DOES A LIMITED DEFINING VOCABULARY MAKE DEFINITIONS SYNTACTICALLY MORE COMPLEX?

MARIUSZ PIOTR KAMIŃSKI[1]

ABSTRACT

Definitions in learners' dictionaries are usually written within a limited defining vocabulary (DV), that is, a set of lexical units specified prior to defining. Some researchers claim that this approach to vocabulary control may lead to definitions being syntactically complex, convoluted, and wordy. This paper aims to examine whether the introduction of a limited DV in *OALD5* made its definitions more difficult to read for learners as compared to the definitions in *OALD4*, which were written with no explicit restrictions on the definition vocabulary. The study examines a selection of construction patterns that are potentially difficult for less advanced learners, using quantitative and qualitative methods. The examination shows that the introduction of the limited DV had no effect on most parameters studied. However, it led to significant increases in the length of definitions and the number of nominal constructions with a postmodifying past participle (e.g., *performance given*, *spice ground, phrase used*).

Keywords: Defining vocabulary; DV; limited defining vocabulary; vocabulary control; construction pattern.

1. Introduction

A central feature of learners' dictionaries is that their definitions are written using a simple vocabulary, an advantage highly appreciated by their target users (Stein 1979: 41; Rundell 2006: 740). Lexical simplicity is achieved by imposing restrictions on the selection of vocabulary items for definitions. From an editorial point of view, these restrictions can be implemented by editors in two different ways: either by specifying all the allowable lexical units (in the form of an explicit list) before lexicographers begin to write definitions, or merely instructing

---

[1] University of Applied Sciences, Nysa; ul. Armii Krajowej 7, 48–300 Nysa; mariusz.kaminski@pwsz.nysa.pl

lexicographers to "prefer the simpler word" while writing but with no prior list (Whitcut 1988: 49). Both approaches are in use in contemporary lexicography, and both have their pros and cons.

Some critics mention negative consequences of the use of an explicitly limited defining vocabulary (henceforth DV) (e.g., Stein 1979: 6; Lew 2010: 293, 2013: 298; Carter 2012; Xu 2012). Fontenelle (2009: 419), for example, argues that although definitions in *LDOCE1* were lexically simple, the lexicographers' strict adherence to the policy of defining within the 2,000 words encouraged them to "resort to syntactically more complex, convoluted (or less natural) constructions". As an example, the researcher quotes the *LDOCE* definition of **tabasco**, adding that a much simpler solution "a very hot sauce" would do the job, but was unfortunately not feasible due to lack of *sauce* on the *LDOCE* list.

> **tabasco** ... a very hot-tasting liquid made from peppers, used for
> giving a special taste to food (*LDOCE1*)

From a syntactic point of view, the *LDOCE* definition above is more difficult to process for less competent learners than Fontenelle's proposed alternative. For one thing, it is longer, which puts a greater demand on the reader's memory (Coleman 1962; Bormuth 1966; Benson 1985). Another is that it contains two subordinate clauses, making the text less readable than if it were composed of independent sentences (Coleman 1962; Coleman & Blumenfeld 1963; Coleman 1964; Fagan 1971; Nilagupta 1977).[2] More importantly, however, it can be argued that the second clause ("used for ...") is ambiguous for those readers who are unfamiliar with English punctuation rules[3] or read definitions carelessly. In other words, there is some risk that such learners will be deluded into thinking that the subject of this clause is *peppers,* not *liquid.* A more extreme example of a definition with an excessive use of postmodifying relative clauses is that of **carbon dioxide**, which comes from a native-speaker dictionary (see below). In this definition, each subsequent clause is introduced with a pronoun *that* referring to one and the same noun (*gas*).[4] This is a remarkably successful space-saving strategy but is a deviation from standard English (Landau 2009: 174).

---

[2]   Coleman (1962), for example, demonstrates that reading comprehension of college students increased when all subordinate clauses were provided as independent sentences. Likewise, Nurss (1966) shows that sentences with fewer relative clauses were significantly easier for readers to understand (cited in Nilagupta 1977).

[3]   Note that the comma before the clause (, *used* ...) suggests that the clause refers to an element mentioned earlier in the sentence.

[4]   This strategy was originally introduced by Philip Gove in *The Third New International* (1961). It allowed for greater compression of information and was supposed to 'achieve precision and objectivity' (Morton 1994: 87). For a discussion of this strategy see Landau 2009: 174.

> **carbon dioxide** ... a heavy colorless gas CO_2 that does not support combustion, that dissolves in water to form carbonic acid, that is formed esp. by the action of acids on carbonates ..., that is absorbed from the air by plants in the first step in photosynthesis, and that is used in the gaseous and liquefied forms ... (*Third New International* 1961)

Another reason for the definition of **tabasco** being more challenging to less competent learners is that the constituent clauses derive by ellipsis from passives. For example, the first clause, *made from peppers,* is a reduced relative clause that derives from *which is made from peppers.* Although it has no overt passive auxiliary verb, it functions as the passive (Quirk et al. 1972: 541), and can be as challenging as the passive. Research has shown that English passives are less readable than the active (Coleman 1964) and are more difficult to learn for both non-native and native learners (Ferreira 2003; Dąbrowska & Street 2006). They are particularly challenging to speakers of languages typologically distant from English, especially those in which passives are never used or used less frequently than in English[5] (Obi-Okoye 2008; Amadi 2018). A construction similar to that above is a reduced clause with a postmodifying present participle, for example, (*the people) living in the cottages,* which derives from *(the people) that are living in the cottages* (Parrott 2000: 412). Other potential trouble spots are strings of nouns (Pym 1990: 86). Certainly, the above constructions are part and parcel of the language of definitions (as well as of standard English) and can hardly pose a comprehension problem for advanced learners. However, in the case of less competent users, things are different, especially when the above patterns are used repeatedly.

Although the syntax of EFL definitions is certainly less of a problem for learners than the vocabulary, it is reasonable to ask whether the introduction of a limited DV has a negative effect on syntactic properties of definitions. Does it make them syntactically more challenging than the strategy of controlling the definition vocabulary with no prior list? In order to answer this question, two earlier editions of the same dictionary were in the focus of my inquiry: *OALD4* (1987) and *OALD5* (1995). Although these editions are now rather dated, they are suitable objects for this investigation, as they represent two opposing approaches to defining: the former uses no prior vocabulary list, and the latter, a limited DV. Furthermore, being consecutive editions, they represent the tradition of the same dictionary, which, from a researcher's point of view, has the advantage of eliminating some external factors. The latter edition was based on the former, and neither of them adopted a syntactically radical approach to defining by means of full sentences, which otherwise might have some influence on quantitative results.

---

[5]   Numerous languages in New Guinea and Chad have no passives (Li & Lang 1979; Jaggar 1981).

2. Two models of controlling a DV

Each of the dictionaries under study represents a different model of controlling a definition vocabulary (Kamiński 2020). The *OALD4* policy has its roots in the first edition compiled in 1942 under the editorship of A. S. Hornby, E. V. Gatenby, and H. Wakefield. Although the definitions in *OALD1* "were made as simple as possible", Hornby did not employ an explicitly limited vocabulary (*OALD1*: v). As he argued, there was no certainty that such a vocabulary "would be known to the prospective users" (*OALD1*: v). Instead, the editor maintained that definitions should be formulated "on the general principle":

> (1) that common words should be explained by means of other common words (with the useful addition of synonyms which are less common) or by means of pictures or diagrams, and
> (2) that less common words (likely to be met with only when the learner has already acquired a vocabulary of several thousand words) should be defined by the use of a wider vocabulary. (*OALD1:* v)

Hornby distinguished between common and less common words as objects of definitions, and as a rule applied different defining strategies depending on that division. In either case, however, he systematically allowed for the use of words from lower frequency bands to serve as synonyms complementing analytical phrases (which arguably made the dictionary productively useful) (Kamiński 2020). Hornby's policy allowed for more freedom in the selection of the definition vocabulary, and was more flexible than the approach adopted in *OALD5* (1995).

OALD5 broke the long-standing tradition, initiated by Hornby in 1942, of controlling the vocabulary with no explicit restrictions. The dictionary made use of a DV of nearly 3,500 lexical items, and occasionally admitted words outside the DV. The outsiders were printed in small capitals to draw the user's attention. Arguably, these words were used whenever the vocabulary of the list was insufficient to give a clear explanation of a specialist, technical, or semantically complex word. In this way, the dictionary followed in the footsteps of its competitor, *LDOCE* (1978 and 1987), which had used a DV of over 2,000 items. The approach adopted by *LDOCE* (and later by other dictionaries, including *OALD*) was a revival of Michael West's approach. The idea was to restrict the vocabulary of definitions to a specific set of lexical units. This model, which was first adopted in West and Endicott's *New Method English Dictionary* (1935), was intended to solve the ancient problem of defining *obscurum per obscurius*. As Paul Procter, the editor of *LDOCE1*, remarks

> The result of using the vocabulary is the fulfilment of one of the most basic lexicographic principles – *that is that the definitions are always written using simpler terms than the words they describe*. (*LDOCE1*, ix)

3. Method

The definitions selected for the study came from a random collection of pages from *OALD4* (76 pages) and *OALD5* (74 pages). Each edition was a source for an independent sample of definitions, and no attempt was made to select definitions for the same words in each sample. I decided against the latter option, which, though seems to allow for easy comparison of corresponding definitions, raises several methodological problems.[6] The hard copies of the pages were converted into electronic format with an optical scanner. Following a manual annotation of definition boundaries,[7] the definitions were extracted automatically. This task as well as subsequent text processing and analyses were conducted with a series of R[8] scripts developed by the author specifically for this research. The definition samples were checked for errors. To facilitate comparison, the samples were rounded to the same number of word tokens: 25,000. The definitions were POS-tagged using TreeTagger (Schmid 1995), and the samples were checked manually for tagging errors. For easier POS recognition, prior to the tagging process, abbreviations such as *esp*., *usu*., *sb*, *sth* and *sb/sth*[9] were automatically expanded into full forms.

Using the R scripts, I identified complex grammatical patterns that could be difficult to interpret for less advanced learners (see the Introduction). This task was possible because the samples had been POS-tagged.[10] The total occurrences

---

6   Before collecting samples of corresponding definitions from two dictionaries, one would have to decide on which definitions to select. For example, should one select *particular* or *all* definitions in an entry (entries)? In the former case, the sampling process will be time-consuming and, more importantly, it may not allow the researcher to collect a sufficiently large sample for a quantitative study. If the researcher decides to study all definitions in a run of entries, the sample is likely to include a proportion of non-corresponding definitions. This is because two dictionaries or editions of the same dictionary have rarely the same content. When preparing a new edition of a dictionary, lexicographers update the dictionary by adding new senses while removing others, and revise the old material by splitting or lumping existing senses. All these changes make it difficult for the researcher to compare definitions systematically. Furthermore, the changes may lead to a significant difference in sample sizes, which I wanted to avoid.

7   The fact of drawing the samples from pages, rather than entries, entails the risk that some definitions are incomplete. This problem, however, is limited chiefly to the definitions that cross page boundaries. Nevertheless, in order to reduce the risk, I excluded those parts of boundary definitions that were very short.

8   R is an open source programming language (R Development Core Team 2013).

9   The slash symbol /, used as an alternative in both editions of *OALD*, was replaced with a conjunction "or".

10   The R scripts were designed to identify sequences of words and their corresponding tags as given

of the constructions were calculated in both editions of the dictionary, and the differences between the observed and expected frequencies were interpreted with a binomial test. The patterns are listed below, together with definition length[11], a parameter that is indicative of syntactic complexity. To compare the lengths of definitions in *OALD4* and *OALD5*, I used the Wilcoxon rank-sum test for non-parametric data.

1) the passive voice: *be + past participle*, e.g., *is taken*, *was driven*;
2) nominal constructions with postmodifying past participles, e.g., *unit composed*, *one used, hat tied.* Such constructions contain reduced relative clauses, which behave like passives.;
3) nominal constructions like those above but with postmodifying present participles, e.g., *people fighting, sound expressing*;
4) reduced relative clauses after a comma: comma + postmodifying past participle; e.g., *used* in "heavy axe with a long handle, used as a weapon" (*OALD4*). Such clauses may be difficult to interpret as they refer to a noun mentioned earlier in the definition;
5) non-reduced relative clauses after a comma, e.g., ", that runs". As in the pattern above, such clauses do not refer to the element immediately before the comma;
6) nominal constructions with postmodifying relative clauses (or N-complement clauses), e.g., *person who performs, atmosphere that seems, part which is*;
7) noun strings, including compounds, e.g., *rubber cap, cotton cloth, army officer*;
8) median length of definitions (in word tokens).

In addition to the above quantitative analysis, a selection of definitions was examined qualitatively. Table 1 presents 20 definitions from *OALD4* and their revised versions from *OALD5*. The aim of this analysis was to have a closer look at syntactic (and lexical) revisions undertaken therein. The *OALD4* definitions came from the same sample as that subjected to the quantitative analysis, whereas the corresponding definitions from *OALD5* had to be located outside the sample.

The definitions selected for the analysis were those that contained one or more low-frequency words, as these made the definitions the most likely candidates for revision in *OALD5*. Because such words are usually difficult to spot with the human

---

in the TreeTagger output. For example, *be+past participle* constructions such as *be followed* and *is called* are coded in the output (with some modifications) as "be_VB follow_VVN" and "be_VBZ call_VVN", respectively. These constructions can be identified using R functions (e.g., *grep*) and the following search pattern: "[a-z-]+_VB[A-Z]* +[a-z-]+_V[A-Z]N".

[11] The length of definition was measured in word tokens. Sub-senses, which were separated by semi-colons in both editions of *OALD*, were treated as separate definitions. The definitions included contextual glosses in parentheses.

eye, they were found with the aid of *AntWordProfiler*[12] (Anthony 2012). AntWordProfiler is a computer program that generates vocabulary statistics for a text by comparing it against vocabulary lists. The program highlights words that fall into a particular list as well as those that do not belong to any reference list. The lists used in this study were New General Service List (NGSL) and New Academic Word List (NAWL), both created by C. Browne, B. Culligan, and J. Phillips.[13] Both lists contain common words: NGSL is comprised of 2,800 core general English words, and NAWL of 960 words frequently used in academic English. Any word that fell outside these lists could be a source of problems for less proficient learners, making the definition potentially difficult to interpret. AntWordProfiler served as a useful guide to the identification of the definitions that qualified for revision in *OALD5*.

Table 1. 20 definitions revised (some of the revised parts are highlighted in grey)

No.	Headword	OALD4	OALD5
1	alien	person who is not a naturalized citizen of the country in which he is living	a person who is not a citizen of the country in which he or she is living
2	alienate	cause sb to become unfriendly or indifferent; estrange sb	to lose or destroy the friendship, support, sympathy, etc of sb
3	alimentary canal	tubular passage between the mouth and the anus through which food passes as it is digested	the passage between the mouth and the ANUS through which food passes
4	alive to sth	aware of or responsive to sth	aware of sth; alert to sth
5	alkali	any of a class of substances (eg caustic soda and ammonia) that neutralize acids and form caustic or corrosive solutions in water	any of a class of substances that react with acids to form chemical salts and have a PH of more than 7. When dissolved in water they form solutions that can burn or destroy things they touch
6	batalion	army unit composed of several companies and forming part of a regiment or brigade	a large group of soldiers that form part of a regiment or BRIGADE

---

[12]   AntWordProfiler version 1.4.0.1 for Windows
[13]   The lists were downloaded from Anthony's website: https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antwordprofiler/.

7	bathos	sudden change (in writing or speech) from what is deeply moving or important to what is foolish or trivial; anticlimax	(in writing, speech or drama) a sudden change from what is important or deeply felt to what is foolish or absurd
8	batik	method of printing coloured designs on cloth by waxing the parts that are not to be dyed	a method of making coloured designs on cloth by putting wax on the parts that are not to be coloured
9	baton	decorative stick held and twirled by drum majors, etc.	a stick held and waved by the person who marches in front of a military band
10	batten	(on a ship) strip of wood or metal used to fasten down covers or tarpaulins over a hatch	a long strip of wood, used esp to keep other building materials in place on a wall or roof
11	battleaxe	unpleasantly domineering (usu older) woman	an older woman who behaves in a fierce or bad-tempered way
12	battle-cry	slogan or rallying cry of a group of people fighting for the same cause	a phrase used by a group of people working together in a particular contest or campaign
13	bauble	showy ornament of little value	an ornament of little value
14	bawl sb out	scold sb severely	to SCOLD sb severely
15	bay	laurel with dark green leaves and purple berries	a tree with dark green leaves and purple berries
16	bonus	payment added to what is usual or expected, eg an extra dividend paid to shareholders in a company or to holders of an insurance policy	a payment added to what is usual or expected
17	in the care of sb	under sb's supervision	being looked after by sb
18	careen	rush forward with a swaying or swerving motion	to rush forward leaning from side to side

19	close to the bone	(of a joke, story, etc) almost indecent; likely to offend some people	(of a joke, story, etc) likely to offend some people, esp because they are about sex
20	cover	sprinkle, splash or scatter a layer of liquid, dust, etc on sb/sth	to put or scatter a layer of liquid, dust, etc on sb/sth

4. Results and discussion

Table 2 displays the distribution of the selected grammatical constructions in *OALD4* and *OALD5* and the results of the binomial test. The test was used to verify the hypothesis that the construction frequencies in the former dictionary were significantly smaller than those in the latter. As can be seen, most of the p-values are greater than the level threshold .05, which means that there is no evidence to support this hypothesis.

However, there is one construction which has significantly increased in frequency, with a p-value below .05. This is the past participle postmodifying a noun, such as *performance given, song sung, spices ground (to a powder), phrase used, material hung,* and *bag filled.* Admittedly, this pattern can be used as an efficient paraphrase of rare words. It is more economical than one with a non-reduced relative clause, from which it derives (e.g., *a performance that is given, a song which is sung, spices that are ground*).

As for definition length (Table 3), the Wilcoxon test showed that the *OALD5* definitions are significantly longer than those in *OALD4*. On average, they are longer by two word tokens.

Table 2. Complex grammatical patterns in the sample

	Grammatical pattern	Example	Raw frequency		binomial p-value[14]
			OALD4	*OALD5*	
1	be + past participle	*is taken*	234	221	–
2	N + past participle	*unit composed*	190	229	0.03

---

[14] The binomial test was computed with *binom.test* function in R, with the option *alternative*="less" for the one-sided hypothesis that the frequency of each structure was lower than the chance distribution. Because the hypothesis predicted that there are significantly fewer constructions in *OALD4* than in *OALD5*, I treated the former frequencies as successes and those of the latter as failures. With this hypothesis, the binomial test was applied to all the rows of the table except for rows 1 and 7 in which there was an opposite situation (the *OALD4* frequencies were greater than those in *OALD5*). It was pointless to verify the hypothesis for these rows because the direction of my prediction was opposite and because it was already clear that there was no evidence to support this hypothesis.

3	N + present participle	*people fighting*	68	86	0.09
4	, + past participle	*, used*	54	62	0.26
5	, + that V	*, that runs*	3	7	0.17
6	N + relative clause	*person who performs, atmosphere that seems, part which is*	173	179	0.39
7	N + N	*cotton cloth*	181	165	–

Table 3. Median length of definitions (in word tokens)

	OALD4	OALD5	p-value[15]
median definition length	6 (IQR=7)	8 (IQR=7)	<.001

Some idea of the nature of revisions can be gained by examining 20 definitions in Table 1. Upon closer inspection, one finds that in many definitions the overall syntax has been retained with no or little changes (see especially definitions 4, 8, 13, 14, 15, 20). The lexicographers used several strategies, which arguably resulted from the need to conform to the requirements of the DV. These strategies are as follows:

(a) the replacement of an off-the-list word with one from the list (as in definitions 4, 7, 8, 9, 15, 16, 18, and 20)
(b) the removal of an off-the-list word with no replacement (1, 3, and 13)
(c) the use of an off-the-list word and the explicit indication of its outsider status by means of small capitals (3, 5, 6, and 14)
(d) the paraphrase of a definition part containing one or more difficult words (2, 5, 6, 11, 17, and 18)

Strategies (a), (b), and (c) were of purely lexical type and, in general, did not affect the syntax of the definitions, whereas strategy (d) had far-reaching syntactic consequences. The strategies will be discussed below.

Regarding strategy (a), it consisted in replacing a single word with a word from the DV list. As can be seen in Table 1, this strategy has been used in the

---

[15] $W = 3{,}781{,}800$

definition of **alive to sth** (definition 4), where *responsive* has been replaced with a near-synonym *alert.* This strategy has also been applied at **bathos** (7) (*absurd* substitutes for *trivial*). Likewise, in order to conform to part-of-speech restrictions, the adjectival sense of *(deeply) moving*, which is not allowable in *OALD5*, has been replaced with *(deeply) felt*. Also under **batik** (8), a phrase *by waxing (the parts)* has been changed for *by putting wax on (the parts),* because *wax* is allowable only as a noun. Lexical replacements usually involve the use of common near-synonyms (e.g., *coloured* in place of *dyed*), but sometimes, apparently for lack of one, the editor has been forced to use a high-frequency, but semantically depleted, hyperonym in place of a more precise word; for example *put ... a layer of liquid* instead of *sprinkle, splash ... a layer of liquid* (20); and *tree* in place of *laurel* (15). The above alterations, however, do not change the overall structures of the definitions.

In some definitions, the lexicographers removed non-DV words without further replacements (strategy b). Apparently, they applied this strategy when they found that the removal of a word did not affect the comprehensibility and accuracy of the definition. For example, *tubular* must have been deemed unnecessary or useless in the definition of **alimentary canal** (3), and *showy* in **bauble** (13). A similar strategy has been used at **bonus** (16), where a large part of the definition specifying a specialist context of use of the word has been removed. The new definition is certainly an improvement on the old one, which is due not only to lack of the specialist terms (*dividend, shareholders*), but also to the fact that the removed part may have been difficult to understand for a non-specialist learner.

Whenever headwords could not be defined satisfactorily within the DV, the lexicographers resorted to words from outside this vocabulary (strategy c). As mentioned earlier, off-the-list words were printed in small capitals to signal their outsider status, as in "to SCOLD sb severely" in the definition of **bawl sb out** (14). The words also served as cross-references, directing the user to the relevant entries. The use of such words seems to be unavoidable, if a dictionary is to define low-frequency, technical, or specialist words within reasonable length (cf. West 1935; Flood & West 1953: 583).

As hinted earlier, the strategy by paraphrase (d) had a significant impact on both lexical and syntactic structure of definitions. In several cases the changes had the effect of lengthening the definitions. An example is the new definition of **battleaxe** (11), in which the meaning of the premodifying adjective *domineering* is now conveyed – albeit partly – through the postmodifying relative clause *who behaves in a fierce or bad-tempered way.* This paraphrase arguably results from the fact that the DV lacks an adjective that would substitute for *domineering* in the same attributive position. From a definer's point of view, a more challenging definition is that of **alkali** (5). The *OALD5* definition no longer uses low-

frequency items: *caustic soda, ammonia, neutralize, corrosive,* but paraphrases them within the vocabulary of the list. The word *neutralize*, for example, corresponds in meaning to the new clauses *react with acids to form chemical salts.* In turn, in order to express the meaning of the following single clause: *form caustic or corrosive solutions in water*, a separate complex sentence has been added: *When dissolved in water they form solutions that can burn or destroy things they touch.* Additionally, *drum majors* at **baton** (9) has been changed to a complex noun phrase with a postmodifying relative clause: *the person who marches in front of a military band*. These examples suggest that the introduction of the DV in *OALD5* resulted in longer definitions. While this is true of the definitions examined above as well as those in the quantitative part of the research (see Table 3), the claim cannot be accepted for the entire dictionary because of lack of statistical significance.

Incidentally, it is worth noting that while the *OALD5* editors imposed restrictions on the range of allowable words, they also limited the meanings in which the words could be used. One can see satisfactory results of this policy in the new definition of **baton** (9), which no longer uses the word *major* in the rare nominal sense (i.e., a leader of a marching band). Sometimes, however, semantic restrictions are not in place. For example, in the definition of **alkali** (5), the word *solutions* is used in the sense of "liquid", which is strictly speaking not its central meaning. This shows that the policy of defining in terms of "main or most common meaning" (*OALD5*: 1417) was not always easy to follow.

Finally, some definitions in the sample do not display radical changes in structure. For example, at **battle-cry** (12), although *people fighting for the same cause* has been paraphrased as *people working together in a particular contest or campaign*, the two definitions are based on the same pattern *N + present participle.* Nevertheless, the latter definition is more likely to be comprehensible to learners, because it avoids the use of *cause* in the peripheral meaning.

5. Conclusions

This study examined 8 syntactic parameters of the definitions of *OALD4* and *OALD5*. We can conclude that, with respect to the majority of the parameters, *OALD5's* definitions are not more syntactically complex than *OALD4*'s. Although most parameters studied, including definition length, were slightly affected by the introduction of the DV in *OALD5*, the results cannot be extrapolated to the entire dictionary. The only construction pattern that increased significantly in number was that of a noun plus a postmodifying past participle (e.g., *performance given*, *spice ground, phrase used*). In this respect, *OALD5* definitions, which are written within a limited DV, may be more difficult to read for less proficient learners (if such learners really read them) than definitions written with no prior list. This is,

however, not an argument against using a DV, especially when the syntax of definitions is not the main source of problems for learners.

A limitation of this study is that it takes into consideration only selected grammatical patterns, ignoring other constructions that could be trouble spots for some learners. Another limitation is that the study relies on the analysis of samples rather than of *all* the definitions in the dictionaries. Moreover, it is worth studying this topic on real users, to know their perspective, rather than to draw conclusions purely on the basis of the lexicographic material offered by dictionaries (Dziemianko & Lew 2006). In a future follow-up investigation, one might examine whether the same results hold for dictionaries of different publishers, especially those using full-sentence definitions.

Acknowledgements

REFERENCES

DICTIONARIES

[LDOCE-1] Procter, Paul (ed.). (1978). *Longman dictionary of contemporary English* (1st edn.). Longman.

[LDOCE-2] Summers, Della & Michael Rundell (eds). 1987. *Longman dictionary of contemporary English* (2nd edn). Longman.

[Third New International] Gove, Philip B. (ed.). 1961. *Webster's third new international dictionary of the English language unabridged*. G. & C. Merriam.

[NMED] West, Michael & James G. Endicott (eds.). 1956 [1935]. *The new method English dictionary*. Longmans, Green.

[OALD-1] Hornby, Albert S., Edward V. Gatenby & Harold Wakefield (eds.). 1948. *A learner's dictionary of current English* (1st edn). Oxford University Press.

[OALD-4] Cowie, Anthony P. (ed.). 1989. *Oxford advanced learner's dictionary of current English* (4th edn). Oxford University Press.

[OALD-5] Crowther, Jonathan (ed.). 1995. *Oxford advanced learner's dictionary of current English* (5th edn). Oxford University Press.

OTHER SOURCES

Amadi, Scholastica C. 2018. Learning the English passive voice: Difficulties, learning strategies of Igbo ESL learners and pedagogical implications. *International Journal of English and Literature* 9.5. 50–62. DOI: 10.5897/IJEL2018.1146

Anthony, Laurence. 2012. *AntWordProfiler* (Version 1.4.0). https://www.laurenceanthony.net/ (1 October, 2019).

Benson, Robert W. 1985. The end of legalese: The game is over. *N.Y.U. Review of Law and Social Change* 13.3. 519–573.

Bormuth, John R. 1966. Readability: A new approach. *Reading Research Quarterly* 1.3. 79–132. DOI: 10.2307/747021

Browne, Charles, Brent Culligan & Joseph Phillips. *New General Service List*. https://www.newgeneralservicelist.org/ (10 October, 2019).

Carter, Ronald. 2012. *Vocabulary. Applied linguistic perspectives* (2nd edn). Routledge.

Coleman, Edmund B. 1962. Improving comprehensibility by shortening sentences. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 46.2. 131–134. DOI: 10.1037/h0039740

Coleman, Edmund B. 1964. The comprehensibility of several grammatical transformations. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 48.3. 186–190. DOI: 10.1037/h0040440

Coleman, Edmund B. & J. P. Blumenfeld. 1963. Cloze scores of nominalizations and their grammatical transformations using active verbs. *Psychological Reports* 13.3. 651–654. DOI: 10.2466/pr0.1963.13.3.651

Dąbrowska, Ewa & James Street. 2006. Individual differences in language attainment: Comprehension of passive sentences by native and non-native English speakers. *Language Sciences* 28.6. 604–615. DOI: 10.1016/j.langsci.2005.11.014

Dziemianko, Anna & Robert Lew. 2006. Research into dictionary use by Polish learners of English: Some methodological considerations. In Katarzyna Dziubalska-Kołaczyk (ed.), *IFAtuation: A life in IFA. A festschrift for Professor Jacek Fisiak on the occasion of his 70th birthday.* 211–233. Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM.

Fagan, William T. 1971. Transformations and comprehension. *The Reading Teacher* 25.2. 169–172.

Ferreira, Fernanda. 2003. The misinterpretation of noncanonical sentences. *Cognitive Psychology* 47.2. 164–203. DOI: 10.1016/S0010-0285(03)00005-7

Flood, W. E. & Michael West. 1953. Supplementary scientific and technical vocabulary. In Michael West (ed.), *A general service list of English words with semantic frequencies and a supplementary word-list for the writing of popular science and technology*, 583–588. Longmans.

Fontenelle, Thierry. 2009. Linguistic research and learners' dictionaries: *The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. In Anthony P. Cowie (ed.), *Oxford history of English lexicography*, Vol. 2, 412–435. Oxford University Press.

Jaggar, Philip. 1981. *Some unusual lexical passives in Hausa*. Unpublished M.A. thesis. University of California at Los Angeles.

Kamiński, Mariusz P. 2020. *Defining with simple vocabulary*. Unpublished manuscript.

Landau, Sidney I. 2009. Major American dictionaries. In Anthony P. Cowie (ed.). *The Oxford history of English lexicography*. Vol. 2. 182–229. Oxford University Press.

Lew, Robert. 2010. Multimodial lexicography: The representation of meaning in electronic dictionaries. *Lexikos* 20. 290–306.

Lew, Robert. 2013. Identifying, ordering and defining senses. In Howard Jackson (ed.), *The Bloomsbury companion to lexicography,* 284–302. Bloomsbury.

Li, Charles N., & Rainier Lang. 1979. The syntactic irrelevance of an ergative case in Enga and other Papuan languages. In Frans Planck (ed.), *Ergativity*, 307–324. Academic Press.

Morton, Herbert C. 1994. *The story of* Webster's Third. *Philip Gove's controversial dictionary and its critics*. Cambridge University Press.

Nilagupta, Sirirat. 1977. The relationship of syntax to readability for ESL students in Thailand. *Journal of Reading* 20.7. 585–594.

Nurss, Joanne R. 1966. *Children's reading: Syntactic structure and comprehension difficulty*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University.

Obi-Okoye, A. F. 2008. Contrastive and error analyses for the TESL teacher/student. In A. F. Obi-Okoye (ed.), *An introduction to applied English linguistics: From theory to practice.* 164–208. Freabag Investment.

Parrott, Martin. 2000. *Grammar for English language teachers* (2nd edn). Cambridge University Press.

Pym, Peter J. 1990. Pre-editing and the use of simplified writing for MT: An engineer's experience of operating an MT system. In Pamela Mayorcas (ed.), *Translating and the computer 10: The translation environment 10 years on*. 80–95. Aslib.

Quirk, Randolph, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech & Jan Svartvik. 1972. *A grammar of contemporary English*. Longman.

R Development Core Team. 2013. *R: A language and environment for statistical computing.* R Foundation for Statistical Computing.

Rundell, Michael. 2006. Learner's dictionaries. In Keith Brown, Anne Anderson, Laurie Bauer, Margie Berns, Jim Miller & Graeme Hirst (eds), *Encyclopedia of language and linguistics* (2nd edn). 739–743. Elsevier.

Schmid, Helmut. 1995. Improvements in part-of-speech tagging with an application to German. *Proceedings of the ACL SIGDAT-Workshop*.

Stein, Gabriele. 1979. The best of British and American lexicography. *Dictionaries* 1. 1–23. DOI: 10.1353/dic.1979.0004

West, Michael. 1935. *Definition vocabulary*. University of Toronto Press.

Whitcut, Janet. 1988. Lexicography in simple language. *International Journal of Lexicography* 1.1. 49–55. DOI: 10.1093/ijl/1.1.49

Xu, Hai. 2012. A critique of the controlled defining vocabulary in *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. *Lexikos* 22. 367–381.