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Jonathan Stammers

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***Unbalanced, Idle, Canonical and Particular:* Polysemous Adjectives in English Dictionaries⁶²**

Jonathan Stammers⁶³

Abstract

This study seeks to compare how various English dictionaries distinguish multiple meanings, focusing on a particular class of words identifiable in dictionary classification, namely, polysemous adjectives. The polysemy displayed by adjectives tends to be of a heavily context-dependent type. A great deal of the literature concerning polysemy has little bearing upon adjectives. Adjectives are also a varied word-class, thus posing a range of challenges to the lexicographer. This study looks at six recently published British monolingual dictionaries of English, both for native speakers and advanced learners. A random sample (based on *Collins English Dictionary*) of adjectives with many senses is selected, and their respective dictionary entries compared and evaluated, following analysis of corpus data. The random sample chosen prove a quite heterogeneous set, with some appearing to be not true adjectives; others to be not truly polysemous; some having a clear hierarchy of senses; others much less clear. Differences between senses are often highly subtle and contextually determined, forming a semantic cline, or continuum of senses, which dictionaries often divide quite differently. Detailed results are shown here for four of the adjectives, *unbalanced*, *idle*, *canonical* and *particular*, and other results discussed in brief.

⁶² This paper is based on my MA dissertation submitted to the University of Birmingham (Stammers 2004). My thanks to Dr. Geoff Barnbrook who supervised this project, and also to Dr. Rosamund Moon and Prof. Susan Hunston for their input and support.

⁶³ Jonathan Stammers, PhD Student. School of Linguistics and English Language, University of Wales, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 2DG, United Kingdom.

1. Introduction

Adjectives pose some interesting problems to a theory of polysemy, and relatively little attention seems to have been paid to them in such a context, perhaps as a result of this. The relevance of much of the discussion of polysemy to adjectives is often unclear. Such theoretical difficulties, though, have to be routinely faced and overcome by dictionary makers, who are obliged to deal with the whole vocabulary of a language, including adjectives and other even more problematic word classes. They have to analyse and distinguish senses, define and otherwise present this vocabulary clearly and comprehensively enough to enable their intended readers to grasp the different meanings. Béjoint [2000: 228] has noted that “the comparison of how a certain number of dictionaries distinguish multiple meanings is potentially interesting”, and so this is undertaken here in relation to adjectives.

Section 2 discusses the theoretical difficulties relating to adjectives and polysemy, and then the particular issues a dictionary maker faces in treating them. Section 3 introduces the dictionaries and adjectives studied, and results for four of these are given in Section 4.

2. Adjectives and polysemy

2.1. Theoretical difficulties

An adjective’s meaning depends heavily on what it is modifying, as well as other contextual factors, such as domain. Two particular problems pointed out by Gove [1968: 5] are: (1) that adjectives do not correspond to any “visualizable objects” in the real world, being *states* or *qualities* that are difficult to conceive of “as distinct from specific things having that state or quality”; and (2) that they do not occur in the typical hierarchies of sense, so resist the traditional analytical style of definition. Unlike other word classes, adjectives do not generally have anything like a superordinate, and they are unusual in that they appear to be arranged in the mental lexicon chiefly on the basis of antonymy, with synonymy playing an important secondary role [see Gross et al. 1989: 92, 95; Miller 1998: 48-52]. An antonym relation appears to be one between words rather than concepts [Gross et al. 1989; cf. Murphy & Andrew 1993], so that while an adjective like *strong* can be grouped together with a whole host of synonyms (*sturdy*, *powerful*, *tough*, etc.), it has a particular relation with *weak* as its antonym that it does not share with synonyms of *weak* such as *puny* or *frail*. This may be an effect of frequency. The *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* [Biber et al. 1999: 514] reports: “Interestingly, several of the most common attributive adjectives in both conversation and fiction comprise contrasting pairs”.

Cruse [2000 : 110ff.] identifies and discusses various different varieties of polysemy, including *autohyponymy*, *automeronymy*, *autosuperordination*, *autoholonymy*, *systematic polysemy*, *facets*, and *perspectives*, but it is far from clear that any of these types of polysemy can be applied to adjectives. Certainly, none of the examples given in these sections is adjectival. Some varieties of polysemy involve the lexical relations of superordinate-hyponym, or meronym-holonym (part-whole), relations that do not readily apply to adjectives. Others involve particular features or properties of, or emphases on, a subject, and adjectives obviously do not denote subjects. At least part of the difficulty is that adjectives do not have “features” or “properties”; most of them *are* features. These are generally the ‘descriptive’ adjectives, which constitute the majority of the class, and are to be distinguished

from ‘relative’ adjectives which refer to a noun, as well as some other classes such as colour adjectives and ‘postdeterminers’. The distinction between ‘descriptive’ and ‘relative’ adjectives [e.g. in Miller 1998] roughly corresponds to that which the *Cobuild Grammar* [Sinclair (Ed.) 1990] makes between ‘qualitative’ and ‘classifying’ adjectives, based partly upon gradability (cf. Cruse 1986 on ‘gradable’ and ‘non-gradable’ adjectives; also Paradis 2001). The *Longman Grammar* [Biber et al. 1999] uses the terms ‘descriptors’ and ‘classifiers’ (or ‘relational adjectives’).

The one type of polysemy that does seem to relate well to adjectives is what Cruse calls ‘*sense spectra*’ [Cruse 2000: 119-20]. Stock also discusses this concept, discussing the type of blurring between senses “where a word seems to operate on a cline between two or more meanings” [Stock 1984: 137]. She gives the example of *culture*, of which a large proportion of the citations seem to indicate a number of rather vague areas of meaning, which cannot be clearly defined: relating to the arts or sophistication, relating very generally to a society or civilization or something broader or narrower, relating to heritage or tradition, or relating to some identified section of society, e.g. “the throw-away culture”. Hines [1979] even went so far as to propose that *good* and *great* are actually monosemous, with differences arising solely from combination and thus not belonging to the adjective. Seppänen [1984] refutes this proposal, but certainly the vast range of contextually determined senses of such adjectives pose a challenge to the lexicographer. Even if one denies that adjectives can be truly polysemous in an abstract sense, a comprehensive dictionary still has to represent the full meaning of a headword sufficiently to cover its usage in whatever context. Moon discusses “whether all words that are treated as polysemous in dictionaries are actually polysemous” [Moon 1987a: 173]. She discusses what she calls “quasi-monosemous” words, i.e. words that “have a single meaning or semantic core underlying their various uses, and yet are difficult to explain in a single dictionary sense and definition” [*ibid*: 174]. Amongst these she includes ‘delexical’ verbs such as *take*, *give*, or *keep* (in such diverse grammaticalized usages as ‘keep warm’, ‘keep thinking’, ‘keep away’ etc.), various nouns which can be conceived of in terms of various features or perspectives (she discusses *mouth* and *top*), and notably, adjectives.

2.2. Lexicographical difficulties

2.2.1. Sense discrimination

“Adjectives are notoriously hard to divide lexicographically into senses”, says Moon [1987a: 179]. “They are often heavily context-dependent and flexible, taking on as many meanings as you like or have space for”. The example, she gives is *light*. This, she claims, has only “two main strands of meaning” (which nevertheless “intertwine”): “not heavy in weight” and “not intense or great in amount, degree, etc.” But she goes on to list ten context groupings which each requires different wordings to explain their meanings: “a light rain”; “a light blue shirt”; “the light breeze”; “a light sleep(er)”; “her light voice”; “a light lunch”; “a light white wine”; “light injuries”; “light housework” and “her light graceful step” [*ibid*: 179]. Thus although she claims only two true ‘senses’, at least these ten usages would apparently need to be treated separately in a dictionary.

In his *Manual of Lexicography*, Zgusta writes:

[...] though it is an error if the lexicographer tries to make the single senses more sharply distinguished from each other than is indicated by the data, the establishment of the single senses

and their organization are, on the other hand, among the lexicographer's cardinal tasks. [Zgusta 1971: 64].

But on what basis should these 'single senses' be 'established'? Moon [1987b: 89-101] gives a general account of many relevant criteria, based on the practices developed by the Cobuild project. She discusses syntax, collocation, derivative forms, etymology, phonology and intonation, the influence of real-world knowledge and uniqueness of referent, lexical relations, connotation and allusion, and pragmatics [cf. Svensén 1993: 112-114], and finds that syntax and collocation are the clearest criteria for distinction. Adjectives are no real exception here, although it is perhaps also worth mentioning lexical relations in passing. Antonymy, which, as we have seen, is generally the only useful lexical relation where adjectives are concerned, could be used to distinguish senses on occasion: *light* with antonym *dark* is separate from *light* with antonym *heavy*, for example.

There are various syntactic clues that may be useful in certain cases. For example, during a brief overview of prototype theory, Aitchison [2003] discusses *old*. She claims this has a default meaning, ('aged'), and that in such cases "a basic meaning can be detected by a lack of restrictions on the surrounding syntax" [2003: 64]. The less basic meaning 'former' is often indicated by a particular syntactic feature, such as possession ('*our* old house'). Another possible distinction is between senses where the adjective is in attributive ('my old girlfriend') or predicative ('my girlfriend is old') position, although most of the time an adjective with a certain sense can appear in either position. There may be both ungraded ('these numbers are odd') and graded ('these numbers are *very* odd') senses, although in real language, such minimal pairs are rare. Collocation is also clearly of great importance where adjectives are concerned, with the (type of) noun collocate being an essential criterion. The methodology used in the production of the Cobuild *Dictionary* involved classifying senses of polysemous adjectives "according to the semantic class of the noun which the adjective modifies" [Hanks 1987: 122].

2.2.2. Defining adjectives

Defining words is a complex art deeply enshrined in tradition. Hanks [1987] gives a good overview of the issues as he explains the new style of definition used in the Cobuild *Dictionary*. He discusses many unhelpful conventions that have developed over the centuries: formulae such as 'of or pertaining to', or 'any of various', ambiguous use of 'etc.', and the widespread use of parentheses for obscure functions. These have tended to make definitions difficult to interpret, and possibly to impose 'bogus precision on word meaning' [Hanks 1987: 116]. He contends that the root of the problem lies back in the 17th and 18th centuries, when dictionary entries were just becoming formalised, and when developments in philosophy and logic led to an unhealthy obsession with substitutability of definitions. Later came similar preoccupations with reductionism (isolating minimal units), and with making definitions into precise inventories of sufficient conditions. There arose an unjustified snobbery about more discursive styles of explanation which may be clearer and more representative. The traditional style of definition is concerned with giving an exhaustive and precise account of word meaning, to the exclusion of syntax, collocation, and usage restrictions or preferences.

By contrast, the new Cobuild definitions are in ordinary English prose, Hanks says, and, where possible contain the word being defined in its natural syntactic environment. The emphasis is not on defining extensively, but rather indicating *typical* usage. Different strategies and considerations are discussed: for the definition (or rather, the *explanation*) of

various types of lexical item; for indicating narrow selection restrictions as well as very general usage; for indicating classes of participant roles; and for dealing with items with particular connotations. He notes particular problems in phrasing the explanations of some adjectives [*ibid.*: 130]. In terms of syntax, most adjectives can occur in either predicative or attributive position, and the predicative position allows an explanation sentence such as:

Something that is **capacious** has a lot of room or space to put things in.” However, the fact that some adjectives can appear only in attributive position caused a particular problem in the phrasing of a Cobuild explanation. The absence of a sufficiently general head noun in English means that, while they can be defined in restricted senses (“A **commercial** product is made to be sold to the public”), for general senses they cannot. One cannot say “*A **commercial** something or someone...,” so in this case there is no alternative but to fall back on a slightly more traditional style: “**Commercial** means involving or relating to commerce or business.

Consistency is very important to lexicographers, and when it comes to the phraseology of definitions, the conventions are often set out quite rigorously. Gove [1968], for example, set out at considerable length the formulae to be used for defining adjectives in *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (1961). But as illustrated above, careful consideration of phraseology is no less necessary for new styles of definition than for the traditional styles. According to Landau [1984: 140], “every dictionary has its own recommended style for defining adjectives”. He gives a list of 37 introductory words or phrases (traditionally) used by lexicographers in defining adjectives (‘associated with’, ‘being’, ‘having’, ‘indicating’, ‘like’, ‘made of’, ‘relating to’, and so on) and notes the sloppy practice of stringing such phrases together in order to combine senses, as in “of, for, characterized by, or resembling...”. This is one way of dealing with the kind of “quasi-monosemous” adjectives that Moon discussed [Moon 1987a: 181]. Moon also suggests – as a more radical possibility – that the notion of syntactic substitutability of the definition could be dropped for these words, and short accounts written of meaning and function, as is generally the practice with grammatical words.

Svensén [1993: 116-24] makes the distinction between a paraphrase and a true definition. Whereas a paraphrase expresses the content of the sign differently (e.g. “**bum**: a tramp or hobo”), a true definition ‘explicitly represents the content aspect of the sign.’ (e.g. “**bum**: a person who avoids work”). The problem with adjectives is that it is often not possible to do any more than paraphrase them fairly approximately within a substitutable definition. In many cases the difficulty arises because the properties the adjectives designate are so basic that they are virtually impossible to define [see, e.g., Wierzbicka 1993: 65ff. on the so-called ‘indefinables’ *good* and *bad*]. Adjectives invariably defy analytical definition since they cannot usually be broken down into component features, and do not form hierarchical systems as nouns do, with the possible exception of some highly technical adjectives. The best one can hope for with simple descriptive adjectives is a simple descriptive modifying clause or phrase. Otherwise one may have to rely on the particularly inexact practice of defining an adjective using another adjective.

Defining an adjective simply using a synonym – although a fairly common practice – is obviously limited, and perhaps useful only as a kind of gloss, where the more specific information about the adjective is given in some other way. Defining an adjective with a wide range of usage using another adjective with a wide range of usage merely asserts that there is an area where the two ranges overlap, without specifying the boundaries of that area. The two ranges will not be identical; language naturally rejects absolute synonyms. A somewhat more satisfactory solution may be to use a string of near-synonyms: a thesaurus style. Stock [1984: 139] suggests this as a way of treating senses which merge into one another, with the support

of examples. Taken together, the synonyms can cover the full usage range of the word they seek to define. Alternatively, if it can be made clear that they are all referring to the same particular usage, they could highlight the area on the sense spectrum where they all overlap as the sense of the headword, although this may be less practical. Hanks [1993: 104] comments regarding this practice: “It is short and succinct, and wastes little space. However, it too has its problems: chief among them is the fact that it carries to an extreme the general failure of English dictionaries to specify the syntactic conditions under which any one of the defining synonymies is applicable”.

2.2.3. Example sentences

One important element of the dictionary entry is the illustrative sentence or phrase. Example sentences “perform a useful backup to the explicit grammatical designation, in clarifying in real language data what is stated abstractly and generally” [Jackson 1985: 58]. They thus appeal much more directly to the intelligence and intuition of the reader, helping them to grasp meaning without having to rely on the metalanguage and stylistic conventions of the lexicographers. One of the most impressive hallmarks of Johnson’s dictionary is his selection of high-quality and interesting literary quotations, and similarly the *Oxford English Dictionary* is notable for the sheer volume of its diachronic quotations. There is certainly much to be said for using examples taken from authentic texts. Fox [1987] argues this case, with particular emphasis on the benefits to learners of English seeing the word in its characteristic environment, illustrating typical collocation and syntax much more reliably than could be represented by an example invented by the lexicographer based on his or her intuition. One risks sacrificing a great deal of naturalness in abridging examples, but Fox notes the fact that quotations may sometimes – albeit reluctantly – have to be edited. This could be for a variety of reasons: usually because the example is too long (space restrictions being so pressing) or complicated, or perhaps in the interests of good taste or political correctness. But certainly with advances in text processing and corpus linguistics, lexicographers now have little difficulty in finding quotations, for English dictionaries at least. On the contrary, they risk being swamped by far too many, without knowing where to begin analysing them [Simpson 2002: 13].

In the case of adjectives, a typical short noun phrase is often sufficient to clarify a sense (for example, “raw materials” for the ‘unrefined’ sense of *raw*), although this requires great sensitivity on the part of the lexicographer; often a longer example will be required. It depends, amongst other things, on how simple or complicated the adjective is in the relevant sense, how much it depends on the wider context for its internal meaning, and also its typical syntactic behaviour. Is it usually in attributive or predicative position? Is it gradable? Is it usually followed by a prepositional phrase? What kind of noun does it collocate with? Here a tricky problem is indicating variability or range. A single example does not show whether the adjective in the relevant sense is restricted to a certain noun or whether it can be used very widely, nor whether its syntax may vary. Of course, such information may then have to be presented in some other way, perhaps more formally.

2.2.4. Structuring a Dictionary Entry

How can the structure of a dictionary entry most effectively present an adjective’s different senses, as well as (perhaps) its basic meaning? There are definite limitations to the conventional format, that is, a list of numbered senses. It imposes an often misleading sense

of hierarchy onto the various senses, and struggles to show the precise relationship between senses, using the same system of presentation for specialist meanings, and metaphorical meanings (which are generally highly dependant on the co-text) [Moon 1987a: 182]. It cannot show where there is a fuzzy rather than a clear distinction between senses [Stock 1984: 139; Hanks 1993: 103]. This may suggest a need for more flexible entries: a more thesaurus-like structure to one entry and a strongly hierarchical one for another; new systems of labelling to denote different kinds of sense distinctions; or this may be an area where hypertext and the possibilities afforded by electronic dictionaries will make a significant difference.

Dictionaries for now tend to have uniform structures throughout, with the part of speech often forming a major division, but the structure of the senses may be *flat* (where all senses have equal status) or *hierarchical* [Atkins 1993: 19]. A hierarchical structure, in view of the problems noted above, obviously allows more scope for arranging and grouping senses. This generally involves numbered sub-senses (1a, 1b, etc.), and these can be useful in representing usages on a semantic cline [Stock 1984: 140], as adjectives often are. Alternatively there may be no sense numbers at all in an entry. This may lead to more ambiguity, but at least presents no unrealistic pretension of hierarchy or autonomy of senses.

The ordering of the senses may be historical (as in the *OED*), by frequency (as in *Cobuild* and other dictionaries for advanced learners) or logical (according to some schema of ‘core’ and ‘extensional’ meanings perceived by the lexicographer). Ordering by frequency precludes a hierarchical structure, but at least ensures the major senses can be immediately found. These are often buried lower down the entry if the ordering is historical. A logical ordering gives some freedom to the lexicographer in arranging senses in a way that portrays a clear overall description of a word [see Svensén 1993: 212-3], but is far more subjective than other methods of ordering, and if a logical ordering is employed, the lexicographer must work hard to ensure logical consistency at least within each entry. Higher levels of distinctness of senses can otherwise be indicated by separate entries, usually marked with numbers in superscript or subscript after the headword. This practice is usually restricted to homographs – words which are unrelated but merely happen to be spelt the same. This is rarely the case with multiple adjectival senses, although the example of *light* is one exception.

2.2.5. Thinking about the users of dictionaries

As should be obvious from the above discussion, the target audience of the dictionary is a major factor. This investigation will look at monolingual dictionaries both for native speakers and for learners of English, but the characteristics and requirements for each group are quite different. Learners’ dictionaries, or the recent ones at least, tend to be a good deal more innovative and experimental than their counterparts for native speakers. They are also less concerned with minority vocabulary or senses, and are generally more explicit in the information they give, assuming less knowledge. Nevertheless, since these are all dictionaries for human beings rather than machines, the intelligence and common sense of either audience should not be underestimated. They are, in Schelbert’s [1988: 67] words, “poetic beings”, “quite capable of interpreting and integrating meanings”. There will always be new or unique senses of words that will have to be deduced given a certain context, so dictionaries neither can nor should try to cover absolutely every eventuality. No dictionary user likes to be patronised. Native speakers especially are more likely to be interested in the rarer senses of a word where their intuition cannot reveal the meaning, than in hair-splitting distinctions between common meanings they know well. Bearing this in mind, we should be wary of placing unreasonable expectations upon the dictionaries analysed.

3. Methodology

3.1. Six Dictionaries

Six monolingual English dictionaries were chosen for this study; each of them recently published in Britain, and in one single volume. Four are aimed at native speakers of English, and two are EFL (English for Foreign Learners) dictionaries.

3.1.1. *Collins English Dictionary (CED)*, 6th Edition (2003)

The first edition of *CED* was published in 1979, based on the American model of the ‘college dictionary’ [see Béjoint 2000: 75-7]. As such, it includes a great deal of encyclopaedic information and much specialized vocabulary. This sixth edition claims to have greatly updated its coverage of regional and specialist vocabulary, and to have drawn on the Bank of English corpus in its revision.

3.1.2. *Oxford Dictionary of English (ODE)*, 2nd Edition (2003)

ODE’s first edition was published in 1998 as the *New Oxford Dictionary of English (NODE)*. It was written on new principles, separating it somewhat from the lineage of *OED*-based dictionaries such as the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. Chief amongst these principles is an emphasis on ‘central and typical meaning’ rather than ‘necessary conditions’ in definition (see *ODE*: Preface to the first edition). Its entries consist of numbered core meanings to which a number of unnumbered subsenses may be attached. It is based largely on the 100-million-word British National Corpus, as well as data from the Oxford Reading Programme upon which the *OED* is based, and a new reading programme targeting specialist fields. It also claims emphases on ‘explaining and describing as well as defining’, and on international varieties of English.

3.1.3. *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary (CTCD)*, Revised Edition (1999)

This revision of the first edition of Chambers’ *21st Century Dictionary* is, the compilers claim, not a direct successor of the *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary* whose first edition came in 1901. It is a more modern dictionary in some ways. It has adopted sense numbers rather than separating senses with a semicolon, has dropped its strongly analytical macrostructure, and has begun to include example phrases and sentences where they are deemed necessary. However, definitions remain highly compact and traditional, and one gets the impression that this dictionary still owes a great deal to those earlier editions of *Chambers* in its basic structure and style. This is the only one of the six dictionaries not to be formally associated with a particular corpus.

3.1.4. *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners (MEDAL)*, (2002)

MEDAL is a new EFL dictionary borrowing many features from its competitors (such as the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* and *COBUILD*), and generally adopts a flexible approach, treating the vocabulary in varying ways according to pedagogic considerations. It concentrates on treating a core of the 7,500 words deemed most likely to be needed by students, in great depth and with great clarity, giving a much briefer treatment of less common words. It is based upon analysis of its own corpus, in collaboration with the University of Brighton's I.T. Research Institute.

3.1.5. *Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner's English Dictionary (COBUILD)*, 4th Edition (2003)

COBUILD's first edition was published in 1987, based almost exclusively on a thorough analysis of what later came to be called the Bank of English corpus, in collaboration with Birmingham University. Its innovative features are many [see Sinclair (Ed.) 1987]. We have already noted its radically different defining style. It was also one of the first dictionaries to sort senses by frequency, to include only authentic examples from an electronic corpus, and to have a column separated off from the main text of the entry containing detailed grammatical information in code form. Its focus is on the commoner words in the language.

3.1.6. *New Oxford Thesaurus of English (NOTE)*, (2000)

NOTE is a highly innovative new thesaurus, based on various existing references and lists of words grouped together along with analysis of the British National Corpus. As well as long lists of synonyms, it includes antonyms, and, where appropriate, gives terms related in other ways. It contains many tables of hyponyms (e.g. a list of names of deer species under *deer*). In many ways, it takes a very dictionary-like approach: listing alphabetically, separating by sense as well as by part of speech, and including illustrative sentences for each sense. Its headword list is necessarily restricted to the commoner words of English, but those it treats it treats very thoroughly, and this includes all the words in our sample.

3.2. A random sample of polysemous adjectives

The random sample is based upon those words presented as polysemous adjectives in one of the dictionaries, *CED*. Its flat structure makes it simpler to select a sample based on the number of senses. In early attempts to seek a sample, it was noticeable that some adjectives that did not seem to be particularly polysemous, such as *lax* or *leaden*, were given as many as five senses. Six senses therefore seemed a reasonable cut-off point, so the aim was to find ten adjectives with at least six 'adjectival' 'senses' shown in *CED*. These were chosen using a random numerical sample based on page numbers. The words chosen by this method were *apart*, *canonical*, *deep*, *floating*, *idle*, *marginal*, *particular*, *remote*, *stable* and *unbalanced*.

Apart is problematical for syntactic reasons. According to three out of the six dictionaries studied, it is not an adjective at all, rather an adverb, whilst *MEDAL* and *COBUILD* give it one adjectival sense and the rest adverbial. However, *CED* has made what seems fair to

assume is an error on the part of its compilers by marking all seven of its senses under the word-class label “ADJECTIVE OR ADVERB”. For this reason, *apart* was excluded early on, and the other nine adjectives investigated in detail. Results for four of these are shown below, and results for the remaining five (*deep*, *floating*, *marginal*, *remote*, and *stable*) [see Stammers 2004] summarised briefly.

3.3. Corpus data

Before looking at the dictionary entries themselves, concordance lines from the Bank of English corpus were extracted, studied and classified for each adjective. The aim was to become sufficiently familiar with the complexities of each word and its varying usages to be in a good position to understand and evaluate the dictionary entries. These results themselves are not shown here [see Stammers 2004], partly for lack of space, and partly because the results of this classification remain in rough form. Rather than ‘tidying up’ those results after studying the dictionaries, it seemed a good test of the dictionaries to see how well they resolved the messiness found in the corpus data.

4. Comparison and evaluation of dictionary entries

4.1. *unbalanced*

s.1, s.2, etc.	=sense 1, sense 2, etc.
1: sub₂	=2 nd (unnumbered) subsense of sense 1
s.e.	=separate entry
s.e:1	=1 st sense of a separate entry
ex.	=example

Table 2: Key to abbreviations used

Sense	<i>CED</i>	<i>ODE</i>	<i>CTCD</i>	<i>MEDAL</i>	<i>COBUILD</i>	<i>NOTE</i>
<i>deranged, disturbed</i>	3	1	2	1	1	1
<i>one-sided, biased</i>	4	2	3	2	2	2
<i>irrational, erratic</i>	2	-	-	-	-	-
<i>lacking balance</i>	1	-	1	-	-	-
<i>(bookkeeping sense)</i>	5	-	4	-	-	-
<i>(electronics sense)</i>	6	-	-	-	-	-

Table 3: Summary of sense distinctions for *unbalanced*

unbalanced (ʌn'bælənst) ADJECTIVE [1] lacking balance. [2] irrational or unsound; erratic. [3] mentally disordered or deranged. [4] biased; one-sided: *unbalanced reporting*. [5] (in double-entry book-keeping) not having total debit balances equal to total credit balances. [6] *Electronics* (of signals or circuitry) not symmetrically disposed about earth or zero reference potential.

Figure 6: CED entry for *unbalanced*

unbalanced ► adjective **1** (of a person) emotionally or mentally disturbed.
2 not giving accurate, fair, or equal coverage to all aspects; partial: *this may give an unbalanced impression of the competition*.

Figure 7: ODE entry for *unbalanced*

unbalanced ▷ *adj* **1** not in a state of physical balance. **2** lacking mental balance; deranged. **3** said eg of a view or judgement: lacking impartiality; biased. **4** *bookkeeping* not adjusted so as to show balance of debtor and creditor.
 ⌚ 17c.

Figure 8: CTCD entry for *unbalanced*

unbalanced /ʌn'bælənst/ *adj* **1** mentally ill **2** giving only one view or opinion of a situation or subject: BIASED: *unbalanced news coverage*

Figure 9: MEDAL entry for *unbalanced*

un|bal|anced /ʌnbælənst/ [1] If you describe someone as **unbalanced**, you mean that they appear disturbed and upset or they seem to be slightly mad. □ *I knew how unbalanced Paula had been since my uncle Peter died.* [2] If you describe something such as a report or argument as **unbalanced**, you think that it is unfair or inaccurate because it emphasizes some things and ignores others. □ *UN officials argued that the report was unbalanced. ...unbalanced and unfair reporting.*

ADJ = disturbed
ADJ = biased ≠ balanced

Figure 10: COBUILD entry for *unbalanced*

unbalanced ► adjective ① he was considered unbalanced and dangerous
UNSTABLE, of unsound mind, mentally ill, deranged, demented, crazed, troubled, disturbed, unhinged, insane, mad, mad as a hatter, mad as a March hare, raving mad, out of one's mind, not in one's right mind, neurotic, psychotic; *Latin* non compos mentis; *informal* crazy, loopy, loony, mixed up, nuts, nutty, nutty as a fruitcake, bananas, cracked, crackpot, daft, dippy, screwy, with a screw loose, batty, dotty, cuckoo, bonkers, potty, mental, screwed up, not all there, off one's head, out of one's head, out to lunch, a bit lacking, round the bend, round the twist, away with the fairies; *Brit. informal* barmy, crackers, barking, barking mad, off one's trolley, off one's rocker, daft as a brush, not the full shilling; *N. Amer. informal* nutsy, nutso, squirrely, wacko, buggy; *dated* touched.
- OPPOSITES: balanced, stable, sane.
② a most unbalanced article on a fundamental topic BIASED, prejudiced, skewed, one-sided, lopsided, partisan, factional, partial, inequitable, unjust, unfair, uneven, unequal; *French* parti pris.
- OPPOSITES: balanced, unbiased, fair.

Figure 11: NOTE entry for *unbalanced*

Unbalanced seems broadly to have one basic strand of meaning running through the various 'senses' we see represented in the dictionary entries, with the exception of the 'mentally disturbed' usage, which is somewhat removed semantically. *ODE*, *MEDAL*, *COBUILD* and *NOTE* each give only two senses, with this sense first, and the 'biased' sense second. *MEDAL* and *COBUILD*'s orderings are certainly based on frequency, whereas *ODE* and *NOTE* generally order senses logically. *CED*, though, gives six senses, and *CTCD* four, logically ordered, and each beginning with the physical or 'literal' sense not included in the other dictionaries. Presumably this omission is due to this adjective's being derived from a verb via an affix, so that this physical sense should be wholly predictable based on the meanings of *balance*, *balanced* or *unbalance*. Only unpredictable usages are described, except in the *CED* and *CTCD*, which are based on older first editions. *CED*, seeking to be

comprehensive, also gives additional technical usages from bookkeeping and electronics. Thus there are no differences between the six in actual sense division here [Table 2]; merely in coverage.

Where definitions and presentation are concerned, most of the dictionaries deal with *unbalanced* very briefly, with two exceptions. *NOTE* uses illustrative examples to label senses, and includes antonyms, and a particularly long list of synonyms for s.1 (mental disorder being a productive area for the formation of euphemism and slang). Secondly, *COBUILD* includes full sentence-length explanations as standard, as well as illustrative sentences and synonym information in the margin. Otherwise, synonyms and traditionally worded short phrases, and the briefest of examples, are used, even by *MEDAL*, since this word lies outside the core vocabulary to which it devotes most space. The first two senses in *CED*, due to their brevity, are actually unclear. S.1, “lacking balance,” is vague, and could reasonably be applied to any sense, and s.2, “irrational or unsound; erratic”, consists of three synonyms, rather confusingly separated by an “or” and a semicolon, with the result that, with no example or other information, it is far from clear which usage this sense refers to, or indeed, whether it is trying to combine more than one usage under a single sense number.

4.2. *idle*

Sense	<i>CED</i>	<i>ODE</i>	<i>CTCD</i>	<i>MEDAL</i>	<i>COBUILD</i>	<i>NOTE</i>
<i>lazy, work-shy</i> (person)	4	1	2	2	3	1
<i>not doing anything</i> (person)	1	1:sub ₁	1	2a		-
<i>unemployed</i> (person)				1a	1	2
<i>not in use</i> (thing / place)	2	1:sub ₂		1	2	3
<i>spare, unfilled</i> (time)	-	1:sub ₃	-	-	-	4
<i>not accruing interest</i> (money)	3	3	-	-	-	-
<i>without purpose, trivial</i>	5,6	2	3,4	3	4	5
<i>empty</i> (threat)	7	2:sub	5	4	5	6
‘idle wheel’	s.e.	s.e.	-	-	-	-
‘idle pulley’	s.e.	-	-	-	-	-
‘idle time’	s.e.	-	s.e.	-	-	-

Table 4: Summary of sense distinctions for *idle*

idle ('aɪd^əl) ADJECTIVE **1** unemployed or unoccupied; inactive. **2** not operating or being used. **3** (of money) not being used to earn interest or dividends. **4** not wanting to work; lazy. **5** (usually prenominal) frivolous or trivial: *idle pleasures*. **6** ineffective or powerless; fruitless; vain. **7** without basis; unfounded. ♦ VERB **8** (when *tr*, often

Figure 12: *CED* entry for *idle*

idle ► **adjective (idler, idlest) 1** (of a person) avoiding work; lazy: *idle students*.

■ (of a person) not working; unemployed. ■ (especially of a machine or factory) not active or in use: *the mill has been **standing idle** for eight years*. ■ [attrib.] (of time) characterized by inaction or absence of significant activity: *at no time in the day must there be an idle moment*.

2 without purpose or effect; pointless: *he did not want to waste valuable time in idle chatter*.

■ (especially of a threat or boast) without foundation: *I knew Ellen did not make idle threats*.

3 (of money) held in cash or in accounts paying no interest.

► **verb 1** [no obj.] spend time doing nothing: *four men were idling outside the shop* | [with obj.] we **idled** the afternoon away.

■ [no obj., with adverbial of direction] move aimlessly or lazily: *Robert idled along the pavement*. ■ [with obj.] N. Amer. take out of use or employment: *he will close the newspaper, idling 2,200 workers*.

2 (of an engine) run slowly while disconnected from a load or out of gear: *Nadine kept the engine idling*.

■ [with obj.] cause (an engine) to idle.

– **DERIVATIVES idleness** noun.

– **ORIGIN** Old English *īdel* 'empty, useless', of West Germanic origin; related to Dutch *ijdel* 'vain, frivolous, useless' and German *eitel* 'bare, worthless'.

Figure 13: ODE entry for *idle*

idle /'aɪdəl/ ▷ *adj* (**idler**, **idlest**) **1** not in use; not being used; unoccupied. **2** not wanting to work; lazy; indolent. **3** having no purpose or value □ *idle chatter*. **4** without cause, basis or good reason; unnecessary □ *an idle rumour*. **5** having no effect or result; not taken seriously □ *an idle threat*. ▷ *verb* (**idled**, **idling**) **1** (usually **idle away**

Figure 14: CTCD entry for *idle*

idle¹ /'aɪdl/ *adj* **1** machines or factories that are idle are not being used: *The extra power stations are idle when demand is lower.* ♦ **stand/lie/sit idle** Valuable machinery is left to lie idle for long periods. **1a.** workers who are idle have no work: *Many men were made idle as the mills closed down.* **2** lazy: *Get upstairs and wake up that idle brother of yours.* ♦ *You're just bone idle, the lot of you.* **2a.** [often in negatives] not doing anything, when there are things that you should do: *Don't worry. I have not been idle while you were away.* ♦ *This country will not remain idle if its friends are attacked.* **3** [only before noun] without a good reason or real purpose: *It was only from idle curiosity that she opened the book.* ♦ *idle chatter/gossip* **4** not really intended or not likely to have any result: **idle threat** *It didn't sound like an idle threat to me* (=it was a real threat).

the idle rich very rich people who can spend their time enjoying themselves rather than working. This expression suggests that you do not approve of people like this.

it would be idle to do sth *very formal* used for saying that something is useless or a waste of time — **idleness** noun [U] → BONE IDLE

Figure 15: MEDAL entry for *idle*

idle /aɪdəl/ (idles, idling, idled)	[1] If people who were working are idle , they have no jobs or work.	ADJ; v-link ADJ
□ <i>Employees have been idle almost a month because of shortages.</i>	[2] If machines or factories are idle , they are not working or being used.	ADJ; v-link ADJ
□ <i>Now the machine is lying idle.</i>	[3] If you say that someone is idle , you disapprove of them because they are not doing anything and you think they should be.	ADJ [disapproval]
□ <i>...idle bureaucrats who spent the day reading newspapers.</i>	♦ idle ness <i>Idleness is a very bad thing for human nature.</i>	N-UNCOUNT
♦ idly <i>We were not idly sitting around.</i>	[4] Idle is used to describe something that you do for no particular reason, often because you have nothing better to do.	ADV; ADV with v ADJ; ADJ n
□ <i>Brian kept up the idle chatter for another five minutes.</i>	♦ idly <i>We talked idly</i>	ADV; ADV with

Figure 16: COBUILD entry for *idle*

idle ► adjective	① <i>an idle fellow</i> LAZY, indolent, slothful, work-shy, shiftless, loafing, inactive, inert, sluggish, lethargic, languorous, listless, torpid; remiss, negligent, slack, lax, lackadaisical, impassive, good-for-nothing, do-nothing; leisurely; informal bone idle; French archaic fainéant; rare otiose. See AWKWARD SYNONYMS at LAZY.
	– OPPOSITE: industrious.
	② <i>'I was getting bored with being idle,' she told her new employer</i> UNEMPLOYED, jobless, out of work, out of a job, redundant, between jobs, workless, unwaged, unoccupied; Brit. informal on the dole, signing on, 'resting'; Austral./NZ informal on the wallaby track.
	– OPPOSITE: employed.
	③ <i>instead of leaving the machine idle, I sold it</i> NOT IN USE, out of use, not operating, not working, inactive, out of action, inoperative, non-functioning, out of service, unused, unoccupied, unemployed; disused, no longer in use, fallen into disuse, mothballed.
	– OPPOSITE: working.
	④ <i>they filled their idle hours with endless gossiping sessions</i> UNOCCUPIED, spare, empty, vacant, unfilled, available.
	– OPPOSITES: busy; full.
	⑤ <i>he didn't indulge in idle remarks or mere social chit-chat</i> FRIVOLOUS, trivial, trifling, minor, petty, foolish, lightweight, shallow, superficial, insignificant, unimportant, worthless, valueless, pointless, paltry, niggling, peripheral, without depth, inane, fatuous, senseless, meaningless, purposeless, unnecessary, time-wasting.
	– OPPOSITES: serious; meaningful.
	⑥ <i>she was not a woman to make idle threats</i> EMPTY, meaningless, aimless, pointless, worthless, useless, vain, in vain, insubstantial, futile, ineffective, ineffectual; groundless, without grounds, baseless, without/lacking foundation.
	– OPPOSITE: serious.

Figure 17: NOTE entry for *idle*

Here, in contrast to *unbalanced*, we see some differences in sense division between the dictionaries. The differences are subtle, the different groupings in Table 3 perhaps reflecting differing divisions of the sense spectrum. *CTCD* s.1 groups together similar senses where other dictionaries make distinctions, e.g. the very subtle distinction between *MEDAL*'s s.2 and 2a for usages in negative formulations. Here, *ODE* and *MEDAL* are at an advantage in being able to group closely related senses together, due to their hierarchical microstructure. *ODE* in particular makes good use of its unnumbered subsenses under s.1, (senses all meaning 'not working') separating these senses from s.2 and its related subsense, and from a third separate sense relating to money (although it could be argued this is quite closely related to s.1). This gives an advantage over *CED* with its flat structure implying seven senses of equal status. Once again, some of these seven senses in *CED* are quite unclear, and difficult to distinguish from the others, due to unhelpful 'x or y' formulations and semicolon use (what does s.6 refer to, and how does it differ from s.5?). By contrast *NOTE*, despite the limitations of a flat structure, is able to show sense distinctions unambiguously, since each sense is distinguished by an illustrative example, an antonym, and a core synonym in capitals, these elements all reinforcing one another. *COBUILD* is able to make distinctions unambiguous through clear explanations of typical usage, with examples. *CTCD* may not be hugely clear by comparison with these, but is slightly clearer than *CED*. The conciseness of these two is of course a strength in enabling more vocabulary and senses to be included overall, but this is at the expense of clarity.

4.3. *canonical*

Canonical is a somewhat atypical adjective. It is a relative adjective, with a complex meaning, based on the noun *canon*. It functions in the same way modifying nouns can in English, as in 'canon law', for example. It is the type of adjective Gove probably had in mind when he pointed to one particular difficulty with adjectives:

Many adjectives – especially those which are noun-derivatives with suffixes of multiple meaning – present the paradox of having numerous meanings but low over-all frequency. Practical considerations call for treating the various meanings of such adjectives in minimum space, using defining formulas which will cover several related meanings simultaneously; yet the acceptable practice of writing definitions which have breadth of sense-coverage too easily degenerates into an unacceptable practice of writing definitions which are merely vague or actually inexact. [Gove 1968: 5].

Its meaning is so technical as to be difficult to ascertain from even a relatively wide context in the corpus data analysed, with some seemingly very specific usages in academic contexts. As a result, the two learners' dictionaries are of little help. The *COBUILD* explanation is clear enough, but applies directly only to the one noun-collocate *status* (as well as to *writer* in the example). *MEDAL* is very concise and general, though not to the extent of *CTCD*, whose senses 2 to 4 consist only of synonyms, despite the complexity of this word, while s.1 amounts to little more than a cross-reference to *canon*, with some elaborate hedging. Only *CED* and *ODE* really help the user to grasp the complicated meanings. The fine distinction of *CED*'s between the clergyman sense and the cathedral chapter sense is a surprising one, again showing the limitation of the flat structure. *CED* includes *canonic* as a variant form, unlike *ODE*, which treats it separately, but with its s.2 being a variant form of *canonical*. This seemingly explains why *CED* includes a musical sense unattested in the others.

Sense	<i>CED</i>	<i>ODE</i>	<i>CTCD</i>	<i>MEDAL</i>	<i>COBUILD</i>	<i>NOTE</i>
<i>according to recognized laws</i>	3	2:sub ₃	(3)	1	-	1
<i>accepted as authoritative</i>		2:sub ₁		-	-	
<i>typical, regular</i>	-	-	2	-	1	
<i>belonging to literary canon</i>	1	2:sub ₂	(1)	-	-	-
<i>belonging to sacred canon</i>		2		-	-	-
<i>based on church (canon) law</i>	2	1	4	2	-	2
<i>relating to cathedral chapter</i>	5	3		-	-	-
<i>relating to canon (clergyman)</i>	6			-	-	-
<i>in form of musical canon</i>	4	-	-	-	-	-
‘canonical hour(s)’ <i>(for prayers)</i>	s.e:1	s.e:1	s.e:1	-	-	table
‘canonical hour(s)’ <i>(for marriage)</i>	s.e:2	s.e:2	s.e:2	-	-	-

Table 5: Summary of sense distinctions for *canonical*

canonical (kə'nonɪk^əl) or **canonic** ADJECTIVE [1] belonging to or included in a canon of sacred or other officially recognized writings. [2] belonging to or in conformity with canon law. [3] according to recognized law; accepted. [4] *Music* in the form of a canon. [5] of or relating to a cathedral chapter. [6] of or relating to a canon (clergyman).

► **ca'nonically** ADVERB

canonical hour NOUN [1] *RC Church* **a** one of the seven prayer times appointed for each day by canon law. **b** the services prescribed for these times, namely matins, prime, terce, sext, nones, vespers, and compline. [2] *Church of England* any time between 8:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. at which marriages may lawfully be celebrated.

Figure 18: CED entry for *canonical*

canonical /kə'nɒnɪk(ə)l/ ► **adjective** **1** according to or ordered by canon law: *the canonical rites of the Roman Church.*
2 included in the list of sacred books officially accepted as genuine: *the canonical Gospels of the New Testament.*
 ■ accepted as being accurate and authoritative: *the canonical method of comparative linguistics.* ■ (of a writer or work) belonging to the literary canon: *canonical writers like Jane Austen.* ■ according to recognized rules or scientific laws: *canonical nucleotide sequences.*
3 relating to a cathedral chapter or a member of it.
 ► **plural noun (canonicals)** the prescribed official dress of the clergy: *Cardinal Bea in full canonicals.*
 – DERIVATIVES **canonically** adverb.

canonical hours ► **plural noun** **1** the times of daily Christian prayer appointed in the breviary, or the offices set for them (namely matins with lauds, prime, terce, sext, none, vespers, and compline).
2 (in the Church of England) the time during which a marriage may lawfully be celebrated (usually between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m.).

Figure 19: ODE entry for *canonical*

canonical /kə'nɒnɪkəl/ ▷ **adj** **1** according to, of the nature of or included in a canon. **2** regular. **3** orthodox or accepted. **4** ecclesiastical.
canonical hours ▷ **plural noun** **1** now especially RC Church **a** the hours appointed for prayer and devotion; **b** the services prescribed for these times, which are MATINS, LAUDS, TERCE, SEXT, NONE², VESPERS and COMPLINE. **2** in England: the hours when a marriage ceremony is able to be lawfully conducted in a parish church.

Figure 20: CTCD entry for *canonical*

canonical /kə'nɒnɪkl/ adj **1** following the generally accepted rules of something **2** based on the laws of a Christian church

Figure 21: MEDAL entry for *canonical*

ca|noni|cal /kənɒnɪkəl/ If something has **canonical** status, it is accepted as having all the qualities that a thing of its kind should have. ADJ: ADJ n
 □ ...Ballard's status as a canonical writer.

Figure 22: COBUILD entry for *canonical*

canonical ► adjective **①** the canonical method of comparative linguistics
 RECOGNIZED, authoritative, authorized, accepted, sanctioned, approved, received, established, orthodox; standard, normal, usual, ordinary, stock, customary, regular, traditional.
 – OPPOSITES: unorthodox, innovative.
② the canonical rites of the Roman Church ACCORDING TO ECCLESIASTICAL LAW, ordered by ecclesiastical law; official, sanctioned. See table.

Canonical Hours		
matins lauds terce	sext none vespers	compline

Figure 23: NOTE entry for *canonical*

4.4. *particular*

Particular is a tricky and awkward word to analyse. There is more to it than meets the eye, and more differences between the dictionaries' treatments of it than are immediately apparent. One problem in analysing its different senses is frequency. In the corpus, its usage as postdeterminer is by far the most frequent, followed by phrasal 'in particular', then the 'significant' sense and only a sprinkling of other senses. The problem with the dominant sense here (e.g. 'a particular historical generation') is that, although universally classed as an adjective, it is actually a function word, a specifier; more like a determiner than an adjective.

The type of nominal collocate really has no bearing on its sense here. It is treated as a function word by *COBUILD*, *MEDAL*, and even by *ODE*, with an explanation of its function rather than an attempt at anything like a substitutable definition. As is seen in *CTCD*, and especially in *CED*, that attempt can end very clumsily. This, (as with *apart*) highlights the difficulty of the category of ‘adjective’ in a dictionary.

Sense	<i>CED</i>	<i>ODE</i>	<i>CTCD</i>	<i>MEDAL</i>	<i>COBUILD</i>	<i>NOTE</i>
(postdeterminer function)	1	1	1	1	1	1
distinct, unique				4	2	
especially intense, marked	2	2	2	2	3	2
fussy, difficult to satisfy	4	3	3	3, 3a	4	3
detailed, meticulous	3	-	4	-	-	4
affirming for class (logic)	6	1:sub	-	-	-	-
(differential equations sense)	5	-	-	-	-	-
‘particular average’	s.e.	-	-	-	-	-
‘particular solution’	-	s.e.	-	-	-	-
‘Particular Baptist’	-	s.e.	-	-	-	-

Table 6: Summary of sense distinctions for *particular*

particular (pə'tɪkjʊlə) ADJECTIVE [1] (prenominal) of or belonging to a single or specific person, thing, category, etc.; specific; special: *the particular demands of the job; no particular reason*. [2] (prenominal) exceptional or marked: *a matter of particular importance*. [3] (prenominal) relating to or providing specific details or circumstances: *a particular account*. [4] exacting or difficult to please, esp in details; fussy. [5] (of the solution of a differential equation) obtained by giving specific values to the arbitrary constants in a general equation. [6] *Logic* (of a proposition) affirming or denying something about only some members of a class of objects, as in *some men are not wicked*. Compare **universal** (sense 10). [7] *Property law* denoting an estate that precedes the passing of the property into ultimate ownership. See also **remainder** (sense 3), **reversion** (sense 4). ♦

Figure 24: *CED* entry for *particular*

particular ► **adjective** **1** [attrib.] used to single out an individual member of a specified group or class: *the action seems to discriminate against a particular group of companies.*
 ■ Logic denoting a proposition in which something is asserted of some but not all of a class. Contrasted with **UNIVERSAL**.
2 [attrib.] especially great or intense: *when handling or checking cash the cashier should exercise particular care.*
3 insisting that something should be correct or suitable in every detail; fastidious: *she is very particular about cleanliness.*

Figure 25: ODE entry for *particular*

particular /pə'tɪkjʊlə(r)/ ► **adj** **1** specific; single; individually known or referred to □ *She liked that particular design.* **2** especial; exceptional □ *took particular care.* **3** difficult to satisfy; fastidious; exacting □ *He's very particular about the washing-up.* **4** exact; detailed. ► **noun** **1** a detail. **2** (**particulars**) personal details, eg name, date of birth, etc □ *took down her particulars.* ●

Figure 26: CTCD entry for *particular*

particular¹ /pə'tɪkjʊlə/ **adj** ★★★

1 [only before noun] used for emphasizing that you are talking about one specific person or thing and not anyone or anything else: **SPECIFIC**: *Are there any particular topics that you would like me to explain further?* ♦ *I remember one particular incident when he almost drove his car off a cliff.*

2 [only before noun] especially great: **SPECIAL**: *Two matters need to be given particular attention.* ♦ *For the local population, street crime is an issue of particular concern.*

3 [never before noun] someone who is particular has very clear ideas about what they like and dislike and wants everything to be exactly as they like it: *Mr Drew is known for being very particular.* ♦ ♦ **+about** *She's very particular about what she eats.* **3a.** **I'm not particular** spoken used for saying that you do not mind what is decided

4 clearly different and belonging to just one person or thing: **DISTINCTIVE**: *He has a very particular philosophy, which involves owning as little as possible.*

Words frequently used with particular

nouns	attention, concern, emphasis, importance, need, relevance, significance	2
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Figure 27: MEDAL entry for *particular*

particular /pəˈtɪkjələ/ [1] You use **particular** to emphasize that you are talking about one thing or one kind of thing rather than other similar ones. □ *I remembered a particular story about a postman who was a murderer... I have to know exactly why it is I'm doing a particular job.* [2] If a person or thing has a **particular** quality or possession, it is distinct and belongs only to them. □ *I have a particular responsibility to ensure I make the right decision.* [3] You can use **particular** to emphasize that something is greater or more intense than usual. □ *Particular emphasis will be placed on oral language training.* [4] If you say that someone is **particular**, you mean that they choose things and do things very carefully, and are not easily satisfied. □ *Ted was very particular about the colors he used.* [5] → See also **particulars**.

PHRASES [6] You use **in particular** to indicate that what you are saying applies especially to one thing or person. □ *The situation in Ethiopia in particular is worrying... Why should he notice her car in particular?* [7] You use **nothing in particular** or **nobody in particular** to mean nothing or nobody important or special. □ *Drew made some remarks to nobody in particular and said goodbye.*

ADJ: ADJ n
emphasis

ADJ: ADJ n

ADJ: ADJ n
emphasis

ADJ:
usu v-link ADJ,
oft ADJ about
n

PHRASE:
PHR with cl/
group
= particular-
ly

PHRASE

Figure 28: COBUILD entry for *particular*

particular ► adjective ① the action seems to discriminate against a particular group of companies SPECIFIC, certain, distinct, separate, isolated; single, individual, peculiar, discrete, definite, express, precise.
- OPPOSITE: general.

② an issue of particular importance SPECIAL, extra special, especial, exceptional, unusual, marked, singular, uncommon, notable, noteworthy, remarkable, outstanding, unique; formal peculiar.
- OPPOSITE: ordinary.

③ he was particular about what he ate FUSSY, fastidious, meticulous, punctilious, discriminating, selective, painstaking, exacting, demanding, critical, over-particular, over-fastidious, finicky, faddish, finical, dainty; informal pernickety, choosy, picky; Brit. informal faddy; archaic nice.
- OPPOSITES: careless, easy-going, laid-back.

④ he gave a long and particular account of his journey DETAILED, blow-by-blow, itemized, item-by-item, thorough, minute, exact, explicit, precise, faithful, close, circumstantial, painstaking, meticulous, punctilious, particularized.

Figure 29: NOTE entry for *particular*

4.5. Other adjectives

Space limitations prevent a full discussion of the remaining adjectives studied, or their dictionary entries, from being shown here. *Deep*, especially, had very long and complex entries, with as many as 20 distinguishable adjectival entries represented between the dictionaries, as well as numerous separate entries for phrases such as “deep space” or “deep litter”. Its very basic meaning makes it not possible to define using simpler language. The concept is a relative one, bound up in ‘orientational metaphors’ [see Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 14-21] to such an extent that it is difficult to tell figurative from non-figurative senses. One can distinguish meanings such as ‘extending far down’, ‘extending far back’, ‘extending far in’, and ‘positioned far down’, for example.

Floating is a participial adjective based on the verb, and most dictionaries dealt with it quite briefly, concentrating on predicable usages such as “floating voter”, its polysemy otherwise predictable from the verb. *CED* though gives it six main senses, with an additional 11 separate entries for phrases, including “floating voter”. *Marginal* is a fairly complex adjective, with both technical and descriptive senses, whereas *remote* and *stable* could both be said to be good examples of what Moon termed “quasi-monosemous” words, with one basic sense, and different readings arising purely from differences of context and collocation. The dictionary entries for *remote* do not reflect such a view, however, with *ODE* and *MEDAL* each giving five main senses, whereas for *stable*, *ODE* has only one main sense 4, plus four subsenses.

Conclusion

Adjectives are very difficult to divide into senses. They are also difficult to analyse in isolation, because they are essentially an aspect of the noun they modify or characterise. *Unbalanced* as in ‘unbalanced diet’ is very different from *unbalanced* as in ‘unbalanced mind’, and the common meaning they share – the essential contribution of *unbalanced* in each case – is very difficult to establish. Whilst much has been written on adjectives from a purely grammatical perspective, and to some extent from the perspective of cognitive linguistics and the mental lexicon, it would seem that they are not taken into account sufficiently in the field of semantics. Works on lexical semantics often generalise on word meaning in terms of a word’s features or properties, but adjectives do not have features; they *are* features. The semantic role of adjectives probably needs further investigation.

Adjectives as a word class form a fairly heterogeneous set. To a certain degree, they do display a distinctive type of polysemy that is very heavily context dependent. Nine randomly chosen adjectives displayed somewhat varied patterns of polysemy. The picture is rather complicated for adjectives such as *canonical* and *marginal*, which have many very technical usages, low overall frequency, and – more importantly – both relative and descriptive senses. Furthermore, their polysemy is partly based on the polysemy of their related nouns (*canon* and *margin*). Similarly, the polysemy of *floating* and *unbalanced* is based partly on their related verbs, so that the polysemy here is not a purely adjectival phenomenon. *Particular* is again a difficult case in having one very frequent use as a function word, some borderline usages, and a few other senses restricted by gradability, predicate position, or by use in certain technical contexts. *Deep*, *idle*, *remote*, and *stable*, which might be considered more prototypical adjectives, are still varied in their polysemy. *Remote* and *stable* have one clear

basic meaning common to all usages; *idle* has two main strands of meaning, giving a clear hierarchy of meaning; and *deep* is a little more complicated, but has a basic meaning common to most of its senses, plus a few other relatively distinct senses restricted either by the type of noun collocate (e.g. ‘sleep’, ‘breath’, or ‘colour’) or by syntax (‘three-deep’, ‘deep in [ACTION]’, etc.). The contextual differences between some senses are very subtle. For example, a person described as ‘idle’ may be permanently lazy, may be failing to do given work, or may have no work to do, and specifying such distinctions is difficult. There is often disagreement between dictionaries in how many different senses they show when there is this type of vagueness, where a continuum of senses is to be divided up.

Generally speaking, these subtleties of difference in meaning are best presented by those dictionaries based on a more recent all-over analysis of the language, and with a less rigid traditional format, though this may be somewhat at the expense of conciseness and space. *ODE*’s structural format lends itself very well to representing polysemous adjectives’ hierarchies of meaning, *NOTE* is able to use several reinforcing elements to make each sense most clear, and as a result is less likely to make overly fine sense distinctions. Relying on traditional style definitions alone can easily lead to a lack of clarity in the sense division of polysemous adjectives, and in explanation of those various meanings.

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