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# Grammar in English Learners' Dictionaries

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## PREFACE

This book is intended as a contribution to the current debate on the coding of grammatical information in dictionaries for foreign language learners. It is primarily based on an unpublished thesis by Marcel Lemmens (1985), written under the supervision of Herman Wekker. Parts of it were adapted and presented in papers which we read at the EURALEX Seminar on "The Dictionary and the Language Learner" at Leeds in April 1985, and to the English Departments of Lund University in May 1985 and Birmingham University in December 1985. We are very grateful to our audiences for their reactions to our ideas and to several friends and colleagues for commenting on an earlier version of this text. In particular, we wish to thank Tony Cowie, Patrick Hanks, Reinhard Hartmann, Stig Johansson and Pieter Loonen for reading the text and saving us from quite a few errors. However, in no way do we imply that they agree with any of our criticisms or ideas. We accept full responsibility for the views expressed here. Thanks also go to Ninette Nelis, Nico de Milliano and Diane Crook for helping us produce this text in the appropriate form.

In this book we deal with the grammatical coding systems in five monolingual EFL dictionaries: the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (ALD, 3rd edition, revised and reset, 1980), the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE, 1978), the two volumes of the Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English (ODCIE 1, 1975 and ODCIE 2, 1983), and the Longman Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs (LDOPV, 1983).

The structure of the book is as follows: Chapter I (Introduction) briefly discusses the general problem of including grammar in dictionaries, and pays attention to what little is now known from recent surveys about the language needs and reference skills of foreign dictionary users. Chapter II (Describing the five coding systems) provides an introductory description of each of the grammatical coding systems examined. Chapter III (A critical review of the coding systems) deals in some more detail with the strengths and weaknesses of each of the systems. Finally, in Chapter IV (Towards a more adequate coding system) we submit to the reader an outline of an alternative proposal which, we

feel, overcomes some of the shortcomings of the other coding systems, and has the advantage of being consistent, self-explanatory and reasonably easy to use.

Like many colleagues, we are critical of the lexicographical work that has been done in the area of grammatical coding (which, in our view, should include fixed collocations and usage). However, we would like to emphasize that our proposal leans heavily not only on what we have found in the five dictionaries under review, but also on the criticisms that the compilers of these dictionaries have provoked from fellow-lexicographers and fellow-linguists.

It is perhaps also worth mentioning here that our own background is in English syntax and linguistics, not specifically in lexicography. We are aware that this may cause a certain bias in the views we express. Still, we have been persuaded by colleagues to believe that a "syntactic" contribution to the current debate on grammatical coding would be appropriate and helpful.

Nijmegen, Spring 1986

M.L. & H.W.



## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 The background

Lexicographers and foreign language teachers would probably all agree that an ideal learner's dictionary should provide the user not only with a full description of the meanings and usage of language forms, but also (especially for encoding<sup>(1)</sup>) with the necessary grammatical guidance (cf. Carstensen 1969:16). As Béjoint (1981:210) puts it, "the best dictionary for encoding is one that provides the most detailed guidance on syntax and collocation, including perhaps advice on pitfalls to avoid." Every good learner's dictionary should thus to some extent also be a good pedagogical grammar, giving information with examples on how to form sentences and phrases in the foreign language by analogy.

The compilers of the currently available learners' dictionaries of English<sup>(2)</sup> have recognized this need for grammatical information, and have attempted to capture the intricacies of English grammar at least partly in coded forms. However, it is well known that there are problems with the specification of grammar in EFL dictionaries. The difficulties are of two main kinds: firstly, there is the problem of arrangement (i.e. unlike the entries in the dictionary, the grammatical information in the dictionary does not lend itself to alphabetical ordering, and is thus far less easily accessible), and secondly, there is the related problem of grammatical labelling (i.e. devising a system of coding which is both reliable, clear and usable requires a great deal of ingenuity). To these two difficulties we would add the point that, in order to avoid confusion, the grammatical information supplied should not be in conflict with the information generally found in the mainstream grammars of modern English. The users of learners' dictionaries are often also users of the well-known survey grammars of English (in particular those by Randolph Quirk and his associates). Our knowledge of English structures has increased enormously over the past 10 to 15 years, and this should somehow be reflected in EFL dictionaries. Moreover, in recent years we have gained a far greater

insight not only into the structural differences between languages, but also into processes of foreign language learning. What we need are dictionaries which take into account the relevant findings of (applied) linguistics and language pedagogy, paying particular attention to the areas of English grammar and usage which are known to cause problems to foreign learners from different linguistic backgrounds.

There appears to be a considerable demand among foreign users of dictionaries for grammatical information of some kind. Tomaszczyk (1979:112) reports that 70% of his 449 informants (foreign students at American colleges and Polish universities, and Polish foreign language students, language instructors and translators) answered that they used their dictionaries to solve grammatical problems. Béjoint's (1981:215) results are not quite comparable to Tomaszczyk's because his questionnaire and his group of informants (122 second, third and fourth year students of English at the University of Lyon) were rather different from Tomaszczyk's; moreover, Béjoint was exclusively concerned with the use of monolingual general dictionaries of English. He reports that 53% of his students said they looked for grammatical information in their dictionaries. Hartmann (1982:82) found that 61.6% of his informants (185 English learners and teachers of German in south-west England) said that they often looked up grammatical points in their bilingual dictionaries (German-English). Although again there are certain differences between Hartmann's survey and the others, these results are strikingly similar<sup>(3)</sup> and all point to a real need for grammatical guidance.<sup>(4)</sup>

We also know, of course, that foreign students do not seem to make full use of the grammatical information supplied by their dictionaries. Students appear to use their EFL dictionaries mainly for decoding activities (principally reading), and often neglect the encoding information (for example on syntax). Béjoint (1981:219) concludes from this rather pessimistically that "monolingual dictionaries are not used as fully as they should: their introductions are not commonly referred to, and neither are the coding systems for syntactic patterns. Certainly many students are not even aware of the riches that their monolingual dictionaries contain." He also notes that "it is for encoding that students need the most information; it is encoding information which is the most difficult to supply; and yet this is the information which students use the least. Lexicographers, consequently, should be wary of embarking upon innovations to help students with their encoding activities. [. . .] Students need to be taught how to use the monolingual dictionaries which they already possess so as to get the most use out of them."

Cowie (1983:107) confirms this view, noting that there is "considerable evidence that foreign learners use their EFL dictionaries for interpretive rather than productive purposes, and may in addition be disinclined to master the systems used to codify grammatical patterning". He recommends that students should be taught to use such information to fuller advantage. In addition, it has been observed that examples play a role which is at least as important as that of the grammatical codes. According to Béjoint (1981:218), the quotations and examples in the dictionaries are studied far more frequently than the codes.<sup>(5)</sup>

While agreeing that students should be taught and encouraged to use the grammatical coding systems more fully, we also wonder what could be done by publishers and dictionary-makers themselves to improve the quality of the current coding systems.<sup>(6)</sup> Compilers of pedagogical dictionaries seem to be faced with a paradox and a dilemma. The paradox is that dictionary users indicate, on the one hand, that they highly appreciate guidance on grammatical matters, while, on the other hand, they do not appear to make full use of all the grammatical information which is already supplied: very few learners read the introductory sections in their dictionaries where the coding system is explained, and the tables of codes are hardly studied. Béjoint (1981:216) reports that 55% of his students (and note that they constitute the most advanced category of learner for which the dictionaries are intended) only read the introductory pages cursorily, others (34%) did not study them at all. The lexicographer's dilemma, obviously, is whether to abandon the grammatical coding scheme altogether, or to improve it in such a way that it will be used more fully, or to leave it just as it is. Béjoint's advice to lexicographers not to embark upon innovations to help students with their encoding activities reflects a fairly general feeling to leave things more or less as they are. In support of Béjoint's recommendation, Cowie (1981a:205) takes the view that it is the teachers' responsibility to make users "more aware of the riches which their monolingual dictionaries already contain."

Perhaps it would be wise to restrict oneself first to dictionaries of limited coverage, and then to attempt to extend the developed system to general EFL dictionaries. However, it would seem to us that on many points the current coding systems in general dictionaries can be greatly improved without too much difficulty.

One of the things that one can learn from the above-mentioned investigations into users' language needs and reference skills is that it cannot be taken for granted that learners are prepared to study all the

relevant introductory sections and to refer to the tables of codes. Our solution would be to make the grammatical codes as transparent and self-explanatory as possible, so that frequent reference to introductions or tables will become unnecessary. We assume that the grammatical codes in the dictionaries are mainly intended for intermediate and advanced learners, some of whom will be foreign students of English, who will also attend introductory classes on English syntax. If that is the case, the terminology and the system presented in the dictionary should on the whole be consistent with the mainstream approaches adopted in syntax classes. What students should be taught is how to apply their knowledge and insight to dictionary items. In the following chapters an attempt will be made to show how this could be done, and to show that dictionary users are not exclusively to blame for not fully using the wealth of information hidden in their dictionaries. It will be argued that part of the problem lies in the inadequacy of the current coding systems themselves. The time may be ripe for discussing the various principles underlying systems of grammatical coding, and for considering a possible alternative.

## 1.2 The five learners' dictionaries

As noted in our Preface, we have selected five monolingual EFL dictionaries whose grammatical coding systems will be examined in some detail. The dictionaries are:

ALD : Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English. General editor: A.S. Hornby with A.P. Cowie. Third edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974 (11th revised and updated impression, 1980). First published 1948. Second edition 1963.

LDOCE : Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. Editor-in-Chief: P. Procter. Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1978.

ODCIE 1: Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English. Vol. I: Verbs with Prepositions and Particles. Editors: A.P. Cowie and R. Mackin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.