Morton Benson, Evelyn Benson and Robert Ilson 2009. *The BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English. Your Guide to Collocations and Grammar.* Third Edition revised by Robert Ilson. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company. ISBN 978-90-272-3261-8. EUR 24.00/USD 27.95

1. Introduction

Monolingual dictionaries of collocations are relative newcomers to English lexicography, but they have enjoyed a steady rise in popularity, especially among learners of English as a foreign language. The past decade saw the publication of two new dictionaries catering for this type of users: *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English* (henceforth *OxColl*) (2002, 2009), and *Macmillan Collocations Dictionary* (henceforth *MacColl*) (2010). Prior to that time, few such dictionaries existed[1]. Arguably, the most popular two were *The LTP Dictionary of Selected Collocations* (1997, 2005) and *The BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English* (henceforth *BBI*) (1986, 1997). The book under review, *BBI3*, is the third edition of this dictionary.

The main part of *BBI3* is the dictionary proper, containing several thousand entries arranged in strictly alphabetical order. It is preceded by a complex front matter consisting of a table of contents, two prefaces, a practical guide to the dictionary, a visual guide to the structure of entries, an introduction, a list of abbreviations, and a table of phonetic transcription. The dictionary is complemented by a workbook with exercises in the use of *BBI3* (available online free of charge on the publisher's home page; for reasons of limited space it is not discussed in this review) and accompanied by a publisher's leaflet which offers a concise description about the publication.

Since a dictionary is essentially an object of practical use, I presume that all these components are meant to help a specific type of user out of some problem arising in a specific type of situation. However, it appears that both the target group and the range of situations in which it might need the dictionary are either remarkably broad or just vaguely defined in *BBI3*. From the relevant information provided in the front matter it can be deduced that the dictionary aims at learners of English who wish to improve their productive skills, especially writing. But little is known about the learners themselves (Are they beginners, intermediate or advanced learners? Are they native speakers of German, Japanese or Dzongkha?) and about the types of texts they attempt to produce in English (Do they want to write personal letters or legal treatises?) To this heterogeneous target group the publisher's leaflet readily adds translators, teachers, students, and writers. It sounds like *BBI3* is a truly one-size-fits-all dictionary. But how effectively can *BBI3* actually suit the various needs of its prospective users? And does it really offer, as is stated in the leaflet, resources which cannot be found in other dictionaries of English?

2. Front matter: Do I want to speak like Abraham Lincoln?

The front matter begins with the first preface, which is a concise description of what information is offered in the dictionary and how it found its way there. It has rather alarming news for any potential buyer with even a vague idea of how dictionaries are made today. In the age of corpus-based lexicography, the authors of *BBI3* openly admit to have selected both the headwords and their respective collocates on the basis of their own intuition as native speakers of English. The patterns of collocations have been verified in relevant lists found in the works of Sir Randolph Quirk and of Igor Mel'chuk – a statement which adds authority to the dictionary but can be fully appreciated only by a fellow linguist (who does not appear to belong to the target group). Attention is also drawn to examples and their use in the entries. The authors' claim that authentic examples attributed to real authors can motivate a language-learner may be valid. One wonders then why so

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1   I am greatly indebted to Professor Robert Lew for his comments concerning the history of dictionaries of collocations.

few such examples are provided in the dictionary, and why the authors illustrate their claim with a quotation from Abraham Lincoln. Mr Lincoln's oratory talents are indisputable, but do today's language-learners really want to learn the English of the mid-19th century?

The practical guide to *BBI3* offers advice on how to locate grammatical and lexical collocations in the dictionary. It is apparently composed with a translator in mind, as most of it deals with how to find English renditions of collocations in other languages, such as German, French, or Spanish. It is concise and clear, but its usefulness, as will be demonstrated later, depends on the degree of structural equivalence between the specific collocation in the given source language and English. More effective is the visual guide to dictionary entries, highlighting the different data types in selected entries. It explains to the user how to locate specific types of data relatively quickly and easily.

The introduction to the dictionary contains an involved classification of collocations. The authors painstakingly describe eight types and nineteen subtypes of grammatical collocations as well as seven types of lexical collocations. The classification is accessible only to a linguist or a user with an impressive knowledge of syntactic theory (ordinary language-learners are unlikely to know, for instance, what verbs that allow dative movement transformation are, and why they should enter into a specific type of collocation). Moreover, the text is rather poorly integrated with the dictionary proper. Classifying collocations would perhaps have been of some benefit if the user could access data in the entries via specific type markers. This is, however, hardly the case, as except for collocations involving verbs, the collocational types are only indicated by illustrative phrases. An index listing collocations by type could have been appended to the book.

Two other sections of the introduction are the notes on the arrangement of entries and the style guide. The former could be relevant for the user of *BBI3* (though given the absence of type markers in the entries, the note, for example, that collocational types in adjective entries are arranged in the order L6, G5, G6, G7 is of little use). The latter appears to be a copy of the style sheet for the editing staff of the dictionary, as the following excerpt (not the only one identified) demonstrates: "the members of the string preceding the compound *must* be followed by the swung dash" (italics mine, MOP).

3.   Dictionary: Search and you won't find

As stated in the practical guide, *BBI3* is a "specialized dictionary designed to help learners of English find collocations quickly and easily" (p. xiii). Since the dictionary also caters for translators (leaflet, p. 2) and, to a lesser degree, for learners of English for Special Purposes (cf. p. xxxiii), I will conduct two case studies in order to test whether the design of the dictionary and, in particular, the rules for accessing the data (as provided in the guide) are geared to the needs of such users.

Since *BBI3* is not explicitly meant for translators from any specific language into English, I will try to find out how well it serves speakers of my native language, Polish. I will only test lexical collocations (Polish grammar is quite different from English; for instance, case endings perform the functions usually realised by prepositions in English). What possible topic would a translator of non-literary, non-specialised Polish texts be likely to deal with? Politics and power relations would probably rank high on the list, so I will focus on the word *polityka* ('policy' / 'politics') and the following six collocations into which it enters: (1) *polityka zagraniczna* ('foreign policy'), (2) *polityka personalna* ('personnel policy'), (3) *polityka partii* ('party policy'), (4) *polityka nieangażowania się* ('policy of neutrality'), (5) *polityka otwartych drzwi* ('open-door policy'), and (6) *polityka faktów dokonanych* ('policy of fait accompli').

All the above collocations (and their English renditions) include nouns, and the guide tells the user to locate such word combinations under the noun. Following this advice will definitely lead the user to the desired information in the case of (1). Indeed, in the entry **policy**, *foreign policy* is listed as one of the combinations. However, in order to find it, the user must know how to translate the Polish *polityka* into English. Most likely, they will know that *zagraniczna* can be expressed by *foreign*, but could be unsure whether to render *polityka* as *policy* or *politics*. Thus, to find the

combination *foreign policy* they would have to look it up under both nouns. This problem will appear with regard to all the Polish collocations (1)-(6).

Translating collocation (2) by means of *BBI3* would pose additional difficulty. The Polish *polityka personalna* consists of a noun followed by an adjective, while its English equivalent *personnel policy* is made of two nouns. According to the guide, such collocations should be looked up under the second noun, and indeed *personnel policy* appears in the entry **policy**. Finding the data, however, presupposes that the user is well aware of the structural differences between the respective combinations in Polish and English, in which case, they know the English collocation already. The dictionary would then only be useful for the verification of the translator's intuition concerning the target language item. The same pertains to translating the Polish collocations (3), (4), and (5). Both these combinations and their English equivalents contains two nouns, but the order in which these nouns appear differs across the languages. One cannot simply map the structure of the Polish collocation onto the English one and look the latter up under its second noun (which is what the authors seem to encourage the user to do in the guide, by choosing only structurally equivalent examples). The English expressions corresponding to both (3) (*party policy*) and (5) (*open-door policy*) are listed in *BBI3* under **policy**, but the Polish speaker is unlikely to find them if they follow strictly the advice given in the guide.

Neither of the possible English renditions of (4), *policy of neutrality* and *policy of containment*, is present in *BBI3*. Could this be due to structural reasons? In the introduction, the authors state that they "do not normally include noun + *of* combinations" (p. xix). If so, then the same problem is likely to appear with regard to (6). Indeed, *policy of fait accompli* is not in the dictionary, but neither is (the more frequent) *fait accompli policy*, without the preposition *of*. Here one might ascribe the absence of these collocations to the fact that they contain poorly assimilated loanwords. But does the translator know this, especially if the Polish combination is made up of native lexis only?

How useful then is the dictionary under review for translation? Since BBI3 is not a bilingual dictionary, it does not offer target language equivalents of any specific source language expressions. Moreover, a limited number of examples illustrating the use of word combinations means that the dictionary is of dubious value for a translator trying to find out whether a given English collocation can be used in a specific context. What *BBI3* can do is assure the user translating a text into English that a particular word combination exists, in that the authors have included it in the dictionary. For this purpose, however, many translators would probably prefer to use parallel corpora or Google, which display the search string in context.

A careful examination of the entry **policy** mentioned above might lead one to suppose that 'noun + of' combinations are absent from *BBI3*. I will pursue this matter further, this time from the point of view of a student learning English for Specific Purposes. One should perhaps ask in the first place whether any dictionary can help its users learn a specific LSP. Terms and collocations belonging to technical or specialised language are not learnt by perusing dictionary entries but in connection with acquiring knowledge about the specific subject itself. Nonetheless, if *BBI3* should contain collocations that are of interest to LSP students, it is interesting to examine whether a user interested in English word combinations within, say, the legal register can find the following 'noun + *of* + noun' collocations containing the word *court:* (7) *court of appeal*, (8) *court of law*, (9) *court of inquiry*, (10) *contempt of court*, and (11) *leave of court*. If so, where should they look the combinations up to find them quickly and easily? It turns out that all these combinations except the last one are included in the dictionary. (7), (8), and (9) can be found under **court**, in a collocational string representing the pattern '*court + of* + X'. (10) appears as an example in the entry **contempt**. Interestingly, in all these cases the given collocation is to be found under the first noun, not under the second one. In other words, following the advice offered in the guide will not be of much help to the user here. Moreover, *court of appeal*, *court of law*, and *court of inquiry* appear in a collocational string placed in the middle of the longish entry. In the absence of indicators of structure or pattern, finding the string requires reading the entry carefully from the beginning.

In a dictionary satisfying the needs of different groups of users, as is the case with the publication under review, access to data could be made more effective by labelling items which are of interest to one group only. Thus, by marking combinations peculiar to, e.g. legal register, one could help users exploring this domain of vocabulary quickly identify the data potentially relevant to their needs. Some items are marked. For example, the headwords **affidavit** and **codicil** are labelled 'legal', and the combination *aggravated assault* is marked as 'usu. legal'. This practice could also have been applied to other collocations typical of legal English and included in *BBI3*, such as those containing *court* mentioned above, as well as *mitigating circumstances*, *hold something in escrow*, *commit felony*, and *commit malpractice*.

Can *BBI3* be used as an LSP dictionary? The answer is clearly in the negative. Poor labelling and unreliable advice offered in the guide make access to collocations typical of specialised language rather difficult. Moreover, the dictionary is not corpus-based, and not meant for any particular LSPs. If the selection of data for a "general" specialised dictionary is to be based on its authors' linguistic intuition, the result simply will not live up to the users' expectations.

4. *BBI3* and other dictionaries: Whatever you are, be a good one

In the leaflet accompanying the dictionary, the publisher assures the potential buyer that when it comes to word combinations, *BBI3* "offers practical resources you won't find in other English-language dictionaries" (leaflet, p. 3). Three entries from *BBI3* are presented (**appointment**, **clock**, and **concerned**) and the publisher encourages anyone to compare them "with any other dictionary of English near you." I will accept the challenge, though I will limit it to the examination of the first entry, i.e. **appointment**. I happen to own (or have immediate access to) a vast collection of English dictionaries. However, I believe that the comparison should be fair, in that the dictionaries compared should be designed to help similar user group(s) solve similar types of problems. Therefore, I will compare the entry in *BBI3* with information found in two other dictionaries of collocations (*OxColl* and *MacColl*) and in one general-purpose learner's dictionary (*LDOCE5*). All these dictionaries are aimed at learners of English and are meant to help their users solve problems with text production. The entry from *BBI3* is reproduced below for ease of reference:

> **appointment** n. ["agreement to meet"] 1. a follow up ; outpatient ~ 2. to have ; keep ; give, make, schedule an ~ (with) (the hospital gave me a follow-up outpatient ~ with a cardiologist) 3. to break ; cancel ; miss an ~ 4. by ~ (she sees patients by ~ only) 5. an ~ to + inf. (she had an ~ to see the dean) ["selection"] 6. to confirm ; make an ~ 7. to block an ~ 8. an ~ to (we announced her ~ to the committee) ["position"] 9. an ~ as 10. to offer an ~ (we offered her an ~ as treasurer) 11. to have, hold ; receive an ~ 12. an interim ; permanent ; temporary ~ 13 a political ~ ["designation"] 14 by ~ to Her Majesty

The comparison of the above entry in *BBI3* with relevant information found in the other dictionaries reveals that the claim made in the leaflet is not entirely correct. Clearly, not all of the 28 collocations containing *appointment* listed in *BBI3* can be found in the other dictionaries. *OxColl* (both printed and CD-ROM editions) contains 21 of them, *MacColl* has 18, *LDOCE5* printed edition has 14, and the DVD edition of *LDOCE5* has 19. However, all these dictionaries contain more (or just as many) word combinations with *appointment* which are absent from the entry in *BBI3*. Both editions of *OxColl* offer as many as 62 collocations not given in the entry in *BBI3*, *MacColl* offers 28, *LDOCE5* (printed) has 14, and *LDOCE5* (DVD) has 19. In all, the other dictionaries definitely do not contain fewer collocations with *appointment* than the examined entry in *BBI3* offers. The same applies in most cases to other important data found in the *BBI3* entry, such as sense definitions (or, more precisely, sense discriminators) and examples illustrating the use of specific collocations. While the entry in *BBI3* contains 4 definitions/sense discriminators and 5 examples, the corresponding entry in both editions of *OxColl* has 3 definitions and 24 examples. In *MacColl*, where the collocational strings are arranged according to the meaning they express, the entry **appointment** contains 16 definitions, each but one followed by an example. The corresponding entry in the printed editions of *LDOCE5* contains 8 definitions and 12 examples, while

in the DVD edition it offers 9 definitions and 23 examples. Eight more examples illustrating the use of *appointment* in the many combinations into which it enters can be found in other entries of *LDOCE5* (DVD), and 118 more in the corpus – both sets of examples being available just a single click away from the entry.

Not only the amount of data, but also its presentation (and, in consequence, the ease of access to it), seems to be superior in *OxColl*, *MacColl* and *LDOCE5* than it is in *BBI3*. The editors of those dictionaries have made use of different colours, fonts, and typefaces for different data. The entries contain markers indicating the parts of speech of the collocates (and structure of the collocations). The respective collocational strings are separated by vertical lines in printed dictionaries, while in the electronic versions they are bulleted in separate lines. In both editions of *LDOCE5*, selected collocations are placed in a separate box in the entry to ease access to them (and the DVD edition also offers hyperlinks to sets of collocations from other entries and from the corpus). All this makes the examined entry in *BBI3* look rather bleak. It features only one colour (black), only two typefaces (lemma in boldface, all other data in neutral), and only two fonts (definitions (probably) in Tahoma, all other data in Times New Roman). The collocational strings are divided by numbers, but no indicators of structure are provided explicitly. The different senses of the headword listed in the entry, with their respective collocations, follow one another as run-on text. This makes using the dictionary rather difficult and time-consuming if one is looking for a specific collocation, for example while writing a text in English. To find the relevant data one might have to peruse the entire entry. Such access to data would, perhaps, be more suitable for a linguist generally interested in types of combinations containing a specific word. But then the presence of structural indicators would be immensely helpful, as it could be used to categorise the different types of collocations.

5.   Conclusion: A dictionary of a linguist, by a linguist, and for a linguist

Neither the choice of data in *BBI3* nor the access to it seems to match the profile and needs of its intended users. In such a case, before one rejects the dictionary altogether, one should find out whether it might be useful to someone else. The book under review contains a wealth of linguistic material. It is a good repository of (its authors') knowledge about the nature of syntagmatic relations into which English words enter. This knowledge has been verified in authoritative publications by some of the leading experts in the field. For an ordinary language-learner it will be of limited use, mostly, but not solely, due to infelicities of presentation. For a translator, the dictionary may perhaps offer some help in the last phase of translation, just when one wants to make sure that a specific word combination one has in mind, for instance, *foreign policy*, belongs to standard, correct, idiomatic English. But *BBI3* would probably be most useful to a researcher mining for information about specific types of collocation (and having enough time and patience to find what they are looking for), and for someone who is interested in learning more about the collocation as a phenomenon. As such, *BBI3* remains a dictionary of a linguist, by a linguist, and for a linguist.

References

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