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Fixed expressions, idioms and phraseology in recent English learner's dictionaries

ABSTRACT: The paper briefly itemizes the kinds of phenomena which continue to bedevil learners of English in the broad area of phraseology. The general treatment of 'phraseological units' in three learner's dictionaries (LDOCE 2, OALD 4, COBUILD) is analyzed. The scope of the dictionaries is assessed by means of a check of 125 items and the results are discussed and compared. A final section draws some tentative conclusions concerning the user-friendliness of the dictionaries and possible changes.

1. Introduction

'Fixed expressions' in English, in particular the subset 'idioms', still continue to pose problems for learners, in both encoding and decoding terms. How do learners find out about and learn them? Since the author first investigated the coverage of phraseological information in various types of dictionaries (Alexander 1978-9 and 1984), there has been a veritable explosion in British EFL lexicography. It would appear an appropriate conjuncture to reexamine the utility of advanced learner's dictionaries in this area.

2. Fixed expressions and idioms

Alexander (1978/79) delineated a number of categories of what can be called 'fixed expressions'. This term subsumes 'phraseological units' such as Gläser (1983) discusses. Advanced students encounter difficulties in assimilating these items (Alexander 1985). Alexander (1984 and 1987) distinguished further a number of idiom types: including binomials, compounds, full and semi-idioms, proverbs, stock phrases, allusions, quotations and idiomatic similes and also discourse expressions (eg gambits). These disparate units manifest similarities. Three clusters of features link fixed expressions: (1) 'idiomaticity', (2) socio-cultural markedness, (3) pragmatic properties in certain items. These criteria can help to map this 'fuzzy' domain.

3. Learner's Dictionaries of English

Studies of learner use of dictionaries show that one of the few uses to which monolingual dictionaries are put is for the purpose of decoding idioms. Hence the justification for comparing the relative offerings to English students on the market. We attempt a partial update of a previous study (Alexander 1984).

4. Analysis

4.1 Treatment of phraseological items

We consider firstly the 'general' treatment of phraseological units in OALD 4, LDOCE 2, and COBUILD. As teachers of advanced learners of English know, familiarity with the 'lay out', terminology and conventions of a dictionary are crucial in maximizing the 'take out' of information.

4.2 The frontmatter

We can view the 'rationale' of each dictionary towards idiomatic and phraseological phenomena as represented in the frontmatter in terms of accessibility and terminology.

4.3 Accessibility of the phraseological information

OALD 4 has a key to the entries at the beginning. The editor has wisely chosen to preface the dictionary with a short 'practical guide' (7 pages only). The detailed guide to the entries has been postponed to the back. Given users' propensities to pay little attention to such guides this may well have been a shrewd move.

COBUILD contains a section in the 'Guide to the Use of the Dictionary' (p.x) on the use of the typographical bullet to introduce phrases or expressions. Two following sections deal with phrases and one (11.5) explicitly states that phrases and expressions are "grouped together in one paragraph at or near the end of the entry" (p.x). A separate section (12) refers to phrasal verbs.

LDOCE 2 focuses on phraseological information in both its 'Explanatory Chart' and the 'Quick Guide to Using the Dictionary'. The latter employs an inductive approach, with examples to access. This may well appeal to certain learner types. Section 2 (p. F18-19) introduces, via a further passage, phrasal verb and fixed phrase searching. Cross-references for further information on dealing, among others, with idioms are made to the 'Full Guide to Using the Dictionary'; these are in smaller print, so only the persistent users will perhaps consult them.

4.4 Terminology – metalinguistic expectations of user

The information is immediately accessible in OALD 4. It stands out with subheadings on 'idioms' and on 'phrasal verbs'. A helpful definition starts the first section: "An IDIOM is a phrase which has a special meaning of its own. (It is difficult to work out the meaning of the whole phrase from the meanings of the individual words)" (p.xiv). The section on the phrasal verbs is also lucid.

COBUILD's definition is rather disappointing: "Phrases or expressions are groups of two or more words, including the entry word, that occur regularly in a particular combination which has a very different meaning from that of the entry word itself. The main words of the phrase or expression are in bold letters." Yet phrasal verbs are separately dealt with and are defined.

LDOCE 2 includes a useful definition of 'idiom'. But it has to be said that the assumed level of metalinguistic sophistication on the part of the prospective reader given the 'dense' text will not appeal to the average student of English. The examples selected are, however, well chosen; the final one drawing attention to how 'fixed phrases' may be used to express polite disagreement.

4.5 General

Much relevant material is to be found within the bodies of COBUILD and LDOCE 2 – once the users are ‘primed’. And also in the case of OALD 4 when moving beyond the frontmatter to ‘The Detailed Guide’.

The ‘pragmatic shift’ in ELT/TESOL is rightly coming to be reflected in lexicography, despite the intrinsic difficulties in presenting such ‘dynamic’ and context-dependent features in dictionary format. All three dictionaries have assimilated the development in their various ways. Such data is beyond the reach of the ‘average’ user. It still remains the teacher’s task to demonstrate how to extract and utilize this information!

4.6 Summary

On balance, OALD 4’s treatment of ‘phraseology’ makes it the most user-friendly of the three dictionaries.

There are a number of disadvantages with the Guide to COBUILD. There is no explicit reference in the Extra Column – one of the most helpful features of COBUILD to what labels are used for phrases and other related entries. The user has to pick this up inductively. The terms PHR and CONVENTION are contained in the list of special entries, however. As mentioned above the term ‘expression’ is also used, but not defined. Nowhere is the term ‘idiom’ used in COBUILD.

A positive feature of LDOCE 2, which it shares with COBUILD, we should add, is its orientation to the words of a language “in terms of their function in combination with other words and structures”. The inclusion of ‘sayings’ in LDOCE 2 is also laudable. And certainly what sets off this dictionary from the others is the explicit inclusion of what I term ‘pragmatic idioms’: under various headings. Unfortunately, in LDOCE 2 much relevant information is ‘buried’ either in the body of the dictionary or relegated to the ‘backmatter’.

5. Scope of phraseological items: Spot check

To ascertain the scope of coverage of the dictionaries a spot check was undertaken of 125 phraseological items. The material selected for the spot check is a collation and refinement of the types surveyed in earlier papers (Alexander 1978/79, 1984, 1987). Some of the fixed expression categories are collapsed. While the idiom types are expanded. This gives rise to the following categories:

- 1 Phrasal verbs – ‘Get on with’
- 2 Irreversible binomials
- 3 Tournures – ‘kick the bucket’-type
- 4 Catch phrases – slogans and clichés
- 5 Proverbs, gnomic expressions: ‘too many cooks’
- 6 Pragmatic idioms : gambits ‘Come again!’
- 7 Animal metaphors : ‘a dog’s breakfast’
- 8 Idiomatic similes : ‘as cool as a cucumber’
- 9 Allusion and allusive idioms: ‘Fleet Street’

They range from prototypical idioms, ie categories (1 – 3), include ‘culturally’-tinged items (4 – catchphrases and 5 – proverbs), and pragmatically relevant items (type 6).

Categories (7) and (9) are subdivisions of a 'broader' category (in Alexander 1987). Both share, however, in common with (8) – idiomatic similes, the feature of containing a large 'socio-cultural' element. They are items which advanced students have not yet encountered. Ten to fifteen items (N = 125) covering each category of potential difficulty for learners were chosen for the purposes of the investigation. The spot check items searched for are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Items checked according to dictionary

Key to symbols used:

+	=	found		f/i	=	formal/informal
?	=	near variant		s	=	saying
0	=	not found		CO	=	CONVENTION
EG	=	illustrative example		ldm	=	ldiom

Dictionaries checked	LDOCE2	OALD 4	COBUILD
1 PHRASAL VERBS	10/10	10/10	10/10
1 bring about	+	+	+
2 do up (repair)	+	+	+
3 get off with	+	+	+
4 give in	+	+	+
5 go on (continue)	+	+	+
6 hang on	+	+	+
7 have on (trick)	+	+	+
8 make it up	+	+	+
9 pull round	+	+	+
10 put over	+	+	+
2 IRREVERSIBLE BINOMIALS	13/15	13/15	13/15
11 bed and breakfast	+	+	+
12 peaches and cream	0	+	0
13 (by) fits and starts	+	+	+
14 (every) nook and cranny	+	+	+
15 cloak and dagger	+	+	+
16 neither fish nor fowl, nor good red herring	0	+s	0
17 cock and bull	+	+	+
18 without let and hindrance	+	+f	+
19 high and dry	+	+	+
20 cut and dried	+	0	+
21 hum and haw	+	+i	+
22 touch and go	+	+	+
23 rant and rave	+	+	+
24 sink or swim	+	0	+
25 lock, stock and barrel	+	+	+
3 TOURNURES	9/10	8/10	9/10
26 play it safe	+	+	+
27 fly off the handle	+	+	+
28 break it gently	0	0	+?
29 let it pass	+	0	0
30 put one's foot in it	+	+	+
31 paint the town red	+	+	+
32 smell a rat	+	+	+
33 swallow the bitter pill	+	+	+

34 go down the drain	+	+	+
35 clear the air	+	+	+
4 CATCH PHRASES	3/15	3/15	3/15
36 I'm only here for the beer	0	0	0
37 And now for something completely different	0	0	0
38 Rhubarb, rhubarb, rhubarb	+	+	+
39 Didn't she do well	0	0	0
40 Shall I do you now, sir?	0	0	0
41 Oh, stop messing about!	0?	0?	0?
42 Oh, no, not again!	0	0	0
43 I have to see a man about a dog	0	0	0
44 Back to square one!	+	+idm	+
45 TTFN	0	0	0
46 He couldn't knock the skin off a rice pudding	0	0	0
47 Stop me and buy one	0	0	0
48 Watch my lips	0	0	0
49 Don't some mothers 'ave 'em	0	0	0
50 It's not cricket	+	+	+
5 PROVERBS	5/15	11/15	5/15
51 Don't put all your eggs in one basket	+	+	+
52 Take the bull by the horns	+	+	+
53 Many a little makes a mickle	0	0	0
54 Don't make a mountain out of a molehill	+	+	+
55 A bad workman always blames his tools	0	+s	0
56 Familiarity breeds contempt	0	+	+
57 If a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well	0	0	0
58 There's nowt so queer as folk	0	0	0
59 Curiosity killed the cat	0	+s	0
60 Necessity is the mother of invention	+	+s	+EG
61 Opportunity seldom knocks twice	0	0	0
62 Many hands make light work	0	+s	0
63 Too many cooks spoil the broth	0	+idm	0
64 It's a long lane that has no turning	0	+	0
65 New brooms sweep clean	+	+	0

6 PRAGMATIC IDIOMS	3/15	4/15	2/15
66 Don't mind me	0	0	+CO
67 Here's something to remember me by	0	0	0
68 Hold your horses!	+	+	0
69 You and whose army?	0	0	0
70 Thanks for having me	0	0	0
71 The point is	?	0	0
72 Let me put it another way	0	0	0
73 What you're really saying is	0	0	+?
74 I think that about wraps it up	0	0	0
75 Going back to	0	0	0
76 That reminds me	0	+	0
77 May I say something here?	0	0	0
78 A classic example of this is...	+	+?EG	0
79 Plus the fact that...	0	0	0
80 Say when	+	+	0
7 ANIMAL METAPHORS	14/15	13/15	12/15
81 to turn canary	0	0	0
82 to put the cat among the pigeons	+	+	+
83 a crocodile of children	+	+	+
84 to be dogged by bad luck	+	+	+EG
85 to duck out of sight	+	+	+
86 to fish for compliments	+	+	+
87 a fly in the ointment	+	+	+
88 to take a gander	+	+	0
89 to get my goat	+	+	+
90 to cook someone's goose	+	+	+
91 to have kittens	+	+	+
92 to make a monkey out of someone	+	0	0
93 to play possum	+	+	+
94 to talk turkey	+	+	+
95 to have a whale of a time	+	+	+
8 IDIOMATIC SIMILES	10/15	14/15	7/15
96 as plain as a pikestaff	+	+	+
97 as pretty as a picture	+	+	0
98 as dead as a doornail	+	+	0
99 as busy as a bee	+	+	0
100 as playful as a kitten	0	+EG	0
101 as different as chalk and cheese	0	+	+
102 as dry as dust	+	+	+EG

103 as vain as a peacock	0	0	0
104 as hard as nails	+	+	+EG
105 to swear like a trooper	+	+	0
106 as good as gold	+	+	+EG
107 as regular as clockwork	+	+	0
108 as drunk as a lord	0	+	0
109 as large as life	+	+	+
110 as deaf as a post	0	+	+
9 ALLUSIVE IDIOMS	13/15	14/15	14/15
111 Achilles' heel	+	+	+
112 home sweet home	0	0	0
113 a peeping Tom	+	+	+
114 mind your p's and q's!	+	+	+
115 the salt of the earth	+	+	+
116 a sacred cow	+	+	+
117 rule of thumb	+	+	+
118 read the riot act	+	+	+
119 in the red	+	+	+
120 raglan sleeves	+	+	+
121 in Queer Street	+	+	+
122 a Pyrrhic victory	+	+	+
123 the prodigal son	+	+	+
124 hoist with one's own petard	+	+	+
125 the world is my oyster	0	+	+
TOTALS	80/125	90/125	75/125

6. Results

Dictionaries checked	LDOCE2	OALD 4	COBUILD
CATEGORY			
1 Phrasal verbs	100 %	100 %	100 %
2 Irreversibles	86.66%	86.66%	86.66%
3 Tournures	90 %	80 %	90 %
4 Catch phrases	20 %	20 %	20 %
5 Proverbs	33.33%	73.33%	33.33%
6 Pragmatic idioms	20%	26.66%	13.33%
7 Animal metaphors	93.33%	86.66%	80%
8 Idiomatic similes	66.66%	93.33%	46.66%
9 Allusive idioms	86.66%	93.33%	93.33%
	LDOCE2	OALD 4	COBUILD
% items found	64%	72%	60%

Table 2 summarizes the findings.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, all ten items were found in the first category – the phrasal verbs. Neither were there any differences in the irreversible binomials category; here all three contained 13/15, ie 86.66%, of the items searched for. In the 'tournure'-type, they all fared well also; either 8/10 or 9/10.

When we look at the 'culturally-tinged' types we have a spread of findings. Of the 'catch phrase' category none of the dictionaries contained more than 20 of the items. The proverbial expressions brought out the greatest differences in coverage, with OALD 4 having 73.33% (11/15) of the items and the others having only a third (5/15). All three fared relatively badly, when it came to the category of 'pragmatic idioms': a maximum of 4/15 (26.66%) was encountered in OALD 4.

All three did fairly well in the categories of 'animal metaphors', and allusive idioms, with an average of over 85%, in two. The other category where marked differences in coverage came out was category 8 'idiomatic similes'; less than 50% for COBUILD and over 90% for OALD 4.

7. Conclusions

The differences in quantitative terms between the rival dictionaries are interesting but not vast. Qualitative factors will not be dealt with here. Different lexicographers clearly focus upon different things. How this squares with users' wants and needs is something we require more research on. How do they deal with the three clusters of criteria isolated as relevant for dealing with fixed expressions above (in section 2), for example? Not adequately enough.

In terms of the feature of 'idiomaticity', OALD 4 seems good value. In terms of socio-cultural factors none of the three dictionaries comes away with flying colours. The 'pragmatic' revolution has been acknowledged by the lexicographers. But the satisfactory storage and accessing of such information in all three dictionaries still leaves much to be desired.

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