From the Bilingual to the Monolingual Dictionary

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This paper is based on the following two assumptions:

1. Vocabulary acquisition has been seriously neglected in language teaching and language learning.

2. The critical period when a massive expansion of the foreign vocabulary is needed is the intermediate level (cf. F. Twadell, 1966:79; J. C. Richards, 1976:84; E. A. Levinston, 1979:149; P. Meara, 1982:100).

The main reasons for this neglect are:

a. the great dependence of language teaching methodologists on the research interests and fashions in linguistics and psychology, and

b. the emphasis placed by language teaching methodologists and language acquisition researchers on the beginning stage. The belief generally held is that vocabulary acquisition can be delayed until the rudiments of pronunciation and a substantial proportion of the grammatical system have been mastered. Therefore language teaching has naturally concentrated on grammar (cf. E. A. Levinston, 1979:148).

Teaching methods and curricula designs vary from country to country, and from language to language. As a non-native teacher of English I can only speak for the English context, but a number of the points that I shall make may well be applicable to the teaching of other languages.

What we then need in the teaching of English as a foreign and as a second language is a major reorientation in teaching methodology. A reorientation that assigns vocabulary acquisition its proper place in the language acquisition process. Who are the pupils and students that are learning English at an intermediate level? In countries in which English is taught as a foreign or as a second language they typically are science students who have to improve their knowledge of English to read scientific material, students who want to do a degree in a situation where the medium of instruction is English, professionals who need a better command of English for promotion, and the future English language/literature students. It is self-evident that the massive vocabulary expansion so urgently needed cannot be provided in the classroom alone. Classroom teaching has to be accompanied by extensive learning activities outside the classroom and it is here that we teachers have failed our pupils and students most seriously. We have not equipped them at all for this situation. Within the classroom we as teachers act as guides and language arbiters. Who takes our place outside the classroom? The best and most comprehensive language guides for students in non-native environments are obviously dictionaries. Where we have failed is first, in not having provided them with the necessary information on the relevant reference books, and second, more substantially, in not having made them competent in extracting guidance from dictionaries.

The teaching of dictionary-using skills has to start in the classroom, right from the end of the beginner's level. These skills have to be practised in the classroom and

at home. Herbst and I have discussed the exemplary nature of dictionary-using skills in the acquisition of general reference skills elsewhere (1987). In the present paper I shall concentrate on the transition from the use of the bilingual to the monolingual dictionary. That is, I assume that, in order to help the group of learners described to obtain the proficiency aimed at, we have to guide them to become competent in the use of different types of dictionaries. The two vital stages are the use of a bilingual and of a monolingual dictionary, both of the general type, but in between we have—for English—the monolingual learner's dictionary (EFL dictionary). The most natural progression seems to be from the bilingual to the monolingual English learner's dictionary to the monolingual general-purpose dictionary. Progression is here understood to correlate with language proficiency, that is, the successful use of a monolingual general-purpose dictionary presupposes a higher degree of competence in English than that of a monolingual learner's dictionary, and the latter cannot be consulted to advantage without a certain command of English. I shall focus on the transition from the use of a bilingual to a monolingual learner's dictionary. These dictionaries provide different types of information and are compiled for different groups of users. One cannot be substituted for the other. I would therefore like to stress from the outset that in talking about 'progression' and 'transition' I am not saying that from the intermediate level onwards the use of a bilingual dictionary should be replaced by that of a monolingual learner's dictionary. What I am advocating is that being able to use a bilingual dictionary is not enough, because of the well-known limits of this type of dictionary. Our learners need an additional tool that helps them to overcome a good number of the shortcomings of bilingual dictionaries. These two types of dictionary complement each other and this has to be brought home to our learners.

Let me illustrate some of the most striking differences with a concrete example. Imagine a foreign learner has come across the following sentence:

Her lecture had so much *meat* in it
that my head began *to swim*.

He/she is not sure about the meaning of the items *meat* and *to swim* in this context and looks them up. In a good modern bilingual dictionary he/she is given the following information:[1]

meat [miːt] *n* **(a)** Fleisch *nt.* cold ~ kalter Braten; (*sausage*) Wurst *f*; **assorted cold** ~s Aufschnitt *m.*
    (b) (*old: food*) Essen *nt*, Speise *f* (*liter*). ~ **and drink** Speise und Trank; **one man's** ~ **is another man's poison** (*Prov*) des einen Freud, des andern Leid (*Prov*).
    (c) (*fig: of argument, book*) Substanz *f.* **a book with some** ~ **in it** ein aussagestarkes Buch.

swim [swɪm] (*vb: pret* **swam**, *ptp* **swum**) **1** *n* **(a)** **after a 2 km** ~ nach 2 km Schwimmen, nachdem ich *etc* 2 km geschwommen bin/war; **it's a long** ~ es ist weit (zu schwimmen); **that was a nice** ~ das (Schwimmen) hat Spaß gemacht!; **I like** *or* **enjoy a** ~ ich gehe gern (mal) schwimmen, ich schwimme gern (mal); **to have a** ~ schwimmen.
    (b) (*inf*) **to be in the/out of the** ~ up to date/nicht mehr up to date sein; (*socially active*) mitmischen (*inf*)/den Anschluß verloren haben; **to keep sb in the** ~ jdn auf dem laufenden halten.
    2 *vt* schwimmen; *river, Channel* durchschwimmen.
    3 *vi* (*all senses*) schwimmen. **to** ~ **back** zurückschwimmen; **we shall have to** ~ **for it** wir werden schwimmen müssen; **the room swam before my eyes** das Zimmer verschwamm vor meinen Augen; **my head is** ~**ming** mir dreht sich alles, mir ist ganz schwummrig (*inf*).

The EFL dictionary provides him/her with the following information:[2]

meat /miːt/ *n* [U] **1** the flesh of four-footed animals and birds used for food: *His religion forbids the eating of meat.* | *There's not much meat on that bone/chicken.* | *What shall we have for the meat course?* —see also RED MEAT, WHITE MEAT **2** valuable material, ideas, etc.: *It was a clever speech, but there was no real meat in it.* **3** *old use* food (esp. in the phrase **meat and drink**) **4 be meat and drink to** to give great enjoyment to
■ USAGE The meat from some animals has a different name from the animal itself. For example, the meat from a **cow** is called **beef,** the meat from a **pig** is **pork** or **ham** or **bacon,** the meat from a **calf** (= a young cow) is **veal,** the meat from a **deer** is **venison,** and the meat from a **sheep** is **mutton.** But the meat from a **lamb** is **lamb,** and for birds the same word is used for both the meat and the creature: *Shall we have* **chicken** *or* **duck** *for dinner?*

swim[1] /swɪm/ *v* **swam** /swæm/, **swum** /swʌm/; *present participle* **swimming 1** [I] to move oneself forward through water by using the arms and legs, a tail, FINS, etc.: *We're all going swimming.* | *She's teaching the children to swim.* | *They watched the fish swimming in the aquarium.* | *Some snakes can swim.* **2** [T] to cross or complete (a distance) by doing this: *to swim a river/100 metres* **3** [T] to use (a particular stroke) in swimming: *She can swim breaststroke, backstroke, and crawl.* **4** [I (**with, in**)] to be full of or surrounded with liquid: *The soup was swimming with fat.* | *meat swimming in gravy* **5** [I] to cause one to feel DIZZY; seem to spin round and round: *He was hot and tired and his head was swimming.* **6 swim with/against the tide** to follow/not follow the behaviour of other people around one—see also **sink or swim** (SINK[1]) — ~**mer** *n*: *She's a strong swimmer.*
swim[2] *n* **1** [S] an act or occasion of swimming: *Let's go for a swim!* **2 in the swim** *infml* knowing about and concerned in what is going on in modern life

There are obviously quite a number of differences. For our present purposes the following are most relevant:

1. The bilingual dictionary provides one-word equivalents for the three senses of *meat*. When reading the entry our student will learn a new sense of the word (c), but he/she will also reinforce the undifferentiated equation *meat* = Fleisch. In the EFL entry, however, our learner while looking for the appropriate sense for this context will also read the explanation of sense 1 and understand that *meat* cannot be used when referring to the raw substance under the skin (human flesh, fruit flesh). The same holds for the verb *swim*: from the EFL entry he/she will gather that *swim* pre-

supposes the use of parts of the body. It thus does not cover the same semantic area as German *schwimmen* which includes that of *to float*, but most important, the bilingual dictionary does not make the 'dizzy' sense explicit.

2. In the EFL entries our learner finds many example sentences that illustrate the item in actual language use.

3. The EFL dictionary, in addition, tells him/her that *meat* is not countable.

The bilingual dictionary thus provides ready translation equivalents, which is particularly helpful, for instance, for the quick decoding of plant and animal names as well as technical terms, whereas the EFL dictionary supplies full explanations of the word meanings, gives many examples and is more explicit with respect to the proper grammatical use of words. Our learner is constantly confronted with English texts, weaned away from the tongue-tying translation attitude and will learn to paraphrase the meaning of an unknown item to elicit the English word from the interlocutor.

But research into dictionary use over the last decade has shown that many dictionary users are unable to find and extract from a dictionary all the information it holds ready for them. Some reasons have been suggested, but much more research is needed. Explanations of a general kind are

(a) a total or partial lack of knowledge of what information the dictionary provides and how it is presented,

(b) underdeveloped dictionary-using skills, and

(c) lack of awareness on the part of the users that the lower their command of the foreign language, the more they have to double-check.

Among the more specific reasons offered are:

(a) difficulties in identifying the appropriate sense,

(b) difficulties in understanding typographical conventions that indicate sense or usage restrictions,

(c) unfamiliarity with the grammatical system used; this may concern grammar as such or only specific distinctions or terminologies,

(d) the specific syntax used within dictionary entries.

All these factors undoubtedly account for many learners' apparent reluctance to use an EFL dictionary and their slavishly desperate devotion to one single bilingual dictionary. The strong grammatical component in EFL dictionaries increases this reluctance to use such dictionaries and their monolingual character is discouraging because learners constantly find (or fear) that the definitions and examples are beyond their linguistic grasp.

Since the EFL dictionary is an indispensable major learning tool that has to be introduced and used as early as possible, we have to ask what can be done.

I think that the LONGMAN DICTIONARY OF CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH is showing us the way. It is at present the only EFL dictionary that uses a systematically restricted vocabulary for its definitions. This defining vocabulary of about 2000 items is listed at the end of the dictionary.[3] Learners are told that if they have internalized these items they can expect to understand the definition of the 50 000 or so entries in the dictionary. What we as teachers therefore have to do is to make sure that our learners have indeed mastered this defining vocabulary. It is here that I see

the lexicographical stepping-stones between the bilingual and the EFL dictionary — stepping-stones that have to be developed into a solid causeway providing reassurance that it leads from the familiar territory of the mother tongue directly and safely to the language one is learning.

What I suggest we need is a bilingual word book with the following features:

1. The size is that of the defining vocabulary, that is about 2000 items.

2. It has an English-mother tongue part which is fully explanatory and a mother tongue-English part which is indexical.

3. The arrangement of both parts is alphabetical.

4. Meanings and senses of words are given in the mother tongue. Since the goal is not translation but the internalization of word meanings, the translations provided are explanatory, differentiating and explicitly contrastive.

5. The overall sense arrangement is syntactic. All traditional bilingual dictionaries heavily rely on the native speaker's grammatical competence. Therefore the grammatical component within the dictionary is too weak to make learners become aware of the intricate interdependencies between meaning and grammar. The strong explicit grammatical component in our bilingual word book also prepares the way for understanding that aspect of EFL dictionaries.

6. All senses are illustrated with typical English sentences with translations in the mother tongue. This has the following advantages:

a. The examples do not have to be restricted to the items of the defining vocabulary.

b. The translations explain unknown words.

c. Learners can match sense descriptions and English illustrations.

d. They get used to authentic English texts.

e. The constant comparisons between an English example sentence and the translation sharpen and strengthen the learners' *Sprachgefühl* as to language precision and good style.

7. Wherever possible pictorial illustrations should be provided to facilitate the understanding process.

In the envisaged bilingual word book the entry for *meat*, with the necessary sense restrictions of a defining vocabulary, might be as follows:

meat [miːt] *n.*

1. *nicht zählbar* Fleisch von Tieren und Geflügel, das man ißt: *There's not much meat on that bone.* An dem Knochen ist nicht viel Fleisch dran.

NB Das Wort für Fleisch in der Bedeutung 'rohe Substanz unter der Haut von Lebewesen und Früchten' ist *flesh.*

2. *nicht zählbar, übertragen* (verwendet in bezug auf Gedankengut u. ä.) Substanz: *It was an amusing speech though it had no real meat in it.* Es war eine amüsante Rede, aber ohne wirkliche Substanz.

Our bilingual defining vocabulary will be a functional basic vocabulary, a functional English *Grundwortschatz* or *un anglais fondamental fonctionnel.* It is not based on frequency nor on purely pragmatic principles. It is functional because its

mastery will enable learners not only to understand the 50 000 words or so of the dictionary but help them to paraphrase the meaning of words to elicit the words themselves from their interlocutors.

Notes

[1] The examples are taken from COLLINS GERMAN-ENGLISH ENGLISH-GERMAN DICTIONARY.
[2] The examples are taken from LONGMAN DICTIONARY OF CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH.
[3] Not listed, however, are the sense restrictions for these items.

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