

A HOMAGE TO TONY COWIE, A DISTINGUISHED LEXICOGRAPHER

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The world community of lexicographers and linguists will deeply miss Anthony Philip (Tony) Cowie, who passed away on 22 November 2015. His contribution to English language studies – lexicography, semantics, phraseology, in particular – was outstanding. We will try here to pay humble homage to the scholar, the friend and his achievements, highlighting some of Cowie’s teaching that has had a major impact on our work as lecturers and teacher trainers at the University of Torino as well as on our scientific research into language and linguistics as university scholars.

A.P. Cowie spent his academic career from 1964 at the University of Leeds, where he later became Senior Lecturer in Modern English Language in 1986, and Reader in 1992. He was awarded the title of Honorary Reader in Lexicography at the School of English on his retirement. He was in charge of the editorship of the *International Journal of Lexicography* from 1998 to 2002, with the support of Thierry Fontenelle and Carla Marello, whom Cowie asked to be Associate Editors of this high-profile journal in the domain of lexicographic research. He also served on the Advisory Council of the *European Society for Phraseology* and the Editorial Board of *Cahiers de lexicologie*. His international reputation made him a much requested guest speaker at graduate seminars, conferences and events all over the world. He was hosted by the University of Torino for a series of lectures in 2002 and was again in Torino for the EURALEX (European Association of Lexicography) Conference in 2006.

All of Cowie’s dictionaries were published by Oxford University Press. He co-edited (with Albert Hornby and Windsor Lewis) the third edition of the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English* (OALD3, 1974) and was Chief Editor of the fourth edition of the same dictionary (OALD4, 1989). The treatment of nouns and verbs in the News Notes on Usage greatly profited from research carried out in the OUP Lexical Research Unit at the University of Leeds, which he directed from 1980 to 1984. Cowie also compiled (with R. Mackin) the *Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English. Volume 1. Verbs with Prepositions and Particles* (1975), which was published again in 1993 as the *Oxford Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs* (1993). The *Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English. Volume 2: Sentence, Clause and Phrase Idioms* (1983), compiled with R. Mackin and I.R. McCaig, was retitled and published as the *Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms* (1993). One of the most challenging projects in his career – Cowie himself admitted – was the planning and editing of the two-volume *Oxford History of English Lexicography*, a comprehensive historical coverage of dictionaries of English in its national varieties, which came out in 2008: the first volume focuses on ‘general-purpose’ bilingual and monolingual English dictionaries from medieval times to the 20th century; the second is devoted to ‘special-purpose’ dictionaries such as thesauri, dictionaries of synonyms, place names, personal names, pronunciation, etymology, slang and cant, learners’ dictionaries and dictionaries in electronic form.

On top of his immense contribution to English lexicography, Prof. Cowie was well aware of the importance of other lexicographic traditions and placed strong emphasis on dictionaries of French, German, Italian, Spanish and Russian as Editor of the *International Journal of*

Lexicography. He encouraged research on bilingual and specialized dictionaries and on lexicographic theory and analysis. He was in favour of corpus-based lexicography in order to search large text corpora and capture objective information on the real use of spoken and written language to feed into dictionaries.

Among the many papers and books written by Tony Cowie, we have chosen to focus in particular on his monograph *English Dictionaries for Foreign Learners – A History* (1999) which has been on the reading list of English Language MA courses for years and our students have been encouraged to read as an example of brilliant writing and scholarship. In 2000 this volume was shortlisted for the book prize of the British Association for Applied Linguistics and was later translated into Japanese. What is most fascinating in this book is the historical survey of the genesis of monolingual English dictionaries for foreign learners (MLDs) from their beginnings in Japan and East Asia in the 1920s and 1930s. He illustrated the lives and achievements of three expatriate Englishmen – Harold Palmer, Michael West and Albert Hornby – who Cowie recognized as “the founding fathers of applied linguistics in this century”. From the pioneering experience of these and many other EFL teachers all over the world, decades of research and practical applications aimed at meeting the most serious “stumbling-blocks” for foreign learners in construction, word-formation and collocation, led to the design of a new type of dictionary, the learner’s or EFL dictionary, which would become the most successful product in the publishing sector in the 20th and 21st centuries. Early research in TEFL established fundamental pedagogical principles that are still crucial today, such as the need to reduce the students’ efforts in learning new vocabulary, giving priority to general purpose and ‘heavy duty’ words, i.e. those that have a high potential of usability in everyday communication. A limited defining vocabulary used to phrase definitions is still regarded as an indispensable feature of EFL dictionaries, as it is essential that definitions should be understandable and clear to the user. Notions that we take for granted today, such as the distinction between countable and uncountable, were introduced by Hornby in the first dictionaries with the labels [C] and [U] respectively. Research into construction patterns was invaluable to provide students with a handy guide to verb syntax; this developed into a list and description of 27 verb patterns, applicable to all English verbs: for example students will need to become familiar with the different syntactic patterns of the verb **hope** in its simple construction (e.g. **hope for s.th.** *We are hoping for good weather on Sunday*) or complex ones (i.e. **hope (that)** *I hope (that) you are okay*; **hope to** *We hope to arrive around two*; **passive: it is hoped that**). Different learning needs were identified (encoding, decoding or both), so that the various editions of MLDs (which Cowie grouped as second and third generation dictionaries) were improved in time, culminating by the end of the 1980s with the publication of three monolingual general-purpose learners’ dictionaries competing on the market to satisfy the ‘global appetite’ for English, i.e. the OALD4 (1989), the LDCE2 (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 1987) and the *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* (1987).

The last chapter of *English Dictionaries for Foreign Learners – A History* is devoted to research on dictionary users, an essential component of modern lexicography in order to identify users’ preferences and expectations when turning to a dictionary and other types of information which are indispensable for major publishers to explore the market and stay competitive but also highly significant for language teachers and teacher trainers to achieve good results. Prof. Cowie reminded us that MLDs were designed on the pedagogical principle that English should be taught through the medium of English, although the majority of students still prefer bilingual dictionaries because they seem to offer a quicker solution to comprehension. Yet, research on dictionary use has also shown that users of MLDs tend to record higher levels of satisfaction (Cowie 2012) and educators are convinced that the effort invested in the use of MLDs will favourably impact on students’ learning (Rundell 1999). Moreover, thanks to the massive

advancement in technology, MLDs have improved more rapidly than other types of dictionaries, according to Cowie, who could clearly foresee the tremendous impact of the digital revolution on lexicography.

Phraseology was another favourite research area of Tony Cowie, especially with reference to its treatment in MLDs (Cowie 1981). In the 1920s the notion of collocation – intended as “a succession of two or more words that must be learned as an integral whole and not pieced together from its component parts” – was identified as a major difficulty for foreign learners when faced with the need to string words together for encoding purposes. Still in its infancy, the notion of ‘word combination’ or collocation (not yet a technical term as it is today; cf. Sinclair 1991) would be pursued in large-scale projects designed by Harold E. Palmer and carried forward by Albert Hornby leading to the *Second Interim Report on English Collocations* in 1933, which established a major framework for the treatment of phraseology in MLDs of the present and of the future decades. Thus, learning a word or vocabulary building implies becoming familiar with different types of patterns which a word (e.g. *mind* n.) can form, such as its collocations (*bear [keep] in mind*), idioms (*out of one’s mind, make up one’s mind*) and phrase-like expressions (*So many men, so many minds*). The analysis of phraseology would then move on to greater refinement, separating the category of phrasal verbs and their morpho-syntactic and idiomatic senses (*The plane took off*, i.e. *The plane was airborne* vs *Fred took Jim off*, i.e. *Fred did an imitation of Jim*) from collocations proper (verb-noun such as *attract/capture/call for... attention*; adjective+noun such as *humid weather/complete disaster/bitter controversy*) and idioms (*the salt of the earth, to make hands meet*).

The complexity of phraseology would become an exciting field of study through decades of theoretical speculation and applied investigation (Moon 1998). In 1994 the University of Leeds hosted an international symposium on the subject which resulted in the volume *Phraseology - Theory, Analysis and Applications* (1998) edited by A.P. Cowie, in which he tried to bring together various theoretical approaches to the analysis of ‘word combinations’ and showed how these different traditions could influence and benefit from one another. Although important developments in the study of phraseology in the domains of stylistics and electronic corpora were not underestimated, the relevance of phraseology to EFL remains a major landmark in Cowie’s view of the monolingual learner’s dictionary as “a codified record of phraseological norms and as an indispensable aid to language-learning and teaching”. Comparative analysis of lexical patterns produced by native and non-native speakers demonstrates how foreign learners overuse or underuse some lexical patterns as compared to native speakers of English and may make collocational errors because of the influence of their mother tongue. We can mention, for example, a typical error made by an Italian learner: **heavy job* (It. *lavoro pesante*) instead of *hard work* or **to make research* (It. *fare ricerca*) instead of *to do/to carry out research*). Investigation into these difficulties for foreign learners provides useful information to be integrated into Usage Notes for helping learners to avoid typical collocation errors.

Tony Cowie witnessed the rise and the golden age of MLDs up to the decline of their traditional paper format, which is currently giving way to a new age of digital media, the new frontier of lexicography. He possessed those special qualities that make a scholar unique, he helped young and less young (meta)lexicographers worldwide, advising them in a sociable, unassuming and far-sighted way. We are grateful to him for sharing his scholarship and friendship with us.

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