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Passive vs. Active dictionary.
A revision

Abstract

The paper is devoted the problem passive vs. active dictionary. It is an attempt to prove that neither out of practical nor theoretical considerations it is appropriate to compile large bilingual dictionaries A→B and B→A purely passive or purely active: they ought to be bidirectional, i.e. intended for users both with mother tongue A and mother tongue B.

As is well-known in the thirties the Russian Lev Sjtsjerba launched the idea that two types of bilingual dictionaries have to be compiled – one type for users who translate from a foreign language into their mother tongue, and the other for users who translate from their mother tongue into a foreign language. Therefore, according to Sjtserba, for a particular pair of languages it was necessary to have four dictionaries: A → B and B → A for users with the mother tongue A, and A → B and B → A for users with the mother tongue B. He called *passive* dictionaries with the source language foreign for the user and the target language – his mother tongue, dictionaries with the source language – the user's mother tongue and the target language – a foreign one he called *active*.

Sjtsjerba's idea of the passive and active dictionaries was part of his com-prehensive theory about different kinds of information necessary for reception and production of a text. He also studied the problem active/passive grammar.

Only in the last decades Sjtsjerba's idea won general recognition. The terms *passive (decoding) dictionary* and *active (encoding) dictionary* now have got current.

Sjtsjerba's idea of passive vs. active dictionaries was pioneering and fruitful in many respects. But it involves certain disadvantages. In this paper an at-tempt to revise some aspects of this idea will be done.

The basis of Sjtsjerba's idea of a passive/active dictionary is as follows: The users need different kinds of supplementary information in addition to the equivalent(s) according to whether the dictionary is used for translation from a foreign language into their mother tongue (decoding) or from their mother tongue into a foreign one (encoding).

When the user translates from a foreign language into his mother tongue he doesn't need any information about the pronunciation and grammar characteristics of the equivalents: it's his mother tongue, and he possesses the information. But this information is necessary for the persons who translate from their mother tongue into a foreign language.

The value of this division of bilingual dictionaries into passive and active is, in my opinion, just that it points up that different categories of users need information of somewhat unlike amount and content. But a consistent implementing of the passive/active principle in compiling large bilingual dictionaries is not appropriate – neither for practical nor for theoretical reasons.

Let us begin with the practical ones.

One has to take account of the fact that Sjtsjerba launched his idea when compiling a Russian-French dictionary, i.e. a dictionary with the source and target languages spoken by millions of people, and for the societies with large mutual interest for the languages in question. In such cases it is natural that one aims at the user's getting that and only that information he needs.

However it is evident that with the majority of language pairs a set of four dictionaries is something absolutely unrealizable. Is it, for example, possible to issue two Norwegian-Turkish dictionaries – one for the Norwegians and one for the Turks? Or even two large Norwegian-English dictionaries? For the time being a set of four dictionaries with Norwegian (as as a source language as well as a target one) doesn't exist. The existing Norwegian bilingual dictionaries are of two types.

Most of them are intended for only one category of users (the Norwegians) and the corresponding counterparts for users with another mother tongue are missing. The excellent *Cappelens store Engelsk-norsk ordbok* is a passive dictionary for the Norwegians and can't be used in the full as an active dictionary by the English speaking people: in the Norwegian part there is no information about the pronunciation and grammar, let alone semantic information. The corresponding active English-Norwegian dictionary for the English-speaking people is missing. And it is not by accident. For practical, material reasons it is impossible to publish a large active English-Norwegian dictionary: the number of the copies that would sell, would be too small.

The Norwegian publishing house Kunnskapsforlaget series blue dictionaries can be used as active or passive (according to the source language) by the Norwegians, but none of them can be used as an active dictionary by the English, Germans, French etc.

The other type of dictionaries is represented by Tom Hustad's *Stor norsk-tysk ordbok* and Einar Haugen's *Norsk-engelsk ordbok*. The first

one (especially the 1. edition) is meant as a passive dictionary for the Germans and at the same time as an active one for the Norwegians, i.e. is intended for two categories of users. The same can be said about the dictionary by Haugen. By the way, it must be mentioned that the latter dictionary contains a good deal of information about Norwegian that strictly speaking doesn't belong to a purely passive dictionary and at the same time as an active dictionary for the Norwegians it doesn't contain a lot of necessary information about English.

An active ...-Norwegian dictionary, i.e. a dictionary that at the same time isn't a passive dictionary for the Norwegians, doesn't exist.

This situation has a natural explanation. Whereas hundreds of thousands of Norwegeans study English and tens of thousands study German, the number of the English or German speakers interested in Norwegian a lot smaller. But it is not only the number of saleable copies that can be used as an argument in this connection.

If one compairs the extent of an active A → B dictionary with the extent of a corresponding passive one, the difference doesn't prove to be very large. It amounts at the most to 30 %, may be much smaller. And a natural question arises: What is more profitable – to publish two dictionaries A → B of, say, 900 pages each (900 x 2 = 1800) or one dictionary of 1200 pages? In addition, the latter will sell much better. It is also evident that for many languages editing of special active dictionaries is absolutely unthinkable, for instance, an active English-Faroese for English speakers.

But it is not only economical reasons that prove that publication of purely active or purely passive dictionaries is not appropriate (excepting some languages spoken by millions). Such dictionaries are not expedient from the theoretical viewpoint.

A passive dictionary is intended to supply the user with that and only that information he needs in order to be able to translate a lexem in a context. Therefore much information about an entry (e.g. pronunciation, semantic comment to equivalents etc.) can be omitted.

The problem is then obvious: When translating from a foreign language into his mother tongue the user needs much less information than when translating the other way.

But is it appropriate to regard a bilingual dictionary only as a tool of translation?

Instances are relatively rare when one would *only translate* a definite text or a few texts. It may generally be stated that the user, as a rule, also wishes to acquire some knowledge of the language in question when translating into his mother tongue. The human being who translates from a foreign language ought not to be considered as a translation device

which does not learn anything. He will and can reverse the information he gets. He processes the dictionary information and remembers it (more or less), and the dictionary is the most important textbook of a foreign language. If the author of the dictionary tries to make it as passive as possible, he deprives the user of a lot of useful knowledge. An average user is convinced that if the word N in the source language (N_S) has the same meaning as the word N' in the target language (N'_t), this implies that at least in some situations the word N'_t can be translated by means of the word N_S. But a completely passive dictionary does not give him enough information about when such reversion of information can be done. This concerns especially the cases when the equivalent has a smaller meaning extent than the dictionary lemma.

The above can be summarized as follows. Neither of general considerations nor for practical reasons it is appropriate to compile completely passive or completely active bilingual dictionaries. It isn't necessary to have for a pair of languages (A,B) a set of four dictionaries, it is enough to compile two: A → B and B → A both for the users with the mother tongue A and for the users with the mother tongue B. Both of them ought to be *bidirectional*, i.e. *encoding and decoding* dictionaries rolled into one.

In Norwegian lexicography there are some dictionaries of such kind: Tom Hustad's *Stor norsk-tysk ordbok,* Lars Otto Grundt's *Stor norsk-fransk ordbok* and my large *Russisk-norsk ordbok.*

As an author of a large bidirectional dictionary I dare to assert from personal experience that the task is quite feasable though exacting. It must be given full consideration to.

Such a dictionary ought to include among other things two grammar supplements. The first one is a passive grammar of the source language, the second one an active grammar of the target language. An ideal passive grammar description also enables the user to decode a text when he doesn't know the grammar of the language in question (translation ad hoc) because this description, in addition to a traditional one, contains tables of flexions (for some languages prefixes, transfixes, circumfixes) and describes the rules for lemmatization of text forms. An active grammar consists of two parts. It contains a traditional grammar description, too, but also the part called rendering of the source language grammar categories by means of the target language. Such a grammar is realized in *Russisk-norsk ordbok,* where the user, say, is informed that the Russian instrumental case in the meaning 7 is rendered in Norwegian in such and such ways.

Completely passive or completely active dictionaries are mostly fit for beginners. Large dictionaries must be bidirectional.