

## English-Latvian Lexicographic Practice: Some Typical Structural Features, Problems and Possible Innovations

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### Abstract

At the present English-Latvian lexicography is ruled by a stable and well-established tradition, which determines the peculiarities of the macro and microstructure of dictionaries. This could be the reason for a certain stagnation resulting in an inability or unwillingness to apply the latest developments and technical tools to the compilation of dictionaries. Electronic corpora are still not applied (at least not consistently) when compiling present-day English-Latvian dictionaries. The application of corpora would positively influence both the macro and microstructure of these dictionaries. Recent English monolingual learners' dictionaries serve as a positive example of how the application of corpus evidence can solve some lexicographic problems such as, for instance, the selection of entry words, the arrangement of senses in a polysemous entry, the presentation of phrasal verbs, etc. English-Latvian dictionaries would only benefit from the adoption of some of these innovative techniques.

### 1 General description of present-day English-Latvian lexicographic practice

Present-day English-Latvian lexicographic tradition cannot be described as substantial because in the Post-Soviet era it has been enriched with one major general *English-Latvian dictionary* (1995, appr. 45 000 entries) which has already envisaged five editions, only its 1997 and 2004 editions being revised and updated. The entry list of the 2004 edition has been supplemented with some scientific and specialised terms, while the only changes related to its microstructure are related to the system of labels. The rest of the recently published English-Latvian dictionaries – for instance, a bidirectional dictionary published in 2003, claiming to contain more than 42.000 entries in its English-Latvian part and being a potential candidate of analysis in this paper – was ruled out because of its limited microstructure.

However, English-Latvian lexicographic tradition can be described as well-established and it obviously possesses some typical macro and microstructural peculiarities. Unfortunately, this could be the reason for a certain stagnation resulting in an inability or unwillingness to apply the latest developments and technical tools to the compilation of dictionaries.

In order to provide an insight into some general features of mega, macro and microstructural peculiarities of English-Latvian dictionaries, it was necessary to choose a dictionary which could serve as a typical representative of this tradition. The latest updated edition (2004, edited by J. Baldunčiks) of the *English-Latvian dictionary* was selected for this purpose. For the sake of brevity, the dictionary will be referred to as the *E-L dictionary* further in the text.

## 2 Typical megastructural elements of English-Latvian dictionaries

Megastructural peculiarities, offering the most general insight into the structure of E-L dictionaries, will be discussed first. The *E-L dictionary* (2004) demonstrates a front matter layout which might be defined as typical of E-L dictionaries – it consists of a *Preface*, the *English alphabet*, a list of *IPA symbols*, *Abbreviations (labels) used in the dictionary* and a *Guide to the use of dictionary entries*.

The back matter contains a list of *Geographical names*, *Personal names* (both with pronunciations), a list of *Common abbreviations* (enriched in the 2004 edition), and a list of English *irregular verbs* (all in all covering nearly 60 pages). E-L dictionaries traditionally do not contain any middle matter.

It should be noted that numerous appendices are gradually going out of date in monolingual lexicography because this information is more and more often integrated in the A-Z section of dictionaries (Landau 2001: 149). Perhaps, in the future English-Latvian lexicography will adopt this practice, especially concerning the lengthy back matter.

## 3 Macrostructural peculiarities of English-Latvian dictionaries

Mary Hass in her list of desiderata for bilingual dictionaries states that in them “the coverage of the source language lexicon is complete” and also adds that they typically include some special vocabulary items, such as scientific terms (quoted in Landau 2001: 11). Perhaps, in slightly different words, the same is stated in the *Preface* to the *E-L dictionary* which claims to have enriched its macrostructure by the inclusion “of new terms relating to science and technology, politics, economy and law, etc.” (*E-L dictionary* 2004: 6).

### 3.1 Selection of entry words

A typical feature of the macrostructure of E-L dictionaries is a certain arbitrariness in the choice of entry words. Even the most recent *E-L dictionary* does not specify the criteria and methods of entry selection, which means that electronic corpus data have not been applied in the compilation of the dictionary.

Frequency counts are probably among the most important tools used for building the macrostructure of the dictionary because they help in deciding which words should be included in the dictionary. If the frequency count is low even in a large corpus, it might be logical to leave the word out. However, it should be noted corpus size is not the only important criterion which determines its quality. As Biber et al. rightly point out “a corpus restricted to any one register will not represent language use in other registers” (Biber, et al. 1998: 34). This aspect should definitely be taken into account when choosing a corpus to be applied in revising the macrostructure of a general bilingual dictionary. A properly applied frequency test would probably introduce significant changes in the entry list of existing E-L dictionaries. Many encyclopaedic, scientific and specialized field entries would be crossed out, as well as some rarely used derivatives. Conversely it is clear that the inclusion of these vocabulary items seems to be a typical feature of E-L lexicography. This leads to the conclusion that the important task of updating and revising the macrostructure of future E-L dictionaries should be performed with great care and consideration.

### 3.2 Presentation of homonyms

The treatment of lexical homonyms appears to be a well established and consistently applied macrostructural feature of E-L dictionaries. In comparison with *LDOCE* and *OALD* where words such as **bat** in the senses of “golf club” and “nocturnal flying mammal” appear in the same entry and might potentially be confusing, being semantically unlinked, E-L dictionaries stick to the presentation of homonyms in separate entries:

- (1) **bat**<sup>a</sup> *n* sikspārnis (...) (“flying mammal”)  
**bat**<sup>b</sup> **I** *n* 1. runga; nūja; 2. (*kriketa, beisbola*) nūja (...) (“(cricket, baseball) club”) **II** *v*  
[at]sist ar nūju (“to hit the ball with a bat”) (*E-L dictionary* 2004: 96)

On the other hand, in E-L dictionaries various parts of speech appear in the same entry, which again has not been put into practice in the above mentioned English Learner’s dictionaries. So obviously, these two types of dictionaries use different approaches to homonymy, and the question is – which of them is more appropriate from the user’s perspective?

### 4 Microstructure: its typical components and characteristic features

In order to shed light on the microstructural features of E-L dictionaries, one has to start with a general description of an entry. Here E-L dictionaries demonstrate an approach which is typical of bilingual dictionaries. Depending on the nature of the headword, the entry consists of some or all of the following components: 1) the entry word plus any alternative spellings; 2) IPA pronunciation; 3) indication of parts of speech arranged in a concrete order; 4) grammatical and semantic information; 5) style and usage indicated with the help of labels; 6) translation of various senses of the entry word, often several synonyms are provided; 7) occasional exemplification of usage, including collocates; 8) phrasal verbs and most idioms appear in separate sections at the end of the entry.

It should be pointed out that this layout generally corresponds to the description of typical structure of the dictionary, including bilingual dictionary entries described by such authors as Haas (in Landau, 2001: 11), Atkins (in Ilson, 1986: 16), Whitcut (in Ilson 1986: 75). However, only a closer look at the selected *E-L dictionary* would reveal some typical features of its microstructure and enable one to draw conclusions about the peculiarities of the dictionary as of well as the entire present-day English-Latvian lexicographic practice.

When describing a typical entry structure, one of the most difficult tasks is to select sample entries because they come in different lengths and shapes – *verb, noun, adjective, grammatical word* entries – show different structural features. Therefore no attempt will be made to cover the whole spectrum of entry types, but some general overruling tendencies will be singled out.

#### 4.1 Variety of entry words

A few microstructural features which also affect also the macrostructure of the dictionary will be touched upon first. The entry words in the E-L dictionary appear in their canonical forms, for instance, **be, child**, etc., but as a user-friendly dictionary, it also provides entry forms like **is, are, was, children**, etc. indicating a cross reference to the canonical form. Spelling variants also appear as separate entries, British spelling being the dominant and

American provided only to give a cross reference. Another fundamental principle of this dictionary is the absence of *run-on entries*, except for phrasal verbs and idioms. All derivatives and compounds are given headword status. This approach is generally approvable in the sense that it eliminates the situations when semantically important words are not listed as main entries and do not receive proper treatment. On the other hand, this can lead to the inclusion of some rare derivatives which, according to Landau, “enhance one’s entry count and is an unfortunate waste of space” (Landau 2001: 102).

#### 4.2 Grammar labels and their arrangement

When dealing with numerous lexical items belonging to more than one word – class, the compilers of the dictionary have put them in one entry and arranged them in a strict order: *noun, verb, adj, adv, pron, etc.* This system has its positive and negative aspects – it looks strict and reliable, but on the other hand, it can result in lengthy entries and even ridiculous situations when, for instance, even though the word is usually used as an adjective, a comparatively insignificant noun sense starts the entry:

- (2) **literal** I *n* 1. iespiedklūda; II *adj* 1. burtisks; in the ~ sense burtiskā nozīmē; 2. precīzs; pareizs; (*par tulkojumu*) burtisks

The noun sense “typographical error”, which starts the entry, is comparatively rarely used and is even not included in many modern dictionaries.

In English-Latvian dictionaries grammatical labels are usually reduced to part-of-speech labels providing some basic information about the syntactic operation of a lexical item and accordingly playing an important role in the entry structure. This dictionary is not an exception. The *E-L dictionary* gives fair treatment to grammatical labels, but it does not indicate transitivity or other syntactic properties of verbs. However, this is compensated by providing explanatory notes, which contain typical collocates:

- (3) **leak** II *v* 1. sūkties; tecēt; 2. izpaust (*informāciju, faktus*)

Accordingly, the first sense, “of a liquid, to get through a small hole” being intransitive, is not supplied with any additional information, while the second one “deliberately reveal” is supplied by two typical collocates “*information, facts*”. The countability of nouns is not indicated either. It is obvious that some minor changes should be introduced into the system of grammar labels.

#### 4.3 Various types of usage labels

As to the broad spectrum of “usage labels” in E-L dictionaries, *geographical* and *specialised field* labels cause no problems. As to *temporal* labels, there also seem to be no difficulties as there is only one temporal label used (*obsolete*), accordingly there is no confusion related to distinguishing among *obsolete, archaic, old-fashioned*, etc. Speaking about *stylistic* labels, the *E-L dictionary* provides various slang labels like *American sl, British sl, student sl*, as well as *derogatory*. Whereas previous editions (1995 and 1997) demonstrate inconsistencies in the treatment of such sensitive vocabulary items such as terms of insult, especially pejorative words referring to racial groups, e.g., *coon, dago, frog, kike, nigger*, which have gradually become more serious offences, the 2004 *E-L dictionary* shows a positive tendency

towards a more careful treatment of this sensitive layer of vocabulary – all these words are labelled as derogatory or slang plus derogatory. Consequently translations are appropriately chosen from the respective layer of vocabulary, which altogether manifests a descriptive, yet appropriately labelled approach.

#### 4.4 The order of senses

The task of the lexicographer is not only to choose which senses of the entry word should be included but also to arrange them according to relevance and frequency of usage. The arrangement of a senses of polysemous words in E-L dictionaries often demonstrates a lack of a systematic approach – it is neither historical, nor determined by frequency of usage or relevance. The overall impression is quite chaotic, even the 2004 dictionary seems to show no considerable improvement in this aspect. Nowadays, it is possible to determine the relative frequencies of senses and accordingly put their translation equivalents in appropriate order by applying corpus evidence. The leading English learners' have dictionaries I have already successfully used corpora in this way. Concordance lists prove to be a great tool in finding typical collocates and linking them to the senses of the word. However, drawing conclusions about the arrangement of these senses is still the lexicographer's job.

#### 4.5 Grammatical peculiarities of phrasal verbs

Phrasal verbs, as a rule, are placed at the end of the entry. On the whole, in E-L dictionaries they are adequately treated, though some additional grammatical information could be wished for. Phrasal verbs can be transitive and intransitive, separable and inseparable. Even though this aspect is so relevant in usage, it has not been carefully treated in E-L dictionaries so far English Learners' dictionaries as *OALD* and *LDOCE*, for example, show the transitivity and separability of phrasal verbs in a very clear way. *OALD* distinguishes among four variants of **put down**, namely, the intransitive **put down**, two transitive separable **put sb↔down**, **put sth↔down** and two transitive inseparable structures **put sb down**, **put sth down**. The *E-L dictionary* provides eight senses of the phrasal verb, specifying the subject of the verb in intransitive senses: (*par lidmašīnu*) *nolaisties*, ((of an aircraft) to land), and specifying the object in transitive: *apspiest (nemierus)*, (crush a rebellion). Nothing is said about the separability of the phrasal verb in some of its senses. This leads to the conclusion that the E-L dictionary helps in the understanding of phrasal verbs but does not provide much assistance in their usage.

### 5 Conclusions

English-Latvian lexicographic practice shows some traditional features. However, it is clear that it would only benefit from the application of some new approaches as well as corpus evidence in the process of compilation – both at the macro and microstructural level. The selection of entry words and arrangement of senses in polysemous entries should be revised first.

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