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The innovative character of the Collins Cobuild Dictionaries and their use in the Communicative classroom

Since the early 70s language teaching has been dominated by the Communicative Approach which superseded structural methods. As is well known, the Communicative Approach urges that a foreign language should be taught in conditions of (or at least similar to) real communication. Some of the basic postulates of the Communicative Approach include the use of real tasks in the classroom, which necessitates communication, and the use of language data not produced specifically for language teaching purposes. The Communicative Approach puts a greater stress on fluency, not accuracy, and on pragmatic effectiveness of an utterance, and decreases the importance of correction. Within the Communicative Approach the emphasis is shifted from written to spoken language, from the teaching of signification and usage to the teaching of value and use (i.e. from the teaching of decontextualized words and structures seen primarily from the point of view of their conformity to the codified paradigms of the language to the teaching of functional and contextual appropriacy of a word or an utterance). The Communicative Approach has changed the sociology of the classroom underlining the necessity of turning language teaching process from language explanation to language exploration, from teacher-centred to learner-centred activity increasing student independence.¹

Unfortunately, many of these principles have remained unimplemented in numerous teaching materials which claim to be based on the Communicative Approach.

A series of new dictionaries printed by the major British publishing houses during the past decade will undoubtedly broaden the scope of modern Eng-

¹ For the summary and analysis of major methodological implications of the Communicative Approach see, for example, Michael Lewis, *The Lexical Approach*, 1993, Chapter I.

lish language teaching based on the Communicative Approach and increase its effectiveness. The innovative character of these dictionaries which draw on many elements of recent linguistic research (in particular, corpus lexicography, discourse analysis, pragmatics, functional and communicative grammar) changes our traditional concept of a dictionary and opens up a new era in lexicography and methodology.

One of the most revolutionary developments in modern English lexicography was the publication in 1987 of *Collins GOBUILD English Language Dictionary*. This dictionary was compiled in the English Department at the University of Birmingham as part of a language research project commissioned by Collins Publishers. The first dictionary was soon followed by the abridged and slightly modified versions – *Collins COBUILD Essential English Dictionary* and *Collins COBUILD Learner's Dictionary* as well as by such reference books as *Collins GOBUILD English Language Dictionary Workbook* (by G. Fox and D. Kirby, 1987) and *Collins COBUILD English Grammar* (1990).

The new dictionaries were enthusiastically received both by professional methodologists and English language teachers. For example, Michael Lewis in his *Lexical Approach* writes:

- In the field of lexicography I can think of nothing
- which compares with the work of Sinclair and his
- team on the Cobuild project. Their work has, quite
- simply, changed the nature of dictionaries. (Page 197).

What makes the Collins COBUILD dictionaries exceptional? What are the innovative features that distinguish them from other word-books and render these dictionaries indispensable in the Communicative Classroom?

1. The unique nature of the corpus

In contrast to traditional dictionaries which are still largely based on written language, the computer-held Collins COBUILD corpus contains both written and spoken texts, running to many millions of words. The items included in the dictionaries come from XX-th century books, magazines, newspapers, pamphlets, radio and television broadcasts, recordings of conversations (lectures, classroom talk, telephone conversations, accounts of dreams, travel agency talk). Thus the language recorded by the dictionaries provides the user with an objective representation of contemporary English

which is neither dated nor noticeably avant-garde. The use of advanced computer technology makes the information supplied by the dictionaries reliable and authoritative.

II. The use of real examples

Another important feature of the Collins COBUILD dictionaries is their return to the practice of selecting illustrative examples from actual texts. In recent years it has become a habit to make up examples in order to illustrate a particular usage in dictionaries specially written for language learners. Criticizing this tendency, Prof. J. Sinclair, head of the Collins COBUILD project, points out that such invented examples

[...] have no authority apart from the thoughts of the person who creates them and they are very often quite unnatural. It is frequently difficult to imagine where they might be used in everyday speech and writing. [...] they are constructed to refine the explanations and in many cases to clarify the explanations. They give no reliable guide to composition in English and would be misleading if applied to that task. (*Introduction to Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary*, page xv).

The richness and variety of authentic examples give the student a feeling of genuine access to the language, offer further comprehensible information on word usage and also encourage their creative use of the language.

III. New type of definition

One of the most important innovations introduced in the Collins COBUILD dictionaries is an entirely new type of definition: the explanations of word-meanings are written in full, natural sentences, for example:

bleak ... I A situation that is **bleak** is unpleasant and unlikely to improve

...

2 A place that is **bleak** looks cold, bare, and unwelcoming ...

3 When the weather is **bleak**, it is cold, dull, and unpleasant.

folder ... A **folder** is a thin piece of cardboard folded into the shape of a container or cover in which you can keep loose papers ...

tiptoe ... I If you **tiptoe** somewhere, you walk there very quietly on your toes.

The compilers tried to get rid of the specific „lexicographic jargon” traditionally used in dictionary definitions and devised a new, user-friendly style, less intimidating for the student. The word being explained is usually mentioned in such a way that you can see how it is typically used in English. In this way an attempt was made to overcome one of the drawbacks of many learner's dictionaries – their insufficient attention to word combinability and, on the other hand, to implement one of the basic principles of modern methodology emphasizing the necessity to acquire new words in their typical collocations.

IV. Recording of pragmatic functions

The Collins COBUILD dictionaries pay particular attention to the recording of pragmatic functions of words and phrases, i.e. the dictionaries comment on typical features of the communicative situation in which the given lexical item is used (formality, politeness, rudeness, disapproval, etc.). For example:

bathroom ... 2 Some people say **bathroom** as a polite way of referring to the toilet; used especially in American English.

juxtaposition ... **Juxtaposition** is the state of being placed next to or very close to something else, especially something that is very different; a fairly formal word.

shagged... If you are **shagged** or **shagged out**, you are very tired and have no energy left; a very informal expression which some people consider rude.

V. New way of presenting grammatical information

In the Collins COBUILD dictionaries grammatical information and information concerning semantic relationships (synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy/hyperonymy) is given in a special extra column while traditional dictionaries place it inside the entry. Each grammatical term used in extra columns is explained in a special entry which is given inside a box at its correct place in the alphabetical order of the dictionary. For example:

DETPOSS ... DETPOSS is used in the grammar notes beside entries to describe a group of determiners, *my, your, his, her, its, our,* and *their*, which show who something or someone belongs to or who they relate to. These words are sometimes called possessives. A DETPOSS is generally the first element in a noun group but it can have a PREDET such as *all, half,* or *both* in front of it. It cannot be used with other determiners such as *the* and *this*...

This way of presenting grammatical information facilitates the use of the dictionaries making them more user friendly.

VI. Incorporating features of other types of reference books

The inclusion of special entries in the body of *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary* (and in *Collins COBUILD Essential English Dictionary* special entries are further developed into **Study Pages** devoted to some particular areas of English grammar) blurs distinctions between a dictionary and a grammar book. *Collins COBUILD Essential English Dictionary* also incorporates some features of a workbook, as each right hand page contains a question the answer to which can be found on the same or adjoining page (for example: „Does a bookmaker make books?” or „Is a zebra-crossing the place where zebras cross?”). Such questions, in a witty, entertaining way, draw the user's attention to some problems of polysemy, paronymy, idiomatic compounds and word-formation and stimulate the student's use of the dictionary, encouraging their independent exploration of the language, increasing student autonomy and making learning fun. These questions are also ready material for all sorts of extra-curricular activities such as English language quizzes and competitions.

The use of the Collins COBUILD dictionaries will undoubtedly increase the effectiveness of language teaching process. Every English language course based on the Communicative Approach should provide learners with training of how to make the best use of these dictionaries.

Bibliography

Lewis, M. *The Lexical Approach*. LTP 1993.

Sinclair, J. *Introduction*, in *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary*. Collins 1987.