

Eight Suggestions for Improving Learners' Dictionaries

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Introduction

The development of monolingual learner's dictionaries (MLDs) has had a profound influence on general lexicography. They have more tangible definitions in easily comprehensible language, examples of usage and collocations, helpful linguistic advice, and a general user-friendly approach. But there's still room for improvement. Based mainly on the 5 advanced English MLDs, that enjoy the bulk of the learner's dictionary market, a number of suggestions are made for improvement.

Actually, every dictionary is a learner's dictionary, in the sense that even well educated native speakers consult them for unfamiliar words, or to clarify spelling, etc. But in this paper, we are referring to dictionaries for learners of English as a foreign language. Although dictionaries are intended mainly for reference, MLDs are language learning aids or tools, companions to text-books. How can they be improved?

1. Explaining a dictionary's rationale

Basing this discussion on the five main English MLDs (Big Five), although all have very detailed and extensive user's guides, none of the Introductions is aimed at the prospective user, but all stay aloof.

- *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 7th ed., 2005. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (OALD7)

In the Foreword, Professor Henry Widdowson writes an exposition for lexicographers, lexicography enthusiasts, linguists, and teachers. As in the previous editions of the OALD, the Foreword is not intended, nor is it appropriate, for its users. Its contents are far above the level of those for whom the dictionary is intended, even though they are considered 'advanced' learners.

- *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 3rd ed., 2001. Essex: Pearson Education. (LDOCE3)

In the 25 pages of preliminary material, Professor Randolph Quirk's Preface is mainly about the problems that faced the lexicographers when they wrote the dictionary. This may be of interest to other lexicographers, dictionary lovers, and teachers, but it is not helpful for the users, who, could they understand the Preface, might not need to use the dictionary. And in the Introduction, Della Summers, Director of Longman Dictionaries, begins

with "Welcome again to the updated and improved third edition...". Why "again"? She discusses mainly what Longman has done differently in this edition, but not what its object and use are.

- *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*, 3rd ed., 2001. Glasgow: Harper Collins Publishers. (COBUILD3)

Of the 50 preliminary pages, Editor-in-Chief, the late Professor John Sinclair, devotes three pages to an Introduction explaining mainly why this dictionary is based on a word corpus, and why a word corpus is good for you – as if the user really cares, or even understands what a word corpus is. Although the editor addresses the user, the Introduction clearly reads like an attempt at self-justification, and may be more relevant to linguists and grammarians.

- *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 2003. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (CALD2)

In the Introduction, Editor Patrick Gillard writes mainly about the "character" of the dictionary, not about how to use it.

- *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*, 2002. London: Macmillan Publishers and Bloomsbury Publishing. (MEDAL)

In the Foreword, Chief Advisor Professor Michael Hoey philosophizes about the dictionary, providing the user with no useful tools to start using it, while in the Introduction, Michael Rundell, Editor-in-Chief, talks about how the dictionary was written, possibly addressing teachers.

It seems they all missed the point. These dictionaries are written for language learners – who are usually high school and university students – but, unfortunately, they are directed more towards their teachers.

Recommendation: Explain to the users in their own language what the dictionary is all about and how to use it.

2. Cultural orientation

The Big Five are all written and produced in the United Kingdom, and are culturally oriented to the British way of life. They are the main English learners' dictionaries that are used around the world. Although in most cases there are also American editions, most learners of English as a foreign or second language are situated neither in the UK nor in North America, but are usually learning their English at



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Lexicography in Asia, Vol. 3 **Call for Papers**

Lexicography in Asia appeared on October 1, 1998 (editors Tom MacArthur and Ilan Kernerman, <http://kdictionaries.com/lia.html>). It comprised mainly a selection of papers from the Dictionaries in Asia Conference, that was held the previous year at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and that served as a forum for the establishment of the Asian Association for Lexicography (ASIALEX; <http://kdictionaries.com/kdn/kdn5-3.html>, <http://kdictionaries.com/kdn/kdn6-4.html>).

K Dictionaries is happy to announce that, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of this collection, we will publish a new volume to be entitled *Lexicography in Asia, Vol. 3* on October 1, 2008. The proposal of papers for this new publication is open to the public.

Papers are invited on all relevant topics of lexicography in Asia, and will be distributed to referees for anonymous review. The deadline for proposals is December 31, 2007. Notifications of acceptance/rejection will be provided by March 31, 2008, and the deadline for final versions is May 15, 2008.

Full details on the submission process, including a styleguide, are available online: <http://kdictionaries.com/lia3.html>. Please address all enquiries to the project coordinator, Anat Kravitz, lia3@kdictionaries.com

school or college, in their own country. For example, authors of the Big Five might define conventional medicine as that type of medicine which is practiced in the West, and alternative medicine as what is practiced in the East. Yet, the Chinese consider their own medicine to be conventional, not alternative.

English is studied in the non-English-speaking countries as the global lingua franca, not as the mother tongue of natives of Britain or the US. Sentences should refer to local events and personalities only if these are familiar to the user and relevant to his society.

In short, these dictionaries assume that the learner is studying English for ‘integrative purposes’, in order to assimilate and integrate in the USA, the UK, Australia, etc., whereas in most cases they are learning the language for ‘instrumental purposes’, in other words, for professional or communication purposes, often in order to confer in English with people in other non-English-speaking countries – as the ‘global lingua franca’.

Recommendation: Each country should have its own dictionaries, written, or, at least edited, if not in that country, then for it.

3. Learning in the language you think in

No teaching can eliminate the need to know the equivalent for a new word in the mother tongue. The generation of total submergence in the language being learned is far behind us. Submergence, yes, but not total. Naturally, teachers would like their students to endeavor to think in the new language. The more they live and breathe it, and the more they speak and read it, the more they can be involved in it and internalize it. But language learners need the confirmation of knowing the mother tongue equivalent, because they inevitably search for it. That’s a fact that I don’t think I need to spend more time on.

Recommendation: Publishers should publish bilingualized editions of their MLDs, that is, with the headwords translated.

4. Over-writing and over-explaining

Competition has been causing dictionary publishers to overshoot the mark. The competition is stiff, and the investment required is huge. You have to compete in order to regain your investment and make profit. So each dictionary publisher, in each new edition, tries to outdo the others by adding something new and original. The result is that MLDs are becoming more encyclopedic with each new edition, thus diminishing, rather than enhancing,

their learner-friendliness. They contain too much extraneous material. Users generally want to know mainly the basic information, such as meaning, use or spelling. But they have to wade through an unnecessarily large amount of information in order to find what they want.

Even the linguistic items are often geared to language-teaching professionals, rather than learners. For example, two pages in OALD7 are devoted to explaining their phonetic symbols – a text seemingly written for phoneticians. Likewise, in MEDAL there are pages devoted to how to write an academic paper, to explaining what a metaphor is for (as if they don’t have metaphors in other languages), and pages devoted to pragmatics, that are a way beyond the language level of the learners. CALD2 has a whole page devoted to the comma.

Recommendation: Cut down on the non-lexical (usually grammatical and encyclopedic) information that is cluttering up the dictionary.

5. Standardizing the dictionary parameters

It’s high time dictionary publishers got together to unify many aspects of their dictionaries. It would make life easier for users, as well as for teachers. Standardization would promote familiarity with dictionary use, and familiarity would facilitate and encourage dictionary usefulness and usability. For how much longer will we continue to be at the stage where almost the only thing that can be taught in the classroom about dictionary use is the order of the letters of the alphabet, because the systems are so different from each other?

For example, the International Standards Organization (ISO) is preparing a revised version of standards called ‘Presentation/Representation of Entries in Dictionaries’, the aim of which is to facilitate the production, exchange and management procedures for the creation and use of dictionary content (André Le Meur and Marie-Jeanne Derouin, ISO 1951: a revised standard for lexicography, 2006. *KDN14*). But will dictionary publishers adopt it?

Recommendation: Out of consideration for the users, publishers should coordinate parameters, rather than strive to be original.

6. Determining the order of meanings by didactic criteria, not by corpus frequency

The information derived from corpora is very interesting and undoubtedly useful for linguists. But must dictionaries indeed be based on corpora? Giving the “basic” meaning of a word first may be more

helpful in understanding its various uses, than giving first a derived meaning just because its use is more frequent.

Recommendation: Dictionaries should be corpus-assisted, not corpus-based, so give preference to the relative didactic importance of the various meanings, instead of to their corpus frequency, when determining order of appearance or example sentences.

7. Cutting down on the amount of space devoted to common words and function words

Dictionary users already know a great many of the meanings and uses of high frequency words. So space can be saved by treating familiar words more briefly and concisely. Do dictionary editors think that after 5 years of study, language learners really want to look up *a*, *an*, *the*, or *of*? Is it necessary for OALD7 to devote over a quarter of a page to the word *a*, or is such extensive treatment given to this entry for the sake of the reviewers?

Recommendation: Accept that dictionary users already possess a basic knowledge of the new language, cut down on unnecessary information, and leave more space for new entries.

8. Finding an alternative to the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to teach pronunciation

Learning the IPA is a difficult task. Many teachers themselves cannot read it. It would be better, particularly for users whose mother tongue is not written in the roman alphabet, to follow the American custom of not applying the phonetic alphabet.

Recommendation: Use a simpler and more practical method for teaching pronunciation, if possible, taking into consideration the user's mother tongue.

Conclusions: Advice to MLD publishers

1. Include a User's Introduction, explaining in simple language how to use the dictionary.
2. Write the definitions in a way that is culturally neutral. And select example sentences that are more universal in content. Consider publishing local editions, at least for the main countries in your market area.
3. Provide translations of the headwords in the user's native language, and reserve monolingual editions for mother-tongue immersion situations.
4. Cut down on the non-essential information that is cluttering up the dictionary.
5. Out of consideration for the users, coordinate parameters with other dictionary publishers, rather than try to be original.

6. Give preference to the didactic importance of the various meanings, instead of to their corpus frequency, when determining their order of appearance, or when selecting the example sentences.

7. Accept that dictionary users already possess a basic knowledge of the new language, so cut down on unnecessary information and leave space for more entries.

8. Introduce a simpler and more practical method than the IPA for teaching pronunciation.

ASIALEX now

The Asian Association for Lexicography (ASIALEX) was founded as the highlight of the Dictionaries in Asia Conference held at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST, 1997). The organizers, Gregory James and Amy Chi, set up a preparatory committee in 1996 to make all of the necessary arrangements, assisted by scholars from Hong Kong and China and representatives of the sister associations AFRILEX, AUSTRALEX, and EURALEX. Over seventy participants took part in the inauguration of ASIALEX and the election of its first Executive Committee that took place on March 29, 1997.

As described by Amy Chi, "[i]t was hoped that ASIALEX would act as a focus for lexicographic development in Asia," and foster further research, cooperation, and grant funding (Dictionaries in Asia and ASIALEX, 1997. KDN5: 6-7, <http://kdictionary.com/kdn/kdn5-3.html>). Much has indeed been accomplished, especially in the form of the first regional symposium in neighbouring Guangzhou (1999, <http://kdictionary.com/kdn/kdn6-3.html>), leading to the biennial conferences in Seoul (2001, <http://kdictionary.com/kdn/kdn8-2.html>), Tokyo (2003, <http://kdictionary.com/kdn/kdn11-07.html>), and Singapore (2005, <http://kdictionary.com/kdn/kdn1314.html>).

For anyone attending these events it was clear how vital ASIALEX can be for the fulfillment of

local, regional, and global needs and aspirations. In ten years of existence it has produced and enjoyed astounding moments, but "there are certainly a lot of pearls buried under the hay", as goes the Chinese saying quoted at the time by Chi. It still has to build itself as a lively, dynamic, democratic society run collectively and routinely by the large body of its membership, in order to be able to realize its full potential and goals. Meanwhile its operation is substantially subject to individual good will and efforts, usually from above without enough grassroots involved – having no paid membership, regular elections, an active board, or interactive networking.

Now ASIALEX, as an Asia-wide organization, exists mainly virtually. It comes alive once every two years for an excellent meeting, a glittering torch handed over from one conference convener to the next, though little flame in between. Can it be inspired to more?

By all means. The Asian Association for Lexicography is young, its spirit of heritage and progress is infinite. Entering adolescence, its future maturity does not depend on each local institute at its turn but on all of us all the time. As observed by Amy Chi in summing up the founding role of the HKUST Language Centre ten years ago, "[i]n the long run, however, it will be the responsibility of ASIALEX to remedy the situation."

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