

Beyond the Dictionary in Spanish

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Abstract

This paper argues that there is a gap between language as recorded by the traditional standard Spanish dictionaries and the way language is actually used by the media, and considers the recent success of Spanish-language style manuals as proof of the need to deal with the inadequacies of traditional lexicography. Distinctions are drawn between style manuals and dictionaries of correct usage. Comparisons are made between different style manuals in order to establish the underlying nature of the (grammatical and lexical) items covered, and the treatment of these categories of items in style manuals is compared to the one given by traditional monolingual (and one bilingual) standard dictionaries. This paper then tries to identify those areas where the traditional dictionary is at fault: updating, breadth and depth of (lexical and grammatical) coverage and contrastive treatment of items. Finally, it is argued that style manuals point the way the standard dictionary should go in order to be a successful linguistic tool.

The title of this paper is that of a book published in 1953 by Gerrard and Heras. This brief glossary showing peculiarities of meaning and usage in Spanish for the English-speaking learner, although confined to colloquial speech and now somewhat outdated, still remains of interest because it shows an early realization of the gap between the dictionary and its users.

Half a century later, the gap still exists, not just affecting the foreigner trying to cope with colloquial speech, but rather the Spanish native speaker when confronted with the standard language as used by the media. I will try to show how the needs of the user faced with the inadequacies of the dictionary are fostering a new breed of linguistic products, which in turn points to the new direction that the traditional standard dictionary should attempt to follow in order to be a successful linguistic tool.

Since the early 1990s, Spain has undergone a startling process of language awareness: the Spanish language has become a popular issue and the market has both responded and fostered that awareness by the publication of a number of landmark monolingual and bilingual dictionaries: the 8-volume *DCR* initiated by Cuervo in 1886 was finally completed in 1995 [Cuervo 1998]; the long-awaited *DEA* [Seco et al. 1999] saw the light after 30 years in the making. There have been also new editions of the *DRAE* [RAE 1992; 2001] and *DUE* [Moliner 1998]. In the field of bilingual lexicography, between 1988 and 2000 Collins published five editions of their classical English-Spanish dictionary [Smith et al. 2000], and Oxford U.P. published the *Oxford Spanish Dictionary* in 1994, with a second edition in 1998 and a revision [Galimberti et al. 2001]. In addition, a vast array of good dictionaries of all

sorts and sizes has been published over the last 10 years, together with bestselling books on language usage, such as that by Lázaro [1997], a compilation of his newspaper articles published between 1975 and 1996, which sold 250.00 copies in one year and is but one example of his influential role in the development of the media style manuals through his prefaces to several of them (e.g. [ABC 1993; Mendieta 1993]) and his collaboration with Agencia EFE. But the most striking feature of this trend has been the successful publication of over 30 different “libros (or manuales) de estilo” (style manuals)¹ and of several “diccionarios de dudas” (dictionaries of correct usage). I am not concerned here with the latter, but a distinction should be made between these two closely related types of work.

The Spanish “diccionario de dudas” is best exemplified by Seco’s classical *DDDLE* [1998] (10 editions between 1961 and 1998) which has achieved great following both in Spain (e.g., [Martínez de Sousa 1998]) and in Latin-America (e.g., [Aragó 1995]). His work discusses alphabetically lexical, syntactical and other contentious issues covering the whole range of contemporary language, which are documented by quotations from written (and some oral) sources.

The style manuals differ from the dictionaries of correct usage on several accounts. First, although some of them have been published by political institutions (e.g., [MAP 1991; Diputación Sevilla 1999]), universities (e.g., [UNED 1994]), publishing houses (e.g., [Muchnik 2000]) or other bodies, most have been typically issued by a media organization, mostly newspapers (cfr. [ABC 1993; El Mundo 1996; El País 1999; La Vanguardia 1986], etc.), but also news agencies (such as those by [EFE 1992, 1995, 2000]) and television stations (e.g., [Mendieta 1993; Telemadrid 1993; Canal Sur 1991]). It should be noted that I am not referring to in-house style guides which most of the media (if not all) are assumed to have and implement. This was the case, for instance, with early editions of the *El País*’ style manual which were never really available to the public until the third one was issued in 1990, and the same could be said of other style manuals, issued first internally and made commercially available at a later date.

The second difference stems from this commercial availability of the style manual and concerns the degree of its influence. The dictionary of correct usage may favour one way or another of using language, but by being addressed to the general public only, its impact is indirect and theoretical (“this is what we would say”). On the other hand, the norms laid down in the style manual, by being both commercially available to the general public and *also* typically binding on all staff working for that media, exert an influence on the public which is direct and indirect, theoretical and at the same time practical (“not only do we favour this norm, but we also implement it in our use of the language”). The actual influence of the media on the way language is used is something that cannot possibly be measured, but some data can be of help. In 1997 the two channels belonging to Spanish state television (TVE1 and TVE2) achieved a combined 34% of the audience (see [El País 1998]). As for the press, Díaz [1999a, p.120; 1999b, p. 186] shows that in 1997 the circulation of the four leading Spanish daily newspapers (*El País*, *ABC*, *El Mundo*, *La Vanguardia*) accounted for almost 30% of the total, while in June 1998 *El País* internet site was the second most visited website in Spain, with that of *El Mundo* ranked 9th, *ABC*’s 14th, and *La Vanguardia*’s 19th. Finally, EFE is the world’s largest Spanish-language news agency and the fourth largest

news agency overall. If we add to this the fact that all these media organizations have each issued at least one style manual (3 different ones in the case of EFE), which have run to several editions (15 in the case of *El País*, 11 of EFE's *Manual de español urgente*), then we can begin to realize the scale of the phenomenon we are dealing with.

The third difference relates to the contents. The dictionary of correct usage attempts to cover the whole range of contemporary language -including literary language- (with an emphasis on the grammatical irregularities, spelling, etc), whereas the style manual² is concerned solely with those areas related to the language of news coverage in its broadest sense, leaving aside questions of literary register or historical interest, with limited emphasis on purely grammatical or spelling matters, but focusing rather on contentious lexical items of immediate interest because of their appearance in everyday news.

Comparison of different style manuals is rendered difficult by their disparity in size, structure, date of publication, and also by the varying nature of the issuing organization and their intended users³, but some telling remarks can be made. Firstly, there is hardly any unanimity about how many and which items to include; [El País 1999] contains 324 entries beginning with 'a', while [El Mundo 1996] records (albeit in 3 different sections) a similar number, 346. However, they only share 172 entries, so that about half of each manual's entries are not contained in the other one. Similarly, [ABC 1993] contains 107 entries beginning with 'a', against 83 in [Mendieta 1993], with only about one third of them (31) appearing in both, perhaps reflecting their different sources: the *DDDLE* ([Seco 1998]) for [ABC 1993] and [EFE 1995] for [Mendieta 1993].

However, there is certainly some common ground in the nature of the items included, which will be useful to identify those areas where the traditional standard dictionary fails its user. I will make reference to the best three monolingual Spanish dictionaries: *DRAE-22* ([RAE 2001]), *DUE* ([Moliner 1998]) and *DEA* ([Seco et al. 1999]) and to *Collins-6* bilingual dictionary ([Smith et al. 2000]).

Two distinct groups of items can be identified in the style manual. On the one hand, the following grammatical items are included in most of them:

-use of prepositions and prepositional phrases, one of the most changing areas of language (cfr. [García Yebra 1988]); e.g., most of the style manuals condemn the use of "a bordo de" when referring to a car or vehicle, a use which is recorded only -though not condemned- by *DEA*.

-verbal patterns: "incautarse de algo" against the 'incorrect' but common transitive use "incautar algo", a pattern condemned by all style manuals but only recorded by *Collins-6* among our four dictionaries; or the use of the prefix "auto-" with verbs which are already reflexive: "autoproclamarse", "autodefinirse" -not in *DUE* or *DRAE-22*, but recorded in *DEA* and *Collins-6*.

-use or omission of the article with place names and years ("Líbano" or "el Líbano", "en 2001" or "en el 2001"), differences between direct and reported speech, and use of object

pronouns are areas not covered by the traditional dictionary.

-general irregularities of the language (defective verbs, cases where peculiar agreement takes place, doubtful plurals) which, in general, are adequately treated by the traditional dictionary on an individual basis.

-certain uses of verbal tenses and forms (use of the three past tenses; the so-called “condicional de rumor”, when the conditional tense is used to convey the idea that reports or news are unconfirmed; “haber” as impersonal verb and therefore in no need of agreement in number with the following direct object). These matters are generally omitted from the traditional dictionary.

-spelling, stress marks, punctuation, use of hyphens (which affects stress, spelling, plural forms and derivatives), use of italics, capitalization of certain words. Only the first two issues are satisfactorily dealt with in the traditional dictionary, and again only on an individual basis.

As we can see, the standard traditional dictionaries (including, to some extent, the bilingual ones) do not always address these points satisfactorily, partly due to a deep-seated reluctance to integrate the treatment of grammatical issues in the dictionary⁴, and partly because the traditional dictionary seems unable to go beyond the *individual* treatment and arrangement of items and cannot therefore provide the *contrastive* approach favoured by the style manual.

Apart from grammatical matters, style manuals tend to focus on the following types of lexical items:

-foreign names that pose translation, spelling, transcription or transliteration problems: Pedro el Ermitaño / Peter the Hermit; Walter de la Mare, Robert De Niro, Eamon de Valera (example taken from [Austin 1999]); Ten Hsiao-Ping / Den Xiaoping; Yeltsin / Eltsin / Ieltsin. Only *Collins-6* offers some help with translated (historical) names and familiar forms (Pepe).

-“exónimos” (place names that have different forms in different languages): Aquisgrán / Aachen / Aix-la-Chapelle. Again, these raise questions about spelling, transliteration and transcription. Translation problems are also involved (compare “Middle East” in [Austin 1999] or [Jenkins 1992] with “Oriente Medio” in [EFE 2000]). The bilingual dictionary is the only one to provide some guidance in this matter.

-adjectives denoting nationality or origin, particularly those that have appeared frequently in the news in recent years, such as “abjasio”, “bangladesi” or “oseta”, none of which are recorded in *DUE* or *DRAE-22*; the first two in *Collins-6*; all three only in *DEA*. In such cases, problems arise concerning spelling, transliteration or transcription, meaning and translation.

-confusable meanings (“infligir” vs. “infringir”) are recorded in most dictionaries on an individual basis, but no attempt is made to differentiate between them.

-contentious uses of words, such as the much used and condemned “ostentar (un cargo)” (to hold office), only recorded -but not condemned- by *DEA* and *Collins-6*.

-acronyms. It should be noted that in many respects acronyms in Spanish behave like nouns: some have plural forms (“S.M.”, su majestad; “SS.MM.”, sus majestades), many are used with the article agreeing in gender with the main word (“la OTAN”), all of them have a full form (“UNHCR” is “ACNUR” in Spanish, but the C is variously understood as “Comisaría”, “Comisionado” and “Comisariado”, the last two forms triggering the use of the masculine article). In many cases, meaning and translation problems arise. Many give rise to derivatives: *DEA* records “otánico”, “otanism” and “otanista”, but not “OTAN”. Some acronyms are ‘read’ by spelling them (“ATS”), others as if they were words (“UNED”), while some are unpredictably read as a mixture of both (“CSIC”). Nevertheless, all standard Spanish dictionaries omit acronyms, and only *Collins-6* records a number of them.

-false friends, whether syntactical (such as overuse of passive sentences) or lexical, due to mistranslation of (mainly) English words of similar form: e.g., “doméstico” (in the sense of “domestic flight”, not recorded in *DUE* or *DRAE-22*, but included in *DEA* and *Collins-6*)

-loanwords from any other language enter the standard dictionary only after a considerable period of time, if at all. The word “talibán” appeared in the Spanish press at about the same time as in English, early in 1995. Seven years later, it is only recorded in two of our four standard dictionaries. *DUE* includes the etymology but the definition names Pakistan and fails to mention Afghanistan. *DRAE-22* omits the etymology and gives a poor definition. None of them mention any other issues. It is true that in Spanish there is no doubt as to its transliteration and that forms such as “Taleb” or “Taleban” (the only ones recommended by [Austin 1999] and used by some English-language newspapers) are hardly used; “talibán” is always written with an acute accent and hardly ever is it capitalized the way it is sometimes in English. But the important question remains of whether to use “talib” (sing.) and “talibán” (pl.) or else “talibán” (sing.) and “talibanes” (pl.)^{5 6}. Many other loanwords (even from languages such as Basque, Catalan and Galician) are still unrecorded, and style manuals are the only works to provide some guidance.

-neologisms. New senses of existing words, including new collocations (such as “tarifa plana”) are quite often not recorded by standard dictionaries; and the same problem arises with new words (“apalazar” only appears in *DEA* and *Collins-6*; “judicializar” and “judicialización” only in *DEA*; none of our four dictionaries record “prepartido”).

-Latin phrases, which raise questions of form, meaning and use, are more often than not omitted from the dictionary. E.g., only *DEA* mentions that “grosso modo” is frequently used with the preposition “a”: “a grosso modo”, although this use is mentioned -and condemned- by most style manuals.

Bailey [1989] identified the two main shortcomings in English dictionaries as: a) failure to cover the breadth of the vocabulary, and b) lack of depth of coverage. This would, in my opinion, constitute a fair description of the state of Spanish monolingual lexicography, but I

would like to qualify these two issues in the light of this analysis of lexical items covered by style manuals and their presence or absence in standard dictionaries so as to draw some conclusions.

First, lack of breadth of coverage should not be interpreted as simply the absence of rare or archaic lexical items from our dictionaries. There is a deep-rooted reluctance on the part of traditional lexicographers to include whole types of lexical items in their word-list. As we have seen, proper names, 'exónimos' and acronyms are excluded from the dictionary, but we have to realize that these items are an integral part of today's language, not just on a purely paradigmatic level (as lexical units in their own right), but also on the syntagmatic level, since they have a wide variety of grammatical, usage and translation implications. All these items have an unequivocal linguistic nature, and the fact that some of them might *additionally* have encyclopaedic features should not be regarded as reason enough to omit them from the dictionary (see [Lázaro 1973; Room 1986]). Failure to cover other types of lexical items may be attributed to one or more of several factors: adjectives denoting nationality or origin may be absent from the dictionary due to lack of updating or because not enough attention is paid to the way the language is actually used. The same could be said about the omission of loanwords and neologisms, but this could also be put down to a fundamentalist approach to language that does not regard them as "proper" lexical items. Disregard for the actual use of language could explain the omission of contentious uses, Latin phrases and false friends, but again this could be due to the desire "to proscribe by omission" certain uses regarded as incorrect.

With regard to Bailey's second point, lack of depth of coverage, again this must not be understood as merely the omission of certain senses of words, but also as the omission of certain types of information about the lexical items. We have already mentioned the unwillingness to integrate the treatment of grammatical issues into the traditional dictionary, but lack of depth of coverage affects other aspects of the linguistic description of the items. We take for granted a consistent treatment of homographs in the dictionary, but there is less consistency when it comes to homophones ("acerbo" and "acervo") and none should be expected when we deal with words being misused on account of their similar pronunciation ("infligir" and "infringir") because the traditional dictionary will not contemplate a contrastive approach. We expect a reasonable treatment of etymology in our dictionaries, and yet we are not given information on transliteration or transcription of modern loanwords. The traditional dictionary will not record the pronunciation of acronyms or the syntagmatic patterns of lexical items, let alone cultural or usage notes (e.g., on irregular plural forms of modern loanwords).

The appeal of the style manual in Spanish, its usefulness, and its success over the last ten years, seem to lie in several factors in which the traditional dictionary is at fault⁷: updating, breadth and depth of (lexical and grammatical) coverage and contrastive treatment of items and problems encountered in dealing with everyday language as used by the media. It should be noted, however, that the style manual has several shortcomings of its own: in common with most standard monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, it seems to have no clear-cut criteria for the placement of multiword lexical units; some are given their own entry while others are treated under the entry for the main word, which in turn is not always correctly

identified. Sometimes it is clear that the style manual simplifies information obtained from other sources where each point is dealt with in more detail: [ABC 1993] reduces the 9-line entry for “audiencia” in [EFE 1995] to a 2-line entry that is baffling. In addition, there is no unanimity as to the solutions favoured by each style manual, which often leads to cases where two of them defend conflicting solutions⁸. This is tied to the main shortcoming in most books of this kind: the frequent absence of any kind of explanation or sufficient reasoning as to why one solution is preferable to another. It is true that the user seeks to find quick and easy guidance on matters of usage, but quite often prescriptive statements of the kind “Not A but B” leave the reader mystified as to the reasons behind that choice; when the language offers alternative forms of expression this is because they are different -however small that difference may be- and the preference of one over another should be based on a reasoned judgement. It is quite natural, however, for the user in need of guidance to turn to those works which provide some answers -however incomplete- rather than to those which ignore altogether the endless possibilities of language. However, the success of the style manuals should not be considered the solution to our main lexicographical problems; rather, they are a symptom of the state of monolingual Spanish lexicography, but one that (paradoxically) points the way forward if the dictionary is to be a successful linguistic tool: the dictionary should go beyond its traditional self.

Endnotes

- (1): This phenomenon is not confined to Spanish, but extends also to Galician (e.g., [Arias 1993]) and Catalan (e.g., [Coromina 1995; Oliva 1997]), and Latin-America ([La Nación 1997]).
- (2) Typically, style manuals contain sections on the nature of modern, free, objective journalism, about the professional ethics of the media, typographical matters, the role of the images, etc. but no mention will be made of these unless related to language use.
- (3) Interestingly, no great differences could be observed between those issued by newspapers and those issued by television stations, except that the latter make some reference to pronunciation.
- (4) A sad example of this fundamentalist approach in lexicography: in 1966, María Moliner, in a ground-breaking decision, integrated within the word-list of the first edition of the *DUE* quite a number of entries where grammatical issues were dealt with in depth. Regrettably, the editors of the 1998 edition reversed that decision and, with no sound justification, relegated all the grammatical entries to an appendix.
- (5) The Spanish language seems curiously unable to cope with the plural form of loanwords which do not display a final -s. The classic example of these ‘regularized’ plural forms are “querubines” and “serafines”, “lands” or “landers” and “lieds”. More modern examples have followed: “targui - tuareg/tuaregs”, “feday - fedayín/fedayines”, “muyahid - muyahidín/muyahidines” and the latest - very close to the case of “talib”- the Persian “pasdar - pasdarán/pasdaranes”.
- (6) Derivatives have appeared in English (“...before the *pax Talibanica*”. *Guardian Weekly*, 6-7-97, 2; “Talibanization” in 1998; “Talibanic” *Washington Post*, 6-3-2001, 23) and Spanish (“...registrando una cierta “talibanización”...” EFE News Services, 23-2-2000; “...matar talibanes (o talibanas, o talibancitos, según la latinización de la Academia).” *País*, 3-11-01, 61), raising the possibility of feminine and diminutive forms being used (“...con las fuerzas talibanas.” EFE News Services, 20-10-2001). It is obviously too early to record them, but it will be interesting to see their fate in future dictionaries.
- (7) It is quite obvious that each of the four dictionaries used responds differently. Among the three monolingual ones, *DEA* is the most useful because its word-list and all senses and definitions are strictly based on written contemporary sources, without any apparent prescriptive bias. The bilingual dictionary, on the other hand, faced with the practical problems of the translation process, tends to

display greater inclusiveness (both of lexical items and of types of information, even including cultural and usage notes) and cannot afford to be prescriptive.

(8) Some examples related to matters of stress and spelling -usually not the most contentious issues in Spanish-: [El Mundo 1996] defends “audífono”, “autostop” and “reuma”, while [El País 1999] favours “audiófono”, “autoestop” and “reúma”. [ABC 1993] draws a distinction between “entrenno” and “entrenamiento”, while [El Mundo 1996] states that “entrenno” does not exist and the word to use is “entrenamiento”.

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