

A Critical Study of the Word meanings in Dictionaries: a case of Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, seventh edition.

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Abstract

One of the main functions of a dictionary is to give the definition of meanings of various words. This view is supported by various writers who have attempted to explain the meaning of a dictionary. Sally (2005) for instance, views a dictionary as a book that gives a list of words of a language in alphabetical order and explains what they mean or gives a word for them in a foreign language.

This paper therefore, seeks to have a critical assessment on the way this function is implemented and wonders whether the goal is fully attained or not. The paper focuses on examining the definition of meaning of various words in dictionaries based on the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD), 7th edition. The strengths and weaknesses of word meanings in dictionaries form the base of this study. The paper concludes that, despite the weaknesses that OALD demonstrates in defining the meanings of various words, this dictionary seems to have more strengths than weaknesses, something which gives hope that dictionaries have to a good extent attained the goals for their existence.

Key words: Dictionary, Meaning, Definition, Word (s)

1. Introduction

OALD is one of the outstanding dictionaries in the world recently. It has a remarkable contribution to the Linguists as well as other learners of the English language in the entire world. The publication of the OALD seventh edition comes 250 years after the appearance of the first comprehensive dictionary of the English language compiled by Samuel Johnson. Much has changed since then. The English that Johnson described in 1755 was relatively well defined, still essentially the national property of the British. Since then, it has been dispersed, diversified, adopted and adapted as an international means of communication by communities all over the globe. (Sally, 2005)

This dictionary, just like other dictionaries, deals with word meanings in two ways: by explanation and by exemplification. However, whatever the way that a dictionary may use in defining the word meanings, a crucial question remains on the suitability or quality of the meaning provided. It is this question then which motivated me to study critically various definitions provided by OALD to the word meanings by assessing their strengths and weaknesses.

2. Different views on how the dictionary is regarded.

Different writers have tried to conceptualize the term 'dictionary'. Landau (2001) defines a dictionary as a text that describes the meanings of words, often illustrates how they are used in the context and usually indicates how they are pronounced.

Hartmann (1983: 3) in Kiango 2000 defines a dictionary as a reference book or list of words (usually in alphabetical order) together with a guide to their meaning, pronunciation, spelling or equivalencies in other languages.

Again, a dictionary may be regarded as a lexicographical product that is characterized by three significant features: it is prepared for one or more functions, it contains data that have been selected for the purpose of fulfilling the function, its lexicographic structure links, and establishes relationship between the data so that they can meet the needs of users and fulfill the functions of a dictionary (Nielson, 2008).

A comprehensive dictionary then should comprise all aspects of a given source language such as common words, colloquial words, dialectal varieties, archaic words, and etymology of words, words in literature, science, technology, slang, vulgar words and deprecated words, sexist and taboo words. This idea was firstly argued by Zgusta (1984) that a dictionary should contain enough information to allow the dictionary users determine relevant information successfully.

In a dictionary, the words that are used in place of another word to explain the thought are referred to as definition. These definitions are what must be covered in a dictionary, and must be accurate, concise and clear. Definitions must be complete enough to satisfy the reader and distinguish several related senses or shades of meaning.

According to Kiango (2000) a meaning is referred to as a concept that is built in the mind through the accumulation of experience of various kinds. Kiango further adds that before defining the meaning of a word one should examine whether the word has one or several meanings. Therefore, to determine meanings that a word

may be associated with, the aspects of homonyms, polysemies, denotations and connotations are very important. However, Words are of different kinds called a symbol. There is no natural connection with thing that they describe, that is, the connection between the said word and an object. Actually there is nothing special about the word; what is said must be connected to what it stands for. The problem that arises is when people are communicating using arbitrary words; they do not have exact meaning. A word would mean one thing in one context and another thing in another context.

Fillip (2008) the meaning of a word is to be derived from the relations between words, concepts and things in the real world.

Generally, meaning is something that is conveyed or signified; sense or significance. But there are situations that meaning(s) does not give the whole understanding of the word unless it is in the context, this is because people think differently; they interpret words and phrases differently because the main idea of a meaning does not reside in words rather in people, that is, words mean different things to different people in different situation.

Word meaning in this work is treated as the meaning of a lexeme, a unit of vocabulary listed, defined in a dictionary. A quick glance of words was done in the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary seventh edition to see the definitions of meanings of words and to account for their strengths and weaknesses.

3. Strengths of OALD

The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary seventh edition is found to have a number of qualities such as words with multiple concepts are clearly explained, the use of examples on how a word may be used in a particular context, the use of pictures, defining words according to their respective categories, words used in definitions are clearly defined somewhere else in the dictionary, the use of simple words in definitions, brevity and so forth.

Words with multiple concepts are clearly explained, for example the word **bank** /bæŋk/ (*noun, verb*) is found to have different number of meanings which are well elaborated with the support of examples. The meanings were labeled as meaning one to eight with different definitions. Some of these meanings for a word 'bank' are as follows:

1. *For money >an organization that provides various financial services such as keeping or depositing money.*
2. *In gambling > a supply of money or things that are used as money in some games, especially those in which gambling is involved.*
3. *Something collected / stored >an amount of something that is collected; a place where something is stored ready for use: a bank of knowledge.*
4. *Of a river or canal > the side of a river, canal, etcetera and the land near it.*
Other meanings include of the slope, of clouds / snow, of machine.

Another quality found is that the grammatical categories of word are identified, and that they reflect to a particular word meaning. That is to say, the definitions correspond to the part of speech of the defined word. The definition of nouns begins with a noun, that of a verb with a verb, that of an adjective with an adjective, that of an adverb with an adverb and so on. For instance: words such as **bank** (*noun or verb*)

Shine (*v*) to produce or reflect light (pg 1348)

Shine (*n*) the bright quality that something has when light is reflected on it. (pg 1349)

Third, as one of the principles of defining the meaning of a word is to define every word that is used in the definition. This also marks another quality of the word meaning definitions in the OALD. Words within definitions are well explained, for example the word **Adrenalin** in meaning of **Adrenal gland** is also defined as another separate entry. This can be seen on page 20 as it has been defined as:

Adrenal gland (*n*) either of the two small organs above the kidneys that produce **adrenalin** and other hormones

Then the word **Adrenalin** is immediately defined after the definition. As observed below

Adrenalin (*n*) a substance produced in the body when you are excited, afraid or angry.

Meanings of words are also associated with aspect like synonyms. In this work the definition of meaning of words are also found to have accompanied with synonyms, and this has no doubt to be marked as another quality of the OALD as it can be observed in the word like: beat.

Beat (*v, n, adj*) to defeat somebody in a game or competition.

Synonym (*SYN*) defeat (pg 115)

One may also observe the use of pictures as well as other illustrations in the dictionary. Pictures have been used for the purpose of clarifying the meaning of some words which might be difficult for the users to conceptualize them. Also the use of pictures in this sense is for the purpose of differentiating the types of things in consideration to their meaning. For example words like *beaver* and *bus* have been defined with the help of pictures. This helps the user of a dictionary to understand them well as the following example demonstrates:

Beaver (*n, v*) an animal with a wide flat tail and strong teeth (pg 117) Here a picture is used to help the dictionary user understands how 'beaver' looks like.

Bus (*n*) a large road vehicle that carries passengers, especially one that travels along a fixed route and stop

regularly to let people get on and off. The pictures for the meaning of a word *bus* (on page 193) are clearly seen to provide differences on the types of buses that are defined in. This includes different types of buses such as a single-decker bus, double-decker bus, bus (Br E also coach), minibus, camper (Br E) / recreational vehicle (AmE) and caravan (BrE).

4. Weaknesses of OALD

Having seen the strengths of the definition of meaning of various words in the particular dictionary, it is with no doubt that there may be some weaknesses too. The following are some of the weaknesses which can be seen in OALD:

Some of the definitions of meaning of the specific words were found to be so circular, that is, the defined word has been mentioned in its own definition something which stands as a stumbling block for an average user to understand. For instance, in attempting to define the word **addition** as a noun, the dictionary defines it as *the process of adding two or more numbers together to find their total*. It can be observed that the word adding has been used in giving the meaning of the word addition; therefore, one must be aware of the meaning of the word adding in order to define the word addition.

Again the word **beauty** has been used in defining the word **beautiful**. Although the word beauty is defined somewhere else in the particular dictionary as far as one of the principles of the meaning definition put forth, one may pose a question that 'Is it necessary to use it in the definition?' Why shouldn't they opt for the other way round? For example, instead of defining the word beautiful as *having beauty; pleasing to the senses or to the mind*, it could be defined as *having the quality of being pleasing to the senses or to the mind*. It is assumed that the second definition could be understood better than the first one.

Next, in some words especially the past forms, the meaning is not given directly rather the dictionary directs the user to look at their present forms to get the meaning of the particular words. This is what is referred in the field of lexicography as **cross differenced**. Example, in order to get the meaning of the word **shot** which is the past form of the word **shoot**; the dictionary directs one to find the meaning of the word shoot in order to get the meaning of the word shot. That is: *shot – noun, adj – see also shoot, shot*. It is likely that this may disturb the user of a dictionary as s/he is forced to refer back, that is referring to another word to get the meaning of the word at hand. In other words, the dictionary forces the user to use it in a flashback way, and this seems to be a tiresome practice.

The same practice could be observed in trying to give the meaning of the articles. For example the meaning of the indefinite article '**an**' is not given directly rather it is indicated by an arrow to show that the meaning of the indefinite article **an** is the same as the meaning of the indefinite article **a**, therefore one is obliged to know the meaning of the indefinite article 'a' to get the meaning of the indefinite article 'an'. This is observed as follows:

An – indefinite article → A

Some of the definitions seem to be difficult to understand due to the use of difficult words that require a reader to cross reference; that is checking for the meaning of the words used in the definition in order to get the meaning of the target word. This is seen mostly when technical terms are used in the definition as a lay person cannot understand them. In giving the meaning of the word **adrenal gland**, the dictionary uses the words **adrenalin** and **hormones** which are difficult to understand hence they require some explanations too as head words (separate entries). This is an example: *adrenal gland- noun, either of the two small organs above the kidneys that produce adrenalin and other hormones*. The main concern here is that since the author is aware of the words adrenalin and hormones there could be no need of either mentioning them or using their meaning in explaining the meaning of the word adrenal gland.

It is also noticed that some of the words have no clear meaning on their own rather their meanings are described according to their usage. This happened to be a case in defining a definite article '**the**' as its meaning is derived just from its usage. That is;

the –

1. *Used to refer to sb / sth that has already been mentioned or is easily understood*

2. *used...*

3. *used when explaining...*

4. *used with... and so forth.*

Although this seems to consider the principle of defining meaning basing on the word usage as well as supporting a theory of meaning as a word usage, it is likely to criticize it in that a word does not possess any meaning when standing in isolation as there is no any semantic information given in defining a definite article '**the**'. This theory advocates that a word becomes meaningful only if it is used in a particular context.

Nonetheless, the definition of meaning of a particular word may display its strength at a certain point but at the other side it demonstrates its weakness (s). Consider the definition given in the word **beautiful**: *having beauty; pleasing to the senses or to the mind*. In this definition one may observe a weak spot since a defined word has been used in its definition, that is the word beauty, but on the other side the meaning seems to have strength as it corresponds to its **word class**. That is: **beautiful- adj, having...**

Again, the meaning is accompanied by **synonyms** like *pretty, handsome, attractive, lovely, good looking, and gorgeous*.

Examples and collocations are supplied to strengthen the meaning of the word beautiful. For example: *beautiful – (especially of a woman or girl) very pleasant to look at: she looked stunningly beautiful that night*.

Subsequently, though the meaning of the word **bus** is clarified by the use of pictures and examples to illustrate what a bus is (*shall we walk or go by bus?*), the meaning given seems to base on either the European environment or the developed countries. Refer the following meaning from a particular dictionary: *a regular bus service connects the train station with the town centre*. In this definition, one may pose a question that do we have the same environment with the train stations connected to the town centre by the roads?

Even the pictures used favor the environment of the developed countries where they may have all such bus categories; that is Single Decker buses, Double Decker buses, bus / coach in BrE, minibus, camper / recreational vehicle, caravan bus etcetera.

A word **spring** is defined as *the season between winter and summer when plants begin to grow*. This definition seems to be environment based as it assumes that the environments are uniform. A question is, how about in desert areas where they do not experience such seasons? Therefore, it is likely that this concept will not be understood by the people in desert areas.

Despite using difficult words in defining the word **adrenal gland**, that is using the words **adrenalin** and **hormones**, the words used have been defined somewhere in the dictionary. For example, the word adrenalin is defined immediately after the headword as follows: **adrenalin** (N) – *a substance produced in the body when you are excited, afraid, or angry*.

5. Summary and conclusion

From what have been discussed in this paper, one would accept beyond doubt that OALD is seen to have more strengths than weaknesses since the definitions of meaning of various words have been clearly given based on the three main theories, which are: conceptual theory of meaning, referential theory, as well as usage theory. Some of the critics to this dictionary are likely to be too general as whoever pinpointing the weaknesses is then likely to be against the three fore mentioned theories of meaning. This paper then stands as a proof that dictionaries have strongly achieved their mission in defining the meanings of various words as exemplified by OALD which is a point of reference in this work. However, since I have addressed some weaknesses which can vividly seen in dictionaries, I therefore recommend the editors of various dictionaries to consider them and see how they can accommodate them in their next editions.

List of Abbreviations and Labels

Adj.....	Adjective
Adv.....	Adverb
AmE.....	American English
BrE.....	British English
n.....	Noun
OALD.....	Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary
Pg.....	page
Sb.....	somebody
Sth.....	something
v.....	Verb

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