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Learner Dictionaries

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Abstract

The phrase learner dictionary is typically used to describe monolingual lexical reference tools designed for learners of a second or foreign language (L2). Such dictionaries have been created to support the learning of a number of European and Asian languages, but the best known and most influential learner dictionaries are produced in English, by major publishers in the United Kingdom and, more recently, in the United States. In contrast to bilingual dictionaries, which have been used by language learners for hundreds of years, monolingual learner dictionaries – also known as pedagogical, ELT (English-language teaching), or EFL (English as a foreign language) dictionaries – are a relatively recent development, spurred by the global demand for English instruction in the 20th century. Because of their commercial success and the ensuing competition among publishers, learner dictionaries have been a source of considerable lexicographical innovation, particularly in the way a word's meanings and information about its usage are researched and presented. These innovations, supported by advances in computer technology and linguistic analysis, have influenced the compilation of other dictionary types. Learner dictionaries are promoted both for receptive uses – that is, they help connect word forms to meanings while reading or, much less commonly, while listening (a process also known as decoding) – and for productive uses – that is, for finding appropriate forms to express one's intended meaning while writing or, much less commonly, while speaking (a process also known as encoding). The monolingual character of such dictionaries can be seen to put natural constraints on the fulfillment of their potential in relation to both processes. To decode an unfamiliar word encountered while reading in the L2, a learner must disengage from the text to find and then comprehend a definition also written in the L2 – as opposed to a simple (though possibly inaccurate) translation in their first language (L1) – which increases cognitive load and disrupts the reading process. For encoding, learners must already know or else somehow find the word they need to use in order to locate usage information about it, as well as how to interpret and apply that information. It is no surprise, therefore, that these dictionaries are usually identified as intended for use by advanced learners, although they are also offered in editions that target lower-proficiency students (under titles that include terms such as elementary, intermediate, or essential), employ fewer headwords, make more economical use of examples and usage information, give simpler definitions, and contain more illustrations.

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Learner Dictionaries

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Introduction

The phrase *learner dictionary* is typically used to describe monolingual lexical reference tools designed for learners of a second or foreign language (L2). Such dictionaries have been created to support the learning of a number of European and Asian languages, but the best known and most influential learner dictionaries are produced in English, by major publishers in the United Kingdom and, more recently, in the United States. In contrast to bilingual dictionaries, which have been used by language learners for hundreds of years, monolingual learner dictionaries – also known as *pedagogical*, *ELT* (English-language teaching), or *EFL* (English as a foreign language) *dictionaries* – are a relatively recent development, spurred by the global demand for English instruction in the 20th century.

Because of their commercial success and the ensuing competition among publishers, learner dictionaries have been a source of considerable lexicographical innovation, particularly in the way a word's meanings and information about its usage are researched and presented. These innovations, supported by advances in computer technology and linguistic analysis, have influenced the compilation of other dictionary types.

Learner dictionaries are promoted both for receptive uses – that is, they help connect word forms to meanings while reading or, much less commonly, while listening (a process also known as *decoding*) – and for productive uses – that is, for finding appropriate forms to express one's intended meaning while writing or, much less commonly, while speaking (a process also known as *encoding*). The monolingual character of such dictionaries can be seen to put natural constraints on the fulfillment of their potential in relation to both processes. To decode an unfamiliar word encountered while reading in the L2, a learner must disengage from the text to find and then comprehend a definition also written in the L2 – as opposed to a simple (though possibly inaccurate) translation in their first language (L1) – which increases cognitive load and disrupts the reading process. For encoding, learners must already know or else somehow find the word they need to use in order to locate usage information about it, as well as how to interpret and apply that information.

It is no surprise, therefore, that these dictionaries are usually identified as intended for use by advanced learners, although they are also offered in editions that target lower-proficiency students (under titles that include terms such as *elementary*, *intermediate*, or *essential*), employ fewer headwords, make more economical use of examples and usage information, give simpler definitions, and contain more illustrations.

The Origins of Learner Dictionaries

Lexicography is a conservative activity (Hanks, 2012) that tends to adhere to established models and practices, particularly in a lineage that boasts the illustrious *Oxford English Dictionary*; so it makes sense that the innovations of the learner dictionary originated in a different area of endeavor – that of ELT. In the first half of the 20th century, linguists in

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the UK and USA were trying to develop more practical approaches to language instruction, moving away from literary and classical models toward models based on current usage. This gave rise to a movement called *vocabulary control*, which sought to lighten the burden on students by identifying words that were used frequently and were thus deemed more important to learn in the early stages.

In the work of Michael West and James Endicott, vocabulary control gave rise to an early attempt at a learner dictionary, the *New Method English Dictionary*, published in 1935, and later to West's (1953) *A General Service List of English Words*, which had an enduring influence on ELT syllabi and teaching materials. An offshoot of these efforts was the notion of a controlled defining vocabulary – a list of common words that dictionary compilers would limit themselves to in crafting definitions, with the goal of helping learners more easily avail themselves of the meanings of unfamiliar words.

Around the same time, two other pioneers of the vocabulary control movement, Harold Palmer and A. S. Hornby, were devising ways to help students of English with more production-oriented uses of the language, for example, by providing syntactic and collocational information about common words through an innovative coding system. The concern with encoding is reflected in the title of what was, by most accounts, the first major milestone in learner dictionary history: the *Idiomatic and Syntactic Dictionary of English*, written primarily by Hornby and published in Japan in 1942. It was reissued by Oxford University Press in 1948 as *A Learner's Dictionary of English*, and again in 1972 as the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (OALD).

While the OALD used simplified definitions, it was the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (LDOCE) that first featured a true defining vocabulary of about 2,000 words; in principle, this eased the decoding burden on users but it occasionally led to syntactically complex, convoluted constructions (Fontenelle, 2009). The publication of the LDOCE in 1978 marked the start of what would become an intense competition for dominance of the learner dictionary market. It was to be followed by the rest of the so-called “Big Five”: the *Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner's English Dictionary* (COB) in 1987, the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (CIDE) in 1995, and the *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (MEDAL) in 2002, as well as a late American entry, the *Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary* (MWLD) in 2008.

Each had its own selling points but also bore the hallmarks of the distinct genre. Béjoint (2010) says that, in addition to a focus on the more frequent words and their more frequent meanings and on common collocations and syntactic patterns, the Big Five also featured:

- simplified definitions;
- attention to spoken as well as written patterns of usage;
- pronunciation information, given in the International Phonetic Alphabet;
- a generous use of examples; and
- front matter explaining how the dictionary should be used, particularly coding schemes.

The Corpus Revolution

While the need to support English-language instruction provided the initial impetus for learner dictionaries, a second major catalyst was improvements in linguistic analysis made possible by computer-based corpora. Advances in electronic storage and processing allowed the construction of databases of authentic texts that reached previously unimaginable sizes of tens, and then hundreds, of millions of words. Whereas learner dictionary data had earlier been drawn largely from the compilers' language experience and pedagogical intuitions, they now found a more objective and broadly representative source in corpora based on texts





from newspapers, magazines, works of fiction, transcribed interviews, and the like. Corpora provided the capacity for detailed frequency analyses, a rich supply of examples, and the ability to track language change – assuming that these corpora were frequently updated (Krishnamurthy, 2002).

The first locus of these efforts was a partnership between Collins Publishers and the University of Birmingham, in a project called COBUILD (for *Collins Birmingham University International Language Database*), under the direction of John Sinclair. The project's first publication, the COB, can be considered the first corpus-based dictionary of English (Moon, 2009).

Among the major insights that Sinclair and his team derived from corpus data was the observation that many words, especially the more common and useful words so important for learners, did not behave as previously thought. Metaphorical, delexicalized, and phrasal uses were often found to be more common than literal or “basic” ones and so, in COBUILD's dictionary, the former were presented first. Traditional distinctions such as *vocabulary versus grammar* and *form versus meaning* broke down under corpus analysis, meaning being seen to arise instead from the syntactic and collocational patterns in which words typically occurred. This information thus took on more emphasis in dictionary entries.

All major learner dictionaries of English now claim to be based to some extent on corpus data, the *Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary* being a notable exception. A reliance on corpora is becoming the norm in bilingual and native-speaker lexicography as well (Hanks, 2012). Yet the manner in which these data are used varies among learner dictionaries. For instance, COBUILD adopted a strict policy of using authentic examples from the corpus with only minor edits, whereas most other dictionaries use corpus evidence to determine which features should be included in their invented examples. The corpus revolution also helped push dictionaries in the direction of digital forms of publishing by computerizing yet more aspects of dictionary production.

How Learner Dictionaries Are Actually Used

A lamentable fact about learner dictionaries is that their rich stores of information about the target lexicon go generally underexploited by users. This seems inevitable, given that they are designed for advanced levels of proficiency, which the vast majority of English-language learners never achieve.

While they could be valuable resources for intentional vocabulary learning, learner dictionaries are not often used in this way; like other dictionary types, they play a supporting role in the performance of other tasks. For decoding, a learner dictionary has trouble competing with the efficiency of a bilingual dictionary, which presents English words along with translations in the learner's L1. If a bilingual reference is unavailable, a learner dictionary may be used; but, as described by Scholfield (1999), the process is fraught with challenges. The learner must identify the appropriate word form, taking into account derivational or inflectional variation; locate the item in alphabetically ordered entries if consulting the dictionary in book form; identify the proper sense in case of polysemy; and comprehend the meaning as supplied in definitions and examples in the L2. This all assumes that an entry has even been included for the word in question. Support for encoding may thus seem to be the primary function of learner dictionaries; but users often ignore explicit grammar and usage information, especially when it is presented via symbols or codes, and rely instead on dictionary examples for guidance, which can lead them astray if, for instance, they use a word's semantic associations to deduce facts about its syntactic behavior (Chan, 2012).



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Some usage problems can be attributed to the way particular dictionaries organize and present information. Discussing the challenges of encoding, Michael Rundell, who would go on to edit the award-winning *MEDAL*, wrote that lexicographers should strive for dictionaries “whose content is presented in such straightforward terms that users will have no difficulty in grasping it” (1999, p. 48). Research suggests that this goal, while praiseworthy, may be unattainable. For one thing, learners’ productive needs and abilities vary widely along a number of dimensions, including task, purpose, context of use, L1, and L2 proficiency level. Their English instruction may not have provided insights into the structure and features of the target lexicon. Even learners in the same context may benefit differently from design enhancements, as shown in recent research employing eye-tracking. Tono (2011) found that, among tertiary level Japanese learners of English, menus at the top of an entry, designed to guide users to the appropriate numbered sense, were more effective for lower-level students, while signposts (i.e., highlighted glosses at the beginning of each numbered sense) were more helpful to higher-proficiency students. This research suggests that dictionary consultation processes are highly complex, involving the interaction of dictionary content, presentation features, and individual differences.

A related issue is that learners’ perceptions of their own needs for lexical information seem to have little in common with those of lexicographers. Recent studies suggest that learners often misunderstand what syntactic or collocational information represents and how it might be used. Dictionary skills training is usually proposed as a remedy. Publishers offer training materials in the form of companion workbooks or downloadable worksheets, but these tend to take a particular dictionary and its data categories as the starting point, rather than real-world language-use problems (Frankenberg-Garcia, 2011). Intervention studies have reported some success in improving learners’ consultation skills, more recent investigations integrating conventional training techniques with language awareness activities (Ranalli, 2013).

Variations on, and the Digital Turn in, Learner Dictionaries

In recent decades several variations on the learner dictionary have appeared, including:

- bilingualized or “semi-bilingual” dictionaries, which in addition to typical entry components also include L1 translation equivalents opposite the English headword;
- bilingual learner dictionaries, which provide L1 definitions, L1 and L2 examples, and usage notes primarily in the L1 (see discussion in Adamska-Sałaciak, 2010);
- “onomosiological” dictionaries designed to support encoding, such as the *Longman Language Activator*, in which entries are organized around semantic themes rather than alphabetized word forms – so that a learner who knows the word *careful* can learn about related items such as *thorough*, *meticulous*, and *conscientious*; and
- special interest dictionaries focusing on pronunciation, British or American culture, idioms, and collocations.

A more significant development was the publishing of learner dictionaries in electronic form, when the Big Five began bundling CD-ROM and book versions together to encourage sales. (Handheld electronic dictionaries, which are especially popular in Asia, were a separate innovation introduced by consumer electronics manufacturers; see Nesi, 2009.) The affordances of digital access and presentation are numerous: advanced searching, definitions that include multimedia (e.g., use of video to demonstrate gestures such as *shrug*, or of audio for sounds such as in *whistle*), and recorded pronunciations. Some enhancements, such as the ability to save searched words and to review them in electronic flash cards, have



the potential to increase the role of learner dictionaries in intentional vocabulary learning, while faster modes of access may reduce demands on working memory, thus encouraging more frequent consultation.

Most of the Big Five have also created free online versions, which compete for web traffic and ad revenue with aggregators of native-speaker dictionary information such as www.onelook.com, as well as web-based translation tools and bilingual dictionaries for many L1s. Liberation from the constraints of the printed page means that electronic formats continue to proliferate, the most recent being apps for smartphones and tablet computers.

These developments, while exciting, have made the future of learner dictionaries uncertain, as their owners are buffeted by the same digital tsunami that has forced the publishers of other print media to revise their business models. A clear sign of the times was Macmillan's announcement in late 2012 that the MEDAL would no longer be published in book form. While this trend means that learner dictionaries of the future may be more interactive and frequently updated, one wonders whether they will also continue to be engines of lexicographical innovation without their previous revenue base.

One lexicographer who works primarily in the digital realm has predicted that all electronic dictionaries will at some point cease to function as stand-alone products, instead being integrated with language courseware or translation tools (de Schryver, 2003). There is already movement in this direction, with plugins available for web browsers and other applications that provide contextualized glosses when a user hovers over an unfamiliar word. Another fascinating possibility is combining lexical databases with natural language processing (a subfield of artificial intelligence) to create customized, dynamically compiled results, as exemplified in the *Base lexicale du français* (<http://ilt.kuleuven.be/blf>) designed for learners of French (Verlinde, Leroyer, & Binon, 2010). In addition, user modeling could be employed to take account of a learner's L1, L2 proficiency, dictionary skills, and current search needs in determining which information to present, thus possibly addressing some of the long-standing dictionary use issues mentioned above.

SEE ALSO: Bilingual Lexicography; COBUILD Project; Corpus Linguistics: Overview; Dictionary Use; Formulaic Language and Collocation; Monolingual Lexicography; Web-Based Lexical Resources

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Suggested Readings

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