

Facing Grammar Problems with the Aid of Lexicographic Tools

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Abstract

In general, dictionaries are considered to be repositories of invaluable linguistic information about words. Traditionally, the facts about language in general dictionaries are presented in form of information categories discussed within a given dictionary article, to name but a few: pronunciation, meaning, spelling or usage. The fact is, however, that the retrieval of this data from lexicographic works of reference is, not infrequently, severely hindered by their users' poor dictionary skills and, as a result, a great deal of the linguistic wealth provided there remains unexplored. The present paper is aimed at a more in-depth presentation of one of numerous information categories described in a dictionary entry – grammatical information and, particularly, part-of-speech membership. We shall primarily discuss the coverage of syntactic behaviours of verbs, the properties of nouns as well as the characteristics of adjectives. The character of this study is general, with no comparison of this information treatment in other languages or within different lexicographic conventions. We will focus on the types and quantity of information that can be extracted from the part-of-speech indication.

Key words

grammatical information, information category, dictionary entry/article, part-of-speech indication

Introduction

It is common knowledge that bilingual dictionaries have always enjoyed greater popularity with the foreign language learners, even those at advanced level. The advantages are fairly straightforward: the access to specific information is uncomplicated, there are direct translations (which reduce the risk of ambiguity, at least initially) and – finally – more and more bilingual dictionaries try to provide assistance with syntagmatic relations between the words, as well as grammatical and discursal information. However, despite all these attempts to improve their quality, the gravest disadvantages of bilingual dictionaries still remain the fragmentary character of the information provided, as well as the fact that they do not describe the foreign language in its own right. Therefore, due to the extraordinary range of lexical and grammatical information provided in monolingual learners' dictionaries, they are – despite all the obvious shortcomings – generally more successful at meeting their users' production needs, and – with no doubt – shifting their interests from bilingual to monolingual dictionaries could only be potentially beneficial. In general,

monolingual learners' dictionaries, together with the ones onomasiologically/conceptually-organised, seem to have greater potential for all the stages of any productive type of tasks and learners must be systematically reminded that with this type of activities, more than with receptive ones, more groundwork is required and even the best bilingual dictionaries (often perceived as easy to use) will not be able to meet this criterion (Rundell 1999).

In the sections that follow we shall present some reports on how the authors of the most well known and best recognized *EFL* dictionaries attempt facing the difficult task of reconciling different rigours and constraints posed by the theory of dictionary making and the needs of their users occurring on the day-to-day basis in the process of foreign language learning. The synopsis offered here covers the studies and results of research projects carried out by de Caluwe and van Santen (2003).

Nouns in dictionaries

As observed by de Caluwe and van Santen (2003), with regard to the question of the plurality of nouns in English and its predictability, some dictionaries (for instance *Longman*, *Chambers* and *Oxford*) choose not to mention the plural forms at all, though their examples feature ones. As a result, it is not always evident for the user whether a given plural form can be formed at all, if it is not specified in the dictionary entry. This obscurity, however, can be largely eliminated by the provision of the label specifying the semantic distinction between countable and uncountable nouns which indirectly helps to determine whether a noun can take a plural or not. Moreover, note that this distinction proves useful in the determination of both an article and other determiners. Naturally, to save on space, dictionary compilers resort to various "tricks", and the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for instance, provides a label for uncountable nouns solely, and the uncountable form occurs whenever one and the same word can appear in both forms. In such cases some irregularities, such as spelling in the formation of a number of plural forms of nouns, for example, may be listed as an accompanying but separate note, albeit they are customarily given in the headword too.

In general, one may say that even though an overwhelming majority of nouns in English are countable, and the formation of the plural form is highly predictable, there are some focal points which should not be disregarded in the compilation and – more precisely – in the provision of the description of nouns in any monolingual pedagogical dictionaries. The issue of *voicing* in the irregular plural formation, for instance, needs proper consideration since even if a given plural is formed in a regular way (like *house* ~ *houses*), the pronunciation pattern is often irregular and, as in this case, changes from the voiceless fricative in singular into a voiced one in plural (e.g. /haus/ ~ /hauziz/). Another feature

which requires particular care in lexicographic works of reference is a vowel gradation. The authorities on the subject such as Quirk and Greenbaum (1990) refer to these plurals as *mutation plurals*. They are formed by an irregular alteration of vowel sound and spelling, with no ending attached to them, for example: *man ~ men, tooth ~ teeth* and *foot ~ feet*. There is also a large group of nouns (usually denoting animals), that demonstrate no difference in form between singular and plural number (e.g. *sheep, fish*), as well as nouns of quantity (referring to number, length, weight, etc.), which do not take a plural form when preceded by another word expressing quantity, e.g. *six thousand, ten million*, etc. Moreover, among some other types of irregular forms which – in an alternative manner, individually selected by a particular title – must be included in a dictionary, one should not ignore foreign plurals (e.g. *stimulus ~ stimuli, stratum ~ strata, tempo ~ tempi, larva ~ larvae*) or nouns resistant to number contrast (ordinarily singular, e.g. *news/mumps/physics* **is** and not **are**; and ordinarily plural, e.g. *scissors, jeans, braces, slacks, tongs*) (Quirk and Greenbaum 1990: 93-99).

Verbs in dictionaries

When browsing through literature on grammatical information in learners' dictionaries, one can easily notice that the analysis of the syntax of the verb seems to be most lengthy and detailed. Take, for example, regular verbs in English which have four morphological forms: the base form (e.g. *call*), the third person singular form (*calls*), *-ing* participle (*calling*), *-ed* form (*called*). As regards irregular full verbs there is no analogy to regular forms, as here different verbs can appear in a different number of forms (e.g. the verb *speak* has five forms while the verb *cut* only three). With reference to the *-s* ending of regular verbs, its pronunciation pattern can vary in the manner analogous to the changes in pronunciation of plural form of nouns (e.g. *catches /iz/, calls /z/, cut /s/*). The ending *-ed* has three pronunciation realisations, that is *patted /id/, called /d/ or packed /t/* – and the pattern can be guessed by the phonological form of the stem and therefore, with some exceptions e.g. (*Collins* dictionary), dictionaries commonly provide only the base form. As for the spelling irregularities, such as doubling of consonant before *-ing*, and *-ed*, deletion and addition of *-e*, different treatment of *-y*, they are covered in most dictionaries. All in all, the major characteristics of irregular full verbs are as follows:

- 1) they have no *-ed* ending or the inflection is reflected in an alternative form with **/d/** devoiced to **/t/** – both regular and irregular forms appear together, e.g. *burnt/burned, learnt/learned, dwelt/dwelled*,
- 2) the change in the base vowel mutation is characteristic of irregular verbs, e.g. *sing/sang/sung, ring/rang/rung, swim/swam/swum, spring/sprang/sprung*,

- 3) there is a changing number of forms a given irregular verb can have – the principal parts are: the base form, the past simple form and the past participle form.

These three forms are differently realised in practice:

- 1) all the three forms may have the same form (e.g. *put/put/put, set/set/set, cut/cut/cut, cast/cast/cast*),
- 2) the past and past participle forms are the same and different from the base form (e.g. *teach/taught/taught, build/built/built, catch/caught/caught, cling/clung/clung*),
- 3) the base and past forms are the same and differ from the past participle form (e.g. *beat/beat/beaten*),
- 4) the base and past participle forms are the same and only the past form is different (e.g. *become/became/become, run/ran/run*),
- 5) all the three forms are different as in *fall/fell/fallen, see/saw/seen, draw/drew/drawn*.

Note that in a dictionary all these irregular forms are typically listed together with the stem (base form), as well as a separate entry. Simultaneously, it is to be observed that some types of verbs seem to have an unclear status and, for example, their inflected forms are fairly uncommon. In such cases, one can observe a different practice in the lexicographic treatment – some dictionaries do not provide the inflected forms at all while others provide all inflected forms and/or examples (de Caluwe and van Santen 2003).

Bogaards and van der Kloot (2001, p. 97-121), drawing on the works authored by Cowie (1999) and Lemmens and Wekker (1986), provide a brief, yet informative, overview of the evolution that has taken place over the past sixty years in the attempts to devise the most transparent systems of presentation of complex grammatical features within the canvas of pedagogical dictionaries. As mentioned in the foregoing, as early as in the 1930s the first attempts at devising complete systems for construction-patterns were made by H. E. Plamer and A.S. Hornby. In the 1942 edition of the *Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary* included 25 verb patterns, the scheme which was later preserved in the following, second edition of *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* and significantly altered in its third edition in 1974. The new subsections were provided in order to explain in a more satisfactory manner more sophisticated niceties occurring between the verbs within the same class. At the same time, *OALD* was for the first time confronted with another publication of the same type in 1978, that is *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE1)*, which applied an alternative analytical approach, as well as coding system for verbs.

The major distinction between the two reference works rested in the indication of patterns. While *OALD* provided each pattern with a serial number or a number and a letter (e.g. VP1, VP6A), *LDOCE1* indicated the patterns by letters and numbers 0-9 and, additionally, more information was included directly with the pattern code, e.g. *no pass./usu. pass.* were used to indicate whether a given verb could be used in the passive voice or not. However, one may generalise and say that neither these two systems nor the systems employed in other learner-oriented dictionaries at that time received plausible comments with regard either to their completeness, consistency and user-friendliness. (More comprehensive comparison and analysis of different schemes and coding systems was done, among many others, by Lemmens and Wekker (1986) and Aarts (1999).

It is noteworthy to mention that while all the studies of this important issue focus on the questions related to the aspects of completeness, consistency, explicitness and user-friendliness of grammatical description of, among others a verb, very little has been done to investigate the usefulness and effectiveness of the data provided. Bogaards and van der Kloot (2001, p. 97-121) quote two examples of research works – Tono (1986) and Nesi (1999) – interested in the evaluation of the latter issues.

The former one conducted a study among the Japanese students of English who were to translate a selection of English texts which only seemingly were typical texts. In fact, the texts included some new words selected for the purpose of the study that were to be looked up in a dictionary by the students in the process of translation. The procedure adopted allowed the analysts to check the degree of dictionary consultation to retrieve grammatical information needed to choose the correct translations. Not surprisingly, the results revealed that the students took far greater advantage of contextualised information than of grammatical indications which were largely disregarded.

In turn Nesi (1999) examined primary school students from Africa and Middle East for whom English was the language of instruction. In this case the students received lists of six words accompanied by information with the definitions, examples, as well as grammatical information which was presented from implicit (no word class or forms) to explicit (both word class and forms were given in full versions). Every word had three sentences attached to it which were to be judged as either correct or incorrect by the subjects. It goes without saying that in order to make such choices the students had to draw on the provided information about word class and morphological features. The conclusion the author of the experiment arrived at was that despite the fact that the grammatical information was viewed as clearly unhelpful, it was still used by the students in order to indicate the correct sentences. Additionally, the grammatical items accounted for explicitly rather than implicitly were particularly helpful to those students who

had no prior knowledge of a given word. Nesi (1999, p. 41) concludes that the research *confirmed the hypothesis that the children would achieve higher scores on grammar recognition tasks when provided with higher levels of grammatical information.*

With regard to this, Bogaards and van der Kloot (2001) comment that although the two studies are hardly related to each other in any way, they both emphasise the need for more research regarding the helpfulness of grammatical information in pedagogical dictionaries and its practical implications. For more information on the problems with the treatment of, for example, function words in dictionaries, please refer to Hoekstra (2010), and on the research into the interpretation of grammatical information by Polish learners in monolingual and bilingual learners' dictionaries, see Dick-Bursztyn (2011).

For the definition of the term *entry*, go to, among others, Whitcut (1985), Hartman and James (1998), Burkhanov (1998). The authors themselves conducted research into the usefulness of grammatical information on verb structures and verb complementation, in particular in the English learners' dictionaries. As to its subjects, the experiment was carried out among secondary school and university students with quite high level of language proficiency. Three dictionaries were selected for the purposes of the experiment, that is: *LDOCE3*, *COBUILD2* and *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (henceforth: *CIDE*). In the process, the students received a booklet with a selection of sentences in their native language (Dutch), and their partial translations in English (verb structures were missing). For each sentence there was a copy of the relevant dictionary entry. Here, the subjects' task was to complete the English sentences at the same time specifying which information was used and how much time was needed to do that. All in all, it turned out that some verbs appeared more challenging in the look-up process than others, and the factor responsible for that may have been – to some extent – the choice of a dictionary. Moreover, these differences were also varied within the two groups of learners. Likewise, the results of the study clearly indicated that the groups of secondary-school students took more time to find the needed grammatical information and, additionally, they were less successful with their search results than the first-year university students.

Also Dziemianko (2005) points out that the techniques used to present syntactic information in the headword so that it fits into a regular format of an entry have long posed a real challenge to lexicographers. According to the author, the major difficulty is the fact that there are numerous and complex interdependencies between a verb and the properties of complements it takes. The author notes that the traditional microstructure in alphabetical dictionaries is a significant limitation on reflecting there the intricate syntax of many English

verbs and concludes that the research based on a selection of learner-oriented dictionaries into the ways in which verb codes are located within the microstructure and related to verbal illustration proves that the attempts to cover the complexity of the English verb syntax have led to many valuable solutions.

Dziemianko (2005) argues after Jackson (1985:59) that *the inclusion of grammatical information in the dictionary is the contribution to making the language learner an independent learner, to enabling the learner to produce for himself correct sentences in the language he is learning*. The final conclusion formulated by Dziemianko (2005) includes the evaluation that the patterns and trends used to present the syntax of the verb in its entry have been enhanced for the benefit of the user. However, the author also points out to the fact that these tendencies need time to become more prevalent in the lexicographic practice and – additionally – will still need to be refined.

Adjectives in dictionaries

In their seminal work, Quirk and Greenbaum (1990:129) determine four basic characteristic features of adjectives:

- 1) they can be used in their attributive function, e.g. they can premodify a noun (as in a **pretty** woman, a **popular** band, an **interesting** story),
- 2) they can occur in the predicative function as subject (e.g. *The painting is **ugly***; *My glass is **empty***; *They are **ill***), or object complement (e.g. *He thought the painting **ugly***; *We find them very **pleasant***; *I found the information **useful***),
- 3) they can be used with the intensifier *very* (e.g. *The dogs are very **loud***; *The boys are very **clever***),
- 4) they occur in comparative and superlative forms which are made by means of inflections (e.g. *big-bigger-biggest*; *thin-thinner-thinnest*; *long-longer-longest*) or by the use of premodifiers *more* and *most* (as in, e.g. *These exercises are **more challenging**/the **most difficult** of all*; *Her daughters are **more beautiful** than yours/ the **most beautiful** in the town*; *This article is **more interesting** than the book/the **most interesting** of all I have ever read*).

The syntactic functions of adjectives include both attributive and predicative ones, as well as postpositive function in the structure of a sentence, which can also be referred to as a reduced relative clause (e.g. *something that is **unusual***). Another important point to be made about adjectives is that the ones with complementation cannot be used in an attributive position but require postposition. Adjectives also function as heads of noun phrases that are to be used with a definite determiner. There are three types of adjectives with this function:

- 1) adjectives used as noun-phrase heads with plural and generic reference denoting classes, types of people as in, e.g. *the blind, the old, the brave, the innocent,*
- 2) adjectives can function as noun-phrase heads in the denotation of nationalities, e.g. *the French, The Dutch, the Chinese,*
- 3) adjectives can be used as noun-phrase heads when they are have abstract reference, e.g. *the exotic, the unreal, the unknown.*

Other functions of adjectives described extensively by Quirk and Greenbaum (1990) are verbless clauses, contingent verbless clauses and exclamatory adjective clauses. In addition to these syntactic functions of this word class, one should not forget about their semantic classification, which is expressed by the following divisions: stative vs. dynamic, gradable vs. nongradable, inherent vs. inherent and, finally, ordering of adjectives in premodification. It seems that all these properties are crucial in the design of a microstructure of a headword in the dictionary for learners of English as a foreign language.

Conclusion

The amount of grammatical information provided in the dictionary varies on account of the type of a lexicographic work of reference it is to be put in. It is more than natural that this information category must be treated with particular importance in dictionaries designed for production or in those used during the activity of L1-L2 translation. Above we have shown how different parts of speech can be accounted for in the dictionary but one must remember that it is done in a number of manners in different lexicographic traditions. As stated by Svensén (2009:144), *the level of abstraction can vary from a formalised and coded notation to authentic examples. The choice is governed by the nature of the dictionary (monolingual or bilingual, for production or reception) and by presumed capability of the users.* Facing grammar problems with the aid of lexicographic tools is not at all an easy task, due to, among many other reasons, the complexity of the character of this type of information, as well as the reluctance of dictionary users to make use of the vital explanation provided for them in the front matter of a work of reference (often referred to as a user's guide).

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