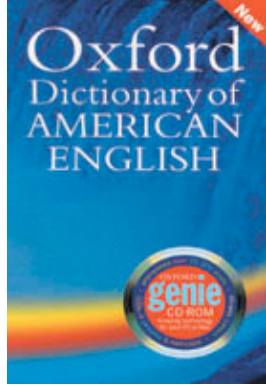


REVIEW OF *THE OXFORD DICTIONARY OF AMERICAN ENGLISH*

<p>Oxford Dictionary of American English Alison Waters (Ed.) 2005 ISBN 0194316631 (Dictionary) US \$29.95 828 pp. Oxford University Press Mahwah, New Jersey, USA</p>	
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Title	Oxford Genie
Platforms	PC w/ Windows 98+, Mac w/ OS X
Minimum Hardware requirements	Pentium II, 128 MB RAM
Publisher	http://www.oup.com/elt
Support offered	Support offered: (1) One-page 'Quick start' guide (2) Website www.oup.com/elt/global/products/multimediasupport (3) Email: eltdict.help@oup.com (4) Phone helpline: +44 (0) 1865 267322
Target language	English
Target audience	Intermediate level ESL learner
Price	Included with book
ISBN	0194316289 (Paper Dictionary + CD-ROM)

Review by Marlise Horst, Concordia University, and Tom Cobb, Université du Québec à Montréal

From both marketing and research perspectives, these are exciting times for learner lexicography. In the 1990s, publishers invested heavily in developing research-informed, learner-oriented ESL dictionaries that drew on large corpora of natural language. Now the race is on to provide ever more sophisticated computerized versions (both online and on CD-ROM) with an ever increasing number of interactive features designed to ease consultation and promote learning. It is safe to assume that no time has been lost in verifying the sales appeal of dictionary packages that include free CDs; inevitably, the research that can verify the merits of the such options will be slower in coming.

Recently a new dictionary, the *Oxford Dictionary of American English* and its accompanying *Genie* CD-

ROM software, entered the fray. This dictionary for intermediate-level learners of English has the clear, uncrowded page format we have come to expect in ESL dictionaries, as well as many of the other welcome features of its competitors, such as color print and a wealth of illustrations. But since the main claim for innovation appears to be the electronic version, we will concentrate our review on the accompanying CD-ROM.

The *Genie* software that accompanies this new dictionary bills itself as "amazing technology amazingly easy to use," a claim that proved justified to the less technology-savvy of the two authors. She had the tool up and running in minutes. Once installed, the tool is indeed easy to use. Double click on the *Genie* icon, and what looks like the small hand-held electronic dictionary beloved by many ESL learners appears on the computer screen (see [Figure 1](#)). Unlike the other ESL dictionary software we examined for this review (Summers, 2003, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, CD-ROM), the *Genie* interface does not take up large amounts of screen space (though the *Longman* screen can be squeezed down if users explore). Once opened, *Genie* simply hovers unobtrusively in the upper left-hand corner of any text one might be reading or writing, waiting to be called on. One can consult *Genie* in the usual type-and-enter way, or amazingly, by simply pointing the mouse at a word to be searched in the text (we tested both Microsoft Word™ and html documents). The word's definition appears instantly in *Genie*'s display – no typing, or even clicking, is needed. If an inflected form like *chunks* is selected, the user is taken directly to the headword "chunk." Then, should a word in the defining language or example sentence be unfamiliar (e.g., *floating* in the example *chunks of ice floating in the lake*), a double click on the problem item brings up a definition of "float." Once at "float", the user can chose between two types of go-back arrows. One returns the user to the starting point ("chunk") while the other is a next-on-the-shelf option that shows entries listed near "float" (in this case "flit" and "flirt").

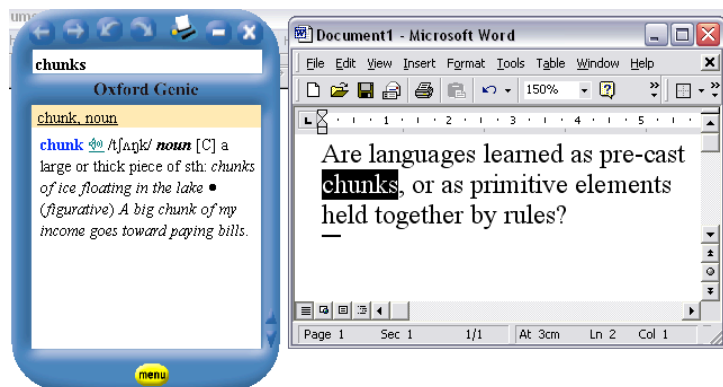


Figure 1. From *chunks* in Word™ to "chunk" in *Genie*

The sheer effortlessness of using *Genie* raises the question of whether this is actually a good thing for English language learners. Studies of traditional dictionary use point to the word-learning effects of searches that engage learners in cognitively demanding processes, such as recalling spellings, searching alphabetically, holding information in memory, and scanning a page of near matches to find the targeted word (Chun & Payne, 2004; Chun & Plass, 1996; Hulstijn, Hollander, & Greidanus, 1996; Knight, 1994; Laufer & Hill, 2000). Other computerized ESL dictionaries we examined (on-line and in CD packages)¹ also make look-ups easy, but they require some minimal effort on the part of the user, such as typing words or pasting them into a box. *Genie*, too, responds to typed or pasted-in look-ups, but it is the effortless pointing function that poses intriguing questions for researchers interested in vocabulary acquisition through computer-assisted reading: will making look-ups this easy mean that learners look up more words or fewer? Learn more new vocabulary or less?

But the question intended users of these materials (learners of English at an intermediate proficiency level) will ask is likely to be more instrumental: how well does this resource meet my needs as a student? *Genie* is clearly designed to appeal to users of the electronic bilingual dictionaries that are so popular with ESL learners today, and if its easy-to-use interface and trendy design succeed in seducing some fraction of this population into using a dictionary from a quality publisher, then it will have accomplished a great deal. The two intermediate-level university ESL learners we asked to examine the paper dictionary certainly saw the computerized format as a highly desirable aspect.

We asked both learners to examine two dictionaries, the Oxford dictionary under review (as pointed out, designed for intermediates) and another, larger, dictionary designed for advanced-level ESL learners, the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (Summers, 2003; henceforth *LDOCE*). They were also asked to complete a questionnaire based on the quiz that appears on p. vii of the Oxford paper dictionary. The quiz is designed to raise users' awareness of the information available in entries by asking them to explore questions such as "Which letter is silent in the word *receipt*?", and "What do you call a person who comes from Norway?" Obviously, the observations of just two learners provide a limited basis for generalizations; nonetheless, the exercise provided a number of useful insights. For instance, one learner complained that the smaller Oxford dictionary refused to lie flat when opened to a particular page, an aspect that other users might also find inconvenient when looking up words. Although the two learners were in intermediate-level ESL classes, both stated that they would prefer to own the larger advanced-level dictionary simply because it seemed likely to have more entries. This impression is correct; the advanced *LDOCE* appears to have 106,000 entries while the *Oxford Dictionary of American English* has just 40,000. Products by Cambridge (Landau, 1999) and Heinle (Rideout, 2004) that also target intermediate learners offer a similar number of entries, while *Longman's Dictionary of American English* (2005) offers the somewhat higher figure of 52,000 entries.

Most of the look-ups in the two dictionaries prompted no-difference responses from our informants. That is, they found that both dictionaries provided useful and clear information of various types (definitions, part of speech, pronunciation, etc.). One point worthy of note arose when the learners were asked to look up *hash browns* in the two dictionaries and assess the clarity of the definitions. One informant noted his preference for Oxford's more natural sounding "fried" over the *LDOCE*'s "cooked in oil." This observation prompted us to wonder whether "cooked in oil" reflects Longman's attempt at avoiding special cooking terms like *fry* in favor of using a basic defining vocabulary made up of general, frequent words like *cook*. The *LDOCE* is explicit in this point and actually lists all 2,000 words of its defining vocabulary. However, in the introductory guide to the Oxford dictionary, the editors note that meanings are "given in simple English using words that are easy to understand" (p. v) but give no further indication of what these simple words are, on what basis they are deemed "easy," or how learners would be able to check that they know them. This omission is striking given the great emphasis other publishers (Longman, Collins COBUILD, Cambridge) place on using corpora of 'real' language to select the words, meanings, examples, and defining lexicons that appear in their dictionaries.

There is evidence of a corpus-informed approach in Oxford's guide on p. iv, where it is noted that blue stars highlight "important" (frequent?) words, but the authors have clearly chosen to emphasize other features. For instance, the book cover mentions special mid- and end-sections that provide a variety of interesting resources, including practice activities for phrasal verbs, information on US and Canadian governments, tips for writing résumés, and a practice TOEFL test. One informant waxed enthusiastic about these attractively presented resources; the other did not comment other than to note the list of irregular verb forms found at the back. Neither of these Montreal ESL learners remarked on the distinctive North American character of *Genie*, despite our efforts to make this apparent by asking them to look up Canadianisms like *toonie* (or \$2 coin, an item not found in *LDOCE*). *Genie*'s headwords are all pronounced on a mouse click, and in a North American voice. By contrast, the *LDOCE* requires the user to choose a British or American voice (and sometimes gives the wrong one).

A truly interesting feature of *Genie* that neither of our users noticed is its smart definitions. This is an innovative attempt at implementing something that has long been seen as a potential advantage of electronic lexicography: the ability to draw on the language of the text a user is reading to deliver the relevant sense of a word. Since research shows failure to determine relevant sense to be the main obstacle to learners' use of paper dictionaries (e.g., Nesi & Hail, 2002), smart definitions may well prove to be an important and research-indicated contribution to learner-oriented lexicography.

How smart definitions work is as follows: the reader moves the mouse over the word *find* in a sentence, such as *Move the cursor over the word you want to find out about*. One would ordinarily expect that this would simply take users to the headword "find", leaving them to sort through the "find" entries for possible combinations with other words. But *Genie's* smart definition feature is able to use the text input to take the user directly to the entry for "find out – phrasal verb." This is clearly a major advance, and one worthy of dictionary researchers' interest. However, this feature appears to be in the early stages of development. In the sentence, *Since 1999 we have had this problem, but since we learned the cause we are no longer worried*, there are two uses of *since* — one as a "prep." and the other as a "conj." But passing the mouse over either of them merely leads to the same definition, which users must read through for themselves to determine which sense they are dealing with. Even though the phrase *Since 1999* contains an obvious clue to the "prep." meaning, *Genie* is not yet able to use this input to identify the appropriate sense. So this is at least one step in the look-up process from which cognitive effort has not yet been eliminated. Oxford will no doubt continue to work on the smart definitions feature in future versions (which will be made available to purchasers via the "Check for updates" link).

The problem described above can be seen as a challenge to be overcome on the way to developing a new and interesting resource. Other weaknesses cannot be so readily ascribed to the difficulties of innovation. For example, the paper dictionary and *Genie* alike provide many clear and useful illustrations with their definitions, but not all words pictured in the paper version are also pictured in the computerized version, and the choice of omissions does not always make sense. Strangely, pictures for "horse" and "cat" – both simple items that even beginning learners may already know – appear in *Genie*, but more useful images from the paper version do not, such as those that distinguish common confusables like "licking," "biting," and "swallowing."

No doubt the issue of pictures and other problems we have noted will be addressed in future editions of the *Oxford Dictionary of American English*. Using computer technology to good advantage in learner lexicography is no simple matter, but publishers of ESL dictionaries are clearly committed to this venture, and with strong teams working on problems and exploring opportunities, we are likely to see much progress in the coming years. With the *ODAE* and *Genie*, Oxford has managed to produce a competitive product and is well positioned to contribute to this progress. The challenge for applied linguistics researchers will be to keep pace.

NOTES

1. These included the dictionaries available on-line at <http://www.ldoceonline.com/> and <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/> and the CD-ROM that accompanies the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (Summers, 2003).

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