

A QUARTER CENTURY

OF SEMI-BILINGUAL DICTIONARIES

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This presentation is about the status of semi-bilingual lexicography after its first quarter century of existence.

In so doing, I will deal with the following questions:

- ▶ What is a semi-bilingual dictionary?
- ▶ What is a semi-bilingualized dictionary?
- ▶ How have changes in the methodology of teaching foreign languages affected the philosophy behind dictionary compilation?
- ▶ What is the function of translation in pedagogic lexicography?
- ▶ How can dictionaries serve as a tool for teaching foreign languages?
- ▶ Are the principles behind dictionaries in English any different from the principles governing dictionaries in other languages?
- ▶ What impact has the appearance on the scene of semi-bilingual dictionaries had on present-day lexicography?
- ▶ What lies ahead?

One of the outstanding advances in lexicography in the past century was the birth seventy-six years ago of the first foreign language learners' dictionary, written by Michael West, *The New Method English Dictionary*. This dictionary was considerably easier than other dictionaries to use and to understand. Embedded in it were the first seeds of user-friendliness, even though awareness of the concept of user-friendliness in dictionaries had not yet appeared.

Learners' dictionaries were intended for learners and users of foreign languages, not for native speakers of the language of the dictionary. Nevertheless, it took fifty-one years from the time the

first one appeared in 1935 until 1986 for learners' dictionaries to become significantly user friendly - both visually and functionally. This is the story of how, and why, learner's dictionaries became semi-bilingualized and why we are marking this year a quarter century since the birth of semi-bilingual learners' dictionaries.

Since dictionaries are a kind of language-learning tool, it is natural that they reflect contemporary language-learning methodology. Until the end of WW II the methodology of language learning was based on translation, so the dictionaries used by language learners were bilingual. Then came the Direct Method in foreign-language learning – total immersion in the language being learned (L2).

It took half a century for the Direct Method in foreign language learning to overtake the entire globe. To my knowledge, the teaching of L2 in L2 started with the appearance of the first basic word lists for learning English, shortly before the Longman Group in London published Michael West's and James Gareth Endicott's *The New Method English Dictionary* in 1935. And for half a century, all learners' dictionaries were monolingual.

The learning of foreign languages by means of the Direct Method was an improvement on the method of learning through translation. Nevertheless, it had many shortcomings. Some, teachers in Israel became aware of its drawbacks, and this led to the birth of the semi-bilingual dictionary.

When encountering a foreign language there is nothing more natural than wanting to know the equivalents of unfamiliar words and expressions in your mother tongue. And when using a dictionary, even though a definition may be understood, a void seems to exist in our minds, until we have the mother-tongue equivalent. When the desire to know this equivalent is satisfied, a certain certainty is created that cannot be achieved without translation. And certainty strengthens memory. We remember new data by attaching it to already familiar data. And in the case of language, new words in a foreign-language are 'hooked' onto words in the mother tongue that are already familiar.

Monolingual learners' dictionaries explain the meanings and fine nuances of usage in the target language. But language teachers do not have at their disposal the means nor the time to verify the extent to which their, or a dictionary's, explanations were understood or not understood. So most teachers resort to using the question "Do you understand?" or "Is that clear?" – which is not really a question at all, but just a rhetorical way of indicating that the teacher has completed the explanation of the meaning, and will assume that it is clear, unless someone says otherwise,

which usually does not happen. Or, in the case of dictionaries, the dictionary has said what it has to say, and that's that. You can take it or leave it.

"Is that clear?" is a meaningless question, which usually remains unanswered, the usual response being no response, and so, the lesson goes on. Whether or not everyone understood remains unknown.

And even if the explanation *is* clear, and every student in the class thinks they have understood the teacher's or the dictionary's explanation, who says that every one of the students has understood it *correctly*? How many students will have *misunderstood* the correct meaning? I know from my own experience that I went through a big part of my life living with the wrong meanings of many words – words to which I had assigned my own subjective meanings at the time, when I first heard or read them, while I was just picking them up – and that misunderstanding was revealed and rectified only later in life through reading and dictionary use.

It is common for children to misunderstand the meanings of words in their mother tongue as they pick them up, only to correct them themselves through experience and exposure when using them. Some of these incorrect meanings can live with us for a very long time. So we remain misinformed, until such time as we realize we acquired the wrong meaning, because something now seems to be out of context.

The problem is not that we did not understand. We understood something, which we thought was the right thing, without realizing that we understood incorrectly - we misunderstood the meaning. Only by providing a brief translation into the mother tongue of the headword or of the particular meaning can the misunderstanding of meanings be entirely prevented.

A semi-bilingual dictionary, then, is a learners' dictionary in which there is a translation into the user's mother tongue for each meaning of every headword and its derivatives. Originally, semi-bilingual dictionaries were all semi-bilingualized, – that is, they were monolingual learners' dictionaries to which translations were added. But these monolingual learners' dictionaries were mostly British dictionaries, written for use in the UK (a few were American), reflecting British (or American) culture and way of thinking. Translating them did not make them localized as far as their content and cultural approach were concerned. During the past 25 years Kernerman Publishing and K Dictionaries initiated the publication in several dozen languages of semi-bilingualized dictionaries that were based on British dictionaries. But today we have dictionary data bases available for semi-bilingualization that were created expressly to be translated,

without carrying over into the translated version the cultural characteristics of British or American learners' dictionaries.

I said earlier that the first semi-bilingual dictionaries were really semi-bilingualized versions of monolingual learners' dictionaries. These monolingual dictionaries have always been written to be used mainly in English-speaking countries, or, if used abroad, to convey the culture of their country of origin – the UK. But today, English is studied abroad mainly for communication between speakers of other languages. Besides, the English spoken around the globe is far from uniform (to make a mild understatement).

The advantages of semi-bilingual language-learners' dictionaries can now be summed up:

The translation satisfies an intellectual and a psychological need to know the meanings of words in the user's native language. Also, the translation strengthens understanding by providing certainty and eliminating uncertainty. And it prevents misunderstanding.

May I bring to your attention, ladies and gentleman, the fact that learning English as a foreign language is different from learning any other foreign language. English enjoys a unique status as a foreign language that is had by no other language. All languages belong to the people that speak them, so that languages are taught within the socio-cultural context of that language. All except English. When English became the universal language for communication – when it became the global lingua franca - it became the heritage of all people. So that English may be taught without any connection whatsoever with the peoples that speak it as a mother tongue. Whereas dictionaries in other languages are all culturally oriented, dictionaries for learning English as a foreign language should not be culturally oriented to any of the English-speaking countries or peoples. When it comes to learning English as a foreign language, the language and the culture of the English-speaking peoples should not be intertwined with the text. That is because the aim of learning English as a Foreign Language today is instrumental. It is learnt as a means of communication not only with English speakers but between speakers of other languages.

A semi-bilingual dictionary (not a semi-bilingualized one, that is based on an existing monolingual dictionary) is geared to teaching the language for communication, without ulterior motives of sneaking into the example sentences the culture of the target language. And it takes into account the particular linguistic problems, the grammar problems, the pronunciation problems, and the spelling problems of the language learner.

Having described the virtues of semi-bilingual dictionaries, the question arises: What is the position or status of SBDs today in the spectrum of lexicography? Well, they did not conquer the world. They did not even make more than a small dent in the education systems throughout the world that are concerned with foreign language learning, having been approved or accepted by only a small number of national Ministries of Education. A few million copies may have been sold, but what is that when compared with the billion people throughout the world learning English today? And the 60-odd titles under which SBDs have appeared in 25 years is a drop in the bucket. As far as I know they did not influence dictionaries involved with learning languages other than English. What is even more surprising – or disappointing - is that SBDs did not make a significant dent in the academic field of meta-lexicography. Only a handful of research projects have ever been carried out involving their use (some in Israel, others elsewhere). Very few articles have been devoted to them, some of which are occasionally cited, and no books, while the topic of semi-bilingual dictionaries in general is only occasionally raised in the literature.

Even though learners' dictionaries did succeed in coming into their own during the period with which this article deals, the concept of semi-bilingual dictionaries, which is a branch of learners' dictionaries, shares only a small part of this success. Beyond the attempts that my publishing company made, and the resultant 30 or 40 different countries and languages into which SBDs were translated and published as a result of these efforts, there seems to have been no progress made in this field by any other dictionary publisher during the quarter century that they are in use.

Does this mean that neither lexicographers nor pedagogues are convinced about their advantages over monolingual or fully-bilingual learners' dictionaries? I do not have the answer. Nor do I foresee any change in the foreseeable future.

All dictionary use is an act of learning. Whether consulting a dictionary in one's own language or one in a foreign or less familiar language, the process of using a dictionary is an act of learning something about the language that the dictionary is written in. For this reason, [all of the features of learners' dictionaries may be, and should be applied to native language dictionaries](#). Therefore it makes sense that [all dictionaries should be learners' dictionaries](#), including college dictionaries. Our firm is presently endeavoring to realize this principle.