

# The Recent Development of Compact English-Japanese Dictionaries, Printed and Electronic: A New Genre

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## Abstract

In Japan there is a burgeoning of compact English-Japanese dictionaries, both printed and electronic. This is due to the fact that a large number of Japanese have come to use English in their different activities and, accordingly, they want a compact, handy English-Japanese dictionary to which they can make a quick reference for unfamiliar words they come across. This paper reports on how the dictionaries are made and what their efficacy is.

## 1 New trends

One notable recent trend in English-Japanese dictionary (E-J) making is the increase of compact E-J dictionaries, both printed and electronic. A printed E-J weighs 150 to 200g and can be easily put into a coat pocket. Electronic versions are more varied in weight and size, and I will discuss them later on.

It is not easy to say how many of the printed compact E-Js exist at present, but the major ones amount to no fewer than nine. The oldest one in current use is *Kenkyusha's New Little E-J*, first published in 1929. In 1957 followed *Sanseido's Daily Concise E-J*, and in 1971 Sanseido released another one, *Vest-Pocket E-J*. Then since 1995 six more new ones have appeared, and E-Js of this type seem to have established themselves as a new genre.

## 2 Editing policy

When *Kenkyusha's Little* was published more than 70 years ago, it was in an orthodox style, a miniature version of a standard dictionary. It was a pioneer, but the users of E-Js in general did not receive it very enthusiastically. Only students welcomed its compactness as they could carry one easily to English class.

It was after World War II that the study and use of English became popular and when *Daily* came into being about 30 years later, it found more favorable circumstances. But it followed the tradition of *Little*, and the vocabulary was around 37,000 words.

Then in 1971, Sanseido published *Vest-Pocket*, which was unique in that the main entry words are provided with self-pronouncing notation, some 600 basic words such as 'a' and 'for' and proper names are dispensed with, and the focus is on the expansion of vocabulary and compact and pregnant description of word senses, under the motto of '*multum in parvo* (much in a small space)'. I was on the editing staff, and hoped that the dictionary would find sufficient users. I

am sorry to say, however, that this editing policy and its results have had only a mixed reception so far.

Then the Internet age arrived and the population of its users exploded. A large proportion of Internet messages are in English, and netizens want a handy E-J to which they can make quick reference when they come across an unfamiliar word, without interrupting the flow of comprehension in reading. These messages are varied in topic, and so the users want the E-J not only to be handy but also to cover a wide range of topics, though the definitions, i.e. equivalents in Japanese, may not be detailed in connotation.

Needless to say, handy small E-Js are also for the people who use English for other business purposes, for reading newspapers and magazines or listening to broadcast, for speaking on overseas trips, etc. Their number is also constantly on the increase.

In order to meet the demand, new pocket-size E-Js have mushroomed - *Progressive*, *Color Pax*, *New Epoch*, *Exceed*, *Info World*, *Personal*, etc., were released by major publishing companies. The two traditional ones, *Little* and *Daily*, also updated themselves to compete with their rivals. Now their vocabulary ranges from 70,000 to 80,000 words, which is very large for their compact size. These dictionaries are essentially miniature versions of standard-size E-Js, complete with all the very basic items; they want to accommodate school and university students, who comprise the largest purchasers' group of E-Js. *Vest-Pocket*, which dispenses with information of elementary level, stands alone as exception. In any case, the problem for all the compact E-Js is how to efficiently pack as much vital and diverse information as possible in a small volume.

### **3 Compact E-J entries compared with those in standard-size English monolingual dictionaries (EMDs)**

In this paper, it is difficult to show sample entries in full. At the presentation, photocopies of them will be shown on OHP. Here I will take up a few samples, and use them to make some comparisons between compact E-Js and standard-size EMDs.

#### **3.1 Entries of a basic word**

I will take up the verb 'put' and compare some of its equivalents in *Daily* with the corresponding definitions in *Concise Oxford Dictionary (COD)*, together with the idioms listed.

*Daily*:

17 equivalents in Japanese: *oku*, *sueru*; *ireru* (*in, to*); *tukeru* (*to*); (*arujoutai, kankei ni*) *ochi-iraseru* (*in, to, at, on, under*); etc.

26 idiomatic phrases: *put about* (*fune ga houkou wo kaeru; etc.*); *put across*; *put away*; *put back*; *put down*; *put forth*; *put forward*; *put in*; *put it on*; *put off*; *put on*; *put out*; *put over*; *put over on*; *put through*; *put together*; *put up*; *put upon*; *put up to*; *put up with* (common to both dictionaries); *be hard put to it*; *put aside* (*by*); *put into*; *Put it there!*; *put oneself forward*; *put to*. (only in *Daily*)

*COD*: 17 definitions: 1 tr. move to or cause to be in a specified place or position (put it in your pocket; put the children to bed; put your signature here.) 2 tr. etc.

Idiomatic phrases only in *COD*: put it to a person; put under; put up or shut up. (Phrases containing a noun/nouns are not counted)

It will be seen from the above that the number of Japanese equivalents and English definitions roughly correspond with each other, and the idiomatic phrases listed are not very different, either, though *Daily* is printed in much smaller type.

A definition tends to be longer than an equivalent, which is more like a synonym, while a definition is a statement and is explanatory. Here, the first Japanese equivalents are 'oku, sueru', which correspond with Definition 1 of *COD*. The two equivalents complement each other and represent the meaning of Definition 1 more approximately in Japanese. Still they are mere equivalents without any examples, unlike *COD*, which gives examples in abundance.

Here in *Daily*, equivalents are placed one after another in a line of type, occasionally interrupted by prepositions which specifically co-occur when relevant. This is a very common style of entry-writing in a small E-J; the equivalents cover a variety of senses, but lack depth, and are without any examples which make the meaning clearer.

In short, entries in compact E-Js are generally bare skeletons of what is offered in standard dictionaries. Or I may call them hints or suggestions which become significant with the help of context, collocation or the general tenor of the statement, to a user who has a working knowledge of English together with common-sense background knowledge of the world, both domestic and overseas. To such a user, the very basic equivalents are too simple to be of use, but they are there perhaps for the purpose of giving the user a sense of completeness that everything is found here.

### 3.2 The periphery of the E-J vocabulary

Verbs such as 'put' constitute the basic sentence structure and semantic framework. On the other hand, it is the role of nouns to provide utterance or discourse with versatility. What is especially expected of a compact E-J is not a basic knowledge of English, but an extensive vocabulary, including current up-to-date words and senses which pop up constantly in this fast-changing world.

They boast of a vocabulary of around 80,000 words, which is, though smaller than that of a standard-size EMD, generally enough for understanding media messages, or ephemeral literature such as manuals and advertisements.

Many E-Js say that in selecting main entry words, they have consulted a word-frequency list obtained from large corpora, though they do not say to what corpora they have referred. Actually they have a large common core vocabulary, with some variation on the fringes. In order to give just a hint as to similarity and dissimilarity in vocabulary, I will take up two words and one compound, and see in which of the 5 standard-size EMDs and 9 compact E-Js they appear.

1. nerd: (American slang) **1** a foolish, dull person **2** a person slavishly devoted to intellectual or academic pursuit <a computer nerd>.

Sense **1** in all the 5 EMDs and 9 E-Js; Sense **2** in 3 EMDs (American) and 2 E-Js.

2. psychopharmacology: the study of drugs that affect the mind.

In 4 EMDs and 3 E-Js.

3. mine disposal: In no EMDs, and in 4 E-Js.

(1) is slang, but it is in frequent current use, so all EMDs and E-Js include it. (2) is a technical term, which 4 EMDs include, while only 3 E-Js do. Concerning a special term of this level, there is dissimilarity among E-Js. (3) is a compound, but the meaning is clear from the component words, so no EMDs include it, but 3 E-Js do, perhaps because the activity now draws considerable attention in Japan.

I have mentioned only minuscule instances, but it can be said that on average the coverage of E-J vocabulary is quite extensive.

## 4 The future

Now at the turn of the century, the world does not cease to change rapidly, and it may even accelerate the process. New words or new senses of existing words will continue to appear and there will be a constant need to follow them up. This will necessitate the revision of E-Js at short intervals. The current compact-size E-J costs under ¥2,000 (\$ 20) and we do not find it a waste even if we buy a new one every four or five years, as we think nothing of paying the same sum of money for a voluminous magazine.

Besides, thanks to the rapid development in information technology, editors have easy access to large corpora in the form of computer database, and easily sort out or retrieve necessary data. This facilitates the compiling of dictionaries, especially small ones, and a computerized typesetting system makes printing easier and less expensive. The technological progress greatly helps small dictionaries to be updated and published quickly. Perhaps feedback from the users will also contribute to the improvement of their quality. Attempts at new editing styles will be made, and *Vest-Pocket's* innovative efforts may become more widely accepted.

It remains to be seen how many of them will survive the next ten years, but the demand for them will not diminish in the foreseeable future.

## 5 Electronic versions of E-Js

We will make a very quick survey of the electronic versions. There are roughly three kinds of them. Most printed E-Js are now available on a small-size CD-ROM, which we can play on a personal computer, or a special machine such as Sony's DataDiscman, which weighs around 500g (without battery). We can also hear the pronunciation of major words on them.

Then there are also smaller machines which have built-in dictionaries (mostly an E-J and a J-E combined), which are mostly the electronic version of printed ones, but the machines are lighter and smaller and so easier to carry around.

There are also ones small enough to be put into a shirt pocket. They have a tiny display window, on which several words are to be shown at a time. The dictionaries are specifically designed for

each machine, but the size of vocabulary is not too large. They are for stop-gap use, and the machine is often multifunctional, with memory for memos and for calculator use.

The problem with them is that they are generally more costly than printed ones, the cheapest being under ¥10,000 (\$100), but the most expensive as much as ¥60,000 (\$ 600). At present, most of the significant ones are electronic versions of printed E-Js, but some substantial and authentic E-Js may be specifically designed for a small and light machine. Here is a great potentiality to be exploited further for the benefit of users.

## References

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