

# **A New Bilingual Learner's Dictionary Format**

## **The Junior Bilingue**

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### **Abstract**

In response to negative feedback from teachers on the usefulness of traditional bilingual dictionaries in early language learning strategies, we have produced an asymmetrical dictionary whose headword list is highly selective and in which exemplification and explanation play a fundamental role. A radical departure from the familiar format of mainstream bilingual dictionaries, it has provided an opportunity to take a fresh look at many tried and tested lexicographical principles. This paper describes the thinking behind the Junior Bilingue concept, showing how we have tackled some of the perceived shortcomings of bilingual dictionaries. It examines the strengths and weaknesses of the format, and outlines some practical aspects of the editing process. It asks whether the Junior Bilingue is, in fact, a dictionary, and concludes that the book is one indication that bilingual dictionaries are becoming more pragmatic in their approach, less cluttered with traditional lexicographical apparatus, and more targeted to the needs of specific user types.

### **1 Background**

If we look at its architecture and its salient features, the traditional small dictionary's parentage is clear: it is a desk dictionary in short trousers. Editorial concerns in small dictionaries are broadly the same as those in larger texts: how to select and translate lexical items; how to balance content and clarity within particular space constraints (or put more crudely, how to pack in as much as possible). Profitability is also a primary concern that determines in no small measure the way dictionaries are edited. In practical terms these considerations mean:

- producing a headword list that is as comprehensive as possible within a given format
- adopting an entry structure that allows us to include as much material as possible (eg by sub-entering lexicalised derivative forms instead of giving them headword status)
- relying on a highly conventional metalinguistic apparatus of typographical codes, abbreviations and symbols
- sacrificing space-consuming example sentences in favour of a headword-intensive, decontextualised lexicon
- producing a dictionary that will pay its way as quickly as possible by selling simultaneously in two language areas

This approach has clear disadvantages when the bilingual dictionary falls into the hands of the young learner. Extensive headword lists are all but useless for students

struggling to achieve a (passive) vocabulary of barely 2,000 words by the time they take their first exams (many pocket bilinguals boast more than 20,000 entries and include words like ‘pinstripe’, ‘sacrosanct’ and ‘unmitigated’); ingenious structural devices can be confusing and misleading to the uninitiated, as can codes, symbols and abbreviations (few readers, least of all schoolchildren, read the ‘how to use’ section before using a dictionary); lack of contextual information sends the comforting but wholly misguided message that single words can be translated unequivocally by other single words; and precisely half the metalanguage in dual-market dictionaries is expressed in the “other” language – which by definition the young learner does not understand. Standard pocket dictionaries are not made for learners, and are used by them at their peril.

## **2 Input from Teachers**

Teachers of pre-intermediate language learners we interviewed prior to launching this project were almost unanimous in their mistrust of bilingual dictionaries. They typically dismissed them as providing both “too much” (too many headwords, too much irrelevant and confusing information) and “too little” (not enough example sentences, not enough information about usage, insufficient help with problem areas - particularly lexical ambiguity). Dictionaries are “full of traps” (in particular because polysemous entries are widely misinterpreted and because metalinguistic codes, cross-references, and disambiguative signposting are either ignored or misunderstood). They are “daunting”, “too dense”, and “hard to read”. They assume a level of linguistic sophistication and prior knowledge that young learners simply – and quite justifiably – do not have.

## **3 A New Approach**

The *Junior Bilingue* is an attempt to reconcile teachers and pre-intermediate learners with the bilingual dictionary. It differs from traditional bilingual dictionaries in many significant ways.

- It is a “single-zone” dictionary, i.e. it can only be used by speakers of one native language because all the metalanguage (on both sides) is expressed in the user’s mother tongue. The French-English title has a dual user profile: a French schoolchild who doesn’t know how to say something in English; and a French schoolchild who doesn’t understand an English word. The remaining profiles addressed by dual-zone dictionaries (ie, in this case, encoding and decoding learners of French) are not addressed.
- It is asymmetrical. The “encoding” and “decoding” sides (800 and 300 pages respectively, for a roughly equivalent number of entries) are presented in different ways, reflecting the different needs of users as they attempt a) to produce and b) to understand the foreign language.
- The encoding side physically separates lexical content from metalanguage, leaving only headwords and examples on the left hand side of the page and “commentary” (information on usage, basic grammar, and pronunciation) on the right.

- Every headword, every sense and every set structure on the encoding side is contextualised.
- Unusually, pronunciation is shown for the *target* language on the *encoding* side. It is shown in IPA and where necessary further illustrated through rhyming analogies (“though” rhymes with “go”; “through” rhymes with “too”, the “i” in “pipe” sounds the same as the one in “like”).
- An effort has been made to give the encoding user more than just the base form equivalent of a given word. Verb equivalents that are irregular are followed by their past and past participle forms : **venir / come (came, come)**; comparatives and superlatives of adjectives are given in a similar way: **joli/pretty (plus joli prettier; le plus joli the prettiest)**.
- The headword list is highly focused (approx. 5,000 words each side, vetted by teachers).
- On the decoding side, irregular or otherwise problematic forms of selected words are given headword status, and no prior knowledge of English is assumed (eg the word “flies” is not just translated as a trouser zip but also shown to be the plural of the noun fly and a form of the verb fly).
- Items on the decoding side are not systematically exemplified, as example sentences are often of no use to the decoding user. Examples are typically given when they help to disambiguate polysemous words, to illustrate the use of delexicalised function words, and to exemplify irregular forms that are entered as headwords.
- Descriptive metalanguage on the decoding side is kept to a minimum (for instance grammatical categories are not given for words that only have one). Where commentary is made (usually in the form of a box), it is expressed clearly in full sentences.
- On the decoding side, polysemy and multi-functionality are pointed out explicitly (“this word has more than one meaning”; “this word has more than one grammatical function”).
- A pragmatic (and unorthodox) approach to children’s likely lookup strategies has been adopted. For example the expressions **s’il te plaît** and **est-ce que** are heads, because entering them under **plaire** and **être** would have been tantamount to not entering them at all (as children would not think to look for them under these verb headwords).

#### **4 Sources and Method**

The dictionary was written by two bilingual lexicographers (one English, one French) following a detailed style model. The text was fine-tuned by two teachers of English (both French native speakers). Standard coursebooks provided some indication of the level of vocabulary required, but content selection was largely intuitive.

It was decided at an early stage that, contrary to our usual practice, example sentences would be invented without recourse to corpora. The large corpora of French and English to which we have access are largely made up of journalistic and literary texts,

representing a level of language inappropriate to learners at beginners level (a learner corpus would have been a valuable resource, but none was available). The settings of example sentences are designed to reflect the daily life of a French teenager, and the vocabulary used in explanatory features is intended to be consistent with that used in the classroom.

For practical reasons the dictionary was not compiled using a structured markup language. A reasonable level of editorial consistency has been achieved via a style guide, though for future editions the text will be marked up.

## **5 Pedagogical Aspects**

A major problem learners face is not the meaning of individual foreign words (which can, at worst, be learned by rote) but their usage. The importance of lexical “chunks” (Lewis, 1993) has long been recognised in communicative language learning, and most teachers would agree that the most effective way to learn lexis is to see it in action. Placing lexis at the heart of the language learning process is perhaps comforting for lexicographers, but “disjointed” lexis as it appears in traditional small bilingual dictionaries is of limited use in language production, and provides scant support for students grappling with English sentence patterns. Encouraging the young reader first to look at how the word works in a sentence before looking at its meaning “in isolation” is consistent with the premiss that language should be approached not as a set of isolated words but as groups of interrelated lexical units. Exposure to contextualised lexis helps consolidate vocabulary acquisition; dictionaries that take this on board can play a valuable role in the classroom.

Because it is so rich in examples, the format constantly exposes the user to facets of the foreign language, including features unconnected to the lookup word. For example, the first (deceptively banal) example given for the word **fois** is *c'est la première fois que je vois ça*/it's the first time I've seen this, which shows not only the word **time** as the equivalent of **fois**, but also an important use of perfect aspect following ordinal + **time**.

The two-column format makes it possible to draw attention to linguistic features that, although shown in traditional dictionaries, are easy to miss because they are not highlighted. A learner who looks up **avril** in a standard French-English dictionary will find **April**, but is unlikely to notice the capitalisation of the English word. A note in the *Junior Bilingue* draws attention to the fact that English, unlike French, always capitalises month names. Similar notes are to be found whenever there is a significant usage discrepancy between the two languages.

## **6 Strengths and Weaknesses**

This dictionary was designed to complement teacher input and the coursebook, and to provide a safer self-study option than standard dictionaries. Initial feedback from teachers suggests that, as we had hoped, pupils who use it make fewer mistakes and more successfully consolidate basic vocabulary because it is always contextualised. It is seen as more reassuring to students and more fun to use than traditional dictionaries. The book has been a commercial success and is being produced for five further language pairs (in permutations of French, English, Spanish, German and Italian).

Possible weaknesses include its limited lexical coverage (although no teacher has yet expressed concern at the small headword list). As it responds to observed errors and

difficulties, it would certainly have benefited from the support of a learner corpus. Some ELT practitioners might feel that the reliance on “invented” examples gives an artificially simplified and insufficiently idiomatic view of the language. Deliberate avoidance of cross-referencing and model entries makes it a highly repetitive text (with the same information given at every word of a given type), which is space-consuming and may be considered by some to “dumb down” the dictionary. Its paper-guzzling format (1200 pages for just 10,000 entries) has perhaps led us to be overselective.

## 8 The Book in Context

Since the mid-seventies, methods for compiling general-language bilingual dictionaries considered as dual-purpose (decoding and encoding) tools have been considerably refined and systematised. Metalinguistic signposting in a specifically bilingual environment has become an essential skill for editors, and “para-lexicographical” features such as discursive boxes and user tips are now widely used as the pedagogical potential of entries has been explored. Concomitantly, many of the trappings inherited from monolingual sources (eg purely descriptive, non-contrastive markers) have been jettisoned in favour of a more streamlined, uncluttered and ultimately practical approach to the bilingual entry. The parallel development of advanced learners’ monolingual dictionaries, in which target language production is of the essence and in which examples and annotations play a key role, has provided further impetus. In recent years many European publishers have produced bilingual dictionaries for pre-intermediate learners that lay great emphasis on exemplification, clarity and general pupil-friendliness. The *Junior Bilingue* is part of a salutary trend towards “specific-purpose” dictionaries in which relevance to an identified user profile is a primary concern.

## 9 Conclusion

The *Junior Bilingue* is a reference book consisting of an alphabetised wordlist with translations. It is therefore a “bilingual dictionary”. But because it emphasises “vertical” rather than “horizontal” coverage (using its space to demonstrate and explain usage rather than to enumerate isolated lexical items) the dictionary label seems somehow inadequate: more than a dictionary, it should perhaps be seen as an alphabetised core vocabulary learning aid.

Returning to larger dictionary texts since working on the *Junior Bilingue* has been a sobering experience. If we ask ourselves who our target user is, and what he or she really needs, it soon becomes clear that many bilingual entries contain superfluous or confusing information, and that there are many missed opportunities for providing clear and helpful guidance. By getting back to basics – by literally returning to the drawing board and setting aside for a moment our preconceptions about what a dictionary should look like – we can continue to produce innovative and genuinely useful tools.

## References:

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**Lewis, M.** *The Lexical Approach, the State of ELT and a Way Forward*, LTP, 1993