

# *Kernerman* DICTIONARY News

## The Coming Boom in English Lexicography: Some Thoughts about the World Wide Web (Part One)

Charles M. Levine

Charles M. Levine was until recently the vice-president and publisher of the Random House Dictionaries. He is currently executive director and CEO of the Flora of North America, a collaborative nationwide project to catalog the plants of the continental US, Canada and Greenland. He has held a number of senior executive positions in digital and print content management in Asia and the USA. [charlev@att.net](mailto:charlev@att.net)

Not infrequently, people unfamiliar with the dictionary marketplace assume that spell checkers, given away free with computer word-processing programs, have made printed lexicons obsolete. "Why would anyone want a dictionary anymore?" some people chime, glossing over the difference between a spell checker and a dictionary, and oblivious as well to how poor spell checkers usually still are. (Since spell checkers are bundled freely, there is no money to be made and no incentive in developing truly better, more intelligent spell-checking software.)

Even those who are more knowledgeable about the dictionary market, such as sales and marketing people at large publishing houses, often think it is just a matter of time before people stop buying printed dictionaries. After all, one is often reminded, printed, multi-volume general English encyclopedias for all intents and purposes have gone extinct – from nearly 750,000 sets worldwide in 1990, to hardly 100,000 today. How can printed dictionaries be far behind?

According to friend and colleague Joseph Esposito, former CEO of Britannica and the driving force behind the first launches of [www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com): "In talking about the relative size of the encyclopedia

market today, you may want to think about two other metrics in addition to unit sales: dollar volume (down by 90% since its peak), and the number of people who actually use an encyclopedia (also down, but hard to measure). Encarta's ubiquity has not resulted in more widespread use. And thereby hangs a tale."

Or, as someone summed up in a Purdue University education course: "How does a company [like Britannica] that survived over 200 years, through the American revolution, the industrial revolution, WWI and WWII, find itself suddenly on the verge of being completely eliminated by three simple letters: www?" (Google search 2000, undated and unattributed.)

In such an environment, no one in their right mind would start up a new consumer encyclopedia company, or a new general-purpose dictionary operation, I have been firmly told.

You could even say that Bloomsbury in England, who created the new Encarta World English dictionaries (a brand new college edition of which was just shipped), are no exception: Microsoft footed the bill for a very specific reason: to avoid paying American Heritage license fees for its dictionary which once graced the Encarta digital reference suite. And, in the end,

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K DICTIONARIES LTD

Nahum 10 Tel Aviv 63503 Israel • tel 972-3-5468102 • fax 972-3-5468103 • [kd@kdictionary.com](mailto:kd@kdictionary.com) • [www.kdictionary.com](http://www.kdictionary.com)

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Microsoft does not mind giving away for free a large percentage of the Encarta digital dictionaries in promotions to sell its Wintel hardware and software. But surprisingly, the printed dictionary market in the United States seems to have held steady during this same past decade, while the market for printed encyclopedias collapsed. Each year, about 2 million college-level dictionaries and 2 million mass market pocket dictionaries are sold regularly like clockwork.

The American domestic dictionary market seems as steady and as uneventful as a rock. And, at the same time, Random House, American Heritage and Merriam-Webster have found a new area (for American lexicographers, at least, who came late to the game) in which to grow – the ESL/EFL (English as a Second/Foreign Language) world market.

In fact, ESL/EFL will probably help keep the wolves from the American lexicographers' door, and prevent dictionary operations from going the way of their encyclopedic cousins. English learning is booming around the world: "Today, 350 million people are native English speakers, but by some counts more than a billion speak at least some English as a second language. Most of them are in Asia..."

"Now it's not native speakers that are moving English forward," said Larry E. Smith, an expert on international English at the East-West Center in Honolulu. "It's the non-native speakers, the people in Singapore, the people in Malaysia." (Seth Mydans, *The New York Times*, July 1, 2001.)

Internet use is also driving English use. "More than 80% of the home pages on the Web are in English, while the next greatest, German, has a mere 4.5% and Japanese 3.1%," according to John Simmons of Interbrand, which specializes in valuing brands. (In "Global usage of English speaks volumes in trade," Robin Young, *The Times*, 19 March 2001.)

By calculating all the commerce carried out in various languages, Simmons came up with a rather imaginative and, no doubt, utterly wild estimate of what he calls the "gross language product (GLP)", which for English "is the biggest at £5,455 billion, followed by Japanese at £2,960 billion, German at £1,714 billion and Spanish at £1,249 billion."

This is a wild but highly suggestive estimate, but indeed by every measure there is a boom in English usage and commerce fostered by the World Wide Web, and this seems to be having just the opposite effect on lexicography as it did on "encyclopediography." The World Wide Web seems to be creating new markets for ESL/EFL printed dictionaries and instruction materials — and for linguists themselves.

In fact, technology companies are competing to hire linguists, despite the downturn in the Net economy: "Suddenly, linguists have their pick of jobs as lexicographers, 'knowledge engineers' and 'vocabulary-resource managers.' For those with doctorates, the typical starting salary is around \$60,000, plus some stock. The more highly trained talent is drawing more than \$100,000.

"Linguistics experts help e-businesses improve customer service by building so-called natural-language processing systems that can respond meaningfully to requests for help or information. With linguists developing the database or 'lexicon,' a system can distinguish between multiple meanings of words, relate groups of words by concept, and narrow the scope of a search by asking questions of the site visitor." (Daniel Goldin, *The Wall Street Journal*, first read sometime in 2000, but undated on Google, where I retrieved the article.)

I hope in the next installment to talk more about this boom in English lexicography and how it relates to new developments coming to the World Wide Web.



## PASSWORD for Hungarians

Tamás Magay

Tamás Magay was born in 1928 in Kaposvár, and graduated in English language and literature from the University of Budapest. He studied lexicography under L. Országh, and wrote his theses on the history of English lexicography in Hungary and the principles of bilingual lexicography. He was co-author and later editor-in-chief of a series of English/Hungarian dictionaries, and edited, among others, a major phraseological bilingual dictionary and a pronunciation dictionary of Hungarian proper names. He is a founding member of Euralex and organized its third congress (Budalex '88), and founded and heads the English Department of the new Gáspár Károli University, including lexicography and lexicology studies. Dr Magay edited the first semi-bilingual dictionary in Hungary (*Magyar Chambers*, 1992) and is the editor of the forthcoming second version.

### 1. Introduction

Plenty, though by far not enough, has been said and written by outstanding scholars and lexicographers on the subject of bilingualizing the monolingual learner's dictionary. Apart from typological relevance, the problems raised and solved so far have usually been in close relation to one of the most challenging questions of (practical) lexicography: *dictionary use* (Atkins

1998, Cowie 1999). It is this aspect that I would like to stress in the present article: how to proceed from the present state of the art, and further refine and improve this type of dictionary.

Gabriele Stein distinguished three stages of dictionary use in foreign language acquisition, the order being of major importance: (1) the bilingual dictionary, (2) the monolingual learner's dictionary, and (3) the native-