

Linju Ogasawara

PROBLEMS IN IMPROVING JAPANESE ENGLISH-LEARNERS' DICTIONARIES

The role of English learners' dictionaries in Japan

English-language learning in Japan has been slanted too much toward grammar learning and translation, partly because we have had several centuries of reading the Chinese classics at the centre of our cultural activity. Traditionally, a knowledge of the many difficult and complicated Chinese characters was considered essential, and a knowledge of many difficult lexical items was more important than syntax. For such purposes, Chinese dictionaries and glossaries were compiled and used extensively by students.

This approach was carried over into Japan when English began to be studied about 120 years ago, when Japan opened itself to the rest of the world after being closed for 215 years. When groups of young people were sent abroad by the Japanese government to study, they came back with copies of English dictionaries published in the United States. Many English dictionaries have since been imported from Britain and the United States and have been selling very well. Japan has been a good market for British and American publications.

Japanese English-learners' reliance upon dictionaries has been so strong that when British language teachers arrived in Japan, they naturally became involved in vocabulary selection and dictionary compilation. The most original person among these was H.E. Palmer. Apart from his syntactical studies, he also wrote a couple of lexicological works (1933, 1934, 1938). Palmer's work led to the creation, with A.S. Hornby, of the *IDIOMATIC AND SYNTACTIC DICTIONARY OF ENGLISH*, which eventually became the *OXFORD ADVANCED LEARNERS' DICTIONARY OF CURRENT ENGLISH*.

In Japan, many bilingual English-Japanese/Japanese-English dictionaries have been produced by commercial publishers. In the general compilation process, a group of Japanese authors are called together and assemble all available English monolingual dictionaries and previously published bilingual dictionaries. They then set out to translate the definitions and descriptions into Japanese and incorporate these translations into the body of their own editions of English dictionaries.

The sources of such English dictionaries in Japan have been, inter alia, various versions of the *WEBSTER INTERNATIONAL*, *CHAMBERS TWENTIETH CENTURY*, the *CONCISE OXFORD DICTIONARY*, the *OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY*, Whitney's *(NEW) CENTURY DICTIONARY* and *FUNK AND WAGNALLS STANDARD DICTIONARY*.

Since the dictionaries used by Japanese compilers were originally devised for native speakers, there are only a few which are appropriate for non-native learners of English. Thus, Japanese English-learners' dictionary authors had to develop

additional features for some entries. The trouble is that their adequacy has often not been checked by qualified native speakers.

Requirements for a good foreign-language learners' dictionary and problems of English-learners' dictionaries published in Japan

The quality of foreign-language learners' dictionaries is important, but how should we judge the quality of such a dictionary? One way is by determining to what extent a particular dictionary meets the requirements of the learner/user.

Let us list several such requirements, together with concrete examples where appropriate.

(1) Since all words need not be included in a learners' dictionary, a selection of suitable words should be made for purposes of both recognition and production in language use.

(2) The information, description and illustrative examples given under the entry for each word must be accurate. The expression *fall on one's hips (meaning "fall on one's bottom") or *get on the car (meaning "get in the car") are incorrect for several reasons. Among the many loan words from English into Japanese we have the word hip which means 'bottom' of the body. Also, Japanese post-position particles do not make the same distinctions that are made by English prepositions. Thus get on a vehicle and get in a vehicle are covered by the same Japanese expression.

(3) More information, description and examples should be given for basic, everyday words. Thus the Japanese translation equivalent of the English verb burn is not usually used in conjunction with electric lights. The American English word downtown is too often translated by a Japanese word which implies an area comparable to a previously low-income section of Tokyo containing small factories, shops and stores. However, I do not believe that the word downtown necessarily carries such connotations. Probably in the Japanese mind the down in downtown tends to be linked to the meaning 'low(er)'.

Japanese English learners have no problem with the expression do one's best, as long as it is used in the present (progressive) tense or the future tense. However, very few Japanese speakers are aware of the subtle implication that the actor of the predicate did one's best has not been successful and that a feeling of consolation is involved. Ignorant of such a delicate implication, a Japanese tends to say "He got first prize. He did his best", when he should have said, "He got first prize. He did very well." None of the English dictionaries published in Japan have any notes about this tricky usage.

(4) Information about the fundamental grammatical quality of the word should be given, such as the 'countable' - 'uncountable' distinction, the type of clause patterns a particular verb enters, etc. Thus, Japanese English learners sometimes say goldfishes and grapefruits. They know they have to use the singular form of fish, whether they refer to a fish or several fish of the same species, and the singular form of fruit. But they do not

expect this rule to be applicable to the words goldfish and grapefruit.

(5) The semantic specification of a word should not be a mere paraphrase by other words. The definition or equivalent should clearly show the core of the meanings of the word according to the context. Thus the conventional Japanese translation equivalent of the English verb cook does not clearly show that cooking is preparation of food by the use of heat. Thus, an English-learners' dictionary should make this factor of using heat clear.

(6) Examples illustrating the uses of a word should help to show typical instances of a particular use of the word. I believe that the semantic core of the meaning of the English word on is 'in touch with', 'contacting', etc. The Japanese translation equivalent of on does not clearly show that factor. Thus, the comparable Japanese word does not make a distinction between on and over and above.

The Japanese translation equivalent of the English verb stand applies to almost any type of building. Thus, Japanese English learners tend to say, "My house stands on the corner" or "My house stands next to the church" when they mean "My house is on the corner" or "My house is next to the church" etc. Japanese English learners find some English expressions using stand rather odd, e.g. "The bus is standing" or "There is a beer glass standing on the table". The Japanese translation equivalent does not have the corresponding function. Thus, this usage should be included in learners' dictionaries.

(7) Distinctive labels to show the register of a word should be given, if possible. Most two-word verbs are on the colloquial side and often the corresponding one-word verb synonym tends to be formal. This general tendency influences the thinking of Japanese English learners. They tend to believe that while call on someone or call at some place is colloquial, the verb visit is formal, which is not the case, although pay a visit is very formal. Thus, a carefully prepared learners' dictionary should consider this fact and should warn the learner against such mistaken interpretations.

(8) The possible range of the collocability of a word should be illustrated by adequate examples. The conventional Japanese translation of take part in means just the idea of 'joining'. Thus, Japanese learners of English tend to use this phrasal verb regardless of the type of noun following in, e.g. *take part in a party/*take part in a picnic. I do not believe that native English speakers would use take part in in such cases, although they would use it in expressions such as take part in a discussion. Accordingly, the constraints on the types of object nouns that may be used with this phrase should be stated in learners' dictionaries.

(9) Information on semantic or cultural associations of words should be given. Thus picture books for young children in English-speaking countries show the sun painted yellow, except perhaps the rising or setting sun and English-speaking children tend to paint the sun yellow. Because of this, native English speakers

tend to associate the egg yolk with the sun: sunnyside up. On the other hand, in Japanese culture we paint the sun red. Thus, we have a red sun on our national flag. By contrast, the Japanese paint the moon yellow. Thus, they tend to associate fried eggs or egg yolk with the moon. One way to serve Japanese noodles is to put a raw egg in the noodles. This is referred to as moon viewing noodles.

(10) Such cultural information should be given about the word as the average non-native learner would not usually be aware of. As you may know, Japanese people do not wear shoes in their houses. If the floor is covered with a straw mat or something similar, they go around barefoot. Otherwise, whether the floor is carpeted or not, most Japanese people wear slippers at home. They change from their shoes into slippers at the front door. On the other hand, in most Western houses slippers, if worn at all, are used principally in the bedroom. This fact is not mentioned in learners' English dictionaries prepared by native speaking authors.

(11) Information about antonyms, synonyms and other related words in the same semantic field, hyperonyms, homophonic and other confusable words should be given at proper places under each entry.

(12) Illustrations or photographs should be included to help grasp the meaning or the object the word refers to.

(13) The variations in the form of the word (e.g. pronunciations, spellings) should be given in order of usage.

(14) If reliable data of relative word-frequency counts are available, a frequency level label could be added to most entries (cf. West 1936/53).

Provisions for specific language/culture-bound dictionaries

Foreign-language learners' dictionaries are of two types: a universal version of the dictionary or a specific language/culture-bound version. The former is usually compiled and edited in the country where the foreign language is used as the native language. The latter is usually compiled and edited in the learners' own country. The specific language/culture-bound versions of the foreign-language learners' dictionaries could best be prepared through close collaboration between native-speaker lexicographers and qualified competent non-native foreign-language teachers and scholars who have extensive knowledge of the linguistic/cultural trouble spots of the learners, and who are familiar with the contrasts between the two languages and cultures.

This means, in turn, that we should promote more basic research and more surveys on relevant aspects, such as contrastive studies of the languages and cultures, accumulation and analysis of common errors made by students, etc., so that the results of such studies can be taken into account in the preparation of learners' dictionaries. High quality foreign-language learners' dictionaries could be made the object of national research and development projects. They might go beyond what a commercial publisher could handle.

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