A Modest Proposal for Preventing E-dictionaries from Being a Burden to Teachers and for Making Them Beneficial to the Public

Carla Marello
Università di Torino
e-mail: carla.marello@unito.it

Abstract

Some simple suggestions, already tested in Italian secondary school classes, aimed at making e-dictionaries an everyday reference tool, as paper dictionaries were (and still are, in some part of the world). By e-dictionaries we mean fully fledged digital versions of paper dictionaries, structured databases which users can access via Internet by paying a subscription and which are still sold on a DVD or USB key support. We will briefly state why accessing free e-dictionaries is good for practice but not as rewarding as it might be to access paid website displaying all the range of possible query modes. We conducted a survey about what Italian secondary school students turn to when they do not understand a word and we maintain that e-dictionaries can enhance metalinguistic knowledge and enlarge students' vocabulary, but such goals are better met by task-based activities which do not have a straightforward language lesson appearance. A task based language teaching approach mixed with CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) is an ideal arena where e-dictionaries might win their battle in order to become truly accepted and widespread in the classroom.

Keywords: dictionary users; reference skill training; e-dictionary use

Introduction

When in 1729 Swift wrote and published anonymously his satirical pamphlet, he supported his argument with great rhetorical skill and he calculated financial benefits of his suggestion. Our proposal is much more modestly articulated but our aim, though not as important as to solve social and economic ills, is not petty. Our suggestions aim at educating students, able to separate the wheat from the chaff which simple Google searching often offers. We keep together proposals for monolingual and bilingual e-dictionaries because it is usual to train together in-service teachers of L1 and of L2, though it would be better to train them separately, when possible.

Step one: Clearing the Ground through Advanced Search

Paper reference tools as defining dictionaries and encyclopedias are no longer in fashion at school. Teachers often mistrust e-tools such as Wikipedia or Google and Google Translate not admitting their use at school or disregarding a focused training about them and actually leaving their students to use them unarmed.

There are many studies (see Töpel 2014 for an overview) which showcase how digital dictionary use has not superseded paper dictionary use and that e-dictionaries are primarily used in certain circumstances. We decided to conduct another survey about what Italian secondary school students turn to when they do not understand a word either in class or in their day-to-day life. In order to

have the desired answers we placed the survey on line (see http://goo.gl/forms/W6Gq3iSdSa). We asked questions aimed at surveying receptive and productive situations, using a very simple Italian language. In Appendix 1 we show how the first 300 technical secondary school students – mainly from Torino metropolitan area – answered the question: "When you have to write in a foreign language, what helps you?" They were given six possible answers to click on while opting for often, sometimes, never.

93 often, 131 sometimes, 80 never turned to bilingual paper dictionary;

35 often, 73 sometimes, 196 never turned to a learner monolingual paper dictionary;

132 often, 124 sometimes, 48 never turned to Google Translate;

101 often, 121 sometimes, 82 never turned to online digital dictionary;

33 often, 56 sometimes, 215 never turned to an uploaded digital dictionary.

Demonizing tools such as Google Translate is neither right nor useful nor enough. They are powerful means of knowledge promotion above all for students belonging to deprived milieux. Teachers should know them better in order to instruct students. And if the school decides to invest in websites, belonging to reference tool publishers, teachers have also - via laptops, tablets and IWB (interactive whiteboard) – the opportunity to show how "traditional" reference tools organize knowledge.

It is not the main goal of the present paper to deal with modes of explaining to the class how browsers work, how e-business grows through cookies, how biased a source of information can be on the Internet, however we suggest that teachers spend at least some time reading the menu "Search settings" in Google. Its Search Help center with "Change your language on Google" and "Change your location on Google" or "Image search" is revealing and generally students do not know it. Above all teachers should invite their students to search always through the Advanced Search page which induces the searcher to refine his/her search from the beginning. We reproduce the page here (see fig. 1) because it is unsurprisingly similar to advanced search pages in paid e-dictionaries you can access through a structured database.

Students should be rather impressed by the fact that they can search an e-dictionary as they do with Google and not simply be allowed to look for one word at a time, as they are in free e-dictionaries. But the point is: what should they search an e-dictionary for?

Step Two: To Get Rid of Alphabetical Order

Mother tongue teachers born in the seventies and eighties received, as students, some training in using a dictionary and, probably now as teachers, give some homework to their class which implies the consultation of a dictionary. The fact that such an activity is performed at home depends on many factors: paper dictionaries are heavy to carry, in the classroom there are not enough copies for everybody, students with a mother language different from that of the majority of the other students should need first a bilingual dictionary to complete the exercise. If the exercise is homework, students can use their family dictionary, can access the Internet, can borrow a dictionary from some helping neighbour. However it is evident that teachers can propose only exercises which start from a given word.

Two Italian monolingual free online e-dictionaries, Sabatini-Coletti and De Mauro, the *Diccionario de la lengua española* (DRAE) also allow to search part of a word (either through part of a word plus star (*), an operator meaning any number of letters no matter which letter, or through the option "word beginning/ending by"). This is a generous help to show the role of derivative morphemes in the respective languages; English monolingual free e-dictionaries such as Merriam-Webster, Macmillan, Collins, *Wörterbuch der deutschen Gegenwartssprache* (WDG) or Larousse *Dictionnaire de français* do not allow searching word parts.

If students can access paid websites of dictionary publishers, teachers can propose more cognitively and linguistically rewarding task exercises. They can propose to find which is the most popular front or end morpheme in a certain dictionary wordlist with star search: "there are more entries beginning with un* or more entries ending in *less?" If they want to focus on form, the following question might be "how many of them are nouns? How many adjectives?" To answer, students will have to refine their search by selecting the part of speech (PoS) filter. (see fig. 2 for the advanced search options in Zanichelli 2016 online). But, if their students are native speakers of the language under examination, they will immediately notice that the list of results is not as good as they might desire. They will click on the intruder word and they will read the whole microstructure and learn how e-dictionaries are made, it is to say that they are grouping different PoS under the same lemma because paper dictionaries do so.

More quick-witted students might ask why the microstructure was not split in e-dictionaries and at this point they will be faced with an answer associated with the law of supply and demand. Profits generated by website subscriptions are not rewarding enough to plan an innovative e-dictionary version of their paper best sellers. On the other hand, the cost of subscription is deemed too high by many schools. It might decrease if demand from schools were larger and with larger profit, publishers of lesser spoken languages might again join university researchers in order to plan dictionaries designed for digital consultation (See L'Homme & Cormier 2014; Poli & Torsani 2014).

E-dictionaries made by non-profit institutions or financed by Governments or universities are already planned in a more homonymic way (if *slow* can be adjective, an adverb and a verb, you find three different entries). See for instance DAFLES (Dictionnaire d'apprentissage du français langue étrangère ou seconde) and Base lexicale du français http://ilt.kuleuven.be/blf

Apart from this type of more formally orientated query, the great advantage of e-dictionaries you subscribe to is in the fact that a word can be found anywhere, if you search "full text". It is a mode which allows search for semantically related words and for collocations without knowing whether the collocation is registered under the first or the second word. It is the search which students like the best because results are often surprising. You can search in the Zanichelli publisher's website both the Italian monolingual dictionary Zingarelli, updated every year, and the Tommaseo dictionary published from 1865 to 1879. The more the dictionary is an auteur dictionary, or an ancient dictionary, the more surprising search results are. If you search in full text the word *regno* 'kingdom' in Zingarelli 2016 you will find 136 entries, including *commoner* and *devolution*, loanwords from Regno Unito, the 'United Kingdom'. The same search in Tommaseo Bellini returns 1260 entries: Why? To answer is an interesting task. Students might decide to read a sample of

articles, selected according to some features (which ones?) or might be invited to suggest a tentative hypothesis about the reason of the presence of the word *regno* in the articles *adolescente* 'teenager', *briglia* 'bridle', *membrana,* 'membrane'*, trementina* 'turpentine'. They will understand by themselves what the difference is between a historical dictionary, full of quotations, and a dictionary with examples made up by the lexicographer.

Step Three: To Use the e-Dictionary for Doing Something Which Is Not a Language X Exercise

Interesting as they can be, the search examples mentioned above have the characteristic of being activities that the teacher wants to be executed because they are a part of the (native or L2) language syllabus. Students will use an e-dictionary with more attention if they have to achieve a non-linguistic goal. For instance, the class organizes the school trip, but first decides to conduct a poll about preferred destination and available budget. Students, having to use a software whose instructions are written in a specialist jargon or in a foreign language, will be motivated to look for new meaning of already known words and for unknown words. The rapidity with which they obtain answers encourages a great number of queries; the easiness in passing from one article to another by simply clicking on a word is a peculiar feature of e-dictionaries.

Some may object that if you look for the meaning of a given word, then free e-dictionaries on the Internet are enough and if you look for its translation you can use free bilingual e-dictionaries plus Google Translate.

It is true, but you have to deal with a lot of advertising, often an old edition and with Google Translate you have better to check results in a …….good dictionary.

To look down on Google Translate is not a wise policy: students are fond of it and if you read the article devoted to this tool in Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Google_Translate), you will see how much interesting work is being done to improve it. You will learn that it is based on Wordnet in its language specific versions or on Multiwordnet and on a powerful software for statistical machine translation. Teachers should try to persuade their students that use of a good bilingual e-dictionary, plus a good monolingual e-dictionary of the target language, is the best way to refine or to check translations by Google Translate in order to avoid inaccuracies. Here is a short possible persuasion path.

Let's suppose your students come across the English sentence:

Mrs Thomas presented the library with ten new PCs.

They understand everything but are not sure about *presented* . They look for it in Google translate and they get *presentato*, which does not make sense. They accept at this point the suggestion given by Google to translate the whole sentence and they get the Italian translation:

 *La signora Thomas ha presentato biblioteca dieci nuovi PC .

They have not progressed a lot. If they search in a paid bilingual e-dictionary the word *presented,* they get no result, but if they search with the option "forme flesse inglesi" 'inflected English forms'

then they find the verb **to present** and they will find an example very similar to the starting sentence.

> **4** (reggenza: **to present with, to present to** + sost.) donare; offrire in dono; regalare: *He presented the school <u>with</u> a library,* ha donato alla scuola una biblioteca; *He presented the awards <u>to</u> the winners*, ha consegnato i premi ai vincitori NOTA D'USO: <u>to give o to get?</u> (Ragazzini 2016)

On the contrary, if they want to translate into English:

Cari genitori per Natale quest'anno mi piacerebbe ricevere un regalo costoso.

Google Translate suggests:

Dear parents for Christmas this year I would like to receive an expensive gift.

Both word order and the prepositional phrase *for Christmas* are suspect. Students might not notice it. If they check the order of phrases on the Internet, they spend a lot of time. The teacher may suggest that they search the word *gift* in full text in a bilingual e-dictionary. Then they will see that it is better to write *Christmas gift* and place *for Christmas* in a different position, following the given examples.

If your students have to deal with specialized text, as it happens with CLIL lessons, they cannot find in Google Translate those meaning discriminations which they can find, and use as filter, in monolingual and bilingual e-dictionaries.

Conclusions

These suggestions will appear too modest to lexicographers and applied linguists, but I experienced that e-dictionaries are not so well known among teachers and students. We are confronted with students who do not know which type of text a dictionary is because they never used a paper one. Dictionaries freely accessible on the Internet do not reveal their structured database nature until they can be consulted only through single entry articles. These suggestions are meant for teachers, but another aim is to stimulate debate among lexicographers about the following four points:

1- Was dissemination of e-dictionaries left too much to computer experts who did not reach the heart of language educators?
2- E-dictionary microstructures are too similar to paper dictionary microstructures; they are long and complex and not easily readable on a smartphone, therefore they will not be really popular until they are redesigned (See Dzemianko 2010, 2012; Prinsloo et al. 2012)
3- Are the above described steps - planned for Italian teachers - acceptable also for other countries? Might they become part of a generally accepted training protocol for in-service teachers?
4- Lessons and exercises in which e-dictionaries are used for linguistic purposes are fascinating for linguists and some teachers focused on form, but are not making e-dictionaries beneficial to a larger audience. Do we agree that task-based teaching and CLIL are important to enhance e-dictionaries role in the learning process? (see Augustyn 2013, Marello 2014).

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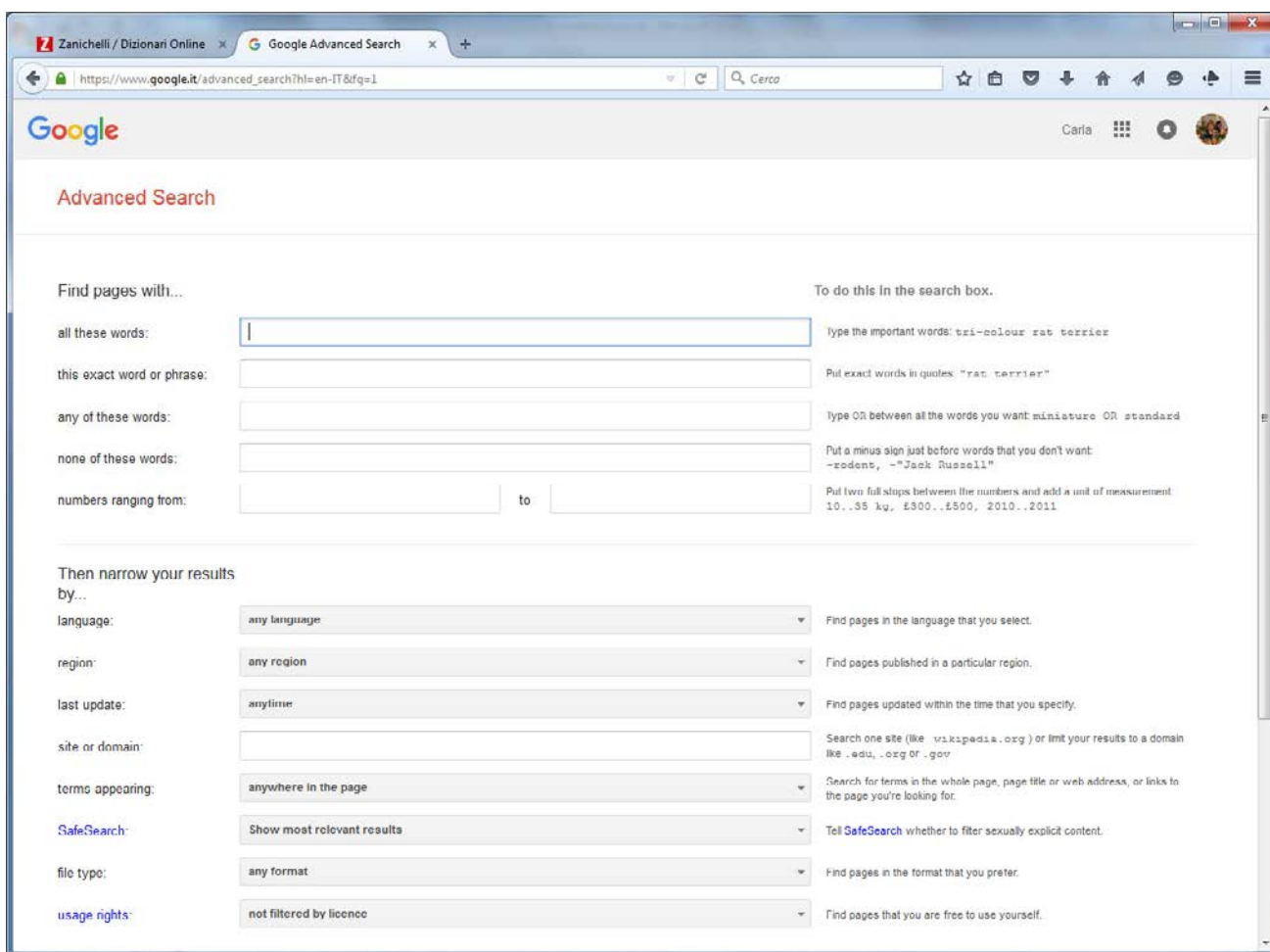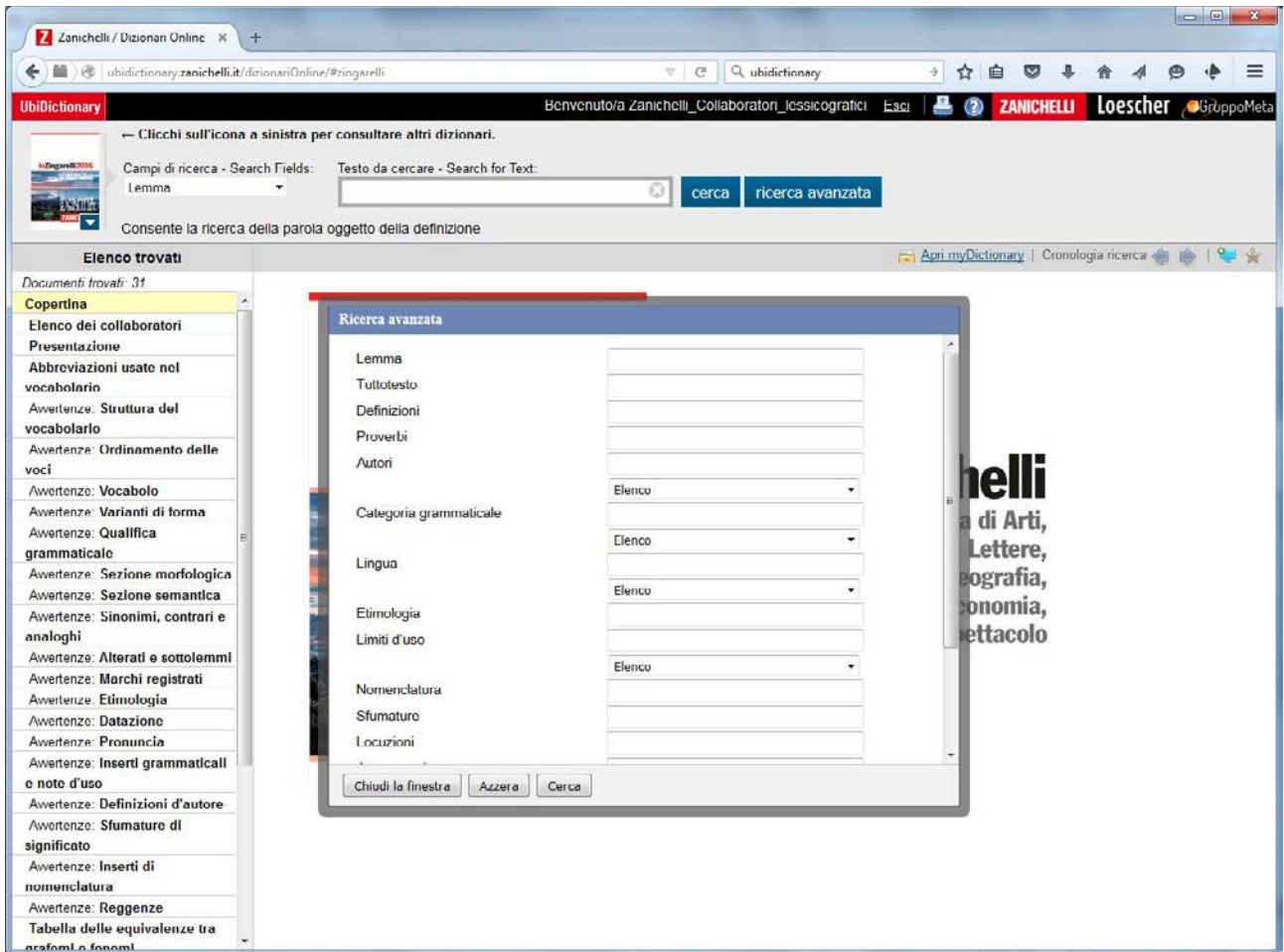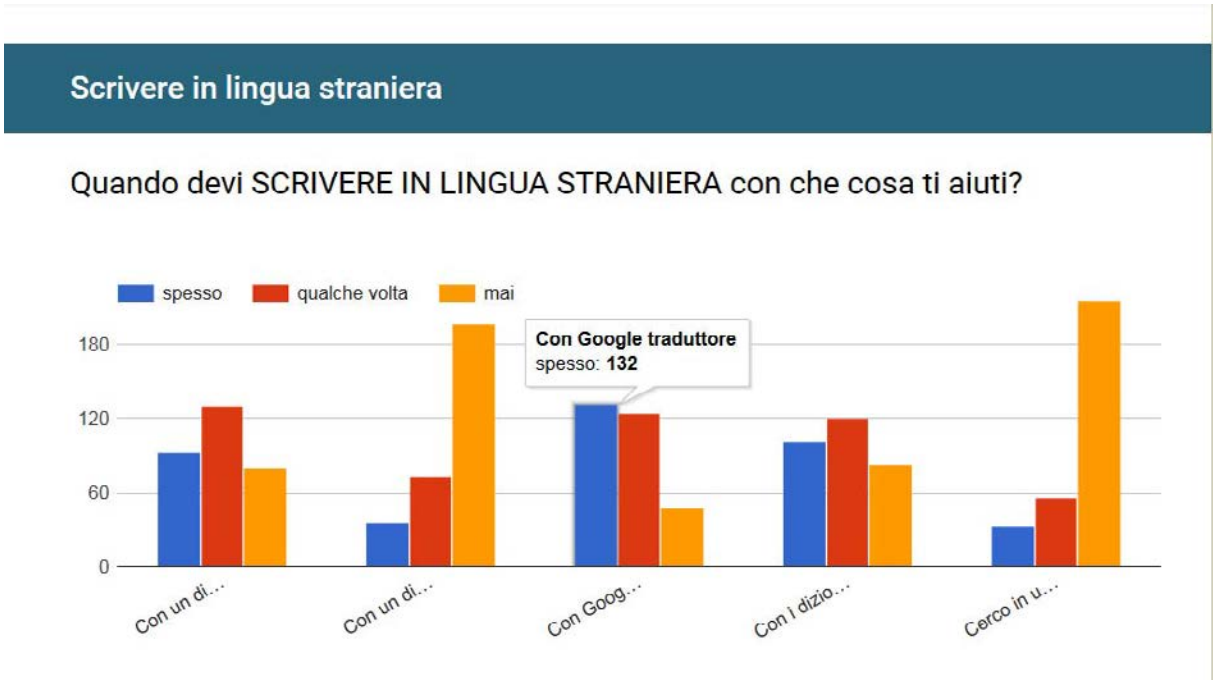
Figure 1: Google Advanced Search.

Figure 2: Zingarelli Advanced Search.

Appendix 1

When you have to write in a foreign language, what helps you?

Scrivere in lingua straniera

Quando devi SCRIVERE IN LINGUA STRANIERA con che cosa ti aiuti?

spesso   qualche volta   mai

Con Google traduttore
spesso: **132**

Bilingual paper dict. | Google Translate | Uploaded digital dictionary

Learner's monolingual paper   Online digital dictionary

Figure 3: When you have to write in a foreign language, what helps you?