

Software Demonstration: Cambridge Dictionaries Online

Andrew HARLEY, Cambridge, UK

Abstract

Cambridge Dictionaries Online has provided a range of learners' dictionaries online for free. While demonstrating this service, we will discuss the challenges and benefits of online dictionaries over and against their paper and CD-ROM cousins.

In July 1999, Cambridge University Press launched an online dictionary service. At that stage, there were already online dictionaries, e.g. from Merriam-Webster <http://m-w.com> Collins Cobuild <http://springbank.linguistics.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/ccsd> and Newbury House <http://nhd.heinle.com> - since then, the Oxford English Dictionary <http://oed.com> has gone online, though by subscription only. Most of these resources are aimed at the native speaker rather than the language learner. To the best of our knowledge, Cambridge Dictionaries Online is currently unique in providing access to a complete range of learners' dictionaries including a comprehensive advanced learners' dictionary. By April 2000, it had already attracted over two million searches, with more than 10,000 searches each day.

To date, sales of electronic dictionaries have been rather modest. Paper dictionaries are portable, easy to browse, and don't require a computer to be switched on. Online dictionaries not only require the computer to be switched on but also require it to be connected via the telephone line (at not inconsiderable expense in many countries) to the Internet. CD-ROM dictionaries have hardly taken off in a big way, so why bother with the development of online dictionaries?

Well, online dictionaries are cheaper if not free, and should be more up-to-date. The consumer can understand that, but what about the publisher? Internet economics are still developing, but even without any direct charging, the publisher gains a large, easily accessible customer base, free feedback and research, and advertising opportunities. But will online dictionaries stop customers buying their print and CD-ROM cousins? I would suggest that, for the market as a whole, that may inevitably be the case. The wheel can't be turned back - online dictionaries exist and are not going to go away. But when customers do want to go out and buy a dictionary, in print or on CD-ROM, they would rather pick one that they have had the opportunity to test thoroughly first.

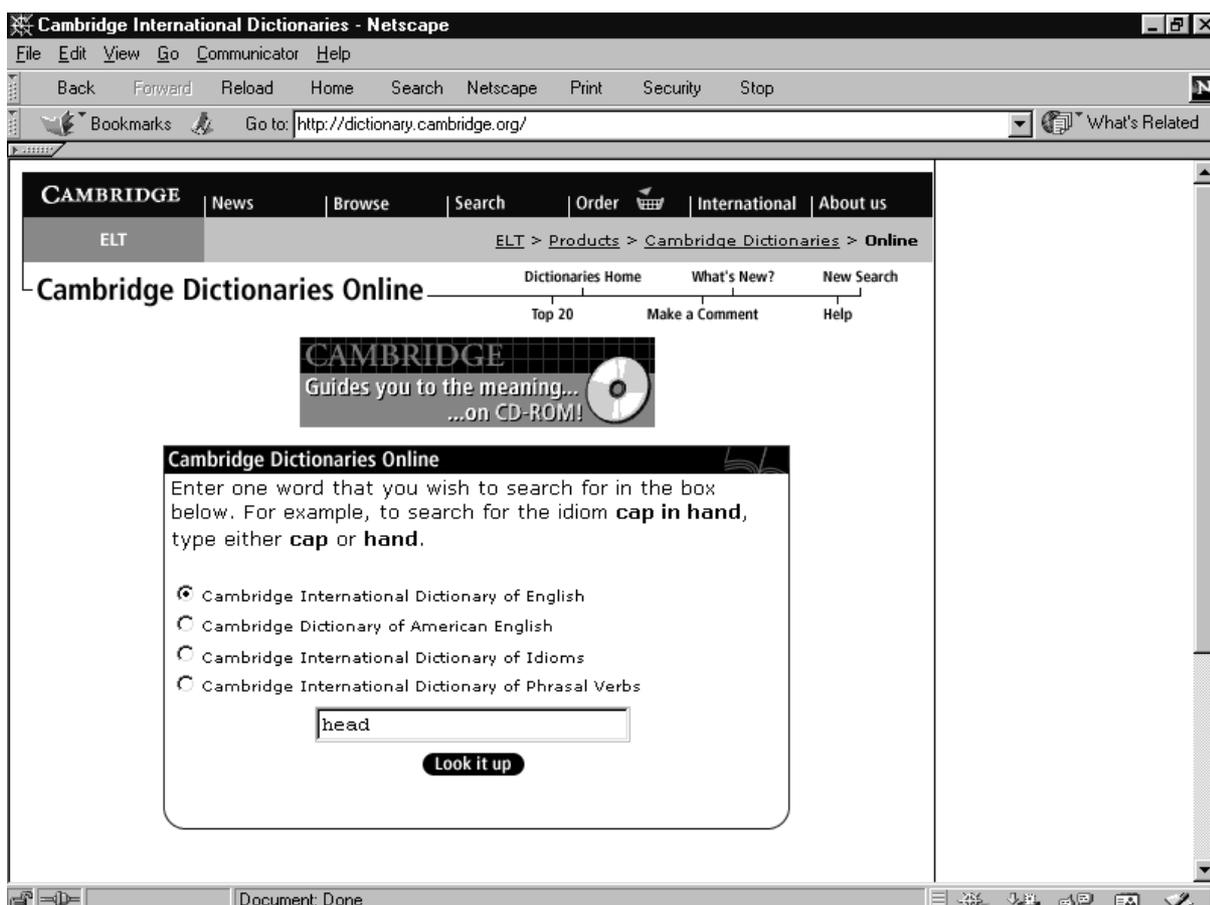
Electronic formats have big advantages over paper formats, a fact that has too often been sadly ignored when electronic dictionaries have provided little more than searchable versions of the printed text. No need to compress text into cramped paragraphs - each definition and example sentence can start on a new line. No need for obscure codes - fuller descriptions become possible (e.g. parts of speech and grammar descriptions no longer need to be abbreviated to save space), with hyperlinks to more detailed information. No need to exclude possible inclusions or extra example sentences on grounds of space. Yet, care is still needed in design - too much information written out in full form with lots of new lines can be just as confusing as compressed paragraphs packed with detail. The important thing to note is that it is a whole new design process.

This clarity of approach should be just as obvious in the design of the user interface. Learners' dictionaries pride themselves on their simplicity and clarity - lots of examples, definitions only using words in core defining vocabularies - and the same needs to be just as true for the user interface: the instructions and the way items are searched for and selected. Just as too much information in entries can be confusing, too many options or too many links can just serve to confuse. The purpose of any link or option should be self-evident. Simply because something is possible in multimedia, that doesn't mean we should necessarily do it. Sometimes less is more.

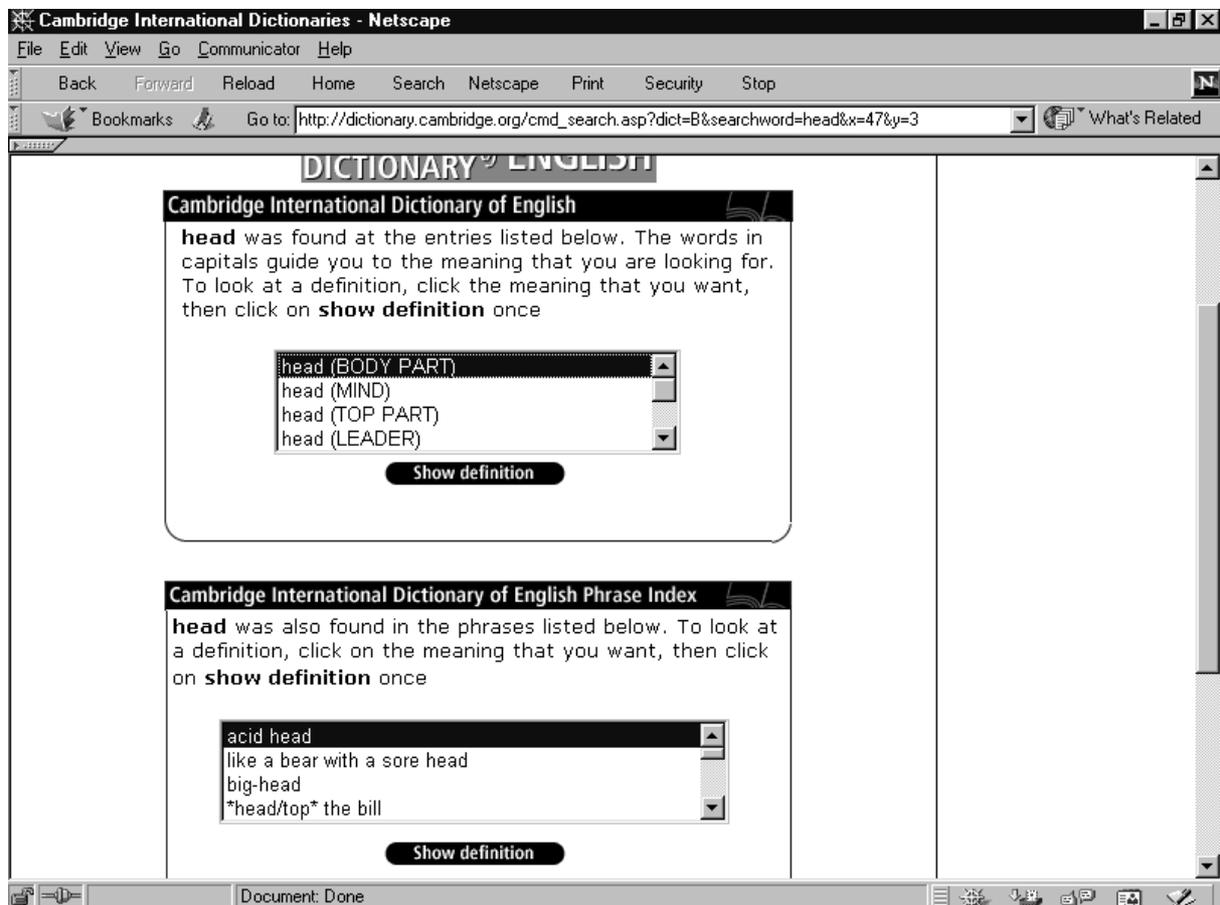
With print, you can guarantee that each reader will see the same thing. With the Internet, things are not so simple: different makes of computer, different operating systems, different colour/font/character settings, different browser software, different window sizes. So it is not only a whole new design process but a technically complex one as well.

Cambridge Dictionaries Online has been described as "fully searchable and specially written for learners of English around the world. It's a straightforward service with no frills and no thumbing. Extremely useful." (BBC Web Guide <http://www.bbc.co.uk/webguide>)

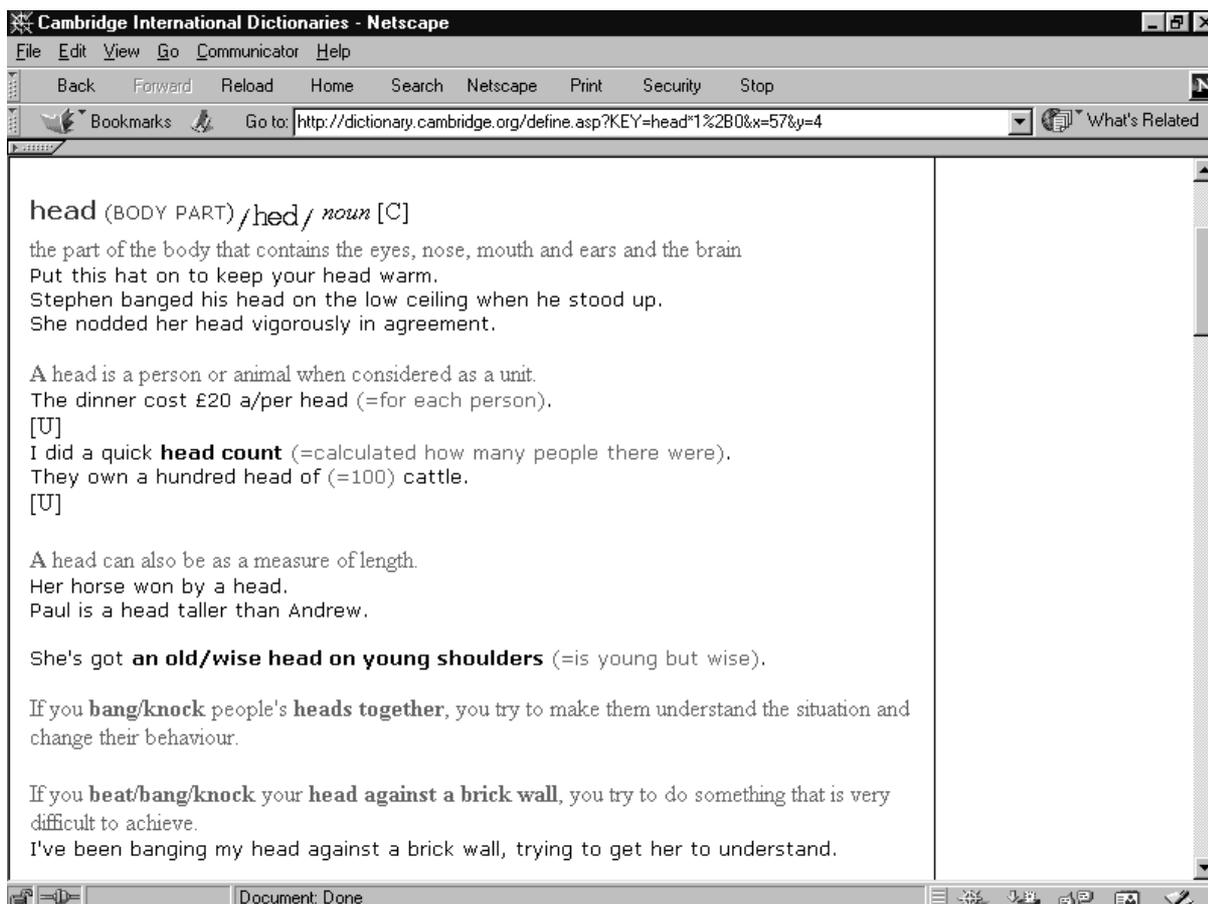
There are 3 core screens. On the first, the user selects a dictionary and types in a word to search for:



On the second screen, the user is shown all the places where the search word is defined in the dictionary. The *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* uses guide words to distinguish different senses. These work even better in electronic form than in print because they can be seen in a single list rather than within the dictionary text:



The third screen gives the definitions and examples for the sense that the user has chosen:



Users are encouraged to comment on entries and suggest new words. Besides this direct feedback, all searches are logged. We can thus instantly find out what words are most often not found (biogeographer!), and what words are most often searched for (idiom, pedagogue, ubiquitous, serendipity, eponymous). A number of words have been added due to their popularity in online searches (e.g. segue).

In researching specifically for learners' dictionaries, it is important to be aware that many if not most of the online dictionary users are native speakers of English. While a search of the users' Internet domains can help with this, so many users worldwide make use of global services such as hotmail.com and aol.com that geographical domain alone cannot be relied upon. If this is an important issue, online registration will be necessary, though this will put some users off.

For reasons of speed and expense, there is still a place for CD-ROM dictionaries, and in fact online dictionaries may well provide an entry into the electronic dictionary arena for many users. Users start to long for offline access and extra functionality. While almost all extra functionality could be provided online, it makes sense at present for the publisher to preserve the best for the purchased CD-ROM or for paying subscribers. At Cambridge University Press, we have recently published the CD-ROM versions of the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* and *Cambridge Dictionary of American English*, and are hoping to see many electronic users purchase the CD-ROM version to complement their use of the online dictionaries.