Dictionaries and productive tasks in a foreign language

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Introduction

The process of making dictionaries involves three main steps: **collection**, **description** and **presentation**. The first step, the **collection** of data, has seen dramatic changes over the past twenty-five years. Over more than four centuries, from the sixteenth till well into the second half of the twentieth century, lexicographers had to read and extract written texts and make paper slips with quotations which were put together in huge boxes, occupying a lot of space. Nowadays, for many languages there are text corpora containing far more numerous and more varied materials. For the English language in particular these corpora are easily available and they contain not so much literary texts as was previously the case. Most of the texts are taken from general newspapers, scientific, administrative and other more or less specialized sources and they include more and more transcripts of radio and television broadcasts and other types of formal and informal oral production. For other languages these corpora may be less rich and less publicly accessible, but many publishing houses do have corpora of several millions of words at their disposal.

At the level of the linguistic **description** of the contents of these immense riches, the last decade has seen a number of significant improvements. KWIC (Keyword in context) software, for instance, which makes it possible to oversee the use of a given word in various contexts, has become quite common and ever more sophisticated during recent years. Moreover, the theoretical notions and the practical techniques that are needed to interpret the language data are much clearer than ten or twenty years ago. The collaboration between experienced lexicographers like Sue Atkins and well known semanticists like Charles Fillmore, for instance, has led to a theoretically sound and practically effective tool that is generally known as the FrameNet approach (see *International Journal of Lexicography* 16.3, September 2003). Insight has been gained into questions concerning the distinction of senses of polysemous words, the status of collocations, idioms and other types of chunks, and there is a much greater awareness of the wide variety of data and phenomena covered by the term 'lexicon'.

As to the third field of lexicography, the **presentation** of the results of the foregoing steps in a dictionary, much less progress can be reported. As a matter of fact we still do not know what type of dictionary and what kind of lay-out is most convenient for which users or how we must proceed in order to improve the success rate in dictionary use, which is traditionally just above chance level.

A number of studies have been conducted on the relative importance of monolingual, bilingual or bilingualized dictionaries for L2 learners. The author of a recent book on this matter, Robert Lew, has investigated this point in a highly systematic way with Polish learners of English. Using a fine-grained design, where more than 700 learners use one of six types of dictionaries in order to find out the meaning of a number of pseudo-English words, the author finds that the monolingual dictionary (with English definitions only) scores far lower than any of the other types, and that some types of dictionaries, especially those with equivalents as well as definitions in English or Polish, tend to be less effective, probably due to an overload of information. In his conclusion Lew states that:

> 'we must question the validity of the recommendation so popular amongst educators of the presumed superiority of the monolingual dictionary. There is hardly any empirical evidence available to support that supposed superiority, and what little relevant evidence is available, points to the bilingual dictionary as the more effective dictionary for reception. The present study provides further evidence of this type' (Lew 2004: 179).

Another type of research has underlined the importance of lemma structures and the use of guide words, menus or sign posts, especially in long lemmas (Bogaards 1998). A study concerning the relative utility and usability of grammatical information reveals that traditional grammar codes are not used very often, even by advanced learners with a good linguistic schooling, but that syntactic information provided by definitions (like in Cobuild style definitions) and even more in examples helps learners in an effective way to write correct sentences (Bogaards and Van der Kloot 2002). Although other studies could be cited, really relevant experimental evidence on the aspect of presentation is

nevertheless still quite scarce.

As may be clear from the examples of experimental research given above, presentation is intimately linked to the intended users. In contrast to the formal uniformity of most dictionaries all over the world, there probably is not one correct way of presenting lexical data in a dictionary, one that suits all users. Ideally there should be a fairly large number of differently designed dictionaries from which the users could choose. Although this is not a weird idea in this time of computer facilities and on demand business, it is not clear how learners could make their choice nor how teachers or dictionary compilers could guide them in this choice. A lot of thinking and a lot of experimental research is necessary before we can start compiling the dictionaries that users of different types would really need.

An example of dictionary use

In this paper I would like to reflect on some aspects of the information that learners minimally need when they have to produce a text in an L2. I will not make a distinction between the oral or written nature of such a text, although we all know that dictionaries are only seldom used in oral settings. In order to simplify the situation, I will take an imaginary native speaker of French who is a learner of English and who wants to say or write something in English and who is prepared to look up in the dictionary the elements he does not have at his disposal.

Let us imagine that he wants to express in English something like:

Notre professeur veut qu'on écoute bien ses conseils.

The first word that could cause a problem is *professeur*. We will assume that our learner is a 'collégien' (a schoolboy in a secondary school) and is aware of the fact that instructors on different levels may be called by different names, as is the case in French. He knows the word *teacher* but wants to verify in a learner's dictionary whether this is the right choice here. He opens one of them and finds a definition such as 'someone whose job is to teach' (MEDAL). Not really satisfied, he turns to a bilingual dictionary and finds:

professeur /profesœr/ [m] (pér) teacher; (de lycée, collège) [school] teacher; (Univ) = lecturer (Brit), instructor (US); (avec chaire) professor • **elle est** ~ she's a [school] teacher • **(Monsieur)** le ~ **Durand** (Univ) Professor Durand • ~ **de piano/de chant** piano/singing teacher ou master (Brit) ou mistress (Brit) • ~ **de droit** lecturer in law, professor of law • **l'ensemble des** ~s the teaching staff

Fig. 1: Part of the lemma **professeur** in Robert & Collins (2002)

If he is brave enough to fight his way through all the abbreviations, brackets and parentheses, this will give him the certainty that teacher is the right equivalent in his context. So he now can write:

Our teacher wants

But what does the teacher *want*? What is the right construction to use with this verb? For this point our 'collégien' goes back to the monolingual learner's dictionary, where he finds:

want[1] /want/ verb [T] ★★★
1 to feel that you would like to have, keep, or do something: *Do you still want these old letters?* • **want sth for sth** *What do you want for your birthday?* • **want to do sth** *Liz wants to see the circus.* **1a.** to feel that you would like someone to do something or would like something to happen: **want sb/sth to do sth** *Her parents didn't want her to marry him.* • **want sth of/from sb** *I wish I knew exactly what they wanted of me.* • **want sth done** *Mrs. Miller wants the entire house repainted.* **1b.** to feel that you would like someone or something to be in a particular place or doing a particular job: *I want those boxes out of the living room by tomorrow!* • *We want Stephen as chairman.* **1c.** to ask for someone because you would like to see or speak to them: *Mom wants you – she's in the kitchen.* • *You're wanted on the telephone.* • *The principal wants you in her office after school.*
2 *mainly Br E* to need something: *We desperately want rain.* • *You won't want much money on a camping trip.*
2a. *Br E* if something wants doing, it needs to be done: *This bill wants paying.* **2b.** *Br E informal* to deserve something: *That rascal! He wants a good kick up the backside!*
3 *spoken* used for telling someone what they should do: *You want to take Pine Street – it's faster.*
4 to feel that you would like to have sex with someone: *She wanted him more than ever.*
all sb wants *spoken* used for saying that someone's needs or requests are reasonable: *All I want is the truth.* • *All they wanted to do was play football.*
be/have everything sb wants to have all the qualities that someone thinks a particular person or thing should

Figure 2: Part of the lemma **want** in MacMillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners (MEDAL, 2002)

or

want *(obj)* DESIRE /ˈ$WANT, $wɑnt/ *v* to desire (a particular thing or plan of action). Want is not used in polite requests in British English. • *I want some chocolate.* [T] • *She wants a word with you.* [T] • *He's everything you'd ever want in a man – bright, funny and attractive.* [T] • *What do you want out of life?* [T] • *What do you want to eat?* [+ to infinitive] • *What do you want to be when you grow up?* [+ to infinitive] • *I want to be picked up at the airport at about nine o'clock.* [+ to infinitive] • *Do you want me to take you to the station?.* [T + obj + to infinitive] • *This letter – do you want it sent first class?* [T + obj + v-ed] • *Do you want this pie hot?* [T + obj + adj] • *I don't want a load of traffic going past my house all night, waking me up.* [T + obj + v-ing] • To want someone is also to wish them to be present: *Johnny, your mother wants you on the phone.* [T] ○ *Am I wanted at the meeting tomorrow?* [T] ○ *He is wanted by the police* (=The police are searching for him) *in connection with the murder of teenager Peter Lewis.* [T] • Want is not used in the present continuous tense although the continuous form of the verb is sometimes used in other tenses: *I've been wanting to see that film for months!* [+ to infinitive] ○ *You wait – she'll be wanting her own horse next!* [T] • (*infml*) Someone who wants **out of**/**in** an activity or plan of action wants to stop or start being involved in it: *I want out of the whole venture before it's too late.* [I] • **Want ad** is *Am for* classified ad. See at CLASSIFY. • *"I want to be alone"* (Greta Garbo in the film *Grand Hotel*, 1932) • Compare LIKE WANT.

Figure 3: Part of the lemma **want** in Cambridge International Dictionary of English (CIDE, 1995)

Although all the information that is needed can be found in each of these lemmas, it is far from certain that our friend will be able to winkle out the right elements. Alternatively, if he goes to the bilingual dictionary, he will be confronted with:

From the series KERNERMAN SEMI-BILINGUAL DICTIONARIES

PASSWORD Dictionar Englez-Român

EDITURA NICULESCU
Bucarest, Romania
May 2005
Editing: Liliana Scarlat, Anca Florea, Dragos Trifan
Translation: Stefan Firica, Alexandru Farcas, Raluca Dumitru
pages, mm.
ISBN 973-568-710-0
http://www.niculescu.ro
http://kdictionaries.com/products/medium/pwro.html

PASSWORD Semi-Bilingual English-Chinese Dictionary

SHANGHAI LEXICOGRAPHICAL PUBLISHING HOUSE
Shanghai, PR China
May 2005
Editor: Ling Zhiguo
Translation: Wu Hao, Song Xiaoman, Ling Zhiguo
1080 pages, 140 x 203 mm.
ISBN 7-5326-1670-3
www.cihai.online.sh.cn
http://kdictionaries.com/products/medium/pwzh.html

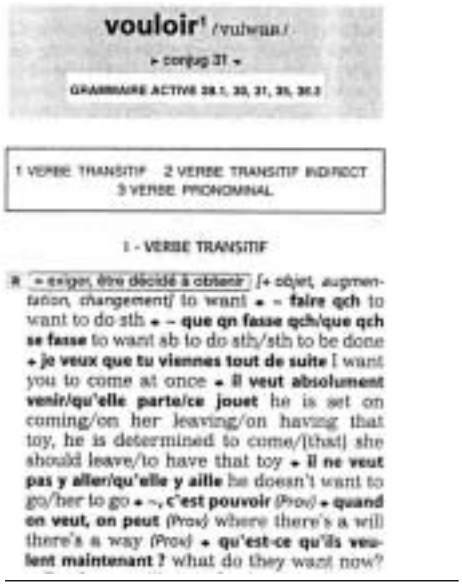
vouloir¹ /vulwar/
▸ conjug 31 ◂
GRAMMAIRE ACTIVE 28.1, 30, 31, 35, 36.2
1 VERBE TRANSITIF 2 VERBE TRANSITIF INDIRECT 3 VERBE PRONOMINAL
1 - VERBE TRANSITIF
R ▸ exiger, être décidé à obtenir /+ objet, augmentation, changement/ to want ◆ ~ faire qch to want to do sth ◆ ~ que qn fasse qch/que qch se fasse to want sb to do sth/sth to be done ◆ je veux que tu viennes tout de suite I want you to come at once ◆ il veut absolument venir/qu'elle parte/ce jouet he is set on coming/on her leaving/on having that toy, he is determined to come/[that] she should leave/to have that toy ◆ il ne veut pas y aller/qu'elle y aille he doesn't want to go/her to go ◆ ~, c'est pouvoir (Prov) ◆ quand on veut, on peut (Prov) where there's a will there's a way (Prov) ◆ qu'est-ce qu'ils veulent maintenant ? what do they want now?

Figure 4: Part of the lemma **vouloir** in Robert & Collins (2002)

But again it is uncertain whether he will be any luckier with this presentation. Although daily practice may show otherwise, let us suppose that our hero eventually comes up with:

Our teacher wants us to

Let us see what happens with the rest of the sentence. *Écouter = listen*, quite simple, although the French verb is transitive (*écouter quelque chose*), whereas the English verb uses a preposition (*listen **to** something*). But what is the word for *bien*? *Listen well*? This does not sound very familiar. MEDAL gives a list of 'Words frequently used with listen': *attentively*, *carefully*, *closely*, *hard*, *intently*, *politely*, some of which can do the job perfectly well. I know of no bilingual dictionary that gives this type of useful information on collocations. So, if no mistakes are made, we now have:

Our teacher wants us to listen carefully to

Not knowing the word for *conseils*, our 'collégien' fights bravely on. Only the bilingual dictionary can bring him to the element he needs, which is *advice*. If he can interpret 'NonC' as meaning that this word does not permit a plural, he will finally write:

Our teacher wants us to listen carefully to his advice.

Had he checked in a learner's dictionary, he would have found 'noun [U]' (MEDAL) or 'n [U]' (CIDE), but, on the positive side, he would have also found a number of examples to take advantage of.

Comments

What I have tried to make clear is that for this virtual dictionary user, the information that is needed cannot be found in one dictionary and is not always tailored to his needs. I am convinced that the task of the dictionary user is systematically underestimated. Even if the information is there, there remains so much to be interpreted and to be adapted to the context at hand that many users give up or end up with incorrect solutions.

As will be clear, the information that was necessary for the 'translation' of the sentence given above was partly available in the **bilingual** dictionary. As these dictionaries have translation as their primary goal, they cannot give a full description or a reasonable number of examples in the target language. Yes, they present the user with the form of the element that is needed in the other language, but in most cases they give insufficient or at best highly coded information on how this element is to be used in the other language. In addition, they do not normally give phonetic transcriptions of the words of the target language at the place where these are most needed: at the right side of the translation equivalence. At the place where these transcriptions are now given, at the left side in the receptive dictionary, they will first of all be helpful for those who already know the word but have to pronounce it, e.g. for reading a text aloud. Those who want to use it for oral production, once they have found the right element, have to make a further step to the receptive part or volume in order to know how to pronounce it.

The most serious drawback of **monolingual** dictionaries of a foreign language is that the user is often unable to retrieve the word he needs. Although more and more techniques and tools are being created to overcome this problem (see Bogaards 2003), in many cases learners will need a bilingual access mode in order to get at the words they need. A bilingual index to a monolingual dictionary, as has been proposed for some types of bilingualised dictionaries, is not a viable option. For polysemous words (and most frequent words are very polysemous) this would create a very bad kind of bilingual list where users need to make their choice on rather vague grounds and have then to turn to the dictionary proper, a step that many will not make.

Electronic dictionaries can remedy this situation to a great extent. But then they should not just be CD-ROM versions of paper dictionaries. They should be rethought in a fundamental way. Really new results can only be expected when such a rethinking not only takes into account the electronic opportunities that

are widely available nowadays, but, in addition, seeks to apply the results of sound experimental research concerning the behaviour of language learners and dictionary users in various situations and at different levels. At Van Dale (see Bogaards and Hannay 2004) we are taking some cautious steps along this very promising path. It will certainly be a long way.

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Longman Slownik współczesny angielsko-polski polsko-angielski: The First Active Bilingual Dictionary for Polish Learners of English

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The following is a brief characterisation of *Longman Slownik współczesny angielsko-polski polsko-angielski* (LSW).[1] After giving some general information about the dictionary, I shall focus on those features which make it the first active dictionary of the bilingual type on the Polish scene.

LSW is aimed at Polish learners of English. Its primary target audience are gymnasium (junior high) and liceum (high school) students, i.e., people in the 13-19 age group, with a command of English ranging from beginner to upper-intermediate. This does not mean the dictionary has nothing to offer to older or more advanced learners. On the contrary, the quality of the translations (which can only be appreciated when compared – by speakers fluent in both languages – with those in other local bilingual dictionaries) and the wealth of usage information (on which more below) make it a suitable tool also for more ambitious language tasks, especially of the encoding type.

The dictionary is corpus-based. For English, it relies on the Longman Spoken and Written English Corpus; for Polish, a 10-million word corpus (90 per cent written, 10 per cent spoken) was gathered specially for this project.[2] The written part of the corpus consists of fiction (mostly for teenagers), fragments of textbooks in various school subjects, and newspaper and magazine articles. For the spoken part, everyday conversations were recorded (with the participants' permission) and subsequently transcribed.

In numerical terms, the scope of LSW is outlined in the table below.[3]

It should be noted that there are quite a few English-Polish / Polish-English dictionaries of comparable (physical) size. Many of them contain, or claim to contain, substantially more entries. However, these

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	English-Polish	Polish-English
headwords	20,554	17,964
run-ons	2,685	2,345
phrasal/reflexive verbs	1,167	777
fixed expressions	8,034	12,927
examples	25,105	33,075
senses	31,402	25,278
translations	39,308	44,240

Table: The scope of LSW in numerical terms[3]