

A nice dictionary, but how can I find what I want?  
— On the *Longman Language Activator*

TAEKO TOMIOKA

**Abstract:**

A few years have passed since *Longman Language Activator* (henceforward *Activator*) was published as “the world’s first production dictionary”. In spite of the fact that this dictionary is filled with natural and authentic example sentences, inspiring definitions and a number of clever features to help students striving to convert meanings into words, it still doesn’t seem to have become very popular among Japanese students. In this paper, I will show how difficult it often is to get to what you want to say, especially for Japanese students of English. Then I will suggest how it could be improved.

**Introduction**

When *Activator* was published, everyone was surprised by its unprecedented attempt to help students express natural English. This dictionary was created based on a thorough study of various corpora, including second language learners’ corpus. Careful attention was paid to choosing only useful and common expressions for the production part of language activities. As is proudly stated in the introduction, this is an “encoding” dictionary, not a “decoding” dictionary. After browsing through this dictionary more carefully, I was even more impressed with its striking features. It is filled with useful expressions, authentic example sentences, and explanations to help students understand the differences among several expressions and their usage. Since this is fully described in Miyai et al. (1995) and Tomioka (1996), I’ll not repeat it here.

The problem arises when students have this dictionary in front of them,

have some idea they want to put into English and they don’t easily succeed in finding the expressions they want. I’ll discuss below several problems in the look-up system of this dictionary, show how it is actually difficult for Japanese students to find the expressions they want, based on an experiment I conducted, and then suggest some possible solutions to these problems.

**Problems**

Since this dictionary is completely written in English, users should start with the Key Word which they think represents or is related to the ideas they want to express. For example, if you are looking for the expression meaning “to walk very softly and stealthily on the tips of the toes, not to be heard,” you have to conclude that it is a manner of walking, so it should be under the Key Word **WALK**. Sure enough, as is shown in the Fig.1 below, it leads to the idea “to walk quietly with light steps” and then to the word “tiptoe” along with several other expressions like “pad,” “creep” or

**WALK**

- 1 to walk
- 2 to walk very quickly
- 3 to walk slowly and in a relaxed way
- 4 to walk slowly because you are tired and have been walking for a long time
- 5 to walk slowly and with difficulty, for example because of illness, pain, or old age
- 6 to walk in an unsteady way
- 7 to walk with heavy, noisy steps
- 8 to walk quietly with light steps
- 9 to walk proudly
- 10 to walk around a place without any particular aim
- 11 to walk for exercise and enjoyment
- 12 to walk through water
- 13 ways of saying that a group of people, especially soldiers, walk together at the same speed
- 14 to walk carefully and slowly, for example because it is dark or the ground is not level
- 15 an occasion when you walk somewhere, especially for exercise or enjoyment
- 16 a single movement made when you are walking
- 17 the way someone walks
- 18 someone who is walking rather than travelling in a car, bus etc, especially in the city
- 19 to take a person or dog out and walk with them in order to give them exercise

Fig. 1 Key Word WALK

**8** to walk quietly with light steps

<b>pad</b>	<b>tiptoe</b>
<b>creep</b>	<b>sneak</b>

**pad** /pæd/ to walk quietly and steadily, without shoes or with soft shoes, or on a soft surface [v I]  
**pad along/down/in etc** Nurse Garcia *padding ahead of the visitors down the long corridor.* | *The cat came padding softly across the kitchen floor and jumped into my lap.*

**creep** /kri:p/ to walk quietly, slowly, and carefully, especially so that no one notices you [v I]  
**creep in/through/across etc** Sara *crept carefully down the stairs in the middle of the night and left the house.* | *Someone crept into the cloakroom and went through all our coats and bags.* | **creep up** (=creep towards) *I watched the cat creep up behind a bird.*

**tiptoe** /'tiptəʊ/ to walk on the front part of your feet but not on your heels, because you want to avoid making any noise [v I]  
**tiptoe past/through/around etc** Bobby *tiptoed past his daughter's bedroom so as not to wake her.* | *They tiptoed from room to room, afraid to speak above a whisper.*

**sneak** /sni:k/ to walk quietly, trying to hide from someone, especially because you are doing something wrong and do not want to be caught [v I]  
**sneak in** *The thieves sneaked in when the guard had his back turned.* | *Molly snuck in through the back yard so her parents wouldn't wake up and see how late it was.* | **sneak off** *We tried to sneak off from work early.*

Fig. 2 WALK 8 to walk quietly with light steps

“sneak” as in Fig. 2. In this dictionary ideas are grouped into 1052 semantic concepts called Key Words so that users can find the expressions only from the meaning. If users cannot think of or find an appropriate Key Word but they know a similar or related word to the idea, they can look for the words in a list of headwords, which is also alphabetically presented in the body of the dictionary. The list itself doesn't give any definition or explanation, but it leads to likely Key Words. In this case, if users cannot think of the Key Word, **WALK**, but do happen to know the expression “sneak”, then they can start there.

The question is whether this look-up system is efficient and friendly enough for the user. In other words, can the users easily think of an appropriate Key Word and that without taking too long?

One example shows there is a problem. If the user is looking for the expression meaning “squeeze the windpipe or neck of somebody, esp. so as to kill,” or “to kill someone by pressing on their throat with both hands or with something such as a piece of string,” what is the appropriate Key Word for that? “squeeze”, “neck”, “kill”, “murder” or “throat”? “squeeze” is found in the list of headwords and it leads to several Key Words as in Fig. 3, but none of them leads to the expression you want. “kill” is a Key Word and as is shown in Fig. 4, it does lead to several ways

**squashed** SQUASH 2  
**squashy** SOFT 2  
**squat** LIVE SOMEWHERE 2, LOW 3, SHORT PERSON 1, SIT 3  
**squat/squat down** SIT 1  
**squeak** SOUND 7  
**squeaky** HIGH SOUND OR VOICE 1  
**squeal** SCREAM 1, 2, TELL 11  
**squeeze** FIT/BE THE RIGHT SIZE 5, GET 9, PRESS 5, 6, PUSH 6  
**squeeze: a light squeeze** SPACE/ROOM 3  
**squeeze: it's a squeeze** FIT/BE THE RIGHT SIZE 5  
**squeeze in** TIME/HAVE TIME 4  
**squelch** SOUND 16  
**squelchy** SOFT 2  
**squint** LOOK AT 6  
**squirm** EMBARRASSED 1, MOVE/CHANGE POSITION 5  
**squirt** LIQUID 5, SHORT PERSON 3  
**squishy** SOFT 2  
**stab: have a stab at** TRY TO DO OR GET STH 4  
**stab sb in the back** BETRAY 2

Fig. 3 “squeeze” in the list of headwords

## KILL

- 1 to kill someone
- 2 the act or crime of killing someone
- 3 an unsuccessful attempt to kill someone
- 4 someone who kills another person
- 5 likely to kill or intending to kill
- 6 ways of saying that something such as an accident, a disease, or a chemical causes death
- 7 words for describing something that can kill you
- 8 to kill a large number of people
- 9 the killing of a large number of people
- 10 to legally kill someone as a punishment for a serious crime
- 11 words for describing someone who is going to be killed as an official punishment to kill yourself
- 12 the painless killing of someone who is extremely ill
- 14 to kill an animal, for example in order to get food or to end the animal's suffering

Fig. 4 Key Word **KILL**

of killing a person, including capital punishment, euthanasia or suicide, but not the expression “strangle.” In this case, the appropriate Key Word was “breathe”. Key Word **BREATHE** has several express-

## FINISH/COME TO AN END

- 1 ways of saying that an event, activity, story, situation etc ends
- 2 ways of saying that a period of time ends
- 3 ways of saying that the time that you have to do something in is finished
- 4 ways of saying that a problem or bad experience has ended
- 5 ways of saying that documents, tickets, agreements etc are no longer legal, or can no longer be used

- |   |                |
|---|----------------|
| 1 ways of saying that an event, activity, story, situation etc ends |                |
| end   | come to an end |
| finish  | be at an end   |
| be over   |                |

### end

*end* /end/ [v I]  
*The war in Vietnam finally ended in 1975. | Their marriage ended after only two years. | The question-and-answer session begins at 2.30. I'm not sure when it'll end. | The story ends on a hopeful note. | end with* Our celebrations will end with a spectacular fireworks display. | *The movie ended with everyone riding off into the sunset. | end in* Our discussions always end in an argument.

*finish* /'fɪnɪʃ/ if something such as a film, meeting, or lesson finishes at a particular time, it ends at that time [v I]  
*"What time does school finish?" "At 3.00." | The movie should have finished by now. They'll be home soon. | Do you think their meeting will be finishing soon?*

*be over* /bi: 'əʊvə/ if an event or an activity is over, it has ended [phr v I]

*The show should be over by ten, at the latest. | Let's go home. I think the party's just about over, anyway. | Right, that's the formal part of the interview over. Is there anything you'd like to ask us? | be all over* (=be completely finished)  
*It's all over between me and Jerry. I'm leaving him. | That's it - Wimbledon is all over for another year.*

*come to an end* /,kʌm tu ən 'end/ if a situation or event comes to an end, especially one that has continued for some time, it ends because it cannot continue any longer [v phrase]

*When this temporary job comes to an end, I'll be unemployed again. | When she finally got to the barbecue, things were coming to an end, so she didn't stay long. | The team's run of success seems to have come to an end.*

*be at an end* /bi: at ən 'end/ a formal expression: if something such as a meeting or conversation is at an end, it has ended because someone wanted it to end [v phrase]  
*I regret to say that our friendly relationship is now at an end. | The young man stood up, realizing that the interview was at an end.*

Fig. 5 **FINISH/COME TO AN END**

1 ways of saying that an event, activity, story, situation etc. ends

## STOP HAPPENING

- 1 to stop happening
- 2 ways of saying that a fire stops burning

- |                     |            |
|---------------------|------------|
| 1 to stop happening |            |
| stop                | fizzle out |
| cease               | peter out  |
| come to an end      | wear off   |

*stop* /stɒp/ [v I]  
*When will all the fighting stop? | Catherine stood watching the rain, hoping it would stop soon. | As suddenly as it had started, the hammering noise stopped. | Pollution will not stop unless you make it financially painful for the companies responsible.*

*cease* /si:s/ a formal or technical word meaning to stop happening [v I]  
*The malarial attacks occurred less frequently and after six months they had ceased. | Presently, the rain ceased and the sun came out, making the roads steam. | At absolute zero all molecular motion ceases.*

*come to an end* /,kʌm tu ən 'end/ if something comes to an end, especially something that has been happening for a long time, it stops happening [v phrase]  
*When Mr Lewis retired, the company's annual day trips came to an end. | The college closed as a centre of agricultural research and their experiments came to an end in 1870. | All good things must come to an end.*

*fizzle out* /'fɪzəl 'aʊt/ an informal expression meaning to gradually stop happening, especially because people become less interested in it [phr v I]  
*Student protests usually fizzle out at examination time. | When we first moved here, he was really keen to do the decorating and cleaning, but that soon fizzled out.*

*peter out* /'pi:tə 'aʊt/ to gradually stop happening, for no particular reason [phr v I]  
*Our meetings were quite frequent at first, but then they just petered out. | Complaints about the school petered out and it began to re-establish its reputation.*

*wear off* /'wiə 'ɒf/ if pain or the effect of something wears off, it gradually becomes less until it stops altogether [phr v I]  
*The effects of the anaesthetic will wear off within a few hours. | The shock has not worn off yet and he seems to be walking around in a daze. | The novelty wears off (=when you stop feeling interested or excited about something because it is no longer new) "He won't leave his new computer alone." "Don't worry - the novelty will soon wear off."*

Fig. 6 Key Word **STOP HAPPENING**

ions like “choke” “suffocate” “strangle” and “smother” in its tenth meaning — “to kill someone by stopping them from breathing.” It is a little surprising and misleading not only for students but also for us English teachers that some manners of killing are grouped under **KILL**, while others are under **BREATHE**. Users may try all the possibilities above, and yet still find nothing.

Another problem is that similar expressions are under different Key Words and there is no way to go from one to another unless we think of other appropriate Key Words. For example, we would think the expression “to finish/end feebly” would be under the Key Word **FINISH/COME TO AN END** (see Fig. 5), because it is a manner of something coming to an end. But there we can only find the expressions meaning “finish/end” and the meaning we are looking for is, in fact, under **STOP HAPPENING** as is shown in Fig. 6. You need to be able to think of that Key Word to find some interesting expressions such as **fizzle out**, **peter out**, or **wear off**. Also another similar expression **die away** is under **DISAPPEAR**. (see Fig. 7) These words scattered under separate Key Words have very close meanings and it would be very useful for the users to be able to know where else other similar expressions might be, but there is no device in this dictionary to retrieve expressions similar to each other.

The last problem I'd like to present here is how many times the students have to turn pages to get to what they want. Unlike regular Japanese-English dictionaries, where you just go to Japanese headwords and the translations of those words are given, you have to first go

**2** ways of saying that a sound, feeling etc disappears

<p><b>disappear</b>  ,dɪsə'piəʃ  [v I] I was lying in bed with terrible back pain and suddenly the pain just disappeared.   You need time to get over it. Grief doesn't disappear overnight, you know.</p> <p><b>fade away</b>  ,feɪd ə'weɪ  to gradually disappear over a long time (phr v I) The laughter faded away when they realized that the man was actually dead.   As the last notes of the song faded away the audience began to applaud wildly.   The memory of the experience faded away over the following months.</p> <p><b>wear off</b>  ,weər ɔf    -'ɔ:ʃ  if something, especially the effect of something, wears off, the effect gradually disappears (phr v I) The pain seemed to get worse as the anaesthetic wore off.   The effects of child abuse never wear off.   Once the initial shock has worn off you'll realize that things aren't as bad as you first thought.</p> <p><b>go away</b>  ,gəʊ ə'weɪ  if an unpleasant feeling, situation etc goes away, it disappears, especially when you have been trying to get rid of it for a long time (phr v I) I'm sure the problem will go away in the next week or so.   I can't do anything to make this headache go away.   His shyness soon went away when he started school.</p> <p><b>die away</b>  ,daɪ ə'weɪ  a word used especially in literature meaning to gradually disappear (phr v I) As the rhythm of the music died away screams could be heard in the distance.   The sound of the drumming hooves grew fainter and eventually died away.</p>	<p><b>go away</b> <b>die away</b></p>
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Fig. 7 **DISAPPEAR** 2 ways of saying that a sound, feeling etc. disappears

to the Key Word which you think is appropriate. Out of the several meanings given there, you then choose the one close to your idea, and then go to that section. There is, therefore, always one step more to take even if you can decide on the best Key Word. If the Key Word you first thought of doesn't work, then you have to double or triple these steps. The more the students have to turn pages, the more frustrating and less likable it will become to use this dictionary.

It is also really a shame not to be able to easily access the wonderful information Activator contains.

### The Experiment

I conducted an experiment in order to see how easy or difficult it was for Japanese students to access the expressions they wanted. A questionnaire which looks like Fig. 8 (p. 26) was given to 35 junior college students (30 female and 5 male) at Sanno. They were between age 18 and 20. Their level of English was between low-intermediate and intermediate. None of them had used this dictionary before, nor had they known about this dictionary.

After a full explanation of the Key Word system using real examples, the students were asked to write down possible words or expressions they might use as a Key Word or they might look up in the list of headwords. The meanings were given as Japanese words. They had a 1052 Key Word list copied from the back part of Activator, but they didn't have an actual dictionary at hand. They were allowed to give as many as four candidates, but they were asked to write them in the order that they would look them up. If they could not come up with any appropriate English word, they were allowed to answer in Japanese. If they happened to know the exact expression for the meaning, they were also allowed to write it down along with other possible Key Words. Then their answers were scored depending on whether they would actually lead to the desired expressions.

### Discussions

As is shown in Fig. 9 (p. 27), very few students successfully found the expressions. The most difficult ones were “prosecution” and “temporary,”

and only 6 to 8% succeeded, although for “talkative” and “burn,” about 60 to 70% did.

Table 1 below shows the overall performance of each student, in other words, out of ten meanings they were given, how many they got as their first choice — only a little over two. Even after adding their second to fourth choices, their success rate is only 37%. If they can find what they want only four times out of ten and that with lots of turning pages, you cannot blame the students for not wanting to use that dictionary.

Table 1 Average scores of finding the words

	First choice	Other choices	Total
Average/10	2.286	1.429	3.771

Table 2 on the next page shows all the words the students thought appropriate for the Key Words or look-up words. The numbers on the left of the words show how many students chose. The shadowed words are the ones which successfully led to the expressions and the numbers on the right in circle show how many times they had to turn pages to get to the expressions.

Table 2 suggests several problems Activator’s look-up system has:

- 1) It is tremendously difficult for students to find what they want in this dictionary unless their semantic association or grouping is exactly the same as Longman researchers’. And yet their categorization is not necessarily consistent.
- 2) The students often made very language specific associations.
- 3) You sometimes need to know the exact word to get to the expressions, which spoils the purpose of the dictionary.  
[Examples] “temporary” in #1, “cure/treat” in #2, etc.
- 4) Even if you know words very close to the meaning, this look-up system sometimes fails to lead the user to the expressions.  
[Examples] “fever” in #4, “crazy” in #5 “weight” in #8, etc.

Since the third and fourth problems are very obvious, let me talk about the first two problems. “talkative” in #9 and “prolific” in #10 are each likely to be grouped under “talk,” “much/a lot” and “produce/make,” “much/a lot” respectively. But actually, “talkative” can be found from the

Table 2 The words students chose as Key Words or look-up words

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
臨時の一時的な temporary 23 fine 9 short 3 temporary 3 sudden(y) 3 special 3 little 3 immediate(y) 3 sometimes 3 part/part time 2 one time always at once continuous exception extra hurry just keep limit moment on permanent seldom stop train urgent vacation watch 仮の	治す・治療する cure/treat 14 hospital 12 care 6 treatment 6 sick 5 treat 2 illness 8 doctor 4 cure 2 well 2 repair 2 medicine 2 hurt 2 body ache do ache drug examine head kill leg mend pain patient recover symptom take care x-ray	やけどする burn oneself 19 fire 14 hot 9 heat 6 injure/injury 6 burn 3 skin 3 cool 2 body 2 water 2 stove 2 hand ache blister do electric foot oven sun sunburn suntan touch	熱がある feverish 17 hot 14 cold 12 heat 11 sick/ill 9 fever 2 headache 2 head temperature aspire call catch cool disease have ice measure sluggish tired	夢中になる crazy about 21 dream 6 hard 5 like interested interesting 3 hobby 2 study 2 sleep 2 heat absorbed love interest become bury concentrate crazy do nothing but excited fan fumatic fever forget hope in night only running straight try work 必死 熱心な 没頭する	潜水する submerge 26 water 10 swim(ming) 5 sink 9 down 4 under 6 sea 8 dive/diving 3 submarine 2 ship 2 in 2 boat bottom cave deep flood into knack marine river through undersea	検閲例 prosecution 17 polluted(man) 6 judge 4 trial 4 law 4 court 3 lawyer 2 judgement 2 examine defendant defense 2 criminal 2 crime accuse chairperson check defend disclosure justice offense officer plaintiff prison protection question research side support 正義の味方	やせる lose weight 22 diet 10 slim 8 fat 5 thin 5 food 3 weight 3 slender 3 down 2 smart 2 eat burn decrease healthy heavy lessen light limit little meat narrow shape sharp sick size sport sunk thinly weaken woman	多弁な talkative 21 speak 3 talk 7 many/much talkative 4 speaker 3 word(s) 3 noise/noisy 2 tell 2 speech 2 language 2 chat 2 a lot say chairman comedian eloquent more politician shut up speechful speed voice well	多産な prolific 16 many/much 10 born 6 child 4 produce 4 make 4 a lot 2 product 2 pregnant 2 mother 2 money 2 bear 2 baby big birth create dog full goods lie long many children more parent plenty of rich

words **talk**, **speak**, **say**, but not from **much/a lot**, while “prolific” can be only found from **much/a lot**, not from **produce/make**. In the same way, “submerge” is searchable from the Key Word **DOWN**, but “lose weight” is not, even if you can think a person’s weight “goes down”. The Key Word **DOWN** has various meanings concerning several things going down; such as the sun, an airplane, a person, a car, etc. It also includes something with less physical movement such as **demote**, **downgrade**, but it does not include “The airplane crashes,” “The stock market slumps,” or “The company goes bankrupt.” This shows how the semantic categorization is often very unpredictable and it takes a lot of trial and error to get to what you want.

The second problem is that some associations the students made seem very language specific. For example, because of Kanji compounds *muchuu* (dream + in) — “be crazy about” and *sensui* (dive + water) — “submerge,” or *ichijitekina* (one + time) — “temporary,” 60 to 75% students answered “dream,” “water” and “time” as their candidates. Some semantic association is strongly influenced by the user’s native language. In the same way, Japanese students tend to look for the expression “His reputation is damaged,” and “corrupt” under **DOWN**, because in Japanese “the reputation goes down” is a very idiomatic expression and “corrupt” is remembered as a Kanji compound *daraku* (fall + down).

### Conclusion

Since it is almost impossible to make the semantic categorization perfect and also it is inconceivable to force the users to abandon their language specific association, or to learn the Activator’s look-up system thoroughly, what we need is a comprehensive mutual look-up system and an index in the user’s native language.

If some manners of killing are grouped under **BREATHE**, and not under **KILL**, there should be a cross reference which indicates the other ones. Then **fizzle out**, **peter out**, **wear off**, **fade away**, **die away** can be easily reached and we can find the expressions **defendant**, **prosecution**, **jury**, **attorney**, **plaintiff**, etc. just by looking up the word “court.” These links to connect similar or related expressions should be much more pow-

erful to make consulting a dictionary more interesting and fruitful.

An index in Japanese might make this dictionary even thicker, but it would solve all the frustration of trying to think of a good Key Word. As shown in Table 2, it was comparatively easy for some words such as “burn” in #3, “feverish” in #4, “submerge” in #6 or “talkative” in #9. About half the students got what they wanted. But for some other words it was almost impossible to think of good Key Words, while the students knew exactly what they were looking for in Japanese. Longman Essential Activator, a reduced and more friendly-looking version of this dictionary was recently published. It has a list of headwords at the back instead of in the body of the dictionary. In the same way, Activator’s Japanese index could be arranged at the back of the dictionary alphabetically, mixed up with the headword and Key Word list.

Finally, the problem of all the page-turning would be solved by making this dictionary electronic, like one on a CD-ROM. Then the thickness or heaviness of the dictionary would be nothing but an advantage and it could include more example sentences or more usage or grammatical explanations if necessary. We wouldn’t have to worry about the physical size of the dictionary.

It might take another few years of research and a lot of manpower to realize all which was suggested here, especially because if Japanese students need a Japanese index, students speaking other languages need indexes in other languages too. But I’m sure then all students would fall in love with this dictionary.

### REFERENCES

- Miyai, Shoji, Hiroko Saito, Rumi Takahashi and Kazuo Dohi. 1995. An analysis of the Longman Language Activator: The World’s First Production Dictionary, LEXICON 25, 26–76.
- Tomiooka, Taeko. 1996. On the Longman Language Activator and its Productivity, Sanno Junior College Journal 29, 67–81.

Fig. 8 Questionnaire

Longman Language Activator に関する調査

どちらかに○をつけてください

男性・女性

- (例1) 有り難く思う    thank, obliged, grateful, appreciate 感謝する
- (例2) 盗み聞きをする    listen, hear, steal, pay attention 盗聴する
- (例3) 万引きする    steal, shop, pick up 盗む
- (例4) 昇進する    up, go up, move up, step up, job

下記の日本語ような「意味」の英語を見つけるのにふさわしいと思うキーワードまたは英単語を思いつく限り書いて下さい。ただし、一番可能性の高いと思われるものから書いて下さい。  
もし英単語がどうしても思い浮かばないときは、日本語の単語でもいいです。

- 1 随時の・一時的な    (    ) (    ) (    ) (    )
- 2 治す・治療する    (    ) (    ) (    ) (    )
- 3 やけどする    (    ) (    ) (    ) (    )
- 4 熱がある    (    ) (    ) (    ) (    )
- 5 夢中になる    (    ) (    ) (    ) (    )
- 6 潜水する    (    ) (    ) (    ) (    )
- 7 検察側    (    ) (    ) (    ) (    )
- 8 やせる    (    ) (    ) (    ) (    )
- 9 多弁な    (    ) (    ) (    ) (    )
- 10 多産な    (    ) (    ) (    ) (    )

以上です。ご協力有り難うございました！

Fig. 9 Percentage of the students finding the words

