THE BILINGUAL DICTIONARY: FRIEND OR FOE?

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Abstract
Bilingual dictionaries are widely used by language learners of all proficiency levels. However, this kind of dictionary presents several problems: both SL and TL items are not sufficiently covered, there are many clashes at the semantic, syntactic, combinatorial and pragmatic levels, data on frequency or linguistic and situational restrictions are systematically omitted, and access to the dictionary can be difficult and time-consuming. In this paper I will focus on dictionary use.

1. Introduction

Despite teachers' efforts in favour of monolingual (learners') dictionaries in L2, bilingual dictionaries are still widely used (and preferred) by language learners of all proficiency levels, as previous research on use has shown (see Battenburg 1991; and Zöfgen 1991, for an overview on the subject). However, the bilingual dictionary presents so many flaws that one is left wondering whether such tools are really a help or a hindrance.

2. What are dictionaries used for?

According to a survey I have recently conducted of 70 students of Translation and Interpreting (Corpas Pastor 1994), most subjects admit to using general bilingual dictionaries very frequently, almost daily. They also use general monolingual dictionaries frequently, or, at least, twice a week. Specialized mono- and bilingual dictionaries are only used when translating specialized texts. General bilingual dictionaries are used for writing, reading, and translating from Spanish into English and vice versa. They are very rarely used for speaking or listening.

The information included in the microstructure (wordlist plus entries) is primarily used:

[a] to check spellings,
[b] to look for examples which may help them to understand a word, to use it correctly or to highlight the best translation;
[c] to look for synonyms when writing/translating;
[d] and to look up the translation equivalent or the definition of a word they do not know or simply for confirmation.

They sometimes look up cross-references; usage labels, especially diaphasic - eg. "infml" vs. "fml" - and diatopic differences such as "AmE" vs. "BrE"-; information concerning pronunciation; as well as proverbs, acronyms or fixed expressions. They also look grammar points up, although they prefer to use grammar and syntax books instead. Pictures are rarely used.

As for the front matter, students tend to read it only once, when they buy the dictionary. The pronunciation guide is sometimes consulted, but appendices are not always useful to the student, except for the tables of irregular verbs and countries and coins.

3. Where are the problems?

Although heavily used, bilingual dictionaries present serious flaws. Such problems concern primarily their macro- and microstructure. In the first case, students complain about the ommission of lemmas from the wordlist, such as words of common use (especially in conversation) and relevant proper nouns, such as place names and the like.

In the second case, not enough microstructural detail is given to help in the selection and discrimination of the correct translation equivalent (TE) in the target language (cf. Meyer 1988, 1990; Roberts 1990): for instance, students have pointed out the existence of outdated equivalents, the lack of proper translation equivalents for different SL words senses and nuances due to overgeneralization, unnatural and non-idiomatic translation equivalents, as well as discrepancies concerning the translation equivalents given under different entries within the same dictionary.

Even the correct selection of a TE is further prevented by inexact and incomplete information about the actual usage of both SL and TL items: no frequency figures are provided, and there is not enough information about typical contexts and verbal environments, register restrictions nor illustrative examples.

Other microstructural flaws concern common spelling mistakes, almost no information about the few fixed phrases included, and lack of synonyms.

A third type of "failure" concerns price (bilingual dictionaries tend to be expensive), typography (students complain about "very small print difficult to read") and differences in the translation equivalents offered by different dictionaries for the same SL item.

4. In what ways can the bilingual dictionary be improved?

The aforementioned flaws of general bilingual dictionaries seem to have disappointed translation students to a paradoxical extent: the translator's best friend is also a misleading false friend.

In order to solve this problem, students have suggested to improve everything mentioned before, namely, to give more information at the semantic, gramatical and pragmatic levels in order to ascertain the best TE of a SL item in a given context.

In addition, more contrastive work in English and Spanish is claimed: this is the only way in which different senses and nuances of a SL item can be faithfully translated into the TL.

Access is also of paramount importance to students: they demand more dictionaries in electronic form (CD-ROM) for instant

retrieval as well as better organizational principles to find the information required in a easier and quicker way. Finally, in the case of printed dictionaries, students ask for better and durable binding.

5. Discussion

Of all the issues raised in this survey, there are two main conclusions to be drawn. On the one hand, translation students continue to rely heavily on general bilingual dictionaries for encoding, decoding and transcoding (translation in either direction) purposes. That is to say, the ideal bilingual dictionary seems to be the general bidirectional bifunctional type in one volume (cf. Cowie 1990).

On the other hand, these students appear to be deeply dissatisfied with their general bilingual dictionaries. The main source of frustration comes from the fact that both SL and TL items are not sufficiently covered: many words and fixed expressions are not entered into the dictionary, the translation equivalents provided are not always correct nor are they properly discriminated, and there is not enough usage information to allow students to use the proposed TE confidently.

Moreover, important data such as frequency or linguistic and situational restrictions are systematically omitted; and the lack of serious contrastive work based on language in use gives rise to many clashes at the semantic, syntactic, combinatorial and pragmatic levels. On top of that, access to the dictionary can be difficult and time-consuming.

However, and despite all their flaws, bilingual dictionaries are still highly valued by students. So, the way to help students is not to discourage them from using bilingual dictionaries at all - on the contrary, "users will be helped only when bilingual dictionaries are significantly improved", as Piotrowski (1989:81) has said.

Corpus Linguistics could be the key to such improvements. As Sinclair (1991) has

demonstrated in the feasibility phase of his pioneering project on multilingual lexicography, by studying large amounts of textual corpora it is possible to analyse language objectively and in detail[1].

Once the individual, independent analysis of a given language is done, contrastive work can start by taking into account not only the proposed TE, but also the functioning of both SL and TL items in real discourse and the different verbal environments of a given item which determines the selection of a particular TE each time.

Comparable corpora will help translators and lexicographers determine the size and nature of the translation unit as well as the type of equivalence achieved in each case (Baker 1993:248). Moreover, bilingual or multilingual dictionaries in electronic form will solve the space limitations and access problems we face at present.

To sum up, I would like to quote Svartvik (1992:28) when he points out that "what seems to be badly wanted [...] is sophisticated and comprehensive bilingual and multilingual electronic dictionaries". Perhaps one should add: *based on evidence drawn from comparable corpora.*

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1   This project set out to produce a sample of a multilingual dictionary on the basis of evidence drawn from comparable corpora in English, German, Swedish, Italian, Spanish, Hungarian and Serbo-Croatian. After two years of protracted silence, the Malvern Seminar, held near Birmingham in 1994 (15-17th, May), meant a relaunching of the project. Most of the original team met there, where we were joined by colleagues from the publishing industry. The author of this paper has been involved in the project since the feasibility phase as part of the Spanish research group coordinated by Manuel Alvar Ezquerra.