

User-Orientation in Dictionaries: 9 Propositions

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0. This paper comes down to a *presentation of and a brief explanatory comment* on the nine propositions which follow.

For dictionaries to be user-oriented, i.e. to be designed as tools for specific users, seem to be fairly self-evident. Yet it is striking that in the paper of Berkov (in this volume) on lexicographical principles mention is made of such concepts as maximum of information and minimum amount of space without bringing into the discussion as well the impact such principles may have on the user. Consequently, it could be worthwhile to *explain*, to *make explicit*, the underlying implications of such a — at first sight — obvious statement.

1. User-orientation is to be defined as a relative characteristic of dictionaries (front-ends), not (necessarily) of the underlying databases from which they are derived.

We would like to suppose that every new dictionary that is published nowadays has been derived from an underlying database (which can, of course, be more or less sophisticated). Furthermore we suppose that different types of users are in need of different types of dictionaries. For example, a French-Dutch dictionary for French speaking users should differ in many respects from a French-Dutch dictionary for Dutch speaking users (see Al 1983). This does not imply, however, that one has to build up a completely separate database for each type of dictionary. *For several reasons it is preferable to set up one "subjacent", fundamental database which is not user-oriented, and to derive from it as many user-oriented front-end databases as there are types of dictionaries.*

Editing, updating and further completion of the bare lexical data are activities which — in a certain sense — should be unrelated to the final products a publisher may have in mind. They concern the fundamental, non-user-oriented database. Front-end databases, on the contrary, are typically product-oriented. They contain specific selections which depend entirely on the needs of the users for whom the dictionaries involved are intended.

The fundamental subjacent database then is the sum total of all imaginable front-end databases. It would make no sense to print out such a collection of data. Such a book would fail to be user-oriented by being excessively complete.

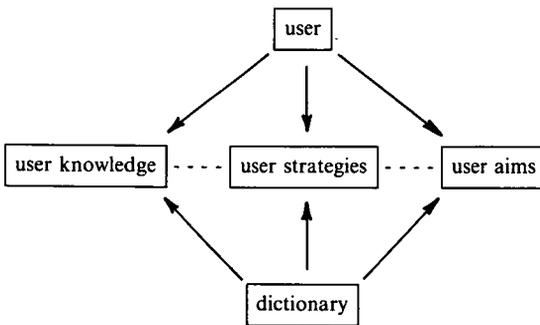
2. As the use of a dictionary can be seen as a typical problem-solving activity, user-orientation should involve both (static) knowledge and dynamic features (strategies, aims, needs) of the intended user.

Using a dictionary often indicates a case of emergency: the user does not know what or how to, or he does not know exactly, or he is not sure, or he wants to verify, etc. In order to solve his problems he eventually reaches for a dictionary.

Many dictionaries which claim (implicitly or explicitly) to be user-oriented lose sight of the fact that this *problem-solving activity* in fact involves *at least three aspects*, viz.:

- the knowledge of the user,
- his (search) strategies,
- his aims / needs.

Schematically:



Often lexicographers forget about the former two aspects and only take into account the latter. This is e.g. the case for most English learner's dictionaries (think of ALD, LDOCE, COBUILD etc.) which are intended for speakers of different foreign languages, yet proceed as if the user-knowledge is the same. Disregarding this different knowledge-base and thus e.g. explaining *scrum* and *puff pastry* in the same way and in the same language for, e.g. both Hungarian and French speaking people, means disregarding important aspects of the user proper.

3. Lexicographical definitions should be seen as knowledge representations and as such be in accordance with the knowledge representation systems the intended users have at their disposal.

In most cases a dictionary publisher publishes more than one reference work. For example, Le Robert is not only the publisher of LE GRAND ROBERT, but LE PETIT ROBERT, LE MICRO ROBERT and LE ROBERT MÉTHODIQUE also form part of the collection. In England too almost every publisher brings out concise, junior, compact and pocket dictionaries in addition to his more comprehensive word books.

Looking at the prefaces of the dictionaries concerned one is forced to conclude that the smaller versions are intended for the non-professionals, be it pupils, (non-native) students or general users. If however one takes a look at the books themselves, it turns out that only very exceptionally is an effort made to adapt the meta-language (e.g. the text of the definitions) to the knowledge level of the intended users.

Very often a smaller dictionary is simply a strictly quantitative subset of a larger one. Cp. for instance the definitions of the French word *succès* in LE PETIT ROBERT on the one hand and in LE ROBERT MÉTHODIQUE, intended for 'the younger users', on the other hand:

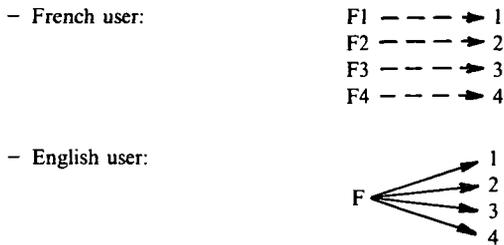
— *PR*: Heureux résultat (d'une décision, d'une entreprise, d'une suite d'événements); caractère favorable de ce qui arrive.

— *RM*: Heureux résultat, caractère favorable de ce qui arrive.

Dictionaries which are the result of a pure quantitative reduction operation cannot seriously be considered as user-oriented.

4. The knowledge the user has should not only co-determine the contents and representation of the knowledge-base aimed at, but also the way the latter is organized.

Let us, by way of example, take a French-English dictionary. A French-English dictionary for *French users* might contain four different, i.e. homonymous, entries for the noun *fraise* (as in the monolingual LE PETIT ROBERT). Such an organization would reflect the fact that for a French native speaker, apparently, there exist four different entities corresponding to the following English translations: *strawberry*, *reamer*, *caul* (e.g. a calf's caul) and *ruff*. On the other hand such a semantically organized presentation would be inappropriate for an English speaking user of a French-English dictionary. *A non-native user can only try to attach several meanings to a unique, semantically opaque form 'fraise', whereas a native speaker moves from meaning to form. Both these facts should be reflected in the organization of a bilingual dictionary.* Schematically:



5. The basic linguistic communicative functions being speaking (writing) and understanding (reading), lexicographers should define the function(s) they want to deploy and accordingly shape their dictionaries in a consistent way.

The distinction between active and passive dictionaries is well-known in bilingual lexicography. It can be used to explain both macro- and microstructural differences. Monolingual dictionaries are less clearcut in this respect. Dutch monolingual dictionaries, for example, are often intended to be dictionaries for understanding, but also contain active, productive information. There is of course nothing wrong in such a mixed type of dictionary as long as the mixing is done in a consistent way. Especially with regard to *collocations*, however, a functional, user-oriented approach is often lacking or inconsistent in monolingual dictionaries. In the Dutch explaining Van Dale Dictionary of Present-Day Dutch (see VAN DALE GROOT WORDENBOEK VAN HEDENDAAGS NEDERLANDS . . .) one finds e.g. typically productive information with regard to *fixed prepositions* (so-called grammatical collocations) but in most cases *Mel'čuk-like lexical functions* (so-called lexical collocations (see DICTIONNAIRE EXPLICATIF . . .) which are often combinatorial and hence productive as well, are lacking. So e.g. one finds *stimulans* (E. stimulus) + prep. *tot* (E. to), but not + verb *geven* (E. give), or *sleutel* (E. key) + (realisation)verb *omdraaien* (E. turn), but not + (realisation)verb *in het slot steken* (E. put into the lock).

User-orientation here as a rule implies a greater consistency with regard to collocations/combinations.

6. More specific communicative functions (such as e.g. translating) require an adequate, specially adapted, user-oriented model.

Linguistic communicative functions can of course be more specified than indicated in proposition 5. Translating dictionaries of the passive type e.g. should not only help users to understand the foreign language, but moreover provide them with contextually adequate expressions. Although user-orientation implies taking into account this differentiation, it should *not lead to the semantic projection of the user's target language into the foreign source language.*

The English adjective *bright* e.g. acquires five meanings according to a particular English-Dutch translating dictionary. These five meanings are inspired by the Dutch translation equivalents (one of the meanings being 'illuster' (E. illustrious) because of the expression 'a bright example'). In our opinion a user-oriented approach to a translating dictionary of FL-MT-type should not alter the semantic profile of the FL; quite on the contrary, it should both provide an insight into this semantic structure (of the FL) and indicate translation possibilities (in the MT). To return to the 'bright'-case, this would involve making clear that 'bright' can be used on the level of perception, emotion, cognition and abstraction and that within this structure several (sometimes overlapping) translation possibilities can be used. In other words, a user-oriented translation dictionary (FL-MT) should not lose sight of the understanding aspect as a basis for 'powerful' translating.

7. User-orientation not only implies answers to specific questions (declarative knowledge), but also ways to find out these solutions (procedures). A clear, transparent structure is a *conditio sine qua non* to be able to work procedurally.

If on the one hand we want a FL-MT-type dictionary to be organized in a way that differs from a MT-FL-type dictionary, and if on the other hand we would like to derive the two front-end databases underlying these two types of dictionaries from one and the same subjacent, fundamental database, there is only one possible solution. At the deepest level every bit of (semantic or grammatical) structure and every usage restriction (stylistic, geographical, etc.) should be recognized and classified as such. Highly structured information is a prerequisite for appropriate user-oriented selections of parts thereof.

One should know, for instance, not merely the key-word of each added example, but also the grammatical category to which this key-word belongs, which meaning of the entry concerned is illustrated by that example, what its stylistic connotations are, etc. If we have this kind of information at our disposal it is relatively easy to take the semantic characteristics of a word as the fundamental framework of an entry in a MT-FL-type dictionary, and the formal properties of that word as an organization model for the FL-MT-type dictionary.

8. A user-oriented approach to polysemy requires a dynamic instead of a static strategy.

A dynamic approach does not lead to a proliferation of meanings which are enumerated ('line' e.g. gets some 50 meanings in CED, but to core meanings which can be extended and refined. A good example of the latter is to be found in COBUILD where the number of meanings of 'line' is 'reduced' to 18. Some of them act as general, basic meanings (such as: 'line is used in the following ways to refer to markings on a surface' - the nature of the surface may then have an impact on the nature of the markings proper so e.g. the lines on a piece of paper, a road, a face, a sports field etc.). Elsewhere we have argued (Martin 1988:12-16) that the semantic organization of the lexicon (in a dictionary) should aim at *dynamic economy*, thus bringing it closer in line with the mental lexicon of the user, or to paraphrase Miller (1978:101) '*what is wanted [in a user-oriented dictionary] are meanings that can be extended plus rules characterizing what extensions are likely to seem intelligible to a native speaker*'.

9. A user-oriented approach implies consistent procedures for the looking-up of multi-word expressions; in this respect procedures reflecting users' intuitions should be preferred.

Looking-up procedures for multi-word expressions involve two aspects:

- (a) the *entry word* under which to look up the expression,
- (b) the *exact place in the entry word* under which the expression is treated.

For the time being we will restrict ourselves to (a): the entry word itself.

Obviously, as has been argued elsewhere (e.g. Van Sterkenburg 1986), establishing the entry word depends on the function of the dictionary. Furthermore, it goes without saying that it is not very user-friendly to find in an English-Dutch passive translating dictionary an expression such as 'kick the bucket' treated both under 'kick' and 'bucket' to find out somewhat later that 'it's raining cats and dogs' is treated under 'cat' only. *User-orientation will involve here a consistent procedure which builds up a certain expectation pattern and lives up to it.*

Moreover, *the more this expectation pattern is in accordance with the user's intuitions the more 'friendly' it is.* We have argued elsewhere (Martin 1988:19-23) that, when looking up expressions for understanding purposes, one should look up the expression under the, semantically speaking, 'heaviest' word. This word usually is the one which comes lowest in a structural description: it specifies the expression the most. That is the reason why in V + N combinations we treated in the English-Dutch Van Dale the expression under N, and why in A + N combinations we preferred A to N as an entry word (cf. figures underneath; the word in *italics* denotes the entry word).

Figure 1 Structural description of the fixed idiomatic expression 'the bucket'.

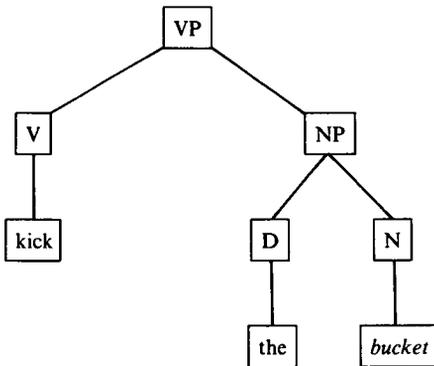


Figure 2 Structural description of the fixed idiomatic expression 'cats and dogs'.

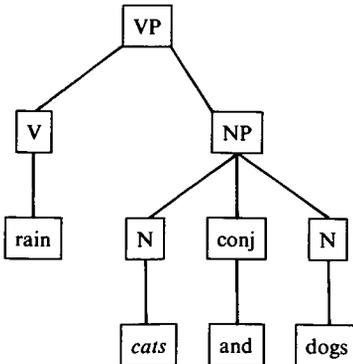
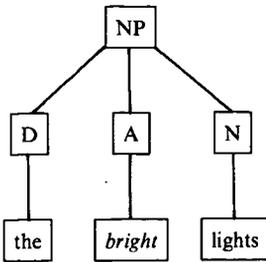


Figure 3 Structural description of the fixed idiomatic expression 'the bright lights'.



10. In the preceding paragraphs we laid claim neither to exhaustivity nor to full argumentation, on account of lack of scope. Our short-term goal therefore was to give rise to some reflection and/or discussion among colleagues attending the conference. If, however, the ideas presented here were to lead to further elaboration, refinement or application (preferably by others than ourselves) we would consider our long-term goal to be reached as well.

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