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Language Learners and Dictionary Users: Bibliographic Findings and Commentary

Abstract

This is a report of the findings of an exhaustive bibliographic search done on scholarly articles written over the past thirty years about learners' dictionaries. The completed annotated bibliography of over 460 academic articles on learners' dictionaries, both monolingual and bilingual, written in English, German, French, and Italian, reveals a number of truths about the field of lexicography in the 1990's. The findings revolve around the tension between two notions: lexicography as a science vs. lexicography as an art. Empirical findings, based on the compilation of all citations in a computer database, include, but are not limited to, the following: most often cited learners' dictionaries, most often cited bilingual dictionaries, and the most influential trends in learners' dictionaries over the past thirty years.

Keywords: bibliography, annotated, learners' lexicography, pedagogical, dictionaries.

1. Introduction

The domain of texts and ideas that can be properly labeled *lexicography* includes an almost equal balance, notwithstanding competing claims, of commercial or market-driven projects, and scholarly or criticism-based projects. Not many years ago at lexicography conferences, colloquia, and seminars, it was not uncommon to hear a call for more cooperation between the two groups; of course, there was a third set of interests that both commercial and critical lexicographers agreed had a claim on the field: linguistic theory. One of the programmatic calls that issued forth from within this general state of affairs concerned what is called 'the dictionary user'. The study of the dictionary user seems likely to be a project where cooperation could readily be developed among the varied interest groups. Indeed, as we look back over the past fifteen years, there is evidence that lexicographers and metalexicographers have created a recognizable body of literature that draws on multiple perspectives, especially that of dictionary makers and of applied linguistics.

This research project is an extension of our publication in *Lexicographica 12* (Dolezal and McCreary, 1996) of one-hundred-seventy-eight annotations, supplemented with over two-hundred new annotations. From reading more than four-hundred-sixty articles that study dictionary use and/or users, we can draw this broad generalization: *the user is a learner.* However, the literature shows an even narrower consequence that follows from the truism that anyone who uses a dictionary must be trying to learn something: that is, what better group of users to study than language learners? Concentrating on the second/foreign language learner answers at least one problem associated with the study of dictionary users: *dictionary user* is not a category: a user could be a child, a college student, a housewife, a teacher - we could obviously name any number of individuals and occupations - therefore, it is not surprising that a ready-made somewhat similar set of users called 'learners' occupies the attention of much, if not most, of the literature on the user.

Lexicography is a relatively new discipline that relies on a relatively old set of methods and practices; to call the study of dictionaries a discipline may even yet be premature. By now, however, there are three widely circulated periodicals devoted to lexicography (*Dictionaries, International Journal of Lexicography,* and *Lexicographica: an International Annual for Lexicography*), the oldest of which is nineteen years old. Even though one can find articles from the early years of academic lexicography (also known as *metalexicography*) which study dictionary users, research and scholarship on the user constitutes a small proportion of the publications in the field. In some ways this state of affairs is not surprising: how many pages of the leading journals of modern languages and literature, for instance, have been devoted to analyses of the poetry user (even if we count approaches to literature such as *reception theory*)? On the other hand, since dictionaries have not traditionally been embraced by literary scholars as literary artifacts, but rather as reference tools (which seem to have their own textual category, albeit unspoken, that does not appear to deserve close readings), we might expect metalexicographers to be centrally interested in issues of knowledge transmission – and thus to be concerned with the problems of dictionary/user interface. But as we have noted, this is not the case.

As we have also noted, more and more attention has been – and, is being – given to issues concerning the user, especially (and almost exclusively) the 'non-native user' of a learner's dictionary. Therefore, the study of language acquisition potentially comes to have an important role in the development of a user-oriented approach to lexicography. A survey of the literature shows that a significant proportion of dictionary studies (many of which are undertaken by researchers in education and applied linguistics) are concerned with vocabulary learning). We would maintain that the effective habits of the dictionary user as vocabulary learner have to be analyzed by testing their use of dictionaries, not dictionary entries; in other words, we are not only interested in vocabulary learning, but also in the *dictionary-as-artifact* as a vocabulary learning device. Or as Wiegand (1990: 18) writes, "For, naturally, the subject "Wörterbuchbenutzer als Textrezipient" (dictionary user as text recipient) also belongs to the subject "Wörterbuch als Text" (dictionary as text), where I understand *"rezipieren" (receive)* as a hyperonym to *"lesen" (read), "zugreifen" (access), "konsultieren" (consult)* and *"interpretieren" (interpret)."*

Unfortunately, after reading over 460 studies, one is not able to draw direct conclusions about the usefulness of a dictionary. Reading the studies leads one to believe that there is no coherent approach to the question of usefulness, and more strongly, that those engaged in the studies show little awareness of the scope and size of the available literature.

While there has been some debate about dictionaries as texts or pseudo-texts, by now the current trend in lexicography is to treat dictionaries as a recognizable text type. For example, two thematic issues of lexicographic periodicals have treated "The Dictionary as Text": Dolezal (1989) and Wiegand (1990); in Wiegand (1990) we find this statement concerning the textual study of dictionaries:

"The view that it is fruitful for metalexicographic research on printed language dictionaries, and on their use as well as their planning and production led by theory, to observe all kinds of printed dictionaries as well as certain parts of these explicitly - and this shall mean as much as with *recourse to textlinguistic categories* - as texts, is increasingly gaining scientific interest within recent European and also partly within Northern American dictionary research" (p. 1).

2. A Brief Review of the Relevant Literature

Rather than producing empirical studies, most of the research published by practicing lexicographers and linguists interested in the dictionary has been either anecdotal reports or opinion surveys based on survey-questionnaires given to college students. In our annotated bibliography (Dolezal and McCreary, revised and expanded unpublished manuscript), spanning the last thirty years, we found only fourteen research articles that were empirical and controlled with independent and dependent variables. In our previous work on the subject we divided the studies into five categories (Dolezal and McCreary 1996: 125-26):

1) Experiential studies (73 in all), both professional and anecdotal, which have sought to understand the shortcomings of currently available dictionaries and how to improve them; these are generally intuitive in content and are usually written by practicing lexicographers...

2) Comparative studies (29 in all) which have looked at the relative advantages and disadvantages of certain types of dictionaries, e.g., monolingual versus bilingual learners' dictionaries; these are also anecdotal and contain both practical and sometimes impractical information relative to the publishers' size restrictions on dictionaries ...

3) Users' needs and skills surveys (26) that categorize the learners' specific needs, goals, and reference skills; the majority are articles accompanied by questionnaires or surveys (19) that are often not very illuminating.

4) Cultural articles (12) which address "extra-lexicographical factors", such as social and cultural considerations, such as stylistic, register, and usage notes.

5) Experimental research: composed of a small number of articles reporting controlled studies (14), including articles elucidating the relationship between dictionary use and reading comprehension, often experimental in design with large numbers of subjects, e.g., Kharma (1985) with 284 subjects, Luppescu and Day (1993) with 295 and Bensoussan's (1983) research with 700 subjects. These studies are generally controlled with independent variables and a dependent variable and have statistically significant results.

3. Lexicography and ESL/EFL

Of the articles we selected, we can also say that if the study of the user is dominated by the study of the second and foreign language learner, then the study of the language learner is dominated by the study of the advanced learner; and finally, this subtopic is largely populated by articles on advanced learners of English. Perhaps it is here in English language learning that we see the greatest effect of cooperation between dictionary makers and dictionary critics, both of whom are influenced by market demands. For publications since 1980, we have found that over one-third of the four-hundred-sixty plus articles are focussed on the English learners' dictionaries, such as *OALD* (87 citations – *OALD*, 66; *OALD4*, 7; *OALD5*, 14), *LDOCE* (136 citations – *LDOCE*, 103; *LDOCE2*, 15; *LDOCE3*, 18) and *COBUILD* (109 citations – *COBUILD*, 98; *COBUILD2*, 11), while roughly one fifth are on bilingual dictionaries, primarily English-German and English-French dictionaries, and on monolingual French dictionaries. Research on a new type of learners' dictionary, the "bilingualised

dictionary". is represented by four articles, Hartmann (1994, 1992), Kernerman (1996), and Laufer & Melamed (1994).

4. Experimental Lexicography

Yet with all this recent activity (Atkins & Varantola, 1997; Atkins, 1996; Bogaards, 1996; Herbst, 1996; and "The Perfect Learners' Dictionary(?)" Conference in April, 1997 at Erlangen, Germany), some of the same problems regarding the study of the dictionary user remain; while the number of controlled studies, and the number of structured tests and questionnaires, has risen, it would not be unfair to repeat Crystal's (1986) observations about dictionary users and lexicographers. He found that most of the work on the user relies on intuitions rather than on verifiable studies; in short, "conventional wisdom" rules. At this juncture some may say with good cause that the history of lexicography has been successfully based on the informed intuitions of linguists, and the conventional wisdom of informed users. However, "success" does not measure effectiveness, accuracy, or even usefulness. Crystal calls for studies on what the users actually do with their dictionaries, recommending that a lexicographer's "traditional training in descriptive lexicography should be supplemented with the ability to practice what might now be called 'experimental lexicography'." He also recommends "acceptability judgements" to throw light on the users' lexicographic competence, experiments based on users' self-reporting of their dictionary usage behavior, and "allowing the users to determine the questions asked in questionnaires to determine the users' performance limitations".

However laudable is a call for projects with tight controls and strict adherence to social scientific methodology, it still does not answer questions concerning the use of this or that particular dictionary in a particular context. For instance, the studies that most closely resemble the methods of psycholinguistic research (e.g., Fischer, 1994; McKeown, 1991; Miller & Gildea, 1987; Nist & Olejnik, 1995), have limited value for understanding how the artifact we call a dictionary is used: definitions are expurgated, edited, and modified in order to create a controlled study; while this might help us understand how certain definitions are used or misused, it cannot help us understand the process of "looking-up". Obviously, research on particular tasks is an important line of inquiry, but certainly the holistic task of using a dictionary requires serious attention also. Thus, using the previous example, understanding a definition (and how users process the information) becomes a different task from understanding a definition in its whole context, that is, as it appears in a complete dictionary. Some early studies (e.g., Ard, 1982) suggest that students have more success using definitions that have been excerpted and put in a text booklet, than using definitions that need to be looked up. A more recent study by Bogaards (1994) hinted at the deleterious effect on comprehension scores caused by the drudgery of looking up words alphabetically. We might be led by these studies to question basic ideas, or "conventional wisdom", such as the primacy of and the efficiency of alphabetical order. If nothing else, the Ard and Bogaards findings should send a strong cautionary signal to those who pursue psycholinguistic research; the strict adherence to social science methodology is mitigated by the practitioners' ignorance of lexicography (the proud adherent of social scientific method might be well advised to remember William Wordsworth's admonition, "we murder to dissect").

5. Critical Questions

Based on the findings from the four-hundred-sixty item annotated bibliography, we have found that the literature on the user up to this time leaves us with a fundamental question and a critical observation about the heterogeneity of dictionary research.

1) What are the possibilities of empirically sound research on the use of dictionaries? Crystal's (1986) suggestions are given in an article entitled "the ideal dictionary, lexicographer, and user", "ideal" being the key word. Perhaps, one day there will an enlightened funding agency that will support the cost of "running subjects" through controlled experiments on the use of the dictionary. Until then, user experiments may not be able to measure up to the standards of psycholinguistic research. Of course, this begs the question of whether a text and its users can or should be studied using this methodology. Until we agree on what type of text a dictionary is, we could just as easily propose that the project is best viewed from the perspective of philology or literary theory rather than social science methodology.

2) Dictionary research is found in a variety of disciplines, including especially the following: a) reading research; b) literary studies; c) linguistics; d) psycholinguistics; e) language education. In many articles written from the perspective of the disciplines from this list, the authors show a general lack of awareness of work done under the rubric of lexicography - we can see evidence of this by the paucity of citations to any of the three major periodicals, the *International Journal of Lexicography, Lexicographica,* and *Dictionaries,* or to the monographs and collected essays in lexicography. However, it is also worth noting that the authors most familiar to the readers of the lexicographic literature do not show awareness of some publications that appear in other non-related disciplines. Notwithstanding the variety of literatures on the dictionary, our study also finds an unevenness of the reviews of advanced English learner's dictionaries; thus, even in this narrow domain of user study, there is not yet a recognizable format for the comprehensive and rigorous examination of dictionaries in scholarly lexicographic reviews.

6. Significant Trends

The most significant trends in pedagogical lexicography are somewhat difficult to discern at this point in 1998. This is a result of three factors:

a) the relative newness of this subfield;
b) the lack of agreed upon methodologies for surveys that are comparable and for experimental studies that are replicable; and,
c) continuing emphasis on the perceived value of the academic and literary aspects of lexicography at the expense of the pedagogical.

The first factor, the newness of the subfield, can be seen in the fact that Hartmann's 1979 collection, *Dictionaries and Their Users*, was the first book that attempted to address the problems that the dictionary user faces. After nearly twenty years, hundreds of articles have been published, but this number pales when compared to the amount written over the years on other issues, such as the notion of prescriptivism vs. descriptivism. The second factor, the lack of agreed upon methodologies, mentioned earlier in the criticism of Crystal (1986), is a continuing conundrum that plagues various subfields within applied linguistics, such as second language acquisition; thus, it is not surprising that it remains a problem in pedagogical

lexicography, since this is a component of language learning in an academic setting. The third factor, the emphasis on the perceived value of academic and literary problems at the expense of the pedagogical is unfortunate but understandable in the domain of higher learning. Out of sixty-eight papers accepted to this EURALEX conference (N. Dufour's message of February 16, 1998), just eight papers address the issue of dictionary use, based on their titles. The other sixty are concerned with other research interests. Overall, one may observe that we have seen a significant leap in the number of articles on how students use dictionaries and how both students and dictionary makers can improve the process of looking up words. However, over the past twenty years one may note only a slight increase in experimental studies and surveys, while the number of anecdotal reports has been holding steady as a substantial percentage of the whole. The relevance/usefulness of the dictionary for the professor/linguist/literary analyst is the focus of many articles, which some may say comes at the expense of students at all levels of instruction and of 'ordinary' dictionary users in general.

7. Conclusion

Our completed annotated bibliography of over 460 academic articles on learners' dictionaries, both monolingual and bilingual, written in English, German, French, and Italian, reveals a number of truths about the field of lexicography in the 1990's. The findings revolve around the tension between two notions: lexicography as a science vs. lexicography as an art. As for lexicography as a science, the perceived but unverified needs of the learner guide much of the scholarship on the dictionary user; however, a lack of empirical evidence limits the generalizability of the research. The notion of lexicography as an art is weakened by the prevalence of "conventional wisdom" in studies in the humanities on the literary and philological aspects of dictionaries. This "wisdom" takes the form of unquestioned and unmentioned underlying assumptions, for example, the usefulness of alphabetical order. Other findings, based on the compilation of all citations and references from over 460 articles in a computer database include: most often cited authors, most often cited learners' dictionaries, most often cited bilingual dictionaries, most frequent topics, the most examined element of the dictionary entry, the number of controlled experimental studies, the number of humanistic studies, and the most influential trends in learners' dictionaries and in bilingual dictionaries over the past thirty years. All of these findings, in regard to language learners and dictionary users, are related to the notions of lexicography as a science vs. lexicography as a humanistic study.

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