

# **Global and Historical Contexts of English Dictionaries**

**English Dictionaries in Global & Historical Context  
DSNA Conference  
Queen's University  
Kingston, Ont., Canada  
June 3-5, 2010**

**Ari (Lionel) Kernerman  
Kernerman Publishing  
Tel Aviv, Israel**

**[www.kernermanpublishing.com](http://www.kernermanpublishing.com)  
[kernrman@zahav.net.il](mailto:kernrman@zahav.net.il)**

- 1 FL dictionaries - the direct method**
  - the translation approach**
  - the semi-bilingual method**
- 2 Importing universal FL dictionaries vs Do-It-Yourself**
- 3 FL dictionaries and cultural orientation**
- 4 Dictionaries as history books**
- 5 EFL/ESL dictionaries**

# Global and Historical Contexts of English Dictionaries

## SUMMARY

The global and the historical contexts of English dictionaries are viewed here as two completely separate entities. English dictionaries have always followed the trail blazed by the expansion of the use of English as a global language, while, at the same time, being themselves trailblazers that facilitated this expansion.

Historically, English dictionaries may be regarded as being mirrors of the specific society in which each one is written and published. They provide a faithful, finely nuanced and extremely accurate reflection of the societies from which they emanate, and can be viewed as history books of these societies. I will discuss some of the social aspects of dictionaries and their uses, from the viewpoint of my own personal experiences.

## Introduction

When I was a young boy, still a pupil in elementary school in Toronto, we were extremely fortunate to have a dictionary at home. I don't think there were many middle class homes at that time that had their own dictionary. But my parents were very keen on providing their children with a good education, so that, even though we were not well off, they made sure there was a dictionary available and accessible. I remember that this particular dictionary was a Gage, but I never noticed whether it was a general dictionary or a school dictionary, (if there were school dictionaries in the 1930s).

All books fascinated me, but this one in particular held me spellbound. Strangely, I loved it and hated it at the same time. I loved it because it was a book, because it held within its covers (hard covers, of course), such a wealth of information about the English language. It was spiritually uplifting to hold it in my hands and to flip through the pages. But at the same time I hated it because it caused me such frustration. After reading a definition, I would have to look up some of the words in the definition in order to understand the definition. This continual need for cross-referencing greatly annoyed me, because it took up so much time, required so much retention of information, and then processing of that information. I imagined a dictionary in which you could understand the explanations without having to look up any of the words in the explanations.

Twenty years later, when teaching English in Israel, I empathized with my students, speakers of Hebrew and of Arabic, who suffered from their dictionaries

as I had suffered from mine, even though theirs was a vastly improved dictionary; it was the then compulsory Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary by Hornby. Although the definitions were written in simplified English (so that users didn't have to cross reference, as I had to), and there were examples of typical usage (making it a dictionary for active use, not passive only, as mine had been), the Oxford was monolingual. Only a monolingual dictionary was permitted at that time, because English was taught only according to the Direct Method of foreign language teaching (English in English). Since I was not supposed to use the students' mother tongue in class, this is how I would teach:

I would write new words on the blackboard, and next to them their explanations in English, or synonyms. Then, without turning around to face the class, and in order not to utter the translation myself, I would wait until one of the students whispered out the translation in Hebrew. On hearing the mother-tongue equivalent, there was a general relaxation of the suspense I had unavoidably created. Fortunately, I was not only an English teacher; I was also a textbook writer and publisher. So with my understanding and perception of what it is that students require in order to be able to use their foreign-language dictionaries more effectively, I published the world's first high-school semi-bilingual dictionary – which was a monolingual learner's dictionary with a brief translation in L1 for each meaning, as distinct from a bilingual dictionary, which merely translates headwords from L1 to L2 or vice versa, usually without definitions or examples. A small change, but a big difference.

### **Who's Afraid of Semi-Bilingual Dictionaries?**

Now, don't get me wrong. Total immersion in L2 works. The American armed forces popularized it when they occupied the South Pacific Islands in World War II, and had to have their soldiers speaking the native languages within days. There was no alternative.

But the method is exceedingly imperfect, because so much is misunderstood, particularly abstract concepts and words that do not have one-to-one translations. Ladies and gentlemen, how many words has each one of us grown up with in our own mother tongue misunderstanding their meanings, only to find out in later life that at the time we had erroneously attached to a particular word our own subjective meaning? Don't misunderstand the meaning of *to misunderstand*. *To misunderstand* does not mean not to understand. *To misunderstand* means to understand. So that when you have misunderstood a word you have understood it. But wrongly, of course. And nobody – not even you yourself – knows that you have misunderstood it. That's what happens when you wrongly learn English in English, especially when learning English as a foreign language.

Now, the logical alternative to the direct method is not the translation method. I was taught French for 5 years in high school, and ended up not being able to say

one sentence in French. That was because our French teacher taught us French in English. She spoke to us in English all the time. She didn't teach us French. She taught us *about* French.

That is why, in a truly semi-bilingual dictionary **only** the headword is translated. In that way, the learners are induced to read in English the example sentences and hopefully also the definitions. This is conducive to getting learners to think in English, which is our ultimate teaching goal.

Moreover, this brief translation of the headword creates clarity, certainty and confidence, and prevents misunderstanding. You FEEL AT HOME, with your mother tongue. [As an aside, I wish to point out that a foreign language **should** be taught in that language. But it is both expedient and also an efficient time-saving device when a measured amount of the mother tongue is used, (in accordance with the level of the learners) – to explain difficult concepts, to save time, and to be absolutely certain that meanings of words, grammar explanations, and instructions, have been correctly understood.]

All this was clearly seen by the Israel Chief Inspector for English, Mr. Raphael Gefen, and immediately the semi-bilingual dictionary became the only dictionary permitted in exams in Israel (and remains so to this day) – and soon afterwards it came into use in dozens of other countries. This development and popularization of semi-bilingual English-learning dictionaries has had an important impact on lexicography and the learning of English during the twenty-four years that semi-bilingual dictionaries have been in popular use.

### **The Concepts of Universality and Globality with respect to English Dictionaries**

The publishers who produced the important Advanced English Learner's Dictionaries produced **universal** dictionaries for the **global** market. They thought, and I think that they still think, that they can produce universal dictionaries that are equally good for everyone, regardless of where they are in the world – a one-size-fits-all dictionary. At Kernerman Publishing we have been trying to break down this concept of universal dictionaries by initiating glocalized dictionaries – that is, global dictionaries that are localized - in an attempt to reflect the culture of the particular society for which they are intended. These are dictionaries that are, insofar as our human lexicographers are capable of creating, culturally, socially, religiously and politically neutral, or, at least, unbiased. Each dictionary starts off by being universal in content. Its contents are subsequently adapted to the needs of the population that the dictionary is meant to serve, and a translation is added for each meaning, while the definitions and examples are not translated. So it is both locally adapted and translated, or semi-bilingualized. An even better solution would be for each country to create its own English-learning dictionaries from scratch. But, naturally, that is not feasible.

## Some Problems of Culture

Here are some instances of cultural interference that I personally encountered:

In some of our children's illustrated dictionaries intended for use in Israel we had to avoid using pictures in which boys and girls play together, because our dictionary market includes religious schools, which are gender-segregated. Likewise, we deleted illustrations that showed pigs in pig pens, because pigs are not kosher for eating.

David Collins, the former Middle East sales representative for Harraps told me that the Saudi Education Minister refused to approve the use of Harraps Easy English Dictionary in Saudi schools because among the entries was the word *pork*, which it is forbidden to eat according to Islamic law. "But if a Saudi goes into a restaurant in London," he asked the Minister, "how will he know what not to order if he doesn't know what you call it?" But his reasoning did not prevail.

In the Province of Quebec, the feminist Minister of Education, insisted that, in one of our dictionaries being prepared for Quebec schools, there be the same number of example sentences containing feminine references as there were with masculine references. In order to achieve this, the number of examples on each page was counted, and the wording of some of the example sentences was changed as required, in order to achieve gender equality. But this resulted in many sentences becoming unnatural, so as to make users wonder whether they really understood the use of that word. For example, "She installed a new engine in her car," might cause learners to wonder whether they understood correctly the word *install*, simply because they are not used to conceiving of women installing car engines. "The three wise men saw the star in the east," was changed to "The three wise women saw the star in the east," in order to even up the tally, but which made the reference Biblically incorrect. And in the attempt to be fair to both sexes, "She has a feather in her bonnet," was changed to "He has a feather in his bonnet," which is correct English, except that men usually don't wear bonnets.

In an edition of one of our school dictionaries for Finland, the number of swearwords was considerably increased, reflecting the high degree of freedom among the youngsters in Finland, as were the number of subentries and examples pertaining to snow and skiing.

I cannot imagine any of the so-called universal dictionaries being prepared for a Moslem country without altering a large number of the examples. For example, in Arabic there are about 15 words for camel. In English, only one.

What would you consider to be a good example sentence for the word "dog"? If your example states that dogs are kept as pets, it would not be relevant in

countries where dogs are not kept as pets, but are consumed as food, such as in Thailand.

And speaking of Thailand, I once heard that the Longman Contemporary Dictionary was banned there because it had, as an example for *prostitute*, “There are a lot of prostitutes in Thailand,” which, at that time was factually correct, but which naturally was offensive to Thais. The same dictionary was not permitted in Israel schools because the example for *Bible* was “The Bible is the holy book of the Christians.” “That’s only partly true,” said the Inspector for English. “It’s also the holy book of the Jews.” So the Longman dictionary was not approved for use in Israel schools.

I could go on and on with examples of this sort of locally inappropriate model sentences found in universal dictionaries, and I might add, taken from corpora. Dictionaries that are made in the U.K., especially those that have example sentences that refer to Mrs. Thatcher, Big Ben, or the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace, are not appropriate for export, unless they are modified to be more culturally neutral, or are used as tools for the cultural assimilation of new immigrants.

### **Every Dictionary is a History Book – “a great family album”**

Nothing reflects a society more fully than a dictionary. No historian can portray a society more accurately than what is reflected in the example sentences in a learner’s dictionary. In pre-20<sup>th</sup> century dictionaries, the decisions regarding which words to include and which to exclude were usually a reflection of the personal biases of the compiler. In other words, dictionaries were inclined to be more prescriptive than descriptive. Word lists were censored by the author, so that what was considered to be not proper or worthy, or was offensive, was not included.

Dictionaries have always been a source for secret pleasure by schoolchildren, who derive endless joy from looking up dirty words and sexual references, *and actually finding them*. There is a story about Dr. Johnson, who was told by a very respectable lady, “Dr. Johnson, I was both shocked and abhorred to see that your dictionary has so many offensive words in it.” “Oh, Madam,” was the reply. “So you’ve been looking for them!”

Modern-day dictionaries strive to include all words in use. Indeed, they are based on computer frequency counts. But, the retrieval of this objective information is a human act, subject to subjective influences. Thus, definitions constructed from word corpora, and examples drawn from these corpora, must inevitably reveal the world outlook of their compilers and editors. Moreover, in corpus-based dictionaries, the principle of giving preference to authenticity and to frequency of occurrence is not a criterion on which the choice for example sentences should be based. Rather, didactic criteria should prevail. But this topic is not included in

the topics for discussion at this conference. There are also problems of political bias, due to commercial interests, as sometimes occurs with words such as Jew and Zionist.

Just as Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language provided comprehensive coverage of British English, Noah Webster created his dictionary to document and define the latest words that Americans were using to describe themselves, their culture, and their country.

John Morse, the President and Publisher of Merriam-Webster wrote, in his Introduction to the booklet *From Noah Webster to Merriam-Webster*: "Written for a nation [the dictionary] is a document that describes its citizens' thoughts and behavior, and ... to succeed, it must faithfully and fully reflect the language of the people and do so in a way that reflects the people's needs and expectations." John Morse goes on to say: "...the dictionary has purposes that go beyond being a mere collection of words and definitions. [It has] three goals – to educate, to unify, and to inspire (the citizens for whom it is intended)."

A dictionary both educates the people for whom it is written, and it unites them by creating a strong linguistic bond. Noah Webster justified his writing *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language* by saying that it was his desire to inspire the people with a national pride, a sense of cultural independence, of social reform, to eradicate illiteracy, and to present them with a spelling reform.

The Merriam-Webster booklet cited above asks further, "Can the dictionary continue to play the same role in the future as it has in the past two hundred years?" Well, it continues to educate, by providing a glossary of our complex world. It assists non-native speakers of any language to understand that language and to make themselves understood. And it is a force in unifying the speakers and the users of a language. It may be called, says the cited source, "a great family album".

## **Not Just Dictionaries, but English Dictionaries**

But the subject of this conference is not "Dictionaries in Global & Historical Context". It is "English Dictionaries in Global & Historical Context". So, in what way are English dictionaries different, in their global and historical context from other language dictionaries? First of all, it may be assumed that the number of learners' dictionaries in each language is roughly proportionate to the number of persons learning that language. No language, other than English, is being learned and used universally, as yet. It is precisely because English is *the* global language, that we have today such a multiplicity of English learners' dictionaries. Another reason for their unusually large number is that some are EFL (being learned in a non-English-speaking country), some are ESL (meant for immigrants or possibly for foreign students in an English-speaking country or environment), and some try to be both at the same time.

So English dictionaries are different from dictionaries in other languages in the large number of publishers that are engaged in publishing them, and, as a result, in the large selection of learners' dictionaries that are available. They are different also in the large quantities of dictionaries that are printed and sold. They are different in their frequent – often annual – reprintings. They are different in the frequency of being revised and updated. They are different in offering such a large number of levels of difficulty, from elementary to very advanced, and so many specialized dictionaries. And they are different in the dizzying speed with which they are continually improved and digitized. The Big Five, for example (Oxford, Longman, Macmillan, Cambridge and Cobuild), formerly completely revised every ten years, are now usually completely rewritten every five years. Above all, they are different in that they are translated into more foreign language editions than any other dictionaries, such that there are more bilingual, bilingualized and semi-bilingualized English dictionaries than there are in any other language.

One last word. How have learners' dictionaries changed lexicography? Learners' dictionaries have changed lexicography from a field in which the lexicographer reigned supreme to a field in which the user reigns supreme. Formerly, the lexicographer was the master and the user was his subject. Now the user is the master, served by the lexicographer. No longer do lexicographers write dictionaries. They write data bases for dictionaries.