

## *The BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English: A Guide to Word Combinations*

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THE BBI COMBINATORY DICTIONARY OF ENGLISH: A GUIDE TO WORD COMBINATIONS. Morton Benson, Evelyn Benson, and Robert Ilson. Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1986. pp. 286 + xxxvi. \$22.00 hardback, \$10.00 paperback.

The promotional material accompanying *The BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English* hails it as "a new kind of dictionary, one you've never seen before. For those who have been perfectly happy with the "old" kinds of dictionaries and never thought of using anything else, a number of questions immediately come to mind: What is "new" about this one? What does it do? Why is it needed?

Further fueling one's curiosity is the fact that this dictionary has a relatively small number of entries (fewer than 15,000) and does not provide many of the features one normally expects in a dictionary. For instance, it does not indicate how a word is pronounced (except to differentiate homographs, such as bow /bau/ and bow /bou/). There is not even a hint of word etymologies. And most surprisingly, many entries do not even include definitions.

What *The BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English* does provide, however, makes it an extremely valuable reference book for students and teachers of English as a second language (and for native speakers of English also, although to a lesser degree). This "new kind of dictionary" specializes

in the thousands of lexical and grammatical collocations (word combinations) which are critically important yet discouragingly difficult for ESL students to master.

Word combinations in English are no simple matter. The introduction to *The BBI Combinatory Dictionary* lists eight different types of grammatical collocations (noun + prepositions combinations, nouns followed by to + infinitive, nouns that can be followed by a that clause, preposition + noun combinations, adjective + preposition combinations, etc.) and seven major types of lexical collocations (verb + noun/pronoun, adjective + noun, noun + verb, units associated with a noun, and verb + adverb).

It doesn't take much ESL teaching experience to know that the intricacies of these combinations cause no end of trouble for most ESL students who often produce sentences such as, *He did suicide.* or *He bore a strong resemblance with his brother.*

Traditional dictionaries offer little help in such matters, but *The Combinatory Dictionary of English* provides a solution to problems of this nature. For example, opening the book to pages 116-117, students who may have written *The storm did havoc to the city.* can learn that the appropriate verbs to use with *havoc* are *play*, *raise*, or *wreak* and that the proper following preposition is *with*. Entries on the

same two pages explain that one *commits* harakiri, *overcomes* a handicap, *makes* haste, and *battens down* the hatches. Additional entries (still on the same two pages) help ESL learners with other troublesome points—for example: Traditions are handed *on* to the next generation, but handed *down from* previous ones. And if you give someone a handshake, it can be *firm* or *warm* (but not *hot*).

In the past, when your ESL students came to you with word combination problems, about all you could respond was, "We don't say it that way. Those are English words, but they don't go together."

Now you can reply, "Look it up in the *Combinatory Dictionary*."

While this "new kind of dictionary" does not offer many of the features that one expects in a dictionary, it contains a wealth of important and useful information that dictionaries have traditionally failed to provide. Thus, *The BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English* is intended to supplement, rather than supplant, the "old kind" of dictionaries. In that complementary role, it is a valuable reference book that ESL learners and teachers ought to have and keep handy.