

## Is there a Need for a US English-French Dictionary?

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### **Abstract**

All four large existing English-French French-English dictionaries were published in Europe with a strong British English dominance and some claims to American English coverage. How well do these dictionaries do in their coverage of American English? In the first part of this article the way American English is treated in English section of the four dictionaries surveyed is analysed: headword list, spelling and pronunciation.

The second part of this article examines how users find or do not find what they are looking for. Finally possible ways to improve the situation and the need for an American English-French bilingual dictionary will be discussed.

### **1 Introduction**

There are four large bilingual English-French French-English dictionaries on the market, namely (in alphabetical order): the Collins-Robert French Dictionary (CR), the Grand Dictionnaire Hachette-Oxford (GDHO), the Harrap's Unabridged (HU) and the Larousse-Chambers (LC). All were published in Europe; three of them are published jointly by UK and French publishers. All four claim some form of US/American English coverage. Some do it implicitly, simply by using a regional label when a word is specifically used in the USA or North America. Others do it more explicitly.

For the purposes of this article, the two versions of English referred to will be called *American English* and *British English*. A broad definition of the former can be found in the preface of the Oxford American Dictionary (OAD): "When we speak of American English we refer to habits in pronunciation, choice of word, or in ways of putting words together that tend to be shared by many Americans." In their argument for the creation of an American national corpus Fillmore et al. (1998) give a more detailed and precise definition.

### **2 How do bilingual dictionaries represent American English?**

The way bilingual English-French French-English dictionaries handle American English varies from a brief mention of the problem in the preface such as "The text also reflects the international nature of the two languages American English has been given generous treatment throughout" (LC) to a fuller explanation of the approach chosen such as "The dictionary has a wide coverage of North American as well as British English, and exclusively

British or North American usage is marked. Where appropriate, American variants are given in translations of French words and phrases. The existence of standard American spelling variants is indicated in translations in the French-English side of the dictionary". (GDHO)

A survey of the treatment of American English in the four bilingual dictionaries named in the introductory paragraph was conducted. The approach was to look at the English>French section, and assess the range of procedures employed. Regional differences are marked with labels and the terminology used for these regional labels varies from one dictionary to the other, as shown in the table below:

Dictionary	CR	GDHO	HU	LC
Symbols used	Brit US	GB US <sup>GB</sup>	British American britannique américain	UK US

Table 1. Terminology

As well as the standard double labelling used by all four dictionaries, the GDHO uses a superscript GB symbol to indicate that a spelling is British and that there is an American variant. It appears in the case of regular variations such as **neighbour/neighbor**. In the HU regional labels are in English in the English section and in French in the French section whereas other dictionaries use abbreviations which can be understood by speakers of either language.

2.1 Lexical variations

This is the level at which well-known lexical pairs such as **lift/elevator**, **pavement/sidewalk**, **autumn/fall** are dealt with. Their treatment is not always consistent throughout a given dictionary although there seems to be a policy for each of the dictionaries. As a rule, the default word is the British word; the American word is included in the wordlist and cross-referred to the British headword.

Headword	CR	GDHO	HU	LC
lift	Brit = elevator	(GB) (elevator)	British (elevator)	UK (elevator)
elevator	esp US = lift	(US) (in building)	American (lift)	US [lift]
pavement	Brit	(GB) (footpath)	British (footpath)	UK [(foot)path]
sidewalk	US	(US)	American	US
autumn	no reg label	surcoat GB	no reg label	no reg label
fall	US (=autumn)	US autumn	American (autumn)	US [autumn]

Table 2. Lexical pairs

Table 2 shows how lexical pairs are handled, with regional labels and sense indicators: these pairs are well identified in real life as well as in dictionaries. They are distinctly marked at headword level. In some cases the American word is used to disambiguate the British sense, in others there is only a regional label or a combination of these two pieces of information.

## 2.2 Spelling variations

Regular spelling differences (such as **our/or**, **tre/ter**) are also shown in the four dictionaries.

Table 3 shows in detail how spelling variations are handled within each dictionary. The first or default spelling tends to be the British one for simple headwords, disregarding the alphabetical order; the presence of a regional label for the British spelling varies according to each dictionary policy and is not always entirely consistent within a dictionary. The American headword may or may not be included in the wordlist as a main headword with a cross-reference to the British headword where both headwords are given.

The connection between the two spellings is not always obvious particularly when the words are compounds as the case of **chequebook/checkbook** shows. If words are grouped in one article for purposes of cross-referencing, the realisation may not be as perfect as one could wish; e.g. **defense**, **defenseless** are clustered together in HU and send the user to **defenceless** only, not to **defence**, **defenceless**.

When no regional label is indicated in the table, it means that none was supplied in the dictionary.

Headword	CR	GDHO	HU	LC
centre	= main hwd	= main hwd, GB	= main hwd	= main hwd, UK
center	= second hwd, US = hwd + cross-reference to centre	= second hwd US = hwd US, cross-reference to centre	= second hwd, American = hwd + cross-referencing to centre	= second hwd, US = hwd, US + cross-reference to centre
cheque	= main hwd	= main hwd, GB	= main hwd	= main hwd, UK
check	= second hwd, US = hwd no connection with cheque, banking sense not given	= second hwd, US = hwd with sense US (cheque)	= second hwd, American = hwd with sense American (cheque)	= second hwd, US = sense US + cross-reference to cheque
chequebook	= hwd	= main hwd, GB	= main hwd	= main hwd, UK
checkbook	= hwd, US no connection with chequebook	= second hwd, US = hwd + entry, US no connection with chequebook	= second hwd, American = hwd, American + cross-reference to chequebook	= second hwd, US = hwd, US + cross-reference to chequebook
colour	= main hwd	= main hwd, GB	= main hwd	= main hwd, UK
color	= second hwd, US = hwd, direct cross-reference to colour	= second hwd, US = hwd US, cross-reference to colour	= second hwd, American = hwd, American + cross-reference to colour	= second hwd, US = hwd, US + cross-reference to colour
defence	= main hwd	= hwd, GB	= main hwd	= main hwd, UK
defense	= second hwd, US = hwd with direct cross-referencing to defence, defense US	= second hwd, US = hwd US, cross-reference to defence	= second hwd, American = hwd, American + cross-reference	= second hwd, US = hwd, US + cross-reference to defence

Table 3. Spelling

### 2.3 Pronunciation

In the four bilingual dictionaries pronunciation is also supplied. Again, the British element tends to be considered as the default; it may remain unmarked (OHD). In other cases, both pronunciations are labelled (LC). Table 4 sums up some typical examples where pronunciation varies. When a regional label is supplied in a dictionary it is shown in the table.

Beyond the presence/absence of American pronunciation it could be worth looking at the choices that were made regarding what can be considered as "standard American" for each dictionary. For instance HU does not indicate the presence of an [r] sound in **clerk**. It was not always possible to find out the principles used but this article is concerned more about the general approach than specific contents.

Headword and pronunciations	CR	GDHO	HU	LC
<b>advertisement</b>				
British	əd'v t sɪmənt	əd'v t sɪmənt	British əd'v t sɪmənt	(UK) əd'v t sɪmənt
American		US dɪvər tə sɪmənt	American dɪvə tə sɪmənt	(US) dɪvər tə sɪmənt
<b>clerk</b>				
British	kl k	kl k	British kl k	(UK) kl k
American	US kl ɜ:k	US kl ɜ:k	American kl k	(US) kl ɜ:k
<b>lieutenant</b>				
British	leɪ'tenənt	leɪ'tenənt	British leɪ'tenənt	
American	US lu:'tenənt	US lu:ɹ	American lu:'tenBnt	(US) lu:'tenBnt
<b>neighbor</b>				
British	'na ðə(r)	'na ðə(r)	British 'na ðə(r) given second	(UK) 'nu ðə(r)
American	'ni:ðə(r)	'ni:ðə	'ni:ðə(r) given first	(especially US) 'ni:ðə(r)
<b>schedule</b>				
British	'edju:l	'edju:l	British 'edju:l	UK 'edju:l
American	US 'sked l	US 'sked l	American 'sked l	US 'sked l
<b>tomato</b>				
British	tə'm ɪtə	tə'm ɪtə	British tə'm ɪtə	(UK) tə'm ɪtə
American	US tə'mə tə	US tə'mə tə	American tə'mə tə	(US) tə'mə tə

Table 4. Pronunciation

Even on such a small sample the discrepancies are obvious and no explanation can be found about policy; in the CR there is no mention of an American pronunciation for **advertisement**, whereas there is no British pronunciation for **lieutenant** in the LC.

### 2.4 Going deeper

As a rule, when one goes deeper into entries, the mention of American English remains mainly at sense level, such as **check** *n* US *chèque*. Metalanguage is not American English in any of the dictionaries, including sense indicators; these tend to be as neutral as possible but

when a choice needs to be made, the chosen spelling or lexical variant is British unless there is a good reason to use an American English word e.g. the headword is American. (e.g. GDHO, **sidewalk** is used as a sense indicator in the entry for **curb**). Where compounds are concerned, the tendency is to give the British version unless it is culturally linked to American English: the four dictionaries give the expression **chequebook journalism** in its British variant.

In examples the selection rule of 1/ *universal/neutral* English, 2/ British English and 3/ American English (only in special circumstances) applies. The same rule as in examples seems to apply for collocates. This applies also to syntactic variations e.g. I have got/I have, etc...

### 3 What about users?

This brief description of what happens in the English>French section of bilingual dictionaries shows that users, as described in the first paragraph of the Introduction of the GDHO, looking for some sort of representation of American English will not find all they need. More specifically American English speakers wanting to encode into French will have to be aware of the British bias and adapt the way they search to take into account the limitations of the dictionary (this applies to the wordlist mainly). French-speaking users wanting to decode will find it difficult as American English is under-represented and many words or senses will not be found.

As far as the French>English section is concerned, the situation is no better. Most of the time American English speakers will have to do a double act by decoding into British English. French speakers wanting to encode into American English will fail. Their English will not have the American flavour they are trying to achieve, at best they will use the right word but they are unlikely to produce sentences with the right use of American English grammatical rules (verb tenses, plural vs singular, etc.).

### 4 What could be done

In the case of the dictionaries surveyed, the editorial policy could be tightened so that treatment of American English is both more explicit and more systematic. There could be better representation of American English in the actual entries of both sections.

In the French>English section all examples where a syntactic variation, it could be given an American English translation; in fact all French examples should be translated by American translators whose task would be to translate into American English, not a "middle of the Atlantic" English.

The problem of American English examples remains in the English>French section. Even if the text is read and checked and americanized by American English native speakers, it will never be a truly American English source.

A more drastic approach would be to produce a truly American English bilingual dictionary, in which all headwords are treated from an American English perspective and where British English would be mentioned in the same way it is mentioned in American monolingual dictionaries. There are suitable corpus-based monolingual American English dictionar-

ies on the market that could be used: the Longman Advanced American Dictionary (2005), The Oxford American Dictionary (2005), to name only a few.

## 5 Conclusion

However well lexicographers work, however aware they are of differences between American and British English, no bilingual dictionary so far reflects fully the nature of American English. The situation of American English as the poor relation in French Bilingual dictionaries contrasts with the number of speakers in the world, the growth of American English into people's lives through the Internet and the growing trend of teaching/learning a more American English. Another argument in favour of an American English French dictionary is the American audience. American learners of French have to work their way through British English before they have access to a French translations

As work on the American National Corpus progresses (Ide and Suderman, 2004) and the real nature of American English becomes clearer it would seem right to launch into surveys and feasibility studies to find out if an American English > French bilingual dictionary would have a market.

The immediate answer to the question asked in the title from a simple user would be "yes". However, the economics need to be right and publishers who already have some sort of American Dictionary and experience in bilingual lexicography would be at an advantage. Will they dare investigate and do it?

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