
Are dictionaries of lexical blends efficient Learners' dictionaries?

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Abstract

The scope of this paper concerns both learners' lexicography and lexical blending. It will focus on the potential utilization of dictionaries of fanciful lexical blends as learning tools, able to ensure an educational role in the learning of the lexicon. In order to deal with this issue, the phenomenon of blending in regard to a learning perspective will be briefly introduced. This will allow an exploration of the ways of using dictionaries of blends in a didactic manner, and at the same time evaluate the limitation of this method.

1. Introduction

The scope of this paper concerns both learners' lexicography and lexical blending. In addition to general dictionaries, there are books that we call dictionaries of fanciful words. These dictionaries, examined in French, have the particularity to contain only neologisms and among them, 17 contain lexical blends only. These dictionaries of lexical blends play an important part in fanciful lexicography in that they are the only to mention a didactic dimension. Therefore, we propose to consider the use of these dictionaries as learning tools – especially two of them: *Distractionnaire*¹ and *Éléphanfare*² –, able to ensure an educational role in the learning of the lexicon.

In order to deal with this issue, we will briefly introduce the phenomenon of blending in regard to a learning perspective. This will allow us to explore the ways of using dictionaries of blends in a didactic manner, and at the same time evaluate the limitation of this method.

2. Lexical blending and dictionaries of lexical blends

The learning aspect of dictionaries of lexical blends can appear doubtful. Therefore, it is necessary to gauge the relations between lexical blending and learning in the first place.

2.1. *Lexical blending and learning*

Without considering their lexicographical utilization, blends are already involved in learning the vocabulary for primary school students. Several *académies*³ offer educational resources to achieve creative workshops using blends. The creation of neologisms – including blends – can also be promoted by the organization of cultural events, which young learners can participate in, as Jacquenod (2001: 171) writes.

[...] le Ministère de la Culture et de la Francophonie a organisé en 1994 pour les élèves de huit à quatorze ans un concours sur le thème des « Mots en fête », les enfants ont inventé des vocables très drôles. Leurs définitions révélaient beaucoup de perspicacité et de finesse. L'un d'eux a proposé le mot-valise « moisiversaire » dont il donne cette spirituelle définition étymologique : « Contraction de *moisi* et de *anniversaire* : description en un mot d'anniversaire gâché, ennuyeux, qui forme

comme une couche de moisi par dessus la joie des cadeaux et d'avoir un an de plus ; anniversaire moisi, où l'on s'ennuie.

The holding of such competitions can be observed in dictionaries of fanciful words⁴. However, the workshops held in schools benefit from methodological frameworks aiming at stimulating the acquisition of the lexicon for the learners.

2.2. *A methodology for young learners*

Through the practice of blending workshops, three objectives are sought. Here, the presentation of these objectives is based on the document available on the website of the *académie* of Nancy-Metz⁵, but other *académies* offer similar programs.⁶

2.2.1. *General progress.* First, we intend to detail the progress of these workshops and then present the benefits derived from them. We follow the program of the *académie* of Nancy-Metz (p. 2-3). The workshop lasts five sessions from 30 to 45 minutes. The aim is 'la création d'un dictionnaire de mots-valises' (p. 2) which encourages the students to work on several concepts.

[...] un travail simple sur les syllabes, une appropriation de l'orthographe lexicale d'un corpus de mots [...], la présentation d'un article de dictionnaire, un rangement alphabétique de tous ces mots, [...]

First, the concept of lexical blending is introduced to students by emphasizing the feature of the syllabic homophony. We can see that the criteria for identifying blends are well defined but the various typologies concerning these lexical units are not detailed⁷. Lexical blends are defined (p. 2) according to the prototype for French⁸: '[les mots-valises] se construisent par « accrochage de deux mots » le premier se terminant par la syllabe débutant le second.'

After this presentation, students are asked to search for word-pairs that share a homophonous segment. In the second session, the focus is on writing dictionary definitions. Students are provided with a list of blends, and then asked to write a definition corresponding to a dictionary article. Thus, lexicographic codes are introduced. Note that the documents consulted refer to many dictionaries of fanciful blends that belong to the corpus we are working on⁹.

The third session requests the students to practice the coinage of blends. The writing of the dictionary begins during the fourth session. The students, who have to coin blends and assign a lexicographic definition to them, collectively write the dictionary. During the fifth and final session each student enters his or her blends using a words processing software. Alphabetical order is followed and applied by the students themselves. All these steps should enable the learners to acquire some knowledge about the lexicon and how it can be presented in dictionaries. The objectives of the workshop are now detailed.

2.2.2. *Introduction to lexicographic research.* The first objective is of a metalexigraphic nature. The main achievement is the mastery of lexicographic consultation in a decoding perspective. The first thing a student needs in order to analyze blends is to use a dictionary to look up the source-lexemes. As the students use dictionaries, they acquire metalexigraphic skills. These skills will be reinvested later for the purpose of the workshop. The document provided by the *académie* of Nancy-Metz sets two metalexigraphic objectives (p. 1):

- Savoir classer des mots par ordre alphabétique.
- Se servir des codes utilisés dans les articles de dictionnaires.

In addition to decoding lexical units such as blends, the use of dictionaries promotes mastering alphabetical order and familiarizing the students with lexicographic rules that will help the making of a dictionary of the blends created during the workshop.

2.2.3. *Notions of lexical semantics.* In order to invent blends and their definitions, the students are encouraged to explore the semantic relations of the lexicon. For example, to write the definitions, the learners are recommended to use synonyms so the source-lexemes will not appear. The program (p. 1) suggests that these two concepts should be discussed.

- Utiliser des synonymes et des mots de sens contraire dans les activités d'expression orale et écrite.
- Préciser, dans son contexte, le sens d'un mot connu ; le distinguer d'autres sens possibles.

Semantic relations such as synonymy, antonymy or homonymy are dealt with, which provides learning of the lexicon, as Genouvrier and Peytard (1970: 233) note.

Rappelons d'abord le but de tout enseignement du vocabulaire : enrichir en qualité et en quantité le lexique individuel de l'élève. [...] en qualité, cela demande que les champs sémantiques soient explorés minutieusement et que l'on parvienne à travailler avec précision sur les synonymes et les homonymes.

Homonymy, for instance, enables the students to make puns while coining blends. The students thus learn concepts such as homonymy, homography and homophony while applying them.

2.2.4. *Introduction to linguistic metalanguage.* The final objective of these workshops deals with the acquisition of linguistic metalanguage. Young learners meet technical terms during the workshop that they will come across later in their studies. The *académie* of Nancy-Metz (p. 1) proposes to introduce some terms.

- Connaître et utiliser oralement le vocabulaire concernant la construction des mots (radical, préfixe, suffixe, famille).

These terms are not defined in detail, but speaking of these concepts with young learners can help their understanding of the linguistic system, and particularly of morphology.

2.3. *A methodology for other learners?*

Similar workshops could be offered to more advanced learners – native or non-native speakers – to raise their awareness to the use of dictionaries, for example. The analysis and coinage of blends is a way to initiate linguistic discussions on notions of morphology, phonology, semantics or syntax, which can be addressed in a playful manner.

However, very few workshops intended for adults exist¹⁰. Galisson (1987: 60) suggests a very close program to that of the *académie* of Nancy-Metz, except that Galisson's dictionary of blends is meant for foreign learners.

Mon intention était donc de venir en aide aux étrangers, en essayant de les éclairer sur la manière d'identifier un mot-valise.

More generally, the purpose of these workshops is the making of dictionaries that gather the blends coined by the participants. And the adoption of the lexicographic format as the outcome of the workshop reveals the importance of the relation between the lexicon and the dictionaries. We will now observe the use of dictionaries of fanciful blends as efficient learning tools.

3. Distractionnaire and *Éléphanfare* against Larousse or Robert?

First of all, what we analyse as learners' dictionaries of blends – *Distractionnaire* (1986) and *Éléphanfare* (2003) – are going to be described so that their didactic properties are gauged. Then, we will be able to focus on the ways to use such dictionaries in a learning perspective and identify the limits to such a use.

3.1. *Distractionnaire* (1986) and *Éléphanfare* (2003)

The two dictionaries were published sixteen years apart. They can be identified as learners' dictionaries by reading their prefaces. But another criterion allows their identification as learners' dictionaries: the source-lexemes of each blend are given either in an index, either directly with the blend. This is a property that is shared only by *Distractionnaire* and *Éléphanfare*, as the other dictionaries try to hide the source-lexemes in order to make the readers guess them, at the risk they never find them.

An interesting property of these dictionaries is the structure of their blends. These structures match those of the other dictionaries of blends, and the most frequent pattern match the prototypical pattern of blending in French.¹¹

	<i>Distractionnaire</i>	<i>Éléphanfare</i>	Total in the corpus
w/ homophonous segment	13,07 %	0 %	20,2 %
w/ truncation	19,6 %	7,41 %	13,4 %
w/ homophonous segment & truncation	61,93 %	85,19 %	61,7 %
w/ entrenchment	5,4 %	7,41 %	4,7 %

Table 1. Comparison of blending patterns

This is quite meaningful as *Distractionnaire* and *Éléphanfare* account for 379 words, or 5,3% of the 7039 blends taken from the 17 dictionaries. This proximity to the prototype illustrates a will to stay to the closest to the norm. For these tools to be efficient for the learners, they have to stay close to standard blend structures.

3.1.1. *Distractionnaire*. Galisson and Porcher's (1986) dictionary is unique in several ways. First, it is the second dictionary that we identified as being a dictionary of lexical blends chronologically. Galisson is a linguist, specialized in language learning technique and Porcher is a sociologist. The fact that an author is also a linguist is relevant since the participation of a specialist is quite meaningful in the making of a dictionary of blends.

Consequently, *Distractionnaire* benefited from Galisson's theoretical framework. Although this dictionary is intended for foreign learners, the authors add a playful dimension to it, as they write that 'sa vocation est d'abord de distraire' (p. 5). Through the use of blends, focus is put on the playful side of the dictionary. Then, a more didactic aim is mentioned in the second part of the preface (p. 7). *Distractionnaire* aims at three goals: to encourage the use of standard dictionaries¹²; to be 'bases d'exercices de lexi-culture'; and to act as a 'recueil de données à différents niveaux' (p. 7). The first goal has been mentioned earlier in this paper. The second objective deals with the theory developed in Galisson (1999) to link the lexicon with cultural information. Finally, the last goal makes *Distractionnaire* a tool for other researchers.

The structure of *Distractionnaire* is quite simple: entries appear in large letters and are immediately followed by a definition. The microstructure is thereby impoverished since no information except the definition is provided.

Décalcomamie : jeu de reproduction d'images coloriées, que les petits-enfants apprennent à leurs grands-mères, pour les faire tenir tranquille avant le dîner. Galisson et Porcher (1986)

However, an index (p. 127-130) concludes the book. It comprises the entire macrostructure.

Décalcomamie : décalcomanie + mamie. (Ibid.)

As a learners' dictionary, *Distractionnaire* provides the source-lexemes of each blend so that the speakers are guided through their reading. This is a unique property of learners' dictionaries of blends.

3.1.2. *Éléphanfare*. The second learners' dictionary of the corpus is aimed at children. Unlike *Distractionnaire*, *Éléphanfare* (2003: 7) does not offer a detailed framework. Its preface, written by the publisher instead of the author, gives a minimal methodology to understand what lexical blending is. A quick historical survey is provided, going from Carroll to Finkielkraut (1979) (the first author of dictionaries of blends in France). However, a better-detailed methodological development could have advantageously replaced this historical part.

Les mots-valises s'adressent aux plus petits. Pour chaque mot-valise présenté dans ce livre, l'enfant peut jouer à retrouver les deux mots de départ, puis à créer des mots-valises avec les mots proposés.

Indeed, the methodology is not made explicit whereas this dictionary might have benefited from more explanations, especially about blending, so that adults could use it, parents as teachers. The blends are assimilated to riddles that the children have to solve to find the source-lexemes.

Le chaligator : cet animal étrange peut rester des heures à la surface de l'eau sans bouger, et venir ensuite se pelotonner sur tes genoux pour ronronner. Réponse : chat + alligator.

The microstructure is adapted to this game of discovery since the source-lexemes are always indicated on the right side of the pages (*Réponse* : chat + alligator). At the bottom of each page, another riddle appears and invite children to coin blends.

Et toi, veux-tu inventer un nouvel animal domestique ? Tu peux te servir de boa et hamster, de marmotte et otarie...

The entries are not arranged alphabetically but rather by themes. However, within these themes, the alphabetical order is not respected either. This is quite surprising because, as we already stated, the mastery of the alphabetical order is one of the objectives of the workshops in schools, which use *Éléphanfare* as an example.

3.2. Means of the use of blends in a self-learning perspective

We already discussed using blends – and dictionaries of blends – during supervised workshops and will now consider their utilization in a self-learning perspective. Whereas Galisson & Porcher (1986) and Loubière (2003) are alone in making a dictionary specifically for learners, other authors go into the methods used to coin blends. Finkielkraut (2006: 13-14) and Créhange (2004: 107-110; 2006: 13-14) also describe the way to coining blends.

The lexical creativity of the speakers is developed as the prefaces of some dictionaries read calls for neologisms. The fact that the speakers are encouraged to follow and apply a method is very similar to language learning techniques, since knowledge is conveyed. Moreover, the creative process does not only concern the lexical unit, but the making of the definition also.

3.3. The limits of blending in a self-learning perspective

While these works can be teaching tools, they need to be accompanied by a learning method. Indeed, without a suitable method, fanciful dictionaries, whether they are learning dictionaries or not, are not viable tools. Without a methodological framework, learners are left to themselves and, although it may be pleasant to coin humorous blends, the process remain unproductive if it is not explained by linguistic analysis.

4. Conclusion

While they never claim to replace standard learners' dictionaries, dictionaries of fanciful blends are an interesting alternative. Their use is impossible for a single learner, but as part of a workshop – to promote the use of dictionaries, for example – it seems possible. Galisson & Porcher and Loubière's wills were perhaps too optimistic and their dictionaries fall far short of their ambitions but their attempts are nonetheless interesting ways to renew learners' lexicography.

Notes

¹ From *distraire* 'to entertain' and *dictionnaire* 'dictionary'.

² From *éléphant* 'elephant' and *fanfare* 'fanfare, brass band'.

³ Education departments in France.

⁴ This point is developed in Léturgie (2009: 211).

⁵ Available at <www3.ac-nancy-metz.fr/IENJarville/IMG/odt_JEANNE_s_ance_mots-valises2-2.odt>, 03-15-2012.

⁶ The electronic addresses of these documents in the bibliography will be provided for the publication.

⁷ For further developments about those typologies, cf. Léturgie (2011a, b).

⁸ Cf. Léturgie (2011 b).

⁹ Among the 17 dictionaries, Créhange (2006), Thibaud (2005) or Chiflet & Kristy (2003) are the most quoted.

¹⁰ Such workshops intended for adults are rare. Only one author of dictionaries of blends (Créhange) holds some of these workshops. <http://alain.crehange.pagesperso-orange.fr/Download/alain_crehange_ateliermotsval.pdf/>, consulted 03-15-2012.

¹¹ Again, cf. Léturgie (2011b) for further details on the prototype for French blends.

¹² « [...] contrairement aux dictionnaires classiques, le *Distractionnaire* ne prétend pas à l'autosuffisance. Il invite, au contraire, les lecteurs qui rencontrent des difficultés de compréhension, à consulter d'autres dictionnaires. » Galisson and Porcher (1986: 7).

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