

Improving Dictionaries*

Ari Kernerman
Kernerman Publishing

Although printed dictionaries have reached a high level of sophistication, there is still much to be improved in order to enhance their usefulness. Prefaces, especially in learners' dictionaries, are not written for users or actual learners, but rather for their teachers, for other lexicographers or for reviewers. For example, Prefaces in learners' dictionaries explain such things as the use of word corpora, the character of the dictionary, the philosophy behind the dictionary, how the dictionary was written, what is different in each particular edition, etc. Interesting, but not helpful information for users. Though intended to be used universally, these dictionaries are culturally biased. Their British culture is irrelevant to the billion learners of English who live in non-English-speaking countries, and need locally or neutrally-oriented dictionaries to help them to communicate with people in other non-English-speaking countries. And the one-size-fits-all principle of monolingual learners' dictionaries does not replace the need to provide mother tongue translation. Many publishers keep adding information to the new editions, much of which is not helpful, reduces the dictionary's efficiency, and does not increase the user's knowledge. On top of that, the absence of a system of lexicography standards makes it difficult for users to refer to more than one dictionary. Giving preference to corpora-determined frequency over the didactic value of presenting basic meanings first is a step backward, not forward. Besides, too much space is unnecessarily devoted to familiar words, at the expense of less familiar words. These, and other deficiencies of our modern dictionaries—including bilingual, native speakers' and specialized dictionaries—are discussed, with suggestions for rectifying them.

Before I criticize them I want to praise them.

Never before has the general public had access to such a large selection of fine dictionaries. The existence of a healthy competition in publishing, the availability of well trained and experienced lexicographers with funds to support their work, the development of modern technology—both in compu-lexicography and in the printing processes, have all contributed to the availability of a generous supply of sophisticated dictionaries of all types. Nevertheless, there are some things that can and should be improved with regard to modern printed dictionaries—mainly with EFL dictionaries—some of lesser importance, others of more pressing importance.

Improving EFL dictionaries

Because of time limitation, references to specific dictionaries are to the “Big Five” English monolingual advanced learners' dictionaries, as they are generally accepted as models for the EFL dictionaries, many of which are derived directly from them.

The Preface

The prefaces of the “Big Five” are generally aimed at a different audience from the actual user. They are policy statements. None of the Introductions, Prefaces or Forewords in any of the “Big Five” seems to have been written for users, but rather for teachers, lexicographers, or reviewers. If we glance at these dictionaries, we see that they include such things as:

* This paper is based on a lecture given at the DSNA Conference in Chicago on July 14, 2007, “Eight Suggestions for Improving Learners' Dictionaries”, and published in *Kernerman Dictionary News* 15, 21-23 (2007).

- an exposition directed at lexicographers, lexicography enthusiasts, linguists and teachers (Prof. Henry Widdowson, in *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 7th edition, 2005);
- the problems that faced the lexicographers when writing the dictionary (Prof. Randolph Quirk), and what is different in this particular edition (Della Summers, Director of Dictionaries, and Adam Gadsby, Editorial Director, in *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 3rd edition, 2001);
- the rationale for the use of a word corpus in compiling the dictionary (Prof. John Sinclair, Chief Editor, in *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*, 3rd edition, 2001);
- the reasons why the printed dictionary has succeeded in holding its own against the electronic dictionary (Patrick Gillard, Editor, in *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 2003);
- the philosophy behind this dictionary (Prof. Michael Hoey, Chief Advisor), and how it was written (Michael Rundell, Chief Editor, in *Macmillan English Dictionary*, 2002).

It can be seen that none of these introductions is aimed at the prospective user.

The culture of English or the culture of the English?

It is said that English is being learned around the world as the global *lingua franca* by over a billion people, and is spoken by over 300 million more as their mother tongue. The same dictionary cannot possibly be appropriate for all of these people. A small proportion of the billion learners may be studying the language for integrative purposes (to assimilate or integrate), mainly as immigrants in a native English-speaking environment (usually referred to as ESL (English as a Second Language)). But the vast majority of the billion learners of English are learning it in their own backyard, for instrumental purposes, in order to communicate in English not necessarily with native speakers of the language but with people in other non-English-speaking countries, or for other practical reasons (usually called EFL (English as a Foreign Language)). A small number of these individuals may be interested in learning about the culture of native English speakers. But it is doubtful whether the majority wants to have UK or US culture dominate their English-language dictionary. They would prefer dictionaries that are culturally local, or, at least, culturally neutral, that is, dictionaries that were written, if not in their own country, then with the intention of being used in their country, dictionaries that have example sentences with local references. As it is, all of the “Big Five”, as well as most other dictionaries, reflect mainly British culture. They abound in example sentences that have references to British individuals—popular statesmen, sports people, or other public figures that are unknown or of no interest to most dictionary users in other countries, or cultural events that are unrelated to them, such as the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace, or sites such as Big Ben. Example sentences in the context of unfamiliar individuals, sites and situations distract attention from the purpose of understanding and learning new words.

Use of the mother tongue in foreign language learning

No methodology can effectively ignore the importance of utilizing the mother tongue in foreign language learning. Language learners have a basic need to know the L1 equivalents for new words, meanings or phrases. Knowing the translation is an intermediate step toward learning to think in the target language. Learners' dictionaries must therefore be adapted not only culturally for their users, but must also provide native language translations. This is the concept behind semi-bilingual dictionaries, and is another reason why learners' dictionaries should be localized, rather than globalized. This does not mean translating an entire dictionary into the user's language—as is done in some East Asian countries. It means providing only the meanings of the various senses in the user's mother tongue.

Overstepping the boundaries of lexicography

What users look for in dictionaries is mainly meaning, spelling, pronunciation, use, and warnings against making mistakes in any of these categories. But, in the war to gain markets, the big dictionary publishers are adding more and more extraneous material (some of which may be considered gimmicks) that is intended to impress teachers, and supposedly to help users. But providing more information does not mean improving knowledge. The result is that the “Big Five” are becoming more encyclopedic with each new edition, thereby decreasing rather than increasing their user friendliness. Users often have to wade through large amounts of material in order to find what they want. Paradoxically, the “Big Five” are designed to appeal first and foremost to language teachers, at the expense of users.

The lack of standardization

There is a severe absence of standardization in dictionary texts, which makes it very difficult to teach dictionary use, unless all the students in a class have the same dictionary. Fortunately, the ISO (International Standards Organization) is preparing a set of standards called “Presentation/Representation of Entries in Dictionaries”, intended to facilitate the production, exchange and management procedures for the creation and use of dictionary content. (See: Kernerman Dictionary News, No. 14, 2006, and the presentation at this conference on Friday by Marie-Jeanne Derouin and Andre Le Meur: “ISO-Standards for lexicography and dictionary publishing”.) Let us hope that the major publishers adopt these standards when they are published.

The dominance of corpora-determined frequency in dictionary writing

The information derived from corpora is very interesting and undoubtedly useful for linguists. One of the useful things to be gained from a word corpus is the order of frequency of words and expressions. Applying corpus-determined order of frequency may be a sensible way to present meanings or use in general dictionaries, but it is less relevant for learners’ dictionaries. Here, giving the basic meaning of a word first may be more helpful in understanding its various uses than giving one of its derived meanings first, just because it is more frequent.

Examples cloned from corpora

The dogmatic approach of copying sentences actually found in a word corpus often results in including sentences which, though typical, are distracting, such as examples containing unnecessary adjectives for a noun entry. Invented examples often make more sense. Corpora should first highlight particular collocations; then lexicographers should write the examples without any extraneous material.

The (un)importance of common words

Language learners do not use a 50,000-word dictionary to look up easy words—words with which they are already familiar. Nevertheless, most of the advanced learners’ dictionaries devote considerable space to the basic function words and to other common words, words for which advanced dictionary users do not require a dictionary. Advanced learners use their advanced dictionaries to look up advanced words, which are given much less space in advanced dictionaries than common words.

Pronunciation without phonetic symbols

Learning the IPA is a difficult task. Many teachers themselves cannot read it. For those whose language is written in the Roman alphabet it is necessary to learn only one additional set of symbols—the International Phonetic Alphabet—to find out exactly how a word is pronounced. But other dictionary users, such as speakers of Arabic, Chinese or Russian, have to learn two new alphabets—the Roman alphabet in order to read English, and then the IPA in order to read the phonetic transcription. The time has come to solve this problem by developing a simpler system than the IPA for indicating pronunciation.

American dictionaries use a kind of simplified spelling to indicate pronunciation, but they vary in their use of diacritics for vowels. Opting for simplified spelling may be a step in the right direction, as long as we unify the system and ensure it will not confuse the learner and lead to spelling errors.

Improving other dictionaries

There is no reason why the publishers of general native-speakers' dictionaries, specialized dictionaries, and bilingual and multilingual dictionaries, should not adopt the principles of user friendliness that are embodied in language-learning dictionaries, when compiling and designing their dictionaries. Actually, native speakers of the language of any particular dictionary may be considered language learners to the same extent as foreign language learners are. Our staff is presently preparing a learner's dictionary for native speakers, which takes into account many of the considerations of user friendliness found in language learners' dictionaries.

Summing up

1. Prefaces or Introductions should be aimed at the user, and should be in the user's own language.
2. The global *lingua franca* should be taught as a (neutral) global language for global use, without it being based on a specific culture.
3. Providing mother-tongue equivalents assures the reader of having understood the data, and builds confidence, to an extent that cannot be achieved in any other way. At the same time, fully bilingualizing all the elements of an entry can be counterproductive.
4. Dictionaries are linguistic, not encyclopedic, texts. Containing more information than what the user requires makes their use cumbersome. Grammar should be included only insofar as it enhances understanding or retention.
5. Mastering the use of any single dictionary requires considerable time and effort, with the result that few users refer to a second dictionary. Standardization would facilitate the use of more than one dictionary.
6. Word corpora, valuable in their own right, are useful in compiling dictionaries, as they accurately reflect frequency. However, the didactic value of the experience of language teachers should not be overlooked in determining the order of meanings.
7. Rather than copy example sentences religiously from a word corpus their usefulness can be enhanced if they are edited by didactic-minded lexicographers.
8. Users of advanced dictionaries are already familiar with the basic vocabulary of the target language. More space should therefore be devoted to new and difficult words and less space to familiar items.
9. There is a pressing need for research to develop an alternative to the International Phonetic Alphabet.

References

- Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*. Glasgow: Harper Collins, 2001.
- Le Meur, A; Derouin, M.-J. (2006). "ISO 1951: a revised standard for lexicography".
Kernerman Dictionary News 14. 1-3.
- Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. Essex: Longman, 2001.
- Macmillan English Dictionary*. Oxford: Macmillan Publishers, 2002.
- Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.