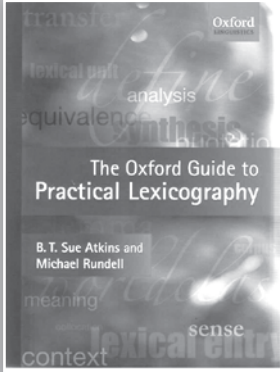# B.T. Sue Atkins and Michael Rundell.
The Oxford Guide to Practical Lexicography

The Oxford Guide
to Practical lexicography
B.T. Sue Atkins and Michael
Rundell
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Double practical
In a previous edition of this publication, I observed that the book *Practical lexicography, a reader*, edited by Thierry Fontenelle, was maybe not as practical as the title suggested (KDN16, 2008: 14-16). In any case, it did not give the answers to practical questions like:
- Under which entry does the user of my dictionary find fixed phrases and idiomatic expressions?
- What does the blueprint of an empty dictionary look like? Which building blocks are universal and essential?
- Where can I find information on tools/ software to build a dictionary?

A little later in 2008 OUP published a companion book with a nearly similar title, *The Oxford Guide to Practical Lexicography* (OGPL). This title is well chosen indeed: the book does discuss, and in many cases provide, the answers to, these questions and many, many more.

Very, very practical
After a brief and crystal clear introduction that tells us what the book is about, what lexicographers do and how the book works, the first chapter begins with 'The birth of a dictionary'. In three major parts, *Pre-lexicography*, *Analysing the data* and *Compiling the entry*, OGPL guides us – lexicographers to be – along practically every issue that anyone who decides on making a dictionary encounters. On page 499, we are ready for the final paragraph 'Writing the entry'.

The style of the book is pleasantly down to earth and on every page one senses the abundant experience of the authors. The basic piece of advice, repeated throughout, is: keep the user of your dictionary in mind with every decision you make. That seems an obvious thing to do, but many existing dictionaries prove that somewhere along the road the maker forgot about the (limitations in the) skills and needs of the users.

The practical approach of OGPL shows in the many remarks, often pieces of very practical advice, preceded by a blue arrow. A few examples:

> "Don't rely too much on labels in your entry: they usually mean more to you than to the user." and "When you're deciding how to handle MWEs (multiword expressions), it's a good idea to look at a lot of other dictionaries, think

about your user profile, then choose the way that best fits the needs of your most vulnerable user."

Here and there, the reader gets an explicit warning, like: "Building the database is a wholly monolingual exercise" and "When in doubt, don't leave it out." Each chapter ends with references to more information, divided into 'Recommended reading', 'Further reading and related topics' and 'Websites'. The lists with references are short and up to date.

A quote from a paragraph that discusses grades of idiomaticity may illustrate the stress OGPL lays on dictionaries as realistic inventories of current words and phrases. The following remark is made on idioms that present no problems of identification as true idioms:

> "…these and only these are used to illustrate the many papers on idiom by theoretical linguists, who are single-handedly keeping alive old favourites like *to rain cats and dogs* and *to kick the bucket*. It is a very long time since either of us heard these in day-to-day discourse." (note 13, p. 360).

Apparently the old favourites are hard to suppress, since they also show up in OGPL on page 167 (*kick the bucket*) and page 181 (*raining cats and dogs*) respectively.

Headword of a multiword expression
It would be impossible for this review to comment on every aspect of dictionary making that OGPL deals with. I focussed on the answer to the very first question in the beginning of this review: "under which entry does the user of my dictionary find fixed phrases and idiomatic expressions?"

In my lifetime, I have spent a lot of time looking in vain for multiword expressions (MWEs) under the wrong headword. Very few (English) dictionaries bother to mention the way they distribute MWEs among entries in the front matter. Consequently it is impossible for a motivated (front matter reading) user to save time by following the lexicographer's system, however counter-intuitive it might be.

In a recent concise dictionary by a renowned editor,[1] the distribution of MWEs

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1 *Essential Dictionary for Learners of English*, edited by Michael Rundell, Macmillan, 2007.

was probably not an item in the styleguide. The same MWE occurs in several articles under different entries, obviously without intention. The lexicographical treatment varies in wording, labeling, definition and the use of examples. Here are two such doubles (with the entry word printed in bold):

- at/in the **back** of your mind: if something is at the back of your mind, you are slightly conscious of it all the time
- at the back of your **mind**: if something is at the back of your mind, you are not thinking about it now, but you still remember it or know about it: *At the back of the mind, she knew he was lying*.
- take sth with a **pinch** of salt: *informal* to doubt that something is completely true
- take sth with a pinch of **salt**: to doubt the truth or value of something is completely true: *If I were you, I'd take his advice with a pinch of salt*.

Would consultation by this dictionary's editor of his later work have prevented this? The disappointing answer is probably no.

OGPL discusses the relevant question 'under which entry does the user of my dictionary find fixed phrases and idiomatic expressions?' in chapter 9.2.6, 'Multiword Expressions'. The authors refer to "a lot of academic research with a view to discovering where dictionary users expect to find various types of MWE". The only more or less concrete statement is "it is often said that German users will look for a phrase first under the noun". In fact, the question is left unanswered. OGPL then offers a number of possible strategies for the lexicographer to follow ('the principal options for English'):

1 under the first or only lexical word
2 under the least frequent lexical word
3 under the first or only noun
4 under the first or only verb
5 as a headword in its own right (in dictionaries of idioms)

In the rest of OGPL there is no sign of the application of any of these options, nor of any other strategy. Further on, in chapter 10.2.1 OGPL discusses the tricky issue of the relative fixedness of many expressions. For example, when we look at 'with a pinch of salt' in a large corpus we may find many instances without the word 'pinch', like *with a huge lump of salt*. The authors argue convincingly that the canonical form in a dictionary should nonetheless be 'with a pinch of salt'. However, without any clarification they present *salt* as the entry for this MWE in the dictionary. Yet *salt* is neither the first or only lexical word, nor the least frequent lexical word, nor the first or only noun, nor the first or only verb.

Automated selecting and ordering
It strikes me that the frame of mind of the authors of OGPL still seems to be the traditional printed dictionary, in spite of the distinction in the very structure of the book between building the database and editing the final product. The authors even say (on p. 363) "What you do with an MWE in the database is not necessarily what will eventually be done with it in the dictionary proper." So much for the theory.

In fact, the book is suffused with the spirit of the traditional idea that every single dictionary article is the creation of a skilled craftsperson. The way Atkins and Rundell describe the arrangement of meanings and MWEs in a dictionary entry smells like arranging flowers in a bouquet. The fundamental distinction between database and resulting product is mentioned, but is neither discussed nor illustrated and thus seems to be of little substance.

In their own words, the authors state that the transformation from database to dictionary essentially consists of selecting and ordering. The notion that if the database is well structured, it can be turned into a dictionary – into a number of different dictionaries – by using a range of programmed rules, seems to be too unorthodox to deserve attention in OGPL. In my view, it is precisely the task of a modern lexicographer to design the database and the rules for derivation and ordering in such a way that ultimately composing lemmas is an automated process rather than a human creation per article.

We know that there is no universal strategy for users to select the headword for a random MWE. We also know that building a database as a source for various products can save a considerable amount of editorial time and can guarantee consistency throughout these products. If one inserts an MWE in the database only once, with a link to every single-word lexical unit (i.e. each meaning of a headword), all options for the selection of the headword in a final product would still be open. This procedure would avoid double, but non-identical, treatment like the examples above. In each entry in which the MWE would be included, we would see the same information (wording, labeling, definition, translation). It would also allow for different choices for different products, and each choice would guarantee a 100% consistency. For example, the choice for either of the strategies that OGPL offers could easily be programmed and automatically produced. The results would be as follows:

1 *take with a **pinch** of salt* (first or only lexical word, if a support verb like 'take'
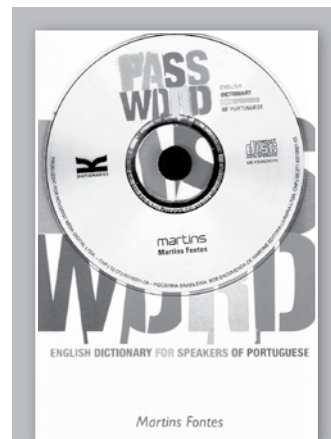
were to be excluded from the list of 'lexical words')

2 take with a **pinch** of salt (least frequent lexical word, assuming that relative frequency of words is available in the database)

3 take with a **pinch** of salt (the first or only noun)

4 *take* with a pinch of salt (first or only verb)

Lexicographers could present the various results to potential users for testing. Probably they would formulate an additional rule that results in *salt* as a headword. For example, the occurrence of variation in the first lexical word (*take with a pinch/grain of salt*) could be a reason for an additional rule that marks the second lexical word as the headword. Of course, it would also be possible to place the MWE in several entries, if the size of the dictionary allows it. An in-between solution would be a cross-reference. OGPL briefly mentions the possibility of referring from a potential headword to the headword under which the MWE is treated as a common feature in a DWS (dictionary writing system). However, in 'Building the dictionary entry' (chapter 12) we do not learn how to deal with this feature. It is simply not mentioned again.

Seminar on Learner's Dictionaries

DSNA XVII Biennial Meeting, Bloomington, 2009

The 17th biennial meeting of the Dictionary Society of North America, held at Indiana University in Bloomington on 27-30 May 2009, included a first-of-its-kind seminar on learner's dictionaries. The seminar was an experiment in program structure and was generally restricted to its participants, although some 20 other persons attended in the audience. The participants all read each other's papers in advance, and the seminar served as a forum for further discussion. Three participants were unable to attend the conference and took part in the discussion using Skype. The participants included Arleta Adamska-Sałaciak, Henri Béjoint, Paul Bogaards, Mari Carmen Campoy-Cubillo, Don R. McCreary, Wendalyn Nichols, Michael Rundell, Peter Sokolowski and Shigeru Yamada, and the organizer was Ilan J. Kernerman. The seminar proceedings, along with two more papers on this topic that were presented at the DSNA meeting, will be published by K Dictionaries, as the second volume in its new Papers on Lexicography and Dictionaries series. For the list of contents, see p.3.

In my view, the use of cross-references for MWEs is an attractive time-saving feature. For example in Cobuild we find a reference to *salt* under *pinch* for *take something with a pinch of salt*. In a concise dictionary, a reference to just the headword without the full MWE is already helpful to a user who will recognise the reference as part of the phrase he or she has in mind.

The distribution of MWEs among articles offered a case for looking into the way database and final product relate to each other in OGPL. I am sure that this book will be a success and that it will go through a large number of reprints and I am curious to see if further automation of the dictionary making process will receive more attention in future editions.

Non-natives read English too

Finally, I would like to make a remark on the blind spot that many native speakers – even those who write for an international public – seem to have for the problems that non-natives may have with infrequent idiomatic English. They should realise that we already have to deal with a double handicap. Not only do we read/study in a language that is not our mother tongue, in addition to that all the example material is drawn from a language that is not our own. What is immediately instructive or illustrative to a native speaker often requires some additional study from a non-native speaker. A little consideration would be appropriate.

In general the language in OGPL is plain and lively English, but here and there an infrequent idiom suddenly enforces the consultation of a dictionary. On page 5 the authors quote the great Dr. Samuel Johnson from 'The plan of an English Dictionary', 1747. Then follows: "Crudely paraphrased this tells us that no amount of theoretical rigour is worth a hill of beans if the average user of your dictionary can't understand the message you are trying to convey." It is ironic that many readers will only be able to understand the paraphrase because the original text is perfectly understandable for an advanced EFL-student. The paraphrase – ideally intended to clarify the quotation – introduces the rare and opaque idiom 'a hill of beans'. No problem for those who remember the famous ending of the film *Casablanca*, in which Humphrey Bogart says '… it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a *hill of beans* in this crazy world'. For many others the Americanism introduces a puzzle.

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