

The analytical definition in monolingual English learners' dictionaries as a vehicle for syntactic information on verbs – a diachronic perspective

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The paper focuses on the analytical definition in monolingual English learners' dictionaries and its role as a source of syntactic information on verbs. An attempt is made to explore how the definition has changed in the last three decades and assess whether the changes have made it a better vehicle for information on verb syntax.

In line with the principles governing the traditional defining style, the transitivity of a verb needs to be reflected in the syntax of its definition. To deal with transitive complementation, lexicographers developed the 'hole'–convention whereby no object of the action expressed in the definition is shown as long as the transitive definiendum does not impose any restrictions on its object. In the case of a transitive definiendum with specific selectional restrictions, in turn, it is obligatory to put the typical object(s) in brackets. Likewise, traditionally, bracketed phrases show semantically restricted subjects. Still, the problems that the conventions cause are particularly noticeable in the case of ergative verbs and verbs which allow indefinite object deletion, in whose definitions brackets, often multiple, are not so much helpful as confusing.

To appreciate the changes that the traditional defining style has undergone, early analytical definitions are contrasted with modern ones. The main frame of reference is provided by LDOCE1 (1978) and LDOCE4 (2003). Whereas the publication of LDOCE1 represented a landmark in pedagogical lexicography, other four large learners' dictionaries are now readily available together with LDOCE4. To judge whether or not the modifications to the traditional defining style are unique to LDOCE, reference is also made to the other dictionaries on offer where the style is adopted.

The analysis of the analytical definitions of a selection of verbs shows that there is a clear tendency to break not only with the convention of using brackets to signal selectional restrictions on the object, but also with the 'hole'–convention as such. Today, as a rule, objects, semantically restricted or otherwise, follow genus terms. Accordingly, syntactic properties of verbs which allow indefinite object deletion are no longer conveyed in their definitions. By contrast, analytical definitions of ergative verbs still manage to reflect their syntax, mainly thanks to formulas which

incorporate surface realizations of atomic predicates, or semantic primitives, and which constitute the lexicographic application of the predicate decomposition approach developed by generative semanticists in the 1960s. Still, such definitions are being superseded by contextual ones, where the definiendum is presented in its typical syntactic environment. Besides, it also transpires that semantic restrictions on the subject alone make lexicographers willing to abandon the traditional defining style in favor of contextual definitions. Nonetheless, bracketed phrases showing restricted subjects at the beginning of analytical ones have not yet become the relic of the past, as the look beyond LDOCE4 suggests. Moreover, the juxtaposition of the definitions from LDOCE1 and LDOCE4 provides evidence that, thanks to information from corpora, the analytical definitions of today outdistance the nebulous ones of the pre-corpus era.

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LDOCE1

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LDOCE4

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MEDAL

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OALDCE6

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