

Making a Thesaurus for Learners of English

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This paper explains the principles and methodology behind the selection and presentation of synonyms in the Oxford Learner's Thesaurus—a dictionary of synonyms (April 2008). The needs of learners when consulting a thesaurus are different from those of native speakers: so different, in fact, that they need a completely different kind of thesaurus to consult. Native speakers have a large bank of language stored in their brains; the thesaurus, for them, is simply a means of accessing this information. It reminds them of words that they already know but cannot bring to mind. For language learners, the traditional thesaurus contains far too many words, and not nearly enough information about any of them. They need a thesaurus that will not only enable them to access information, but will also teach them things they did not know before. The first task was to decide which words to include. A conceptual framework was established, dividing the language into areas of thought and experience. Words under each heading were sorted into groups of near-synonyms. A system of frequency counting was used to order the synonyms and eliminate the less frequent. The resulting entry list was checked against a core vocabulary for learners. Then the entries had to be written. Here, the list of synonyms-forming pretty much a complete entry in a traditional thesaurus—was just the beginning. Each synonym was defined and exemplified. Careful thought was given to register, usage and collocation. Notes contrast the meaning and usage of pairs or groups of words that are particularly hard to tease apart. The aim of the learner's thesaurus is to expand the learner's word bank. It both adds words to the bank, words that the learner did not even know before, and helps learners choose more effectively between words that they have met before, where their knowledge of the exact meaning and usage of the words was previously incomplete.

Introduction—what is a thesaurus?

The word “thesaurus” comes from the Greek meaning “storehouse” or “treasure”, and in its modern meaning “thesaurus” still conveys the idea of richness in language. The current edition of Roget's *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* lists over 80 words for *fast* (meaning “speedy”), including *go-go*, *souped-up* and *volant*. The expectation is that the information in the thesaurus will be complete: here, we are to assume, are all the synonyms of *fast* in English. The compilers of the thesaurus have made no judgement about the usefulness or otherwise of these words. They are grouped under keywords—*speedy*, *vigorous*, *hasty*, etc.—but otherwise no distinction is made between them. The traditional thesaurus—whether the entries are organized thematically, as in *Roget*, or alphabetically, as in many modern thesauri, such as the *New Oxford Thesaurus of English*—is designed for use by expert speakers of the language. Users have a meaning that they want to express but cannot quite think of the right word. They look up any word that approximates to this meaning and are provided with a list from which to choose. How this choice is made depends very much on the user's own judgement. The thesaurus does not really teach new words: it reminds people of words that they already know but cannot bring to mind. Its chief purpose is to enrich their writing by enabling them to access and activate all the language that they know.

The needs of language learners

Language learners, too, need synonyms to enable them to be more precise and more interesting when they express themselves. They need to be able to choose language of an appropriate register for the context. Teachers questioned on a research trip to Poland complained that “even

high-level students use the same basic vocabulary again and again.” Learners “need to be able to juggle synonyms.” How can a traditional thesaurus help with this juggling act? Frankly, it can’t. It contains both too much information—more synonyms than anyone really needs for their active vocabulary—and too little: no definitions, minimal usage information and no way of distinguishing between the words on offer.

It is often said that there are no absolute synonyms in English: that there is always some slight difference of nuance, register or collocation, that makes one word choice better, or at least different, from another. At the level of individual utterances, this is often untrue: in a particular sentence it may be possible to substitute a particular word for one or more others with no change of sense or style. But when you consider a word in all its possible utterances, and try to find another that can be substituted in every case, the number of absolute synonyms becomes ‘vanishingly rare’ (Cruse 2004: 155). The challenge for the learner is to know when two words can substitute for each other and when they cannot. The challenge for us was to produce a *learner’s* thesaurus that would enable users to do just that. It would need to fill in gaps in their knowledge about the meaning and usage of words they have met before: what exactly are the differences between *easy* and *simple*? And it would need to introduce them to new, more precise and more interesting words and expressions—*effortless, painless, plain sailing*—together with enough information about meaning and context to enable them to use them correctly.

Existing resources for learners

Of course it would be quite wrong to imply that before the *Oxford Learner’s Thesaurus* (OLT) there existed no resources to help learners of English with their encoding needs. Bilingual dictionaries (the most obvious choice for many learners) offer a correspondence between a word in one language and its nearest equivalents in another, not a comparison of alternative word choices within the same language, and as such really lie beyond the scope of this paper. A reverse dictionary, such as the *Oxford Learner’s Wordfinder Dictionary*, offers words to fit particular definitions, but these are organized in groups according to topic. In some cases this results in groups of near-synonyms, such as *fast, quick* and *rapid*, under *speed* listed at *fast/slow*. However, many of the categories and terms are much more concrete than this. Twice as much space is devoted to *football* as to *fast/slow*, including terms such as *manager, referee, fan, kick-off* and *half-time*. The concern is not so much with distinguishing between similar terms as providing a useful vocabulary for talking about a topic, and the level is no higher than intermediate. What does the learner do, who has reached this level and knows these words and wants to know more?

Most radical of the encoding dictionaries, since its first publication in 1993 when it proclaimed itself as “the World’s First Production Dictionary,” is the *Longman Language Activator*. This takes around 20,000 words and expressions and organizes them under “key concepts”, so that learners can find vocabulary for talking about jobs, for example, including *profession, vocational* and *sign up* (but not *retire* or *fire* which are to be found under the key concept “leave”). An index and menus help learners locate the meaning they want to express. Each word or expression is defined and exemplified, with important collocations highlighted. The level is higher than the *Wordfinder* and the key concepts and vocabulary more abstract: “We believe that concrete nouns, and content words in general, present fewer, less serious problems of correct use for students, so you will not find different types of transport, dogs, machinery or buildings here.” (Summers 1993: F8) How, then, is this different from our concept of a learner’s thesaurus? Perhaps the main difference is one of tone. The *Activator* was (and is) radical and aspirational: it deals with concepts, meanings and the expression of those meanings. Its purpose is to help learners “express their ideas”; the current edition includes a short guide to finding information in the *Activator*, but offers no further help with

exploiting this information once found¹. Although most of the concepts feature groups of words that include near-synonyms, the term ‘synonym’ is barely mentioned, and many of the groups also feature words and expressions of varying parts of speech. The definitions work hard, within the space available, to get at the essential meaning of each word or expression, but different words within the group are not explicitly compared and contrasted. Idioms and phrases are given equal status with words (which contrasts with the usual treatment of such expressions in learners’ dictionaries) and the coverage of spoken phrases is unusually generous. The emphasis is on writing and speaking more “natural” English.

But what does a learner really use a resource like this for? Our research with teachers and students suggests that what learners actually want (or the way they express their perceived need) is “synonyms”. Their approach is not conceptual, but word-based: they want more words that mean *job* or *leave*. They want these synonyms for specific purposes: to improve their writing (especially in order to impress an examiner); to collect topic vocabulary in preparation for a speaking task; and to cope with exam-style tasks such as paraphrasing and register transfer. General learners’ dictionaries have begun to address this need. The *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* includes around 70 notes dealing with functions (such as “giving your opinion”), “others of saying” words such as *beautiful* or *cook*, and “talking or writing about” topics such as advertising or companies: many of these notes in fact deal with groups of near-synonyms, although expressions related in other ways may also be included. The seventh edition of the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (OALD) includes around 200 synonyms notes that are in fact slightly cut-down versions of entries from the OLT which was then work in progress. But even 200 notes cannot cover all the synonyms that learners might wish to use: for this they will do better to consult the 2,000 entries of the learner’s thesaurus.

Selecting the synonyms

The first task in compiling the OLT was that of deciding which words to include. The initial approach to this was to establish a conceptual framework, dividing the language into areas of thought and experience. This work was undertaken by Penny Stock, who explained it thus: “The structure, when it is complete, will actually look rather like a hierarchical thesaurus taxonomy as laid out, for example, in the front matter of Roget, although it is not being built up in a hierarchical top down way.” (Stock, in correspondence, 1994) Instead Stock was taking a “strictly pragmatic approach”, starting with the semantic area “Emotions and Feelings’ and then ‘working outwards from this group’. This may be compared with the approach taken in the *Longman Language Activator* as described in the introductory matter to the first edition: “The conceptual analysis was very much “bottom-up”, beginning with the vocabulary items themselves.” (Scholfield 1993: F17) Scholfield explicitly rejects the notion of a ‘hierarchy’ of concepts in favour of a “network”. (Scholfield 1993: F18)

The experience of working from Stock’s framework towards a finished *OLT* led me to conclude that both Stock and Scholfield were right to be wary of the “top down” approach, and, further, that Scholfield was nearer the mark than Stock in starting right from the bottom with the vocabulary items themselves. This was by no means obvious at the outset, however. Stock’s framework, when completed, did not entirely resemble Roget’s taxonomy, but this was surely deliberate: she chose to have more categories, at a lower level of abstraction, as being more learner-friendly. *Receive* and *take* are no doubt easier to conceptualize than *volition – social volition – possessive relations*, but as concepts they also overlap. Too much time was spent shuffling words around between semantic areas: it was only half-acknowledged at this point that precise allocation of words to categories did not really matter, as the conceptual framework was not to form part of the finished thesaurus. It was intended from the start that, whatever approach was taken to constructing the thesaurus, the learner should be able to consult it on a word-by-word

¹ A separate workbook (Maingay, Tribble: 1993) was published to accompany the first edition, but this has not been revised and does not appear in the current Longman catalogue. The *Longman Essential Activator* does take a more practical approach, with study material, but this is aimed at intermediate learners.

basis. That is, we imagined a learner saying, not “I want to talk about the idea of love,” but “I want a word that *means* something like ‘love’ and is appropriate for this particular context.” That meant a separate entry for each synonym group, with the entries arranged alphabetically by headword. One of the weaknesses that we perceived in the *Activator* was the conceptual structure, which works well when the user’s own mental map of concepts matches the way they are divided up in the *Activator*, and rather less well when it does not. But it was not until much later in the process—once the compiling of entries was already well under way—that a different approach to selecting the synonym groups was taken.

Initially, words were listed under each semantic area and then sorted into groups of synonyms. The concern at this stage was to be inclusive, not to let anything potentially useful slip through the net. It became increasingly apparent, however, that to serve the needs of the learner much greater selectivity and discrimination would be required. A decision had to be made about each group and each word, as to whether it might form part of a learner’s active vocabulary. Frequency was an important guide, both absolute corpus frequency, and the relative frequency of synonymous terms, but so also were less quantifiable pedagogical considerations. Here we drew on work that had recently been done by the editors of the seventh edition of the OALD. This dictionary introduced the Oxford 3000™, a core vocabulary for learners, “carefully selected by a group of language experts and experienced teachers as the words which should receive priority in vocabulary study” (OALD 7/e 2005: R99). It seemed to us that learners wishing to expand their vocabulary by consulting a thesaurus were most likely to start from one of these core words. We started to approach the task of selecting synonyms from the other end: the question then was not, “What does the language have to offer?” but “What will be most useful to learners?” We focused our attention on synonym groups containing words from the Oxford 3000, and ensuring that all the Oxford 3000 words had been accounted for. (That is, they were either included, or considered and excluded, for lack of important synonyms.)

Compiling the entries

Ultimately, the *Oxford Learner’s Thesaurus* probably only benefited from the two contrasting approaches taken in different stages of compiling. The conceptual framework ensured that the whole range of the language was considered. The focus on a core vocabulary ensured that most attention was given to the most important words. However, selecting and grouping the synonyms was only the start of the process. Next, and possibly even more challenging, we had to decide exactly what information to present about each synonym group, and how.

The essential point to consider was the needs of the learners for whom the thesaurus was designed. It needed to offer both depth and range. The depth of information—in the form of definitions and guidance on usage—needed to be much greater than is offered in a traditional thesaurus. The range could be less, but could still be maximized by avoiding repetition. It was decided that each word could appear in only one synonym group (or in one synonym group for each of its senses, in the case of polysemous words). Each synonym group was to appear once. This is a radical departure from the practice of most modern alphabetically organized thesauri, such as the *New Oxford Thesaurus of English*, where the entries for *beautiful*, *attractive* and *pretty*, for example, contain many of the same words, but do not exactly mirror each other, and the synonyms in each are arranged in a different order according to their perceived closeness in meaning to the headword. We had to ask a number of searching questions about each word and each group. Which sense exactly of *variation* are we dealing with here, and where are its boundaries? Is it closer in meaning to *change* or to *difference*? How many synonyms of *attitude* do learners need or can they cope with? What is the ‘core’ synonym of *core*, *heart* and *point*? What about *record* and *upbringing*, which are both synonyms of *background*, but not of each other? What is the best order to present this group of synonyms in? How is the learner going to find any particular word in the thesaurus, if it is not a headword?

Some of these questions had to be answered on a case-by-case basis. For others it was possible to develop a policy. The alphabetical ordering of headwords, with each entry based around a single synonym group, was established from the start. In order for users to be able to find words

that were not headwords there was to be a full index of all the synonyms at the back of the book. But how was the headword of each group to be chosen? Frequency seemed to offer the most objective basis for deciding this, and also for the ordering of synonyms within the group. In this way the needs of learners at a range of levels could be met. Students still at upper-intermediate level could focus on the more frequent words near the top of the entry; more advanced students could skip straight to less well-known words near the bottom of the entry.

This frequency ordering was not a completely straightforward process, however. It was not possible to take raw frequency data, straight from a corpus, because we were often dealing with single senses of polysemous words, and we had no automatic sense tagger that could do the job. We counted samples of concordance lines for each word across a range of different corpora (British English, written and spoken, American English, written and spoken, and a corpus of business English). The frequency of each sense of a word within the sample was scaled up to give an average frequency per 10 million words of corpus. An average was then taken across all the corpora (taking account of the different sizes of the corpora) and a frequency order established.

In general, the results of the counting tended to confirm our own intuitions about relative frequencies, but there were some mild surprises. *Discussion* outranked *conversation*, *satisfaction* beat *happiness* and *sensitive* scored more highly than *sympathetic*. Of course what these frequencies partly reflect is the wider range of application of the higher ranked words, which in turn can depend on exactly how the senses of polysemous words are divided, which is very much down to the lexicographer's judgement. But we were not trying to establish absolute frequencies, merely a useful and credible order within each group, that would enable the learner to distinguish the more frequent and more general words from the less frequent and more specialized. We also gained some insights into differences between spoken and written English, and between general and business English (such as that in business and journalistic contexts *move*, in the sense of "act" or "action", is more frequent than *act* and *action* themselves).

At this point in the development of each thesaurus entry we had arrived where most thesauri can stop: with the words arranged in synonym groups, in a particular order. In a learner's thesaurus, however, this is only the menu; the real meat of the entry is the information about each individual synonym: definition, examples, collocations and usage information. Research with teachers and students in the UK, Poland and Austria revealed a number of useful points about the presentation of this material. Learners would not necessarily expect to read a whole entry to find the information they wanted. They would need to be able to jump straight to the part of the entry that interested them. Definitions could not be too long, even when trying to convey quite subtle differences of meaning. Example sentences needed to convey the most essential usage patterns, but they could not be too numerous. We designed an entry structure that treated each synonym separately and concisely. The work of differentiating the synonyms was to be done, in the first place, by the definitions. These had to be worded very carefully, so that any variation in the wording, however slight, signalled a distinct, if subtle, variation in meaning, which could be supported with evidence from the corpus, illustrated in the example sentences. Any differences that could not be wholly accounted for within the definitions and examples would be treated in tinted notes that clearly contrasted two or three of the words in the entry.

The starting point for each synonym's "mini-entry" was the entry in the OALD, where a lot of this information on meaning and usage is already presented to learners. But a dictionary like the OALD presents each word in isolation. It does not compare and contrast words of similar meaning on a systematic basis. Take *gift* and *present*. Neither of these words will be unknown to any user of the OALD or the OLT. Both are in the defining vocabulary; it would seem fairly acceptable to define one in terms of the other. Out of nine learners' dictionaries surveyed², only

² OALD, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, *Macmillan English Dictionary*, *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, *Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, *Oxford Wordpower Dictionary*, *Oxford Student's Dictionary*, *Oxford ESL Dictionary*, *Macmillan Essential Dictionary*.

one (at intermediate level) makes any explicit distinction between these words. And yet corpus evidence shows that the contexts in which they are used are in general fairly distinct. In the OLT the definitions are carefully differentiated. A *gift* is ‘a thing or a sum of money that you give to sb’; a *present* is “a thing that you give to sb, especially on a special occasion or to say thank you.” The examples chosen to illustrate each word reflect the differences indicated in the definitions. In most of the examples you cannot substitute the other word, without it sounding at least slightly odd. Finally, a note entitled “Gift or present?” explicitly contrasts the two words, pointing out all the ways in which their usage differs (see Figure 1).

gift [C] (*rather formal, especially written*) a thing or a sum of money that you give to sb: *There's a free gift for every reader.* ◊ *The gift of love is the greatest gift a person can give or receive.* ◊ *The party was originally funded by a gift of £50 000 from a top motor manufacturer.* ◊ (BrE) *All such posts are in the gift of the managing director* (= only given by the managing director). See also **give** → GIVE 5

present [C] a thing that you give to sb, especially on a special occasion or to say thank you: *What can I get him for a birthday present?*

NOTE GIFT OR PRESENT? Gift is more formal than present and is used especially in business contexts: a store will advertise its *Christmas gift ideas*; the people who buy them will talk about the *Christmas presents* they have bought for family and friends. A **present** is usually given by and to an individual; a **gift** may be given by a company (*a corporate gift*) and/or to an organization. A **present** is usually an object, but a **gift** may be a sum of money, or sth such as *the gift of love/life: funded by a present of £50 000* ◊ *She gave me the present of love.* Especially in American English, however, **gift** is not always so formal and is sometimes used in personal contexts instead of **present**: *The watch was a gift/present from my mother.*

Figure 1: from the entry for *gift* in the *Oxford Learner's Thesaurus*

Interestingly, the usage examples presented in the *OALD* and all the other learners' dictionaries also accurately reflect the differences in usage (see Figure 2). The *OLT* simply goes much further in presenting and explaining these differences.

gift 0-ɪ /gift/ noun, verb

■ **noun** 1 a thing that you give to sb, especially on a special occasion or to say thank you **SYN** PRESENT: *The watch was a gift from my mother.* ◊ *Thank you for your generous gift.* ◊ *a free gift for every reader* ◊ *the gift of life* ◊ (*formal*) *The family made a gift of his paintings to the gallery.* ◊ *gifts of toys for the children* 2 ~ (for sth/for doing sth) a nat-

■ **noun** /'preznt/ 1 a thing that you give to sb as a gift: *birthday/Christmas/wedding, etc. presents* ◊ *What can I get him for a birthday present?* 2 (usually **the pres-**

Figure 2: from the entries for *gift* and *present* in the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*

We were aided in the work of analysing and disambiguating synonyms by some sophisticated corpus tools. The “Sketch-Difference” feature in Adam Kilgarriff's Sketch Engine program (Kilgarriff et al. 2004: 112-113) compares the collocations of two words, highlighting the differences between them. The results show that, in a corpus of British English, *get* collocates more strongly with *present*; the more formal *receive* and *accept* collocate more strongly with *gift*. A corpus of American English gives slightly less clear-cut results (a difference that is acknowledged in the note). Very often what the analysis of the collocations of synonyms reveals is tendencies, not clear-cut distinctions. These tendencies can be presented fairly in a learner's thesaurus, which is wholly concerned with the use of near-synonyms, in a way that they cannot in a learner's dictionary, which has many other concerns, not least the need to present a very much larger vocabulary for decoding purposes.

In the *OLT* collocations are presented together in a way that clearly reveals areas of overlap and difference. Each entry begins with a section called “Patterns and collocations” that shows the grammatical structures and collocates that are shared by two or more of the words in the group. For example, the “Patterns and collocations” section at *rotten* shows which adjectives can describe *food*, *eggs* and *bread* that are no longer fresh. Further information is given at the individual synonyms, including collocations where only one of the synonyms is usual (*rotten fruit*, *stale cake*, *sour milk*) (see Figure 3).

rotten *adj.* See also the entry for SMELLY

rotten · stale · sour · mouldy · bad · off
 These words all describe food which is no longer fresh.

PATTERNS AND COLLOCATIONS

- ▶ rotten / stale / mouldy food
- ▶ rotten / bad eggs
- ▶ stale / mouldy **bread**
- ▶ to go rotten / stale / sour / mouldy / bad / off

rotten (of natural things such as food or wood) that has decayed and cannot be eaten or used: *The fruit is starting to go rotten.* ◊ *They pelted him with rotten eggs.* ◊ *He stepped on a rotten floorboard and felt it give way.*

stale (of food, especially bread and cake) no longer fresh and therefore unpleasant to eat: *There was one piece of stale chocolate cake left in the tin.* See also **stale** → SMELLY

sour (of milk or sb's breath) having an unpleasant taste or smell because it is not fresh: *The milk had turned sour.* ◊ *He smelled a sour whiff on the old man's breath.* See also **sour** → BITTER 1

Figure 3: from the entry for *rotten* from the *Oxford Learner's Thesaurus*

Register and pragmatics also needed attention. For productive use the usual gradations of *formal*, *informal* and *slang* are not really sufficient. Consider the following sets of words: *pick – choice – selection*; *bargain on sth – expect – anticipate*; *all right – safe – unscathed*. These words all appear unmarked in each of the five main advanced learner's dictionaries³ and indeed, none of these words is really informal or really formal; and yet, across each set there is a fairly clear gradation of register from the less formal to the more formal. In the *OLT* six levels of formality are recognized, including *rather formal* and *rather informal*. Separate *spoken* and *written* labels are also used: these very often coincide with the informal and the formal, but not always. (Consider the difference between “We regret...” and “I beg your pardon...” Both are formal, but the first is used in writing, the second in speech.) The evaluative labels *approving* and *disapproving* may help learners to distinguish a *wry comment* from one that is merely *sarcastic*.

But how important is it, really, for learners to understand all these differences? There is a word, “autonym”, that means “a word that describes itself”: examples include *short* and *polysyllabic*. *Long* and *monosyllabic* are the opposite. So too, sometimes, is the word *interesting*, used (as it very frequently is) in learners' writing: rather than passionate engagement with a topic, what it conveys instead is ineffable dullness, as in “This book is an interesting adventure story.” If the student can instead learn and use the word *gripping* (or *fascinating* or *compelling* or *stimulating*, according to the context), the reader will immediately become much more engaged with the text. It is to be hoped that the process of engaging the reader will engage the writer also, not only with the topic under discussion, but with the language used to discuss it.

We may imagine some of the users of the *Oxford Learner's Thesaurus* as students at undergraduate or upper-secondary level who have already been learning English for a number of years. These students are pretty familiar with English grammar and can read fairly competently most of the texts that their English course requires. However, they probably do not read widely in English beyond the immediate demands of their course. From films and music and magazines they

³ OALD, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, *Macmillan English Dictionary*, *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, *Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner's Dictionary*.

may well have acquired a certain familiarity with American slang, but their ability to write fluently in English on serious topics is hampered by a lack of the appropriate vocabulary. And yet these are serious students, with ideas to express, learning English for a purpose. This purpose is probably a practical one: to pass their exams or to get a good job. Perhaps only a few of the students are motivated by a sheer love of the language. But that is not to say that they will not come to appreciate the language more as they become more proficient at expressing themselves in it. The principal aim, in creating the *Oxford Learner's Thesaurus*, was to produce a reference work that would be of most benefit to learners of this type, in the tasks for which they might wish to use a thesaurus: writing, vocabulary building, preparing speaking tasks, doing exam practice exercises. The thesaurus is designed to help learners towards the more sophisticated vocabulary that they do not have time to acquire simply through reading; it does the analysis of meaning and use that the learners might otherwise have to do (or fail to do) for themselves. It is to be hoped they will find it a valuable resource. Once they see how it can improve their writing, it may also inspire them to study the language more deeply for its own sake.

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