

Comparison of two Learner's Dictionaries regarding Delexical verbs

C-essay

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1. Introduction

1.1 Learners' dictionary

The purpose of this essay is to compare two dictionaries in terms of their treatment of lexicogrammatical phenomena. I will use *Collins Cobuild learner's dictionary*, (will be called CCD) the edition from 1995 and *Oxfords Advanced Learners Dictionary of Current English* (will be called OALD) from 1974 by A S Hornby. The Oxford version is an older print, and I will use it to see how the lexicons have evolved over time. There are newer versions of Oxford's dictionaries but I will not use them. All of the existing dictionaries use different systems and codes to describe and explain the grammar of the entry word, and some of them differ greatly, therefore I think it is important to find out which one is the best for learners. Dictionaries for learners are a new idea, they were brought to Britain in 1942, a man called A. S. Hornby brought a script from Japan to the English Council.

I have chosen to compare delexical verbs, because these tend to cause problems for people who are not native speakers. Delexical verbs are when a very frequent verb, like *take*, *have*, *make*, *get*, *do* or *give* works together with a noun to make a meaning. An example of this taken from a corpus could be: *I had a chat with John*.

The problem with delexical verbs is that when a word becomes delexicalized, it loses its meaning. This is what happens to the verbs and instead the meaning is concentrated into the co-occurring noun. Ex: *Take a look*. The verb is *take*, and the noun is *look*. However the "action" is to look at something; therefore the verbal meaning is pushed onto *look* instead of *take*.

Another problem with the delexical verbs is that they tend to work more like idioms. Idioms are a problem for most non-native speakers as the meaning is derived from the sum of their constituent words, they often do not "mean" anything. It can be hard to understand why someone would say that "it is raining cats and dogs." The words collocate with each other and native speakers tend to understand it easier than non-native speakers. Many of the idioms have a non-literal meaning, it is raining cats and dogs which means that it is raining heavily. Also some of the idioms' grammar is deviant from the rest of the language, an example of this

could be *By and large, the play was a success*. That means that for the most part the play was a success.

The aim of this essay is to investigate similarities and differences in the representation of delexical verbs. My goal is to have a look at 10 delexical verbs in both dictionaries. I will try to find both similarities and differences, then I will see which dictionary that in my opinion has the best grammatical code, the best description and the best way to explain it to a non-native speaker. Lastly I will also have a look at how the older dictionary differs from the newer ones.

Dictionaries have always been a problem for beginners. The earliest were problematic because there were many complex rules for the words. With each new edition of the dictionary words and rules were added but they have been simplified. Therefore I am going to have a look at two of the biggest and most recognized learner dictionaries.

1.2 Aim

The aim of this essay is to find out which dictionary is the best for learners and how it can be improved even further, regarding delexical verbs.

1.3 Literature review

The first man I came across while searching for earlier work was Samuel Johnson, who is also known as DR. Johnson. He was born in 1709 in a wealthy family. However, at the time Johnson went to school his family lost much money and they could not afford his education. He had shown great promise as he was very intelligent but he had to leave the school without any degree. Johnson and his family did not have a lot of money so he wrote poems and short stories for different papers for many years. He applied for different teacher jobs but his lack of degree and the fact that he had Tourette Syndrome, which at that time was an unknown issue made it hard for him to get any jobs.

In 1746 a group of publishers contacted him about creating an authoritative dictionary of English and he was quick to accept. It took him nine years to complete it but at the time that was very fast. The first print came out in 1755 and was called *Dictionary of the English*

language, it was a huge book and it contained 42,773 entries. Johnson also included literary quotes to explain the meaning of the different words, the book contained about 114,000 quotes and this was an important innovation in English lexicography. Johnson's lexicon became the greatest lexicon at the time even though many more appeared; it was even described as the greatest single achievement of scholarship. It was not the first dictionary nor unique but it was the most commonly used for 150 years, until the completion of *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Another important source is A. S. Hornby, an English grammarian and lexicographer who was one of the first ever to create a new kind of dictionary, the learners' dictionary. Learners' dictionaries are aimed towards people who are not native speakers and those are the kind of dictionaries I am going to use. *Oxford advanced learner's dictionary of current English* from 1974 is also written by him and A. P. Cowie, Cowie who has written another book that I will use. Therefore Hornby will be a big influence in my essay.

Dictionaries for learners are a new idea, the first one *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* started as *Idiomatic and Syntactic dictionary*. It was first published in Japan in 1942. A. S. Hornby was at the time teaching English in a small college in Japan, he got involved in making the first learner's dictionary and managed to send an early copy to Britain. The script reached Humphrey S. Milford at the time he was the publisher to the University of Oxford. He realised that this dictionary could be very useful for non-native speakers in a way that ordinary dictionaries could not. Learner's dictionaries explained spelling, grammar and phonetics much more extensively than dictionaries for English speakers. During the war there was a shortage of paper so getting a thick dictionary printed would be a problem; however the British council managed to help them and the book finally came out in 1943 and became an instant success. Today it is one of the most used resources by learners of the English language worldwide.

There is some earlier research and similar tests have been done; Paul Bogaard and Willem A. van der Kloot wrote an essay called *The use of grammatical information in learners' dictionaries*. In this essay they do a test with students where they let the students use different dictionaries to look up certain words. They wanted to know how the different dictionaries explained the grammatical parts and which one people found to be easiest.

1.4 What are delexical verbs?

As stated before, delexical verbs are often very frequent verbs used in a context where they have very little meaning. Therefore they are delexical, they have lost their meaning. Instead they occur with a noun that describes the action. Verbs like *make*, *take*, *have*, *get*, *do*, and *give* are often delexical, Delexical verbs are not only found in the English language, they are a phenomena found in many other European languages.

A good example is the phrase; *Have a shower*. The verb *have* does not really mean anything, you could just say to shower and it would have almost the exact same meaning. Delexical verbs are more about collocation and the words “fitting” together like idioms and therefore they are hard for non-native speakers to understand.

2. Method

Two dictionaries were consulted with the regards to the following list of delexical verbs. I will look up the words in both dictionaries’ and see how they list the different verbs. The following aspect will be considered in detail, first the definition, how they explain the word, secondly the grammar codes, how simple or complicated they are for learners to use and finally the different examples given in the explanation. I will not list all of the words in every section; instead I have chosen 3 examples from each. I will look for similarities and differences and try to ascertain which one is better suited for learners, based on my own opinion.

2.1 List of verbs

The following delexical verbs will form the basis for the comparison between the dictionary representations.

take a look

have a chat

make progress

catch my breath

give it a try

get a grip

do the dishes

give it a think

had a drink

give a response

3 Delexical verbs in the dictionary

In this section I am going to list some of the verbs to give a quick view of how they are listed in the different dictionaries. Entries like these contain all the data I am going to work with. I have also listed a number of keys so that it will be easier to follow my examples.

3.1 Collins

Here is an example of what an entry in CCD looks like:

Have a chat

Chat /tʃæt/ **chats, chatting, chatted.** When people **chat**, they talk to each other in an informal and friendly way. *The women were chatting... I was chatting to him the other day... He's chatting with his dad... We chatted about old times.*

► Also a noun. *I had a chat with John.*

V-RECIP
=natter
Pl-n V
V to/with n
N-COUNT

Here are some of the most frequent keys and abbreviations that I encountered.

◆ Represents the frequency of the word goes from 1-5

V = Verb or verb group

Prep = Prepositional phrase or preposition

Adv = Ungraded adverb

N-Sing = Singular Noun

V-Recip = Reciprocal Verb

Pl-n = Noun in the plural, plural noun

N-Count = Count noun

N-Uncount = Uncount noun or noun group with an uncount noun

N-var = Variable noun

Oft poss n = Often possessive noun

Inflective = Verb inflections include any endings added to the base form of the verb. These include *-s*, *-ing*, and *-ed*.

3.2 Oxford

Here is an example of an entry in OALD

Have a chat.

Chat /tʃæt/ n [C] friendly talk (usu about unimportant things): *I had a long chat with him.* □

vi, vt (-tt-) 1 [VP2A,C] Have a ~: *They were ~ting(away) in the corner.*

Here are some of the most frequent keys and abbreviations that I encountered.

Sing = Singular

VB = Verb

V-ed = Past participle of the verb. Explained in the entry

Adj = adjective group

Wh = Clause beginning with a Wh- word, or a Wh- word

Inf = Infinitive form of a verb

► Changes in wordclass do not involve any change in meaning

These are from the older Oxford dictionary.

n = noun (s)

[C] = Countable noun

[U] = Uncountable noun

The large box □ = Many headwords can be used as more than one part of speech. For example, the word picture can be used as a noun or a verb; the word welcome as a noun, a verb or an adjective; the word last as an adjective, an adverb or a noun. These different sections within an entry are divided from one another by a large box

Vi = Verb intransitive

Vt = Verb transitive

Doubled consonants = Many verbs that end with a single consonant have this letter repeated in the spelling for the present and the past participles and for the past tense. For example, drop has dropped and dropping. In the same way, some adjectives repeat the last consonant in the spelling for the comparative and superlative. For example: hot has hotter and hottest. If the consonant is doubled the dictionary shows this by printing the repeated letter in brackets, for example, drop (-pp-) hot (-tt-)

[VP] = Verb pattern

4. Results

The things I have looked at in both of the dictionaries is the style of definition, the grammar codes, the example sentences, if they use full sentences or part sentences, how they use corpus examples, if they are clear, how complicated the grammar is and I will also look for frequency information.

Both dictionaries are for learners, OALD is the older one, the version I am using is from 1974, CCD is from 1995. Both contain the delexical verbs, but not all of them. I also had a look in Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary which is not for learners but it did not contain any delexical verbs at all.

The CCD is based of a corpus, and has more examples than the OALD and it uses example sentences directly from the corpus on every word.

The OALD is not based on a corpus, but it still manages to have some good examples and often uses synonyms, which I think is good for learners. CCD does this sometimes but not as frequent.

Here is a list of the only phrases that were missing.

Phrase	CCD	OALD
Do the dishes	√	X
Give it a think	√	X
Had a drink	X	X
Give a response	X	X

I only encountered two verb patterns while looking up my 10 words, but I will write the explanation for them here, as I think it is good to see how Hornby explained them.

[VP2A] = This pattern is for verbs which may be used without a complement. Such verbs are called complete intransitive verbs. Adjuncts are possible but not essential.

Subject	Vi
1 <i>We all</i>	<i>Breathe, drink, eat</i>
2 <i>The moon</i>	<i>Rose</i>
3 <i>A period of political unrest</i>	<i>Followed</i>

There are variations with introductory *there/it*

1 <i>There followed</i>	<i>A long period of political unrest</i>
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2 *It doesn't matter*

Whether we start now or later

That-clauses are possible after *seem, appear, happened, chance, follow*.

1 *It seemed*

(that) the day would never end

2 *It so chanced/happened*

(that) we were out when she called

3 *It doesn't follow*

(that) they are husband and wife

[VP6A] = The verbs in the pattern have a noun or pronoun as direct object. Conversion to the passive voice is possible.

Subject + Vt

Noun/pronoun

1 *Did you enjoy*

the film?

2 *We all had*

a good time

3 *Everyone likes*

her

4.1 Structure of definition.

This is an example of how I am going to list each headword. I list the words against each other and then give my own opinion.

Term	Class	Differentiation
A heat pump	Is a machine	That uses a refrigerant to transfer heat energy from a cold temperature source, such as the ground, to another source, such as a building.

CCD

Term	Class	Differentiation
<i>Catch ones breath</i>	<i>A method of</i>	<i>How you stop for a short time while doing something energetic, so that you can start breathing normally again. If something makes you catch your breath, it makes you take a short breath of air, usually because it shocks you.</i>

OALD

Term	Class	Differentiation
<i>Catch ones breath</i>	<i>A phenomena</i>	<i>When you stop breathing for a moment (from fear, excitement etc.)</i>

In this case I was expecting the explanation to be that when you catch your breath, you get tired from doing hard physical work so you stop for a second to regain your breath. However this one was not in the OALD version instead I found out that it can also mean that you get scared and loses your breath for a moment. I think both explanations are good, OALD has a very short but easy to understand explanation, but I think they should have included the other meaning as well.

CCD

Term	Class	Differentiation
<i>Have a chat</i>	<i>A way of conversation</i>	<i>When people chat they talk to each other in an informal and friendly way.</i>

OALD

Term	Class	Differentiation
<i>Have a chat</i>	<i>A way of conversation</i>	<i>Friendly talk (usually about unimportant things.)</i>

Here I think that the CCD explanation is superior and it is short and clear. The OALD explanation is also short but I think it feels old fashioned, because I do not agree that chatting usually has to be about unimportant things. CCD describes the matter better as informal and friendly.

CCD

Term	Class	Differentiation
<i>Get a grip</i>	<i>A term for</i>	<i>If you get a grip on yourself, you make an effort to control or improve your behaviour or work.</i>

OALD

Term	Class	Differentiation
<i>Get a grip</i>	<i>A term for</i>	<i>When you take a grip on yourself, you stop being idle and inattentive.</i>

Here I think both explanations work well, but for a learner I think OALD gives a simpler explanation which is easier to understand. CCD sounds very complicated and I think it would be hard for a learner to understand

4.2 Grammar codes and information.

In this section I have listed the different words with their grammar codes, after each word I will once again write my opinion.

Catch one's breath

CCD	OALD
/breθ/ ◆◆◆◆ V and N =Recover V inflects =Gasp	/breθ/ n [U] [C]

CCD has a very good grammatical code on this entry and it shows that *breath* can be both a verb and a noun and it also contains two synonyms, showing that it can have two different meanings. I think this is a good thing for learners even though there are examples synonyms are a good way to learn the meaning of the word.

OALD on the other hand does not have as much information and they tell us that it is a noun and they show that *breath* can be either countable or uncountable depending on how it is used.

Have a chat

CCD	OALD
/tʃæt/ ◆◆◆◇ ► Also a noun V- recip Pl-n V N-count =Natter	/tʃæt/ n [C] [VP2A,C] □ vi vt (-tt-)

Here both dictionaries give us plenty of information, CCD tells us how frequent the word is used, that it is a countable noun and once again gives us a synonym. In addition it tells us that chat can be a reciprocal verb and gives us an example of that in “they talk to each other in an informal and friendly way”

OALD also tells us that it is a countable noun and the big box tells us that the word can be used as more than one part of speech. There is also a long verb pattern that tells us what type of verb it is. The (-tt-) note means that the word will have double consonants in the present and the past participles and for the past tense

Take a look

CCD	OALD
/lʊk/ ◆◆◆◆ Verb ▶ Also a noun V prep/adv V N-sing	/lʊk/ n [C]

I think OALD again is the superior it has only the most basic information, pronunciation, tells us it is a countable noun. CCD has far more information but I think it might be a little too much for learners, the abbreviations might be hard to follow and one has to constantly check them up in the beginning of the dictionary.

4.3 Usage of example sentences.

In this last section I have listed all the examples for the phrases; I will once again compare them and after every example write my own opinion.

Catch one's breath

CCD	OALD
He had stopped to catch his breath and make sure of his directions. Kenny caught his breath as Nikko nearly dropped the bottle.	Half-way up the mountain we stopped to take breath.

CCD has a wider variety of examples, OALD has only one example and it does not sound as modern as the other. This is probably because the CCD examples comes from a corpus and that way they represent the authentic examples of a language, the OALD example have been invented a long time ago and is not as current anymore. It is listed under catch one's breath but it does not give a very good example of it.

Had a chat

CCD	OALD
I had a chat with John.	I had a long chat with him.

Here I think both of the examples are equal, both are very easy to understand, they use a simple vocabulary and they also use a relatively simple grammar. The only thing that can be brought up is that the OALD example is slightly longer but I do not think that it makes it harder to understand.

Make progress

CCD	OALD
The medical community continues to make progress in the fight against cancer... The two sides made little if any progress towards agreement.	Making fast progress... Make progress in ones studies... The patient is making good progress.

OALD is superior and it has shorter examples but it shows a better variety of the word and how it can be used. In CCD the examples might be a little complicated for learners.

5. Discussion

After looking at all these descriptions, grammar codes and examples, it would appear that *Oxford's Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* is enough for a low level student; it is very simple and easy to use. It has good examples and makes good use of synonyms to almost every word. The only negative aspect I can think of is that the verb pattern are a little complicated and might be hard to follow, some terms were missing and it would be too simple for a student at higher level. Sometimes you might want to know more than just the most basic information.

CCD on the other hand is much more advanced. It has lots of grammar codes and abbreviations, this means that the student has to understand a lot of grammar to be able to use it. The grammar codes are written in the margin instead of in the running text which I thought was good, because it was easier to read and follow that way. Although I missed the synonyms; I think those are a great way for a learner to understand the meaning of a word.

The problem I can see with learners using this dictionary is that they might be overwhelmed by all of the different grammar codes and some of the information might feel unnecessary. In order to really understand it all and get the most out of the dictionary the student needs some knowledge of grammar and the examples in the book are pretty advanced. On the positive side the layout was much better in CCD much because of the use of the grammar codes in the margin but also some of the other things, the big arrow ► were much easier to spot than the big box □ in Oxford, this led to finding the right form of the word much easier.

Even if CCD is more advanced than the older OALD I find that they have simplified the system and if you know the grammar it is easier to follow than the older OALD. In OALD especially the verb patterns were very hard to follow as the codes were similar but had different meaning. Lastly I would like to point out that nowadays almost all dictionaries use a corpus database for sentences while the version of OALD that I used did not use them.

6. Conclusion

Furtherer research could explore more than two dictionaries; look up more words, maybe not just delexical verbs but some other type of words too. I would probably do some kind of test that I could hand out to a group of students of different skill level. That way it would be easier to get a good picture of which dictionary that would be the best for learners. My test was about two dictionaries from different eras, one pre corpus and one with the use of corpus. It could be interesting to compare two modern dictionaries and see which one nowadays is better suited for learners.

7 Reference/ literature list

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