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Research in the News

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Dictionaries for learners of English

The Department of Lexicography and Lexicology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań has done extensive research on dictionary use in the context of language teaching and learning. The department forms part of the Faculty of English, which is the largest institution in continental Europe educating teachers of English at the B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. levels. Therefore, it is only natural that the language-teaching potential of dictionaries is the main focus of the studies undertaken in the Department.

1. Dictionaries for reading and writing

A major activity at the department is the practical compilation of dictionaries for learners of English. Along with a growing number of authors within ELT (e.g. Hall & Cook 2012) and lexicographic (e.g. Augustyn 2013) circles, we believe that an optimal learning tool should capitalize on the learner's command of their first language. In Lew & Adamska-Sałaciak (2015) we argue for the adoption of bilingual learners' dictionaries into additional language learning.

One problem with monolingual learners' dictionaries when used for comprehension (typically while reading) is that they explain meaning through definitions. My ongoing experimental research suggests that English definitions (taken from highly acclaimed learners' dictionaries) are problematic as vehicles for meaning explanation, not just for learners (including advanced learners of various language backgrounds), but also for native speakers of English. For learners of English, definitions present parsing challenges and lead to further comprehension problems. However, an even bigger problem that also affects native speakers of English is the inherent difficulty of extracting a unitary meaning from a distributed assemblage of lexical cues.

Compared to reading, a more challenging context of dictionary use is composition writing. For productive use, a dictionary needs far richer entries, which should include carefully disambiguated target language items, exhaustive information on syntactic patterns, collocational information, and example sentences which can serve as models for L2 writing. The best monolingual learners' dictionaries accommodate most of these needs, but their fundamental problem is that this rich information is indexed under the target L2 word, which often is not known a priori to the learner. A bilingual learner's dictionary compiled in Poznań, in collaboration with Longman (Fisiak et al. 2011), includes all the rich information needed for successful text production, but indexed under the L1 terms. A study in progress is aimed to test the effectiveness of this dictionary as a writing aid for Polish learners during the writing assignment forming part of a formal secondary-school leaving examination. Preliminary results indicate that the dictionary significantly improves scores on all four

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aspects of language production evaluated in the examination rubric, including – somewhat surprisingly – the non-lexical component of STRUCTURE, particularly when the digital version of the dictionary is used.

2. Finding information in dictionaries

Some dictionaries for language learners now include special entry navigation devices meant to assist users in locating specific information in longer entries. Two types of such devices are SIGNPOSTS – brief verbal cues prefacing each sense of an entry – and MENUS, which gather similar cues in a single block above the entry. Recently, as part of a Ph.D. project, Ptasznik & Lew (2014) tested a combination of signposts and menus to see if it might be more effective than just a single device. It turns out that such redundancy of navigation devices does not improve search speed or success. The conclusion of this and previous studies (Lew 2010), is that signposts are more effective than menus.

Another aspect of signposting is currently being investigated by Dziemianko, who is testing the effectiveness of various typographical ways of presenting signposts, modelled after the leading monolingual English learners' dictionaries. Preliminary results indicate that white capital letters against a blue background work best in terms of both access speed and meaning retention. This layout is modelled on the 5th edition of the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (Mayor 2009).

Collocational information can be very helpful in productive activities, and the best dictionaries for learners do include such information, but what is the best way of presenting collocations? A recent study by Dziemianko (2014) suggests that collocations presented in bold type – either directly in sentences exemplifying the collocational patterns, or immediately preceding their respective example sentences – are easier for learners to find than those placed in the (recently fashionable) dedicated collocation boxes. In terms of retention for later use, collocations presented in bold before example sentences are remembered better than those given in bold WITHIN examples, with boxes again performing the worst.

Idioms, phrases, and expressions are a particularly troublesome type of lexical item for lexicographers and dictionary users alike, since it is not clear under which component word such MULTI-WORD UNITS should be listed in a dictionary. The leading English learners' dictionaries tend to place multi-word units under the first content word, but is this where learners expect to find them? In my recent study presented at the Dictionary Society of North America (DSNA) 2015 Conference, I tested idiom look-up by both advanced and intermediate learners of English. At both proficiency levels, learners tended to look up the least frequent word (presumably because it appeared less familiar). These results strongly suggest that dictionaries should list multi-word units under the least frequent word, rather than the first content word. Before they do, English language teachers should be telling learners to look under the first content word.

3. Moving forward: online dictionaries and mobile dictionaries

Traditional dictionaries for language learners are printed books, but they are rapidly being replaced by digital dictionaries. With the new medium come new opportunities and challenges

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for lexicographers, such as the new search and navigation options afforded by digital dictionaries. These aspects are also studied intensively at our department. In a recently published paper, Dziemianko (2015) shows that judicious use of colour can help online dictionary users locate and retrieve syntactic information better.

The new digital-native generation of language learners are increasingly expecting to get their dictionaries online for free. This drives them away from established authoritative dictionaries and to online dictionaries of uncertain provenance and often questionable quality. Trying to stop language learners from using such free online resources is probably a losing battle, but we could at least offer guidance on which online dictionaries are better than others. As part of an M.A. project, we have elaborated an evaluation framework for online dictionaries and used it to assess objectively the quality of the most popular freely available online dictionaries between English and Polish. The results of this evaluation were presented at the e-Lexicography 2015 conference.

4. Conclusion

One limitation of the empirical studies on dictionaries in language learning conducted at our department is that they tend to be limited in scope to Polish learners of English. This raises the question of how generalizable particular findings are to learners of other language configurations. Many probably are, but it would be best to try to replicate some of the studies with language learners of different backgrounds. Therefore, my aim in offering the present contribution is not just to inform readers of our work and findings, but also to extend an invitation to replicate our studies in different contexts. With such an extended empirical basis informing the design decisions, future dictionaries stand a good chance of becoming even more useful tools for learners than they are today.

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