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DOI <https://doi.org/10.24136/rsf.2021.007>

## **ON THE NEED OF USAGE INFORMATION IN DICTIONARY DEFINITIONS: EFL STUDENTS OF POLISH PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN FOCUS**

**Abstract:** Assuming that the information provided by dictionary definitions should indicate that language use depends on the pragmatic situation of discourse as well as the social relation between the speaker and the hearer, dictionaries frequently employ special conventions. As particularly important from the perspective of a language learner, the manner of adopting different conventions should not be too complicated for him. Obviously enough, the knowledge of the difference between semantics and pragmatic meaning, especially when the dictionary user comes from different culture seems to be of prime importance. When consulting dictionaries, the EFL learner needs clear instruction in formal language use as well as neutral usage that is not informal in order to avoid the wrong style – choice consequences (here understood as miscommunication and /or misunderstanding).

**Keywords:** style labels, lexicography, dictionaries, pragmatic properties, semantics.

**Abstrakt:** Zakładając, że informacje zawarte w definicjach słownikowych powinny wskazywać, że użycie języka zależy od sytuacji pragmatycznej oraz relacji społecznych między mówiącym a słuchaczem, słowniki często stosują specjalne konwencje. Szczególnie ważne z punktu widzenia uczącego się języka, jest to aby konwencje te nie były zbyt skomplikowane. Oczywiście wiedza na temat różnicy między semantyką słowa a jego znaczeniem pragmatycznym, zwłaszcza gdy użytkownik słownika pochodzi z innej kultury, wydaje się mieć pierwszorzędne znaczenie. Podczas korzystania słowników uczący się języka obcego potrzebuje jasnych instrukcji dotyczących formalnego użycia języka, jak również jak i użycia, które nie jest formalne, aby uniknąć konsekwencji niewłaściwego wyboru.

**Słowa kluczowe:** etykiety stylistyczne, leksykografia, słowniki, właściwości pragmatyczne, semantyka.

**Summary:** The purpose of the study was to show how the entries in pedagogical dictionaries available at primary school in Poland are labelled according to the parameter of style. All in all, one is justified in saying that when analyzing dictionaries from the macrostructural perspective we do not find relevant labels.

**Streszczenie:** Celem badań było pokazanie, jak hasła w słownikach pedagogicznych dostępnych w szkole podstawowej w Polsce są oznakowane względem parametru stylu. Okazało się uzasadnionym stwierdzenie, że analizując słowniki z perspektywy makro i mikrostruktury nie znajdujemy w nich relewantnych kwalifikatorów stylistycznych.

### **Introduction**

When we compare the status of EFL teachers to teachers of other languages we will notice that teachers of English are in much better position. For those who are not familiar with the Polish educational system, let us briefly introduce: there are plenty of textbooks for all kinds of learners (with the in-depth descriptions of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary). What is more, in order to help EFL students to gain a good command of new vocabulary, pedagogical dictionary has been introduced. At the same time, there has been a steady growth on the market and consequently the strong competition between publishers.

Simultaneously, researchers in the field indicate that students of English find learning new lexical items as a problem. Obviously, teachers tend to develop their workshops constantly trying to attract more pupils' attention but there still is a need for improving teaching materials to enable vocabulary comprehension. The EFL dictionary is a best tool in studying the ways in which words are used in different cultures and societies. What also stems from practical lexicography is that students of English have problems in comprehending dictionary conventions. This may be a consequence of their disregard of guide to the dictionary sections or alternatively the inability of taking advantage of them.

#### **1. On the scope of pedagogical lexicography**

It is necessary to indicate that the term *pedagogical lexicography* is considered to be intuitively clear by the majority of dictionary-makers. It is worthy of noting that the dictionary as a particular type of reference literature is not infrequently regarded as a kind of pedagogical discourse. From this point of view, the notion of *pedagogical lexicography* appears to be redundant, because lexicography is, by its very nature, pedagogical due to the fact that every dictionary is *per se* pedagogical (Burkhanov 1999: 200). Hence, experts in the field place the scope of pedagogical lexicography into the design and production of dictionaries for *EFL* students (see Cowie 1987, Piotrowski 1986). According to the aforementioned point of view, the main emerging domains of pedagogical lexicography are as listed below.

First, there is the theory and practice of producing learner's dictionaries. Second, the theory and practice of compiling minimal lexicons. Third, the theory and practice of pedagogical lexical statistics. Fourth, the theory and practice of developing reference books of lexicographic type. Fifth, the theory and practice of introducing and reinforcing new lexical items in a given coursebook glossary as well as in the vocabulary lists from particular lessons.

In turn, Hartman (2001:26) defines pedagogical lexicography as a promising new field developing somewhere at the intersection between language teaching and dictionary making. At the same time, the author adds that *the pedagogical lexicography, in the (British) English context, has been accountable for a new genre of reference works, the 'learner's dictionary'*. It is worth noting that both the scope and the main objectives of this area of lexicography are taken into consideration. The latter, in contrast with general lexicography, is usually defined as lexicography of smaller size and greater instructive orientation. (see Burkhanov 1999:201) For the reason of their greater instructive orientation, pedagogical dictionaries designed for non-native learners represent – in the words of Zgusta 1971:214) – *only what somebody learning a language may be expected to say, write, and read*. This is the main reason why the scope of pedagogical lexicography in foreign language teaching is often restricted to the production of learner's dictionaries only (Burkhanov 1999: 201).

In present – day studies, the scope of pedagogical lexicography covers every single one of reference works “designed for all practical didactic needs of teachers and learners of language” (DOL, 1998:107). For this reason we can assume that pedagogical lexicography tailors wide-ranging information for learners (such as syntax, morphology, collocation restriction, pragmatic properties of words, etc.)

In the words of Rundell (1998: 37) the following information categories should be understood by the students:

- syntactic behaviour,
- collocation preferences,
- sociolinguistic features,
- semantic features,
- contextual effects.

As stressed in the foregoing, the most important task of EFL dictionaries is to assist the aim of self – instruction. To be more precise, the dictionaries under consideration display necessary information related to syntax, morphology, collocations and pragmatic properties of words. On the whole, the ongoing interest in teaching and learning English means that pedagogical lexicography is an omnipresent issue.

## 2. Dictionaries used in Polish primary schools – the state of the art

In the context of foreign language teaching, reference to dictionaries is usually understood as a reference to bilingual dictionaries. Our experience as language teachers is that we tend to use also monolingual dictionaries. Although students tend to look up unknown lexical items in a bilingual for the simple reason that they are given translation equivalents at hand. At the same time it is the teacher's job to help pupils to obtain from the dictionary the information they are looking for.

For the purpose of the present study we will look into process of teaching English as a foreign language at Primary School in Odechów, Masovian district, Poland. There are 220 students that are taught English. The pupils start with English when they enter school (at the age of 6). Up to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade they have 2 English lessons a week. From the 4<sup>th</sup> form on the pupils are taught English three times a week. There are no strict guidelines given by the Polish Government, Department of Education as to the dictionaries that are allowed. It is usually up to the teachers what kinds of works of reference are available.

## 3. Usage coding in EFL lexicography<sup>1</sup>

When we face the challenge of investigating usage specifications in lexicography, one should by all means refrain from tackling the problem of the meaning of the usage category. And so, for example, according to Allen (1992:1071) usage is *the way in which the elements of language are customarily used to produce meaning* while Landau (2001: 174) argues that the term usage denotes either kinds of spoken or written language, the standard ways of its usage, as distinguished from non-standard ones or – alternately – the study of any limitations on use (geographic, social or temporal).

In current lexicographic practice such data is provided by usage labels, usually given in the form of one word labels or abbreviation (such as, for example, old-fashioned, slang, AmE). Quantitatively, Landau (2001: 175) claims that most common usage labels are as follows:

- currency or temporality: archaic, obsolete,
- frequency of use: rare,
- regional or geographic variation: U.S., British, Canadian, Australian
- technical or specialized terminology: astronomy, chemistry, physics
- restricted or taboo: vulgar, obscene,
- insult: offensive, disparaging, contemptuous,
- slang: slang,
- style, functional variety, or register: informal, colloquial, literary,
- status or cultural label: nonstandard, substandard.

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<sup>1</sup> For the detailed description see Stachurska (2018).

The idea of incorporating thus understood labels in the structure of lexicographic description is by no means a novelty, and it has existed for a long time, but – equally for a long time – lexicographers have faced the multitude of difficulties related to the intricacies of the shape the labelling system (Ptaszyński, 2010: 411-412). One of the main reasons, as indicated in Atkins & Rundell (2008:496), is that: *many labels are umbrella terms that conceal a good deal of variation*. To uncover the content of these umbrella terms is to say that labels proposed for the dictionary content aim at indicating data about limitations concerning the way words are to be used, in the contexts they occur or, alternatively in relation to different lexical items within the body of a dictionary. In the literature of the subject, these limitations are referred to as diasystematic marking or diasystematic information (see, for example, Hausmann, 1989; Svensén, 2009). In turn, Landau (2001: 217) explains briefly as *usage refers to any or all uses of language*. According to the author, it explains and guides the readers how to use a given language correctly, but also provides relevant information on the limitations of use. As a rule, usage comments are provided in dictionaries as a guide on how to use words appropriately (the use of a particular lexical item can be restricted to a certain area, a specific domain as well as style/register). Normally, these limitations are indicated in such a way that dictionaries employ labels (either in the microstructure, or in the megastructure of a dictionary).

In other words, this means that they are to be useful when dictionary users are uncertain if a given word is old-fashioned/slang/taboo, etc. Such pieces of information, in the words of Svensén (2009: 315), inform dictionary users that *a certain lexical item deviates in a certain respect from the main bulk of items described in a dictionary and that its use is subject to some kind of restriction*. Obviously enough, a dictionary user normally consults the work of reference for the guides on how to use a lexical item appropriately (or alternatively one of its senses), its spelling, pronunciation, the fact if it is restricted somehow (to a geographical region/ a domain / a style). Such information tend to appear in different forms as well as varying positions. Most frequently, limitations of all types are provided as labels given within the dictionary microstructure.

#### **4. Labels in dictionaries for primary school students**

The main target set to this section is to analyse dictionary macrostructure with regard to the manner in which the presence of stylistic or – more generally – sociolinguistic stratification is marked. To reach the goal, it seems reasonable to take a closer look at each of the EFL dictionaries separately.

To start with Szkolny Słownik angielsko – polski, polsko – angielski (2012), its stylistic coding is provided in the section titled “kwalifikatory stylistyczne”, where they are explained the following manner:

Kwalifikatory stylistyczne opisują wyrazy hasłowe lub znaczenia tych wyrazów nacechowane stylistycznie.  
 form. oznacza język urzędowy  
 liter. oznacza język literacki  
 pot. oznacza język potoczny  
 wulg. oznacza słowa wulgarne<sup>2</sup>

One gets the impression that the list of labels provided is somewhat incomplete. It seems that such labels as slang, taboo should also be used. What is more, one can easily notice that register labels are also not given (except the word liter.)

When we move to the relevant features of *Słownik angielsko – polski polsko – angielski* (2010) there is nothing like label introduction within its macrostructure. When we turn to its microstructure the layout of the individual lexicographic articles and the information they include do not include any sociolinguistic hints.

As far as the subsequent work of reference available at the school library is concerned, namely *Słownik angielsko – polski polsko – angielski i gramatyka* (2002) the editors also do not provide any usage explanations for the users.

Not surprisingly, when we turn to *Ilustrowany słownik angielsko – polski* (2016) we can not find any usage hints. There are any indications that language use depends on the pragmatic context of discourse as well as the social relation between the discourse parameters (both in case of macro and microstructure of the dictionary under review).

When we move on to the relevant features of *Oxford Wordpower* (2007) we see that its treatment of usage is merely restricted to inside front cover within the space devoted to grammar expressions, abbreviations and explanatory signs (wyrażenia gramatyczne, skróty i znaki objaśniające). In particular, one may observe that among them there are the following usage hints: Brit (=British English) as well as US (=American English). Editors do not provide any additional comments or at least short explanations and in fact do not find necessary to employ any usage notes on how words are to be used in particular context.

Latest available dictionary is *Collins Słownik polsko angielski angielsko – polski* (1998). Here we find the following explanation:

Kwalifikator to informacja w języku hasła umieszczona w nawiasach i wydrukowana kursywą. Ułatwia ono wybranie odpowiedniego znaczenia wyrazu hasłowego w zależności od kontekstu, w których wyraz ten występuje,

<sup>2</sup> Usage labels describe headwords or the meanings of headwords. They can be as follows:

- form – a word that is suitable for formal situations,
- lit – a word that is used in literature,
- pot – a word used in normal conversation,
- wulg – a word used in an insulting manner. (translation mine)

lub podaje jego synonim. Potoczne użycie wyrazów zaznaczone jest przy pomocy skrótu inf bezpośrednio po wyrazie hasłowym. Znaczenia polskie i angielskie wyrazów hasłowych są również odpowiednikami stylistycznymi.<sup>3</sup>

We also find the following explanation of the lexical item **indicators**, what in our opinion is used as corresponding to label as used in metalexigraphy:

An *indicator* is a piece of information in the source language about the usage of the headword to guide you to the most appropriate translation. Indicators give some idea of the context in which the headword might appear, or they provide synonyms for the headword. They are printed in italic type and shown in brackets. Colloquial and informal language in the dictionary is marked at the headword. You should assume that the translation will match the source language in register.

An overall analysis of the macrostructure of the dictionary reveals that except the label inf one cannot find any additional usage hints.

The purpose of the study was to show how the entries in pedagogical dictionaries available at primary school in Odechów, Poland are labelled according to the parameter of style. All in all, one is justified in saying that when analysing dictionaries from the macrostructural perspective we do not find relevant labels. In case of only one dictionary, namely Słownik szkolny angielsko – polski, polsko – angielski (2012), there are four labels used. They are provided (almost as a rule) before the referential definition of the meaning of the word. The name of the labelling is to show the potential user the type of social context in which a given word may most typically is expected to be used.

### **Ways of optimizations**

What has already been mentioned is that the usage labels should be undoubtedly included in the structure of all pedagogical dictionaries. As shown, they are present they do not appear or alternatively appear in insufficient quantity and quality.

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<sup>3</sup> translation mine: Label is a piece of information given is a microstructure of the word (it is enclosed in parentheses and printed in italics). It makes it easy to choose the appropriate meaning of a headword depending on the context in which the word is used or gives its synonym. The colloquial use of words is marked with the abbreviation inf immediately after the entry word. The Polish and English meanings of words are also stylistic equivalents.

As stressed many a time there are no commonly agreed criteria on usage labelling. That is why we propose two solutions: changing the available dictionaries to those published abroad, such as Oxford Wordpower<sup>4</sup> or alternatively PWN Oxford Wielki Słownik Angielsko - Polski<sup>5</sup> or adapting the currently published works of reference to the requirements of metalexigraphy (what means limiting the actual length to one word as well as developing a unified schedule of usage labels)<sup>6</sup>.

### Conclusions

All in all, the general discernible pattern is that the entries are not properly marked (if at all) and that is so they cannot be easily classified by the students. The survey of the labels that has been carried out in the foregoing shows that one may hardly speak of any consistency. It is worth noticing at the same time, that this is quite difficult area for EFL learners. It may also be worth mentioning that for a language teacher whose native language is not English the area of usage labels seems also difficult – as often it is not realized what the attitudinal value of a given word is (this is probably the consequence of pushing sociolinguistics outside the curricula). At the same time, it must be stressed many a time that in order to master a foreign language use, language teaching materials such as dictionaries are of prime importance from the early stage of education. Certainly, although dictionaries tend to expound Standard English, other variants that appear in different social contexts are to be properly marked. For the obvious reason, the usage labels the teachers and learners should focus on should give them helpful hand in decoding and encoding tasks.

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<sup>4</sup> The labelling scheme proposed in Wordpower we find acceptable for primary school students.

<sup>5</sup> Here we find the following list of usage labels (termed as usage and field labels): archaic, Australian, children's speech, Canadian, controversial, outdated, dialectal, euphemism, figurative, official, English, humorous, colloquial, Irish, ironic, journalistic, literary, offensive, pejorative, proverb, rare, Scottish, slang, specialist, American, common, vulgar.

<sup>6</sup> There has already been proposed a unified labelling system in Stachurska (2018).



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