of** exercise*

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lack² │W3│ *v*

1 [T] to not have something that you need, or not have enough of it: *Alex's real problem is that he lacks confidence.* ⚠ Do not use the verb **lack** before 'in' or 'of': *We lack ideas (NOT We lack in/of ideas).* However, you can use the phrases **be lacking in** and **a lack**: *We are lacking in ideas* OR *We have a lack of ide as.*

2 **not lack for sth** *formal* to have a lot of something: *He does not lack for critics.*

The MED

lack¹ /læk/ noun [singular/U] ★★★ a situation in which you do not have any or do not have enough of something you need: + **of** *The match was cancelled due to lack of support.* ♦ *Most of his problems stem from a lack of confidence.* ♦ **for lack of sth** *The court case was dismissed for lack of evidence.* ♦ *We couldn't find her passport, but it wasn't for lack of trying* (= we tried hard to find it).

no lack of sth a lot of something, often more than you need: *There is no lack of stories to fill the papers.*

Words frequently used with **lack**

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adjectives apparent, complete, distinct, general, marked, serious, sheer, total

lack² /læk/ verb [T] ★★ to not have any or enough of something you need or want: *He lacked the skills required for the job.* ♦ *The play was good in parts but generally the acting lacked sparkle.*

The OALDCE

lack /læk/ *noun, verb*

■ *noun* [U, sing.] ~ **(of sth)** the state of not having sth or not having enough of sth ⸢SYN⸥ DEARTH,SHORTAGE: *a lack of food/ money/ skills* ◊ *The trip was cancelled **through lack of*** (= because there was not enough) *interest.* ◊ *There was **no lack of** volunteers.* ⸢IDM⸥ see TRY *v.*

■ *verb* [VN] [no passive] to have none or not enough of sth: *Some houses still lack basic amenities such as bathrooms.* ◊ *He lacks confidence.* ◊ *She has the determination that her brother lacks.* –see also LACKING ⸢IDM⸥ **lack (for) 'nothing** (*formal*) to have everything that you need--more at COURAGE

From the example given, the four learners' dictionaries indicate that *'lack'* belongs to both a noun and a verb. Also, they inform the users that *'lack'* can be used as an uncountable noun and a countable noun, but in the case of a countable noun, only the LDCE, the MED and the OALDCE mention that *'lack'* is never used in the plural. As for the word-class label, the LDCE and the MED separate *'lack'* into two headwords according to its parts of speech, whereas the OALDCE presents it as one entry, but separates the two different word classes by labeling ■ *noun* and ■ *verb*. Unlike these three dictionaries, the Cobuild does not use any special sign to differentiate between the two word classes. It simply mixes up the two word classes of *'lack'* in the same entry and define them alternately, which might be inconvenient and confusing to the users.

The other reason why the word-class label is important is that it provides basic information about the syntactic operation of a lexical item. For example, when the users see any item labeled *'noun,'* they can expect to be told the places at which it may occur in the syntactic structure, for example, as head of a nominal group, e.g. *two beautiful white* **roses**.   Similarly, the label *'adjective'* indicates that it can occur either as a modifier before a noun or nominal group or in a predicative position, i.e. after the verb *'be'* or *'linking verbs'* such as *become, get, feel,* and *smell*.

Let's consider the following examples.

1. **main**

The Cobuild	– ADJ: det ADJ = chief
	1 The **main** thing is the most important one of several similar things in a particular situation.
The LDCE	– *adj* [only before noun]
	1 bigger or more important than all other things, ideas etc of the same kind
The MED	– *adj* [only before noun] ★★★ most important, largest or most frequently used
The OALDCE	– ■ *adj.* [only before noun] being the largest or most important of its kind

2. delicious

The Cobuild	– ADJ = tasty
	$\boxed{1}$ Food that is **delicious** has a very pleasant taste. □ *There's always a wide selection of delicious meals to choose from.*
The LDCE	– adj 1 very pleasant to taste or smell: *'The meat was completely delicious', she said politely. | the delicious smell of new-mown grass*
The MED	– adj ✱ 1 with a very pleasant taste or smell: *This sauce is delicious with fish or vegetables.* ♦ *The fruit tasted delicious.*
	2 *mainly literary* very pleasant or enjoyable: DELIGHTFUL: *She felt a delicious floating sensation.*
The OALDCE	– adj. 1 having a very pleasant taste or smell: *Who cooked this? It's delicious.* 2 (*literary*) extremely pleasant or enjoyable: *the delicious coolness of the breeze*

From the first example, these four dictionaries use grammar codes after the word-class labels to inform the users of the places at which '*main*' can occur in the syntactic structure. The LDCE, the MED, and the OALDCE employ the same code '*only before noun,*' simply indicating that '*main*' is an adjective which is used directly before a noun. The Cobuild, by contrast, uses the code 'det ADJ,' which cross-references the users to adjective patterns in 'the Explanation of Grammatical Notations' section (p. xv) in order to learn that 'det ADJ' refers to the same function as '*only before noun.*' However, there is one comment to note here; namely, the Cobuild, the LDCE and the MED fail to inform the users that '*main*' is not used in the comparative or superlative forms although the LDCE has the grammar code 'no comparative', which can be used for the case of '*main.*' Only the OALDCE mentions in the Reference Section (p. R47) that all the one-syllable adjectives not used in the comparative or superlative forms are not marked.

From the second example, all the four dictionaries only indicate the word-class label 'ADJ/adj,' but again, only the

OALDCE mentions in the Reference Section (p. R47) that all the adjectives without grammar codes can be used both before a noun and after a linking verb. The other three dictionaries, on the contrary, do not provide any grammar codes or any further information on the word-class label 'ADJ/adj.' In this case, the users have to infer from the examples that the label 'ADJ/adj' alone refers to adjectives that can be used before the nouns they describe or after linking verbs.

To sum up, these four dictionaries can deal with the aspect of parts of speech or word classes fairly well; however, the OALDCE seems to do best in that it also provides the users with some other necessary information on syntactic operation, e.g. certain adjectives which are not used in the comparative or superlative forms.

(4) Syntactic patterns of verbs

In this part, I mainly focus on the syntactic patterns of verbs as I agree with Jackson (1986) that the verb is considered as the main element that determines which other element may be presented in its clause.

In respect of verbs, these four learners' dictionaries employ codes to indicate the syntactic patterns that verbs can occur in. However, the OALDCE is the only dictionary that concerns the syntactic patterns of verbs; in other words, it has a separate section of 'Key to verb patterns' on the inside front cover (ii), which illustrates all the verb codes and patterns used in the OALDCE. Moreover, if any users need a more detailed explanation of these codes, they can consult pages R36-41. The Cobulid, the LDCE, and the MED, by contrast, provide information on verb codes and their examples together with other grammar codes in the 'Explanation of Grammatical Notations' section (p. xv), on the inside front cover (ii), and on the inside front cover, respectively.

The following are the summaries of verb codes used in these dictionaries.

The Cobuild

AUX An auxiliary verb is used with another verb to add particular meanings to that verb, for example, to form the continuous aspect or the passive voice, or to form negatives and interrogatives. The verbs *be, do, get* and *have* have some senses in which they are auxiliary verbs.

MODAL A modal is used before the infinitive form of a verb, e.g. *You may go.* In questions, it comes before the subject, e.g. *Must you speak?* In negatives, it comes before the negative word, e.g. *They would not like this.* It does not inflect, for example, it does not take an *-s* in the third person singular, e.g. *She can swim.*

V-LINK A link verb connects a subject and a complement. Link verbs most commonly occur in the patterns **V adj** and **V n**. Most link verbs do not occur in the passive voice, e.g. *be, become, taste, feel.*

Some phrasal verbs are link verbs, e.g. *I was sure things were going to turn out fine* (**V adj**); *Sometimes things don't turn out the way we think they are going to* (**V n**).

V-PASSIVE A passive verb occurs in the passive voice only, e.g. *His parents are rumoured to be on the verge of splitting up.* Some phrasal verbs are passive verbs, e.g. *The civilians were just caught up in the conflict.*

V-RECIP Reciprocal verbs describe processes in which two or more people, groups, or things interact mutually: they do the same thing to each other, or participate jointly in the same action or event. Reciprocal verbs are used in the pattern **pl-n V**, e.g. *Fred and Sally met,* where the subject is both participants. The participants can also be referred to separately in other patterns, e.g. **V n** *Fred met Sally,* and **V with n** *Fred argued with Sally.* These patterns are reciprocal because they also mean that *Sally met Fred* and *Sally argued with Fred.* Note that many reciprocal verbs can also be used in a way that is not reciprocal. For example, *Fred and Sally kissed* is reciprocal, but *Fred kissed Sally* is not reciprocal (because it does not mean that Sally also kissed Fred). Non-reciprocal uses of reciprocal verbs are shown as **non-recip**. Some phrasal verbs are reciprocal verbs, e.g. *He felt appalled by the idea of marriage so we broke up.* (**pl-n V P**); *My girlfriend broke up with me.* (**V P with n**).

V-RECIP-PASSIVE A passive reciprocal verb behaves like both a passive verb and a reciprocal verb, e.g. *She was reconciled with her mother.*

Elements used in verb patterns

v: stands for **verb or verb group**. It is not used to represent a link verb.

e.g. **v PRON: her** 1...*I told her I had something to say.*

v PREP n: 10... *She opened the door and stood there, frowning at me.*

v-cont: stands for **continuous verb**. It is used to show a verb which is used in the continuous.

e.g. **ADV before v-cont: always** 3... *She was always moving things around.*

V-ed: stands for **past participle** of the verb explained in the entry.

V-ing: stands for **present participle** of the verb explained in the entry.

The LDCE

[I] intransitive: a verb that has no object: *Jack* **sneezed.** | *House prices* **are rising.**

[T] transitive: a verb that is followed by an object, which can be either a noun phrase or a clause: *I* **love** *chocolate.* | *She* **said** *she was too busy.* | *I* **remember** *going on holiday there.*

[linking verb] a verb that is followed by a noun or adjective complement that describes the subject of the verb: *I* **felt** *very tired.* | *Her father* **is** *a doctor.* | *Your dinner's* **getting** *cold.*

The MED
Verbs

  • **[I]** intransitive verbs that have no direct object: *He* **paused** *for a moment.* ♦ *Could you* **speak up** *please?*

  • **[T]** transitive verbs that have a direct object: *I* **ate** *my lunch.* ♦ *She* **handed** *the note over to me.*

  • **[linking verb]** verbs that are followed by a noun or adjective complement describing the subject: *They* **looked** *happy.* ♦ *I* **feel** *better now.*

  • **[auxiliary verb]** verbs 'be', 'have', and 'do' when they are used with other verbs to form questions, show their tense, etc: *When* **are** *you leaving?* ♦ *They* **didn't** *understand.*

  • **[modal verb]** verbs that are used with another verb to express ideas such as possibility, permission, or intention: *She* **might** *come.* ♦ *He* **can** *go now.* ♦ *I* **will** *ask him to call you.*

The OALDCE

Key to verb patterns

Intransitive verbs

[V]   verb used alone

A large dog appeared.

[V+*adv./prep.*]

verb + adverb or
prepositional phrase
*A group of swans floated
by.*

Transitive verbs

[VN]   verb + noun phrase

Jill's behaviour annoyed me.

[VN+adv./prep.]

verb + noun phrase +
adverbor prepositional
phrase
*He kicked the ball into the
net.*

Transitive verbs with two objects

[VNN] verb + noun phrase + noun
phrase
I gave Sue the book.

Linking verbs

[V-ADJ] verb + adjective

His voice sounds hoarse.

[V-N] verb + noun phrase

Elena became a doctor.

[VN-ADJ] verb + noun phrase +
adjective
*She considered herself
lucky.*

[VN-N] verb + noun phrase + noun
phrase
*They elected him
president.*

→ For a more detailed explanation
of these codes and the codes used
with phrasal verbs, look at pages
R36-41.

Verbs   used   with   clauses   or phrases

[V that] [V (that)]

verb + **that** clause
*He said that he would
walk.*

[VN that] [VN (that)]

verb + noun phrase + **that**
clause
*Can you remind me that I
need to buy some milk?*

[V wh-]   verb + **wh-** clause

*I wonder what the job will
be like.*

[VN wh-]verb + noun phrase + **wh-**
clause
*I asked him where the
hall was.*

[V to]   verb + **to** infinitive

I want to leave now.

[VN to] verb + noun phrase **to**
infinitive
*I forced him to go with
me.*

[VN inf] verb + noun phrase +
infinitive without 'to'
*Did you hear the phone
ring?*

[V-ing] verb + **-ing** phrase

She never stops talking.

[VN-ing] verb + noun phrase + **-ing**
phrase
*His comments set me
thinking.*

Verbs + direct speech

[V speech] verb + direct speech

'It's snowing,' she said.

[VN speech] verb + noun phrase +
direct speech
*'Tom's coming too,' she told
him.*

Let's look at the example of the verb 'park' and see how these learners' dictionaries deal with its syntactic patterns.

The Cobuild   — |2| When you **park** a vehicle   VERB
or **park** somewhere, you drive
the vehicle into a position
where it can stay for a period
of time, and leave it there.
□ *Greenfield turned into*   V
the next side street and
parked... He found a place   Vn
to park the car...
Ben parked across the street.   Vprep/adv
...rows of parked cars.   V-ed

The LDCE   —   *v* **1** [I,T] to put a car or other vehicle in a
particular place for a period of time: *You can't*
park here – it's private property. | I couldn't find
anywhere to park. | She parked the car on the
drive. | a line of parked cars

2 [T] *spoken* to put something in a particular
place for a period of time, especially in a way that
annoys someone: **park sth on/in etc sth** *He*
parked a load of papers on my desk.

3 park yourself *informal* to sit down in a
particular place, especially with the intention of
staying a long time [+**on/in etc**] *Connie parked*
herself on the sofa.

The MED   —   verb ★★ [I/T] to move a vehicle into a place where
you are going to leave it for a period of time: *Mary*
parked the car at the side of the road. ♦ *We'll have*
to park here. **a.** [T] [+ **in/on/here etc**] *informal* to
leave something in a place for a period of time:
Can I park my bags here while I get something to
eat?

The OALDCE   —   ▪ **verb 1** to leave a vehicle that you are driving in
a particular place for a period of time: [V, VN] *You*
can't park here. ◊ *You can't park the car here.* ◊ [V]
He's parked very badly. ◊ [VN] *a badly parked*
truck ◊ *A red van was parked in front of the house.*
◊ *a parked car* ◊ *(informal, figurative) Just park*
your bags in the hall until your room is ready. –

see also DOUBLE-PARK **2** [VN+*adv./prep.*] ~ **yourself** (*informal*) to sit or stand in a particular place for a period of time: *She parked herself on the edge of the bed.* **3** [VN] (*informal, business*) to decide to leave an idea or issue to be dealt with or considered at a later meeting: *Let's park that until our next meeting.*

From the example given, the Cobuild, as usual, presents the syntactic patterns of verbs in a unique style – i.e. it starts by labeling the word class of 'park' as VERB in the extra column on the right-hand side of the entry. This is followed by the verb codes matching with the examples given. The *Vn* code, for example, indicates that 'park' is a transitive verb which needs either a noun phrase or a clause as an object. However, some users may find this style somewhat troublesome, especially when the entry is very long.

The LDCE and the MED employ the verb codes after the word-class label '*v*' and sub-entries if those verbs have more than one meaning. They also include additional verb patterns for such particular verbs. As seen from the example, the LDCE gives additional verb patterns of 'park' after the meanings or in front of the examples provided (See sub-entries 2 and 3), while the MED provides such information immediately after the verb code '[T] [+in/on/here etc].'

Unlike the Cobuild, the LDCE and the MED, the OALDCE deals with this aspect by providing the verb codes immediately after the meanings or in front of the examples. Still, the coverage of verb codes in the OALDCE is not well systematized as it can be seen in the second and third sub-entries that the verb codes and patterns are placed in front of the meanings.

Notably, it is found that there are some problems with the instances illustrated in these four learners' dictionaries. For example, in the Cobuild, '*parked*' in the example '*rows of parked cars,*' although marked 'V-ed,' does not fit into the syntactic structures of the typical transitive or intransitive verb, which is followed by an object or is used without an object. This is because '*parked*' in this example grammatically functions as an adjective. Similar examples: '*a line of parked cars,*' and '*a parked car*' and '*a

badly parked truck' are found in the LDCE and the OALDCE respectively. Another problem is that the examples in the MED do not correspond to the verb codes provided. As seen, the verb codes [I/T] indicate that *'park'* is both the intransitive and transitive verbs, whereas the examples represent these two verb codes in the other way round. The last problematic example is seen in the OALDCE's example: '*A red car was parked in front of the house.*' The verb code of this example is marked 'VN,' representing the transitive verb followed by a noun phrase according to 'Key to verb patterns,' but this example is presented in a passive structure without an agent. Certainly, this kind of example can be misleading to those who do not have good background knowledge of the English grammar.

To summarize, the syntactic patterns of verbs prove to be a difficult area for these four learners' dictionaries to cope with. In fact, the problem does not stem from different choices of verb codes or patterns selected to present in the dictionaries, but the main problem is that such syntactic patterns are not as useful in practice as they promise to be. That is, these dictionaries sometimes fail to demonstrate explicit examples; besides, quite a number of examples provided do not fit into particular grammatical structures or functions they intend to display.

Conclusion

To sum up, the main purpose of this paper is to investigate the area of meaning, inflections, parts of speech or word classes, and syntactic patterns of verbs demonstrated in four popular learners' dictionaries: the Cobuild, the MED, the LDCE and the OALDCE. What I have discussed, although with only some aspects of the whole information presented, can give some insights into the nature of these four dictionaries and, at the same time, reflect the way in which they portray their information. Moreover, this investigation also points out some of their strengths and weaknesses.

Generally speaking, it is expected, perhaps unrealistically, that learners' dictionaries should provide the users with all the syntactic and morphological information about individual words

not deducible from general rules of grammar. To be fair, we know that it is effectively impossible for highly respected learners' dictionaries, including the Cobuild, the MED, the LDCE, and the OALDCE to do so. This is because of not only the problem of space limitation but also the question of which information it is really necessary to include or exclude, as well as how this information should be presented in the dictionary.

As discussed in the paper, these four dictionaries seem to face the same problem with regard to syntactic patterns of verbs; that is, the examples presented sometimes do not match with certain verb patterns or fit into them. On the whole, however, they all do fairly well in terms of meaning, word classes, and inflections. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Cobuild, the LDCE, the MED, and the OALDCE, to a certain extent, are successful in providing what learners have expected.

Last but not least, as far as the true value of learners' dictionaries is concerned, I do agree with Professor Henry Widdowson that the expectations that the users have of a dictionary depend on what they want to use it for, and this remark also corresponds to what Samuel Johnson (1755) says of his own dictionary, "The value of a work must be estimated by its use: It is not enough that a dictionary delights the critic, unless at the same time it instructs the learner..." (cited in Hornby:2005, vii).

Acknowledgements

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