

# An Evaluation of Semantic and Pragmatic Information in LDOCE5

Hongmei Yuan

City University of HongKong  
13750055907@163.com

## ABSTRACT

With the popularity of English learning, English learner's dictionary, which aims to help learners, especially those who learn English as a second or foreign language improve their English ability, has increasingly become a necessary learning tool. By and large, it is the popularity of English learning that has led to the emergence of various English learner's dictionaries, monolingual or bilingual, physical or electronic. Accordingly, an objective and comprehensive understanding of English learner's dictionary is crucial in selecting an appropriate dictionary. To analyze an English learner's dictionary, this paper focuses on one of the most highly recognized English learner's dictionary, the 5th edition of *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (hereinafter referred to as *LDOCE5*), mainly focusing on its two aspects, namely semantics and pragmatics. By analyzing the semantic and pragmatic information of *LDOCE5*, this paper will provide a reasonable basis for English learners to choose a dictionary.

**Keywords:** dictionary, *LDOCE5*, semantics, pragmatics

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*LDOCE5* shares some common points with other English learner's dictionaries, for instance, it is a bilingualized dictionary designed for advanced learners. In addition, *LDOCE5* has its own characteristics. Firstly, the arrangement for words, *LDOCE5* uses an alphabetical ordering for headwords, while nesting arrangement for such relative words as derivatives (many end with -ly or -less), fixed phrases, idioms under the headwords. Alphabetical ordering is also used for the sequence of compounds that also has headword status and can usually be found after the entry of their first half part, and the format of compounds can be seen both hyphenated and open, such as compounds 'bell-ringer' and 'belly laugh' after the word 'bell'; secondly, *LDOCE5* has a comprehensive collection of 230,000 entries, phrases, and definitions, including a large number of new words and meanings, such as a new addition to the 5th edition, 'carbon footprint'; thirdly, the definitions of these entries are concise in that all of them are explained with 2,000 basic words from Longman Defining Vocabulary, which are easy to understand for its target users; fourthly, the examples in *LDOCE5* are authentic, since 165,000 examples are all taken from the Longman Corpus Network, which are used in the real context; fifthly, reader-friendly presentation of

information, in addition to its main body, *LDOCE5* has added some additional instructions such as 'Pronunciation table', 'How to use the Dictionary', and 'Grammar codes and patterns' before the main body, as well as appendices such as 'Longman Communication 3000' and 'Longman Defining Vocabulary' after the main body. In order to gain a deeper understanding of *LDOCE5*, this paper mainly focuses on its two aspects, namely semantics and pragmatics.

## 2. SEMANTIC INFORMATION OF *LDOCE5*

Since language learning is generally for expression and communication, the importance of words cannot be ignored, especially when considering the fact that words are the smallest unit of language that can be used freely<sup>[1]</sup> (Ye, 2010, p. 120). Thus, it is very important for learners to grasp meanings of words. In that sense, explaining the meanings of words to readers is the basic function of a dictionary, and English learner's dictionary is no exception. As Chan and Loong (1999) have suggested, when evaluating the semantic information of an English learner's dictionary, some points should be considered, including the presentation and explanation of "the different meanings of a word", "the synonyms and/or antonyms of the words", "indication of the difference

between a certain word and its synonyms”, and “the collocations of the words”<sup>[2]</sup>, the analysis of semantics of *LDOCE5* is carried out mainly based on these aspects (p. 302). In addition, Storjohann (2010) noted that “sense relations” of lexicology “are documented in dictionaries of synonyms and antonyms”<sup>[3]</sup> (p. 9). Hence, the points above can be categorized into three main aspects, namely meanings of words, sense relations consist of synonyms and antonyms, and collocations. The three aspects will be analyzed in *LDOCE5* from both their advantages and disadvantages.

## **2.1 Advantages of Semantic Information in LDOCE5**

*LDOCE5* explains words in flexible styles according to their different situations. For words that belong to different word classes, that is, the words with the same spelling but different word classes, they are separated into different entries and marked with numbers in the upper right corner of the word and its part of speech, and then all the meaning are given below each entry. For instance, meanings of ‘command’ are distributed under its two parts of speech, ‘command<sup>1</sup> n’, and ‘command<sup>2</sup> v’. The given definitions is usually consistent to its word class, such as, one of the definition of ‘common’ as n. is a Relative Clause ‘an order that should be obeyed’; while one of the definition of it as v. is by a to-Infinitive clause ‘to control something’. This allows learners to connect meanings of entries with their parts of speech. If learners want to express officially ask sb. to do sth., they can find this usage under ‘command<sup>2</sup> v’. For words with multiple unrelated meanings, signposts are used to help learners find the meaning they need quickly, for example the multiple meanings of ‘article’ are expressed under its signposts, 1 NEWSPAPER/MAGAZINE, 2 OBJECT, 3 LAW, and 4 GRAMMAR. If learners want to know the legal connotation of ‘article’, they can find it under the signpost 3 LAW. The stable principle is that the meanings of all words are arranged according to their frequency of use, and the most common meanings are ranked first, for instance, when ‘big’ is used as adjective, it has seventeen meanings, among which the first meaning ‘SIZE’ is most often used. In that sense, users can not only have a comprehensive grasp of the multiple meanings of words, but find the meaning they need in the concrete communicative context quickly according to parts of speech of words, signposts and frequency of their meanings.

Information of sense relations are presented mainly through synonyms and antonyms of a particular word. The former are marked by the abbreviation SYN, while the latter are by OPP. The synonyms of most words are given according to their meanings, while some synonyms present their equivalent expressions in another region (If a word is used in British English, its synonyms may be used in American English). For instance, the synonym of ‘cutlery /ˈkʌtləri/ n [U] especially BrE’ is ‘silverware

*AmE*. Synonyms of different meanings of the same word are often the same, while antonyms may be different. For example, the synonyms of two different meanings of ‘fat’ — ‘weighting too much because you have too much flesh on your body’ under the signpost ‘Flesh’, ‘thick or wide’ under the signpost ‘OBJECT’ — are both ‘thin’, which can be explained by the fact that ‘thin’ has multiple meanings. In addition, learners may easily find indication of the difference between some certain words and their synonyms, usually through the cross-reference, THESAURUS. For example, the difference between ‘client’ and its synonym ‘customer’ can be easily found in the THESAURUS under the entry ‘customer’. It points out the prominent difference through giving definitions of the two words respectively, in this example, ‘client’ can be ‘distinguished from ‘customer’ based on the judgement that whether the person is ‘professional’. Thus, it can be said that the establishment of semantic relations and cross-reference system is helpful for learners to master a word through its relation with other sense-related words or their different expression in another region, which largely compensates for the separation between sense-related items caused by alphabetical ordering.

It is recognized that “collocations are both indispensable and problematic for language learners”, especially for those who are “at an advanced level”<sup>[4]</sup> (Nesselhauf, 2003, p. 223). Undoubtedly, *LDOCE5* pays attention to this semantic aspect. In *LDOCE5*, collocations are marked in bold under the entry. In particular, for words with many collocations, the collocation box is added at the end of words. In the collocation box, collocations of a word are distributed under the sub-categories in terms of its collations with different word classes. For instance, collations of ‘train’ can be categorized into ‘VERBS + train’, ‘ADJECTIVES/NOUNS + train’, and ‘train + NOUN’, which fully shows how a particular word collocates with other words, and mainly focuses on lexical collocations, such as ‘a commuter train’. Meanwhile, it provides equivalent substitution of some collocations, such as ‘a train trip *AmE*’ for ‘a train journey *BrE*’, this is helpful to select appropriate expression in a specific communicative context. In addition, some collocation mistakes that learners are likely to make are marked at the end of the collocation box. *LDOCE5* considers the fact that its target users are influenced by their mother tongue environment. For instance, Chinese English learners often have problems in the use of articles because of the differences between Chinese and English expressions. This point is highlighted in the COMMON ERRORS after collocations of ‘train’, and it uses Δ to remind users that ‘go by the train’ is wrong expression for ‘go by train’. Thus, *LDOCE5* not only provides various collocations of words, but also takes into account their collocations with different word classes, using

context and the impact of the learner's mother tongue environment.

## **2.2 Disadvantages of Semantic Information in LDOCE5**

Some small disadvantage can be found at the semantic level. Indication of the difference between a certain word and its synonyms is neither consistent nor clear enough. Firstly, most words are distinguished from their synonyms, but some are not. For instance, the difference between 'flummoxed' and its synonym 'bewildered' is not indicated. Secondly, the difference between most words and their synonyms can be easily found through the subsequent THESAURUS, but some words are not. For instance, the difference between 'isolated' and its synonym 'remote' is indicated neither under 'isolated' nor 'remote', but under the other word 'far'. Although there is a semantic connection between the three words, it may not be easy for readers to find it. In addition, the synonym relations between words are not labeled consistently. For example, 'remote' is marked as SYN under 'isolated' and vice versa, while only 'bewildered' is marked as SYN under 'flummoxed', but the SYN under 'bewildered' is not indicated. This may make the semantic relations between words unclear. Perhaps it would be better to have a note explaining the purpose of this arrangement to learners.

## **3. PRAGMATIC INFORMATION OF LDOCE5**

It is fair to say that normal communication takes place in a certain context. Thus, only when English learners master the usage of words in concrete situations, can they communicate in appropriate language. Hymes (1972) pointed out that the criteria for judging "communicative competence" consists of both "grammaticality and acceptability", more specifically, he suggested that four aspects should be taken into consideration, "possible", "feasible", "appropriate" and "performed" <sup>[5]</sup> (p. 280). Hence, English learners should not only use the target language correctly, but also appropriately. This aspect is usually presented through pragmatic information in a learner's dictionary. According to Chan and Loong (1999), evaluation of this point in English learner's dictionary can focus on the use of a word "in special fields", "the degree of formality", "the regional differences", "the currency" and "the degree of acceptability" of an item, as well as the attitudes of both a speaker and an addressee (302). Evaluation of LDOCE5 at pragmatic level are mainly from these aspects.

### **3.1 Advantages of Pragmatic Information in LDOCE5**

LDOCE5 provides pragmatic information of the word in the main body through many ways. Firstly,

entries are annotated with Labels that show some specific using situations. Various features that can be included in Labels box that is appended to the first page of the dictionary. It covers most situations in which words may be used. *BrE*, *AmE*, and *AusE* show "the regional differences" of an item, for instance, 'small ad' used in *BrE* and 'want ad' used in *AmE*; *formal* and *informal* show "the degree of formality", such as, when the meaning is to force someone to leave the job, 'fire' is an informal expression, while 'dismiss' is formal; *not polite* and *taboo* show "the degree of acceptability", such as, 'houseboy' is not polite; *law*, *literary*, *medical*, and *technical* show special fields, such as, 'rustic' is used in literary area; old-fashioned, and old use show "the currency", such as, 'hostelry' is old use for 'pub' or 'hotel'. In addition to words, some collocations are also labeled, for instance, most collocations under the entry 'hell' are marked as informal and not polite, which is consistent with the degree of formality and acceptability of the word 'hell' itself. Thus, such labels can help users use both words and collocations more appropriately. Secondly, LDOCE5 distinguishes spoken and written language. For instance, 'hastily' is written form for 'quickly'. In addition, SPOKEN PHRASES are added after some words, such as 'here you are/here you go' after 'here'. This allows learners to choose appropriate expressions based on spoken and written contexts. Thirdly, LDOCE5 labels academic words from the Academic Word List, which collects important vocabularies that need to be mastered in writing English academic articles. For instance, 'clarity', 'clarify', 'clarification' are all academic words. This is helpful for advanced English learners, especially those who need to write academic articles in English. Fourthly, LDOCE5 adds REGISTER box after some words to introduce more common expressions in everyday English. This generally selects the word that is more appropriate for everyday communication from its sense-related items. For instance, "In everyday English, people usually say which way...?" to ask the way rather than using "the noun direction". Sometimes, it may pay attention to the differences between Chinese and English. For instance, "In everyday English, people often use the expression do the washing-up, rather than wash the dishes", though the latter may be more in line with Chinese expression habit. Overall, learners can know which word is more suitable for a specific situation through these information in the main body.

In addition to the pragmatic information introduced in the main body, eight speech act words or functional words are appended after the main body, including "Agreeing, Disagreeing, Apologizing, Opinions, Requests, Suggestions, Hello, Goodbye, and Thank you". This part distinguishes the usage of eight words in formal written context and informal spoken context respectively. Meanwhile, the speaker or writer's choice of different expressions can reflect their attitude to some extent. For

instance, by using “I’m not so sure/Are you sure”, the speaker can express disapproval politely, while addressee can realize that someone disagrees with him, but he still feel respected.

Overall, *LDOCE5* contains abundant pragmatic information, not only the criteria for evaluation that Chan and Loong (1999) have mentioned, but also additional content such as difference between written and spoken context, as well as words used in academic context.

### **3.2 Disadvantages of Pragmatic Information in LDOCE5**

Some small disadvantage can be found at the pragmatic level, mainly focusing on the introduction functional words. Firstly, the eight words mentioned above are not enough to generalize a lot of speech acts. It might be better to add some other speech act words, such as helping, invitation, promising, ordering, and celebration. Secondly, real communication is usually not confined to these direct speech acts. Sometimes there are some indirect speech acts. For instance, some declarative sentences can express requests in specific contexts. When a student who is busy doing his homework says to the person next to him, it's hot today. Perhaps his implication is to ask the addressee to turn on the air conditioner. So it might be more practical to include such examples below the Requests.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

Based on the evaluation criterion put forward by Chan and Loong (1999), this paper evaluates the semantic and pragmatic information in *LDOCE5*, from both its advantages and disadvantages. For semantics, *LDOCE5* gives different meanings of a word by using the definitions beginning with the words or phrases from the same part of speech with the meaning of the word; information of sense relations are presented mainly through synonyms and antonyms of a particular word; indication of the difference between a certain word and its synonyms can usually be found through the cross-reference, THESAURUS; collocations of an item are presented clearly in the collocation box, especially the lexical collocations. Its disadvantage at this level is mainly that indication of the difference between a certain word and its synonyms is neither consistent nor clear enough. For pragmatics, *LDOCE5* uses the Labels to indicate the using field, the regional difference, the degree of formality and acceptability of an item, as well as the attitudes of a speaker/writer and an addressee. In addition, it distinguishes the written and spoken contexts of an item, and marks words used in academic context. Its disadvantage at this level lies mainly in speech act words. Overall, *LDOCE5* is very helpful and practical when considering from both semantics and pragmatics. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that this dictionary can appear on the choice list of English learners. On the basis

of this paper, some more in-depth research can be carried out. For instance, the dictionary can also be analyzed in other aspects of linguistics, including phonetics, morphology and syntax, which will be helpful for a more comprehensive evaluation of this dictionary.

## **REFERENCES**

- [1] Ye, F., Xu, T., Wang, H., & Li, J. (2010). *Yu yan xue gang yao*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- [2] Chan, A. and Loong, Y. (1999). Establishing criteria for evaluating a learner's dictionary. In R. Berry, B. Asker, K. Hyland, and M. Lam (eds.) *Language Analysis, Description and Pedagogy*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, 298- 307.
- [3] Storjohann, P. (2010). *Lexical-semantic relations theoretical and practical perspectives*. Amsterdam: J. Benjamins Pub.
- [4] Nesselhauf, N. (2003). The Use of Collocations by Advanced Learners of English and Some Implications for Teaching. *Applied Linguistics*, 24(2), 223-242. doi:10.1093/applin/24.2.223
- [5] Hymes, D. (1972). On communicative competence. In J. B. Pride and J. Holmes (eds.) *Sociolinguistics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 269-293.