

WHY SHOULDN'T MONOLINGUAL DICTIONARIES BE AS EASY TO USE AS BILINGUAL ONES?

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THE LEARNER'S CHOICE

Surveys of learners' use of dictionaries generally confirm the teachers suspicion that, way beyond the elementary level, many still prefer trilingual dictionaries to monolingual ones (Tomaszcak 1979). Learners might seem to have some excuse for this when **writing** and totally stuck for a word or phrase for the meaning they want to express, but in fact even here, from early intermediate level onwards, they can now resort to a superior monolingual resource, the Longman Language Activator. What is more puzzling is learners' persistence in using bilingual dictionaries when they meet an unfamiliar word when reading, or need to check some detail of a word they basically 'know' when writing (the focuses of attention in this article). Here dictionaries written completely in the target language are more obviously usable.

THE MONOLINGUAL ADVANTAGE

Does it **matter** what sort of dictionary learners use? Well, for one thing, many teachers and dictionary experts would agree that few bilingual dictionaries get close in quality of information to that found in the learners' monolingual dictionaries produced by major publishers such as Longman, Collins or Oxford. Those learners who use monolingual dictionaries also recognize this themselves (Bejoint 1981). Then there is the familiar argument that learners need to get into the habit of 'thinking in the target language': they will not be efficient comprehenders and users of English if they operate always via an extra step of translating into their first language, which use of bilingual dictionaries is likely to encourage.

There is also some learning research that bears on this. For instance Ahmed (1989), in a large survey of vocabulary learning strategies by learners of English in Khartoum, identified two kinds of unsuccessful learner. The characteristic of the lower level group was hardly to use any leaning strategies at all, including never using **any** sort of dictionary.

But another way of being unsuccessful, which characterized some of the university level learners in the study, was to use bilingual dictionaries and rely on connected translation type activities when learning. The more successful learners at that higher level had gone on from using trilingual dictionaries to using monolingual ones, and made some use of information in such dictionaries beyond just the definitions.

HOW TO 'EASIFY' MONOLINGUAL DICTIONARY USE?

So, there seems little doubt that graduation to a good monolingual dictionary is something learners should be encouraged to aim at as soon as their proficiency allows it. Teachers no doubt often encourage it. Yet the learners themselves are clearly reluctant to progress, presumably because they find a resource entirely in the target language harder to use.

One solution is better training of learners in how to use monolingual dictionaries. This is clearly desirable. But the monolingual learners' dictionary makers should not be complacent. They also need to pay attention not just to the quality and quantity of information they offer in a dictionary, and its relevance to learners, but to how to offer it in the most palatable possible way. The more they can do to help, the less the learner needs to master special strategies for the use of monolingual target language dictionaries.

WHAT REALLY ARE THE PROBLEMS?

A learner needs many skills to use a dictionary successfully (Scholfield 1982). Some of these, such as fluency in use of target language alphabetical order, are not pursued here. After all, a learner needs that just as much to use a bilingual Target Language - Native Language dictionary successfully! They cannot be the major problems.

The most obvious 'difficulty' for a learner looking within a monolingual entry is, of course, that, on reaching the right place in the headword list, the explanations of the meanings are all in the target language. However, the dictionary can go a good way to make things easier by making sure the definitions are all in a basic vocabulary that the learner is likely to know already. This sort of limited defining vocabulary has, of course, been a hallmark of all Longman learner dictionaries for decades.

In their latest edition of the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English they have taken advantage of their huge corpus resources of natural English as well as their 5 million word corpus of learners' writing to revise this vocabulary, so as to make sure that it reflects common, current English and takes learners' proficiencies into account as well.

However, the language of the definitions is not the only problem, but also their organization. In many ways this has been a neglected area of concern in learners dictionaries which Longman have now faced head on in their new edition. Let us look at this in a little more detail.

WHERE ONE WORD CORRESPONDS TO SEVERAL DIFFERENT MEANINGS

A great many words in English have more than one sense/meaning especially the moderately common words that intermediate learners are most likely to be looking up (e.g. *manage* can mean *control* a company etc. or *'succeed in dealing with'* a heavy load, and numerous other things). Zipf is famous for a law that states that the number of meanings a word has is proportionate to its frequency. Also many words appear in more than one part of speech with

different, though related meanings (e.g. chase verb and noun). Traditionally; there are a wealth of ways that dictionaries have of organising information in such instances. They often split the information between different entries each with the headword spelt the same: e.g. **chase 1** verb, **chase 2** noun, though COBUILD takes the unusual approach of lumping different parts of speech together in one list of such words. And within the entry for a given headword the different senses may be in all sorts of different orders (which meaning of **manage** should come first?).

What system is best for the user? Well, there is little hard research evidence on this subject, but if we put ourselves in the position of the learner, we can perhaps see what is likely to be easier for him/her. Having arrived at the right place in the alphabetical listing, will it be easier to scan just one big entry for the wordform one is looking up (e.g. **chase**), or to first choose the right part" of speech entry and then look in that? Probably the latter. After all, the very minimum the user will know or have guessed from context about the word they are looking up before going to the dictionary, will probably be whether it is a noun or verb etc. So it is going to be quicker then to use this information to choose and go through the entry for just one of those, rather than scan a longer entry that switches confusingly backward and forward between both.

Is it going to be easier if the different meanings are then presented within entries in frequency order, historical order (oldest first), or some land of logical' order Surely the first, since the learner seeking the meaning of an unknown word when reading will on average have to scan down the least number of different definitions to find the relevant one. Frequency has also been shown to be a key feature of the organization of words in speakers mental lexicons (Taft 1991).

However, one must be a little careful here. A number of dictionaries do use some sort of frequency order, but all frequencies are not the same. To be most certain of general effectiveness, the frequency order must be based on occurrences of words and phrases in a really **representative** corpus of all kinds of English, both written and spoken. Here Longman have a clear advantage in their use of the Longman Lancaster written corpus and the British National Corpus including the Spoken Corpus, both collected following rigorous regimes of sampling so as to reflect all varieties of written and spoken English in sensible proportions (Summers 1993).

Strict application of the frequency principle sometimes produces unexpected results. For instance for **rough** *noun* is a phrase - *in rough* - that comes out as the first meaning to be dealt with, not any of the simple noun senses like *rough* 'noisy or violent person'. Again the abstract sense of **shape** *verb* meaning (applied e.g. to beliefs or ideas) turns out to be more frequent than the concrete one (applied e.g. to dough). While most dictionaries (e.g. OALD) would, as a matter of 'logic', list simple word meanings before phrase meanings, and concrete senses before abstract, Longman have gone wholeheartedly for learner accessibility.

SIGNPOSTING

Is this all that can be done? Even with the above system the learner still often has to scan a

good deal of an entry containing quite a number of word and phrase senses to locate the relevant one. I am sure what most puts a learner off the use of monolingual dictionaries is the sheer mass of condensed target language text in monolingual entries and the daunting prospect of wading through this picking out the numbered definitions and checking each one to find the right one.

This is perhaps where Longman in their new edition have made the most innovative step. In entries with a confusing number of meanings (usually over seven), they have (a) clarified the visual effect immensely by starting the information on each sense indented on a new line, and (b) marked the start of each new sense with capitalized 'signposts' simple words and phrases that roughly characterize each sense and make identifying the right one much easier. These signposts are of a variety of types whatever is likely to help the user. For instance **nurse** *verb* has its first sense signposted as SICK PEOPLE reflecting the collocational scope of the object of the word in this sense. The second sense is labelled YOUR FEELINGS in similar style. A later sense is introduced by HOLD, a reduced paraphrase.

These signposts do not replace the full definition, which follows each signpost with the examples and all the other usual information for each sense. What they do, however, is to form a quick menu for the user's eye to run down. In many cases the context in which the learner has met an unknown word will prompt a choice of signpost. Or if the word is to some extent known, then the signposts will normally be within the scope of that known information. Thus learners should usually be able to select the right sense paragraph to read fully without having to read all the detail in several other paragraphs first.

CONCLUSION

Can the monolingual dictionary ever be as easy to use as the bilingual? Well, perhaps never quite. But practices like those above should go a long way to help. The last effort still needs to be made by the user. But the reward, of course, is access to lexical information of unparalleled quality.

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