A study of the third-generation Chinese-English dictionaries

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Abstract
This paper introduces a survey of the general Chinese-English dictionaries published in Mainland China over the past 30 years. The author argues that whereas these dictionaries have distinctive Chinese characteristics, they are not made for any specific user category nor are they made for specific uses. Instead they are intended for all types of users and linguistic activities. Besides this, they follow traditional dictionary-making practice, introducing few innovations. On the basis of the survey and its analysis, suggestions are put forward to improve the compilation of Chinese-English dictionaries.

Keywords Chinese-English dictionary, dictionary-making, lexicography

1. Introduction

The history of Chinese-English (C-E) dictionary-making in China in the last 200 years can be divided into three phases (Zeng 2003). The first phase was from 1815 to 1911. The first title was *A Dictionary of the Chinese Language: in Three Parts*, compiled by Robert Morrison from 1815~1823. It was followed by Samuel Williams's A *Syllabic Dictionary of the Chinese Language* (1874), Herbert Giles's *A Chinese-English Dictionary* (1892), and Frederic Baller's *An Analytic Chinese-English Dictionary* (1900). Most of these lexicographers were Western priests aiming to facilitate communication in their religious work in China.

Not being professional lexicographers, these compilers selected lemmas without applying systematic rules and provided little information about them except equivalents. Therefore, these titles, in modern terms, were at most bilingual glossaries, but not dictionaries. Besides, due to their limited knowledge of the Chinese language, the authors made a great number of mistakes in their dictionaries, especially concerning codifying pronunciation and explaining the lemmas.

The second phase started in 1912 and ended in 1977. During this period, a dozen C-E dictionaries were compiled mainly by Chinese lexicographers rather than by Western missionaries. The first one was probably *A Chinese-English Dictionary* by Zhang Zaixin and Ni Shengyuan (1912), which included about 3,800 single characters. Six years later, Li Yuwen (1918) published

A New Chinese-English Dictionary, which contained about 10,000 single characters and over 50,000 phrases. Other influential works in this phase were Liang Shih-chiu's *The New Practical Chinese-English Dictionary* (1971) and Lin Yutang's *The Chinese-English Dictionary of Modern Usage* (1972). Compared with those made in the first phase, these dictionaries pioneered such major innovations as distinguishing free morphemes from bound morphemes and arranging headwords according to the radicals. They also housed substantial improvements in their lemma selection, definitions, and ways of representation.

The third phase began in 1978 and has been going on to the present day. Due to the open policy adopted by the Chinese government, the demand for C-E dictionaries increased dramatically. As a result, a great number of new titles appeared in this period. Our survey is intended to cover the main problems of the C-E dictionaries published in this period in Mainland China.

2. The status quo of the third-generation Chinese-English dictionaries

In general, the C-E dictionaries published in China since 1978 have clear compilation purposes and aims with distinctive Chinese characteristics. Most of them are arranged in phonetic order, are rich in illustrative examples, and have double macro-structures — that is to say, an entry is usually comprised of a single character as the main entry and a list of multi-character phrases as its subentries. Based on the *Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* (2005), they select entry words according to their types and sizes, with particular attention to new words and new senses of existing words. Some dictionaries explain and illustrate the usage of the equivalents by providing synonym discrimination and collocations.

A dozen titles were selected from this category, as listed in Table 1. These dictionaries are widely used in China, and are representative in one way or another. For example, *A Chinese-English Dictionary*, edited by Wu Jingrong (1978), is the first one of the third-generation Chinese-English dictionaries. It won popularity soon after it was published, and became one of the most influential C-E dictionaries in China. Yao Xiaoping, editor of the third edition, claims

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that "[t]his first step is extremely important in the history of the Chinese-English dictionary compilation in China. Every other Chinese-English dictionary coming after it, no matter whether it is a new edition or a revised one, benefits more or less from this first dictionary (2010: 3)." So this dictionary and its following editions are included in this research.

The Chinese-English Dictionary (1998) and its two revised editions, *A Comprehensive Chinese-English Dictionary* (2004) and *The New Chinese-English Dictionary* (2003), were all written by Wu Guanghua. His works are famous for their large size of entry lists and a wealth of technical lemmas. *A New Century Chinese-English Dictionary* (2003) was compiled by Hui Yu. He claims that his dictionary is practical and reader-centered. In particular, it outnumbers any other C-E dictionary in providing collocations. *A New Age Chinese-English Dictionary* (2000) is another dictionary made by Wu Jingrong. It is highly acclaimed by critics and readers for its novelty, accuracy, and practicality.

3. Problems of the third-generation Chinese-English dictionaries

Although the past 30 years have been a period of prosperity for the publication of C-E dictionaries, there still are some problems.

3.1 Mixed user categories

In Table 1, the type of each dictionary is given according to the statement in the preface of the dictionary. According to Svensén, a monodirectional dictionary is a bilingual dictionary "intended only for native speakers of one of the language" (2009: 28). In this case, the C-E dictionary designed only for Chinese users is monodirectional, such as *A Chinese-English Dictionary* (1978), *A Modern Chinese-English Dictionary* (2001), and so on. In this spirit, a bidirectional dictionary is a bilingual dictionary "intended for native speakers of both languages" (Svensén 2009: 28). If a C-E dictionary is made for both Chinese users and foreign users, it is a bidirectional bilingual dictionary. Thus, *The Chinese-English Dictionary* (1998),

Table 1. A list of the dictionaries under investigation

Editor and Year	Dictionary Title	Published by	Type
Wu Jingrong (1978)	A Chinese-English Dictionary	The Commercial Press	monodirectional
Wei Dongya (1995)	A Chinese-English Dictionary (Revised Edition)	Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press	bidirectional
Yao Xiaoping (2010)	A Chinese-English Dictionary (Third Edition)	Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press	monodirectional
Wu Guanghua (1998)	The Chinese-English Dictionary	Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press	bidirectional
Wu Guanghua (1999)	The Chinese-English Dictionary (Second Edition)	Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press	bidirectional
Wu Guanghua (2010)	The Chinese-English Dictionary (Third Edition)	Shanghai Translation Publishing House	bidirectional
Wu Guanghua (2001)	A Chinese-English Dictionary (New Century Edition)	Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press	bidirectional
Wu Guanghua (2003)	The New Chinese-English dictionary	Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press	bidirectional
Wu Guanghua (2004)	A Comprehensive Chinese-English Dictionary	Dalian University of Technology Press	bidirectional
Wu Jingrong (2000)	A New Age Chinese-English Dictionary	The Commercial Press	bidirectional
Dictionary Division of FLTRP (2001)	A Modern Chinese-English Dictionary	Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press	monodirectional
Hui Yu (2003)	A New Century Chinese-English Dictionary	Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press	bidirectional
Wu Wenzhi (2001)	A Practical Chinese-English Dictionary for Translation	Lijiang Publishing House	monodirectional
Gao Ling (2010)	A Practical Chinese-English Dictionary for Students	Foreign Languages Press	monodirectional

A New Age Chinese-English Dictionary (2000), *A New Century Chinese-English Dictionary* (2003), etc. belong to this type of dictionary.

As appears in Table 1, most of the dictionaries claim to be bidirectional, meant both for speakers of Chinese who are learning English and for foreign learners of Chinese. In order to meet the needs of these two different user categories, the dictionaries have to include more information in the entries, which makes their structure complicated. For example, *A Comprehensive Chinese-English Dictionary* (2004), *The Chinese-English Dictionary* (1998) and *The New Chinese-English dictionary* (2003) define the headwords of a single Chinese character in both Chinese and English. The definitions in the Chinese part are intended for users whose native language is not Chinese. However, because of the complicated structures of these dictionaries, it would be very hard for foreign users to use them. According to another user research (Xia 2009), non-native learners of Chinese seldom use CFL (Chinese as a Foreign Language) dictionaries, or the monodirectional C-E dictionaries made especially for CFL learners. Thus, the Chinese definitions provided especially for CFL learners are useless, or at least superfluous, since both user categories would not consult them.

Let's take another example. *A Comprehensive Chinese-English Dictionary* (2004) and *The New Chinese-English Dictionary* (2003) set up 6,000 and 4,000 synonym discrimination columns, respectively. The objects to be discriminated are the semantic differences between Chinese headwords. The information is apparently provided for CFL learners. However, since almost no CFL learners would use these dictionaries, the information is unnecessary, and even becomes an obstacle to Chinese users. As we know, the major users of these dictionaries are Chinese native speakers. They need badly to know the semantic nuisance and usage of the English equivalents, but not the differences between the Chinese headwords. Therefore, the information of Chinese synonym discrimination might hamper their consultation, or at least lower the speed of their searches.

Based on the above analysis, we might conclude that the information added for CFL users in these bidirectional C-E dictionaries neither finds favor with CFL users nor wins the praise of Chinese native speakers. On the contrary, the added information may make dictionary searches more difficult. As a result, some of the Chinese users may give up using these dictionaries.

3.2 Mixed uses

In theory, a C-E dictionary may be used for translation or learning, or both. The dictionaries listed in Table 1 all claim in their prefaces that they can be used for both purposes. However, the purposes of using a C-E dictionary are quite different when used for translation than for learning. A translator looks up a C-E dictionary mainly for the equivalents of the headword. Thus, the dictionary should include as many headwords as possible. But an English learner would like to know more about the usage of the equivalents rather than the equivalents only. The learner needs grammatical, collocation, and pragmatic information of the equivalents. Thus, the dictionary should provide full and detailed explanations of the equivalents. To meet the requirements of both these dictionary users, the dictionary will inevitably become bulky and complicated. That's why current C-E dictionaries grow bigger and bigger.

Such oversized dictionaries may cause problems for users. First, they are too heavy to carry. For example, *A Comprehensive Chinese-English Dictionary* (2004) has more than 6,000 pages in three volumes. It's very inconvenient for a student to carry them to and from classroom. Second, they are too complicated to use for common dictionary users. As these dictionaries tend to include as many headwords and as much information as possible, they become very complex in their structures. This adds the difficulty of dictionary searches. In fact, some scholars (Zeng 2005; Zhang 2007) have pointed out that it is infeasible to compile a C-E dictionary for all uses.

3.3 Lack of innovation

Although the C-E dictionaries have experienced rapid developments in their quantity and quality in recent years, the same cannot be said for efforts to introduce innovation in their features. Zeng Taiyuan argues that "Looking at the Chinese-English dictionaries published across the Straits, they have little difference in their contents. The structure of the entry is generally made up of two parts: definitions (equivalents and explanations) and illustrative examples (expressions, phrases, and sentences). The only difference lies in the number of headwords and examples in the dictionaries, the inclusion of new words and new senses and the accuracy of the definition" (2005: 81).

We will look at *A Chinese-English Dictionary* (1978) and its revised edition (1995) first. The first change made is the addition of 800 single character headwords and 18,000 multi-character headwords (including proverbs, idioms, and colloquial

expressions). The added headwords are mainly new words. At the same time, the revised edition drops some obsolete entries. The next change is that more explanations are given to polysemous headwords and equivalents. Another major change is to use English labels instead of the Chinese ones in the first edition.

A New Age Chinese-English Dictionary (2000) advocates novelty, accuracy, and practicality. However, its notion of "novelty" restricts only to the inclusion of new words and new senses. According to its statement in the preface, this is embodied in the following two aspects. One is to include as many new words as possible. The other is to give detailed explanations of the new senses of the old words (Wu 2003: 3).

A New Century Chinese-English Dictionary (2003) is hailed as opening up a new generation of C-E dictionaries by some critics (Su 2004). However, the dictionary hasn't achieved any significant breakthroughs and innovations in the field of lexicography. In modern lexicography, corpora have been made full use of. According to Rundell (2010), now few serious English dictionaries (or UK-published bilingual dictionaries) are compiled without reference to corpora. And all the major publishers of English learners' dictionaries were using corpora as their primary source of linguistic data. However, *A New Century Chinese-English Dictionary* (2003) might be an exception. It is not compiled on any modern corpora.

3.4 Absence of Chinese-English learners' dictionaries

C-E dictionaries enjoy a big market among learners of English in China. According to Yong (2003), up to 73% of English majors at universities own a C-E dictionary. And the rate of owning a C-E dictionary among English learners at universities ranks second, just next to bilingualized dictionaries (Yu 2001). These data show the popularity of this dictionary type among English learners.

However, there are no C-E dictionaries in the market that are especially made for English learners. Yuan (1996) argues that no C-E learner's dictionaries are available in China. Although many dictionaries claim to be "a Chinese-English dictionary for students," they are only the shortened versions of the general C-E dictionary. The situation has remained unchanged up until now. That is to say, no C-E dictionaries are compiled especially for English learners, despite the great need for them in the market.

4. Conclusions

Based on the above analysis, we may conclude that C-E dictionaries need improving badly. First of all, they should be compiled according to the needs of different user categories. In other words, C-E dictionaries should be designed and made especially for users whose native language is Chinese and for users whose native languages are not Chinese. For the dictionaries aimed at foreign users, they should focus on providing information on the meanings and usage of Chinese headwords. But for the dictionaries aimed at Chinese users, the emphasis should be placed on explaining the meanings and usage of the English equivalents.

Secondly, the C-E dictionary should be made specifically for different linguistic activities. That is to say, a dictionary for translation and a dictionary for English learners should be compiled separately instead of having an integrated one for both purposes. While the former shall be centered on providing adequate and accurate equivalents to help users in their production of English texts, the latter will aim at creating an environment that facilitates the acquisition of the English language.

Thirdly, latest research findings in linguistics and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) should be introduced into the compilation of the C-E learner's dictionary. For example, English learners' dictionaries benefit vastly from research findings in SLA. Modern lexicography is shifting from the lexicographer-centered to user-centered approach, which accords with the cognitive laws and the needs of foreign language learning. Therefore, C-E lexicographers must study the interlanguage characteristics of learners and their English linguistic features in order to compile their dictionaries accordingly. For a C-E learner's dictionary, the Chinese part can only be used as an index for dictionary users, and no further information should be given to it. This would avoid distracting the users. But the English part should be explained in great detail.

Finally, C-E dictionaries must be made with the aid of modern corpora. Ever since the first electronic corpus was used in the COBUILD dictionary in 1987 (Rundell 2010), large electronic corpora have become indispensable for dictionary-making, including monolingual as well as bilingual dictionaries. They can help lexicographers make editorial decisions based on actual language usage rather than on intuition or on second sources. Furthermore, they can provide lexicographers not only with the frequency of word uses and linguistic

features, but also collocation and usage of particular words. Nowadays English learners' corpora are available in China. Through careful analysis of their data, lexicographers can predict possible difficulties that learners might encounter in their process of learning English, highlighting them in their dictionaries accordingly. This could greatly improve the quality of C-E dictionaries.

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