Dictionaries for Foreign Students
(Learner's Dictionaries)

Monolingual dictionaries for foreign learner's of English became a distinctive genre in Britain in the second half of the twentieth century, with a worldwide boom of the teaching of English as a foreign language. The inspiration was taken from the research on the teaching of languages and especially Harold Palmer's "The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages". First learner's dictionaries were compiled in Japan by the Tokyo Institute for Research in English Teaching (IRET) of which Palmer was director from 1923 till 1936. Michael West, Harold Palmer and Hornby are the three sole or principal authors of first learner's dictionaries and four important dictionaries of this period are:
The New Method English Dictionary (West and Endicott, 1935)
A Grammar of English Words (Palmer, 1938)
A Beginner's English-Japanese Dictionary (Hornby and Ishikawa, 1940)
Idiomatic and Syntactic Dictionary (Hornby, 1942).
In 1927 the research department of IRET was asked to compile a controlled vocabulary suitable for schools of middle grade. It was necessary to identify those relatively few words which carried the main burden of communication in most everyday encounters.
Research into vocabulary control in the 1920s and 1930s was characterized by two widely differing approaches. The first to emerge was associated with a group of American linguists among whom the leading figure was Edward Thorndike of Columbia University. The so-called objective quantitative method was to count the words in a body of written texts amounting, in the case of Thorndike's highly influential list The Teacher's Word Book (1921), to four million. Palmer's approach was strikingly different and was "subjective", because of a firm belief that the personal judgement of the investigator and the experience of teachers were essential factors in vocabulary control.
Several dictionaries were published with controlled vocabulary in the following decades. In 1935, Michael West and Endicott published "The New Method English Dictionary", siding with Palmer's subjective approach rather than with the quantitative approach of Thorndike, with about 24,000 words defined by a defining vocabulary of 1,923 words. "The General Basic English Dictionary" by C.K. Ogden, it had 20,000 words, all defined with the 850 words of Basic English. Also there were some other dictionaries of the same kind but there are five learner's dictionaries considered to be the most important, the so-called "Big-Five".

1. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary

The dictionary that was to become the Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English was published first in Japan in 1942 under the title Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary by Hornby, Gatenby and Wakefield, who had taught English as a foreign language in Tokyo. The text was back to Britain during the Second World War and taken over by a new department of Oxford University Press. It was reproduced photographically and published in 1948 as A Learner's Dictionary of Current English. It was characterized by the following features: the wordlist contained the most important words necessary for foreign learners, the definitions were made by a simple language. ALD gave information on the plurals of nouns, the comparatives of adjectives, irregular verbal forms, countable and uncountable nouns, etc. ALD illustrated every meaning with at least one example, more than in any other dictionary of comparable size, all were current usage rather than literary styles. ALD recorded a great number of phrases. For

example, the entry *peace* treated *make peace, at peace with, the king's peace, break the peace, keep the peace, hold one's peace.*

ALD did not have obsolete or archaic words, and it gave meanings of polysemous words. ALD also had extensive front matter and back matter: lists (irregular verbs, common abbreviations, measures, geographical names, ranks in the armed forces) and pictures [motor car (interior and exterior), aeroplane, football, rugby, baseball, music, etc).

ALD was extremely successful, because the public of students learning English was immense and growing fast. ALD had several other editions, including more and more words, but all definitions were again made by simple vocabulary, for example, ALD's fifth edition was published in 1995, it had 55,000 references and the words were defined by 3.000 words.

2. *The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE)*

LDOCE was launched in 1978 with 55.000 entries, 69.000 examples and phrases and 100.000 pronunciations. Like ALD it had grammatical information, controlled vocabulary, emphases on phraseology, front matter and abundant back matter, but it also had it's original points. LDOCE was more generous in its inclusion of American English than ALD, in pronunciation, morphology and even in syntax.

In some cases, Stein argues that the definitions were simply wrong. For example **bemoan** 'to **be very sorry because of** ' missed the point, which is that *bemoan* is a **'way of expressing sorrow'**: the word cannot be used of someone who is silently sorry. Some metalexicographers concluded that LDOCE's defining vocabulary was less useful than it appeared at first.

LDOCE tended to split the meaning of polysemous words in many subsenses, sometimes to absurd lengths: the most often quoted example is the entry for the verb *walk,* in which LDOCE distinguished seven different meanings, beginning with

1 (of people and creatures with 2 legs)...   2 (of creatures with 4 legs)

Why not a special definition for creatures with six legs, some said, and one for spiders?

LDOCE had a much more analytic macrostructure than ALD, giving entry status so homographs, compound nouns, phrasal verbs and even some derived words: for example, there were separate entries **for *shock absorber, shoker, shockheaded, shocking, shockproof, shock treatment and shock troops,*** and the adjectival uses of ***good*** were scattered over more than fifteen entries: ***good book, good-humoured, good looker, good-looking, good looks, good-natured, good sense,*** etc. This sometimes made it difficult to locate a word, when closely related words were separated by totally different ones.

LDOCE , like ALD, was a great commercial success, and it was the object of many reviews and papers.

LDOCE 2, edited by Della Summers, was published in 1987. It had 56.000 words and phrases, 75.000 examples, pictorial illustrations. All the phrasal verbs, for example, for ***put*** were sub-entries in the entry for ***put.*** There were less differentiation of meanings in the treatment of polysemous words: ***walk*** did not have different meanings according to the number of legs. LDOCE also had several editions, the last one was published in 2009 as LDOCE 5 that is available online, the 3.000 most important words of its wordlists are printed in red, the others in blue.

3. The Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary

The Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary (COB) was compiled by a group of lexicographers working in Birmingham under the direction of John Sinclair and published in 1987. It had over 70.000 references and had been prepared with the help of the computer: What makes COB especially remarkable is that the compilation process for COBUILD used the computer in all the four traditional lexicographic stages of data-collecting, entry-selection, entry construction and entry arrangement. It used a corpus that was the joint property of Collins and of the University of Birmingham. COB had no precise defining vocabulary, although it said that the words used in its definitions were about 2.500- the commonest words of English. The front flap said that it had been 'specially developed for learners and teachers of English' and it did have some features of the learner's dictionary, a limited wordlist, meanings arranged by frequency, etc.

COB was the first dictionary to draw all its headwords and examples from an electronic corpus. The examples were taken from the corpus with only minor adaptations. COB's macrostructure grouped all the homographs in the same entries. The syntactic patterns of verbs, nouns and adjectives were given in a special column to the right of the main text. The abbreviations were easy to understand: *adv* (adverb), *n* (noun), *prep* (preposition), *adj* (adjective), *etc.* COB also used extra column to indicate the lexical relations of the headwords (synonyms, antonyms or hypernyms).

But there are many examples where the pronouns make the definition difficult to understand. The use of "etc" is not easy to interpret either:

The hackles of a dog, cat, etc. are the hairs on the back of its neck, which rise when the animal is angry.

Can hackles be used of a wolf, a horse, a hamster, a budgerigar?

Like other learner's dictionaries COB also had several other editions, the last one was COB 6 published in 2008, simply called Collins COBUILD Advanced Dictionary.

4. The Cambridge International Dictionary of English

The Cambridge International Dictionary of English (CIDE), compiled under the direction of Paul Procter was published in 1995. It had 100.000 words and phrases arranged alphabetically under 50.000 headwords and more than 100.000 examples. CIDE was particularly good in varieties of English and in idioms. It had grammatical information and used the defining vocabulary of about 2.000 words which are listed in an Appendix, with indications of which meanings of polysemous words are used.

Meanings were treated in different entries: for example, *ear* two entries, 'body part' and 'plant part', *shock* had four, one for 'surprise', one for 'offend', one for 'damaging effect' and one for 'hair', etc. Within the entries, nuances of meanings were not numbered, just signalled by a bullet point, often without a definition. For example, at *gap:*

• an empty space or opening in the middle of something or between two things • The children squeezed through a gap in the wall •She has a small gap between her front teeth
• (fig) There is a gap (=something missing) in the magazine ,market that needs to be filled • (fig) The gap between rich and poor is still widening (= the difference between them is becoming greater) etc.

On the whole, CIDE was found to be the more demanding of the four big learner's dictionaries of the time. It was made available on a CD-ROM in 1999. CIDE 2 was made available online and the third edition was published in 2008.

5. The Macmillan English Dictionary

The Macmillan Dictionary for Advanced Learners (MEDAL) entered the stage in 2002. It was compiled by a team of lexicographers headed by Rundell, who had worked on LDOCE, and Fox, who had worked on COB. It was based on the World English Corpus and a special corpus of learner productions. It had over 100.000 references drawn from the corpus. MEDAL gave its defining vocabulary of about 2.500 words. The most important words were printed in red, with a number of red stars indicating their frequency, and were given full treatment, with examples; the others, those that are necessary only for reception, were printed in black and treated more briefly.

Like other learner's dictionary MEDAL had several sorts of boxes on various linguistic points, some provided encyclopedic information. There were boxes comparing synonyms, called "other ways of saying", At the entry **beautiful** the box gave **attractive, good-looking, handsome, pretty, gorgeous, striking,** and **cute**. There were boxes explaining how function words and some highly common words can be used. For example, at **because**:

Because can be used in the following ways:
as a **conjunction** (connecting two clauses): *We went by bus because it was cheaper.*
in the preposition phrase **because of** (followed by a noun): *The game was cancelled because of the snow.*

MEDAL had differences between British and American English. "ways of . . ." gave advice on pragmatic questions: for example, the box at **apologize** said:

I'm sorry the usual way of apologizing to someone you know well
I do apologize for . . .   a more polite and formal way of apologizing, etc.

MEDAL's main original points were:
1. It was published in a British and American edition – first in learner's dictionaries.
2. It was prepared withy Wordsketch, a software program designed to draw the 'portrait' of each word – first in the compilation of a commercial dictionary.
3. It had a few proper names: *Eastwood, Clint, Edinburgh Festival, El Dorado, Emerald Isle, English Channel,* etc. MEDAL does not say how they were chosen.
4. It gave detailed information on frequent collocations. It had boxes called "Words frequently used with...": for example at **background**, the box gave **cultural, disadvantaged, educational, ethnic, middle-class, privileged** ,etc.
5. MEDAL had 'metaphor boxes', it's the most original feature.

MEDAL 2 was published in 2007. It had 'get it right' boxes on frequent errors, discursive sections on 'key writing functions', exercises, personal notes, etc.
To sum up, more than twenty editions of the main five learner's dictionaries were published since 1948. Each had several editions. All also produced in smaller, cheaper versions for less advanced students called *elementary, intermediate, student's essential,* or a variety of more imaginative names: the *Longman Active Study Dictionary of English* (1983; 38.000 words and phrases), the *Oxford Wordpower Dictionary*, etc.

Key features of the learner's dictionaries are:
1) A language of reference that is the usual, everyday usage, not the formal or literary.
2) An emphasis on the quality of microstructure rather than on the quantity of the wordlists.
3) A focus on the more frequent words and the more frequent meanings of words.
4) No information that is not functional, for example no etymology.
5) Definitions written with a limited defining vocabulary.
6) Extensive front matter and 'How to use the dictionary'.
7) pictorial illustrations of various kinds.
8) The use of the electronic forms, on CD-ROM or the internet.
9) The use of the corpus – no one would think now of publishing a learner's dictionary that would not be based on a corpus.
10) A more user-friendly style and simpler formulations.
11) A more readable format, with fonts of different sizes and colours, etc.

Over the years learner's dictionaries have improved and some think that they have reached perfection. The learner's dictionary of the future comes with a CD-ROM or as a CD-ROM, coordinated with a grammar, access to a corpus, pronunciation, a spellchecker, a thesaurus, a grammar checker, a set of exercises, access to website, etc.