Verb Syntax in the revised *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*: Descriptive and Pedagogical Considerations

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Introduction

Thanks to the enterprise of a Japanese publisher in reissuing in a facsimile edition **The Bulletin** of the Institute for Research in English Teaching for the years 1923 to 1941, we now have an incomparable record of A. S. Hornby at work, as grammarian and lexicographer, in the four years leading from the genesis of the first edition of the **Advanced Learner's Dictionary** to its completion. We learn of Hornby's approach to syntactic analysis, his preferred grammatical models, his plans for new dictionary projects, above all his insistence in dictionary work on combining descriptive rigour and practical usefulness.

Like his mentor Harold E. Palmer, Hornby recognised the need to be both authoritative and practical when providing grammatical information in a learner's dictionary. Hornby drew on the most up-to-date scholarly descriptions available, notably those of Otto Jespersen, whose **Essentials of English Grammar** and **Analytic Syntax** are known to have been influential in shaping his descriptive approach (1939: 147-155). But in Hornby's view, the findings of research were valueless without some practical project to apply them to; and by late 1938 he was already engaged in compiling two monolingual dictionaries, and had completed a **Beginners' English-Japanese Dictionary** of 2,000 entries patterned closely on Palmer's **Grammar of English Words** (1938: 23). In his report to IRET members of those activities, as well as in the earliest edition of OALD, Hornby gave examples of learner errors produced by the extension of known patterns to verbs to which they did not in fact apply. As he put it: 'The pupil learns the sentence, «I told him the meaning of the phrase,»... He makes, by analogy, the sentence, «I explained him the meaning of the phrase.»' Now a scheme of verb patterns, he believed, with suitable supporting examples, could be used 'to guide learners in the right construction of English sentences' (1938: 25).

By 'verb patterns' (which he distinguished from sentence patterns) Hornby meant the principal types of verb complementation found in the English sentence. One such system of patterns was used by Palmer for his **Grammar of English Words**. But the system of 25 Verb Patterns announced by Hornby in 1938 and afterwards incorporated without modification in the **Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary** (1942) —later published by OUP as the **Advanced Learner's Dictionary** (1948)— was designed by Hornby alone, and departed from Palmer's preferred model in two key respects (Cowie 1989a). It organized the patterns into two major blocks (transitive verbs first, intransitive verbs afterwards) and it aimed to reflect Hornby's view that whereas it was helpful to show the constituency of sentences, in terms of phrase and non-finite clause classes, it was also crucial to indicate the syntactic functions of those classes (as direct objects, indirect objects, and so on).

Though Hornby's intentions in this respect were not perfectly realised in ISED, the underlying perception was of key importance, and was to lead to important developments in later editions (and later rival dictionaries).

OALD 3: a major revision

Hornby left the 1942 VP scheme virtually untouched until the third edition of 1974, when it underwent substantial revision. Since the latter was the starting-point for the present (1989) reshaping, it may help if I set out what are commonly regarded as its chief shortcomings, both descriptive and pedagogical.

One descriptive failing, without doubt, is inconsistency and incompleteness in the way clause constructions are described. If one opts for a treatment of verb complementation that takes account of function as well as form, the two descriptive levels should both be represented in all cases. Nor is it a matter of assigning different types of label to *different* adjacent elements, but a matter of providing two kinds of information about the *same* post-verbal constituent. Now if one looks, in OALD 3, at the descriptive headings above the VP tables, one finds that complementation is sometimes represented by clause element labels, thus:

1. [VP12B] Subject + *vt* + IO + DO,
at others by constituent class labels, so:
2. [VP18A] Subject + *vt* + noun/pronoun + infinitive,
and at others again by both, though at different points, thus:
3. [VP22] Subject + *vt* + DO + adjective.

Certain curious anomalies in labelling survive from the earlier editions. In the case of [VP22] it is clear that the final adjective functions as an object complement (as in *We painted the ceiling green*), but reference to this is oblique ('an adjective which indicates result or manner'). In the next pattern, [VP 23], which is also complex-transitive, there is again no reference to the complement in the table, but it is correctly identified in an accompanying note.

A second point has to do with identifying the major groupings of verbs. The number of VPs was doubled for the third edition (it went from 21 undivided and 4 sub-divided patterns to 51 coded patterns and sub-patterns), and their arrangement was changed, so that they now roughly followed the order copular and intransitive (VPs 1-5), monotransitive (VPs 6A-19C), di-transitive (VPs 20-21) and complex-transitive (VPs 22-25). However, these significant groupings were not made explicit to the user either by providing the individual patterns with suitable labels or by introducing sub-headings.

Then again, the complexity of the system was greatly added to by the creation of small sub-patterns within a given VP on the basis of transformational differences between sub-classes of verbs. For example, the division of VP6 into A and B was made on the ground that some transitive verbs with NP objects allow passivization while others do not. The scheme was also enlarged to take account of the substitution possibilities of certain classes of direct object. For instance, VP6C and VP6D were distinguished for the reason that while an infinitive is not substitutable for the gerund in the first case, it is in the second:

4. [VP6C] She enjoys playing tennis. (Cf. * She enjoys to play tennis.)
5. [VP6D] She loves going to the cinema. (Cf. She loves to go to the cinema.)

Such properties could quite easily have been treated in individual entries without the need for additional sub-patterns. For example, in all cases where a direct object could be realized by either an infinitive clause or an *-ing* form clause one would simply enter the appropriate codes for those two patterns. Where no substitution was possible only one code would appear.

Yet perhaps the chief target of critics in recent years has been the letter/number code linking individual dictionary entries to the explanatory tables (Heath 1982, Lemmens and Wekker 1986). Codes such as VP4F and VP6A, of course, simply reflect the ordering of patterns in the total scheme: they tell the user nothing about the individual patterns themselves. Learning them calls for exceptional dedication, and they have undoubtedly deterred many students from referring to what is still, despite its various shortcomings, a helpful grammatical statement.

OALD4: the new scheme

The key features of the present radically revised scheme were intended to make good these various deficiencies.

First, in line with practice in the most widely used pedagogical grammars of English (e.g. Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973), clause elements and constituent classes were both incorporated in the description. Where there is one post-verbal element, its phrase or clause class is shown below its clause function in the appropriate table:

6. [Tg]

subject	transitive verb	direct object: non-finite clause (*-ing* form)
Peter	*enjoys*	*playing football.*

Where there are two such elements, only the class of the second is identified, since that of the first is always a noun phrase or prepositional phrase (additionally brought home to the user by the coding):

7. [Cn.n]

subject	complex-transitive verb	direct object	object complement: noun (phrase)
We	*made*	*Frank*	*chairman.*

For the revised edition of OALD, the number of VPs has been reduced to 32. Why so few—or so many? The basis of the new scheme is an empirical comparative analysis of the complementation patterns of verbs. Its outcome is a framework of clause types in which similarities and differences are systematically set out. The analy-

tical approach can be illustrated with reference to two patterns which are easily confused. These are, first, a transitive clause whose direct object is a non-finite clause with included noun phrase (here, *Mark*):

8. I wanted [Mark to beat Bill]

and a complex-transitive clause with a noun phrase as direct object and a non-finite clause as object complement:

9. The gang forced the porter [to hand over the keys].

Those contrastive structures (respectively coded Tnt and Cn.t) were brought to light by means of various formal tests. For instance, a pseudo-cleft construction shows NP + *to*-infinitive clause to be a constituent of the main clause in the first example but not in the second:

8a. What I wanted was Mark to beat Bill.
9a. * What the gang forced was the porter to hand over the keys.

Morever, NP + *to*-infinitive can be passivized in the first instance but not in the second:

8b. I wanted Bill to be beaten by Mark.
9b. ? The gang forced the keys to be handed over by the porter.

Those comments have to do with the descriptive soundness of the Verb Pattern scheme. But there were also specifically pedagogical problems to be addressed. These chiefly concerned the type of notation chosen, the arrangement of individual codes in entries, and the relationship between codes and examples.

First, I thought it vital that codes should be self-explanatory (the weakness of the earliest reference systems being that they were quite opaque). Ideally, it should be possible for the user to learn the meanings of a full set of labels within a very short time. But since the notation had to be concise as well as memorable, I decided not to attempt direct representation of *all* clause elements and constituent classes by means of standard grammatical labels. One of the arguments I put forward in an earlier paper (Cowie 1984) for not providing a point by point description, as my colleagues and I had already done in the second volume of the **Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English** (1983), and as the Collins-Birmingham team were later to do for the **Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary** (1987), is that every gain in explicitness of statement has to be paid for, either by expanding the dictionary unacceptably, or by dispensing with vital illustrative material.

The challenge was to represent the two levels of patterning faithfully and mnemonically, but by means of a simpler notation than those adopted for the dictionaries I have mentioned. As a first step, the capitals L, I, T, C and D were chosen to denote the five major classes of verb (linking, intransitive, monotransitive, complex-transitive and di- or double-transitive) made familiar to many teachers and students overseas by the Quirk grammars. Treatment of constituent classes was more problematical. In the end, a set of abbreviations was decided on (some of them close to stan-

dard part-of-speech labels) to represent the various phrase and subordinate clause types: 'a' for adjective phrase, 'n' for noun phrase, 't' for *to*-infinitive clause, and so on. These were placed after the verb labels to give, for instance, [La] (linking verb + adjective phrase) and [Tn] (monotransitive verb + noun phrase). But the major verb-classes are of course defined syntactically: a linking verb is by definition a verb in construction with a noun or adjective phrase functioning as a complement. Thus by including in a code a particular verb label, one is also signalling the number and functions of the post-verbal elements. Where there were two such elements, as after a double-transitive verb like *give, present* or *award*, they were separated in the coding by a dot. Consider the example

10. The chairman gave everyone a week's holiday.

For this the code is [Dn.n], where the dot marks the separation of the two objects, indirect and direct. But [Dn.n] (specifically 'n.n') also indicates a possible realization of those elements: noun phrase + noun phrase. This can be contrasted with [Dn.t], as in:

11. Mary asked Bill to shut the door.

Here the post-verbal elements are unchanged (indirect + direct), but the second (the direct object) is now realized by a non-finite dependent clause.

I have justified this notation on grounds of its succinctness: it conveys patterning on two descriptive levels with great economy of statement. But from the standpoint of the learner and teacher these conventions have a further practical advantage, namely that they allow a given code to be read in either or both of two ways. The less proficient student can interpret [Dn.t], say, as a string of verb, noun and *to*-infinitive, and relate it directly to an example in the entry for *ask*. At this level of proficiency, no distinction will be drawn by the user between [Dn.t], [Cn.t] and [Tnt], as illustrated respectively by:

12. Mary asked Bill to play the piano.
13. Mary inspired Bill to play the piano.
14. Mary liked Bill to play the piano.

But the teacher or more advanced student should be able without too much difficulty to identify from the codes the different verb classes and clause elements that they represent. For these users, the functional level is important because distinctions at this level correspond to underlying differences of meaning, which the less able may perceive, but which the teacher needs to be able to explain.

A further vital requirement of the revision was to give careful thought to the arrangement of codes in entries and sub-entries. I have already explained that when the 1942 VP scheme was revised in the early 1970s, it was decided to rearrange the major verb-groupings, putting the copular and intransitive types first and the simple, double and complex transitives last. However, whilst this plan was carried through as regards the tabular treatment in the front matter, the old ordering of patterns was left unchanged in a number of individual entries, only the codes being altered to reflect the listing of patterns in the new scheme. There were numerous inconsis-

tencies. In the entry for **leak 2.** for instance, the patterns followed the same order as in the revised scheme [VP2A. 6A, 14], whereas at **leave¹**, they followed that of the old scheme [VP6A. 2A, 3A]. A logical arrangement of VPs, consistently followed in the entries, was clearly needed, and as a first step the full set of what had now become 32 patterns was arranged in the explanatory Guide, with functionally related constructions grouped together. All the monotransitive patterns, for instance, were put in sequence so that structural similarities could be perceived as users moved down the series. Here is part of that series:

15. [Tf] Officials believe that a settlement is possible.
16. [Tw] We hadn't decided what we ought to do next/what to do next.
17. [Tt] Mary hates to drive in the rush-hour.

But at the same time the arrangement of patterns, and their codes, make it possible for users to note structural relationships *across* the system. For example, a parallel arrangement of 'D' (double-transitive) patterns and the use, again, of 'f', 'w' and 't' make clear that the same phrase or clause constituents can occur as direct objects after both 'T' and 'D' verbs:

18. [Dn.f] Colleagues told Paul that the job wouldn't be easy.
19. [Dn.w] The porter reminded guests where they should leave their luggage/where to leave their luggage.
20. [Dn.t] The director warned the actors not to be late.

The connections between the tables in the Guide and individual verb entries have also been systematized. In the new edition, the arrangement of patterns in any one entry follows a regular sequence — one directly based on the ordering of VPs in the explanatory tables. This can be seen by comparing the codes given above with the corresponding parts of the entries for **leak** and **leave** in the new edition:

21. **leak** ... 2 [Tn, Tn.pr]
22. **leave¹** ... 1 [I, Ipr, Tn, Tn.pr]

Yet another requirement, as David Heath has pointed out, is that codes and examples should be set out in entries in such a way that they are seen to complement each other (Heath, 1982). This can be done either by placing individual codes before the appropriate example sentences, as in the second edition of the **Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English** (1987), or by setting out the codes at the top of the entry or sub-entry and as far as possible arranging the examples in the same order below. We opted for the second course. Juxtaposing individual codes and examples would have meant either illustrating every pattern in every entry (surely an unattainable goal) or omitting reference to some patterns in some cases (surely an undesirable expedient).

We have aimed to record all patterns recognized by the scheme in every verb entry. Of course it is true that many users do not take the trouble to learn grammatical codes, or the patterns they refer to, so that a learners' dictionary must provide as many examples as space allows. This has often been remarked on (Béjoint 1981, Heath 1982). We have tried to reconcile fullness of coverage with necessary

economy, sometimes using the oblique and parentheses to combine two or more patterns in one example (and incidentally indicating their relatedness):

23. **convey** ... *a poem that perfectly conveys (to the reader) the poet's feelings/what the poet feels.*
24. **suck...** *The baby sucked (away) (at its bottle) contentednly.*

The aim in providing grammatical information in OALD 4, as in the earliest edition of the dictionary, has been to combine descriptive rigour with support for learners wishing to extend and systematize their grammatical knowledge. In my view the learner's needs are best served by building simple and easily memorized verb-pattern schemes; by making those schemes systematic, so that the user can trace the connections between one pattern, or group of patterns, and another; and above all by helping the learner to move easily back and forth between abstract patterns and concrete examples.

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