

A CORPUS-BASED STUDY OF “RELATION” AND “RELATIONSHIP” IN ADVANCED LEARNER S DICTIONARIES

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Abstract

The synonyms “relation” and “relationship” are very confusing for English learners, and this paper deliberately chooses this pair of synonyms as the investigatory case. The investigating scope covers four dictionaries for advanced learners in non-native English speaking countries. They are Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (4th edition, 1989) (OALD4), Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (6th edition) (OALD6, 2000), Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (3rd edition, 1995) (LDCE3), and Collins Cobuild English Dictionary (2nd edition, 1995) (CCED2). In this paper, the author first makes a comparative study of this pair of synonyms in the four dictionaries. The focus is fixed upon four aspects, namely, the numbers of word entries and sense items, countability, collocations, and usage notes. Then, with the help of the evidences from Lancaster-Oslo-Bergen Corpus (LOB) and Freiburg-LOB Corpus of British English (FLOB), the author delves into these four aspects and evaluates their treatment in the four dictionaries. It is found out that dictionaries based on corpora reflect better the actual use of language and provide more accurate and useful information for learners.

Key words

“relation”; “relationship”; dictionary; corpus

1. Introduction

The word “dictionary” is always associated with authority, learning and accuracy. However, words are not dealt with completely consistently in different dictionaries partly because of the subtle ambiguity of word senses and usages and partly because of dictionary compilers preference. In this article, the author first makes a comparative study of the synonyms “relation” and “relationship” in four advanced learners dictionaries. They are Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (4th edition, 1989) (OALD4), Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (6th edition) (OALD6, 2000), Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (3rd edition, 1995) (LDCE3), Collins Cobuild English Dictionary (2nd edition, 1995) (CCED2). The four aspects which are focused upon in the discussion are the numbers of word entries and sense items, countability, collocations, and usage notes. Then, with the help of the evidences from Lancaster-Oslo-Bergen Corpus (LOB) and Freiburg-LOB Corpus of British English (FLOB), the author delves into these four aspects and evaluates their treatment in the four dictionaries.

2. A brief survey

The publication of the above-mentioned dictionaries has been well received by learners and has also caught lexicography researchers attention. Li Ming and Zhou Jinghua (2001), Yang Xiaojun and Li Saihong (2003), Yuan Kele (1997) and so on have made a lot of comments on them. As learners dictionaries, they share some features. First, the vocabulary is relatively small, ranging from 50 thousand to 80 thousand. They are all commonly used words. Collocations and idioms are also included and paid

special attention to . Second ,about two to three thousand words are used to define sense items . Third , examples provided are rich ,practical and typical ,and they are usually collected from corpora . Fourth , there are detailed labels about grammatical and usage information . Finally ,there are beautiful illustrations and various appendices ,which are found practical and convenient for learners .

Another characteristic that is worth mentioning here is the exploitation of computational corpora in lexicographical work . OALD4 has not made use of computational corpora . OALD6 is based on the Oxford Corpus Collection and the British National Corpus (BNC) . LDCE3 has used three corpora ,which are the BNC ,the Longman Lancaster Corpus and the Longman Learner s Corpus . CCED2 has used the Bank of English .

The following table is a comparison of “relation ”and “relationship ”in terms of the number of word entries ,sense items ,and examples . The marks and × indicate respectively the existence and nonexistence of separate usage notes in the four dictionaries .

Table 1 . A comparison of relation and relationship in the four dictionaries

	word entry	sense item	example	usage note
OALD4	relation	4	11	
	(relationship)	3	6	
OALD6	relation	3	18	×
	relationship	4	12	
CCED2	relation	5	15	×
	relationship	3	5	
LDCE3	relation	4	7	
	relations	2	6	
	relationship	3	4	

3 . An investigation of relation and relationship in the LOB and FLOB

The reason why the LOB and FLOB are chosen in this investigation is that the four dictionaries were published approximately in the last decade of the 20th century and based on British English . It is well known that the LOB was completed in the 1970s . In order to remove the worry that it cannot represent current English ,the FLOB has been chosen as a complement because it represents British English in the 1990s . And it is worth mentioning that LOB and FLOB are approximately of the same size and they can also match in terms of registers . Here are some findings .

Table 2 . Frequency of relation(s) and relationship(s) in the LOB and FLOB

Corpus	total	relation	relations	relationship	relationships
LOB	261	82 (31 .4 %)	91 (35 .9 %)	65 (24 .9 %)	23 (8 .8 %)
FLOB	358	88 (24 .6 %)	60 (16 .8 %)	164 (45 .8 %)	44 (12 .3 %)

3 .1 The numbers of word entries and sense items

As for the number of word entries ,it is very interesting to find that the four dictionaries deal with these words quite differently . Both CCED2 and OALD6 have two entries ,one for relation and the other for relationship . OALD4 and LDCE3 form two extremes . The former has only one entry ,that is , relation . Relationship is placed within as a derivative . The latter has three entries ,with relation , relations and relationship treated respectively as a separate one . Table 2 shows that the occurrence of

relation(s) (82 +91) is much higher than that of relationship(s) (65 +23) in the LOB. However, the opposite is true in the FLOB. The occurrence of relation(s) is 148 (i.e. 88 +60) while that of relationship(s) is 208 (i.e. 164 +44). The diachronic changes of frequency in the two corpora can verify the treatment of relation and relationship as separate word entries. Therefore, it is cheerful to see the modification in OALD6. With regard to LDCE3, it is really unnecessary to have three separate entries. It is quite reasonable for relations to form an independent sense item of relation in the dictionary, but not an independent word entry. Fortunately, LDCE (4th edition, 2003) has made the same modification as OALD6.

A careful inspection of every token of relation(s) and relationship(s) in the LOB and FLOB reveals that all senses are covered by the four dictionaries. The numbers of sense items are approximately the same. And the ranking order is arranged according to the frequency in corpora. Some slight differences about sense items are still found among the dictionaries. For instance, the third item of relation in LDCE3, which says "[U (of)] formal the act of telling a story" is not found in the LOB or FLOB. Since it is so rare in use, the other three dictionaries just exclude it. It is understandable for learner's dictionaries to do so. In OALD4, the idiom have (sexual) relations (with sb) together with in /with relation to sb /sth is improperly established as an independent sense item. There is not enough evidence found in the LOB and FLOB to support this arrangement. Fortunately, OALD6 has corrected this treatment.

3.2 Countability

Countability is a very complicated grammatical category in English not because English nouns have many inflectional forms but because it is hard, even for native speakers, to judge when they are countable or uncountable. Nevertheless, native speakers have intuition to resort to. Non-native speakers have to turn to dictionaries for help. Therefore, it is necessary for learner's dictionaries to give sufficient information about the countability of English nouns. A glance of Table 2 can lead one to a definite decision, that is, relation and relationship are both countable. CCED2 indeed marks them only as countable nouns. But the case is not so simple. Both relation and relationship can be used as uncountable nouns. In LOB and FLOB, the instances where the two words are modified by little or much can easily be found, especially in such sentence patterns as bear no /little /much ... relation /relationship to ... , there is little relation /relationship to In OALD4, it is found unusual that the sense items of relation are given clear labels about countability whereas those of relationship are given none. This may indicate that the compiler of OALD4 is not so sure about the countability of relationship because OALD4 is not corpus-based. CCED2, though corpus-based, provides too simple information. OALD6 and LDCE3 have done better in this respect.

3.3 Collocations

Collocations or idioms are paid high attention to in the process of dictionary compilation. The study of collocations began in the 1920s and 1930s. Harold E. Palmer and A. S. Hornby are representatives. According to Palmer, what English learners find difficult lies not in word senses but in grammatical structures and collocations. A. S. Hornby lays great stress on collocations. This is obviously manifested in his OALD, where a large number of collocations can be found. As for relation, the highest collocation frequency is the prepositional phrase in relation to. In the LOB, within 82 occurrences of relation, half are in relation to. In the FLOB, the frequency is still higher. Within 88 occurrences of relation, 61 are in relation to. How should dictionaries deal with so frequent a collocation in corpora? CCED2 has set a good example. This collocation is highlighted in such a degree that it occupies two sense items. One means "compared with" and the other means "concerning", "in connection with". In this way, the learner can get much help in consulting the dictionary.

The collocation with relation to, which appears in OALD4 and LDCE3 but does not in CCED2 or OALD6, is not found in the two corpora. So the deletion of this collocation in CCED2 or OALD6 is justified. In the other words, the corpora have made it clear that the collocation with relation to becomes outdated, so it should be omitted in current learner's dictionaries. If the compiler does want to keep it, a usage note, for example "dated", is needed.

3.4 Usage notes

Providing usage notes is a striking feature of current learners dictionaries. Usage notes play an important role in helping learners to distinguish correct and incorrect usages. Since the rising of pragmatics in the 1970s, lexicographers have paid close attention not only to grammatically correct use of language but also to its tactful use. There are 200 usage notes in OALD4 and the number rises sharply to 420 in OALD6. LDCE3 contains 400. In CCED2 a special column, though too brief, is deliberately designed to provide grammatical and pragmatic information. All these show the importance of usage notes. However, a peculiar phenomenon is noticed in OALD6. On the one hand, the number of usage notes increases greatly from 200 in OALD4 to 420 in OALD6. On the other hand, the usage note to relation, relationship and relations, which appears in OALD4, disappears in OALD6. How should this phenomenon be explained? The explanation can be found nowhere but in corpora.

Before turning to corpora, let's have a look at H. W. Fowler's observation (Fowler 1957). Nearly half a century ago, he noticed the intricate uses of relation and relationship. According to him, relation started as an abstract noun meaning relationship (i. e. the state of being related /connected); but being transferred from the abstract to the concrete, came to denote a person. So there are two names relative and relation for the same thing, only so far different as relative is something of a formal word, and relation the dominant term. As for the evolution of relationship from relation, Fowler also says

The word relation has many senses, most of which are abstract. It approaches the concrete in the rather rare sense a story or narrative; it is fully concrete in the very common sense a related person, i. e. a son or mother or cousin or aunt or the like. Now, sonship, cousinship, &c., being words for which there is a use, it is entirely natural that ship should be affixed also to the word that summarizes them; sonship the being a son, relationship the being a relation — with the extension (due to the generalizing sense of relation) into "the being this, that, or the other relation", or "degree of relatedness". To that use of relationship, then, there is no objection. But to affix ship to relation in any of its other, or abstract, senses is against all analogy; the use of ship is to provide concretes (friend, horseman, clerk, lord) with corresponding abstracts; but relation, except when it means related person, is already abstract, one might as well make connexionship, correspondenceship, or associationship, as relationship from relation in abstract senses.

(Fowler 1957 :492-493)

The extract above indicates clearly Fowler's objection to extending the use of relationship to mean those abstract senses which relation originally means. To support his idea, he also gives some examples:

- (1) The king was therefore not necessarily of royal blood, though usually he was the son of the precious Pharaoh; the relation of Tutankh-Amen to his predecessor is not known.
- (2) Why not leave the relations of landlord & farmers, as well as those of farmers & labourers, to the beneficial effects of the policy? Why is a tribunal necessary in the one case & not in the other if mutual frankness will adjust all relationships?
- (3) She declared that she & her husband had no business relationships.
- (4) Already a wholesome change has begun to operate in the relationship between this country & France.
- (5) His attacks upon the Napoleonic tradition are well known, but we are not aware that his relationship to it has ever been so carefully traced.

(ibid :493)

Of the above examples, the first, Fowler argues, shows that if relationship rather than relation is used, the meaning can be more precise. The second suggests, by the writer's shifting from one to the other, that relationship in the improper sense has no superiority whatever to relation or relations. And (3)-(5) show how needlessly the long variant (i. e. relationship) is often resorted to.

In spite of such evaluation, correction or criticism as Fowler's, the change of word senses does not stop its step. Though relation started as an abstract noun, most of its senses have become concrete. People have to use relationship to mean the abstract sense. By and by relationship has begun to obtain the

concrete sense. This trend of change is shown clearly in the statistics from the LOB and reinforced in those from the FLOB (see Table 2). In the process of this change, the various uses of relation(s) and relationship(s) are sure to overlap. A large number of instances can be found in the two corpora, for example:

- | | |
|---|---|
| (6) human relation /relations/relationships | social relations /relationships |
| personal relation /relations/relationships | economic relations /relationships |
| sexual relations /relationship /relationships | adult-child relationship /relationships |
| American-Soviet relations /relationship | family relations /relationships |

Since the uses of relation(s) and relationship(s) intermingle so much, any generalization of their similarities or differences might have exceptions. This may partly explain why the usage note to relation, relationship and relations is deleted in OALD6. What's more, the original note in OALD4 does not provide much additional information. However, without any adequate information about usages, learners can easily get confused. Take OALD6 for example:

- (7) [relation] 1 ~ (between A and B) | ~ (with sb/sth) the way in which two people, groups or countries behave towards each other or deal with each other
 [relationship] 1 ~ (between A and B) | ~ (with sb) the way in which two people, groups or countries behave towards each other or deal with each other
- (8) [relation] 2 ~ (between A and B) | ~ (to sth) the way in which two or more things are connected
 [relationship] 3 ~ (between A and B) | ~ (to sth) the way in which two or more things are connected

(7) is the first sense item of relation and relationship, and (8) is the second item of relation and the third item of relationship. Since the information within (7) and (8) is respectively identical or almost so, learners will naturally ask: "What is the difference between the first sense items of both relation and relationship?" "What is the difference between the third sense item of relationship and the second sense item of relation?" These questions really deserve lexicographers' further attention.

4. Conclusion

From what have been found in the four dictionaries and the two corpora, the following conclusions can be drawn. First, in such collocations as in/with relation to and such sentence patterns as bear no [little, etc.] relation/relationship to..., there is little [no, etc.] relation/relationship to... relation and relationship are used as an uncountable noun. Second, only relation can be used to refer to a person who is in the same family as somebody else. In this case, it is countable and synonymous with relative. Third, for all other usages, such as mentioned in (7) and (8), relation and relationship can be used as both a countable and an uncountable noun, and they can replace each other.

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