

A Case for a Semi-Bilingual Dictionary for Productive Purposes

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Abstract

The paper argues for a need for a semi-bilingual learner's dictionary for productive purposes. An entry in such a dictionary would include an L1-L2 translation and provide specifications and examples of use of the target L2 word. Elements of contrastive semantic analysis would be incorporated into the entry. It is claimed that a dictionary of monolingual and bilingual information is both effective for learners and appreciated by them.

Dictionary usefulness and dictionary use

Dictionaries are written in order to be used by those who need them. A dictionary is therefore a product and, like any other good product, should satisfy the needs and preferences of its consumers. A wise production team, in turn, should try to find out what these needs are, when the user is most likely to require the product and what type of consumer will benefit from the product most. It is not surprising, therefore, that one development of dictionary research is research into dictionary use. The main objectives of dictionary research studies have been to examine the reference skills of the users, the language tasks which require most the use of dictionaries, and the users' satisfaction with different types of existing dictionaries.

Since many consumers of dictionaries are foreign language learners who know their L1, studies have been conducted to compare learners' monolingual dictionaries with bilingual ones, in terms of preferences for one dictionary type rather than the other and in terms of the effectiveness of each dictionary type. One of the most comprehensive studies comprising over 1000 learners in seven European countries (Atkins and Knowles 1990) shows that the majority of learners (75%) use bilingual dictionaries. This preference does not necessarily mean that bilingual dictionaries are actually more helpful. In the above study, it was found that it was the monolingual dictionary that was very often more successful in helping users find the relevant information. This is so because the monolingual entry can generally provide more detailed and precise information about the word than the bilingual entry, for example, information about idiomatic usage, common collocations, connotations, register. Moreover, a simple one-word translation, in a bilingual dictionary, can even be misleading when there are semantic incongruencies between the two languages. This apparent paradox between the usefulness of one type of dictionary (monolingual) and the learner's preference to use another type (bilingual) has also been reflected in other studies on dictionary use.

In Tomaszczyk (1983), the subjects surveyed

(learners, teachers, translators), more often criticised the bilingual dictionary than the monolingual one but as far as frequency of use is concerned, they consulted it more often than the monolingual one. In Nuccorini's (1992) study, students admitted that the information in the monolingual dictionary was more helpful for understanding the meaning of words. Nevertheless they used the bilingual dictionary more often. Only teachers in Nuccorini's study used the monolingual dictionary more often than the bilingual one. This overall preference for the bilingual dictionary was best expressed by Piotrowski (1989: 73) "no matter what their level of competence, foreign learners and users use their bilingual dictionary as long as they use dictionaries at all."

Assuming people know what's best for them, why do they prefer the bilingual dictionary even though they admit the monolingual is better? Maybe they do so because the bilingual dictionaries are good for them in spite of their weaknesses. Apparently people feel insecure if they cannot relate the meaning of a foreign word to a lexical concept that exists in their L1, however good the explanation and the illustrations might be in L2.

Bilingualised dictionary - a hybrid dictionary for comprehension

If the monolingual information is useful and the use of a bilingual dictionary a psychological necessity, then a hybrid dictionary which contains the two types of information would seem appropriate. This is not a new idea. The first such dictionary was English-English-Hebrew and appeared in 1986. It is now referred to as a bilingualised dictionary. Since then about 20 such dictionaries have been published. Since this kind of dictionary is relatively new, evaluation studies have just begun. Hartmann (1994) observed learners working with a bilingualised dictionary during a reading task and interviewed them afterwards. The study revealed that users at four different L2 proficiency levels appreciated the juxtaposition of target language definitions and mother tongue translation equivalence. Most informants consulted both the definition and the translation part of the dictionary looking up the unknown words. Laufer and Melamed (1994) conducted a study comparing the effectiveness of a bilingualised, bilingual and monolingual dictionary. Learners were tested on their comprehension of unknown words and their ability to produce original sentences with these words in three conditions. In each condition a different dictionary was used. The learners were divided into unskilled, average and good dictionary users (1). The results were as follows (the sign > stands for 'better than' and * for 'significantly better than'):

Comprehension

unskilled users: bilingualised > bilingual > monolingual
 bilingualised > * monolingual
 average users: bilingualised > monolingual > bilingual
 bilingualised > * bilingual
 good users: bilingualised > monolingual > bilingual

Production

unskilled users: bilingual > bilingualised > monolingual
 bilingual > * monolingual
 bilingualised > * monolingual
 average users: bilingualised > bilingual > monolingual
 bilingualised > * monolingual
 good users: bilingualised > monolingual > bilingual

What the above results show is that the highest scores were almost always obtained when the bilingualised dictionary was used. This was true for all learners in the case of comprehension, and for the good and average dictionary users in the case of production. Only the unskilled users did better on production with a bilingual dictionary. On the basis of these results, it was concluded that the combination of the monolingual information which contains a definition and examples with a translation of the new word into the learner's mother tongue tended to produce the best results, "tended", since not all the differences between the bilingualised dictionary and the other two were statistically significant.

Semi-bilingual dictionary - a hybrid dictionary for production

The bilingualised dictionaries available nowadays are most suitable for comprehension purposes. The learner comes across an unfamiliar word in a text, finds the relevant entry in the dictionary and extracts the necessary information about the meaning of the word. As pointed out earlier, the dictionary is both effective and appreciated by its users. If this is the case, why not produce a similar dictionary for productive purposes? The realisation that there is a special need for a productive dictionary has resulted in the publication of the Longman Language Activator (1993). I have been recommending this dictionary to our English majors for their writing assignments. But the majority of learners do not major in English. Their language level is lower. The limitation of the Activator, in spite of its many virtues, is that it is a monolingual dictionary, and it therefore makes two assumptions about the user which may not be true. The first assumption is that the user is somewhat familiar with the word s/he is searching for, at least with its form. Otherwise it would be impossible to find the right entry for it. So the learner uses the Activator to deepen the knowledge of a word which is not completely unknown. The second assumption is that though the user may not possess the precise word needed, s/he is nevertheless familiar with other words in the same semantic area. S/he will therefore

open the dictionary at the entry of one of these words, check the other words in the semantic field and select the most suitable one for that purpose.

These assumptions are not incorrect when the user of the dictionary is very advanced. In the case of most learners, however, the writing activity in a foreign language is such that it makes a monolingual dictionary insufficient. When composing a piece of writing, the learner may be in the process of formulating the thought in the foreign language (if s/he is advanced enough to do so) and then s/he suddenly gets stuck for a word. What would most probably come to mind is the L1 word that is needed rather than a synonym, antonym, or any other semantically related word in L2. This is so since words in our dominant language are more easily accessible than words in languages less familiar to us. If the learner wants to find the equivalent L2 word, the easiest way to do so is by consulting a bilingual dictionary. But what such a dictionary will provide is information about the looked-up (original) L1 word, which is irrelevant for a writing task in L2. It will also supply an L2 translation, but translation alone is not enough for the task. What is needed, in addition to the translation, is the grammatical, semantic, pragmatic specifications of the newly found L2 word together with examples of its use. As things are nowadays, the learner will have to turn to a monolingual dictionary for that kind of information. This is so because the Lx-Ly dictionary was designed with an Ly speaker in mind looking up information about the Lx word s/he encounters but does not understand, or for an Lx speaker trying to find information about an Ly word never seen before. And it is precisely this information that is needed when writing.

About a decade ago Tomaszczyk (1983) and Snell-Hornby (1987) suggested a special bilingual dictionary for productive purposes. What is suggested in this paper is to fill the gap in the learner's need, with a special bilingualised, or rather *semi-bilingual* (the preference for this name will be clarified later) dictionary for productive purposes. An entry in such a dictionary could be divided into three parts:

Part 1: L1-L2 translation, followed by information about the L2 word

Such information will consist of the words' phonological, grammatical and semantic specifications (all provided in L2), followed by a definition and examples of use. In other words, Part 1 of the entry in our dictionary is a mirror picture of the entry found in the existing bilingualised dictionaries - the English word with its specifications, definition, examples and translation into L1. Since the monolingual information in these dictionaries is supplemented by a translation of the word, or bilingualised, the name *bilingualised* dictionary makes perfect

sense. But the dictionary proposed here starts with an L1 word which is first translated and then supplemented by monolingual information. Therefore the name *bilingualised* is not suitable for it. *Semi-bilingual* is preferable as it does not specify the directionality of information. Some L1 looked-up words will have several equivalents in English (the Hebrew word SHIR, for example, is either a poem or a song). In such cases, each of the translations will appear separately with its specifications, definitions and examples of use.

Part 2: semantically related words

This part resembles a thesaurus. Words semantically related to the English equivalent of the looked-up L1 word will be listed with their definitions. The advantage of this component is in providing the user with an opportunity to select the most suitable word out of several words in the semantic area.

Part 3: additional meanings of the L2 translations

This part will occur in those entries where the English translated word is polysemous or homonymous while the L1 word is not. Here is an example of such a case. Suppose the learner has looked up the Hebrew word MOFSHAT, which in English is 'abstract' (the opposite of 'concrete'). But 'abstract' has also an additional meaning of 'summary'. This meaning has nothing to do with MOFSHAT. This additional meaning could be translated and illustrated in Part 3 of the entry. The advantage of doing this is in preventing the learner from assuming that each time 'abstract' appears, it will mean MOFSHAT.

I will now illustrate two types of entries with Hebrew-English examples. In the first example, the English translation of the Hebrew looked-up word has additional meanings which are presented in Part 3 of the entry. In the second example, the looked-up word has several English translations. These are in Part 1 of the entry. As these translations are not homonymous/polysemous, Part 3 is not necessary in example two (2).

According to surveys of user needs, dictionaries are primarily used for decoding and very little for encoding. The only thing we know for sure, on the basis of the reports, is that learners do not often look up words which they want to use in writing. We cannot be sure of why they do this. Not using the dictionary for encoding purposes does not necessarily mean not having the need for it. The need may well be there. But the dictionary that can satisfy this need is not yet available. A semi-bilingual dictionary for productive purposes may be precisely the writing aid that the learner is waiting for.

Notes

1. In the study, this was done on the basis of the total test score which indicated how well a learner could use the information in all the three dictionaries for comprehension and production.
2. These are only general guidelines for the entries. Professional lexicographers could certainly introduce necessary modifications.

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EXAMPLE ONE

BERER בָּרַר

find out (vt, past tense, past participle **found out**)
to learn something by study or inquiry: *Find out the cost and let me know. Please find out when the next train leaves. They found out that he was lying.*

Related words:

get at (v, prep, infml) **gila** to manage to find out: *I'm afraid we just can't get at the information; no one will help us.*
determine (vt, fml) **chishev ve'kava** to find out exactly: *The police wanted to determine all the facts/what happened.*
detect (vt, fml & tech) **hivchin** to find out: *we have been able to detect some improvement as a result of the medicine.*

Other meanings:

yada (al kach) *You've broken the vase and if your mother finds out she'll be angry.*
tafas *Don't steal pens; if you're found out there'll be trouble.*

EXAMPLE TWO

NO'ACH נֹחַ

1 comfortable (adj, opp - uncomfortable) No'ach (fizit)
a pleasant to be in or on: *a comfortable chair.*
b free from pain, anxiety, grief: *she feels comfortable after the operation.*

2 convenient (adj, opp - inconvenient) No'ach (sidur, hat'ama)
suitable, that avoids trouble or difficulty, easy to get to: *Will it be convenient for you to start work tomorrow? This is a convenient method of payment. The car is parked in a convenient place.*

Related words: (related to 1b)

tranquil (adj) **shalev, shaket** calm, quiet and peaceful: *She leads a tranquil life in the country.*
relaxed (adj) **ragu'a** calm and peaceful in body and mind: *He spoke in a relaxed way to his friends.*