

Beyond Butterscotch. The Place of Cultural Knowledge in the Bilingual Dictionary

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Abstract

This paper examines the place of cultural knowledge in the bilingual dictionary. Changes in the place of foreign languages in British education have led to changes in the cultural knowledge which lexicographers can assume among potential users of their dictionaries. This paper first discusses what this implies for the use of supporting glosses, and illustrative examples are drawn from the principal large Spanish-English dictionaries. The range of treatments given is discussed, and it is argued that asymmetrical cultural prominence (the main principled justification for giving a supporting gloss) is not restricted to the obvious cases of literary, historical and culinary terms. Consideration is also given to the most explicit treatment of cultural information in current bilingual dictionaries – the “cultural box”. The process of how these are produced is examined, and some discussion is given to what makes for a good cultural box.

1 Introduction

In the United Kingdom, until quite recently studying a foreign language at tertiary level was all but synonymous with studying the literature and culture of that language. This is no longer the case. In many institutions, language courses are now commonly combined with practically-oriented disciplines such as economics and business studies, with less emphasis on language as a vehicle of personal cultural enrichment. There is simultaneously a push for more language teaching at primary level, and decline in language study at the end of secondary level – just where the study of literature traditionally commenced. Whatever long term effects this somewhat schizophrenic approach might have, these changes raise many important questions for practitioners of bilingual lexicography. The issue I wish to examine here is how cultural information should be presented. My examples will be from large paper Spanish-English dictionaries.

2 Lexical gaps and how to fill them

However many cultural reference points two languages may share, each will almost inevitably contain “lexical gaps” (Bentivogli and Pianta 2000) in relation to the other. In such cases where no direct equivalent is available to the bilingual lexicographer, a free combina-

tion of words, often explicitly indicated as a gloss (by use of an equals sign, for example), is necessary. Bentivogli and Pianta cite the example of *butterscotch*, which is glossed as “= caramella dura a base di burro e zucchero di cana” in the Collins English-Italian dictionary. Such cases are in one sense straightforward – a gloss must be given or the item cannot appear in the dictionary.

2.1 Supporting Glosses

Other items are more problematic. Imagine we are reading a passage of Spanish and find that a certain person was “nacido en el seno de una familia carlista” (born into a “carlista” family). Let us suppose that the last word is unfamiliar to us, and we consult our dictionary to find:

carlista *adj* Carlist

This would leave us little the wiser. It is perfectly true that *Carlist* is used without further explanation in books on Spanish history. It is not, however, a familiar item in less specialized contexts. Who, then, is this entry intended to help? An English-speaking reader familiar with the Spanish historical context is unlikely to need to consult the dictionary here. From the Spanish point of view the entry is potentially misleading, as it may suggest the word is an unproblematic translation equivalent, which it is not. In summary then, this is the lexicographical equivalent of asking for bread and being given a stone. Cases of this kind have been noted as a “perennial problem” by Schnorr (1986), but we shall see there appears as yet to be no firm consensus in practice on how to deal with them.

In such cases where there is a marked difference in what we might term the “cultural prominence” of the translation equivalents, there is a good case for giving a supporting gloss. This case is all the stronger given the changes noted in the introduction, as we cannot assume learners are in the process of assimilating the traditional store of target-language literary-cultural knowledge.

Let us look at how *carlismo* is treated in the main current Spanish-English dictionaries:

Collins Spanish	CB (cultural box)
Harrap Spanish	= support for the claim to the Spanish throne of Don Carlos de Borbón and his descendants after the death of his brother Fernando VII in 1833
Larousse Gran (1993)	Carlism
Oxford Spanish	CB
Simon & Schuster	Carlism, the movement supporting the Bourbon pretender to the throne of Spain

Figure 1. Treatment of *carlismo* in Spanish-English dictionaries

Only the 1993 Larousse Gran (the oldest of the texts consulted here) gives a bare translation, and we find that most recent dictionaries give extended treatment in a “cultural box” offset from the main body of the text, or (as with Harrap) a fairly lengthy gloss. Even Simon & Schuster (often regarded as somewhat old-fashioned in approach) is not content with a translation equivalent, though the gloss gives little clue as to the historical period the term relates to.

When we examine further cases we find, however, that supplying supporting glosses does not seem to be a policy applied across the board. Consider the complementary historical/ architectural terms: *mozárabe* and *mudéjar*:

	mozárabe	mudéjar
Collins	Mozarab(ic) + x-ref to CB (Reconquista)	Mudejar + x-ref to CB (Reconquista)
Harrap	Mozarabic, = Christian of Moorish Spain	Mudejar. = Muslim in Christian-occupied Spain
Larousse	CB	CB
Oxford	Mozarabic	Mudejar
S & S	Mozarabic	Mudejar (Mohammedan living under a Christian king in Spain)

Figure 2. Treatment of *mozárabe* and *mudéjar* in Spanish-English dictionaries

This reveals a wide range of approaches, from Oxford's unsupported translations (the terms are not, however, entered in the English-Spanish side of the dictionary), to dedicated cultural boxes in Larousse, or cross-referencing to an umbrella topic in a cultural box (Collins), or brief supporting glosses (Harrap). The Harrap supporting glosses highlight the "how far should we go?" problem in providing cultural information, as they implicitly assume knowledge of the when, how and why of the Muslim (or is that "Moorish?") presence in Spain.

We now turn to the issue of onomastic adjectives, taking the example *calderoniano*:

Collins	relating to Calderón
Harrap	Calderonian, = typical of the style of the dramatist Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600-1681)
Larousse	Calderonian [of the playwright Calderón]
Oxford	Calderonian
S & S	Calderonian, pertaining to or characteristic of Pedro Calderón de la Barca or his style

Figure 3. Treatment of *calderoniano* in Spanish-English dictionaries

Here again the glosses tend to rely on assumed prior knowledge. Even the most informative entry, from Harrap, gives no clue about the substantive meaning of the term – does it suggest grandiloquence, melodrama, bloodthirstiness, pathos, tedium or some other trait? It may be argued that this is a point where meaning lies "beyond the dictionary". With many onomastic adjectives, indeed, there will be no immediately obvious sense beyond "of or pertaining to". *Cervantine*, for example, is probably an acceptable translation of *cervantino*, and *shakespeariano* of *Shakespearian*. But there are cases where such treatment would ignore significant semantic issues. In English, for example, *Dickensian* has two quite distinct connotations, in addition to the base sense, as indicated in the following contexts:

- a) The housing conditions were practically Dickensian. (i.e. utterly miserable)
- b) The Christmas party was positively Dickensian. (i.e. merrily convivial)

The question of which Spanish (or English) onomastic adjectives have similarly semantic weight could usefully be examined in a corpus.

2.2 Beyond historical, literary and artistic terms

Literary and artistic movements are predictable areas of what we might call “asymmetrical cultural prominence”, where supporting glosses might have a legitimate use. Another such area is that of food, but if we examine a few examples we will find that cultural prominence can also be an issue in target language.

	tortilla (not omelette)	paella	tamal
Collins	flat maize pancake, tortilla	paella	tamale
Harrap	tortilla, = thin maize pancake	paella	tamale
Larousse	tortilla, corn cake	paella [dish made with rice, meat, seafood, and several vegetables]	tamale, minced meat and red peppers in corn husk or banana leaves
Oxford	tortilla	paella	tamale (ground maize and meat or a sweet filling in a banana or maize leaf)
S & S	tortilla (thin unleavened cornmeal pancake)	Valencian rice dish with meat, fish or seafood and vegetables	tamale, dish made of cornmeal, chicken or meat and chili wrapped in banana leaves or corn husk

Figure 4. Treatment of *tortilla*, *paella* and *tamal* in Spanish-English dictionaries

Paella is fairly widely recognized in Britain thanks to Spanish holidays and tapas bars, and the growing popularity of Mexican restaurants might suggest that *tortilla* is an acceptable translation equivalent, but the same cannot be said for *tamale* – the *tamal* is a Mexican culinary item yet to find much of an audience on this side of the Atlantic. In the United States, however, the profile of cultural prominence is different – *tortilla* and *tamale* would be much more familiar than *paella* (significantly, the US-produced Simon & Schuster gives no direct translation for this latter term). The Collins and Harrap glosses for *tortilla* will no doubt seem increasingly unnecessary in coming years (what pancake, in any case, is not flat and more or less thin?). Why neither dictionary feels the need to give a supporting gloss to *tamale* is somewhat puzzling. The bare translation is likely to be of more use to a Spanish-speaker than most British users, as it at least shows the English singular form, back-formed from the Spanish plural *tamales*. The implication that *tamale* is a familiar word in British English is certainly not warranted.

This asymmetry of cultural prominence is not, however, restricted to predictable areas of cultural difference, such as the literary or culinary. Spanish schoolchildren learn from primary level a metalanguage for mathematics which is absent from British education, where the equivalent terms would be regarded as rather abstruse, even at secondary level or beyond. Consider the treatment of the following Spanish terms and their English translations in the dictionaries (Y = item present; N = item absent):

	su(b)straendo/subtrahend	minuendo/minuend	multiplicando/multiplicand
Collins	N / N	N / N	Y / Y
Harrap	Y / N	Y / N	Y / Y

Larousse	Y/Y	Y/Y	Y/Y
Oxford	Y/N	Y/N	N/N
S & S	Y/Y	Y/Y	Y/Y

Figure 5. Treatment of mathematical terms in Spanish-English dictionaries

While Larousse and Simon & Schuster provide blanket coverage for these items, the asymmetry evident in the Harrap and Oxford dictionaries is a fair reflection of the currency of these terms in the respective languages. Unfortunately, this implicit information is so deeply embedded in the dictionary structure as to be inaccessible to anyone who isn't already aware that it's there! One benefit of a more explicit and principled approach to the presentation of cultural information might be to reveal similar information presently buried beyond easy retrieval in our dictionaries.

3 Cultural boxes

As we have seen, some concepts are difficult to pin down in a brief supporting gloss, and the increasing use of "cultural boxes" in many larger bilingual dictionaries has allowed relatively discursive treatment of a wide range of cultural institutions and concepts.

3.1 The purpose of cultural boxes

Various explanations can be given for the popularity of this innovation.

a) The most immediate is that they are fun. "Browseability" is more associated with monolingual than bilingual dictionaries, but cultural boxes somewhat redress the balance, and, as so often with lists, discovering who and what is in or out can make for an engaging read. Users relatively new to the language and its cultural background will find them educational, while the better-versed can nit-pick over the details of the explanations.

b) More seriously, cultural boxes recognize fundamental aspects of language use. There are terms and concepts which are not amenable to direct translation, or which are of a cultural significance which merits more detailed explanation. Items for which such treatment is appropriate are likely to be far more numerous than could be included as a "feature" in most paper dictionaries. Indeed, I would suggest that which particular items are chosen is less important than the declaration of intent constituted by explicitly recognizing such cultural items.

3.2 What makes a good cultural box?

Some cultural boxes threaten to turn into mini-essays ("bullfighting" is often a good example in Spanish-English dictionaries), while others only require quite succinct treatment. Rather than presenting a universal pattern for such boxes, then, I will suggest what seem to me desirable characteristics, to be attained wherever possible.

a) The information should not promote a clichéd or "folkloric" view of the target culture. One way of avoided this danger is by suggesting how the concept being explicated might be regarded from within the target culture, as well as from without.

b) The information should satisfy a wide range of users, not just those new to the language and culture. More informed users should find something of interest to them, too.

c) The information should be as culturally resonant as possible, and suggest how the specific detail fits into a wider cultural context. Some Spanish-English dictionaries include a cultural box on the custom of eating twelve grapes as the bells strike for New Year, which will no doubt be new to many, but once known, this fact hardly seems to illuminate an extensive area of Spanish culture.

d) The information should be presented clearly and accessibly.

All these requirements are easier to prescribe than to put into practice, of course. How the knowledge is obtained, and how it is transformed into an accessible form, are processes within which there is much potential for misinterpretation and misstatement.

3.3 An example of how a cultural box is generated

As an example of this production process, we will look at how the boxes in the 2000 edition of the Larousse Gran Diccionario were created. For the boxes on the Spanish-English side an initial list of possible topics was drawn up from existing material and suggestions from Spanish and English native-speaker editors. This list was edited down through discussion to provide the final topic list. The text for new boxes was written by Spanish native-speakers, then translated and edited by English native-speakers (in consultation with the original writers) to produce the finished text.

Providing content that is a fair representation of the source culture, but also comprehensible and accessible to users from the target culture, can involve considerable changes between the original text and the final version. For example, the original text for “gaucho” was written by a Uruguayan editor, but when translated this seemed to British editors to be overly fulsome in its endorsement of the values of comradeship represented by these figures. Left unaltered, this may have promoted a rather “folkloric” image of Argentinian culture, so mention was made of the transformation of the gaucho figure into literary form in the national epic *Martin Fierro*, and of the affectionate sendup of the tradition in the contemporary comic strip *Inodoro Pereira* (See Appendix for final version).

4 Conclusion

There are those who regard a bilingual dictionary as purely and simply a translation tool. For them such features as cultural boxes and supporting glosses are at best a distraction, or simply marketing-induced fripperies taking up space better devoted to technical terminology. I do not share this view, as I believe that the general-purpose bilingual dictionary can also serve as a bridge between cultures, or (as cultures are not monolithic) between two sets of cultural understandings. Limitations of space, at least in paper dictionaries, will certainly mean that it is not possible to give full treatment to all problematic issues of the kind discussed above. However, if a representative selection of such problems is squarely and explicitly faced, this will nail our lexicographical colours to the mast, as far as the importance of the issues is concerned.

We have seen that the use of supporting glosses often seems somewhat ad hoc and even inconsistent, but I have suggested that the concept of relative cultural prominence, and the use of corpus evidence may help in forming a more principled approach.

If we value the cultural aspect of our dictionaries, and remain mindful of the changes in British education I referred to at the start of this paper, it will become increasingly necessary to examine what cultural knowledge we select for special treatment, and to consider how this can most usefully and clearly be presented for the users of our dictionaries.

References

A. Dictionaries

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Appendix

Final version of "Gaicho" text

The Gauchos were the cowboys of Argentina and Uruguay, skilled horsemen who were in charge of the huge cattle-herds of the pampas. The culture of the Gaicho, which dates from colonial times, combines elements from several sources: Spain, indigenous Indian culture, and that of freed slaves. They gained fame for their courage and daring during the wars of independence against Spain, but they later became increasingly marginalised because of their fiercely independent spirit and nomadic customs. Nevertheless they remain vivid figures in the national imagination, together with their working tools and weapons – the Spanish hunting knife and Indian "boleadoras" – their distinctive clothing, such as the poncho, and customs, such as drinking mate and singing campfire songs. They were immortalized by José Hernández in his long poem "El gaicho Martín Fierro" (1872-79), which is Argentina's national epic and did much to create and popularize their legend. Although this tradition may be affectionately sent up nowadays (e.g. in the comic strip "Inodoro Pereyra" by the cartoonist Fontanarrosa), the gaicho is still regarded by many as the embodiment of the virtues of solidarity and companionship.