# REVIEW

*User-friendliness of verb syntax in pedagogical dictionaries of English*. By Anna Dziemianko. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006. Pp. xii, 229.

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In Dziemianko's own words, *User-friendliness of verb syntax in pedagogical dictionaries of English* is "an endeavour to contribute to the experimental research on the use of monolingual English dictionaries". More specifically, "[t]he study attempts to examine the user-friendliness of sources of verb syntax in pedagogical dictionaries of English" (Dziemianko 2006: 3).

Two terms are central here – *experimental* and *user-friendliness*. To take experimental first, Dziemianko notes that, compared to studies of dictionary use based on questionnaires and interviews, "[e]xperimental research ... is more reliable in that it has the advantage of obtaining first-hand data on dictionary-using behaviour" (2006: 2). She also notes that " ... the experimental approach ... is underdeveloped in research on dictionary use" (2006: 2). The only comparable studies are those reported in Bogaards and van der Kloot (2001) and Bogaards and van der Kloot (2002).

With respect to user-friendliness, Dziemianko takes the view that user-friendliness in dictionary use is not guaranteed by including in a given dictionary information which is believed by the dictionary compiler to be useful. Neither is it enough that relevant information is easily accessible. In Dziemianko's (2006: 7) words:

> Once the syntactic information found in a dictionary has helped users achieve their purpose, it can be considered useful, but its source may not be user-friendly. The utility, or usefulness, of the identified syntactic information is seen as a necessary, although not yet sufficient condition for the user-friendliness of the source which furnishes such information.

According to Dziemianko, the ultimate test for whether user-friendliness has been achieved lies with the dictionary user's frequent reliance on the source of

information: "The source should ... be referred to very often, or, in other words, it should present the information in a way which would attract users' attention very frequently" (2006: 7).

This view of user-friendliness, which is remarkably clear in its reliance on the judgment of dictionary users, leads to the formulation of the following three research questions:

1. Was the relevant syntactic information identified in the verb entry?
2. Was the identified syntactic information used correctly?
3. In which source or sources was the useful syntactic information located most often?

The study falls into two parts – a theoretical part and an empirical part. The theoretical part consists of an analysis of the entire range of English learner's dictionaries from *Grammar of English words* from 1938 to *Cambridge advanced learner's dictionary* from 2003, and a review of the literature on trends in the presentation of verb syntax in pedagogical dictionaries. The empirical part consists of an experimental study of the user-friendliness of sources of verb syntax in pedagogical dictionaries.

With respect to the theoretical part, the assumption, for which Dziemianko does not provide any specific argumentation, is that information on verb syntax in pedagogical dictionaries resides in three microstructural elements: codes (including pattern illustrations), examples and definitions. The analysis of the dictionaries and the review of the literature reveals a number of trends of development, which eventually help Dziemianko formulate her hypotheses.

For codes she notes the following four features, which can be viewed as lexicographers' efforts to make encoded information on verb syntax more user-friendly:

1. increasing transparency of coding systems;
2. gradual departure from functional codes to formal codes;
3. placement of codes next to the pertinent examples illustrating the coded structures; and
4. replacement of codes by pattern illustrations (referred to by Dziemianko also as "collocations").

With respect to examples, she notes that they, if pedagogically oriented, are perceived by most lexicographers to be the most frequently used source of information on verb syntax.

As far as definitions of verbs are concerned, we can distinguish between three formats: defining by synonyms, defining by explanation (analytical defini-

tions) and defining by contextualisation (contextual definitions). Since synonyms alone do not provide any information on the syntax of the verb defined, we are left with analytical and contextual definitions. Dziemianko notes a development in analytical definitions in pedagogical dictionaries from abstract, decontextualised definitions towards analytical definitions which provide much more information about the syntactic and semantic-collocational properties of the verb. However, the format of the contextual definition (also called the full-sentence definition), which is the one we find consistently used in the *COBUILD* dictionaries (and occasionally in other pedagogical dictionaries) is characterised by Dziemianko as "even more effective" than the "modern" type of analytical definition. In her own words: "Overall, the above discussion implies that full-sentence definitions do not require much effort of the dictionary user looking for information on verb syntax in entries" (2006: 38).

Dziemianko can now formulate the following five hypotheses, which she then tests in her experimental study:

1. Syntactic information is most frequently located in examples.
2. Contextual definitions serve as a source of verb syntax more often than analytical ones.
3. Verb codes in the margin of the verb entry are consulted less frequently than those inside the entry.
4. Symbols for functional categories in verb codes decrease the frequency of reference to encoded syntactic information.
5. Reference to verb codes increase with proficiency.

At the heart of Dziemianko's experimental study was a multiple choice test with fifteen questions, in which a number of Polish high-school and university students were to complete gapped sentences, choosing the material to be inserted into the sentence from among four different alternatives. The following illustrates the test:

> *When the old Archbishop of Cantebury ... they held the canopy over her.*

> (a) *anointed with Alexandra*      (b) *and Alexandra anointed*
> (c) *anointed Alexandra*      (d) *anointed to bless Alexandra*

Each multiple choice question related to the syntax of a verb which was assumed to be unknown (with respect to both meaning and syntactic properties) to the students. The fifteen verbs were: *anoint, chafe, chivvy, ensconce, gyrate, haemorrhage, hobnob, implore, jolt, josh, moonlight, subpoena, tailgate,*

*trounce* and *yonk*. The students were also given a "mini-dictionary", containing entries for the fifteen verbs with the microstructural elements (codes, examples and definitions) that provide syntactic information on the verbs.

A total of ten "mini-dictionaries" were constructed by Dziemianko to reflect the different types of microstructural elements. Five dictionaries had analytical definitions and five had contextual definitions. Of the five dictionaries with analytical definitions (and similarly, of the five dictionaries with contextual definitions), one had pattern illustrations, two had functional codes (one with the codes inside the entry and one with the codes in an extra column) and two had formal codes (again one with the codes inside the entry and one with the codes in an extra column).

To illustrate, the entry for *anoint* with an analytical definition and formal codes placed inside the entry looked like this:

> **anoint** [...] verb to put oil or water on someone's head or body during a religious ceremony: [Vn] *Accordingly they petitioned the Pope to anoint Philip.* ◊ *He anointed my forehead.* ◊ [Vn with n] *The priest anointed her with oil.* ◊ [Vn as n] *The Pope anointed him as archbishop.* ◊ [Vnn] *In 751 Pepin was anointed king.*

The entry for *anoint* with a contextual definition and functional codes placed inside the entry looked like this:

> **anoint** [...] *verb* if someone anoints a person or a part of their body, they put oil or another liquid on a part of that person's body, usually for religious or ceremonial reasons: [T+obj] *Accordingly they petitioned the Pope to anoint Philip.* ◊ *He anointed my forehead.* ◊ [T+obj+ with n] *The priest anointed her with oil.* ◊ [T+obj+as n] *The Pope anointed him as archbishop.* ◊ [T+obj+n] *In 751 Pepin was anointed king.*

In actual fact, as can be seen, functional codes ("obj") are here mixed with formal codes ("n"). The example here also illustrates a problem with the contextual definition as a source of syntactic information. The contextual definition in this example only illustrates the first ([T+obj]) of the four complementation patterns allowed by *anoint*.

Now, in practical terms, the students were asked, in the multiple choice test, to circle that of the four suggested ways of completing the gapped sentence which they considered correct. They were also explicitly told to consult the mini-dictionary provided for help and to underline the piece or pieces of information they found useful in completing the gapped sentence.

Although parts of the "Methods" chapter (2006: 45-115) is tough going for readers (like the present reviewer) who are not particularly conversant with statistical methods used in experimental research, it seems on the whole that the design of the experimental study is sound and well-suited to produce data

whose analysis is relevant for providing answers to the five hypotheses. In particular, the number of subjects taking part in the study (325 high-school students and 281 university students) must be considered to be large enough to produce statistically significant results.

The carefulness with which the study was designed can be illustrated by the following point. As mentioned, it was assumed that the students would be unfamiliar with the meaning and structural properties of the fifteen verbs used in the study. However, to eliminate from the study cases where individual students were actually familiar with the meaning or structural properties of one or more of the verbs, they were asked in a pretest to explain in Polish or English the meaning or meanings of the fifteen verbs and to give at least one example in English to illustrate as many grammatical constructions as possible in which each of the verbs could occur. As it turned out, only a negligible number of cases had to be excluded from the study on this score.

It might however have been a good idea to introduce the "Methods" chapter with a general description of the design of the experiment. It took the present reviewer a good deal of time (and frequent references to pp. 207-210 in the appendices where the design of the mini-dictionaries is illustrated) to grasp fully the set-up of the multiple choice test.

At a general level, Dziemianko can conclude that, although subjects, particularly the high-school students, in some cases underlined syntactic information in the mini-dictionaries that was irrelevant for the completion of the task, they were in general able to use the potentially helpful syntactic information found in the dictionaries. She does note, however, that university students did substantially better than high-school students. However, these general results are strictly speaking irrelevant for providing confirmation or the opposite of any of her five hypotheses.

If we now look at the use of the three microstructural elements providing syntactic information on verb syntax, definitions, codes and examples, it turns out that for all the ten mini-dictionaries, the high-school students invariably resorted predominantly to examples for useful information. The same applies to university students with the qualification, however, that in the two mini-dictionaries with pattern illustrations, these pattern illustrations were the preferred choice as source of information. This confirms Dziemianko's first hypothesis that syntactic information is most frequently located in examples, although with the reservation about the university students' reliance on pattern illustrations. The university students also generally relied on a larger number of sources of verb syntax information than the high-school students.

For the high-school students, definitions came in second on the popularity list of sources of verb syntax information, whereas they hardly consulted codes at all. For the university students, the picture was slightly different: if defini-

tions were of the contextual type, they were more resorted to than codes, but codes were more popular than definitions, if the definitions were of the analytical type. These results confirm Dziemianko's fifth hypothesis that reference to verb codes increases with proficiency.

The general conclusion on definitions is that syntactic information was located considerably more often in contextual definitions than in analytical definitions, thus confirming the second hypothesis.

With respect to codes, the investigation confirms the third hypothesis about the location of codes. Codes located inside the dictionary entry were referred to more often that codes in the extra column. As far as the hypothesis about dictionary users' preference for formal codes over functional codes is concerned, the investigation comes to the (also for the present reviewer) surprising result that less proficient dictionary users (the high-school students) actually preferred functional codes for formal codes; for university students, what can be concluded only is that the hypothesis has not been confirmed.

Dziemianko can thus conclude that all her hypotheses except her fourth hypothesis were confirmed by the findings of the experimental study.

This however is not the end of the story. In the "Results" chapter (2006: 117-191), Dziemianko explores not only findings directly related to the five hypotheses, but also findings about a host of other relations. We are in fact given a warning about what is in store for us in connection with the formulation of her hypotheses (Dziemianko 2006: 43):

> It appears, however, that research into any unexplored area, also the user-friendliness of sources of verb syntax in learners' dictionaries, should not be limited to the verification of hypotheses suggested mainly on the grounds of logic, common sense or informed opinion. A more flexible and broader approach should be adopted in the hope of identifying some relations about which no predictions have ever been made.

In the "Results" chapter, we are thus told for example that it could be interesting to see, whether gender has any influence on students' preferences for specific types of information on verb syntax. As a matter of fact, it turns out that the findings with respect to this particular issue are inconsistent and therefore inconclusive.

There is no doubt that many of Dziemianko's findings that are not directly related to her five hypotheses are interesting in themselves and very often worthy of further investigation, but the sheer wealth of such findings may have a tendency to block our view of the more central findings directly related to her hypotheses.

Finally, Dziemianko turns to the question of practical consequences of her study for learner lexicography. Her main conclusion in this respect is the following (2006: 188):

> The study shows, then, that as far as syntactic information is concerned, a user-friendly verb entry should contain examples, a contextual definition and functional codes interspersed among examples. ... Clearly, the conclusions are not at all surprising as far as the sources of uncoded syntactic information are concerned. However, those conclusions which pertain to codes and pattern illustrations create a need for further investigation.

Her reservations about coded information stem partly from the fact that she was unable to come forward with any hard-and-fast explanation of the subjects' preference for functional codes over formal ones. Since one explanation (which applies mainly to the high-school students) might be that the subjects lacked the necessary grammatical knowledge for understanding the codes, she advocates the inclusion of more examples illustrating the meaning of symbols incorporated in codes in the relevant macrostructural element of the dictionary.

However, this may point to a more general problem with the type of experiment conducted by Dziemianko – namely how to interpret the results of such an experimental study, not only when they do not correspond to expectations, but also when they actually do correspond to expectations.

Since her questionnaire also revealed that very few of the subjects participating in the study had received instruction in the use of monolingual learners' dictionaries, she also recommends in her conclusion that such instruction be intensified.

All this seems plausible enough, but there is one essential point which is not discussed in the conclusion, namely whether findings from a study of the user-friendliness of verb syntax in pedagogical dictionaries, in which the subjects were asked to perform a specific task, namely the completion of gapped sentences, choosing the material to be inserted into the sentences from a number of alternatives, can be generalised to all the types of tasks for which pedagogical dictionaries are used, such as for example free foreign-language text production and translation. This is a moot point and could have deserved some attention, for example in the form of a remark to the effect that further research is needed in order to establish with certainty whether her findings can in fact be generalised to other types of tasks.

From the perspective of the functional school of lexicography (cf. for example Tarp 2006), the study obviously suffers from the weakness that it does not address the so-called extra-lexicographic needs of potential dictionary users, i.e. needs that exist independently of any actual dictionary use. What it does investigate is the actual use by dictionary users of already existing and well-established sources of information about verb complementation patterns. This means that the study, because of its design, is unable to point to possible alternative forms of sources of information. However, at the present point in time, it remains to be seen how investigations of extra-lexicographic needs can be de-

signed. On these grounds it must be concluded that, given that we accept that there are no alternatives to the existing forms of sources of information on verb complementation, Dziemianko's study has laid a firm theoretical and empirical groundwork not only for further studies of user-friendliness of grammatical information in pedagogical dictionaries, but also for practical learner lexicography, particularly with respect to the contents and design of verb entries.

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