



Review of *Oxford Primary Dictionary*

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Even though English pedagogical lexicography has been essentially focused on dictionaries to non-native speakers (the so-called learner's dictionaries), it is possible to find a very restricted group of pedagogical reference works concerned with the teaching of English to young native speakers, known as school dictionaries. This review evaluates one of those rare works - the *Oxford Primary Dictionary* (OPD, 2011), an English dictionary compiled to primary school students aged nine or more. This analysis contemplates the four component parts of any semasiological dictionary: the outside matter, the macrostructure, the mediostructure and the microstructure (Landau, 2001; Hartmann & James, 2002).

The first component part to be analysed is the outside matter. This component consists of external texts which do not belong to dictionary entries. The outside matter can be divided into three different parts according to its position in the dictionary – front matter, middle matter and back matter.

The front matter, i.e., the introductory parts of the dictionary, should attend two main functions: 1) to present the objectives of the dictionary and 2) to be an instruction manual for the user (Fornari, 2008). Even though OPD (2011) presents a very concise front matter, the component seems to satisfy these two requisites, which allows us to classify OPD (2011) as a reference work with a simple but functional front matter. OPD (2011) presents its front matter divided into two sections, named *preface* and *how to use the dictionary*. The first section provides some information about the dictionary, including its target audience. This specification (the target audience) is of prime importance because it helps not only lexicographers to evaluate and compile reference works, but also users to choose the dictionary which best suits their needs. The preface also informs some relevant linguistic aspects of the dictionary, such as the use of *Oxford Children's Corpus*, the choice of words suitable for young students and the writing of definitions carefully conceived and written in a

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clear and simple language. Moreover, the preface states that the dictionary intends to help both reading and writing abilities, which is an interesting thing to be verified later on in the microstructural evaluation of the dictionary.

On the use of illustrations, the preface makes it clear that those resources have been used in order to support the definition of some lexical items. There is a whole paragraph in the preface mentioning all the entries supported by illustrations. In this regard, it is striking that the dictionary is concerned to convey to its users which lexical items are illustrated in the reference work, but it does not explain why it illustrates some entries but not others. The preface ends by summarizing information found in the back matter. The section *how to use the dictionary* clearly explains the organization of the entries. OPD (2011) makes use of both running text and images to describe the kind of information presented in the dictionary, making up a rather economical 4-page long front matter, albeit in consonance with what is expected from a front matter compiled to young students.

The second component of the outside matter – the middle matter – comprises all the information interposed between the entries. OPD (2011)'s middle matter consists of illustrations and *Top Tips*. As it was already observed, the presentation of illustrations to complement the dictionary's definitions is not justified by the reference work compilers. It is not explained, for example, why the dictionary presents illustrations for the *insect* entry but does not do the same for the *mammal* entry. The *Top Tips* are little boxes containing tips about some words. The preface of the dictionary informs that the *Top Tips* give reminders of difficult spellings or plurals and provide hints about punctuation and usage. In this review, it was noticed that the spelling hints presented in the *Top Tips*'s spelling hints overshadow the other ones, which have few occurrences.

The last component of outside matter, the back matter relates to information presented at the end of the dictionary, after the main nomenclature. OPD (2011)'s back matter is the densest component of the whole outside matter, presenting spelling tips, a common irregular verbs list, a common prefixes and suffixes list and a section called *some interesting word histories*, which explains the origin of some English words, functioning as an introduction to etymology, which, rightly, is not presented in the entries. Although lexicographical studies have not yet come up with a research that postulates the kind of information which should be presented by the outside matter of a dictionary as OPD (2011), it is possible to state that the information discussed here seems to fit the target audience of the dictionary.

The second component part to be analysed is the macrostructure. Macrostructure can be defined as the overall list structure which allows the user to find information in a dictionary (Bugueño Miranda, 2007). On this canonical component, it is worth reminding that OPD (2011) was compiled with the assistance of the *Oxford Children's Corpus*, a language database consisting of over 30 million words of texts written for children, which gives some property to the dictionary's lexical selection. In fact, the headwords seem to harmonize with the dictionary's pedagogical function, since it was

observed, through the verification of random entries, that all the words used in definitions and examples of the dictionary are available on its macrostructure as an entry. It is of prime importance in a pedagogical reference work, since it spares the user's time to consult another dictionary in case of having doubts about a word presented in a definition or example. The arrangement of entries also meets dictionary's users, since it follows a strict alphabetical order, with no interruption in the word list to posit related lexical units. The word selection focuses on British English, using the label *In America* to point words which are part of American lexicon. However, this rule is not strictly followed. Though it was found the *In America* label to the word *elevator* (whose British pair is *lift*), for example, it was not found the same label to the word *candy* (whose British pair is *sweet*). Regarding words with same spelling but different meaning, OPD (2011) adopts a homonymic solution, presenting different meanings in different entries, as in *egg*¹ (the noun) and *egg*² (the verb). It is necessary to highlight here that linguistic researches have shown that the gap between homonym and polysemy is not so well defined, and this can cause controversy in some entries (Atkins & Rundell, 2008).

The third canonical component is the mediostructure and it comprises the cross-reference structure in a dictionary (Bugueño Miranda & Zanatta, 2010). Mediostructure can relate to at least three kinds of cross-references: inside an entry, between different entries or from an entry to the outside matter. OPD (2011) provides only one kind of cross-reference throughout its pages, which is the advice "please see illustration on following page" at the end of entries which are followed by an illustration located on a different page.

Thus we come to the microstructure, the last dictionary component to be discussed in this review. In the lexicographical field, evaluating microstructure is to analyse the structure of entries in a dictionary (Hausmann & Wiegand, 1989). First, it is worth noticing that OPD (2011)'s entries are quite simple, which can be considered a right choice regarding the kind of user the reference work is compiled to. OPD (2011)'s formal comment shows information about spelling, pronunciation (for words considered difficult), grammar class, inflections (the parts of verbs, some comparatives and superlatives and adverbs) and the plurals of nouns. All this information is offered in a very didactic way by the dictionary (for example, the pronunciation is presented by the use of "rhymes with..." or "say" followed by a simple scheme that uses ordinary letters), and is properly highlighted (use of bold, italics, parentheses, brackets, different colors and font size). As for this part of microstructure it could also be suggested the insertion of information about separation of syllables, as this is a common question even among adult English speakers.

In regard to the semantic comment, OPD (2011) presents only two kinds of information – definitions and examples. Concerning the explanation of meaning through a paraphrase, it is possible to observe three models of definitions: the analytical definition (*genus proximum + differentia specifica* – being the most widely used in the dictionary), the whole-sentence definition and the synonymic definition. In terms of examples, the dictionary says that all of them were taken from children's

books, which can be seen as another good feature of the dictionary regarding its users. As the discussion now is about the semantic comment, it is worth remembering that the dictionary's preface suggests that the reference work intends to help its users in both reading and writing activities. Notwithstanding, in analyzing the entries, it is not possible to find any kind of information which could help users to write. At best, one can give to synonymic definitions the function of supporting the students in their writing, as it could be used to expand vocabulary. However, not all headwords have synonyms. Moreover, all the synonyms found in the dictionary are positioned as a tool to explain meaning and do not present any evidence of being an information with a different function than the other explanatory paraphrases. Finally, it is important to observe that OPD (2011)'s definitions and examples suggest that the dictionary is concerned with providing its users with a clear and simplified language, having in its controlled vocabulary one of its main points. The simple syntax of sentences, as well as the use of short and medium sentences, can be seen as notorious qualities of the dictionary. In some cases, words which are derived from a main word are included at the end of an entry (e.g., believable – believe).

This review concludes that, although OPD (2011) shows some drawbacks which can be improved, it is a useful reference work for its purposes. There is no doubt about the dictionary's high quality, which indeed represents a good profit for all British young students and also for those who have English as a second language.

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