

## **Parallel Development of Monolingual and Bilingual Dictionaries for Learners of English**

Dictionary makers have traditionally treated the compilation of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries as quite distinct activities. However, there is a lot of overlap in the work required for the two genres, especially when the target user group is similar. This paper discusses the parallel development of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, and suggests that as well as labour-saving advantages each genre can provide useful insights which may be incorporated into the other. It suggests also that consideration of cross-linguistic data may in some cases modify the assumption of corpus frequency as the overriding factor in dictionary inclusion policy.

### **1. Introduction**

Dictionary makers have traditionally treated the compilation of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries as quite distinct activities involving different teams of lexicographers often working for different departments within the same organisation. Undoubtedly each genre requires some different skills, the most obvious being defining for monolinguals and translation for bilinguals. However, for dictionaries aimed at the same user group there is an enormous overlap in the work needed.

This paper concentrates on the development of dictionaries for learners of English only, rather than bidirectional dictionaries. The basic aim of such dictionaries is to describe the English language in such a way as to enable the user both to understand and to use it. Information such as sense distinction, grammar, context, collocation, and register is common to both monolinguals and bilinguals, even though it may be presented in markedly different ways.

There have been many instances of post-hoc bilingualization, such as the so-called semi-bilingual dictionaries which typically append one word translations to a learners' dictionary definition. This paper, however, sets out to discuss the potential benefits of parallel development of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. It will suggest that if what is essentially the same dictionary, in both monolingual and bilingual versions, is compiled in tandem, then the compilation of each can provide insights which can be incorporated into the other. It will discuss

ways in which cross-linguistic data can be collected and acted upon during the compilation process.

## 2. Non-equivalence between languages and the role of the definition

One of the most fundamental problems of bilingual dictionaries is the lack of equivalence between languages. This lack of equivalence is often not in the basic meaning of the word but in its register, its context, its collocation, or the reflection of the attitude or opinions of its user. For a compiler working on the English framework of a bilingual dictionary, it is very difficult from the starting point of English to predict where these lacks of equivalence will be, and to allow for them within the entry. This is particularly the case where the English framework is to be used as the basis of bilingual dictionaries in more than one other language.

Register differences are systematically handled in several good bilingual dictionaries, though some subtleties may be lost. The other issues are perhaps less obvious to a translator of a bilingual dictionary. Monolingual learners' dictionaries are becoming increasingly sophisticated in identifying contextual, collocational, and attitudinal nuances and expressing them in definitions. It is in this area that the use of a monolingual definition could be of great value to the translator.

Consider the following definitions from a forthcoming dictionary from Cambridge University Press:

- 1) (Collocational information – either specific or indicating range of collocations)  
**wash out** to clean the inside of something [esp. container, room] with a liquid  
**wait out** to wait until something unpleasant is over
- 2) (Attitudinal information)  
**waltz in** to enter a place or organisation very confidently and start doing something without thinking about it much and in a way which might surprise and upset others
- 3) (Contextual information – in this case a legal context)  
**vest in** to give something [e.g. power, authority] to a person or organisation, especially in an official, legal way
- 4) (Contextual information – purpose of action)  
**wait in** to stay at home because you are expecting someone or something to arrive

If the translation of a headword in a bilingual dictionary fails to supply any of this information it will lead to an impoverished understanding of the word in question. Compilers of the English framework of a bilingual dictionary will certainly not be able to predict all cases where the nearest translation does not contain all of the same features, but by providing a full definition will be creating both a monolingual dictionary and an essential reference for the translator.

The translator must use that reference to identify any characteristics of the English word which are not inherent in the translation. A detailed discussion of ways of incorporating this information into a bilingual dictionary is not within the scope of this paper, and would depend on many factors, such as length of dictionary and level of competence of the target user. However, one interesting possibility is that the base translation may in some cases become a paraphrase rather than a one-word 'equivalent'. The paraphrase would be more like an actual definition than has traditionally been the case in bilingual dictionaries. Such a paraphrase would often be too long or unwieldy to be incorporated directly into a translation, so the user would then look at the translation of example sentences for guidance on how to convey the sense of the headword most closely in a more succinct and stylistically appropriate way.

The comparison which the translator makes between the characteristics of the headword and the characteristics of the translation can also lead to the discovery of inadequacies in the English definition. Very often, a translator will come up with a translation possibility but will feel that this word has certain characteristics which are not mentioned in the English definition. The translator then checks back with the English lexicographer. With a high standard of English lexicography, it should not be the case very often that characteristics of a words are missed, but it does occur, and the translation process acts as a useful cross-check in this respect.

Often it is the translation of example sentences which leads to reexamination of the essential characteristics of a definition. If the translator comes up with a main translation based on the definition, but then discovers that this translation is not appropriate for any of the examples given, it is worth examining the reasons. If the example sentences all seem to generate the same translation of the headword, but that translation has characteristics not mentioned in the English definition, some re-appraisal is definitely called for. Even if the definition proves to be accurate, it will probably be necessary to amend the example sentences, since they are likely to give a misleading impression about the use of a headword.

### 3. Cross-linguistic information

When bilingual dictionaries are compiled, part of that process is to compare and contrast the languages in order to predict issues which may be problematic to speakers of one or other of the languages covered. This may result in many adaptations to the text. There are two main ways in which such issues can be identified. The first is by observing learner errors, either by analyzing a corpus of material produced by learners or by direct observation. The second is by the translation process itself. It is on the latter method that this paper focusses.

When a framework English text is translated for a bilingual dictionary, it is usual for many modifications to the original text to be made. The following are common examples:

- Different (usually fuller) description of collocation to distinguish translation possibilities, such as the following from the Oxford Hachette French Dictionary (1994): *evil* [*person*] méchant; [*act, destiny, intent, genius, smell, tongue, temper*] mauvais; [*plan, spirit*] maléfique
- Modification of example sentences. This may occur for a variety of reasons, for example when an item other than the headword is particularly difficult to translate, or where the resultant translation would be particularly clumsy or ambiguous. An example of this would be the juxtaposition of the words *affairs* and *business* in English, which in French could cause clumsiness because of the possible translation of both words with *affaires*.
- The addition of grammar or other usage notes to guide the user away from common errors.
- The addition of extra sense divisions because a word which is perceived in English as having one sense may be perceived as having two or more senses in the other language if the translation differs markedly according to context.
- The addition of extra divisions to cope with grammatical differences. For instance, many definitions of English verbs happily conflate transitive and intransitive uses, but the juxtaposition of two quite different verbs, one transitive and one intransitive, as core translations may be confusing.

All these processes of modifying English text for translation provide information which could potentially be of use for all lexicography. The fact that certain elements of an entry are found to be problematic during the translation process means that they are also likely to be problematic if

they are allowed to remain unchanged in a monolingual dictionary, at least for one section of its proposed audience. For instance, an English example sentence which is rejected for a bilingual English-French dictionary because it is ambiguous in French translation is likely to cause problems for native speakers of French who encounter it in a monolingual dictionary.

Similarly, the translation process can expose ambiguity in English examples caused by lack of context. In the early stages of work on a recent CUP publication a translation of the example *They sat at the back of the hall* had rendered *hall* in its sense of 'corridor'. Although a native speaker of English would be very unlikely to have this confusion, even in this decontextualised sentence, such an error on the part of the translator is very instructive in pointing to the fact that this example could cause confusion to users of a monolingual dictionary.

The translation process should always involve direct liaison between the translator and either the lexicographer or another reliable native-speaker informant. These discussions can be fruitful sources of information about the efficacy of the monolingual definition and example sentences. If a translator is not sure about any aspect of the word's meaning, connotation, context, or register, the entry should be examined to see why this is. Even more alarming are cases where the translator has misunderstood an aspect of the English entry. Even with the excellent level of English the translator possesses, such instances do occur, and should provide a warning to the English lexicographer.

Of course it would not be possible to take into account the native language of every potential user of a monolingual learners' dictionary. However, most publishers will have a clear idea of the major target markets for their monolingual dictionary. In fact, dictionary publishers already act on this knowledge in various different ways, and expect it to influence both marketing and editorial decisions. Increased market research and promotion in particular areas, avoidance in the defining vocabulary of false friends in target languages, and the analysis of learner texts written by speakers of those languages would be examples of this.

However, much of the cross-linguistic information unearthed during the translation process could usefully be borne in mind during the compilation of a monolingual. The problem with much current working practice is that these issues are raised during translation, dealt with for one particular dictionary, but never recorded, so the insights afforded by the translation never filter back into monolingual dictionaries.

There is nothing to prevent publishers of both monolinguals and bilinguals from building up a databank of such information which can be

referred to during the compilation of any dictionary. However, when monolingual and bilingual versions of the same dictionary are developed in parallel, it becomes easier to identify these issues. The close correspondence of the texts means that direct transfer of information becomes easier because it is much more likely to be directly relevant.

#### **4. The influence of cross-linguistic comparison on dictionary text**

Lexicographers constantly have to make pragmatic decisions on what to include in a dictionary to conform to the dictates of space available. Most modern dictionary publishers use frequency of occurrence as the overriding criterion for the inclusion of any word or any information about the behaviour of that word in a dictionary. It is unlikely that any lexicographer would argue against this as a basic principle, but the question is whether it should be the only principle, and if not, to what extent it should give way to other considerations.

If it is accepted that, as this paper postulates, issues raised by cross-linguistic comparison provide useful insights into the needs of the users of any learners' dictionary, it is necessary to consider the degree to which they should influence dictionary text, and whether this information should ever take precedence over inclusions made purely on grounds of frequency.

An example of this question would be an adjective like *timid*. The Oxford-Hachette dictionary translates it as *timide* when it refers to a person, and *crainitif* when it refers to an animal. However, at least one reputable learners' dictionary, defines the word *timid* in terms of people only, presumably because corpus evidence shows overwhelming collocation with a human subject, and many lexicographers have become used to treating the corpus as the ultimate arbiter on inclusion.

It is quite conceivable that the French speaker, knowing that two different words express the idea of timidity in French will want to know whether the same is the case in English. If the English lexicographer is aware of this, there may be a case for modifying the definition or adding an example sentence with an animal subject, even though frequency criteria alone might not justify it.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Parallel development of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries would seem to be advantageous from several points of view. Firstly, there is the

practical aspect of recycling of labour. Monolinguals and bilinguals should never be mirror images of one another, and it would be a mistake to think that sense division, example sentences, etc. can be carried lock, stock, and barrel from one to the other. Some of the problems of semi-bilinguals arise because bilingualization is forced onto a book which was conceived monolingually. However, it is precisely the different way of looking at entries which each approach entails which enables the lexicographer to gain a wider perspective on a word, potentially enriching both versions.