

## **The Different Functions of Illustrative Examples in Learners' Bilingual Dictionaries**

**Compiling a dictionary around illustrative examples:**

### **The Experience of the Larousse School French-English, English-French Dictionary**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper deals with specific functions illustrative examples perform in the Larousse School French-English English French Dictionary, a learner's dictionary intended for beginners published in 2002. Playing a central part in the lexicographical concept behind this dictionary, illustrative examples are used systematically in a pedagogical approach to show the translation of the headword in context and to help users learn the language through context and association. They also serve to distinguish between the different senses of a word, thereby allowing for a simple structure of entries adapted to the needs of young learners. Finally, they greatly contribute to making the dictionary user-friendly and provide a valuable initiation in the use of bilingual dictionaries.

#### **1. Introduction**

When formulating the concept of this new dictionary for young learners of English, we came across what we think is one of the most basic needs of beginner users of bilingual dictionaries: finding their way around the entry to get to the information they are looking for, i.e. the translation of a word, or a particular meaning of a word. Indeed, we knew that a typical behaviour of users of dictionaries is to look first for the examples, as a reflex to spot text that is familiar to them in the way it is written, before reading the lexicographic metalanguage. We therefore assumed that young learners, because they are beginner users of bilingual dictionaries, would be even more likely to rely mostly on examples to find their way in entries, as lexicographical indicators are new to them. Research we carried out among language teachers confirmed that examples did help young users to find their way

around bilingual dictionary entries. To meet this and other learning needs of young users, we thus placed examples at the centre of the structure of this dictionary and referred to them as *illustrative examples* as opposed to set phrases, grammatical structures and compounds. Illustrative examples are the backbone of this dictionary. Almost all the headwords and senses in this dictionary have at least one example. Those that do not are concrete and basic words which we thought did not need to be contextualized. Compound nouns, important structures and set phrases adequate for the beginner's level are shown at the end of the entries, underlined and also followed by illustrative examples.

In the first part of this paper, we will explain the different functions illustrative examples have in the School Dictionary and how we use examples not only as descriptive pieces of text, but also as sense indicators. We will moreover show the pedagogical value of examples which, in our view, help users learn a language through context and become aware of the culture behind that language. In the second part, we will discuss the difficulty of selecting the examples so that they perform a particular function, or several functions, and the essential part they can play in making the dictionary an attractive and interesting learning tool.

## **2. Compiling a New Bilingual Learner's Dictionary around the Example**

The French-English, English-French School Dictionary is not the reduced or adapted version of an existing dictionary. It is the result of much thought and research and represents for us a new way of conceiving a bilingual tool that focuses on satisfying the learning needs of young users.

When we first started working on the general aim of this bilingual dictionary for young learners of English and thinking of examples as the principal means of conveying information of different nature, we were convinced that they should have a greater illustrative purpose than those used in our traditional bilingual dictionaries. As Dugardin (2000) points out, the main purposes of examples in learners' dictionaries are illustrative ones: examples must show how language works. They must illustrate how the headword behaves grammatically and how it collocates. We were also aware of the encoding role examples must play in a bilingual learner's dictionary and applied what Dugardin (2000) states regarding the different approaches to the decoding and encoding functions, to the conception of this dictionary. Thus our aim was that examples had to provide THE answer the user would be looking for in terms of context, collocation and grammar patterns, and also in terms of translation. Moreover, it soon became clear to us that, in order to be pedagogical, we had to be systematic in our approach and show at least one illustrative example for each sense of the headword, grammatical structures and set phrases.

On the other hand, we analysed the Larousse monolingual learners' dictionaries and those intended for 11 to 13 year-old school children, which also emphasize the role of the example as a means of showing context and language structures that are perfectly adapted to the users. As Pruvost (2002) accurately describes, a valuable methodology has been developed over the years at Larousse in the conception of monolingual learners' dictionaries. After serving a defining function, examples are now postdefinitional, i.e. they illustrate the definition by showing the headword in use in typical contexts. We thus considered applying this kind of examples to a bilingual learner's dictionary.

To confirm our analysis, we carried out research among secondary-school language teachers - especially of English – to determine what the real needs of young learners were and how learners responded to lexicographic material. We thus carried out in-depth interviews of teachers who taught English in different parts of France and in different types of school, i.e. schools with high academic standards and schools with average or low academic standards. We also assembled panels of English teachers to discuss what they thought was missing in our traditional bilingual dictionaries.

From this research, we learned that young users of our traditional bilingual French-English dictionaries found it difficult to read entries and almost never succeeded in retrieving the right information when looking for a translation. Indeed, in entries showing several meanings of a word, most users were unable to get past the first semantic category. Almost none of them read all the semantic categories in order to find the right translation and usually took the easy option of choosing the translation given in the first semantic category.

Another typical behaviour observed by teachers was that users only glanced through entries looking for the translation that seemed more exotic to them or far removed from the French word. Moreover, when several translations were given for a headword, or a particular meaning of a headword, they had trouble deciding which one they should use and nearly always ended up selecting the first one. However, whenever there were examples in the entries, most users read them and tried to find the translation they were looking for in the translation of the example.

### **A simple lexicographical concept**

From these observations we retained that the code of traditional dictionaries and lexicographical markers, especially sense indicators, were difficult to understand, and that examples did help users find their bearings in the structure of entries, and thus came up with the following simple lexicographical concept:

a word – or meaning of a word - = translation + example + translation

**mot** 1. word : *j'ai appris un nouveau mot en anglais* I've learned a new word in English

2. note : *Jonathan m'a laissé un mot pour dire où il était* Jonathan left me a note to say where he was

- Only *one* head translation so that users do not have to make a choice. This translation is the most generic equivalent of the headword and can be used to translate it in most contexts. Sometimes, two translations can be found if they are true synonyms, but there are few of them. When the American usage is different from the British one, two clearly marked translations are given.

- An example to *show the headword in context*.

- A translation of the example that *always shows* the translation of the headword in context.

The presentation of this dictionary is thus simpler and clearer, with no abbreviations: grammatical categories, register and inflexion indications are given in full. Moreover, to help users get quick and easy access to information, there are *no sense indicators*: semantic

categories are only marked with a number. As a result of this simplified structure of entries, illustrative examples play an important part in this dictionary, and have the following specific functions.

### **3. Illustrative examples: from a descriptive function to a structural function**

#### **3.1. Illustrative examples show context.**

As in actual language words are not isolated but exist in context, the first function of illustrative examples is to show situations in which the headword is usually used, taking into account the reader's age and needs. This descriptive function of the source language also serves the purpose of association of the reader's knowledge of his own language with the context offered in order to enable him or her to get the information he or she is looking for. Illustrative examples are also used in the Larousse School Dictionary to show contexts of typical patterning related to the headword: grammatical structures, collocations and phrases. So that they can be easily found, these typical patterns are shown with their illustrative examples at the end of the entries, or grammatical categories, separated from the semantic categories.

- fête** 1. party (*plural parties*) : *Matthieu fait une fête samedi* Matthieu is having a party on Saturday  
2. holiday : *le 14 juillet est la fête nationale en France* the 14<sup>th</sup> of July is France's national holiday

**penser ...**

*penser à quelqu'un* OU *à quelque chose* to think about somebody OU something ; *je pensais justement à toi* I was just thinking about you

**heure ...**

*de bonne heure* early : *je dois me lever de bonne heure* I have to get up early

Thus the first function of illustrative examples is to accompany the user from the source language to the target language in the translation process, which is new to the young learner. Illustrative examples satisfy the user's need for reassurance to start from the known to go to the unknown. Moreover, they have a pedagogical function through the typical lexical and grammatical patterns they illustrate, as young users are still in the process of learning their own language and need contexts to confirm usage of those patterns.

### **3.2. Illustrative examples show contextualized translation**

Through their translation, illustrative examples show the target language in context. The principle of this dictionary is that the head translation is also used in the translation of the example, thereby being shown in context. This enables the user to see how the translation of the headword associates with other words and is a reassuring proof that the translation given for the headword can actually be used in a context that is as natural and as typical as the context in the source language. This is an essential pedagogical value that illustrative examples give to this dictionary since users know that they can never fail, or mistranslate, if they use the head translation to translate the headword found in contexts that resemble the one given in the dictionary. As the School Dictionary is intended for beginner learners, the translation of the headword is the most generic one. Moreover, the contextualized translations of examples illustrating the headword, grammatical structures and set phrases, allow users to learn English by acquiring vocabulary and patterns.

**contrôle** test: *on a un contrôle d'anglais cet après-midi* we're having an English test this afternoon

### **3.3. Illustrative examples show cultural and encyclopaedic information**

A language is not solely composed of words interacting with one another, it has a close connection to the culture that produced it. Thus, learning a language is also getting to know the particular aspects of the culture behind it. Examples can play an essential part in showing culture by illustrating words that have a specific cultural dimension. Whenever it was possible we used examples to convey cultural information through illustrative contexts of simple words. Examples can also show information of an encyclopaedic nature, thus allowing the users of the dictionary to increase their general knowledge. This is from our standpoint an important function of illustrative examples.

**jonquille** daffodil : *la jonquille est l'emblème du pays de Galles* the daffodil is the emblem of Wales

**originally** à l'origine : *originally Covent Garden was a fruit and vegetable market* à l'origine Covent Garden était un marché aux fruits et légumes.

**dinosaure** dinosaur: *les dinosaures ont disparu il y a 65 millions d'années* dinosaurs became extinct 65 million years ago

Aside from setting the headword in context and providing encyclopaedic information, the above example also shows collocation (*les dinosaures ont disparu*) and its translation (became extinct).

### **3.4. Illustrative examples show meaning.**

In this dictionary, only the basic meanings of words are shown ordered according to frequency. These basic meanings are selected from monolingual dictionaries intended for

secondary school students, and the order in which they are presented is also that of our monolingual dictionaries or has been determined by the frequency of such meanings observed in the Larousse web corpus.

The illustrative examples given at each semantic category disambiguate the meanings of the headword, thereby helping users to choose the right translation when encoding. Contrastive, they act like sense indicators, and thus have a *structural function*. Because they are formulated in short sentences that are similar to the ones the readers have heard or read, they are clearer to young users than the metalanguage used in most bilingual dictionaries. This is a new and important function that illustrative examples can have in bilingual learners' dictionaries as it allows for a much *simpler structure of entries*, and a dictionary code free from the sense indicator norm imposed by traditional bilingual dictionaries.

- guide:** 1. guide: *il est guide de montagne* he's a mountain guide  
2. guidebook: *je cherche un guide sur l'Ecosse* I'm looking for a guidebook on Scotland

#### **4. Selecting illustrative examples**

Selecting the different kinds of illustrative examples according to the various types of words in the wordlist was an essential task in the compilation of this dictionary. The examples served a particular function, or several functions, according to the word they illustrated. In the case of nouns for instance, examples had to show meaning, and be contrastive in the entries with more than one sense. They also had to show how the noun behaved in simple contexts. In the case of verbs, adjectives, or adverbs, examples had to show meaning but also illustrate grammar patterns and collocations. All the examples had to generate a specific translation of the headword and show this translation in a natural and typical context.

It was sometimes difficult to find examples that actually combined all the functions we intended them to have. When the headword would allow it, we tried to give examples that would show cultural or encyclopaedic information. One of our main concern was to make sure the examples in this bilingual learner's dictionary, were perfectly adapted to the user's knowledge of the foreign language and would help him or her perform the encoding function. Finally, aside from serving one or several functions, the illustrative examples had to be lively and attractive in order to retain the user's attention.

##### **4.1. Where do the examples in this dictionary come from?**

Some of the examples on this French English side of the dictionary were taken from a database and a web corpus we use at Larousse to compile monolingual as well as bilingual dictionaries. Other examples were taken from our monolingual dictionaries intended for secondary school students. Some of the examples on the English French side of the dictionary were taken from our database and web corpus, and also from the British National Corpus.

According to Potter (1998), corpus-based examples contain valuable information on collocation, grammar and style that made-up examples cannot provide. Although we think *real* examples are very useful because they are the reflection of written and spoken language

and use such examples in our dictionaries, we were only able to select a small number of examples from our corpora when compiling the School dictionary.

Thus, all the examples taken from these different sources had to be adapted to serve the functions mentioned above and to meet the lexical and syntactic level of young learners. Indeed, most of the examples in the database could not be used as such in this dictionary either because they were too complicated or too long, or because they were intended to serve mainly the decoding function. As a learner's dictionary, the Larousse School dictionary emphasizes the encoding function and therefore its illustrative examples, aside from the functions mentioned above, had to allow young users to produce small and simple structures in the target language.

Examples taken from the web corpus and the BNC, although they provided authentic and natural contexts, were not satisfactory either for several reasons. First of all, they were not adapted to the kind of language a young learner is likely to produce or need to understand. Secondly, many examples from these corpora were usually too long and contained words, other than the headword, that complicated the context and would therefore divert the learner's attention if used in the dictionary, even if they were shortened.

Our French monolingual dictionaries, which also emphasize the need to show the headword in context through clear illustrative examples, provided a good source of examples, some of which had to be slightly adapted and shortened.

Therefore, very few of the examples taken from our database and the corpora combined the functions of showing meaning, context and the translation we wanted to show. Most of the illustrative examples of the Larousse School dictionary were thus written specifically for it or adapted from the above-mentioned corpora. These corpora were of great use for checking authenticity, grammar as well as lexical pattern. We thus agree with Humblé's (1998) point of view regarding the criteria that must be used when selecting the examples in a learner's dictionary and believe even more so in the case of a bilingual learner's dictionary. Like Humblé (1998), we think that examples have to be chosen according to the level of the learner and that lexicographer-made examples can meet the needs of beginner learners. The Larousse School dictionary being designed for beginners, we thus came to the conclusion that examples written by experienced lexicographers would best serve the particular pedagogical function, or functions, we intended them to have regarding either the source or the target language.

#### **4.2. Short, precise and natural examples showing up-to-date language**

Because the dictionary is aimed at secondary-school children starting to learn English, we emphasized very typical contexts and made a point of showing short and natural sentences that users of 11-13 years are likely to say, hear or read in their day-to-day life, as these are also the kinds of contexts that they are likely to want or need to translate. Selecting contrastive examples that explicitly showed the meaning of the headword was a main concern. As is often the case in bilingual dictionaries, finding examples that served descriptive, structural and pedagogical purposes on the one hand, and generated the translation we intended to show on the other hand was a difficult task that required the combined work of French speaking and English speaking lexicographers.

#### **4.3. The socio-cultural dimension**

As language and culture are interrelated, many illustrative examples deal with the socio-cultural environment of pre-teenagers and refer to school, sports, leisure activities, music, etc. It is important to take this dimension into account when writing examples in a learner's dictionary as we want the user to subscribe to the language used in it. Indeed, we think that this plays a decisive role both in the way the dictionary is perceived and how it helps users learn the language. Examples thus reflect today's French culture for instance through the different kinds of first names used in them.

#### **4.4. An educational intent**

Even simple and short sentences used as examples can contain cultural and encyclopaedic information that can be interesting for the young learner. This is an aspect that is common to all Larousse bilingual dictionaries and that, we believe, can make the learner's dictionary a lively and user-friendly tool for learning a language as well as developing individual general knowledge.

### **Conclusion**

Covering essential pedagogical and lexicographical functions, illustrative examples are one of the main ingredients that can make a bilingual learner's dictionary a valuable and attractive learning tool adapted to the user's needs. Allowing for simplified codes, they moreover provide an easy initiation in the use of bilingual dictionaries. This was confirmed by the very positive reception the School Dictionary got among teachers and pupils.

However, placing the example at the centre of the structure of entries is only possible when the dictionary is intended for beginners, thus showing a limited headword list and the basic meanings of words. It is not applicable to larger dictionaries to such an extent, although illustrative examples can play some of the functions described above in dictionaries aimed at intermediate or even advanced learners.

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