

General Monolingual Persian Dictionaries and Their Users: A Case Study

Saghar Sharifi

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Abstract

User needs and user satisfaction have unfortunately been neglected in the compilation of Persian dictionaries. This article aims to investigate five general monolingual Persian dictionaries in terms of their meeting user needs and the extent of user satisfaction with them. The investigated dictionaries are *Dehkhoda*, *Mo'een*, *Amid*, *Farhange Farsie Emrooz*, and *Sokhan*. To assess user needs, different groups of users, based on Assi (1995), filled up questionnaires, and some were interviewed; some statistical procedures, such as the chi-square significance test, were used. The objectives of this study were to identify the users' reference needs and the relationship between these needs and social variables. Moreover, the extent of the users' satisfaction with the mentioned dictionaries, the relation of this satisfaction to the social variables, and the necessity of certain qualifications in users were assessed. It was found that the users' educational background was the only determining factor in their amount of dictionary use, in their finding the desired information, and in their satisfaction with the dictionary.

1. Introduction

The lexicographic tradition of Iran spans more than several centuries. Nonetheless, dictionaries compiled in this country face inconsistencies and shortcomings, which prevent such dictionaries from efficiently meeting the needs of their users. Over the past decades, user perspective has been a point of debate in lexicography, the considerations of which could contribute to the compilation of proper and more efficient dictionaries. Although Samuel Johnson stated that one who uses a dictionary expects to find the solution to his problem in it, taking the user into consideration has been a subject of notice in recent centuries. In this respect, linguists and lexicographers, such as Zgusta (1971), Hartmann (1983), Wiegand (1987), Bergenholtz and Tarp (2003), and Tarp (2009), have discussed the user and focused on his role, his needs and skills, the situations of dictionary use, information items, and methods of access to the information.

According to Wiegand's *Lexicographic Theory* (1987: 200), dictionaries are usage tools designed to meet special needs of humans. He regards dictionaries as having 'genuine purpose' and introduces their real aim by referring to them as means of obtaining special information about language (quoted from Tarp, 2008: 28-32).

In the same way, in *Function Theory*, which is based on Wiegand's and a resultant of current lexicographic theories, one can see similar points. One principle that these two share is that meeting the objective needs of users and presenting lexicographic data in a dictionary entails the preparation of a 'user profile' and the 'situations of use' in which a problem occurs. (Bergenholtz & Tarp, 2003: 173; Tarp, 2009: 25-26). In other words, what is considered today is that all theoretical and practical considerations in lexicography should be based on determining user needs, that is, what is needed to solve the problems of special users in special language situations.

Therefore, in this research, which is among the pioneer works in Iran, the reference needs of Persian-speaking users and the extent of their satisfaction with five general monolingual Persian dictionaries, i.e., *Dehkhoda*, *Mo'een*, *Amid*, *Farhange Farsie Emrooz*, and *Sokhan*, were investigated. To assess user needs, different groups of users filled up

questionnaires, and some were interviewed; several statistical procedures, such as the chi-square significance test, were used. The results of such a research could reveal the shortcomings of Persian dictionaries and could be applied in practical lexicography via the compilation of user-friendly dictionaries.

2. Background of research

Most international researches done on the user have focused on monolingual and bilingual dictionaries through the distribution of questionnaires to different groups of users, native speakers and language learners, adults and children, and mostly students. Among these researches one could name the works of Barnhart (1962), Quirk (1973), Tomaszczyk (1979), Baxter (1980), Béjoint (1981), Greenbaum et al. (1984), Laufer (1992), and Laufer and Melamed (1994). In these researches, the lexical items searched by users, the amount of dictionary use, the kind of dictionary used, the shortcomings of the dictionaries, and the type of activity for which the dictionary was used were investigated.

In Iran, a few works have been done, one of which is Assi (1995). In his work, Assi proposes the determination of lexicographic priorities, the type of dictionaries needed, and a plan for the desired format, content, and methods used in compiling dictionaries. Referring to the present status of dictionaries and lexicography, he reminds us of dictionary typologies from linguists and lexicographers' prospects, such as Scherba, Malkiel, Zgusta, Alkassimi, and Hartmann, and lists the negative and positive points of each. Finally he presents his own classification, which has been derived from positive points mentioned in the previous ones. He depicts user needs, the most important factor in determining the dictionary type, and different groups of users, the main factor for determining the specifications of a dictionary, on a diagram. The specifications form the three stages of compiling a dictionary, namely, policy-making and planning, design, and production. The junction of the two vertical and horizontal axes determines the type and specifications of a dictionary, as in Table 1.

Table 1. The decisive factors and features in dictionary-making.

Variables: Dictionary features Factors: at different user groups stages with different needs and re- quirements	Stage I:	Stage II:	Stage III:
	policy decision & planning Function subject purpose language(s) type	design Scope format Theory	production Content mode and method of compilation compiler(s)
Writers of { literary texts technical texts teaching materials	-----	-----	-----
Journalists	-----	-----	-----
Translators { L1 → L2 L2 → L1	-----	-----	-----
Teachers { second language LSP	-----	-----	-----
Learners { LSP second language { beginners advanced	-----	-----	-----
Specialists in science & technology terminologists businessmen abstractors librarians :	-----	-----	-----
	1 2 3 4 5	6 7 8	9 10 11

Another work on Persian lexicography is that of Vosughi (2004), which takes user needs into account. The work, focusing on dictionary types and the extent of information in them without taking into account the needs of a special group of users, gives general principles for the making of dictionaries.

In the theoretical part, Vosughi tries to collect criteria and methods of lexicography both in English and Persian dictionaries. He also searches the semantics, word formation, and mental vocabulary of language speakers. In the practical part, the reference needs of different groups of users who are involved with language in some way, such as students, literary men, and teachers, to name a few, are investigated (Vosughi, 2004: 134). He concludes that Persian users search 'meaning', 'pronunciation', and 'explanations' the most, and 'encyclopedic information' the least. He concludes further that many Persian users have no clear idea of the content of dictionaries, and thus of their real needs (Vosughi, 2004: 136). In the end, he offers

a list of 'information fields' in a comprehensive dictionary and proposes his model for dictionary making.

In Persian, another research work, which deals directly with the user's role, is that of Moohebat (2008). She regards the dictionary as a tool for solving the user's linguistic problems and believes that taking users into consideration and meeting their needs would be the important factors in determining dictionary type. In her research, she tries to identify users, all of them being university students majoring in translation, engineering, or medicine; she classifies their reference needs and realizes this attempt as a proper solution for rectifying the disorganized situation of lexicography in Iran. Her work is based on Assi's recommendation (1995), and her main concentration is on the first stage in lexicography, that is, planning or policy making.

Moohebat's work shows that the reference needs of users are mainly receptive. Most users lack sufficient awareness of the nature of the dictionary that they use – bilingual versus monolingual, general versus technical, learner dictionary versus a dictionary for native speakers. Most of these users do not refer to 'outside matter', use dictionaries mainly for 'translation', and search 'meaning', 'spelling', and 'pronunciation'. Most of them have not been trained on how to use a dictionary, and dictionary 'price' is the most important to them when choosing one to buy. Finally, the author emphasizes the role of user training and proposes a suitable dictionary structure for each group of users.

3. Research procedures

3.1. *Objectives.*

The objectives of this study were to identify the users' reference needs and the relationship between these needs and social variables (the users' age, education level, and major, that is, human sciences versus other majors such as engineering, medicine, etc.). Moreover, the extent of the users' satisfaction with the mentioned dictionaries, the relationship between social variables and this satisfaction, and certain qualifications in the users were assessed.

3.2. *Methods and tools.*

To collect data, questionnaires were distributed among the 127 users. In the first part of the questionnaire the users were asked about their personal information (age, educational background, specialty or study major, and occupation). Later, to identify the reference needs of the users and to evaluate the monolingual dictionaries, they were asked about the dictionaries they used most often, the frequency of referring to a dictionary, their knowledge on how to use dictionaries, their reference to different chapters, shortcomings of the dictionaries from their points of view, and their priorities when buying a dictionary.

Ten respondents and six Iranian lexicographers were also interviewed, with the results provided after statistical analysis.

This research used distribution frequency and percentage in the descriptive statistics and chi-square test in the inferential statistics. The sampling community covers several Persian-speaking people in Iran and non-Persian-speaking people now learning the language in Iran. The social variables, as mentioned earlier, were the users' age, education level and major, and occupation. In other words, the aim was to measure the relationship between these variables and the users' needs, satisfaction, and skills.

The dictionaries investigated were general monolingual Persian dictionaries, brief descriptions of which follow.

1. *Loghatnāmeḥ Dehkhoda (Dehkhoda's Dictionary)*

Dehkhoda was the first and is the most comprehensive Persian encyclopedic dictionary. The new edition is introduced in 14 volumes and includes 21149 revised pages. It contains important Persian and Arabic words, the names of people and localities, and numerous prose and poetry senses and examples.

2. *Frahang-e Farsi-e Amid (Amid Persian Dictionary)*

Amid is a two-volume dictionary in 2003 pages, containing short definitions and few examples.

3. *Frahang-e Farsi-e Mo'een (Mo'een Persian Dictionary)*

Mo'een is a six-volume dictionary: four volumes contain words and the other two contain proper nouns. It includes many Farsi words and expressions, as well as Arabic, Turkish, Mongolian, Indian, and European words and expressions frequently used in Persian, together with some words appearing in Persian prose and poetry, some slang words, and words certified by the Persian Language Academy.

4. *Frahang-e Farsi-e Emrooz (Modern Persian Dictionary)*

According to what the author claims in the introduction, this one-volume dictionary in 829 pages is a general dictionary rather than a technical one. The user, too, is a person with a high school degree who might encounter a word in the media, books, or the press, and for which he is anxious to obtain some kind of information.

5. *Frahang-e Bozorg-e Sokhan (Sokhan Comprehensive Dictionary)*

Sokhan is an eight-volume general monolingual Persian dictionary in 8592 pages. The language scope of this dictionary is both Standard Persian, spoken in Tehran and used by the media, and Old Persian, the Persian language in the Post-Islamic Era.

4. Results

4.1. Results Gained from the Questionnaire

The results gained from the responses to the questionnaire are summarized below.

4.1.1. *Reference needs of the users.* To determine the users' reference needs, questions were asked regarding the dictionary they use most frequently, the amount of dictionary use, the information items searched most often, the dictionary parts referred to, and the situation(s) of use. The results are as follows:

- In all the mentioned groups, except among Persian learners, the older dictionaries, that is, *Dehkhoda*, *Amid*, and *Mo'een*, have the highest percentage in the users' first priority. In other words, Persian users tend to use older dictionaries more frequently. Of the two newest dictionaries, *Sokhan* is used mostly by younger users, those who major in the human science, Persian learners, and M.A./M.Sc or PhD holders. *Farsi-e Emrooz* is the least known and the least used in all groups. The results can be seen in Fig. 1.

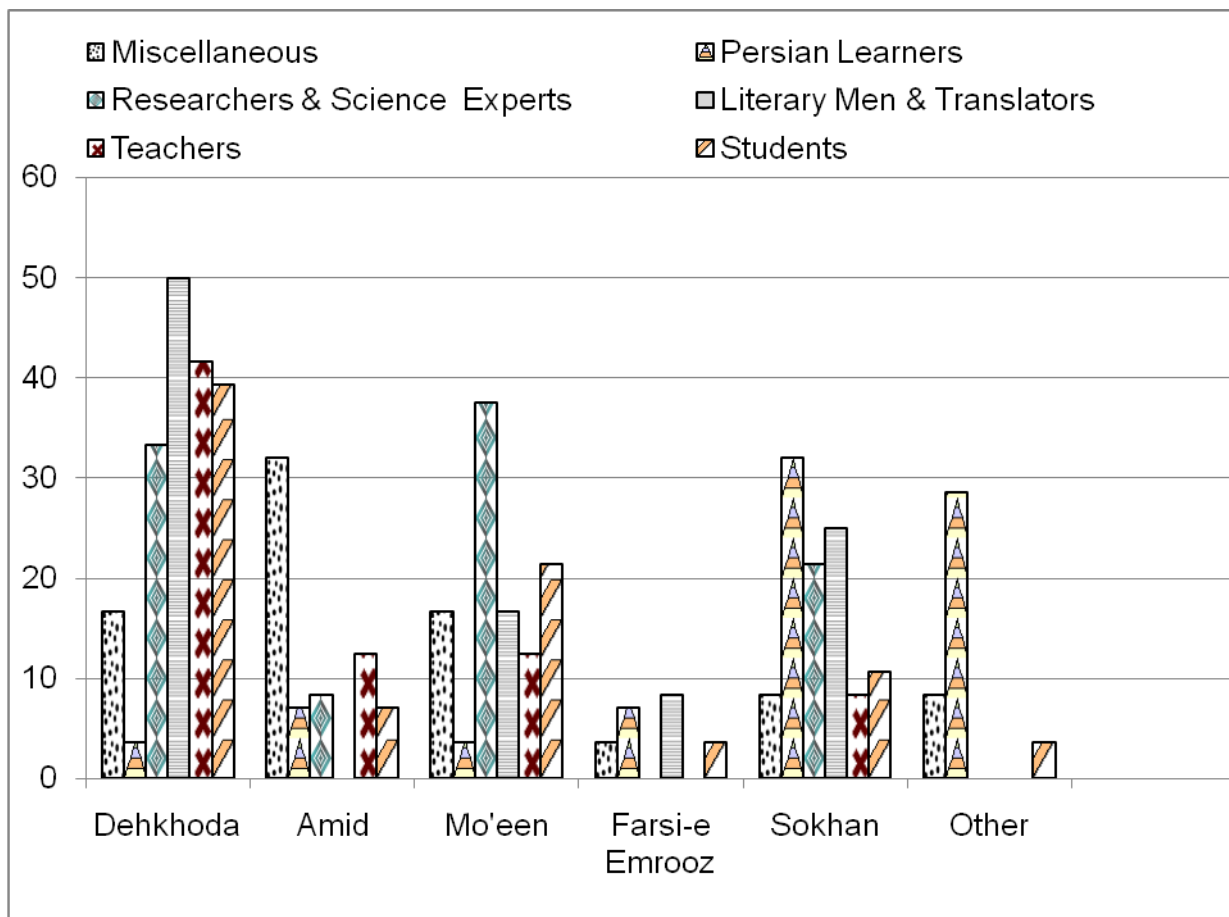


Figure 1. Users' first priority in the dictionary they use according to their occupation.¹

- In all user groups, except those under 20 years of age and non-Persian speakers, at least half of the users refer to a dictionary at a 'medium' amount, as seen in Table 2. According to the results of chi-square analysis, an education major is the only determining factor in the extent of dictionary use.

Table 2. Amount of dictionary use ('medium' and more) in users.

Occupation	Percent	age	Percent	Educational background	Percent	Degree	Percent
Students	57.1	Over 50	71.4	Human Science	65.4	PhD	60.8
Teachers	66.6	41-50	79.2	Other	45.4	MA/MSc	61.8
Writers	83.3	31-40	47.6			BA/BSc	54.3
Researchers	58.3	21-30	55.6			Post High School	80
Persian learners	42.8	20 & less	20			High school diploma	50
Miscellaneous	58.3						

- In all the mentioned groups, most of the users refer to dictionaries mainly for receptive purposes, that is, when 'reading' texts. Productive activities such as 'translation and editing' and 'writing' rank next. These results can be seen in Fig. 2.

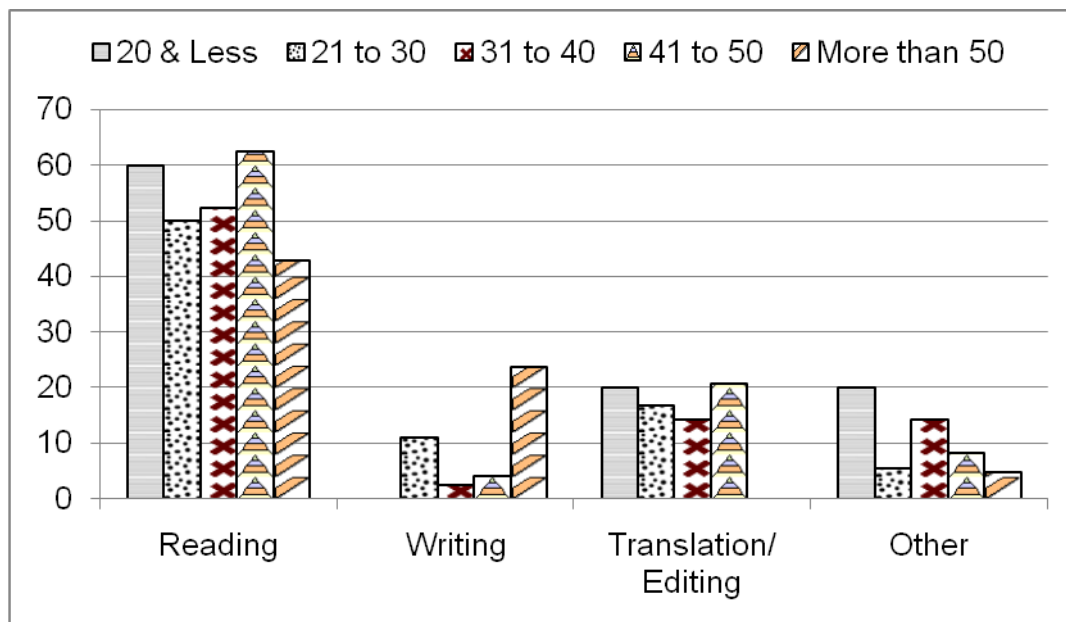


Figure 2. Users' first priority in Situation of use according to their age.

- In all the mentioned groups, users look for the 'meaning of the word' rather than other information items, with 'pronunciation' and 'spelling' ranking next (Fig. 3).

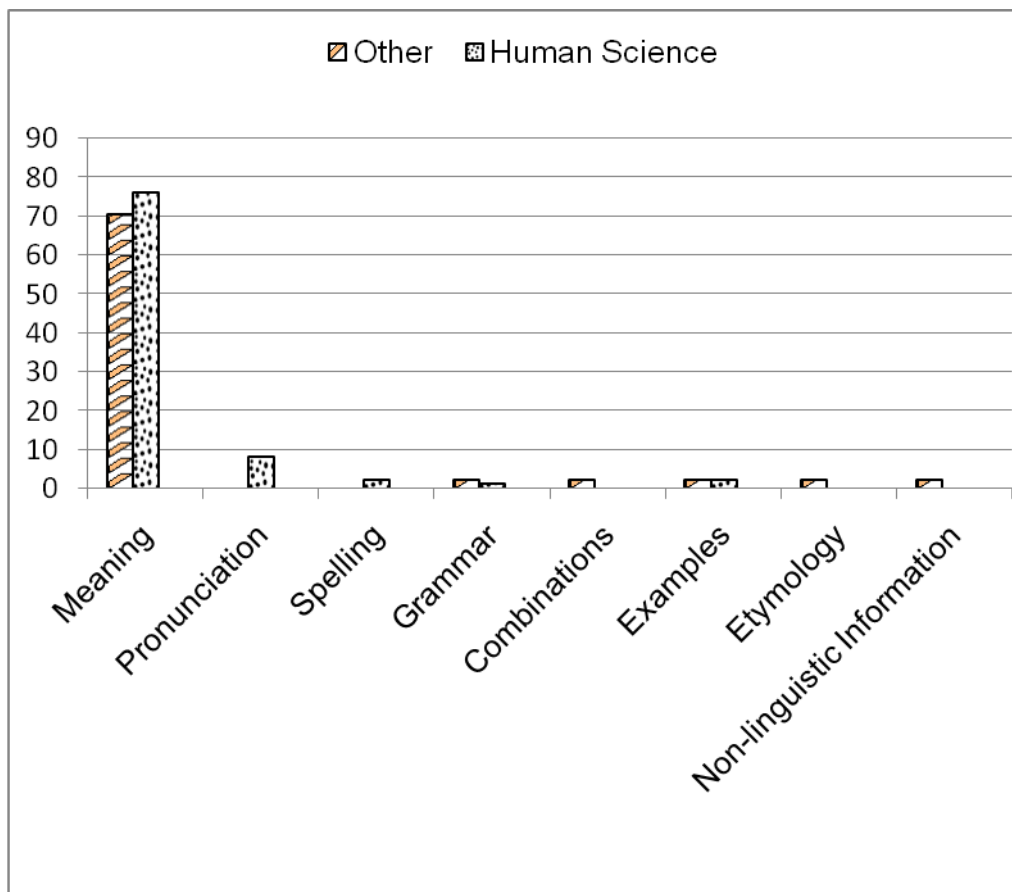


Figure 3. Users' first priority in information items searched according to their educational background.

- A minority of the users refer to 'outside matter' in the dictionaries. The results from chi-square analysis revealed that none of the variables are determining factors when referring to 'outside matter'. These results can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Users' reference to 'outside matter'.

Occupation	Percent	Age	Percent	Educational Background	Percent	Degree	Percent
Students	3.6	Over 50	14.3	Human Science	8.3	PhD	3.6
Teachers	4.2	41-50	8.3	Other	11.4	MA/MSc	17.6
writers	16.7	31-40	9.5			BA/BSc	5.1
Researchers	20.8	21-30	8.3			Post High School	40
Persian learners	10.7	20 & less	—			High school diploma	—
Miscellaneous	33.3						

- For most users, 'the author's reputation' is the most encouraging factor when buying a dictionary, with 'accuracy of the information' and 'number of entries' standing next in rank (Fig. 4).

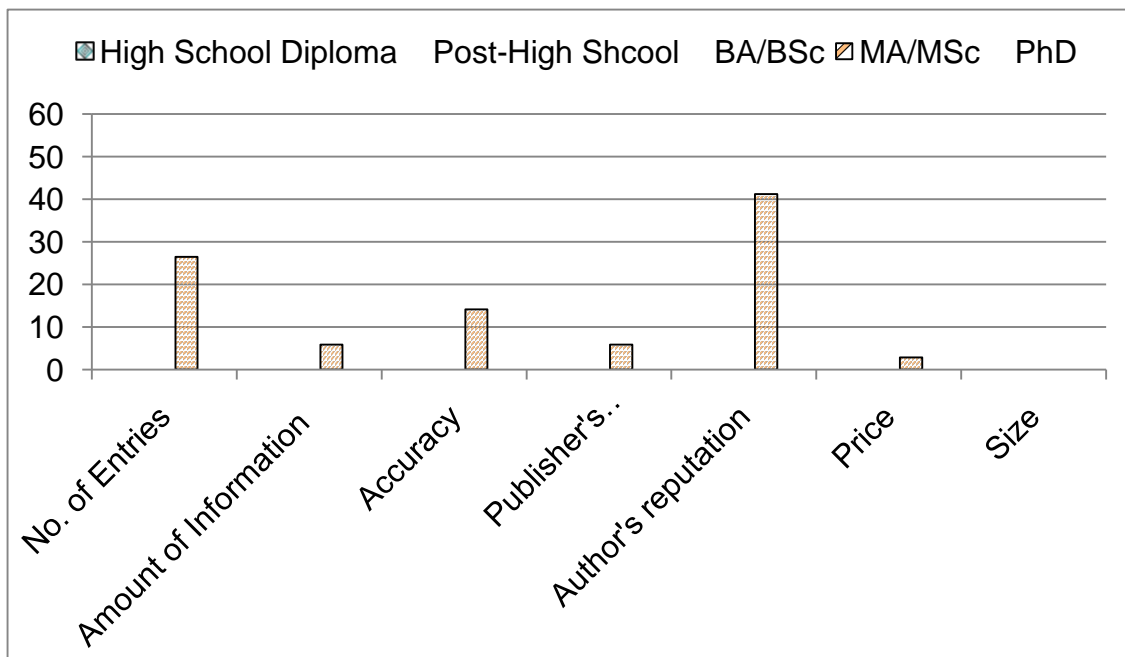


Figure 4. Users' first priority in important features when buying a dictionary according to their degree.

4.1.2. *Users' satisfaction.* To measure user satisfaction with the investigated dictionaries, the respondents were asked if they find the intended information, which items are found more easily, and, in general, if their needs are met. If not, in what respects. The results are as follows:

- User satisfaction with the dictionaries is at a considerable level, with half of the users in all groups getting access to their proposed information in the dictionaries 'most of the time' or 'always'. Results from chi-square analysis showed 'age' and 'occupation' to be the determining factors to access to the proposed information. Table 4 shows these results.

Table 4. Frequency ('most of the time' or 'always') of finding the desired information.

Occupation	Percent	Age	Percent	Educational Background	Percent	Degree	Percent
Students	67.8	Over 50	90.5	Human Science	90.5	PhD	71.4
Teachers	66.7	41-50	62.5	Other	62.5	MA/MSc	70.5
Writers	75	31-40	66.7			BA/BSc	62.7
Researchers	83.3	21-30	61.1			Post High School	80
Persian learners	46.4	20 & less	40			High school diploma	50
Miscellaneous	75						

- In this research, all the users refer to three types of information that are more easily accessible as the first option. These are 'meaning', 'pronunciation', and 'spelling'. Among these, 'meaning' is more accessible than the other two. Fig. 5 shows the results.

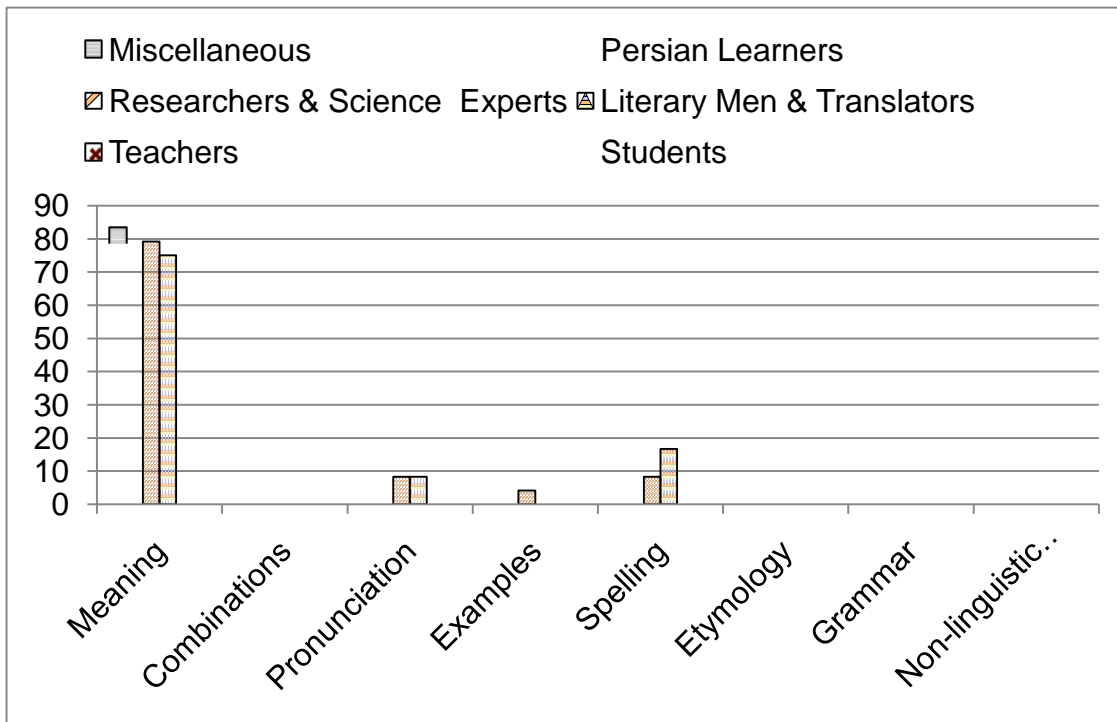


Figure 5. Users' first priority in finding information types easily according to their occupation.

- In all the groups, 'not finding a word' was claimed to be the most frequent shortcoming of dictionaries (Fig. 6).

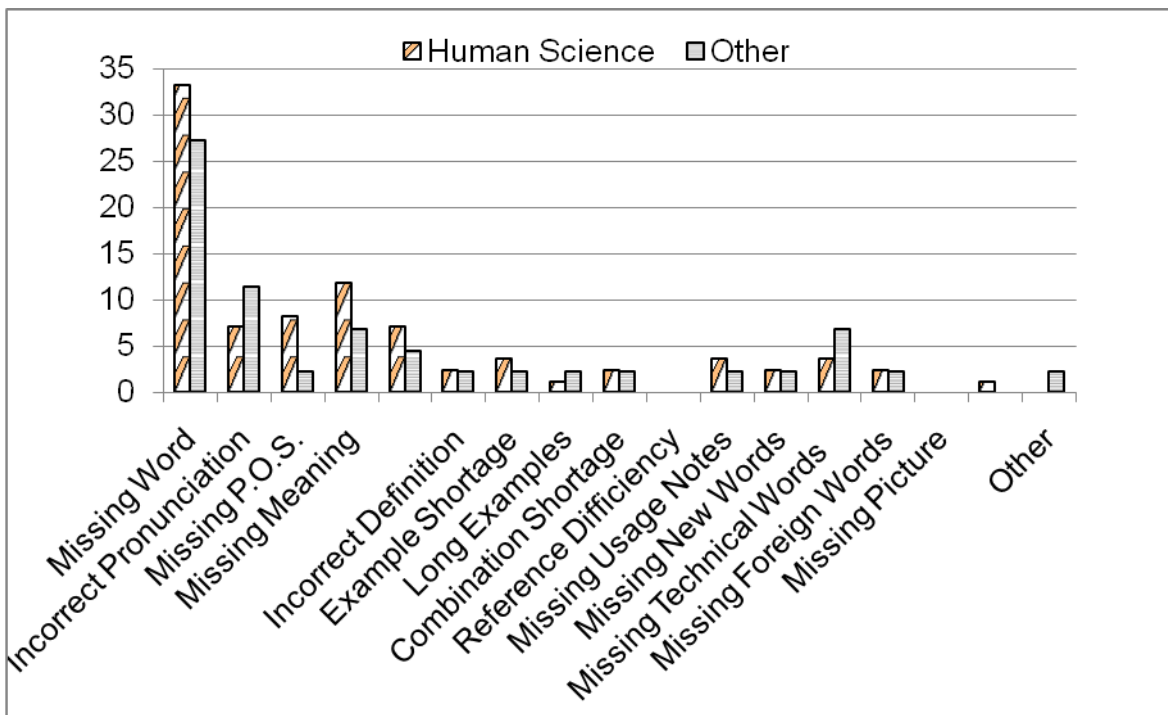


Figure 6. Users' first priority in the most frequent shortcoming of dictionaries according to their educational background.

- In general, in all the user groups, 'missing data' and 'offering out-of-date information' are, in turns, the most frequently claimed shortcomings of the Persian dictionaries (Fig. 7).

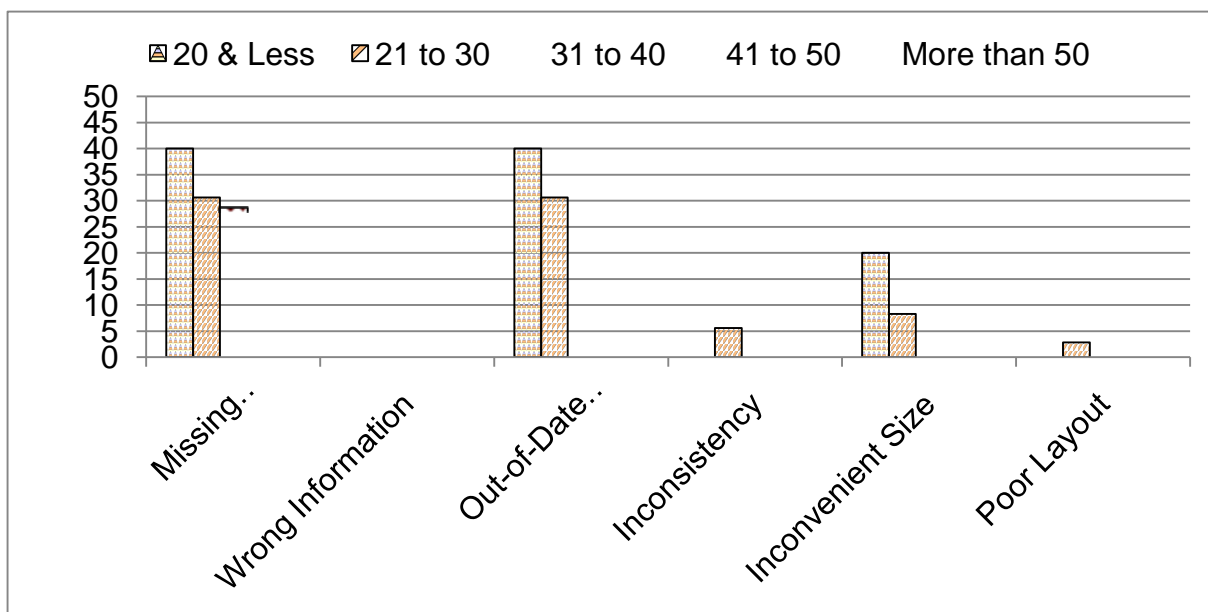


Figure 7. Users' first priority in shortcoming of dictionaries in general according to their age.

- About four-fifths of the users in all the mentioned groups are satisfied with the dictionaries. According to the results gained from chi-square analysis, the users' field of education and their degrees are the determining factors in this regard. Table 5 shows these results.

Table 5. Users' satisfaction with the dictionaries.

Occupation	Percent	Age	Percent	Educational Background	Percent	Degree	Percent
Students	71.4	Over 50	90.4	Human science	85.7	PhD	78.6
Teachers	83.3	41-50	91.7	Other	75	MA/MSc	85.3
Writers	91.7	31-40	80.9			BA/BSc	81.3
Researchers	95.9	21-30	69.5			Post High School	100
Persian learners	75	20 & less	100			High school diploma	50
Miscellaneous	83.3						

4.1.3. *Users' reference skills.* Since meeting users' needs requires their being able to use a dictionary efficiently, the users were asked about any kind of training in this regard.

- Only a small number of users have been trained on how to use a dictionary. None of the variables indicate users' training qualification on how to use a dictionary. Table 6 presents these results.

Table 6. Users' training background.

Occupation	Percent	Age	Percent	Educational Background	Percent	Degree	Percent
Students	10.7	Over 50	9.5	Human Science	26.2	PhD	21.4

Teachers	16.7	41-50	16.7	Other	6.8	MA/MSc	17.6
Writers	41.7	31-40	21.4			BA/BSc	20.3
Researchers	20.8	21-30	22.2			Post High School	20
Persian learners	25	20 & less	40			High school diploma	—
Miscellaneous	8.3						

4.2. Results gained from interviews

The data gathered from interviews were very similar to those from the questionnaire. The interviews with lexicographers revealed that members of this group use the dictionaries and are satisfied with them the same way as ordinary users are. Moreover, their knowledge about dictionaries was similar to that of ordinary users and followed some kind of habit or tradition. The most significant difference between lexicographers and ordinary users is the former's extent of referring to the 'outside matter' in dictionaries and seeking 'non-linguistic information'.

5. Conclusion

The responses in the questionnaire and the interviews reveal that most users tend to use older dictionaries. Most of them refer to a dictionary when 'reading a text' and engage in 'searching the meaning' most often. Furthermore, they regard 'the author's reputation' as the most important factor when buying a dictionary. Considering that most users have not been trained academically and systematically to use a dictionary, we come to the conclusion that most users do not have the required knowledge on how to select a dictionary properly enough to meet their needs. In most cases, they are traditionally influenced by the author's name and reputation, rather than by other determining factors, when buying a dictionary.

Moreover, the statistical analysis reveals that the study major of the user is an effective and determining factor in connection with the frequency of referring to a dictionary, finding the data in the relevant part, and the user's satisfaction with the dictionary. This indicates that people's knowledge and information on dictionaries and the way of using it greatly relate to their educational background. In the other words, education plays an important and effective role in their performance.

The other point is that users seem to be satisfied with the existing dictionaries. Since the mentioned dictionaries suffer from shortcomings in both their content and structure, sticking to the use of certain dictionaries might result from the users' lack of proper training. Furthermore, the users' satisfaction with the existing dictionaries is probably due to the fact that creditable and standard dictionaries are not easily accessible. Therefore, based on the findings of this study, it could be concluded that compiling a new general monolingual dictionary is not an immediate necessity in the Persian-speaking society. Thus, focusing on special dictionaries such as a children's dictionary, a student's dictionary, etc., must be considered of priority. On the other hand, according to the extracted data, revising the existing dictionaries and enriching their user-friendly aspects should be taken into consideration at the next step.

Finally, a comparison of this work, which was done on a more varied groups of respondents, with the works of Barnhart (1962), Quirk (1973), Béjoint (1981), Greenbaum et al. (1984) and Laufer (1992) reveals that the reference needs of the Persian users are similar to

those stated in these works. In terms of information, both groups mainly sought 'meaning', 'pronunciation', and 'spelling' in dictionaries. Further, like the respondents in Quirk (1973), most Persian-speaking users do not normally refer to 'outside matter' in dictionaries. Where user satisfaction is concerned, 'difficulty' or 'incomprehensibility of the definitions' were mentioned by the users, while Persian-speaking users claimed 'missing data' and 'offering out-of-date information' to be the main shortcomings in Persian dictionaries.

Note

¹ The classification of the users' occupations is based on Assi (1995).

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