

More on English Aspectual Verbs: a Lexicographic Investigation of *Start*

Daniele Franceschi

Abstract

This paper analyses the lexicographic entries for the verb *start* in the online editions of two unabridged dictionaries of English, namely the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Merriam-Webster Unabridged*, as well as in one learner's dictionary, i.e. the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, in order to examine how this highly frequent ingressive aspectualiser is treated in terms of the evolution of its various senses and by contrasting it with its near-synonyms. The study shows that dictionaries need to provide clearer and finer-grained information about the areas of overlap between *start*, *begin*, *initiate* and *commence*. Although these predicates share a similar semantic nucleus and may to a large extent enter the same syntactic constructions, they differ at a more subtle pragmatic level. This meaning dimension does not seem to be appropriately accounted for in dictionaries.

Keywords: English aspectual verbs, ingressive predicates, *start*, dictionaries.

1. Introduction

English aspectual verbs, i.e. those predicates that report the state of progression of a certain event, such as *start*, *continue*, *stop*, etc., have been analysed extensively in the linguistic literature and from multiple perspectives. In large part, studies have focused on their syntactic behaviour, in particular with respect to clausal complementation patterns (cf., among others, Brinton 1988; Wierzbicka 1988; Bailey 1993; Duffley 1999; Fukuda 2007; Mair 2009), and on the differences in their internal temporal semantics (Freed 1979; Tobin 1993). Since the 1990s, they have also been investigated in terms of the cognitive factors underlying their subcategorisation frame, i.e. the

types of (simple or more complex) constructions they participate in (Pustejovsky 1995; Pustejovsky and Bouillon 1995; Verspoor 1997; Egg 2003; Ziegeler 2007; Sweep 2010; 2011; Falkum 2011; Goldberg 1995; Franceschi 2014; 2015; 2017).

What is still missing today is an in-depth examination of when, how and why the different uses and senses of these predicates, and of the constructions embedding them, progressively emerged, became established, changed and in some cases went out of use. The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (OED) provides an incomplete diachronic description of the form-meaning pairings involving these predicates. In addition, information regarding frequency is coarse-grained and does not specify which syntactic contexts are more likely for a certain predicate to appear in. We know, for instance, that *initiate* is less frequent than *start* and *begin*, because it belongs to those lexical items that occur between 10 and 100 times per million words in typical modern English use (Band 6). *Start* and *begin*, by contrast, are ten times more frequent and are assigned to the frequency band of lexemes occurring between 100 and 1000 times per million words (Band 7), etc. What we do not know, however, is the frequency with which aspectual verbs appear in different types of constructions. This information would be relevant for both synchronic and diachronic investigations of their specific syntactic-semantic behaviour.

An additional aspect that has been neglected in dictionaries has to do with the extra-linguistic motivations behind language use. The OED provides details about the etymology of words and of their stylistic functions, but it does not motivate differences on other significant grounds, as in the case of near-synonymous words that are often interchangeable. The verb *commence*, for instance, is said to derive from Middle English *comence*, adapted from the Old French *cumencer*, *comencer* in its transitive use and to be “precisely equivalent to the native *begin* (which was however originally intransitive)”; the latter would be “preferred in ordinary use”, whereas *commence* would have “more formal associations with law and procedure, combat, divine service, and ceremonial”, thus continuing earlier Anglo-Norman use. None of the factors that go beyond historical linguistic facts seem to be addressed. However, lexicographic representation would be more complete if it also included references to other aspects,

e.g. pragmatic factors, that determine language use and language change.

For reasons of space, it will not be possible here to examine the syntactic-semantic evolution of all the aspectual verbs in English or to discuss the reasons that have affected their various representations. We will just focus on one predicate, namely *start*, which is the most common of all the aspectual verbs in present-day English (Franceschi 2015: 171). Section two analyses the transition from the prototypical patterns of the verb in the OED to its more peripheral uses that do not yet appear in the dictionary, in an attempt to exemplify how the syntactic and semantic properties of *start* can be manipulated to meet specific communicative needs and to show that lexicographic information may be enriched. Section three compares the entries for *start* in the OED with those included in the *Merriam-Webster Unabridged Online* (MWU) and in the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (CALD, 2008) with the aim of discussing the lexicographic choices made in two authoritative English dictionaries, considered as representative of the British and American varieties, and in one dictionary specially designed for learners and teachers of English. Section four illustrates some cases of non-lexicalised expressions involving aspectual verbs other than *start*, which now appear in crowdsourced websites recording new word uses and in less “standard” dictionaries. Section five finally draws some conclusions and proposes some ideas for future lexicographic work.

2. The evolution of *start*

The core semantics of *start* is strictly related to motion. According to the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, in Old English the verb originally referred to ‘leaping up’ or ‘moving swiftly/briskly’, while in Middle English this sense evolved to ‘awaken suddenly, flinch or recoil in alarm’; in Modern English it acquired the meaning of ‘causing to begin acting or operating’, also in the transitive sense of ‘setting in motion or action’. The senses of ‘setting machinery in action’ and ‘beginning to move/leave/depart’ without the implication of suddenness are from the 19th century.

The latter sense of ‘moving/leaving/departing’ of *start* is still preserved today in certain intransitive constructions, in which the

verb appears in combination with spatial prepositions denoting path, such as *to*, *toward(s)*, *for*, *forward(s)*, etc., e.g. *I started to school*, *he started toward the door*, *they started for the south*, etc. In these contexts, *start* still “evokes the notion of breaking out of a state of rest or inactivity” (Duffley 2006: 99) and “inherits” the syntactic and semantic properties of motion verbs, such as *go*, *walk*, *run*, *jump*, etc. (Newmeyer 1975: 52). Although the semantics of *start* has evolved over time and the verb now appears in various syntactic patterns, this initial sense of physical movement is still common. A corpus search was conducted to check the frequency of this meaning in naturally occurring data. The search was restricted to *start* in its simple past/past participle form immediately followed by a preposition that unambiguously produces a spatial interpretation¹. Table 1, which compares the raw frequencies of occurrence of the sequence *started toward(s)* in the British National Corpus (BNC), in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and in Google Books, suggests that the original motion sense is still a salient semantic feature of *start*. The low frequencies of this type of construction in the two main corpora of English might induce us to think that it is in fact no longer common and widespread. However, Google Books, which was searched for occurrences of this construction in the 20th and 21st centuries until 2017², shows that this pattern is still very well represented³.

¹ The decision to restrict the search to the simple past/past participle form of the verb was made to avoid coming across instances of *start* as a noun, e.g. *make a start*, which would have produced “noise”.

² The search was restricted to this period, because the BNC and COCA consist of texts produced in this time range, even though the former only contains data up to 1994. This fact may to a certain extent explain the reduced frequencies of occurrence of *started toward(s)* in the BNC. What the two main corpora of English seem to suggest, however, is that this pattern is losing ground, while Google Books reveals a different scenario.

³ Interestingly, since *toward* is more common in American English than in British English (cf. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/toward-towards-usage>), the results obtained from Google Books suggest that the motion sense of *start* in this specific syntactic context may be more common in American English, although the two corpora seem to contradict this tendency. However, this might be due to their more limited size.

TABLE 1
Raw frequencies of occurrence of *started toward(s)*

	BNC	COCA	Google Books
started toward	1	499	1,200,000
started towards	25	20	177,000

The motion sense of *start* appears as the first entry in the OED, but it is presented in a somewhat confusing way by lumping together its original inchoative function, e.g. *The two ladies, who had been transfixed with dismay by these proceedings, started forward* (1944, G. Heyer *Friday's Child*, xxv. 304), with its subsequent causative use, e.g. *My voice made a dozen black birds start out of the bushes and fly off, cawing* (2002, S. Waters *Fingersmith*, xvi. 620)⁴. The latter interpretation represents an evolution of the former, more basic sense, and should perhaps be treated separately. The fact that the causative interpretation of *start* developed from a prototypical inchoative sense and appeared at a later stage in the evolution of the English language is confirmed by the examples from Old and Middle English provided in the dictionary. None of them testify to the existence of this sense of *start*. In addition, the OED claims that the meaning of the verb without the implication of sudden onset of movement is now obsolete and only lists a citation from 1820: *Out started to the door the hoary leader of the horde himself* (*Blackwood's Edinb. Mag.* Apr. 50/1). According to the OED, *start* would convey the idea of motion with a sudden impulse also when used in association with an inanimate subject, typically a liquid (2008, L. K. Hamilton, *Blood Noir* 315, *Blood started out of his mouth*). On closer inspection of corpus data it can, however, be observed that *start* is widely used in contemporary English also to indicate movement without necessarily implying that this should be sudden or abrupt, as in *Maggie grabbed Gay's arm and started toward the back door*⁵ or *Tom breathed as he got to his feet and gingerly started toward*

⁴ The sense of causativity in this example is reinforced by the use of *made*. However, if we remove this predicate and change the sentence into *My voice started a dozen black birds out of the bushes [...]* we still obtain a causative interpretation, because the semantics of *start* has evolved to include this component of meaning.

⁵ Google Books search: Douglas, K. (2003), *Dead Ringer*, p. 296.

*the house*⁶, etc. This meaning is maintained not only in specific situations, as the OED's entry shows (1998, R. Parry *Wolf's Pack*, 2001, xi. 137, *His eyes started from his head*).

A distinct trend that can be observed when analysing the diachronic behaviour of *start* in the OED is its increased propensity towards transitivity. There are a number of intransitive patterns that appear to be losing ground and which are marked as obsolete, for example: its use with adverbs of direction (1658, J. Quarles, *Hist. Most Vile Dimagoras* i. 29, *He gaz'd, and then begun to start away, resolving to out-run the winged wind*); when reference is made to immaterial things with the meaning of 'passing away', 'departing', 'dissipating' or 'coming to nothing' (?1663, *Come Turn to Mee* (single sheet), *It doth grieve my heart from thee for to part... Yet in the absence of a friend, my love shall never start*); with the meaning of 'fleeing' or 'running away' (1907, J. M. Synge, *Playboy of Western World* iii. 67, Pegeen. *You've right daring to go ask me that, when all knows you'll be starting to some girl in your own townland, when your father's rotten in four months, or five. Christy. Starting from you, is it?*) or 'escaping' (1622, J. Taylor, *Water-cormorant*, sig. E2, *And thence [sc. from the jail] he gets not, there he shall not start, till the last drop of blood's wrong from his heart*), etc. This tendency is confirmed by performing a corpus search for *start* followed by the definite and the indefinite article (Table 2). In present-day English, this is now the most frequent and natural pattern, which outnumbers the other uses of *start* as a 'motion verb' or with an inchoative interpretation (e.g. *the storm started about 45 minutes ago*)⁷.

TABLE 2

Raw frequencies of occurrence of *started the/a*

	BNC	COCA	Google Books
<i>started the</i>	635	5137	13,400,000
<i>started a</i>	446	3864	9,090,000

⁶ Google Books search: Heffner, M.K. (2007), *My Heart Can't Tell You No*, p. 346.

⁷ Google Books search: Duffie, K.L. (2010), *Life Interrupted: In the Aftermath of My Son's Murder*, p. 133.

What is interesting to notice is that *start* now entails a highly causative meaning in transitive constructions, which appears to be an extension of its original ‘motion sense’. In other words, the idea of physical movement affecting the subject (e.g. *Before I could argue, he started toward the door*)⁸ seems to have progressively evolved into a more elaborate concept, whereby a certain event may be construed as ‘moving towards’ something, thus causing or producing certain effects (e.g. *In one case the avalanche started a fire, and the victims burnt to death while trapped in the debris*)⁹. Causativity therefore is a salient semantic feature of *start*, differentiating it from the other ingressive aspectualisers, such as *begin*, *commence* and *initiate*, that have a different semantic-pragmatic contour. The causative reading of *start* in transitive constructions appears to be more predominant than its uses in association with agents performing actions with no direct consequences on the objects (Table 3), e.g. *I have started my new book of poetry with a brand new outlook on life*¹⁰.

TABLE 3
Raw frequencies of occurrence of *started a fire/book*

	BNC	COCA	Google Books
<i>started a fire</i>	13	176	299,000
<i>started a book</i>	3	16	165,000

Further evidence for this behaviour may be obtained by using the Word Sketch function of Sketch Engine¹¹, typing in the lemma *start* and then analysing the number and type of the collocating objects. The words *engine*, *fire* and *career* are the three most frequent direct objects of the verb in the BNC; *starting an engine/a fire/a career* obviously implies ‘causing an engine, a fire and a career to start’.

⁸ Google Books search: Merrell, W. (2014), *Henry Sampson and the Great Galveston War*, p. 133.

⁹ Google Books search: Perla, R.I. & Martinelli, M. (1976), *Avalanche Handbook*, p. 180.

¹⁰ Google Books search: Potillo, T.C. (2011), *Poetry Through My Journey: Me, Myself and God*, p. 145.

¹¹ <http://www.sketchengine.eu>

An important syntactic pattern that exploits the highly causative semantics of *start* and which is well-represented in Google Books, but not in corpora, is the caused-motion construction, whereby an experiential object is understood as being affected by an action causing a figurative “move” towards something, i.e. sparking an interest and thus having an impact on the object itself, e.g. *Nirvana started me into music*¹². The OED does not acknowledge this use of *start*, although it now appears as established. This is a figurative interpretation of *start* that is not yet lexicalised, because the verb does not normally have this argument structure. However, this is not an ad-hoc formation built “on-the-fly” to satisfy the communicative requirements of a specific situation. The sequence *started me into*, for instance, appears over 3,000 times in Google Books. The OED does not seem to include complex patterns that often result from the adaptation of constructions typically involving other verb classes. This is also the case of the di-transitive construction, prototypically embedding verbs such as *give*, *bring*, *tell*, etc., that convey the idea of a transfer from an agent to a beneficiary, but which is also possible with *start*, as in [...] *now some bird or wind had dropped a berry and started me a new crop* [...] ¹³. Finally, *start* may also be subsumed under the reflexive construction, e.g. *Suddenly the car started itself*¹⁴, even though this syntactic pattern is not a hallmark of ingressive predicates, but rather of those verbs requiring obligatory reflexive objects, such as *behave*, *better*, *pride*, and of some verbs of appearance, such as *offer*, *present*, *suggest*, etc.

In short, the semantics of *start* has evolved from an original sense of ‘moving/springing suddenly or in alarm’ to a causative interpretation, which in the second half of the 17th century also referred to the act of setting in action. The first rudimentary steam engines had begun to be used exactly in that period and this important event obviously had an impact on language change. As we have seen above, *start* still today collocates very frequently with the word *engine* and the ‘cause to begin operating’ sense remains a central one in present-day English. The motion sense of *start* without the

¹² Google Books search: *Spin* magazine (2004), Volume 20, Issue 4, p. 68.

¹³ Google Books search: Stegner, W. (1991), *All the Little Live Things*, p. 42.

¹⁴ Google Books search: Chifunyise, S. (2002), *The Ghost Car of Chegutu and Other Stories*, p. 27.

implication of suddenness is instead a development that dates back to the beginning of the 19th century, when sporting events, especially cricket matches and horse races, had become popular. The semantics of *start* was therefore adapted to refer to motion in a much broader sense. This is another example of how the development and change of societal aspects may modulate language use. Lastly, over the past few decades there has been a complexification process involving the use of *start*, which now also enters constructions normally served by other predicates and that do not (yet) appear in dictionaries. It can be argued that the semantics of *start* has undergone significant transformations, progressively taking on new figurative meanings.

3. *The Oxford English Dictionary vis-à-vis the Merriam-Webster Unabridged and the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*

The first thing that one notices when comparing the OED with the MWU is that the latter presents less detailed information for *start*, with no reference to frequency of occurrence, scarce details about etymology and no precise indication of the sources where the example sentences are taken from. Most of the citations in the MWU are from literary works, but exact references are not provided (e.g. *everywhere men and women started from their beds at the shots* – Marjory S. Douglas) and in several cases the citations are only partial (e.g. *started from my sleep with horror* – Mary W. Shelley). In addition, while the OED lists citations in an organised, chronological order, the MWU includes example sentences from the works of both contemporary and past/classical authors in the same sections. To exemplify the meaning of *start* as ‘reacting with a sudden brief involuntary movement’, for instance, the MWU provides citations by Margaret Deland (*stepped stealthily, and started when a twig snapped underfoot*), Rose Macaulay (*she never starts or shows surprise*) but also by Shakespeare (*why do you start and seem to fear things that do sound so fair*). This obviously impinges on the understanding of the diachronic syntactic-semantic development of the verb.

Similarly to what happens in the OED, the inchoative and causative senses of *start* are not clearly distinguished in the MWU. Although the intransitive uses of the verb are listed first, both dictionaries fail to acknowledge that the causative interpretation of

start is an evolution of its more basic sense of moving not as a direct consequence of another activity or event.

A crucial aspect of meaning that enables us to distinguish between *start* and its synonyms, in particular *begin*, is completely overlooked both in the OED and in the MWU. When *start* is complemented by the *to*-infinitive construction and is associated to certain types of verbs (typically semelfactive predicates) it may have a non-implicative sense, which is instead not licensed by *begin* in the same context. The action of sneezing, for instance, which expresses semelfactive ‘Aktionsart’, i.e. one denoting a punctual but atelic event, may be negated when introduced by *start*, e.g. *she started to sneeze but then she didn’t sneeze*. On the other hand, we would obtain a wrong sentence if we replaced *start* with *begin* (**she began to sneeze but then she didn’t sneeze*). This is because the former has a prospective future sense among its meanings (i.e. the event is constructed as if the person in question had just huffed and snuffed without actually exploding into a sneeze), whereby the action is only approached but not performed. It is as if *start to* could be paraphrased as ‘be about to’ in certain contexts, a possibility that is ruled out for *begin*, which is always implicative of the situation it introduces. This pragmatic aspect of meaning is fundamental and should be somehow mentioned in dictionaries, especially learner’s dictionaries.

The *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* instead presents *start* as an exact synonym of *begin*. This is rather confusing for the EFL learner, who cannot clearly distinguish between the two verbs and is thus induced to use them as exact synonyms, although there is a grammar section that partly clarifies the difference (e.g. *start*, and not *begin*, is used to talk about machines, as in *Press this button to start the printer*, and about creating a new business, as in *She started a new restaurant and it’s been going really well*). CALD presents just the two major syntactic patterns in which *start* typically appears, i.e. the gerund and the *to*-infinitive clause, and some fixed uses involving prepositions. There is one example of a colloquial use of *start* (*don’t get me started*), but no information concerning its origin or evolution¹⁵. Rather misleadingly, CALD claims in the

¹⁵ Information concerning origin and evolution is almost always absent from learner’s dictionaries. The only exception I am aware of is the basic ‘word origin’

grammar section that “we can use the verbs *begin* and *start* to mean the same thing but *begin* is more formal than *start*”. In addition to contradicting the previous statements about the difference between the two verbs (e.g. the reason why *Press this button to start the printer* is possible, while **Press this button to begin the printer* is not, is due to their different core semantics), this is simply not true. How can we argue, for instance, that ‘beginning a book’ is more formal than ‘starting a book’? It is obvious that the areas of contrast between the two predicates are to be found elsewhere and that CALD should offer to the learner a more fine-grained description of their different use.

The lack of appropriate comparisons between synonymous words is perhaps one of the main shortcomings of general dictionaries¹⁶. The OED, which is recognised as the most comprehensive English dictionary in existence, does not provide sufficient cross-referential information to disambiguate apparently similar words. *Start* and *initiate*, for instance, are presented as semantically related in their transitive use “originally with reference to the promulgation or circulation of a belief, opinion, rumour or the like; later also with reference to the initiation of an argument or dispute, the establishing of a custom, etc., or to the fact of being the first to be active in (a matter), engage in (a practice), practise (an art), etc., e.g. *Sometimes one big group of guys would start a rumour that another big group of guys... were around the corner right now* (2005, N. Brooks *My Name is Denise Forrester*, 219)”. However, it is not clear that, despite a certain degree of similarity and also interchangeability, only *initiate* appears to trigger an inferential process whereby the beginning of the situation referred to is figuratively associated to the performance of an official, ceremonial and/or religious act (e.g. *First she initiated me into the spirituality of the divine effigies*)¹⁷. In contrast to *start*, *initiate* also seems to impose an animacy constraint on its subjects,

information given for many of the single-word entries in digital versions of some of the Oxford University Press dictionaries. However, it may be of help in some cases to understand where the semantics of certain lexical items stems from and thus be able to use them more appropriately.

¹⁶ Hence, the creation of lexical resources such as WordNet and FrameNet to account for and describe the ramified relations existing in the lexicon.

¹⁷ Google Books search: Teissier Landgraf, M.C. (1995), *The Russian from Belfort*, p. 83.

for example *Georgians claim that the Abkhaz initiated the hostilities*¹⁸ vs. *the flood started our troubles* (Freed 1979: 78)¹⁹, and it may be understood metaphorically as ‘pioneering’ (*Gibbon initiated open heart surgeries using the heart-lung machine*)²⁰. There is a stronger sense of rituality associated to *initiate*, which is instead not so strongly felt with the more neutral *start*.

4. Some non-lexicalised uses of aspectual verbs

There are a number of uses of aspectual verbs that are not yet present in the mainstream dictionaries of English, but which can easily be retrieved via Google Books or in lesser known dictionaries, such as *Green’s Dictionary of Slang* (GDS). The latter is a particularly useful reference work to observe the changing behaviour of these predicates in informal conversation. The GDS also indicates in which variety of English a certain new use first appears. On the other hand, the OED lists, for instance, the colloquial expression *Don’t start!* with several examples from the 20th century, but it does not tell us that the first recorded use is found in Australian English in 1885; it then also appeared in British English by 1937 and eventually in American English by 1977. This information is instead provided in the GDS.

The *Urban Dictionary* (UD), a user-generated database of slang and popular terms, is another interesting source for new, non-lexicalised words and expressions that may be indicators of lexical development. The verb *commence*, whose semantics typically evokes a sense of an official beginning (e.g. *Serious and solemn they commenced the meeting*)²¹, now also appears to ironically indicate the beginning of something that is in fact not so formal or important *per se*, such as the act of drinking alcohol – hence the irony. According to the UD, *commence* has the new meaning of ‘initiating the consumption of alcoholic beverages, quickly and efficiently’

¹⁸ Google Books search: Van Hear, N., McDowell, C. (2006), *Catching Fire: Containing Forced Migration in a Volatile World*, p. 176.

¹⁹ My perception is that the combination of *initiate* with a non-animate subject comes across as rather odd, e.g. **The flood initiated our troubles*.

²⁰ Google Books search: Ionescu, M. I., Cohn, L. H. (1985), *Mitral Valve Disease: Diagnosis and Management*, p. 139.

²¹ Google Books search: Fernandez, I. (2007), *Through the Eye of a Needle: Transforming Relationships*, p. 110.

(e.g. *Hey Dana and Joel, let us commence. It is Thursday!*)²². We do not know when this use of *commence* was first documented (even though it was added in 2010) and, above all, whether it will become stable.

The verb *keep* also seems to be used sarcastically to indicate the opposite of what it refers to. In the UD it was added in 2004 with the meaning of ‘stopping’, e.g. *Sam, you’re playing that music too loud. Keep!*²³ and looks as if it also had a sort of threatening function. By communicating the opposite of what is literally meant we normally obtain an ironic effect, which is exploited here to put pressure on the interlocutor by covertly making a threat. The GDS does not include this use of *keep*. On the other hand, it presents a sense of *keep* that has now gone out of use, i.e. the meaning of ‘remaining a virgin’. The latter sense, however, is not present in the OED and we do not officially know that it existed and then fell out of use.

Certain new uses of aspectual verbs seem to appear with special reference to sporting events or competitions or to have evolved from this specific context to produce metaphorical interpretations. *Resume* was added to the UD in 2005 with the meaning of ‘continue playing’ in the game of baseball (e.g. *Damn negro, I’m have to tie my shoe. Aight, resume!*)²⁴ and *stop*, which according to the GDS refers to ‘knocking one’s opponent down’ in Australian English (e.g. *He stopped the abo in three last Saturdee*) also seems to be used with a figurative interpretation of ‘defeating’ (e.g. *I forget I’m a policeman for an hour or two and polish off this dirty big meal. It stopped me, I tell you*). The latter is not present in the OED, which instead lists other officially recognised extended meanings of *stop*.

Finally, the GDS claims that the verbs *finish* and *terminate* may metaphorically refer to ‘having sex’ and/or ‘achieving orgasm’, e.g. *Jeff made sure to let her finish too, Bobby’s goal was to terminate Susan*. Although the most natural syntactic configuration for *finish* and *terminate* is the transitive pattern, the former is subsumed under the intransitive construction to convey this particular meaning.

²² <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=commences>.

²³ <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=keeps>.

²⁴ <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=resume>.

5. Concluding remarks and proposals

In the light of the evidence presented in the previous sections of this paper, it is possible to envisage some improvements in future lexicographic descriptions of aspectual verbs.

Since the OED relies on Google Books Ngram data to provide information about the frequency of words in contemporary English²⁵, this database may also be used to show which syntactic patterns are more typically associated to these predicates. As we have seen above, there are some less “core” uses of *start*, which are however well documented in Google Books and thus need to be acknowledged in dictionaries as well. Providing only general frequency information for *start* by summing the unmarked with all the inflected forms of the verb is not enough to account for its behaviour in various syntactic contexts. In addition, historical corpora of English are now available, e.g. the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), and they could be used to monitor and report on the evolution of word senses. This would obviously be extremely time-consuming work, but it may initially be restricted only to high frequency lexemes such as aspectual verbs. Keeping dictionaries up-to-date has become more pressing than ever now that most of them are online and users can easily access them.

Aspectual verbs in English consist of near-synonymous words, which may to a certain extent be interchangeable. It is thus often challenging to clearly distinguish between them even for the native speaker, let alone for the learner of English as a second or foreign language. Even when one verb can be substituted by another without affecting the syntactic-semantic plausibility of the sentence, there are subtle and definable nuances of meaning that should be accounted for in dictionaries. It may be easier to compare and contrast near-synonyms by adding example sentences under one entry that do not just include a single verb, but also the other related ones. By doing so it would be possible to observe the changes that the alternation of one verb with another brings about. Figure 1 shows what some example sentences under *start* (with the meaning of ‘cause to begin operating’ or ‘set in motion’) may look like.

²⁵ <https://public.oed.com/how-to-use-the-oed/key-to-frequency/>.

FIGURE 1
Suggested dictionary entry 1

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>They stopped and started the motor, reversed the boat-anything to provoke the crocodile into attack.</i> (2006, L. Kelly, <i>Crocodile</i> vii, 176)
CAUSATIVE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘start the motor’ (155,000 results in Google Books) • ‘start the engine’ (668,000 results in Google Books)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Eventually he opened his eyes [...], grabbed the arcane anachronism of a wheel, and initiated the engine.</i> (2014, E.C. Leuthard, <i>RedDevil 4: A Novel</i>)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘initiate the engine’ (1 result in Google Books)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Then he came round to his side of the car and climbed in and began the engine to <u>run</u>.</i> (2012, C. Townend, <i>The Beginning of Everything and the End of Everything Else</i>)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘begin the engine’ (1 result in Google Books)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>*commence the engine.</i>

The first example is taken from the OED. It shows unambiguously that *start* is the predicate among the four ingressive aspectualisers that best expresses causativity with the sense of ‘setting (machinery) in motion’. The fact that *initiate* and *begin* appear only once in Google Books in the same context suggests that this meaning component is not prominent in their semantic makeup. This does not completely exclude the possibility of using the two predicates, but information about their frequency indicates that this should be done with caution, as they obviously have other semantic-pragmatic functions. When the alternation of one predicate with another is instead common (Figure 2), dictionaries should acknowledge that meaning differences may only be of a pragmatic nature.

FIGURE 2

Suggested dictionary entry 2

- They **started** the day with a good meal. (2011, M.C. Williams, *The Story of Two Jakes*, 108)
- Human S + *start* + O (244,000 results in Google Books)
- Following the natural principles of change, they **initiated** the transformations. (1997, E. Wong, *Harmonizing Yin and Yang*, 39)
- OFFICIALITY
- Human S + *initiate* + O (16,500 results in Google Books)

The higher frequency of *start* here shows that this verb has a basic generic meaning, while *initiate* a more specific one, i.e. a sense of officiality, that is reflected in the reduction of its use.

Since “complete synonymy is rare, and absolute synonymy hardly exists” (Lyons 1981: 148), dictionaries need to provide finer-grained information about the areas of overlap and contrast between words. Aspectual verbs in English belong to a class of verbs with a very similar semantic nucleus, but with subtle variations in meaning that are not necessarily reflected at the structural level. This can be a source of confusion especially for language learners and teachers, who should be able to find appropriate and transparent information in dictionaries. The limited analysis conducted here seems to indicate that this is not always the case and that more pragmatic information should be provided.

References

A. Dictionaries

- Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (CALD), 2008, C.U.P., Cambridge.
- Green's Dictionary of Slang*, <http://www.greensdictofslang.com> (last accessed 30 June 2019).
- Merriam-Webster Unabridged Online* (MWU), <http://unabridged.merriam-webster.com> (last accessed 30 June 2019).
- Online Etymology Dictionary*, <http://www.etymonline.com> (last accessed 30 June 2019).

Oxford English Dictionary Online (OED), O.U.P., Oxford, <https://www.oed.com> (last accessed 30 June 2019).
Urban Dictionary <http://www.urbandictionary.com> (last accessed 30 June 2019).

B. Other sources

- BAILEY, DAVID, 1993, "The Problem of the Alternation of to V/V-ing after 'Aspectual' Verbs", in J. Chuquet and D. Roulland (eds), *Subordination, Subordinations*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes II, Rennes, pp. 185-197.
- BRINTON, LAUREL, 1988, *The Development of English Aspectual Systems*, C.U.P., Cambridge.
- DUFFLEY, PATRICK, 1999, "The use of the infinitive and the *-ing* after verbs denoting the beginning, middle and end of an event", *Folia Linguistica* 33, pp. 295-331.
- DUFFLEY, PATRICK, 2006, *The English Gerund-Participle. A Comparison with the Infinitive*, Peter Lang Publishing, New York.
- EGG, MARKUS, 2003, "Beginning Novels and Finishing Hamburgers: Remarks on the Semantics of *to begin*", *Journal of Semantics* 20 (2), pp. 163-191.
- FALKUM, INGRID LOSSIUS, 2011, *The Semantics and Pragmatics of Polysemy: A Relevance-theoretic Account*, PhD thesis, University College London, London.
- FRANCESCHI, DANIELE, 2014, "Licensing and blocking factors in the use of BEGIN verbs: a lexical-constructional and pragmatic analysis", *Review of Cognitive Linguistics* 12(2), pp. 302-341.
- FRANCESCHI, DANIELE, 2015, *Ingressive and Egressive Verbs in English: A Cognitive-Pragmatic Approach to Meaning*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne.
- FRANCESCHI, DANIELE, 2017, "Metonymy and Metaphor in the Construction of Meaning of English Continuative Verbs", *Textus – English Studies in Italy* 30(1), Special issue, *Figurative Language We Live By. The Cognitive Underpinnings and Mechanisms of Figurativity in Language* (A. Baicchi and A. Bagascheva eds), pp. 63-77.
- FREED, ALICE, 1979, *The Semantics of English Aspectual Complementation*, D. Reidel, Dordrecht.
- FUKUDA, SHIN, 2007, "On the control/raising ambiguity with aspectual verbs: a structural account", in *Papers in Linguistics* 47, B. Stiebels (ed.), 'Studies in Complement Control', pp. 159-195.
<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.117.4166&rep=rep1&type=pdf> (last accessed 5 April 2020)
- GOLDBERG, ADELE, 1995, *Constructions: A Construction Grammar Approach to Argument Structure*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London.

- LYONS, JOHN, 1981, *Language and Linguistics*, C.U.P., Cambridge.
- MAIR, CHRISTIAN, 2009, *Infinitival Complement Clauses in English*, C.U.P., Cambridge.
- NEWMAYER, FREDERICK J., 1975, *English Aspectual Verbs*, Mouton de Gruyter, The Hague.
- PUSTEJOVSKY, JAMES, 1995, *The Generative Lexicon*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- PUSTEJOVSKY, JAMES and BOUILLON, PIERRETTE, 1995, "Aspectual coercion and logical polysemy", *Journal of Semantics* 12 (2), pp. 133–162.
- SWEEP, JOSEFIEN, 2010, "A frame-semantic approach to logical metonymy", *Constructions and Frames* 2 (1), pp. 1–32.
- SWEEP, JOSEFIEN, 2011, *Metonymical Transfers: The Complex Relation of Metonymy and Grammar*, ACLC, Universiteit van Amsterdam.
- TOBIN, YISHAI, 1993, *Aspect in the English Verb: Process and Result in Language*, Longman, London.
- VERSPoor, CORNELIA MARIA, 1997, "Conventionality-governed logical metonymy", in H. Bunt, L. Kievit, R. Muskens, H. Verlinden (eds), *Proceedings of the Second International Workshop on Computational Semantics*, Tilburg, pp. 300–312.
- WIERZBICKA, ANNA, 1988, *The Semantics of Grammar*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam-Philadelphia.
- ZIEGLER, DEBRA, 2007, "Arguing the case against coercion", in G. Radden, K. M. Köpcke, T. Berg, P. Siemund (eds), *Aspects of Meaning Construction*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam-Philadelphia, pp. 99–123.