

From Dictionary Use through Lexicology towards Lexicography

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Abstract

The present paper deals with a new approach to teaching lexicography at the university level that has been developed at Moscow State University, Russia. It consists in presenting all three academic subjects, i.e. Dictionary Use, Lexicology, Lexicography as a triad in the university curriculum, the course in lexicography being the concluding part of the triad. The structure and the content of the course in lexicography are also outlined in the paper.

1 Introduction

This paper is a kind of response to the proposal made by James Magay at the previous EURALEX congress in Stuttgart to create a pool of curricula in lexicography and lexicology and share our experience in teaching lexicography at the university level in Europe [Magay 2000].

In Russia lexicology has been traditionally a compulsory subject in the curriculum at faculties of foreign languages in universities and Russian scholars have gained great experience in teaching lexicology as an academic subject which forms the theoretical basis of students' linguistic knowledge. As for lexicography it has always been viewed as a part of lexicology and taught at the end of the course. Nowadays it is sometimes regarded as applied lexicology [Gwishiani 2000]. In my opinion it is quite understandable because due to the "iron curtain" Russia has been isolated from the rest of the world for decades and as a result any foreign language including English used to be taught as a dead language. Thus dictionaries were mostly used for decoding. Moreover, only bilingual dictionaries published in the Soviet Union were available at that time.

The political situation in Russia has changed dramatically over the last decade and a traditional bilingual dictionary does not any longer meet the modern needs of those Russian learners of English who strive to use it for communication.

The latest achievements of British lexicography have resulted in a great variety of reliable monolingual learner's dictionaries, which are becoming more and more accessible to Russian learners of English, who unfortunately are not ready to make the most of these dictionaries because they do not possess proper dictionary reference skills. Thus they badly need a special course in dictionary use especially at the university level. My teaching

experience shows that students should be instructed how to use dictionaries properly in order to get prepared for taking a university course in lexicology because it is impossible to cope with it successfully without mastering necessary dictionary reference skills. Besides, it is time to determine the place of lexicography as an academic subject in the university curriculum.

Recent developments have brought about changes made in the curriculum at the Faculty of foreign languages of Moscow State University and they are described in this paper.

2 Dictionary Use

Some years ago a compulsory course in Dictionary Use was introduced in the curriculum for first year students of English [Minaeva 1999]. Dictionary use is part and parcel of learning a foreign language, consequently the role of dictionaries is constantly growing. [Hartmann 1999] The course under discussion is aimed at developing a certain number of practical skills the learners need for the effective use of dictionaries of different types. This course consists of lectures and practical seminars. The students are given detailed information on the kinds of dictionaries, their purposes, and they are given instructions how to use most effectively enormous potential of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries in practice. As a result of the comparative analysis of four monolingual learner's dictionaries¹ (MLD) made the students have an opportunity to make their own choice of the MLD to use and as a form of feedback they give well-grounded reasons for their choice during the seminar on monolingual dictionaries. In addition, the course gives some preliminary idea of special dictionaries and their types. Having acquired some knowledge of the macro- and microstructure of general-purpose dictionaries students are able to make their own presentations on special dictionaries.

This course is also of great practical importance because it helps the students to use dictionaries properly, to retrieve as much information as possible. Thus, it not only helps to enlarge and enrich their vocabulary but also enables them to broaden the range of their learning activities and improve their English.

3 Lexicology

At the same time the course outlined prepares students for the second step, i.e. taking a university course in lexicology which naturally requires the use of dictionaries. Thus students go from practice towards theory. The main aim of this course is not only to acquaint the students with the general principles of systematizing vocabulary, different types of lexical units, their structural, semantic and functional peculiarities, but also to show a heterogeneous character of the lexicon and ways of its development. It would be wrong if we presented this subject as a purely academic one. It is intended for second year Russian students studying English as a foreign language. And it is important for them to not only understand the theoretical principles of organizing lexis but also develop their abilities of linguistic analysis. In this way they acquire skills of choosing and using words properly in different situations [Gwishiani 2000]. Thus Lexicology provides a theoretical basis for the study of English vocabulary and gives learners a chance to get an insight into the depths of the word, its content and form as well.

4 Lexicography

Having taken the courses described above, i.e. Dictionary Use and Lexicology students who have already mastered some practical dictionary reference skills and gained some theoretical knowledge of the vocabulary study are inclined to take a more advanced course in lexicography, this time an optional one. The course is targeted only at those who are interested in reaching the summit of the triad Dictionary Use - Lexicology - Lexicography.

The name of this course is “*ELT Dictionaries, their Power and Potential*”. It is intended for those third year students whose ambition is to work further in this direction, to use great potential of dictionaries in their future work, i.e. either in their practice teaching or independent linguistic research.

4.1 The Content and Structure of the Course

This course embraces a great variety of aspects to be discussed and studied. They can be grouped according to the levels of the word description: *structural*, *semantic* and *functional*. Such learner-oriented approach is fully justified because the students are already familiar with these aspects and terms from the previous courses. For the first time they come across these terms in Dictionary Use when they analyse the microstructure of learner’s dictionaries where they can find *structural*, *semantic* and *functional* prescriptions how to use foreign words properly [Fedorova 1998]. The course in Lexicology provides students with some theoretical knowledge of the form and content of words and their usage. Otherwise stated, it shows their *structural*, *semantic* and *functional* peculiarities.

Within the framework of the course in question at the *structural* level we deal with such topics, for example, as “Dictionary and morphology”, “Word building and word families in the dictionary”. The study of these aspects helps to work out the necessary strategies for learning grammar through dictionaries. The practical importance of this part of the course for future teachers is obvious.

The problem of word meaning and dictionary definition is the most complicated one at the *semantic* level when we try to establish the relationship between form and content and realize that this relationship does not mean one-to-one correspondence which is very rarely achieved in natural human languages. Moreover, we often come across instances of the violation of the law of the sign, such as e.g. polysemy, homonymy, synonymy.

Polysemy is one of the most ambiguous aspects not only in lexicology but in lexicography as well, especially when we try to establish where one word ends and another begins on the dictionary level. The main purpose of the course is to show how the identity-of-unit problem in general and polysemy and homonymy in particular are treated in dictionaries and how polysemantic words and homonyms are presented in different learner’s dictionaries.

As for the *functional* level attention is focused on regional and functional differentiation of the language in the dictionary. Special emphasis is placed on the system of functional labels in the dictionaries that can be classified according to the following categories:

1. labels showing formality (*fml*, *infml*, *sl*, *taboo*)
2. labels showing speaker’s feelings (*(dis)approving*, *derogative*, *humorous*, *jocular*)

3. labels referring to the origin of the word (*lit, poet, trademark, dated, old use*)
4. regional labels referring to different varieties of English (*BrE, AmE, AustrE*).

The students examine, for example, how some differences between American and British variants of English are presented in dictionaries.

It should be mentioned that the course in question is not restricted to considering problems of structural, semantic and functional description of the word in the dictionary. It also includes using dictionaries for developing different language skills such as reading, listening, speaking and writing. In other words, students study the power and the potential dictionaries do have for decoding and encoding. Thus, the course can help the learners to improve their English as well.

4.2 Future Prospects

Having completed this course on general-purpose dictionaries the student can take another optional course "*Specialist Phylological Dictionaries: Possibilities and Prospects*" which is a kind of logical development of the previous one as far as the structure of the courses are concerned.

Again, the course starts with the study of the form of the word, and its structure. At the structural level such dictionaries as pronouncing dictionaries, spelling dictionaries, dictionaries of confusables (paronyms), etc. are analysed.

Then we turn to the *semantic* level (the same has been done in the previous course). But this time the students consider lexical systematic relationship in specialist dictionaries, i.e. in dictionaries of synonyms and antonyms or thesauruses.

As for the *functional* level usage dictionaries are of paramount importance for developing strategies for error prevention. The aim of this part of the course is to show how dictionaries can be used for speech production. The most difficult problem learners face while producing their own speech in a foreign language is lexical combinatorics. That is why combinatory dictionaries or dictionaries of collocations are of great help for students in learning how to overcome difficulties of collocability through dictionaries.

As is well-known restricted collocations registered in these dictionaries occupy the intermediate position between free collocations and idioms proper and they make the learner's speech idiomatic. But it is impossible to do without phraseological dictionaries especially while decoding. That's why they are included into this course with special emphasis on dictionaries of phrasal verbs. There is no such a phenomenon in the Russian language and Russian learners of English have great difficulty using them. At the same time phrasal verbs are part and parcel of the English language and they play an essential part in making the foreign learner's speech idiomatic. The importance of such dictionaries in foreign language learning has also been proved by the increasing number of these dictionaries which have appeared lately. This course also demonstrates how it is possible to realize the full potential of dictionaries of cultural literacy in order to develop the student's cultural background knowledge.

To sum it up I would like to stress that it is really hard to overestimate the role of special dictionaries in foreign language learning. Thus, the course under consideration may be regarded as a notable contribution to teaching lexicography as an academic subject.

5 Conclusion

It should be mentioned in conclusion that we have made an attempt to unite all the three academic subjects, i.e. Dictionary Use, Lexicology and Lexicography in the university curriculum, in order to show the students that everything is mutually conditioned in the language and consequently in language learning. They should realize that they can not study any language without having special reference skills and they can not use the potential the dictionary has if they do not have the proper theoretical basis, i.e. profound lexicological knowledge. It's quite obvious that much remains to be done to put it into practice. But we would like to share our first experience with other EURALEX members who are concerned about these problems in order to get feedback that would greatly contribute to teaching lexicography in general and developing of this course in particular.

Notes

¹ Here are four monolingual learner's dictionaries which are available in Russia:

- Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 6-ed (OUP), 2000
- Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 3-ed, 1995
- Cambridge International Dictionary of English, CIDE (CUP), 1995
- COBUILD Dictionary of English Language, 2-ed, 1996.

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