

Dictionaries and Teacher Development

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Thesis 1

Learning more about the language you teach is an important part of your development as a teacher.

Thesis 2

Lexicography is an especially accessible entry point to learning about language as well as about learner needs.

Teachers interested in language? Hardly

Language students can want to improve their knowledge and abilities in all kinds of areas—cultural background, pronunciation of words, accurate hearing, and on and on. But the one thing that virtually all have in common is a desire to learn what its elements—words, word order, endings, rhythm and intonation—mean. Unfortunately, very few ESOL teachers and would-be teachers are seriously interested in developing their own understanding of these matters. The same is true of the more academic reaches of the profession as well.

The evidence

- 1) Only a tiny minority of the workshops and presentations at major conferences in the field concern aspects of the English language.
- 2) Well-known international journals contain relatively few articles on specific aspects of English grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation. The ELTJ has gone so far as to jettison its regular section of letters from readers on points of language.
- 3) A similar reluctance to air views on the elements of English can be seen in the journals and conference papers in applied linguistics which, as a whole, is mainly concerned with such 'higher order' topics as testing, cross-cultural issues, discourse analysis, curriculum design, methodology, CALL and the politics of language.

Fortunately, there are applied linguists whose work is of clear relevance to the main interest of language learners. More often than not, I think, they answer to the name 'lexicographer'. They are the people who 'compile' dictionaries, and other word-books such as thesauruses and synonym dictionaries.

Lexicography, our students, and us: leading questions

Can I ask you to try to answer—either on your own or in a discussion group—a long string of questions?

1. You can say vastly more knowing words but no grammar than you can knowing grammar but no words. Do you think language learners don't instinctively realize this? Do you realize it when you're planning and teaching?

2. Check out the price of a recent monolingual learner's dictionary (MLD). Did you know that one of these contains surprisingly close to 100% of all the words (excepting names) that a learner is likely to encounter in a given stretch of everyday spoken and written English?

What does an hour's 'live' teaching cost? Which is more durable, the dictionary or the classroom experience? Which is more portable?

3. Can you think of six completely different kinds of information people look up in wordbooks? Which 'look-ups' do you think your students most often perform and when... while writing?... reading?... reviewing?... doing cross-word puzzles? How about you?

4. How many different ways can you think of to order the entries in a 'wordbook' like a dictionary or thesaurus besides by themes, by narrow word families and according to the order of the alphabet? Here are just two of several less commonly encountered ways:

a) Alphabetically, but with the headwords spelled backwards. For example, under 'S' you find *ssenippah*. Great if you want to see all the words that end in *ness* in one stretch. (For linguists and poets.)

b) All the single letter words in an alphabetical section, then all the two letter words, and so on. (For cross-word addicts.)

5. Suppose we divide lexicography into monolingual and bilingual branches. Have you come down squarely for one and against the other in the language classroom? Let me ask you—can you think of a single reason why a bilingual dictionary (BD) cannot, in principle, contain all the information about grammar, collocation, usage, dialect and register that a MLD does? Check out one of the new big Collins BD's.

6. If you see a word in print or hear it in speech, and want to find out what it means - and you have an alphabetical MD - you just look the word up in the right part of the alphabet. But suppose what you start with in your mind is a meaning that you need a word for? Do you look in the alphabet under 'meaning'? What then? Are you most likely to be in this look-up situation when reading or writing? Which is best for a word-for-a-meaning look-up? A totally non-alphabetical thesaurus like a 'Roget's' or an alphabetical synonym dictionary? OK, let's go to the reference section of a good bookstore. Take a Roget's in hand. Read the introduction. Try to find a few words by working through the index. Note what learners have to know in order to be able to use the 'double-gate' index of a Longman Roget's is the same thing they need to know in order to use an alphabetical MD. What's that?

Of course you know that the classic thesaurus gives no definitions. But what about synonym dictionaries? How is a bunch of synonyms different from a definition? Look in a Cobuild (Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary 1987). Where do you find a word's synonyms? Its definition (s)? Any new thoughts on the difference now?

Suppose you're learning a foreign language. You have a meaning in mind, and probably also a word in your own language to express it. What kind of dictionary will get you quickest to the foreign word you need? Have you reached for a BD? Why not? Prejudiced? After all, the mother tongue section functions as an index of meanings much more efficiently than the index in a Roget's list of alphabetized foreign language headwords.

7. What would a bilingual thesaurus look like? What could it help us to learn about words in the foreign language (and maybe our own)? Did you know that Collins now offers a full-sized combination MD and thesaurus, with the thesaurus part at the bottom of each page? What other kinds of hybrid workbooks can you think of?

8. The pronunciation guide in the front of almost any good-sized European-made English MD or BD is the key to the International Phonetic Alphabet. If you don't know the IPA now, learn it immediately. Write your full name in it. There, you've begun.

American dictionaries, while generally excellent, tend to have in-house pronunciation scripts. Why could this be a great pain in the neck for the learner of English?

9. Has a student never asked you to recommend a dictionary? Well, then, you must also learn how to compare one dictionary with another. Let's look at four good British MLD's to see how they approach the matter of defining words. (For more on comparing dictionaries see Sidney Landau's very readable *The Art and Craft of Lexicography*, Cambridge University Press, 1989. He also discusses American dictionaries.)

(a/b) The OALD (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 1989) has finally received its long overdue revision and is now more or less the equal of the LDOCE (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 1987). Both these dictionaries are remarkably broad in their coverage of current English. Their definitions are generally concise yet comprehensive and seldom unduly difficult for an intermediate learner. Notice how their entries for *get* orient the user by breaking the entry for this word up under sub-headings like 'shows a change in position', 'shows a change in state'... (LDOCE).

A big difference between these two dictionaries is that the LDOCE uses only 2,000 basic words in its definitions. There is some evidence that learners find this very helpful. Skeptics have pointed out that limiting the words used in definitions reduces accuracy. Interestingly, it seems as well that the hardest words for foreign learners to accurately grasp are precisely those which are most common in the language (e.g., *get*, *any*, *a*, *the*, *as*). Thus, concentrating such words in definitions could actually reduce comprehensibility. But no one knows for sure. Compare a couple dozen definitions in the two dictionaries and see what you think.

(c) A completely different approach to defining has been taken by the revolutionary Cobuild. On the one hand, the Cobuild definitions are often anything but concise. Not counting entries for phrasal uses, it gives over 40 different definitions for *get*, and there are no sub-headings to guide the user past irrelevant parts of the entry. To be sure, when a user finds the right number, the definition is clear. But there is no

explicit attempt to guide the user towards an understanding of what the various subsenses, or sub-meanings, of get have in common. That is, in longer entries the Cobuild exaggerates the number of different meanings that a word has.

On the other hand, the wording of its definitions for the individual sub-senses is usually superbly clear. The style has been called 'folk defining' because, when read aloud, the definitions sound like what an average layperson might say when defining a word for a child or friend. Though of course a lot of thought has gone into these definitions !

d) The Heinmann School Dictionary of English is slightly smaller and much more portable than the three I've discussed so far. It is especially interesting for the way it is bucking the trend elsewhere to include ever more information. Its definitions are laconic and there is a great deal of white space on the page. But the lack of clutter, and intelligent use of indentation and other presentation devices, means that it is very easy to find what you're looking for.

10. Did you know that some so-called illustrated dictionaries have only about one illustration for every two hundred entries? (e.g., the Collins Cobuild Essential English Dictionary, 1988.) About 2.5 percent is normal. Could the illustrations sometimes be there mainly to attract buyers?

But check out the illustrations in the LDOCE. Many are splendid (see 'blot'). Some are revolutionary (a) in the way certain word families are portrayed (see 'damage') or (b) in the use of a few (but still not enough!) conventions from comic books to suggest dynamic (see 'burst').

11. Take a poll among your students on what dictionaries they own. See if you can borrow them over a coffee break for a good inspection. Tell them they should each have a dictionary at least as big as a cheese-burger.

12. Newer learner's dictionaries may have long user's guides. Ask your students if they have ever read one. Have they learned to interpret the symbols and abbreviations that give information about grammar? If not, will they? Is it reasonable to expect that they should? Do you read user's guides?

13. Did you know that each country has its own traditions in lexicography? The Americans, French and Germans, for example, are fond of dictionaries with lots of

'encyclopedic' information in them (i.e., proper nouns of all kinds). German 'encyclopedic dictionaries' look more like encyclopedias and American ones look more like dictionaries, and so on.

14. How do people find entries in Chinese or Japanese MD's? Are they Cyrillic and Greek alphabets ordered just like ours? What about Arabic and other writing systems?

15. Have you ever seen the multi-volume Oxford English Dictionary? Try to find it in a library. When was it first published. Look up a word. Are the definitions of sub-senses presented in order of conceptual basicness of meaning (as in, e.g., the LDOCE mostly), frequency of use (as in the Cobuild mostly) or in order of the time of the earliest record of use? Did you know that this dictionary has recently been revised and can be had 'on computer'?

16. Buy a paperback version of one of the Cobuild dictionaries and use it to train yourself to be a better definer. If you can guess beforehand which words might come up in a class, prepare your oral definitions by looking these words up first even if you know perfectly well what they mean.

17. Which dictionaries are best for recent words and which for newer words? Compare the big Collins and Longman dictionaries for native speakers with the 'Shorter' (in two volumes!) and the recently up-dated 'Concise' Oxford English dictionaries.

18. Did you know that there are specialized mono-, bi- and multilingual dictionaries for almost every profession and branch of art, science, technology and commerce? They are expensive, but if you are considering commercial translation, they are indispensable.

19. Did you know that Longman produces an index of new words so that you can keep up to date? I wonder if there's anything in it about recently fashionable distinctions between development vs training vs education?

20. Further reading besides Landau's book, Tom McArthur's *Worlds of Reference* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986). Take out a subscription to *English Today*. It attracts articles by many of the best-known scholars in the field, but the editor, Tom McArthur, sees to it that it is popularly written, interesting and fun. There is almost always something on words and lexicography. Each issue contains several pages of readers' letters about aspects of English and English usage. This is the most interesting, wide-ranging and informative forum for discussion of the nature of English I know of. I only wonder—because of the lively interest its readers display in the workings of English—how many of them can be ESOL teachers !

Conclusion

Learning about wordbooks involves learning about the range of information that can be important for a learner to know about them. Time spent considering the diverse range of options in presenting lexical information can tell you a lot about the immense variety of look-up needs that users may have. These insights can carry over into the classroom and make you a better, more interested vocabulary teacher. And this is a huge part of being a good language teacher. Finally - in my, by now, hundreds of hours of observing trainee teachers in the classroom, I am quite sure there are two things I have never seen occur together. A teacher being good at dealing with word meaning and a class that was turned off and uncooperative... whatever the method of instruction was.