

## DEFINITIONS AND DEFINING VOCABULARY IN LEARNER'S DICTIONARIES

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Defining vocabulary is a remarkable pedagogic attempt. Over a few centuries lexicographers as well as teachers put together their ideas and efforts to identifying words that have the power to define others words. This paper discusses a few such attempts made by people such as Dr Johnson, Michael West, and AS Hornby among others to explain how this notion of defining vocabulary has evolved.

### INTRODUCTION

Dr. Johnson's remarkable and oft-quoted analogy explicates a sense of dictionary audience or dictionary users.

The value of a work must be estimated by its use: it is not enough that a dictionary delights the critique, unless at the same time it instructs *the learner*; as it is to little purpose, that an engine amuses the philosopher by the subtlety of its mechanism, if it requires so much knowledge in its application, to as be of no advantage *to the common workman*. (Emphasis added)

Codifying the established conventions of the usage of words in dictionaries is directly proportional to users' expectations, competences, and cultures. Also, it does not depend too much on either the theoretical judgements as descended from the practical concerns of our ancestors or from the explorations made through intuition by the modern linguists, or from the analysis of the linguistic phenomena alone. It is, however, a continuous process where the dictionary-makers, having concerned with the quality of description and the level of reception by the user, use all the available resources such as defining vocabulary, and the techniques such as simple definition and citations that implicitly or explicitly teach the typical structures in which the target word is usually used/should be used, to achieve his purpose. In other words, what makes a dictionary 'learner's' is not just the number of entries it accommodates or the number of aspects it covers, but it is the *way* the facts are presented that makes it learner-friendly.

If Dr. Johnson were the solicitor who advocated the use of such learner-friendly *explanations* in place of definitions of scholarship, it was the reformists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as Dr. West, Palmer, and Hornby who advocated the use of *simple* words to define the entries in a standard learner's dictionary. By the First World War the notion 'defining vocabulary' had gained enough support from experts teaching English as a Foreign Language (Ogden, 1933), and later was incorporated

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into Longman's Dictionary (1974). This major breakthrough—defining the vocabulary using limited, familiar and highly frequent words—in pedagogical lexicography was further revitalized by scholars such as Paul Proctor, John Sinclair and Patrick Hanks when they brought out learner's dictionaries such as, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1978) and Collins *Cobuild English Language Dictionary* (1987). In the Collins dictionary, 'exploratory strategies' that 'typify' the 'meaning potential' in contexts of use (Hanks, 2006) have been employed along with the use of 'real' English examples. The following sections will trace the evolution of definitions and defining vocabulary diachronically and provide citations from dictionaries and offer critical comments on them.

### **DEFINING VOCABULARY**

The selection of words to define the target words has made an ever lasting impact on the business of dictionary compilation. These defining vocabulary have the potential to define other words of the language. These words may exhibit high *indexical valance* (Widdowson, 1983) in that the value of learning of these words may increasingly help the learners learn more words of the kind. For instance, words such as *fruit, thing, game, sport, problem, and vehicle* among others assist the learners to primarily visualize and conceptualize a generic model of a concept, a thing or a feeling and enable them to figure out the specific lexical sets of words associated with the target word. Identification of such defining vocabulary was a systematic process and took several years of effort beginning from early dictionary compilers to till to date experts. Here an over view of a few pioneering attempts are discussed. In English lexicographic tradition Dr Johnson stands tall in the list of reformers. Hence the discussion is situated around Dr Johnson.

### **PRE-JOHNSON ERA**

Although, it may not be difficult to trace the roots of the notion defining vocabulary, historically, the traces for English language have been found by anthropologists and historical linguists as early as in the early part of the 8<sup>th</sup> century (Murray, 1900). As Murray put it, the compelling need to understand or master the classic language, *Latin*, in England led some expert readers to provide 'interlinear glosses' to facilitate comprehension. Over a period of time these 'oldest vocabulary of English', which was primarily *Latin* in its content, was recovered from these glosses. These collected glosses were later developed into wordlists; and these wordlists were later classified and organized under broad themes. The words collected from such glosses primarily helped the non-expert readers to comprehend the literary texts written in the Latin language. Put precisely, these interlinear glosses were either the probable substitutions of the target 'Hard-words' available in the Latin language which a common reader of Latin text was expected to be familiar with or

they were the vernacular equivalents of the target Latin word. In other words, these words, partly were the words that

- could define the Hard-words of Latin;
- have already been familiar to the readers of the Latin texts;
- could be the most frequently used words across the social categories;
- constituted a larger part of everyday communicative activities.

These *glosses* as they were collected, modified, and preserved formed a larger part of Dr. Johnson's dictionary of English language.

### AGE OF JOHNSON

As Hanks (2005) put it succinctly, it was Dr. Johnson who discussed and dealt with this aspect so explicitly both in his letter to Lord of Chesterfield and in his dictionary as well. Since his *Plan* of the dictionary aimed at ascertaining 'the meaning of English idiom' as used 'in the general intercourse of life, or found in the works of those whom we commonly stile polite writers... without including the terms of particular professions...' (Johnson, 1755), his upper most concern for definitions was that they 'should be simpler, more comprehensible than the word it is being used to define', as it benefits the common man. A randomly selected word and its interpretation from Johnson's Dictionary (A Modern Selection by McAdam and Milne, 1963) is given below.

*Crocodile*. An amphibious voracious animal, in shape resembling a lizard, and found in Egypt and the Indies. It is covered with very large scales, which cannot, without great difficulty, be pierced; except under the belly, where the skin is tender. It has a wide throat, with several rows of teeth, sharp and separated, which enter one another...

The defining words in the definition given above have a dual task at hand: they should retain the 'truth value' (Leibniz's term as quoted in Hanks, 2005, 2006) of the target word, and at the same time they must also be familiar or known to the user. Hence a defining word, according to Johnson, is not just a substitutable equivalent of the target word but also a 'simple' word that is 'less abstruse than that which is to be explained'.

One might suspect and, of course, argue pointing at the way the *description* is written that the definition is 'abstruse' and least considers the role of defining vocabulary as we define it today. The point, however, is that the explanations provided by Dr Johnson had a few major objectives which probably may have constrained his use of defining vocabulary. The objectives were:

- 1) to preserve the purity of English language;
- 2) to give a faithful account of the target words while retaining the truth value;
- 3) to be comprehensive; and
- 4) to address the needs of the native speakers of English.

The central features of the defining words, therefore, were:

- they should be simple and comprehensible;
- they should be 'less abstruse than the word being explained';
- they must not tamper with the *truth value* of the target word.

### POST-JOHNSON ERA

Although, the years that followed the publication of Dr. Johnson's dictionary had shown considerable attention to the development of learners' dictionaries, often, except for a few lexicographers such as Webster and Worcester, the attention in lexical studies was paid to the linguistic concerns than to the pedagogical concerns. However, the pre-First World War years had witnessed a revitalizing concern for defining vocabulary; and by then the English language had crept into corners of the world and started becoming an influential language of world communication. A few practicing teacher scholars such as Ogden, Richards, Palmer, Thorndike, West, and Hornby, had refilled the field with their ideas to facilitate foreign language learning. The following probes into the details of these expert teachers' concerns in exploring defining vocabulary.

*Charles Kay Ogden*, a Cambridge psychologist, was one among the notable British reformists whose primary concern during the reform movement was to facilitate foreign language teaching/learning by reducing and replacing the 'full-language' to a limited number of words and simple grammatical rules. Ogden's (1930) BASIC (British-American-Scientific-International-Commercial) wordlist includes just 16 verbs and a total of 850 words, all of which could be written on a single sheet, for international communication (Smith, 2003). This wordlist was based on the principle of 'logical analysis' (McArthur, 1989 in Tickoo *ed*, 1989), and had three functions as an auxiliary language: as an international lingua franca, a way into the standard language for foreigner, and a cure for verbosity among users of English at large. This wordlist was used to give 'more than 40,000 senses for over 20,000 words.' This restricted wordlist, as Catford (1950) put it, was arrived at by following a 'four-fold' *elimination principle*:

- a) of all words (except the names of common objects) which can be defined in not more than ten words;
- b) of words which are primarily emotive rather than referential, for example, *opinion* for *conceit*, *modesty*;
- c) of words which have a chiefly literary or stylistic value, and
- d) of words which are used in contexts too specialized for the level of general communication. (Ogden, 1930, p.15)

*Michael West* was yet another pioneer in ELT, who, having witnessed the low achievement rates in English language proficiency by Indian learners, expressed

his dissatisfaction in the existing textbooks, and recommended graded readers based on a careful selection of words according to their frequency. He subsequently published himself *A General Service List of English Words* (1953) for the development of reading materials. West in one of his articles stated,

The primary thing in language learning is the acquisition of vocabulary, a practice in using it (which is the same thing as 'acquiring'). The problem is *what* vocabulary...

(West, 1930, p. 514)

In defining what constitutes *this* vocabulary, he along with Flood devised a list of 479 *Science and Technical Defining Vocabulary*. Words in this list, as they assumed, should facilitate foreign students access to science and technology texts, and should be 'capable of explaining scientific ideas while using as few scientific terms as possible'. West and Flood (1951) called these words 'defining vocabulary'. Words with such *valency* for the dictionary, they felt, could only be devisable by attempting to explain everything in science to a person who has little or no training in science. However, a set of functional criteria was arrived at for its selection. It includes:

- a) word should occur in other works on the subject;
- b) word that seems to be quite commonly used by the scientist, that can be replaced by a common word should be excluded;
- c) the frequently needed should be added;
- d) words of moderate necessity and cannot be replaceable should be added;
- e) words of wider denotation should be preferable to narrower meaning;
- f) key words to a group of ideas should be included and so on.

Words were itemized according to the principle criteria defined above into scientific (60 words), semi-scientific (125 words), and non-scientific. These words were expected to serve a moderate goal for foreign learners of English.

The contribution of *Herald E. Palmer* to the oral or situational approach in language teaching, the reform movement, and above all, the field of vocabulary, is praiseworthy. His principles, as explicated in Tickoo (2008), 'simplified texts based on carefully selected and sequenced words would cultivate the skills of reading and writing'; and 'no single list of words could serve all types of learners' purposes', helped teachers such as West, Faucett and Hornby in developing the criteria for word selection. As the founder of IRET (Institute for Research in English Teaching) in Japan, his work involved developing materials for Japanese EFL learners. Palmer here upheld the value of frequency study of words of general utility and asserted that materials could be written in small select vocabulary. He, as part of his exploration of definition of what constitutes a *word*, divided words into general, notional, and special categories, and emphasized the need to teach general concrete words before teaching abstract vocabulary. As for the learner to achieve the 'point of transition' (for more information please see Tickoo, 2008) in the target language,

he argued, the quintessence of the language should be organized based on the principles of Frequency, <sup>1</sup>Ergonic Combination, Concreteness, Proportion and <sup>2</sup>General Expediency. His notable contribution in the form of *Interim Reports on Vocabulary Selection* was primarily based on subjective assessment, experience and experimentation and on the statistical accounts of frequency and range. He emphasised that an English vocabulary of 3000 words is ‘an ideal basis for the compilation of texts to be used by the average foreign student in order to attain proficiency in ordinary “Plain English”’ (in Tickoo, 2008, p 305).

As a colleague and successor to Palmer, A. S. Hornby is well known as the compiler of the most prestigious and monumental piece of scholarship: *Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English*. His legacy that has continued to influence even after long years of his departure includes: simple definition, many examples of use, importance of collocation and patterns, pronunciation and illustrations.

For a considerable period of time the process of learning English was to be facilitated through the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* in India. The linguistic descriptions of target words in the concise dictionary were purely intuition based, and relatively complex for learners, especially Indian learners, to decipher the meaning(s) (Brown, 1978 in *In Honour of A S Hornby*). More often the learners were to take a cyclical journey, where they start at one word and end at another one, and this cyclical process was a time consuming, tiring and boring activity. It was Hornby’s advanced learner’s dictionary that explained words in an accessible manner for learners from EFL contexts.

Another major problem that Hornby addressed was that the first generation dictionaries lacked the delicacy and attentiveness to the learner variables, learning contexts, and their relation to the syntactic structures employed in encoding grammatical patterns in the construction of meaning. That is, often, alien and not so familiar syntactic patterns were used to the most frequently occurring and familiar structures, thereby increasing the difficulty level. This problem was thoroughly addressed by Hornby (1938) and his colleagues through his systems of ‘verb patterns’ supported by the frequency analysis of syntactic patterns. Later his work was absorbed into his dictionaries.

*Crocodile* (pronunciation) *n.* a reptile with a long body, a very hard skin, and a long tail, living in the rivers of Africa, Asia, Australia and America. (+ an illustration)

(*The Advanced Learner’s dictionary of Current English*, 1948)

*Crocodile* (pronunciation) *n.* large river reptile with a long body and tail, covered with a hard skin. (- illustration)

(*Oxford Advanced Learner’s dictionary of Current English*, 1974)

While the purpose of Dr. Johnson’s dictionary was to provide a comprehensive description, or interpretation and a truthful account of the target word for the native speakers of English, Hornby’s effort was put into to help the learners, especially

those who study English as a foreign language, with their decoding and encoding skills. However, both the definitions share a set of common and uncommon features.

- a) Both the dictionaries are meant to inform the general reader or a common man.
- b) Both Johnson and Hornby worded their definitions in a true traditional sense following a *genus* term and *differentia* pattern (Hanks, 2006). That is, firstly both of them answered the question 'what sort of a thing is a crocodile' and later distinguished it from other members of the related sets.
- c) Both Dr. Johnson's and Hornby's dictionaries have illustrations. While Johnson's definitional properties include verbal illustration in the form a long interpretations, Hornby's dictionary incorporated, at least for concrete things, images/pictures to support the interpretation.
- d) The major difference between Johnson's and Hornby's dictionaries is that while Hornby approach was scientific in that he identified words that can form his defining vocabulary, Dr. Johnson applied his intuition to word his definitions.
- e) While Dr. Johnson's definitions are long and include encyclopaedic and specific information of the target words for reference purposes by general readers, Hornby's definitions are primarily meant for learners.

#### **THE INTERIM REPORT ON VOCABULARY SELECTION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE (1936)**

A committee—Faucett, Palmer, Thorndike, and West—was appointed by the *Carnegie Conference* for the selection or valuation of vocabulary, for the simplification of the teaching of English in order to facilitate the practical needs of children, youth and adults who need English as an additional language. The committee, adhering to a set of criteria to arrive at a wordlist, submitted a report (*Interim Report on Vocabulary Selection for the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language*) in 1936. One of the selection criteria used was the 'value of the words for the purpose of definition of the meaning of other words' (Definitional value). They are the words necessary

- 1) to enable a pupil to satisfy a need which he is unable to express directly;
- 2) to enable a teacher to define an unknown word without the use of vernacular;
- 3) to understand a dictionary.

For the selection of words both subjective and objective criteria were used; and the questions of needs, usefulness, and appropriacy were also considered seriously.

### **LONGMAN'S DICTIONARY AND ITS DEFINITIONS AND DEFINING VOCABULARY**

Hornby came up with a pedagogical template of the modern English language dictionary for foreign learners, and the *Longman* brought in a radical change in the way the words were defined. Considering practical problems of the learners for whom English was taught as a foreign language, a defining vocabulary (*controlled vocabulary*, Proctor, 1978) of 2000 words was used to define the target words and to give examples. This defining vocabulary for the dictionary making purposes was selected from West's (1953) *General Service List of English Words*. According to Quirk (as remarked in the preface of the 1978 edition of the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*), this decision would help the users in two respects:

- a) 'his knowing this small set of words is the only prerequisite for understanding the definitions of every word in the dictionary;
- b) the strict use of defining vocabulary resulted in a fresh and revealing semantic analysis.

The basic working principle behind selecting these words 'the definitions should always be simpler than the word being defined', was one of the major arguments of both Johnson and Hornby. However simple the definitions may seem, the compilers still followed the traditional style in defining the words: presenting a substitution of the target word as *definiendum*, and distinguishing it from other sets of words.

Example: Currency: the particular type of money in use in a country.

While ALD, LDOCE and other learner's dictionaries followed traditional techniques of definition, CoBuild dictionary has looked definitions from a different perspective.

### **RECENT TRENDS IN DEFINITIONS**

Among all other innovations in lexicography, CCELD stands on the top for its radical reformations. For Cobuild, the 'definiendum is not a word but a word in context' (Hanks, 2006). These empiricists, unlike generative linguists who rely heavily on intuition, depend on evidence. Observing large amount of texts, they believe, enable them to observe typical and atypical patterns of language use. These patterns are usually meaningful units made up of individual words of the language. Selectional preference for each of the phrases subsequently depends on the context in which they are used. In other words, the use of a word is not independent of the context/co-text; and, often, the basic meaningful unit of language is a phrase than a word.

The appearance of a word or a word sense in the corpus based Cobuild dictionary (CCELD) is a choice made by the lexicographer from corpus evidence. These selection preferences are made on the basis of the general occurrence and



their concomitant usage across the corpus. These decisions are later supported by the lexicographers' intuition. Hence not all entries follow objective criteria in determining their entry behaviour. It is largely a preference made. However, what aspects must be included is both a practical and theoretical concern. Let us examine the following contexts and their meaning senses from the *Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner's Illustrated Dictionary* (2010).

Context/Example:

No one likes these suburban domestic grabs, but they're **bread and butter** cases.

Definition from the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2009): bread and butter questions are very important basic ones.

Definition from the *Collins Cobuild Illustrated Dictionary* (2010) : bread and butter issues or matters are important to most people, because they affect them personally.

Close examination of both LDOCE and CCALID reveal the following points:

- While LDOCE's definition is written in a traditional style, CCALID's definition is written in an explanatory style.
- While the LDOCE focuses on one semantic variant, one context, and one possible collocation (question), CCALID focuses on more than one variant ( issues, matters, and affect).
- LDOCE does not give any account of the negative semantic preference attached to the phrase, whereas CCALID signals to such preference through the use of words such as issues and affect.

In addition to these features, CCALID has the following features:

- Presents the meaning sense in a context in which the target word is a part;
- Draws generalizations and semantic preferences from both the corpus evidence and intuition;
- Makes explicit of the characteristic features such as frequently used collocations, colligations, or the lexical and structural preferences,;
- Addresses the reader directly;
- Renders more assistance for encoding purposes for the users.

All said, the nature of defining vocabulary is an evolutionary idea. It's definition cannot be simplified to identifying a lexical set with wider application alone. Each word to be used to define the other words is carefully chosen considering a range of factors. Moreover, these words are dynamic in their nature.

#### *Notes*

1. Ergons are words that possess the power of almost unlimited combination like the word *like* which appears as present tense, as adjective, as infinitive and as preposition, which the other words of equal frequency do not have.
2. Words though are not frequent and yet important.

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