

Defining Dictionary Definitions for EFL Dictionaries

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The following are some of the issues involved in defining headwords, which we will touch on in this paper:

- *What is the definition of a dictionary definition?*
- *What linguistic styles for definitions are in use today for specific types of dictionaries? (e.g., technical definitions, folk definitions)*
- *Are there differences in style and technique for defining the various parts of speech?*
- *Is it valid to explain a word in terms of a different part of speech for the sake of clarity?*
- *Are definitions in corpus-based dictionaries different from those in non-corpus based dictionaries?*
- *Can (and should) the viewpoint of the lexicographer be completely hidden?*
- *Does saying what a word is not, adequately explain what it is?*
- *Should only active voice be used?*
- *Which is more important, accuracy or comprehensibility?*
- *How do definitions in learners' dictionaries differ from those in general-purpose dictionaries?*
- *Should the definition be translated for reinforcement, in FL learning?*
- *How useful are illustrations?*
- *How useful are synonyms? Can they replace definitions?*

1. Introduction

This paper differs from most of the presentations at this congress in that it is not a research paper. Rather, it reflects the view of practitioners and users, in an area in which there seems to be little research. (An exception to this is Grochocka and Fabiszewski-Jaworski.)

There is a semantic problem in defining the word 'definition', as used in the compound 'dictionary definitions'. If we think of dictionaries as having explanations instead of having definitions, all our problems of defining (or explaining) disappear. 'Definition' is a technical word, one that carries with it an abstract connotation. 'Definition' implies: 'You come to me, if you want to understand what I'm all about.' 'Explanation' implies: 'I will try to come down to your level so that you can understand me.' It's like the window being half open or half closed.

Because the name of the game in dictionary writing is *the presentation of information*, while the name of the game in dictionary use is *understanding information*, the question arises: Should accuracy have precedence over comprehensibility? How compatible can these two elements be made? The task of the lexicographer is to provide information about words that is accurate, reliable and authoritative. This means writing definitions that can stand up in court. Moreover, the definitions must be all-inclusive. This requirement can make them cumbersome and complicated, and it requires concentration in comprehending them. This is everything that the dictionary user, if he is not a scientist or legal authority, does not want.

2. Comprehensibility of Defining Words

I recall my own personal experience when using a dictionary, when I was a primary-school student. I struggled with every dictionary look-up to understand the meanings of words. At that time there were no examples of use in dictionaries, no aids of any kind, only what to me were incomprehensible definitions! They were incomprehensible because instead of being written

primarily to be understood, they were written primarily to be authoritative. The syntax was cumbersome, in an effort to get all the information into one sentence. The lexis that was used to define ordinary words was frequently on a much higher level than the word being defined, the result being that I had to look up two or three words used in the definition in order to understand the definition. How frustrating it all was! In my opinion not enough has changed since then in the nature of definitions in general purpose dictionaries, such as desk dictionaries and unabridged dictionaries. High frequency words are often defined using low frequency words.

In a way, contemporary dictionaries for language learning take into account the frequency of the entry word, or at which stage in learning the language the user is apt to be when looking up that particular word. Longman dictionaries, Macmillan, Cambridge, and to a certain extent Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary have a limited defining vocabulary. This does not necessarily mean that the dictionary tries to help the user by explaining words using words that are more likely to be familiar. It just means that all the words used in the definitions are chosen from a given list. This does not at all prevent the need for cross-referencing.

3. Pardon me, Sir or Madam, but your viewpoint is showing

Word corpora are a useful source of data for writing examples (even though, in the opinion of the writers of this paper, their usefulness is generally overestimated). Their use for definition writers could be in helping them to determine the separation into meanings. In any event, corpora do not reduce the need for human involvement; perhaps they even increase this need.

In many cases, a strict corpus-based example is dependent on a given context, and loses its reliability when appearing as the exemplification of a dictionary headword. For example, the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary has the following example for 'banish': 'He was banished to Australia, where he died 5 years later.' This is rather confusing for a 21st century learner who is unfamiliar with British history of the early 19th century! Likewise, Cobuild exemplifies 'revoke' with 'The government revoked her husband's license to operate migrant labor crews.' There is simply too much information here, too many extraneous factors complicating the meaning of 'revoke' and diverting the user's attention. But our subject is definitions, not examples. Besides it should be emphasized that not only foreign language learners should be considered language learners from the viewpoint of lexicographers, but that all dictionary users, including native language dictionary users, are language learners, as the very act of dictionary use – which is searching for information about your language - makes us all language learners.

Only humans can write definitions. But those that can do it are few and far between. Moreover, this particular type of human (the kind that Dr. Johnson called 'a harmless drudge'), have their own private thoughts, feelings and opinions, just like everybody else has. It is difficult for dictionary writers not to expose their opinions, their biases and their prejudices in the definitions that they write. And if a compiler and the editor have a similar biased opinion about a concept, it is liable to show through in the definition.

4. Styles in defining

Some might think that concrete nouns would be the easiest kind of word to define. But that is not so. When we try to define a word like ‘mouse’, we see how difficult it is. The Oxford Advanced defines ‘mouse’ as ‘a small animal that is covered with fur and has a long thin tail’. Longman Contemporary defines it thus: ‘a small furry animal with a long tail...like a rat’. But there are many other animals like this. Many dictionaries get around this difficulty by using illustrations. In the example above for mouse, the Longman entry has an illustration, the Oxford does not.

How do EFL dictionaries cope with definitions, given the learner’s difficulties in dealing with foreign languages? A common and useful tactic is to provide a ‘folk definition’, which is a definition a native speaker might use when asked by a learner to explain a word. We suggest that, for abstract nouns at least, a ‘when’ or ‘where’ clause is more useful than an abstract noun, or even for a non-abstract noun. In other words, in a folk definition it is more likely that a given part of speech might be defined by another part of speech or by an adjectival clause. I would claim that ‘membership’ is more usefully defined as ‘when you are a member of an organization, etc.’, than the definition currently supplied by popular EFL dictionaries today, as in Oxford Advanced Learner’s and Longman Contemporary as ‘the state of being a member of...’ or Macmillan’s Advanced - ‘the fact of being a member...’. Cambridge gives ‘Membership is the state of belonging to an organization’, while Cobuild, as usual, provides a wordy definition that, in our view, is the least useful of all – ‘Membership of an organization is the state of being a member of it.’ These definitions are impeccable linguistically, but even the most advanced learners might find the Cobuild definition hard to swallow, since, in most cases, users want to consult the dictionary to find the meaning as quickly as possible and then to proceed with reading a text. Surely, even using a gerund ‘being a member’ should satisfy even the most meticulous of lexicographers, who should always see matters through the eyes of the learner.

These EFL dictionaries, in their efforts to follow a lexicographic practice of defining a word using the same part of speech, are particularly fond of defining abstract nouns by ‘a quality of’, or ‘a process of’, or ‘the ability of’, as well as ‘the state of’, mentioned before. For example, Macmillan defines ‘necessity’ as ‘a process, thing or action that is needed in a situation’. Here, Cambridge is more user-friendly – ‘the need for something’.

Another example with abstract nouns is the word ‘parenthood’. Oxford and Longman define it as ‘the state of being a parent’. Macmillan avoids ‘state’ and has ‘the condition and situation of being a parent’. Cambridge has the only user-friendly definition – ‘being a parent’.

In all these cases, the examples clarify the headword, but this does not justify the unnecessary difficulty of the definition. Of course, one solution to defining an abstract noun is to deposit it as a run-on at the end of the entry for the verb or adjective (for example, Oxford – headword ‘subtract’, run-on ‘subtraction’). But this is rather an unfair solution, and not particularly helpful to the learner, who is thereby deprived both of a definition and examples for the abstract noun form.

However, the most problematic use of non-user-friendly definitions is with prepositions. This is certainly a difficult issue, given the multiple meanings of prepositions. Who can expect the EFL learner to plough through the columns of ‘of’ in Macmillan (21 meanings), especially meaning

20, ‘used for stating the type of activity or situation that lasts for a particular period of time’, (the example being ‘12 years of peace’)? Oxford Advanced has ‘only’ 13 meanings for ‘of’ (nearly a column of print), and does not include Macmillan’s meaning 20. Longman has 18 such (as well as a Usage Note), and has the irritating habit of having ‘used to’ to head each meaning, which confuses learners, who could understand it to mean a past habit rather than the past participle or adjective use here. Its meaning 9 is ‘used to say what subject, person, thing, etc. another subject, person or thing is connected with’, the example being ‘the Queen of England’. Surely there are simpler, more elegant and certainly more user-friendly ways! How many learners have the patience or energy to plough through these so-many definitions? The examples given are all clear enough, and the different definitions could be shortened considerably, as indeed Cambridge does, with just two or three words for each meaning (19 in all).

5. Illustrations for clarification and reinforcement

A familiar game with children is to ask adults to explain what a winding staircase is without using their hands. Few are capable of doing this, but even if some can, the manual demonstration is more vivid than any verbal definition could be, while a good illustration is likely to be even better than any verbal definition can be.

Dictionary illustrations are costly and consume much space, but they are worth their space in gold. Many people have a better visual grasp than verbal. Besides, it is very difficult to satisfactorily explain in words many concrete nouns, actions, states, situations and concepts.

6. Synonyms for added value

Even though no two words are perfectly synonymous, if a word has a good synonym, and especially if that synonym might be familiar to the user, adding the synonym after the definition may be more helpful in understanding its meaning than reading the definition itself. There may even be cases where the definition required is so cumbersome that the definition may be sidestepped in favour of a very good synonym, provided, of course, that the synonym is adequately defined elsewhere. In many cases, the synonym may very well be the identical word used in the learner’s mother tongue, given the English language’s tendency to borrow from all and sundry (but taking into consideration also the danger of ‘false friends’).

There is always the temptation to make a definition into a thesaurus, without due attention to distinctions of register, specific references, or degrees of formality. For example, EFL dictionaries tend to begin their definitions of ‘begin’ with ‘start’, giving the impression that the two are always synonymous. Thus, in the Oxford Advanced, meaning 1 is ‘to start doing something’, meaning 2 ‘to start to happen’, meaning 3 ‘to start speaking’. True, this dictionary has a Usage Note for ‘start’, but not for ‘begin’, telling readers not to say ‘“Ladies and Gentlemen,” he started,’ and that you should not use ‘start’ to mean ‘begin speaking’, thereby contradicting its given definition for ‘begin’ meaning 3. We would suggest that a Usage Note for ‘begin’ should have been in place, mentioning the differences in formality between ‘begin’, ‘start’ and ‘commence’. Macmillan, Cambridge, Cobuild and Longman behave likewise, without even a Usage Note under ‘start’.

7. Supplementary translations

The usefulness of adding translations, in spite of there being definitions, is what really clinches comprehension. Meanings may be misunderstood, even though the explanation may seem very clear. Only translations can guarantee accurate and reliable comprehension, as well as dispel lack of confidence and uncertainty. Translations can serve as a check on the definitions, but cannot be used instead of them. It is this common sense approach that led to the blossoming and proliferation of semi-bilingual dictionaries in the past twenty-odd years. It is exceedingly important, however, that only the headword be translated, and not the definition or the examples. For advanced learners, the focus is on the L2 definitions and examples. After all, we all know the pitfalls of a bilingual dictionary, given the multiple meanings of the word to be translated. The semi-bilingual dictionary avoids these pitfalls by means of the pattern of the headword being followed by a definition, examples, and then a translation for every meaning.

In dictionaries for the primary school and junior high school level (e.g. Passport), definitions are superfluous, for two reasons. First, it is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to write useful definitions at the lower-intermediate level. Second, for this level, a headword, translation and abundant examples should suffice. At the upper-intermediate and advanced levels, satisfactory definitions can usually be written that can be understood by language learners at that level. Moreover, diligent students, having read the definition in L2, will find themselves thinking in the mother tongue. This is an excellent exercise for inducing students to think in the foreign language, a skill which is the ultimate goal in the language classroom.

8. Summing up

What can be done to deal effectively with the issues raised in this paper – with reference to foreign language learners, for whom the dictionary is an important learning tool?

Firstly, the writers of both foreign-language- and native-language-learning dictionaries should have considerable teaching experience behind them, in order to ensure the user-friendliness of their definitions. And secondly, regardless of their own personal opinions, affiliations and beliefs, when writing, lexicographers should try to neutralize themselves of all political or religious beliefs. Teachers are only too aware of students exclaiming, ‘But that’s what it says in the dictionary!’ An extensive corpus will be so wide that any biased lexicographer will be able to find in it a quotation to suit the writer’s prejudices, regardless of the linguistic veracity of the information. Therefore definitions and examples should be the joint contribution of a team of at least two lexicographers, with editorial supervision in the hands of more than one person, all of whom are independent of the publisher’s political or commercial interests (a difficult precondition).

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