

## Make me a match: Putting learners in touch with dictionaries

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In the new, Fourth edition of the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, the entry for *book* has been rewritten. The first sense is no longer “a set of pages fastened together inside a cover”, but “a written text that can be published in printed or electronic form”. The “set of pages” is destined to become a historical sense, much like *codex*, *scroll*, or *tablet* (the Mosaic rather than the Jobsian variety).

A dictionary, too, is a book, that is to say a written text in printed or electronic form. In undergoing the transformation from a set of pages to a text, the dictionary is in the process of achieving its destiny. In fact, the dictionary was electronic before its time, with its hypertext (cross-references), non-linear progression, and easy access to any piece of data that the user required. Online, alphabetical order is no longer relevant. Dummy entries, placeholders that cross-refer to other entries, are no longer needed. Running heads, alpha starts, run-ons, and all the rest of the time-honoured catalogue of dictionary furniture are consigned to the bonfire.

Much thought has been given to how to convert dictionary codices into electronic dictionary texts; perhaps less to how users encounter dictionaries in the real world.

One thing that strikes me in my role as dictionary publisher (as opposed to lexicographer) is that the distinctions between different types of dictionary are being eroded by online dictionaries.

Learners' dictionaries developed in the middle of the last century, born of a realization that the needs of learners of English (or of any language, for that matter) were very different from those of native speakers. Native-speaker dictionaries rarely trouble themselves with grammar, because things like complementation patterns and restrictions on plural use are obvious to natives. With its grammatical information at the lexical level and model example sentences, the learner's dictionary filled a gap in a way that nothing else has been able to do so far.

ELT bilingual dictionaries developed later, and continued the same approach to the type of information presented as the learners' monolinguals had done, setting them apart from the traditional type of

bilingual dictionary, which tends to be more useful as a decoding rather than an encoding tool.

ELT publishers and editors have always made great efforts to pass on the message to teachers and learners that learners' dictionaries are an almost inexhaustible mine of information and advice about English that can help with encoding as well as decoding. It has to be said that this message has got through only sporadically. To the vast majority of users of language (i.e. virtually everyone), a dictionary is still a monolithic fountain of knowledge that is not susceptible to variation or adaptation, and not the highly flexible tool that can be recreated endlessly to suit its users which lexicographers know it to be.

In the days of print, the distinction between learners' dictionaries and native-speaker dictionaries was made clear-cut by their physical separation in the bookshop. If your local bookshop was in São Paulo, it is likely that it stocked English learners' dictionaries and bilinguals, not native-speaker English monolinguals. If your local bookshop was in Brighton, you would find your learners' dictionaries in the ELT section. You would be guided by the realities of distribution or the layout of the shop into choosing the most appropriate dictionary for your needs. The question of level would largely be decided by looking at the dictionary on the shelf and opening it at random. If the 2000-page doorstopper looked too forbidding with its sheer bulk and closely packed print, then an intermediate or elementary dictionary would do the job.

In the digital age, these distinctions no longer apply. In the absence of the physical cues of the bookshop layout or the printed books themselves, a certain degree of sophistication is required of the user, a sophistication that we cannot necessarily expect them to have. When a student in Italy wants to know the meaning of *upcycling*, the most likely course of action is to google “upcycling definition” or “upcycling meaning” or “upcycling traduzione”, and wait for the avalanche of sources (Wikipedia, Urban Dictionary, learners' and native-speaker dictionaries, monolingual and bilingual dictionaries), all jostling for space on the first page of results.

Faced with this bewildering array, the user is likely to choose the first result, or the first name that he or she recognizes. The type of dictionary will be largely immaterial, and the whole historical back story of ELT dictionaries, from Hornby's flight from Japan in 1942 with his *Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary* in his suitcase all the way up to the latest innovations in corpus lexicography, becomes invisible.

The result of this is that it becomes more difficult for the publisher to unite the user with his or her ideal dictionary. Where previously the publisher was the village matchmaker, the situation now can be more like a free-for-all online dating service, if not something rather more promiscuous. While SEO is a very useful tool for publishers, it does not necessarily do the job of putting the right dictionary at the user's fingertips.

Of course, not everyone comes to the dictionary via Google. An important part of our job as publishers will be to build up our online brands, so that the user comes straight to our site, whether via a bookmark or a widget. Cambridge's API is an attempt to do this at a group level rather than an individual one. A website with a particular community of users will be able to supply the datasets that most suit their users' profile.

Localization and channelization are other ways that dictionary publishers can get closer to their customers. Thanks to geo-targeting, specific local-language bilinguals be offered; advice about choosing the right tool for the job can be offered in the local language; the metalanguage of entries can be translated (and the user is always at liberty to reject the default option if that is not appropriate to his or her needs). If the level of words being looked up is intermediate rather than advanced, we can suggest an intermediate dictionary as the default. If the lookups tend to belong to a particular domain, we can suggest an ESP dictionary. And user profiles can help in hiding or showing particular elements of the entry, such as IPA, translations, or extra examples.

In addition, publishers can actually take advantage of the absence of physical separation. Where previously a conscientious writer, editor, or translator would need various monolinguals and bilinguals, a thesaurus, a collocations dictionary, a spelling dictionary, and a usage guide, all of this information can be combined in one dataset. I may want to know a meaning of a word; but how do I say it in Turkish? And what are its collocations and synonyms? So instead of having to come out of one book to see what another book is saying about the same word, I can display as much or as little information about it as I like, all on the same screen.

Thus, a one-size-fits-all approach does not have to be the logical outcome of online dictionaries. The difference is that, before, the differences between dictionaries were explicit and enforced by the physical product, whereas now they are hidden below the surface so that the dictionary-using experience is a streamlined, almost automatic one. One thing that has not changed is that we still have to get to know our new customers extremely well, something that has always been the dictionary publisher's job.

Fortunately, we are now in a position to get to know our users better than ever before. Whereas in the past the feedback on our dictionaries was limited to small surveys, individual lookup observations, and letters from individual customers, we can now track users' journeys (with their permission), so that we can form a much clearer picture of the words they are looking up, the domains that these words fall into (and therefore their interests), the level of English that their lookups indicate, and even the type of word information that they are seeking. Our surveys can reach vastly increased numbers of people, with the result that we are closer to our users than ever before, and for the first time we can really start to understand their language-learning habits and preferences so that we can often answer their questions even before they have started to formulate them.

Some users may miss the old serendipity of browsing the pages of a print dictionary (the forerunner of the user journey), but the new technology used by the best online dictionaries has the potential to offer an experience that is of far higher quality in terms of the targeting of the information, and which can adapt itself to the user's backgrounds, needs, and interests in exciting and surprising ways.

### Cambridge Dictionaries Online

Cambridge University Press is a leading global publisher of English language learning and teaching materials. The first Cambridge learner's dictionary was published in 1995.

Originally entitled *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, this developed into the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, and has just been published in its fourth edition. It was followed by dictionaries for intermediate and elementary learners, dictionaries of American English, and semi-bilingual editions for Chinese, Turkish, Polish, and Russian speakers.

Cambridge Dictionaries Online (CDO) was launched in 1999, the first dictionary website with learners of English in mind, and became one of the most popular dictionary sites on the Web. It remains the pre-eminent online learner's dictionary, with millions of users around the world.

Cambridge and K Dictionaries have just announced their decision to partner up to provide bilingual English learner's dictionary content for a range of languages, which will be added to CDO over time.

<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>

### Free dictionary & Free lunch

TheFreeDictionary.com welcomed its five billionth visitor in April 2013, just months before its 10<sup>th</sup> birthday. In 2007 the website's owner, Farlex Inc, launched Definition-Of.com as a community-based dictionary that allows users to generate, access, and rate its content. For every two definitions approved on the site, Farlex donates one school lunch to a hungry child through the United Nations World Food Program's (WFP) school meals program. In this way, users are afforded the opportunity to share their knowledge with others and, at the same time, fight global hunger. In addition to its monetary donations to the WFP, Farlex has provided it with development resources and advertising space on its websites. To date, these combined efforts have helped provide over 100,000 meals to children around the world. As noted by the WFP, these meals do more than just nourish the children physically; they help nourish their minds, encouraging them to attend school and improving their academic performance.

<http://farlex.com/>