

CHAPTER - V

Dictionaries often throw interesting sidelights on grammatical issues, taking them up for discussion in fairly non-technical terms. Most dictionaries, however, do nothing more than define common grammatical terms, sometimes with examples. But then the definitions and their attending examples to be found in the dictionaries are none the less important because dictionaries are more consulted by people in expressional troubles than grammar books. Some dictionaries do just more than give definitions and examples. For example, the Longman Dictionary (1984 : 1781-4) has a whole section devoted to "Ten vexed points" in English grammar. Justification for bringing in dictionaries under the purview of the present study lies in the fact that even a very sophisticated and recent book on tense by Declerck (1991 : 107) makes a profitable use of the lexical explanation of the term 'after' in examining the after-clauses.

For our purpose we will take up for discussion some of the well-known and widely used dictionaries : Oxford English Dictionary (1933); Longman Dictionary of the English Language (1984); Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (1989); Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary (1987); and Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language (1951), henceforward abbreviated as the OED, the DEL, the OALD, the

CCELD, and the WNTCD respectively. Since all of them except the CCELD adopt a traditional approach to the meaning of the past perfective, and since the CCELD, as we will see presently, has a new explanation to offer, we may divide this chapter into two sections. The first will discuss the OED, the IDEL, the OAD, and the WNTCD, and the second, the CCELD.

The OED (1933) has, inter alia, the following definition of and the data about the past perfective which is styled 'Pluperfect' in the Dictionary :

1. Gram. Applied to that tense of the verb which expresses a time or action completed prior to some past point of time, specified or implied. ... 1824.

L. MURRAY Eng. Gram (ed. 5) 1.124

The Pluperfect Tense represents a thing, not only as past, but also as prior to some other point of time specified in the sentence : as, 'I had finished my letter before he arrived' 1879 ROBY Lat. Gram. IV. XVII §1487. The Pluperfect denotes an action in past time, done before another past action.

(Vol. VII, p. 1025)

It is evident from the extract above that the OED treats the past perfective from the orthodox viewpoint which holds that the business of 'had + past participle' is to indicate an event prior to another event in the past. Since Latin grammar, as is clear from the closing sentence of the citation above, holds the same view of the past perfective, we may safely conclude that the orthodox view of the past perfective is Latinate in nature. What

is more important here is that the OED does not assign to the past perfective any other business.

The WNTCD (1951) follows the OED track and has little new to add. The entry on 'pluperfect' in WNTCD reads:

I. a. In grammar denoting that an action or event took place previous to another past action or event.

(Vol. II : 1296)

We may here note in passim the entries on 'past perfect' and 'pluperfect' in Webster's New World Dictionary (1972) and New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language (1981) respectively. While the former (henceforward abbreviated as WNWD) almost repeats the WNTCD, the latter (henceforth abbreviated as NWD) baulks the importance of the two times (the one 'past' and the other 'more past') so much talked of by all grammarians.

The WNWD definition of 'past perfect' is :

a tense indicating an action
or state as completed before
a specified or implied time in
the past; pluperfect.

(p. 1040)

It can be observed that this definition is more comprehensive than that given in WNTCD (1951) because it, like the OED definition, qualifies the 'time' in the past, and WNTCD does not.

The NWD definition, on the other hand, is rather simplistic:

Applied to that tense of a verb which denotes that an action was finished at a certain period in the past

(P. 1046)

This approach of the NWD clearly has all the limitations that the IDEL approach has. Besides, the NWD defines 'past tense' almost in the same way as it does 'pluperfect' :

Past tense, n. Gram., one of the forms of a verb indicating action or state of being that is past or took place in the past.

(p. 1086)

These NWD definitions tend to equate 'I read Lord of the Flies in 1955' with 'I had read Lord of the Flies in 1955', and therefore are likely to create confusion. Or, if we say that these definitions are too simplistic to be taken seriously, we will admit that the NWD here at least falls short of the image of the dictionary it has contemplated :

In a language that does not have or want a language academy, it is the function of the dictionary not merely to record usage, but to present it discriminatingly, for the guidance of those who wish to be guided along paths of the "best" (which in effect means the most effective) usage.

(p. xv)

In his 'Foreword' to the IDEL (1984) Randolph Quirk observes : "Good dictionaries proceed from a controlled interaction of tradition and innovation The present volume has achieved a superb balance" This 'balance' in respect of (the definition of) the past perfective is not all that manifest. Thus goes the IDEL (1984) definition of the past perfective : "of or being a verb tense (e.g. had finished) that expresses completion of an action at or before a past time" (p. 1074). This definition, it is clear, offers two possible meanings of the past perfective: the first, that it (the past perfect) expresses 'completion of an action' AT 'a past time', and the second, that it expresses 'completion of an action' BEFORE 'a past time'. There is little to say about the second alternative except that it is an orthodox or traditional view of the past perfective adopted by many grammarians. The first alternative, however, is a trifle confusing because completion of an action at a past time may be indicated by the past simple as well, as in 'I wrote the letter the day before yesterday'. Besides, the first alternative rules out the difference between 'I wrote the letter before he came', and 'I had written the letter before he came' so much so that according to this alternative the simple past and the past perfective become virtually synonymous.

The OALD (1989) is rather tacit about the use of 'had' although the entry on 'pluperfect' in the dictionary clearly tells us that the pluperfect or the past perfective is used

expressing an action completed before a particular point in the past

... (in English had and a past participle, as in 'As he had not received my letter, he did not come')

(p. 963)

What is surprising is that the entry on 'hang' has an illustration which does not abide by the given rule of 'pluperfect' (and its attending example) just referred to : "The project had hung fire for several years because of lack of funds" (P. 566). The objection we can level against this example is that there is no context here to provide us with the information regarding an anterior past event. Moreover, if 'lack of funds' implies a state event then it is clear that the use of the past perfective here is rather paradoxical, if not wrong. For, first there was the lack of funds and then the project 'hung' fire. The other way to keep 'had' where it is in the example is to regard it as the so-called non-factual past perfective which we have already discussed in the first section of the previous chapter; but in that case the sentence would hardly carry any sense.

Another strange use of the past perfective in the OALD is to be found in ^{the} example given under the entry on 'onlooker' (P. 864) : By the time the ambulance had arrived, a crowd of onlookers had gathered. The OALD definition of the past perfective does not guide us into the understanding of the role of the past perfective used in the sentence. The factual implication of the

sentence is that the gathering of the crowd took place before the arrival of the ambulance. And if this implication is taken for granted, it is very difficult to see why 'had arrived' should not be simply 'arrived' unless we have recourse to Jespersen's (1931 : 83) tentative postulate that one past perfective in a sentence may 'induce' another in it.

(ii)

The treatment of the past perfective in the CCELD (1987) is worth examining at least for two reasons : first, the Dictionary professes to be specially updated and factual in registering the usage; and secondly, it offers a new explanation of the use of 'had' — an explanation which is not even mentioned in the whole range of grammatical literature on the English language.

Let us first quote the relevant portion of the claim that forms the 'Introduction' of the CCELD:

For the first time, a dictionary has been compiled by the thorough examination of a representative group of English texts, spoken and written, running to many millions of words The words came from books, magazines, newspapers, pamphlets, leaflets, conversations, radio and television broadcasts The aim was to provide a fair representation of contemporary English The user can thus be confident that the examples display the language as it is used Usage cannot be invented, it can only be recorded.

(p. XV)

... examples from real usage are primary evidence and complement the secondary evidence of the explanation.

(p. XVI)

Grammars can produce structures which are quite correct, but which are not at all likely to occur.

(p. XVII)

... it [the CCELD] is a description of what the language is like at the present time.

(p. XIX)

With regard to usage, correctness and related matters of style ... We have adopted a slightly conservative position. We hope that the language presented in this book is above all reliable, not dated nor markedly avant-garde, not unusual to the kind of person we think of as an average user.

(p. XX)

It is interesting that in spite of all these commendable claims — especially, despite the claim of adopting 'a slightly conservative position' — the CCELD entry on had has something very new to offer:

The form had is used to indicate 2.1 that an action or situation occurred at a previous time. Had is often used when the clause in which it occurs is less important than another clause nearby. EG He had known her for two years before he proposed By 1950 more than half the land had been cleared for pasture 2.2 that you are

reporting what someone said or felt in the past.
EG Officials said that Japan had agreed to
restrict car shipments for three years

(p. 666)

The first part of 2.1 explanation ("that an action or situation occurred at a previous time") and the whole of 2.2 indeed betray the 'conservative position' ; the former being an orthodox generalisation and the latter an application of that generalisation in what is commonly known as 'indirect narration'. What strikes the reader as novel is the second part of 2.1 explanation wherein it is observed that had is 'often used when the clause in which it occurs is less important than another clause nearby' (underlining mine). None of the writers on the English language has taken this viewpoint into consideration. Nor is it a happy explanation. For in a sentence like The patient had died before the doctor came, it would not be very logical to maintain that the first clause is less important than the second. While grammarians and linguists have said a lot about the phenomenon of 'stress' or 'emphasis' in a given sentence, they have normally refrained from specifying any particular grammatical category (in this case, the past perfective) making for the importance of a particular clause over the others in a sentence.

The CCELD entry on 'pluperfect', while being orthodox and clear, does not match with what we have called the new explanation

under the entry had. The pluperfect, as the CCELD puts it,

is the term used in grammar for the tense of a verb describing actions that were completed in the past before another event in the past ... [e.g.] she'd eaten them before I arrived.

(p. 1103)

Since 'had' is a kind of tool used in the case of the pluperfect or the past perfective, it is not clear how the past perfective can at the same time imply both an anterior past event and a less important event.

Another important point to note about the CCELD treatment of the past perfective is that nothing is said of the interchangeability of the past perfective and the simple past, although there are examples in the dictionary of positing past within past without the use of the past perfective, relying solely on the past simple. Let us consider the entry on 'before' :

If there is a period of time or if several things are done before something happens, it takes that amount of time or effort for this thing to happen.
EG A dozen ideas were considered and rejected before he finally hit on the plan.

(p. 115)

From the content of the example cited it is clear that though there is sufficient time-gap between the two past events, 'had' is not used in referring to the anterior past event. Indeed, one

might ask the question : what could be the difference between 'A dozen ideas were considered and rejected' and 'A dozen ideas had been considered and rejected'? This is a question we will turn to a moment later.

Apropos of the claims put forward in the 'Introduction' of the CCELD, one is left with the only alternative that the past perfective may sit in the less important clause in rather modern or 'contemporary' usage. But the sample survey we have carried out of the usage of the past perfective at different levels, as well as the theoretical position of the past perfective discussed at length in Chapter II, does not corroborate such a possibility.

Finally, the CCELD, in spite of its purported thoroughness, wholly omits the 'non-factual' past perfective, which we have discussed in Chapter IV. Should we, then, come to the conclusion that the past perfective in the before-clause — which is discussed at length by Declerck (1979b) and touched upon by Quirk et al (1985 : 1020) — is wholly non-existent in modern or good usage?

It may perhaps not be irrelevant here to reproduce verbatim a part of the response of Gill Francis, Senior Grammarian, Cobuild, to the present author's queries in connexion with the CCELD treatment of the past perfective.

The following queries were sent to John M. Sinclair,
Editor in Chief of the CCELD:

1. COBUILD observes that 'Had is often used when the clause in which it occurs is less important than another clause nearby. Eg He had known her for two years before he proposed ...' (p. 666). But, Comprehensive Grammar (Quirk et al, 1985) and Tense (Declerck, 1991) as well as many other books on English grammar and usage I have consulted do not have a single word on this point, I would be grateful if you could kindly let me know the source COBUILD has used in making the point. Is it pragmatically possible to regard the news about the death of a patient as less important than that about the coming of the doctor in a sentence like "The patient had died before the doctor came"?
2. In the COBUILD entry on 'before', the example given is : A dozen ideas were considered and rejected before he finally hit on the plan. (P. 115) that would be the difference, if any, if the sentence is recast into "A dozen ideas had been considered ..."?
3. What Quirk et al and Declerck refer to as 'non-factual' past perfective in a sentence like I saw him before he had seen me (see Quirk et al, p. 1020 a xerox of which is enclosed herewith) has not been taken into account in the COBUILD entry on 'had'. Since COBUILD aims to "provide a fair representation of contemporary English", may we take it that the 'non-factual' or 'paradoxical' past perfective is not likely to occur in good English or in English now?

(See Appendix-III)

Reproduced below is the reply given by Gill Francis, on behalf of John M. Sinclair, who takes up the queries in turn:

1. CCELD says that 'had' is often used when the clause in which it occurs is less important than another clause nearby. I agree with you that this is perhaps overstated, and probably does not apply to the example 'he had known her for two years before he proposed' since here the 'had' clause is the main clause and the 'before' clause is subordinate. New and important information is more likely to be encoded in a main clause than a subordinate clause. Where there are two co-ordinated clauses however, as in the example 'people have already forgotten - or had until last Tuesday', the 'have' clause is signalled as more important, since one of the functions of the present perfect is to express relevance to the present time.

2. You ask what is the difference between 'a dozen ideas were considered and rejected before he finally hit on a plan' and 'a dozen ideas had been considered ...'. I think there is not much difference, but perhaps in the second formulation, the information in the main clause is encoded as slightly less relevant than in the first formulation.

3. The non-factual past perfective of Quirk etc. Quirk seems to be very tentative about this, saying only that the sentence 'I saw him before he had seen me' appears to be paradoxical as the second in a sequence of events is marked by 'had' and that therefore the 'before' clause MAY be non-factual. So I went to the corpus - I looked at 10,000 lines of clauses with past perfect tense and found only the enclosed 18 lines where it comes in a 'before' clause. I think you will agree that none of them are 'non-factual' in Quirk's sense,

because the event in the 'before' clause did take place. So yes, I think you may take it that Quirk's 'non-factual' past perfect is not likely to occur. There IS a non-factual past perfect, exemplified by clauses like 'she had hoped her money would last until the end of the week' (see p. 252 of the Cobuild grammar) which clearly signals that the money did not last, but this is not what Quirk means.

(see Appendix -IV)

Gill Francis's reply is interesting not merely because of its refutation of a part of the CCELD hypothesis regarding the functional meaning of the past perfective but also for two other reasons: first, Francis's nebulous differentiation between 'a dozen ideas were considered' and 'a dozen ideas had been considered', second, her assertion that 'non-factual' past perfective is not likely to occur.

To take up the first of these two important reasons, Gill Francis's postulate that in a dozen ideas had been considered ... "the information in the main clause is encoded as slightly less relevant than in the first formulation [a dozen ideas were considered] seems to be as dubious as the CCELD hypothesis that the past perfective is often used when the clause in which it occurs is less important than another clause nearby. (This hypothesis, however, is refuted by Gill Francis in her ^{reply} ~~only~~). Unfortunately, Gill Francis has not cared to discuss how this

special semantic effect ("the information in the main clause is encoded as slightly less relevant") is achieved. The confusion becomes even greater if we ask whether Francis's postulate could be applied to such other cases of 'backshifting' with the help of 'had been' as in Zandvoort's (1975 : 63) examples — I was told that twenty aeroplanes had been shot down the day before and I asked her how long the man had been unconscious. It is really impossible to see that in the examples cited just now the information in the clauses taking had been are 'less relevant'. Similarly, Francis's hypothesis would fail to do justice to Leech's (1991 : 336) example : The prisoner was released after he had been in prison for several years.

Equally worth considering is Gill Francis's remark that the non-factual past perfective is not likely to occur in good English or English now. Francis grounds her observation on the Cobuild Corpus (to which we will return in the following chapter) which, according to her, does not vouchsafe the existence of the non-factual past perfective. The quandary is that if we take Francis's view for granted, we have to question the utility of discussing the non-factual past perfective in modern English grammar. It becomes all the more piquant when we see that Geoffrey Leech, one of the writers of Comprehensive Grammar (Quirk et al : 1985), declares in a letter to the present author : "I have never noticed this use of the past perfect before, and I suppose it is rare, or

even becoming obsolete" (See Appendix II).

We may here briefly look into the treatment of the past perfective in Collins Cobuild English Grammar (henceforth abbreviated as Cobuild Grammar). Although this discussion should have figured in Chapter II of the present study, we have deferred it until now not only because Cobuild Grammar is one of the two companion volumes of CCELD but also because we want to juxtapose the dictionary with the grammar.

Cobuild Grammar, as is clear from its 'Introduction', is fairly ambitious :

The information in this book is taken from a long and careful study of present-day English. Many millions of words from speech and writing have been gathered together in a computer and analyzed It is the first grammar of its kind This grammar attempts to make accurate statements about English

(p. V)

Despite its attempt to "produce a grammar of real English — the English that people speak and write" (p. X), Cobuild Grammar unfortunately fails to present a tidy case for the past perfective. The formula for the past perfective, as enunciated in Section 5.37, is quite traditional : "If you want to talk about a past event or situation that occurred before a particular time in the past, you use the past perfect" (p. 252). One of the examples given under this Section is By dusk tear gas had spread through

the south campus. Even if we assume that there is another past event implied here subsequent to the spread of tear gas, the example becomes questionable when we place it beside another example of the ilk given in Section 5.41 : It all happened a long time ago (p. 253). Why, we might ask, not "It all had happened ..." or "By dusk tear gas spread ..." ?

The hiatus between precept and example can be noticed in the last example under Section 5.37 of Cobuild Grammar (p. 252) : I detested any form of games and had always managed to avoid children's parties. It is not clear here why the past perfective is used in respect of an event that really succeeds another past event. Besides, if the detestation of any form of games and the avoidance of children's parties are to be regarded as simultaneous activities, then why should not the simultaneity be expressed at least by the past simple throughout? The only way to justify the appositeness of the example in relation to the definition of the past perfective given under Section 5.37 is to see the sentence as a reported speech in indirect narration : for example, the reported speech in the conversion from I said, "I detest any form of games and have always managed to avoid children's parties" to I said that I DETESTED ... and HAD always But this kind of 'backshifting' is not the subject-matter of Section 5.37 of Cobuild Grammar. Another untidy example of the type we have discussed just now is the one given under Section R 102 : Murray had resented the changes I had made (p. 456). Cobuild Grammar, in its treatment of the past perfective, appears to be somewhat

simplistic.

Over against the 'rule' regarding the use of the past perfective (as given in Section 5.37 of Cobuild Grammar), we can posit some examples used elsewhere in the book and show how often a rift between theory and practice lies camouflaged under the apparently faithful description of the issue. The following examples from Cobuild Grammar (pp. 344-6) do defy the generalised rule laid down in the beginning of Section 5.37 (p. 252):

1. He was detained last Monday after he returned from a business trip from overseas.
2. He mentioned his plans to her early one morning, before he left for the paddy fields.
3. When old Thrussel died, his widow came to me and said that he wished to be buried in the churchyard.
4. They heard voices as soon as they pushed open the door.

Cobuild Grammar has not cared to offer any explanation for the absence of the past perfective in these examples, although in each of them we have at least two past events. It may, however, seem from the information contained in the examples that Cobuild Grammar wishes to imply that in cases of close succession of events (in the past), we can simply use the simple past. But a relieving assumption like this is set at naught by such example as The moment Stagg had finished, he and the other two scientists were subjected to a barrage of questions (p. 346) in which case

we have a close succession of two events in the past and the clear use of the past perfective to indicate the earlier one.

Finally, Cobuild Grammar has not taken into account the CCELD postulate that the past perfective ('had') is often used "when the clause in which it occurs is less important than another clause nearby" (CCELD : 666). And in doing so, it has made the CCELD postulate look even more awkward.

In conclusion, we would like to reproduce John Sinclair's prefatory remarks (CCELD : 1987) which seem relevant in the discussion of the past perfective in general and the non-factual past perfective in particular. Sinclair is talking about usage and authority the battle between which seems never ending:

These concepts must support each other or no-one will respect either of them. If their close relationship breaks down, and authority is not backed up by usage, than no-one will respect it. It will be seen as unrealistic, arbitrary, old-fashioned and a barrier to free expression.

Similarly, no-one will respect usage if it is merely an unedited record of what people say and write. Unless they have the support of authority, people will be unable to distinguish between good and bad usage; it will not be possible to teach or use the language with any confidence. Those people ... will become quite upset if the whims and fashions of usage are not tempered by some yardstick or standard.

One of the major points that the present study seeks to highlight is that this needed balance is glaringly lacking in the case of the past perfective in English.