

A New English – Russian Learner's Dictionary: From Reception to Production

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Abstract

Traditional bilingual dictionaries are now being replaced in Russia by dictionaries of a new generation, that is, specifically user oriented learner's dictionaries. The present paper is centered on some basic principles elaborated and used by the authors in compiling an English – Russian learner's dictionary. Those principles are conditioned by the practical needs of Russian learners of English. The dictionary is aimed at providing guidance on both speech reception and speech production, and its purpose then is not only to show through illustrations how words live in modern English but also to give prescriptions how to use them effectively in one's own speech. The principles, outlined in the paper, serve this very purpose.

1 Introduction

In Russia bilingual dictionaries have always been widely used in foreign language teaching in general and in English language learning in particular. This can be accounted for by the fact that English used to be taught as a dead language due to the so-called "iron curtain" which isolated Russia from the rest of the world and dictionaries were used only for decoding. According to S. Ter-Minasova "the learner's needs were satisfied with the type of dictionaries where only the meaning was given" [Ter-Minasova 1995]. But the political situation in Russia has changed dramatically over the last decade and a traditional bilingual dictionary, which still according to many surveys, predominates in the early stages of foreign language learning [Hartman 1999], doesn't meet the modern needs of those language learners who strive to use English for communication. Thus, a traditional bilingual dictionary with the main purpose to describe the correlation between the target language and the source language, their similarities and differences needs to be replaced by a more specifically learner oriented reference book, i.e. a bilingual learner's dictionary (BLD), which not only shows how a certain word lives but also gives prescriptions how to use it most effectively in one's own speech.

Making the BLD is a relatively new (but promising) branch of Russian national lexicography. A lot of problems are bound to arise in this connection: how to make such a dictionary learner oriented, what kind of material to select, how to organize it within the dictionary. In order to solve these problems it is necessary to work out certain theoretical principles.

2 Basic principles of compiling the BLD

In this paper we will focus on some basic principles that we used in "The English-Russian Dictionary" (Russky Yazyk Publishers, 1998) and explain how they were applied to our material with special attention to the needs of the language learner.

2.1 Principles of selecting the lexical material

First we will discuss the principles of selecting the lexical material, i.e. grading, and usage frequency.

2.1.1 Grading

The number of words included in the dictionary is in accordance with the level of language proficiency of the learner and reflects the principle of grading. This means that at the initial stage of learning the learner needs a limited number of words and their basic meanings. But later, his vocabulary may be increased in two ways: *extensive* and *intensive*. By *extensive* we mean that the learner should be provided with new words, while the *intensive* way of building up vocabulary means an increase in the number of senses when dealing with polysemantic words. In our opinion, this approach should find its reflection in any learner's dictionary.

2.1.2 Usage frequency

Our own theoretical studies and practical experience in compiling a BLD have also proved that the concept of frequency should be viewed somewhat differently from its traditional interpretation with regard to general-purpose monolingual dictionaries.

Monolingual dictionaries constitute the most important source of linguistic information for the compiler of a BLD including frequency data. As far as the frequency of usage is concerned, corpus-based dictionaries are considered to be most reliable and, no wonder, are recommended for this purpose. But being general-purpose, these dictionaries display some characteristics every compiler of BLDs should be fully aware of, i.e. they do not take into account some specific needs of foreign learners of English, or rather the needs of some particular groups of potential users. This means that compilers of BLDs must use the linguistic material contained in such dictionaries very selectively and cautiously. Without questioning the quality of the corpora, the BLD compiler should use some additional criteria when making a final decision about the inclusion of a certain word as a main-entry into the BLD. Here, it is necessary to consider the requirements of the potential users of the dictionary whose needs can be accounted for by the fact that they are foreign learners of English, by their level of cultural and linguistic sophistication, their particular spheres of interests and activities and their age.

Moreover, the general frequency tendencies of the source language, English in our case, should be very skillfully combined with those of the target language the native language of the dictionary users. The two languages reflect the world of those who use them.

The compilers of BLDs should, first and foremost, select the core vocabulary of the source language for including words with the highest frequency in the dictionary as headwords. In modern MLDs the core vocabulary is built on the basis of corpora analysis. However, it is quite obvious that as far as texts about the life and culture in the country where the target language is used are concerned, the number of such texts in corpora is limited. Consequently, the frequency of words denoting social realia, concepts and issues topical for the country of the target language may be rather low. Then, a question is bound to arise. Should we include such words of the source language as headwords in the BLD because of the special requirements of the target language speakers?

Our own practical experience has shown that we sometimes had to include in our dictionary words and word-combinations whose frequency is relatively low in English but which are needed by Russian users of English in describing the world they live in. Words and phrases used to talk about the Russian Orthodox Church can serve as a typical illustration of this point. They are included in the dictionary because they reflect a growing interest in religious issues in modern Russian society.

A language learner uses a dictionary not only as a source of linguistic information but also as a source of cultural, historical and other kinds of factual information [Kozyreva 1998]. Therefore, the learner's dictionary should raise the cultural awareness of its users. Consequently, compilers of BLDs should set themselves the task of providing some factual information alongside purely linguistic data. The selection of facts, dates, numbers and names included in a BLDs should be made thoroughly and the amount of factual material must be also carefully measured.

2.2 Principles of arranging the material within the BLD

Next we will concentrate on some principles of arranging the linguistic material within an entry of the BLD because for a user of the BLD the microstructure of the dictionary, i.e. the structure of an entry, is of paramount importance. It is essential for a dictionary maker not only to select the lexical material properly but also to organise it in the most effective way.

2.2.1 Simplicity and clarity

The organisation of the material in the dictionary and its metalanguage should be clear and simple and the structure has to be as transparent as possible, while providing enough information to indicate how and where each particular word is used in modern English.

2.2.2 Didactic effectiveness

The principle of didactic effectiveness implies that everything within the entry should be pedagogically oriented and prescriptive. In order to succeed in implementing this principle the system of prescriptions has been worked out in accordance with the three levels of the description of vocabulary, i.e. structural, semantic and functional. We will confine ourselves here to reviewing only the first type of prescriptions.

The group of structural prescriptions includes grammar notes, which are given in brackets. In most cases they are laconic, e.g. *обыкн pl*, *обыкн pass*, but sometimes for purely teaching purposes they can get much longer, e.g. *в сочетании с инфинитивом выражает должностное действие от с глагольными формами особен с. р. р.*

Such explanatory notes are important for a Russian learner of English because they attract user's attention to the form of a word or the structure of some expression. Due to their explicitness this kind of prescriptions can be called *direct* in contrast to *indirect* prescriptions, i.e. when some other grammatical phenomena are reflected in the illustrative material. For example, when we illustrate the adjective *small* in its first meaning we adduce such examples as a *small room/town*, *to buy a smaller house*, *the smallest church in England*. Such examples demonstrate how the degrees of comparison of one-syllable adjectives are usually formed. *Indirect* structural prescriptions are of great help as far as the use of verb forms is concerned. Thus, a very carefully

balanced combination of *direct* and *indirect* prescriptions on all these levels is an effective way of achieving the main goal of a bilingual learner's dictionary.

2.2.3 Exemplification of usage

In a production-oriented bilingual dictionary illustrative material is paramount because it is examples that help the users to realize how this or that word lives in the language and how it can be used in their own speech. Thus, exemplification of usage as one of basic principles underlying learner's dictionaries resulted from the urgent practical needs of their users.

As is well-known our speech consists of creative productive components as well as recurrent constructions which are more or less fixed and as a result can be easily reproduced in different contexts. These recurrent combinations are called *restricted* collocations. These collocations occupying the intermediate position between free word combinations and idioms proper are of great importance, since it is these collocations that make the learner's speech idiomatic. In order to teach the learners on the one hand to recognise *restricted* collocations in oral and written speech and on the other hand to use them properly it is necessary to include such kinds of collocations in the learner's dictionary.

It is also worth mentioning that even the number of examples illustrating each word becomes meaningful in the learner's dictionary. The more widely the word is used the more restricted collocations it has. Thus the number of examples is a kind of a signal for the user of the learner's dictionary. If a word has a lot of examples, the user should pay special attention to its typical usage and this word should be included in his active vocabulary. By the way in this case we deal with *indirect* functional prescriptions which implicitly show how a certain word functions in speech.

The problem of presenting restricted collocations as a part of illustrative material is also of primary concern for a dictionary maker. Bearing in mind the fact that the dictionary in question is a production-oriented dictionary, we should present restricted collocations in the most general form. This enables the learner to use them effectively in different contexts. Let's consider the entry "**gain** II" which contains linguistic information about the verb *gain*:

gain II *v* **1.** получать приобретать, добиваться. **to ~ access to smb/smith** получить доступ к кому-л/чему-л.; **to ~ a victory/the majority of votes** одержать победу/получить большинство голосов; **to ~ recognition** добиться признания; **what will he ~ by that?** чего он этим добьется **2.** увеличивать, набирать: **to ~ height/speed** набирать высоту/скорость **his watch has ~ ed five minutes since yesterday** его часы за сутки ушли на пять минут вперед.

In the adduced example the two meanings of the verb *gain* are illustrated with the restricted verb collocations of the type V+N in the most general form, i.e. the infinitive form. But at the same time, we consider broadening the context to a sentence to be very important particularly in those cases when it is necessary to demonstrate the difference in the structure of the English and Russian sentences and, thus, it helps the learner to avoid any mistakes (e.g. *his watch has ~ ed five minutes since yesterday*). It should be mentioned in this connection that when structuring entries and choosing illustrative material we were able due to many years' experience

of teaching English to Russian students to take into account not only current usage in modern English of words selected for inclusion in the dictionary but also the kind of difficulties Russian speakers might encounter when using them. In most cases this is reflected in examples and their translations. But in some cases we intentionally draw the user's attention to such difficulties by means of a special sign of **NB** and brackets in which the information on the usage peculiarities of the word in question is given, e.g.:

gay *adj* **1.** весёлый ~ **laughter** весёлый смех **the** ~ **voices of children** весёлые/радостные голоса детей **2.** яркий, пёстрый (о красках): ~ **colours** пёстрые цвета; ~ **flowers** яркие цветы **3.** разг. гомосексуальный ~ **to be** быть гомосексуалистом; **a** ~ **bar** бар для гомосексуалистов [**NB:** в настоящее время слово, в основном, употребляется в значении 3]

This feature of our dictionary together with some others outlined above manifests its instructive character, thus making it an indispensable tool in foreign language learning.

2.3 “Bilingual” teamwork as a means of establishing credibility and reliability

The compiler should remember that examples can play their didactic role only if they are reliable. Let us explain what we mean by reliability. Needless to say, dictionary makers should use the most authoritative and up-to-date sources of linguistic information. But they also need to cooperate with their British or American colleagues on most complicated issues. Their help becomes invaluable in order to consistently apply the principle of reliability in the dictionary. The dictionary in question is the outcome of a joint project of Russian and English linguists from Moscow State University and the University of Leeds (Great Britain). It is an concrete example of teamwork. And we share Professor Ilson's opinion that fleshware as well as hardware and software is one of the keys to success [Ilson 1999].

3 Conclusion

In this paper we have made an attempt to outline some basic principles used in the dictionary under discussion and conditioned by the practical needs of Russian learners of English. We believe that this dictionary as compared to a traditional bilingual reception dictionary is a step forward because of its prescriptive character and that it can be effectively used by Russian learners of English for both reception and production purposes.

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