From Practice to Theory: the Evolution of English Pre-corpus Monolingual Learner's Dictionaries

Anca CEHAN*
Nadina CEHAN*

Keywords: *monolingual learner's dictionary*; *precursor*; *phraseology*; *vocabulary control*; *verb pattern*; *pre-corpus*

1. Introduction

The monolingual learner's dictionaries (MLD) provide comprehensive information about the words of a language in terms of semantics, grammar usage, collocations, pragmatics, examples of how the word is used in context in the target language. Although the information in the English MLDs is provided in English, the dictionaries are designed to meet the needs of foreign students. Nowadays, MLDs have been produced for several languages; however, the merit of creating this lexicographic genre belongs to the English lexicographers, and the beginnings of the English MLDs may be traced back to the sixteenth century.

Even if we agree that English lexicography started with bi- and multi-lingual dictionaries, unlike Heuberger (2015) and Cowie (2002), we believe that the history of the English monolingual dictionary began in the sixteenth century with the first published teacher's word lists, and not with the work of the Vocabulary Control Movement group, as Heuberger and Cowie state. Our contention is based on the development of the early published teacher's lists into dictionaries following the gradual application of some of the features of the bi- and multi-lingual dictionaries. The precursors of the MLDs, the teacher's lists, originally designed for both native and non-native learners of English, evolved gradually to develop specific principles of dictionary compiling. This slow process reached a historical moment with Hornby's conceptualisation of the new lexicographic genre, specially addressed to foreign learners of English. It is reasonable, therefore, to claim that the evolution of the English MLDs began before their conceptualisation, by an accretive process, through the appropriation of several building principles from other lexicographic genres and the development of their own building principles. In what follows, the paper traces the progress of the MLDs during the pre-corpus period.

* "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iaşi, Romania (acehan@uaic.ro).
* cehan_nadina@yahoo.co.uk.

„Philologica Jassyensia", an XIV, nr. 2 (28), 2018, p. 21–33

BDD-A28902 © 2018 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:14 UTC)

2. The precursors

The first bilingual English – French dictionary, Palsgrave's *L'esclarcissement de la Langue Françoyse* (1530), besides providing French equivalents for English words, displayed the remarkable presence of idioms, presented in the context of a whole clause, like in today's dictionaries. The presence of phraseology remains a characteristic of the bilingual dictionaries throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The sixteenth century examples of dictionaries that incorporated phraseology include Salesbury's Welsh – English dictionary of 1547, Thomas's Latin – English dictionary of 1587, Hollyband's *A Dictionarie French and English,* published around 1593, and Florio's Italian – English dictionaries, *A Worlde of Wordes* (1598) and *New World of Words* (1611). The Swiss Guy Miège published three French – English dictionaries between 1677 and 1684, which showed the same feature. The presence of phraseology was reinforced in 1611 by Cotgrave's *Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues,* which used an ordering convention of headwords that revealed an awareness of the differences between lexical items: first simple words, followed by compounds and idioms. This structure has been largely preserved to this day.

The phraseological tradition of the bilingual English dictionaries was continued by the monolingual ones. The earliest monolingual lexicographic works for foreign learners were the word lists published by English teachers trying to standardize the English spelling and explain selected problematic, unfamiliar or rare words, mostly nouns. For instance, Mulcaster's *Elementarie* (1582), which contained around 8,000 unexplained words, was an attempt to organise the English spelling. It included both simple and compound headwords arranged alphabetically, and used occasional metalinguistic labels such as *compos.* or *comp.* (Moon, 2000: 508).

Commonly considered the first 'true' monolingual English dictionary, Cawdrey's *A Table Alphabeticall… of hard usuall English wordes, borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latin, or French, etc.… gathered for the benefit and help of Ladies, Gentlewomen, or any other unskillful persons* (1604), was compiled, as its title states, with the aim of explaining "hard words… for the benefit and help of Ladies…, or other unskillful persons". The category of 'unskilful persons' must have included both English and foreign learners of English. *The Table Alphabetical* listed around 3,000 simple headwords, many of them defined using more colloquial multi-word items. This way of explaining words gave rise to a lexicographic strategy of defining hard words using more colloquial and phraseological items.

The list of the early MLDs continued with Bullokar's *An English Expositor, Or Compleat Dictionary: Teaching the Interpretation of the Hardest Words, and Most Usefull Terms of Art, Used in Our Language* (1616), which drew on Cawdrey's *Table Alphabeticall* and continued it, but also included a number of compound headwords. Like its predecessor and the rest of the seventeenth-century English MLDs, it explained 'hard words', *i.e.,* loans and obsolete words, but unlike them, it also dealt with scientific and philosophical terms, and featured a context-oriented approach to the lexicon.

BDD-A28902 © 2018 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:14 UTC)

Bailey's eighteenth-century dictionaries (*Universal Etymological English Dictionary* and *Dictionarium Britannicum*) marked a change in dictionary content by following the bilingual tradition rather than the monolingual one. They offered phraseological information on verb valency, selection restrictions, fixed phrases and contextualised examples and thus consolidated the conventions of dictionary compiling, and foreshadowed Palmer and Hornby's verb patterns.

Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) marked a moment of discontinuity in English lexicography. It was a monolingual dictionary but not necessarily a pedagogical one, which aimed to inventory all the words of English and their meanings, and to 'fix' the language in a state of excellence. Nevertheless, in the course of his work on the dictionary, Johnson had the insight that language change was inevitable and, therefore, language could not be 'fixed'. Consequently, a dictionary needed to describe rather than prescribe. Johnson's *Preface* contained many of the issues that modern lexicologists still debate, such as questions about the selection of headwords and the distinction between general vocabulary and specialized terminology.

Furthermore, Johnson was the first English lexicographer to employ authentic examples of usage collected from literature. His *Dictionary* influenced English lexicography in several ways with its extensive use of literary citations given as illustrations of excellent usage, its entries organised as pieces of coherent discourse, the arrangement of word senses in definitions reflecting both etymology and dominant meaning, and, most importantly, its systematic treatment of phrasal verbs. For a long time, it was regarded as the authority that established the standards of correctness in English due to the literary style of its definitions and clear reliance on scientific and technical authorities, its full vocabulary range, and descriptive and normative comments. However, words and their meanings were treated in isolation, without much contextual information except that given in the citations. The vernacular and colloquial 'low words' were dismissed in the tradition of Cawdrey and Bullokar, and the treatment of idioms and fixed phrases was less consistent than in Bailey's dictionary. Nevertheless, Johnson's dictionary broke new ground by recognising phrasal verbs, and describing them in terms of meanings and uses.

To sum up on the sixteenth through nineteenth-century tradition of dictionary compiling on which MLDs have drawn, they focused on giving advice on the spelling and meanings of difficult words in isolation, initially excluding the phraseological items from the headwords, but using them in the definitions. Gradually, they started to include phraseological items, and Bailey's works constituted a synthesis of various previous conventions. Johnson started a new trend in lexicology with his increased coverage of phrasal verbs, although fixed phrases and other kinds of phraseology were neglected. In retrospect, the early dictionaries contributed to the gradual formalisation of a view of the lexicon and grammar by developing some of the principles and conventions still used by contemporary MLDs:

1 listing simple and compound items as headwords in alphabetical order (since Mulcaster's spelling dictionary, *Elementarie,* 1582);

2 dismissing vernacular and colloquial vocabulary (since Cawdrey's, Bullokar's and Johnson's dictionaries);

BDD-A28902 © 2018 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:14 UTC)

3 explaining difficult words using more familiar ones (since Robert Cawdrey's *A Table Alphabeticall…,* 1604);

4 selecting vocabulary and verb syntax for various kinds of learners (since Robert Cawdrey):

5 including fixed phrases, phraseological information, verb valency, selection restrictions (since Bailey's *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* of 1721 and *Dictionarium Britannicum* of 1730);

6 recording and describing phrasal verbs in terms of meaning and use (since Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language,* 1755);

7 supplying a context-oriented approach to the lexicon (since John Bullokar's *An English Expositor,* 1616);

8 using definitions formulated in a literary style (since Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language,* 1755);

9 basing coverage in (literary) evidence (since Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language,* 1755);

10 using authentic examples of usage (since Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language,* 1755).

The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed a spectacular development of pedagogical lexicography and its most notable achievement: the conceptualization of the modern MLD. This was stimulated by advances in language studies and the need for learner's dictionaries throughout the British empire. Palmer's and Hornby's interest in pedagogical grammar resulted in a distinct verb-pattern scheme, Daniel Jones's *English Pronouncing Dictionary* (1917) provided a pronunciation system, and the Vocabulary Control Movement inspired the selection of headwords, the choice of phraseological information and the convention of restricting the defining vocabulary.

A modern MLD contains a wordlist selected on frequency grounds, accompanied by plentiful grammatical and lexical information about the behaviour of words. The fundamental idea of including only selected items is a major difference from the monolingual dictionaries for native speakers, and originates in the studies of the Vocabulary Control Movement, and the works of Michael West *New Method English Dictionary* (1935) and *A General Service List of English Words* (1953).

3. The Vocabulary Control Movement

The key figures of the Vocabulary Control Movement group were Harold Palmer, Michael West and A. S. Hornby. The main contribution they made to the field of lexicography in the 1920s and 1930s was inspired by their teaching experience and by the practical conclusion that it was an advantage for foreign language students to learn the most frequently used words first. Consequently, they identified a minimum number of common vocabulary items which would enable the foreign students to maximize their learning efforts and suggested the *selection* of dictionary headwords based on frequency.

BDD-A28902 © 2018 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:14 UTC)

Palmer worked with Hornby to produce *Thousand-Word English* (1937), a list of the 900 most frequent words[1]. Three of the insights they had during their work on word lists have become principles of lexicography and defined the MLD genre ever since: controlled or limited vocabularies, verb patterns. and the treatment of phraseology. To wit, besides words selected according to frequency and usefulness criteria, foreign learners need verb patterns and idiomatic phraseology.

MLDs owe much to Palmer's pioneering work in verb syntax and his experiments with various systems of accounting for verbal valency described in his *New Method Grammar* (1937) and *Grammar of English Words* (1938). Both grammars contain verb-pattern schemes where each verb pattern is identified by means of a number code. As a result, one or several codes are included in each verb entry, according to the number of valencies of the verb defined. Actually, from the perspective of the verb treatment, Palmer's *Grammar of English Words* is a precursor to the MLD, as it contains approximately 1,000 undefined headwords provided with verb patterns and numerous examples. Verb patterns were introduced in MLDs based on Palmer's insight that the verb is the pivot of the clause. Moreover, Palmer also insisted that phrases, not only words, would help English learners with understanding English. His idea of indicating the patterns for each headword verb had a major influence on Hornby *et al*.'s *Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary* (1942) and all subsequent MLDs.

West, in his turn, started to improve his students' reading by using readers which were strictly controlled for vocabulary, and developed a limited vocabulary of about 1,500 words for writing the definitions of his *New Method English Dictionary* (West and Endicott, 1935). In 1936, Palmer and West published the "Carnegie Report" (1936) on vocabulary selection, which became *The General Service List of English Words (GSL)* of 1953*,* compiled by West and published by Longman. The original *GSL* included roughly 2,000 words, collocations and idioms selected according to their frequency from a corpus of written English, and accompanied by the frequency ratings of various word senses. The list influenced the next generation of learner's dictionaries by imposing the conventions or principles for the selection of vocabulary (Brezina, Gablasova 2015, Browne 2013) which were to be applied consistently from now on:

1 word frequency;
2 structural value;
3 universality (words likely to cause offence were excluded);
4 subject range (specialist items were excluded);
5 definition words (difficult words were excluded);
6 word-building capability;
7 style (slang words were excluded).

Together with Endicott, West compiled the *New Method Dictionary,* containing definitions which used a vocabulary of less than 1,500 words. Working on this dictionary, they identified solutions to several weaknesses of the English monolingual dictionaries for native speakers, such as defining familiar words using

[1] West's list, elaborated upon in America, contained practically the same words.

BDD-A28902 © 2018 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:14 UTC)

unfamiliar terms or providing several near or approximate synonyms, which would prompt the use of guesswork or inference.

At this juncture, the main contributions of the Vocabulary Control Movement were (a) the identification of a minimum core vocabulary based on frequency grounds, later used both as headwords and in definitions, and (b) the principle of the close relationship between grammar patterns and lexis (Palmer and Hornby's verb patterns and phraseology).

4. A. S. Hornby's first monolingual learner's dictionaries

Hornby worked with Palmer on verb patterns and vocabulary selection for various levels of learners in Japan. During this activity, they grew to understand that the linguistic research undertaken since the mid-1920s under Palmer's direction could be exploited in a special dictionary for foreign students. The idea and the term itself of a 'learner's dictionary' belonged to Palmer.

During the 1930s, together with another two English teachers in Japan, Gatenby and Wakefield, Hornby compiled the first English dictionary for advanced non-native learners, which offers practical rules and models of language usage: *The Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary (ISED),* published by Kaitakusha in 1942. *ISED* contains a deliberately limited selection of words and illustrates the idea that the more frequently used words are more useful for learner skill development, and that the patterns in which these words occur are essential for everyday communication. The dictionary abounds with information about the verb patterns associated with each headword, and uses codes for these syntactic environment(s). The authors urge the users to learn the headwords together with the verb patterns provided.

ISED was re-published in 1948 by Oxford University Press as the *Advanced Learner's Dictionary (ALD),* later renamed the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (OALDCE)*. It illustrates all the basic principles of contemporary EFL dictionaries, as seen from McArthur's (1992, 593 - 94) summary of the characteristics of *ISED:*

1 The choice of headwords is based on the criterion of usefulness derived from classroom observation and frequency research. Colloquial and specialized vocabulary is omitted;

2 The principles of frequency and usefulness combine in deciding what words and meanings to emphasize, while archaic usage, historical, literary and etymological references are omitted;

3 The received British pronunciation of each headword is provided in IPA transcription (derived from Jones's *English Pronouncing Dictionary)*;

4 Meanings are given in simple language, avoiding the convoluted constructions used in many mother-tongue English dictionaries;

5 Meanings are explained in fully developed definitions, and example phrases and sentences present the headword in its context(s) of use;

6 Grammatical information on every headword is provided, including verb patterns;

7 Further information is provided in pictorial illustrations;

BDD-A28902 © 2018 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:14 UTC)

8 Language-related appendices are given at the back of the dictionary.

To McArthur's features, one could add the presence of explicit synonym discriminations and descriptions, and information concerning register. All these suggest a selective macro-structure supported by a carefully developed micro-structure. As a matter of fact, Hornby's *ISED* establishes most of the characteristic features of the MLD as a distinctive genre.

OALDCE, which followed *ISED* in 1942, continues the strategy of using grammar codes for the syntactic environment(s) in which the headwords appear. Each verb pattern is identified by means of one or several number codes, according to the number of verb valences the headword participates in. The verb-pattern scheme consists of 25 patterns plus 8 subdivisions, analyzed on two levels: a syntagmatic one, containing at least the verb and a noun with which the verb co-occurs, and a paradigmatic one, illustrating a lexical set of words – typically synonymous, that could replace the given word. The verb patterns analyze clauses in terms of parts of speech but do not take into account the semantic types of the clause components. In brief, what makes *OALDCE* unique is the limited number of entries and the guidance on verb patterns and word usage.

In 1963 *OALDCE2* became *An Advanced Learner's Dictionary of English (ALDE)*. This brought a few important changes, including a more formal defining style and increased coverage. However, most of the added words either do not pose idiomatic or syntagmatic difficulties, or are infrequent. Furthermore, the subentries are nested under root words; within entries, and swung dashes are used for the repetition of the headword. Both these innovations made words more difficult to recognize and find, and the dictionary less user-friendly. In pedagogical terms, the increased coverage made the dictionary more useful for decoding language, but less useful for encoding.

5. Hornby's lasting legacies: verb patterns and the treatment of phraseology

In the *OALDCE3* of 1974 (published by Hornby together with Cowie and Lewis, with the name *Oxford* reintroduced to the title) a few changes were made in the presentation of verb patterns. The adoption of the verb-complementation scheme of Randolph Quirk *et al*.'s *Grammar of Contemporary English* (1972) increased the number of patterns to 51, and improved verb-pattern presentation. The subject was introduced as part of the verb pattern, and the patterns that have the same major function were grouped together. In fact, verb patterns were replaced by *clause* patterns, which in the meantime became central in any verb-pattern analysis. The illustrative examples were accompanied by tables with vertical divisions corresponding to the major structural elements of the pattern.

Also edited by Cowie, *OALDCE4* (actually renamed *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary – OALD*), which followed in 1989, reduced the number of verb patterns to 32 and replaced the numeric codes with mnemonic ones, and added

BDD-A28902 © 2018 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:14 UTC)

the indication of complementation. For example, the *OALDCE3* "S + *vt* + noun/ pronoun + *that*-clause" became "Vn (*that*)" [2].

Palmer and Hornby's verb patterns, although based on introspection, provided a revolutionary insight into English verb valency, and were used by EFL teachers for almost half a century before being superseded by corpus-based research results. However, one may wonder why verb and clause patterns were present for so long almost exclusively in MLDs[3] and ignored by the native speaker's monolingual dictionaries. One possible explanation resides in the difficulty of capturing phraseology in the absence of clear evidence and analytical techniques, which were put at the disposal of lexicographers by corpus analyses only decades later. Moreover, for a long time, meaning was assumed to be a property of words, not of phrases, built up compositionally from the contributions of each component element. As a result, it was believed that native speakers do not need syntagmatic guidance.

Another characteristic design feature of Hornby's dictionaries was the treatment of collocations. This feature can still be found in the MLDs of today. *ISED* included the description of collocations, often as part of examples, and Hornby gave their simplest possible lexical and grammatical form: no tense, number or modifiers (*e.g., to lose one's hair, to lose one's reason).* However, over time, in parallel with offering more rigorous analyses of the verb patterns, Hornby started to pay more attention to collocations as well.

Collocations (later described by A. P. Cowie (2004) as being either 'lexical' or 'grammatical') pose serious problems of presentation. To solve some of these problems, Hornby used the results of his research done for the *Guide to Patterns and Usage in English* (1954), a teacher's grammar handbook in which he employed pattern codes such as 'noun/ adjective + prepositional phrase' to code collocations. In *OALDCE* Hornby recognized four noun patterns, which he coded as NP1 to NP4: 'noun + *to*-infinitive' (NP1), 'noun + preposition + (pro)noun' (NP2), 'noun + *that*-clause' (NP3), and 'noun (+ preposition) + conjunctive + phrase or clause' (NP4).

In *OALDCE2* Hornby improved the description of the noun + preposition collocations by distinguishing two types: in one of them, there was the possibility of substituting the noun by a verb or an adjective as in *She's a specialist in lung diseases* ('noun + preposition' pattern), which has a parallel verb pattern in *She specializes in lung diseases*. Similarly, the 'noun + preposition' pattern in *Her anxiety for their health* could be replaced by an 'adjective + preposition' pattern: *She's anxious for their health*. However, only half of the problem had been solved, as the preposition used with the noun was not always used with the verb or adjective. Moreover, in another type of collocation, the nominal prepositional phrase could be substituted by an infinitive or finite clause. For instance, *time for fun* ('noun + preposition + noun') could be replaced by *time to have fun* ('noun + infinitive'); *reason for one's silence* '(noun + preposition + noun') could be replaced by *reason why one was silent* ('noun + *wh*- finite clause')[4].

[2] *OALD5*, with Crowther as chief editor, made use of the British National Corpus, and its own Oxford American English Corpus.

[3] The only dictionary for native speakers which followed Hornby's verb patterns tradition is the corpus-based *New Oxford Dictionary of English* of 1998.

[4] All the substitution possibilities were first described fully in *Cobuild*'s 'grammar column'.

BDD-A28902 © 2018 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:14 UTC)

The phrasal verbs, the prepositional verbs and the phrasal prepositional verbs and their syntagmatic patterns did not enjoy any special treatment until 1974, although Hornby improved his analysis of these verbs in his *Guide* published three decades before. In *OALDCE3* he did distinguish transitive phrasal verbs (*e.g., turn the light on*) from transitive prepositional verbs (*e.g., take the cat for a walk*) by pointing out particle movement. *OALDCE3* was also the first MLD to use the abbreviations *sb* and *sth* in combination with phrasal verbs and indentations for each particle following a verb. Today, these practices are in general use.

In *OALD4* the definitions offered more information on selectional restrictions and the examples contained many collocations. Notes on usage were also added. The *OALD*s abandoned this kind of presentation in the 5th (1995) and 6th (2000) editions, edited by Crowther and Wehmeier, respectively, which also benefited from work with corpus evidence.

By making phraseology one of the key concepts of lexicography, Hornby has remained one of its dominant figures. His analyses and coding solutions are still used today as such or have been adapted in original ways (*e.g.,* the 'skeleton example' as in *give sth to sb*). The present-day treatment of phrasal, prepositional and phrasal prepositional verbs still follows his line.

Hornby was a teacher, a grammarian and a lexicographer, an applied linguist with an extraordinary ability to link theory and practice. He insisted repeatedly on the dangers facing foreign language learners who rely on analogy with either their mother tongue clause patterns or with familiar English ones, and on the central importance of learning not only the meanings of words but also the verb patterns where these may occur. These insights have been of great importance for both lexical and grammatical theory and have shed new light on the relationship between meaning and use, and between grammar and lexis.

Hornby's MLDs are regarded as some of the greatest twentieth-century works in applied linguistics and lexicography. One may say that Johnson 'fixed' the English of the eighteenth century, and Hornby 'fixed' English as a foreign language, as his works have become standards of reference. By developing the principle that an MLD should demonstrate how the language is used and by showing the collocational contexts in which words occur, Hornby set lexicographic standards that have survived the test of time. Recent MLDs, despite their basis in corpus studies, the inclusion of more expanded and refined grammatical information and more user-friendly presentations still follow Hornby's basic principles.

An approach to the lexicon similar to that of Palmer, Hornby and West was used by Jan Ate van Ek to establish the lexical content of the Council of Europe's *Threshold Level* in 1975[5]. The philosophy of this European document was that using intuition as a basis and specifying the contexts and situations in which a language was likely to be used, the applied linguists could predict the words that various learners of a foreign language would need. Later on, computer-based techniques validated these ideas.

[5] For more on the Council of Europe's "Threshold Level," see Council of Europe, "Education and Languages, Language Policy, http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/dnr_EN.asp?.

BDD-A28902 © 2018 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:14 UTC)

As far as dictionaries are concerned, after Hornby's *OALDCE3,* the MLD market expanded and became more competitive due to the publication in 1987 of Longman's first dictionary for advanced students, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE1)* edited by Paul Procter. *LDOCE1* was similar to *OALDCE3* in presentation, being written in the tradition of the Vocabulary Control Movement, but included an updated word list. A major innovation was the use of the 2,000 words controlled vocabulary in definitions, selected from West's *General Service List of English Words*. The items not part of the defining vocabulary but used in the definitions were printed in small capitals and listed among the word entries. Other improvements included an elaborate grammatical apparatus inspired by Quirk's *Survey of English Usage* (1959) and *Grammar of Contemporary English* (1972). *LDOCE1* used partly mnemonic double codes made up of a capital letter corresponding to the word class (*e.g.,* D for ditransitive verbs, L for linking verbs, U for uncount nouns, C for count nouns, etc.) and a number representing the type of structure in which the item could be found. The combination of letter and number information gave a clear indication of the syntactic structures in which a word was used in a given sense. These codes were an innovative feature which made *LDOCE1* a more user-friendly dictionary than *OALDCE3.*

6. Defining features of pre-corpus MLDs

In what follows, the defining characteristics of pre-corpus MLDs are reviewed in some detail: alphabetical ordering, vocabulary control, contextual information, characteristic defining style, extended grammatical information, and treatment of phraseology.

Alphabetical ordering. Although it is a general tradition of dictionary writing, the alphabetical arrangement of headwords[6] can become an issue as the compilers need to take into consideration user proficiency, space limitations, word accessibility and user-friendliness. Although very common, alphabetical ordering may not be transparent to the inexperienced user. Moreover, the ordering of compound words can raise difficulties. Both Cotgrave's and Bullokar's dictionaries combined alphabetical ordering with an organizational convention referring to headwords: first simple words, followed by compounds, idioms and fixed phrases. This convention has become a standard in dictionary compiling.

An alternative practice, quite commonly used at the level of microstructure by the Oxford MLDs, was the inside-entry nesting, *i.e.,* the grouping of several related words or phrases under a headword in the hope of pointing to semantic and morphological relationships useful for vocabulary building. The nesting structure facilitates vocabulary development as words are grouped in families, and as such, easier to define, and much repetition is avoided. However, for reasons of ease of access, nesting was replaced by strict alphabetical ordering in all the Oxford dictionaries after 2000.

Vocabulary control. In MLDs, the selected headwords are explained using more familiar words, including compounds; specialised, vernacular and colloquial vocabulary tend to be omitted. In the Cawdrey, Bullokar and Johnson line of

[6] Latin and Greek dictionaries used the convention of alphabetical ordering from time immemorial.

BDD-A28902 © 2018 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:14 UTC)

tradition, vernacular and colloquial 'low words' were dismissed in the older MLDs, while the more recent ones display a constant concern with word frequency and use a minimum core vocabulary. The Vocabulary Control Movement's main contribution to lexicography was the identification of this minimum core vocabulary. Hornby, Thorndike and West's idea of deciding on a limited number of headwords selected according to frequency of use, range and familiarity, first illustrated by West's *New Method Dictionary* and Hornby's *ISED,* and adopted later by *LDOCE1*, has become a norm. Even the most recent *OALD9* of 2015 boasts a corpus-based 3,000-word list.

Contextual information. Starting with Bullokar's dictionary, the MLDs imposed the principle of presenting authentic examples of usage, taken either from literary texts or from other authentic sources. Actually, dictionary coverage increased in the pre-corpus age with basis in literary evidence. Samuel Johnson, the first scholar who used authentic examples collected from English literature can be considered a pioneer of corpus lexicography.

Defining style. In the modern MLDs, definitions are formulated in a literary style, in the Cawdrey – Bullokar – Johnson line of descent. However, the lexicographic strategy of explaining difficult words using more colloquial, simple ones reflects the Vocabulary Control Movement tradition as well, and its vocabulary control principle. Also in the Johnson tradition, the definitions show reliance on scientific and technical authorities.

Grammatical information. Palmer was the first linguist who pleaded for the presence of grammatical information in MLDs. Although subject to constant reconsideration and revision, grammatical information has always been included in MLDs. The presence of verb patterns, a defining feature of the genre, is due to Palmer, who had the idea of indicating the pattern(s) for each verb, and Hornby, who later used it in his dictionaries. What has changed over time are the aspects of grammar presented in MLDs, the syntactic descriptive schemes and the coding systems.

Phraseology. Together with the bilingual dictionaries, the MLDs are pioneering lexicographic works in providing idioms and collocations, fixed phrases, phraseological information, and selection restrictions. Starting with Bailey's, MLDs have offered a wealth of phraseological information. Johnson's dictionary lists phrasal verbs, and describes them in terms of meanings and uses. Palmer and Hornby's belief that the presence of phraseology in MLDs is crucial has never been questioned, and has been regarded as an expression of the principle of the close relationship between grammar and lexis. After the advent of large-scale corpora and computational linguistics with their abundant grammatical and lexical information, and the *Collins COBUILD* of 1987, the treatment of phraseology has changed only in the sense that phraseology and collocation have enjoyed a more phrasal-oriented approach.

Having historically evolved from teaching materials, MLDs have caused a revised understanding of language education (Biber, Conrad et alii 1998; Lewis 1993) and play today not only a central role in language education, but also bear witness to how the practice of their compiling has accompanied and contributed to the progress of linguistics and applied linguistics. Inspired by educational aims and informed by linguistic studies, the MLDs have been established as a new genre in English lexicography, characterized by a controlled frequency-based list of

BDD-A28902 © 2018 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:14 UTC)

headwords, a limited defining vocabulary, a provision of grammatical information, especially on verb patterns, and a specific treatment of phraseology.

Bibliography

Biber, Conrad et alii 1998: Douglas Biber, Susan Conrad and Randi Reppen, *Corpus Linguistics: Investigating Language Structure* and *Use*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Brezina, Gablasova 2015: Vaclav Brezina and Dana Gablasova, *Is There a Core General Vocabulary? Introducing the New General Service List*, "Applied Linguistics", 36, 1–22.

Browne 2013: Charles Browne, *The New General Service List: Celebrating 60 years of Vocabulary Learning*, "The Language Teacher", 34.7, 13–15.

Council of Europe, *Education and Languages, Language Policy*, http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/dnr_EN.asp?.

Cowie 2004: Anthony Paul Cowie, *Phraseology – the Hornby Legacy*, "Proceedings of the 11th EURALEX International Congress", 37–52.

Cowie 2002: Anthony Paul Cowie, *English Dictionaries for Foreign Learners: A History*, New York, Oxford University Press.

Ek 1975: Jan Ate Van Ek, *The threshold level in a European unit/credit system for modern language learning by adults*, Strasbourg, Council for Cultural Co-operation of the Council of Europe.

Heuberger 2015: Reinhard Heuberger, *Learners' Dictionaries: History and Development; Current Issues*, Philip Durkin (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Lexicography*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 25–43.

Lewis 1993: Michael Lewis, *The Lexical Approach: The State of ELT and a Way Forward*, Hove, Language Teaching Publications.

Howatt 1984: Anthony Philip Reid Howatt, *A History of English Language Teaching*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

McArthur 1992: Tom McArthur (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Moon 2000: Rosamund Moon, *Phraseology and Early English dictionaries: the Growth of tradition*, "Proceedings of the 9th EURALEX International Congress", 507–516.

Primary sources

Bailey 1753: Nathan Bailey, *An Universal Etymological Dictionary*, London, https://archive.org/details/anuniversaletym00unkngoog.

Bailey 1736: Nathan Bailey, *Dictionarium Britannicum*, Second Edition, London, https://archive.org/stream/bub_gb_030pPyvwS9MC#page/n3/mode/2up.

Bullokar 1656 [1616]: John Bullokar, *An English Expositor*, London, J.L., https://books.google.ro/books?id=VOn8nQEACAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

Cawdrey 1617: Robert Cawdrey, *A Table Alphabeticall, or the English Expositor*, Fourth Edition. London, W. I., https://books.google.ro/books?id=DOdiAAAAcAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary (COBUILD1), 1987. 1st ed. ed. J. Sinclair. London and Glasgow, Collins.

Cotgrave 1611: Randle Cotgrave, *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues*, London: Adam Iflip, http://www.pbm.com/~lindahl/cotgrave/.

Florio 1611: John Florio, *Queen Anna's New World of Words*, London, Melch Bradwood.

BDD-A28902 © 2018 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:14 UTC)

Florio 1598: John Florio, *A Worlde of Wordes*, London, Arnold Harfield, https://archive.org/stream/worldeofwordesor00flor#page/n5/mode/2up.
Hollyband 1593: Claudius Hollyband (Claude Desainliens), *A Dictionarie French and English*, London.
Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary (ISED), 1942, A.S. Hornby, E.V. Gatenby, and H. Wakefield (eds.), Tokyo, Institute for Research in Language Teaching (Republished in 1948 by Oxford University Press as *A Learner's Dictionary of Current English*).
Johnson 1799: Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, Eighth Edition, London, https://archive.org/stream/bub_gb_Nk9NAAAAcAAJ#page/n7/mode/2up.
Jones 1917: Daniel Jones, *Everyman's English Pronouncing Dictionary*, London, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.93283.
Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE1), 1978, P. Procter *et al* (eds), Harlow, Longman.
Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current (OALDCE9), 2015, S. Wehmeier *et al* (eds), Oxford, Oxford University Press.
Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (OALDCE8), 2010, S. Wehmeier *et al.* (eds), Oxford, Oxford University Press.
Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (OALDCE7), 2005, S. Wehmeier *et al.* (eds), Oxford, Oxford University Press.
Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (OALDCE6), 2000, S. Wehmeier *et al.* (eds), Oxford, Oxford University Press.
Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (OALDCE5), 1995, J. Crowther *et al.* (eds), Oxford, Oxford University Press.
Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (OALD(CE)4), 1989, A.P. Cowie *et al.* (eds), Oxford, Oxford University Press.
Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD), 1984, A. Cowie (ed), Oxford, Oxford University Press.
Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (OALDCE3), 1974, A.S. Hornby, A. Cowie, J. W. Lewis *et al.* (eds), Oxford, Oxford University Press.
Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (OALDCE2/ ISED2), 1963, A.S. Hornby (ed), Oxford, Oxford University Press.
Palsgrave 1852 [1530]: Jean Palsgrave, *L'éclaircissement de la Langue Française*, Paris, Imprimerie Nationale, https://archive.org/stream/rosettaproject_fra_detail-1#page/n3/mode/2up.
Thomas 1587: Thomas Thomas, *Dictionarium Linguæ Latinæ et Anglicanæ*, London, Richard Boyle.

Abstract

The paper traces the progress of a typically English lexicographic product: the monolingual learner's dictionary, during the pre-corpus period, by looking at the accretion of its defining features: treatment of phraseology, vocabulary control, presence of grammar information, ordering of headwords, contextual information, restricted defining vocabulary and defining style in the works of the precursors and those of the Vocabulary Control Movement. As such, it presents the defining features of the genre and offers an overview of the main contributions made by the early lexicographers from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, Samuel Johnson, Harold Palmer, A.S. Hornby, and Michael West.

BDD-A28902 © 2018 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:14 UTC)