

# The presentation of set phrases and collocations in bilingual dictionaries with focus on an Icelandic-French dictionary

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## Abstract

This paper presents a PhD thesis whose aim is to analyse the methodological concepts pertaining to the composition of bilingual dictionaries with a focus on the language pair Icelandic and French and example entries for an Icelandic-French dictionary. Set phrases, such as idioms, for example *Il pleut des cordes* ('It's raining cats and dogs') as well as collocations, for example *se brosser les dents* ('to brush one's teeth') are important for the language learner but are often neglected in bilingual dictionaries despite various linguists having pointed out the importance of taking them into account in lexicography. Therefore, special attention will be paid to the presentation of set phrases and collocations in a bilingual dictionary destined to help with encoding from a mother tongue to a foreign language (an L1→L2 dictionary). In the thesis, it will be examined how bilingual dictionaries can give more information on set phrases and collocations in the target language and thus be a better tool for the language learner. Propositions will be exemplified with selected entries for an Icelandic-French dictionary with explanations and scientific argumentation for the choices made. We set out to establish a model for an Icelandic-French electronic dictionary that will be as detailed as possible, in terms of examples, and focused on collocations and set phrases.

The thesis is a contribution to research in the field of bilingual lexicography and aims to contribute to the making of bilingual dictionaries in general, regardless of the languages in question. It is hoped that the outcome will also serve as a foundation for a new Icelandic-French dictionary as the need for a new one to meet the expectations of users in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has become considerable.

## 1. Introduction

It is important for language learners to have access to bilingual dictionaries in their mother tongue. However, satisfactory bilingual dictionaries do not exist for all language pairs and this is the case for Icelandic and French, although there is a long tradition for teaching French in Iceland.<sup>1</sup> A French-Icelandic dictionary was published in 1995 (Stefánsson, dir.). It is now out of print but is available online. The only existing Icelandic-French dictionary was published in 1950 (Boots) and has become rather obsolete since the vocabulary of both the source language (Icelandic) and the target language (French) has changed considerably in the past 60 years, as well as the way that dictionaries are edited. An Icelander looking for an equivalent in French of an Icelandic word or a word combination must therefore often rely on a third language (e.g. English or some Scandinavian language).

This need for a new Icelandic-French dictionary gave the inspiration for our thesis whose aim is to explore how to make an Icelandic-French dictionary to meet the needs of users in the 21st century. This work is based on previous research in the field and consists in presenting and developing further new ideas, particularly concerning the best presentation of set phrases and collocations in a bilingual dictionary so as to make bilingual dictionaries better instruments in foreign language acquisition.

In this paper, we present our research project, which is to be finished in the end of 2013. We begin with a discussion on the concept of collocations and then we lay out the

methodology and procedures that we rely on in order to establish a new model for an Icelandic-French dictionary.

## 2. Set phrases and collocations in bilingual dictionaries

Foreign language learners wanting to acquire native-like fluency in the target language, need to master set phrases, such as idioms, for example *Il pleut des cordes* ('It's raining cats and dogs') as well as collocations, for example *grièvement blessé* ('seriously injured') and *se brosser les dents* ('to brush one's teeth'). In this paper we focus on one type of set phrases, collocations (Mel'čuk 1998: 23) since they are particularly important when it comes to foreign language production. As Svensén (2009: 173) puts it: 'Using collocations in a foreign language whenever possible, and using the correct collocators, is regarded as an indication of good language proficiency. Producing incorrect collocations, or resorting to periphrasis where collocations could have been used, on the other hand, gives an unsure and unnatural impression.'

A collocation is generally considered to consist of a base and a collocator, the collocator being chosen by the speaker according to the base (Hausmann and Blumenthal 2006: 4). For instance the French collocation *bonne année* ('happy New Year'), where the noun *année* forms the base and the collocator, the adjective *bon* (fem. *bonne*) is chosen accordingly. Unlike the meaning of idioms, the meaning of collocations can easily be deduced from the words that constitute it. However, the unpredictability of the collocator can cause problems to non-native speakers of a language when they need to encode from their native language (i.e. to write and speak in the foreign language) 'because it is impossible for them to know whether or not a native-language word combination can be translated word for word into the foreign language.' (Svensén 2009: 166). Therefore it is important that a bilingual encoding dictionary shows frequent collocations with the headword (most often collocations occur under the base). An example is the Icelandic *fara í sturtu* ('to take/have a shower'):

- (1) Icelandic: *fara í sturtu* (lit. 'go in a shower');  
French: *prendre une douche* (lit. 'take a shower').

This information on collocations is also important for the French-speaking user who might think that the Icelandic verb in this context should be *að taka* ('to take'). However, the construction *að taka sturtu* is unnatural and gives the impression of a direct translation from English.

Furthermore, a collocation in one language does not necessarily have a collocation as an equivalent in the target language and may even correspond to free word combination or a single word. In French as well as in Icelandic *to teethe* is expressed by a collocation whereas in English a single verb is used:

- (2) Icelandic: *taka tennur* (lit. 'to take one's teeth');  
French: *faire ses dents* (lit. 'to do one's teeth').

Bilingual dictionaries can help the language learner with the encoding of a foreign language. Various linguists such as Blumenthal and Hausmann (2006: 4) have stated that the collocation is an entity that should be taken into account in lexicography as well as in foreign language teaching. However, collocations have often been neglected in bilingual dictionaries, the reason being, up until recently, the lack of space. Modern day dictionaries usually include collocations but they often figure as examples with no distinction from a free construction (Blumenthal, Hausmann 2006: 7); consequently, the dictionary user has for example no information on the fact that the collocation *passer un examen* ('take an exam') shown under the base *examen* is not only one example amongst others to show the use of the headword but the most common way of referring to this idea, and that the verb *passer* cannot easily be replaced without changing the meaning. An Icelander might be tempted to use the verb *prendre* as a direct translation of the collocate *taka* ('take') for the Icelandic *að taka próf* ('take an exam') which can be found but is less attested.

Since electronic and on-line dictionaries have become widespread, bilingual dictionaries are no longer limited by volume and can be amended so they will serve better the needs of advanced foreign language students, especially relating to phraseology and the presentation of set phrases and collocations.

We set out to establish a model for an Icelandic-French electronic dictionary that will be as detailed as possible, regarding examples and focusing on set phrases and collocations bearing in mind Laufer's words that 'Lexicographers may have to do more than inserting a collocation in an example which illustrates the meaning of the headword. The collocations should be given both prominence and easy access.' (Laufer 2011: 45)

The chief questions that will be investigated are: How can the meaning of set phrases and phrases that are partly fixed best be explained in a bilingual dictionary? How do dictionary users proceed to find set phrases or collocations they are looking for in the target language? How to select the collocations that should be treated in a bilingual dictionary? Where to put collocations and set phrases within the microstructure of an entry in a bilingual dictionary?

### 3. Methodology and procedures

The methodology that has been followed by previous authors of bilingual dictionaries will be analysed and articles and writings in that field examined and summarised. The role of bilingual dictionaries and the needs of the users of a bilingual dictionary will be defined quoting Kromann et al. (1991) and Svensén (2009). The target group of a new Icelandic-French dictionary will most likely be Icelanders learning French as a foreign language. However, we will look into how a bilingual dictionary that is primarily destined to encoding (an L1→L2 dictionary) could also be useful to French speaking users needing to decode Icelandic, that it to understand and translate from Icelandic to French. In this context, possibilities of electronic dictionaries will be examined.

Significant works about set phrases have been written: among those is Gaston Gross's book on set phrases in French (1996). We will rely on works where key ideas of phraseology have been defined (Burger 2007, Sverrisdóttir 2009) and works on the role of dictionaries in language learning (Heinz 2009).

The question of the presentation of set phrases has been studied in the case of monolingual dictionaries (Heinz 1993, Jónsson 2001) as well as in learners' dictionaries (Cowie 1981). Less has been written about set phrases in the context of bilingual lexicography, although here can be mentioned the work of Hausmann (1989-1991) and that of Siepman on collocations in learners' dictionaries (2008) as well as Roberts (1996). Research on collocations and corpus studies is also of great importance (Mel'čuk 1998, Blumenthal and Hausmann eds. 2006) in the context of bilingual lexicography.

The existing most recent bilingual dictionaries for the language pair, French and Icelandic (Stefánsson, dir. 1995; Boots 1950), will be compared and their microstructure studied. Selected bilingual dictionaries will also be taken into account, mainly regarding collocations and set phrases and how they are presented, for example *Le Grand Robert & Collins: dictionnaire français anglais, anglais-français* (2008). The new dictionary ISLEX ([www.islex.hi.is](http://www.islex.hi.is)), an on-line Icelandic-Scandinavian multilingual dictionary is of great importance as it lays emphasis on including numerous set phrases and expressions.

In order to select collocations and set phrases in Icelandic to include in the example entries for an Icelandic-French dictionary we rely on Icelandic monolingual dictionaries, particularly on the dictionary *Stóra orðabókin um íslenska málnotkun* (Jónsson 2005) where set phrases are classified according to concepts. The search engine *Google* via pages in Icelandic and the database *Íslenskur Orðasjóður* will also be used to get an idea on the frequency of the set phrases and collocations. The French text database *Frantext* and the French monolingual dictionary *TLFi* will provide information on equivalents of collocations and set phrases in French; these sources will be completed with frequency data taken from *Google*, a formidable tool that allows us to transform subjective perceptions about collocation frequencies into objective demonstrations. We could give as an example the French collocation *grièvement blessé* ('seriously injured'), in which one could assume that the adverb *grièvement* was the only possible collocator with the adjective *blessé* as it is the most frequently used. However, *Google* shows us that the adverb *gravement* occurs also frequently with the adjective *blessé* or 1.830.000 times against the 3.420.000 times of *grièvement*.

Propositions on how a good bilingual dictionary could be most useful to the common user in the study of French and at the same time conforming to academic and scientific demands will be exemplified with selected entries for an Icelandic-French dictionary with explanations and scientific argumentation for the choices made.

The headwords selected for this thesis are limited to certain conceptual categories, for example nouns referring to animals as well as nouns referring to body parts, verbs of perception (such as *to see*, *to touch*, etc.) and adjectives of colour. These conceptual categories have been chosen because they are important for our communications in every day life and they play a decisive role from a cognitive point of view. Furthermore, they offer numerous set phrases and collocations, which give us the opportunity to examine their treatment in bilingual dictionaries. For instance, the following collocations included in the entry *magi* ('stomach') that we have written for our proposal of an Icelandic-French dictionary:

(3) <i>fá í magann</i> (‘to have (a) stomach ache’)	avoir mal au ventre / à l’estomac
< <i>drekka</i> > <i>á fastandi maga</i> (‘to drink on an empty stomach’)	<boire> à jeun
<i>liggja á maganum</i> (‘to be lying on one’s stomach’)	être allongé sur le ventre
<i>sofa á maganum</i> (‘to sleep on one’s stomach’)	dormir sur le ventre
<i>draga inn magann</i> (‘to hold/pull in one’s stomach’)	rentrer le ventre

#### 4. Concluding remarks

The objective of this thesis is to establish a model of an Icelandic-French dictionary with articles that give a better example of the use of the foreign language in question (French). This will be achieved by building on the basis of new research in the field and by presenting new ideas and developing them further. The outcome will hopefully be a contribution to a new French-Icelandic dictionary. The focus will remain on an Icelandic-French dictionary but at the same time the project is a contribution to research in the field of bilingual dictionaries regardless of the combination of languages implicated.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> French has been taught at the University of Iceland since its foundation in 1911. French is taught as a third language after English and Danish in high schools in Iceland, the students having the choice between French, German and Spanish.

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