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Redundancies in EFL Dictionaries[1]

1. Introduction

Lexicography in the period leading up to the publication if *COBUILD1* in 1987 was compact in a sense that space in the print dictionaries was utilized in a very efficient manner. After the appearance of the dictionary, however, this no longer seems to be the case – there are redundancies that would not have been tolerated before. The main factor behind this unfortunate development is excessive emphasis on user-friendliness in EFL dictionaries. At the same time, the general shift to the electronic media contributed to a less disciplined use of space. This paper discusses three aspects of redundancies found in EFL dictionaries and suggests possible directions to remedy this problem.

2. Redundancies

2.1 Idioms

Idioms present a problem for lexicographers and users alike. Lexicographers have to determine under which element of an idiom to provide the information; users, where to find it. Lexicographers have worked out basic rules to enable the users to locate idiomatic expressions easily: E.g., Phrases and idioms are shown at the first important word of the phrase or idiom (*LDOCE4*: xiv)2. There used to be one entry per idiom; however, this principle seems to have been relaxed. *LDOCE4* enters "hit home" twice under **hit** and **home3**:

> 27 **hit home** a) if a remark, criticism etc about you hits home, you realize that it is true (s.v. **hit**1 [v])
>
> 5 **hit/strike home** if a remark, situation, or experience hits home, it makes you realize how serious, difficult, or dangerous something is (s.v. **home**2 [adv])

This treatment of "hit home" violates the dictionary's above-mentioned rule of set-phrase provision and produces redundancy.

2.2 Signposts

Another challenge users face in consulting EFL dictionaries is the need to navigate a long, polysemous entry in search of an appropriate sense. This problem was first addressed in 1995 by *CIDE*4 and *LDOCE3* with guide words and signposts, respectively. Inserted at the beginning of a sense, they provide users with a clue as to what the subentry is about:

> A signpost is a word or short phrase that guides you to the right meaning. It may be a synonym, a short definition, or the typical object of a verb (*LDOCE3*: 18).

Some experts observe that signposts contribute to quick reference (Bogaards 1998: 560, Nichols 2006: 165). However, some signposts just repeat part of the definition (Yamada 2010: 156):

> **stir** 2 MOVE SLIGHTLY [intransitive and transitive] to move slightly, or to make something move slightly (*LDOCE5*)

The signpost in the example above does not add anything new. This cannot be an efficient way of using space.

2.3 Full-Sentence Definitions

Definition is a dictionary component concerned with meaning. It usually takes a form of phrase that is substitutable for the headword. Selectional restriction is sometimes incorporated in parentheses. Some definitions are criticized for being difficult to understand because special grammar and language are employed in an effort to pack much information into a phrase. In response, *COBUILD1* provides only full-sentence definitions (FSDs). The FSD aims for ease of understanding, sounding as if the teacher speaks to students in the classroom. A typical FSD begins with "if." The subordinate clause provides the context in which the headword typically occurs, and the main clause gives the meaning. This multi-functionality can have detrimental effects, involving repetition. Let us look at Sense 3 of **cheat** in *COBUILD3*:

> If someone **cheats** you out of something, they get it from you by behaving dishonestly. □ *The company engaged in a deliberate efforts to cheat them out of their pensions… Many brokers were charged with cheating customers in commodity trades*.
>
> VERB
> *V n out of/of n*
> *V n*

The possible sequence of "*cheat* someone *out of* something" is reiterated by the FSD, a grammar code, and an

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[1] I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Leonid Yoffe for his comments and help with the final draft.
[2] *CIDE* (1995) uniquely offers the Phrase Index in the back matter which shows the user exactly where to find phrases and idioms.
[3] This is in line with Bogaards' suggestion: [I]t seems that people with different mother tongues have varied search strategies …. As the learner's dictionaries are written for a worldwide use, they should ideally mention all multi-word expressions in the entries of all relevant content words (1996: 286).
[4] This dictionary adopts the organizing principle of one meaning per entry.

example. The question arises, however: would advanced students of English need that triple reminder? That repetition would be unnecessary if the definition maintained its conventional, clearly-defined function of providing an explanation of meaning5.

In the definition of "stir" of *LDOCE5*, quoted in 2.2, not only is there a overlap of "move slightly" in the signpost and the definition also the phrase is clumsily repeated in the definition to spell out the verb's intransitive and transitive uses. Since the grammar notation6 shows both uses, it is not necessary for the definition to repeat the information. A succinct definition like *OALD4*'s (1989) with an example for each use would just suffice:

2 [I, Tn] (cause sth to) move slightly

In *COBUILD* dictionaries, there are overlaps between FSDs and style labels:

[2] If you describe someone as a **barbarian**, you disapprove of them because they behave in a way that is cruel or uncivilized. N-COUNT disapproval

(s.v. **barbarian** in *COBUILD3*)

3. Conclusion

There are two approaches to make dictionaries accessible: to make dictionaries easier to use or train users (Béjoint 1994: 166-167). EFL lexicography has shifted from maker-led to user-led. There was a time when some sophisticated dictionary design features were above users' rudimentary reference skills (Béjoint 1981: 219, Cowie 1981: 206). Ensuing user research shifted emphasis to user-friendliness. However, the pendulum has swung too far. Lucidity is obviously desirable in EFL dictionaries. However, the cost-benefit of attaining this goal has to be considered very carefully. In this case, redundancies represent a heavy cost. It has been reported that in the *COBUILD* dictionaries, which universally adopt FSDs, include a smaller number of headwords than its rivals. The FSD intended for ease of understanding sometimes end up being a hindrance to quick reference, understanding, and information retrieval because of its lengthiness and multi-functionality. We need to be reminded that the dictionary is basically a tool for quick reference and that EFL dictionaries are for advanced language learners. In the light of the present state of EFL dictionaries, it appears advisable to revisit the principles which underpinned dictionary compilation prior to FSDs and other redundancy-producing features, as well as provide dictionary use education. Designers of e-dictionaries should not just accommodate redundancies but offer options of compact and user-friendly presentations according to the user's level, needs, and choice.

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[5] Rundell (2006: 330-331), who originally quoted this *COBUILD3* entry, raises "overspecification" as an intrinsic weakness of the FSD, pointing out that the omitted patterns of "cheat someone of something" and "cheat someone" are as frequent. Yamada (2010: 152) also suggests the FSD's limitation in showing syntactic complexities. He argues against concentration of information in the definition as this is not the only component users seek.

[6] Spelling out of "intransitive and transitive" by *LDOCE5* is an example of excessive user-friendliness as the abbreviations would be sufficient.