

ISLE Workshop:
Grammatical Information in Dictionaries of English

Abstracts

Margaret Deuter

Grammatical information in ELT dictionaries

It was the recognition that learners of English required a different type of reference work from native speakers than motivated A S Hornby and his colleagues to compile the *Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary*, published in 1942. The title of that first learner's dictionary betrays the authors' interest in grammar: in order to be a production dictionary, the work should equip students with enough information to use the words they looked up in correct grammatical sentences. Among the many innovative features of *ISED* was the inclusion of verb pattern information which would enable students to encode successfully.

The focus on users' needs and expectations has influenced the inclusion and presentation of grammatical information in learners' dictionaries as the genre has developed. In *ISED* and the subsequent editions of the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* which remained portable print-only products, space was at a premium and grammar pattern information was necessarily compressed, making it difficult to access and process. Although learners might need more information about grammar (as well as other aspects of the language covered in the dictionary), their willingness to engage with complex, codified information could not be assumed. Revisions of the way the verb patterns were presented were made in the name of user-friendliness, until finally for the 8th edition in the light of user research, the codes were dropped completely and the information now presented through complement frames and examples.

Besides information at the entry, learners' dictionaries have often carried extra study-page material on grammar. The purpose of this extra matter might be to explain more fully what is presented in rather cryptic form in the entries, for example explaining modals or phrasal verbs, or it might also be meeting a customer demand that the dictionary should be a one-stop shop, giving a basic overview of grammar to enable at least low-level students to complete simple tasks without recourse to other reference material.

Bilingual learners' dictionaries, which have been produced over the last 25 years or so, have been able to take a more selective approach, depending on the needs of specific target audiences. The conventions of grammar teaching in the relevant countries could be taken into account, and the amount of information shown could be tailored to the language group. Some of our Oxford BLDs, for example, only give grammar information about the English words where their behaviour differs from the L1.

With the arrival of digital products and the disappearance of space constraints, it would theoretically be possible to include much more grammatical information in dictionaries. However, our observations indicate that in many cases, students are failing to make full use

of the information that is already included. The challenge therefore remains both of making the information as transparent as possible and encouraging the users to explore and apply it.

References

Hornby, A.S., Gatenby, E.V & Wakefield, A.H. 1942, *Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary*, Kaitakusha, Tokyo.
Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 1e-9e 1948-2015, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Valerie Gorman

The impact of grammatical terms and labels on dictionary users

While Atkins & Rundell (2008) praised the Oxford Dictionary of English (2003) for providing grammatical information in exceptional detail, compared with other monolingual dictionaries of the time, they also questioned ‘whether the average user even notices [grammar] labels, still less understands their meaning.’ The Oxford English Dictionary editorial staff is currently undertaking a review of its grammar terms and labels. One consideration in this review is the question of how meaningful such terms and labels are to today’s average user. Do the users notice the grammar labels? If so, what do they understand by them? Do they find them helpful in understanding or using the language?

There was a need for empirical data to help answer these questions. A survey from a small sample of dictionary users would provide insight into the wider user population and give some indication of where effort may be best focused. It was felt that the members of Wolfson College, Oxford, provide a representative sample of potential OED users: they are highly educated scholars with a wide variety in career fields and interests; they include both native and non-native English speakers; they have varying levels of formal education in English grammar. A questionnaire was therefore developed and distributed to the members of Wolfson College in early 2018.

This paper will cover the methodology of developing the questionnaire, collecting the data, and collating the results. The results of the survey, illustrated with graphs, will be presented, and the paper will conclude with a discussion of the findings. The results of this study into how educated readers interpret the grammatical information presented in dictionaries have broad implications for how lexicographers choose to make grammatical information more accessible to their users.

Charlotte Brewer

Grammatical prescriptivism in the OED

One of the most salient features of the OED is its commitment to descriptive lexicography. As its two surviving editors proudly (and justly) claimed in 1933, the first edition (1884-1928) achieved a revolution in English Language lexicography by virtue of being based on ‘a collection of some five millions of excerpts from English literature of every period’. Such grounding in evidence of actual usage formed ‘the only possible foundation for the historical treatment of every word and idiom which is the *raison d’être* of the work’. Following on from that, the editors rejected the practices and underlying assumptions of prescriptive lexicography, and this stance is routinely adopted in most good English language dictionaries today. In the words of the first edition of the *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998), reprinted in many other Oxford dictionaries, ‘A good dictionary reports the language as it is, not as the editors (or anyone else) would wish it to be’.

As any dictionary reader knows, however, it is quite easy to locate examples of lexicographical prescriptivism even in respectable English language contemporary dictionaries, not least those published by Oxford, notwithstanding usage evidence to the contrary. What is usually at stake is language change or language variation, and in some cases this relates to a word’s grammatical usage.

This paper looks at a number of such instances in the OED. In particular, it examines how judgements on grammatical usage have varied between one stage of editing and the next--sometimes, but not always, indicated by the special symbol (the paragraph mark ¶) deployed in the first edition and (occasionally) since to indicate ‘catachrestic or erroneous’ usage. The paper also considers how the current version of OED, as represented in OED Online (www.oed.com), treats issues of prescriptivism in relation to grammatical usage.

Kate Wild

Using corpora for grammatical analysis for the OED

In the OED, some types of grammatical information are given as a matter of course, including part-of-speech and transitivity labels. In many cases, though, it is left to the discretion of the editor to determine whether further grammatical information is necessary or helpful, and to decide how to present that information, either as a statement appended to a definition, or in a distinct sense with its own illustrative quotations.

One reason for covering a grammatical feature is frequency: for example, if a verb in a given sense is (or was) usually used in the passive, or a noun is (or was) frequently used as a modifier, those features will be mentioned. In the first edition of the OED (OED1) there was more of a tendency to note occasional uses, and we find comments such as ‘Also in *pass.*’ and ‘Also *attrib.*’ Since such features are predictable, the policy of the current edition (OED3) is to comment on them only if common. In this, OED3 is similar to many dictionaries of current English, and, like the editors of those dictionaries, OED3 editors have for a number of years had access to corpora of modern English to confirm their intuitions about typical constructions.

Until recently, though, it has been more difficult to carry out similar assessments for earlier periods of English. Analysis has largely been based on quotations collected from historical databases and reading programmes, but evidence in this form is less conducive to frequency analysis. Now, with access to large historical corpora, editors can systematically examine the frequency and significance of particular grammatical features for given words and senses.

This paper explores the potential of such corpora, especially the corpus of *Early English Books Online*, with reference to case studies of particular constructions. For example, analysis of verbs taking indirect objects and corresponding prepositional phrases (e.g. *show x the book, show the book to x*), and of clauses with anticipatory *it* as subject (e.g. *it is evident that..., it was decided that...*), indicate cases where historical corpora can facilitate more systematic coverage in the OED, both within and across entries.