Bilingual Dictionaries for Learners

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In 2002 Dictionnaires Le Robert produced a new bilingual dictionary designed for pre-intermediate learners of English, the Junior Bilingue (since renamed First in English). Unlike most standard bilingual dictionaries available in France, it is asymmetrical (the "encoding" and "decoding" sides are presented in different ways) and designed specifically for French people learning English (ie, all the metalanguage is in French and the text is built around known problems encountered by learners). The dictionary is now widely used in French schools, and similar texts have been produced for French native learners of Spanish and German, and (published by Vox) Spanish native learners of French and English. What follows is an outline of some key issues that determined the editorial orientations of this project.

1. A production dictionary

This book was designed first and foremost as an aid to target language production – what bilingual lexicographers term "encoding". The encoding dimension in standard European bilingual dictionaries has been steadily systematised since the publication of the Collins-Robert in the late seventies (1978, 6th edition 2002), with its network of synonymic and contextual indicators, its emphasis on collocational patterns and its wealth of carefully selected, corpus-based example sentences. But Collins-Robert and its rivals are reference works designed for relatively sophisticated users. Their entries are highly coded, much of the information they give is abbreviated or implicit, and they assume a good deal of prior knowledge on the part of their readers (at the very least, an acquaintance with the "how to use" section at the beginning of the book). Using a bilingual dictionary as an encoding tool is a tricky business, even for the experienced user. The encoding user is always, to a greater or lesser extent according to his or her level of linguistic competence, stepping into the unknown; translators know that to lift a foreign language term from a dictionary without further cross-checking is fraught with danger, and most teachers have anecdotes about the hilarious misuse of dictionaries. A user-friendly dictionary – and a fortiori a bilingual learners' dictionary – must do all it can to reduce this risk factor, lighting the reader's way as he or she gropes towards proficiency.

The Junior attempts to achieve this in several different ways. Instead of baldly presenting the target-language equivalent of a given word, it first shows the headword 'in action' – in a translated example sentence with no distracting metalanguage. The example sentences are designed to emphasize points relating to the headword equivalent (prepositional collocations of verbs, uncountability of nouns, use of articles, grammatical behaviour) which students need to understand and learn. Facing these example sentences, in a separate column, we find the translation of the headword used in the example, followed by notes in French that draw attention to specific points (register, syntax, pronunciation and so on). The presence of this second column means that information that is implicit in standard dictionaries can be made explicit for the learner. In standard dictionaries, for example, French numerals (deux, quinze) are translated by English numerals (two, fifteen), and the reader is expected to know that where dates are concerned English uses ordinals (the second, the sixteenth). In the Junior, this is made explicit via example sentences and an accompanying note in the right-hand column. The two-column layout is an effective way of uncluttering the dictionary entry and clarifying metalinguistic commentary.

2. Focusing on essentials: the reception/decoding side

Space constraints, lexicographical conventions (not all of them indispensable, or even particularly useful) and economic realities (bilingual dictionaries typically being expected to pay their way in two linguistic communities at once), mean that at least some of the information provided in a bilingual entry is likely to be irrelevant to a given user. Worse, such a surfeit of information can present an obstacle to understanding. The example below illustrates this:

black /xxxx/ 1. n (= colour) noir (m). 2. adj noir. ◆ Black (= person) Noir(e) m(f).

This classically well-formed one-line entry is both basic (in terms of the rudimentary lexical information it contains) and complex (in terms of the highly coded way in which the information is delivered). Riddled as it is with metalinguistic codes, abbreviations and symbols – e.g. no fewer
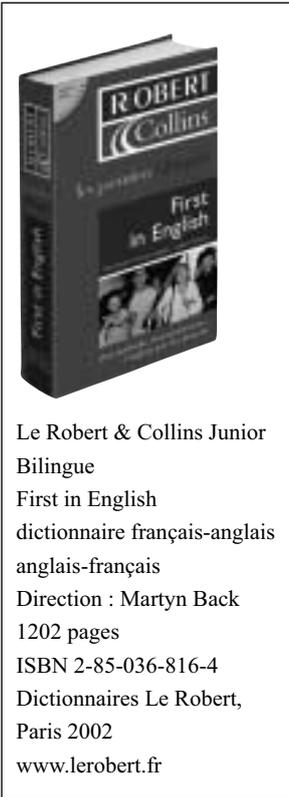
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After several years teaching English, translating and acting, he began working on large bilingual dictionaries, first at Larousse, then at Dictionnaires Le Robert, where he is now editorial director in the bilingual department. In 2002 he created the Junior Bilingue, a successful new learners' bilingual dictionary.

When he is not working, Martyn can be found cooking for friends, hiking through various wildernesses (lately the Sahara in Mauritania and Libya) or chugging along the Mediterranean coast in an old Provençal fishing boat moored in La Ciotat.

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than five pairs of brackets – it contains a good deal of superfluous information for the French native who just wants to know what "black" means. Dividing the entry into noun and adjective is only useful for the English-speaking user (it makes it possible to indicate the masculine gender of the French noun). The indicator (= colour) is designed to inform the English user that other senses of the noun black are not covered here. The sub-entered capitalized form Black, with its special symbol and accompanying synonymic indicator, is there to introduce the capitalized French translation and to remind the English reader that "a Black (person)" is either un Noir (if a man) or une Noire (if a woman). But for the French decoding user most of this information is redundant, and the following presentation (adopted in the Junior) is perfectly adequate:

black /xxxx/ noir.

Here is another example of how classic bilingual editing can over-egg the pudding for decoding users:

eighteen /xxxx/ 1. adj dix-huit inv 2. n dix-huit m inv 3. pron dix-huit.

In the Junior this becomes, with no loss of vital data:

eighteen /xxxx/ dix-huit.

3. Translated examples in a learners' bilingual dictionary

The example sentence in a bilingual dictionary can (in its most banal guise) exist simply to illustrate a given headword translation; it can introduce important collocational information *(we took part in the show = on a participé au spectacle)*; or it can show a contextual nuance for which a new translation is required. In "reference" bilingual dictionaries, as in advanced learners' monolinguals, example sentences help present an accurate "snapshot" of word behaviour, and corpus tools provide examples that have the stamp of authenticity. Phrase translations tread a careful line between naturalness and "generativity" (ie, they must be idiomatic, yet sufficiently banal in stylistic terms to enable the user to re-use them confidently).

In bilingual dictionaries designed for pre-intermediate learners, the status of the example sentence is somewhat different. Examples exist primarily not to provide a snapshot of headword behaviour, but as pedagogical devices. Although natural and idiomatic, they are designed above all to generate a translation that shows the headword equivalent in action. The words they contain are carefully chosen to avoid

complicating the issue for the reader, and in most cases they are deliberately designed to make a point. At *mai*/*May*, for instance, there is an example sentence that in most reference bilingual dictionaries would be considered superfluous: *Stéphanie est née le trois mai / Stéphanie was born on the third of May*.

This apparently banal example sentence in effect "teaches" three important things. Its primary function is to show the use of the prepositions *on* and *of* with month names. Secondly, it shows the capitalization of the month name in English (compared to lower case in French). It also (though more incidentally) takes the opportunity to show *elle est née / she was born*, which many French native speakers have difficulty with.

Example sentences in the Junior are not drawn from corpora. The level of language in our French lexical corpus is inappropriate (much of its content consists of newspapers such as Le Monde, novels and magazines), and it was important for editors to "fine-tune" their examples to maximize their pedagogical value. Corpora provide an accurate and full picture of a language; pre-intermediate learners need a more focused and simplified view. The same is true of phrase translations: editors were encouraged to produce translations that are grammatically well-formed, but to avoid "over-idiomatic" language. At this level, the goal of language learning is to produce intelligible, grammatical sentences, not to imitate the idiosyncrasies of native speakers.

4. Asymmetry

The clear distinction between the functions of encoding and decoding, language production and comprehension, tends to be blurred in the classic bilingual text, which attempts to square the circle by providing information for four user types at once (ie encoding and decoding users in each of the two languages) in a text whose two sides more or less mirror each other. In a learners' dictionary, where the emphasis is on production, the encoding and decoding sides can (and should, ideally) be treated differently, with lots of examples and guidance on the encoding side and a much more summary presentation in the decoding section. In Junior Bilingue, as we have seen, pages on the encoding side are divided into two parallel columns, with headwords and examples on the left hand side and explicit annotations (in French) on the right. The decoding side, on the other hand, is arranged like a pared-down traditional bilingual text, trimmed of all information designed for the "other" user

(including systematic exemplification – there are very few examples on this side). One immediately visible idiosyncrasy of this dictionary is that the line dividing the two sides is off-centre, the encoding and decoding sides occupying two thirds and one third of the book respectively, for an equivalent number of headwords.

5. Learner-centred tools

A key strategy when designing a bilingual dictionary for learners is to focus on actual areas of difficulty. An excellent way to achieve this is to use a "learner corpus", ie a corpus of texts written by non-native speakers, complete with mistakes. Whether such a useful resource is available or not (and it was not, for the Junior), bringing teachers on board from the early stages of the project is another vital way of ensuring that the text is as pertinent as possible. In a text presently being edited at Le Robert for learners of English, for example, the entry for "dolphin" has what might appear to be a superfluous and somewhat contrived example sentence, "Flipper is the name of a dolphin in a TV show". Teachers told us that many French pupils think that the English word for "un dauphin" is "a flipper", because of the title of the TV series Flipper, and the role of this example sentence is to alert the young reader to this common misapprehension.

Reader competence and behaviour must always be taken into account by dictionary writers, and the systematicity and rigour usually associated with "good lexicography" need to be tempered by a degree of calculated pragmatism. In traditional dictionaries, the entry for "go" includes the verb "go" and the noun "go". The reader who encounters the word "goes" is expected to know that it is a form of either the noun or the verb, and to consult the relevant section of the relevant entry (a kind of "auto-cross-referencing" based on prior linguistic knowledge). But a true beginner may well look up "goes", and the Junior includes "goes" as a headword. By the same token, "funnier" and "funniest" are headwords as well as "funny", and all irregular verb forms ("bought", "been", "said") are also given headword status.

French native speaker teachers of English are very clear about the real problems faced by a large proportion of their students. Lack of grammatical knowledge in the students' own language and scant grasp of interlingual issues (most notably the fact that word for word translation is a recipe for disaster) lead to widespread misuse of standard dictionaries, with catastrophic results in the classroom. For this reason,

teachers are understandably mistrustful of standard dictionaries as learning tools. The explicit annotations in the Junior Bilingue, designed to clarify ambiguities and explain grammatical points, make it a more appropriate companion for young learners than the standard pocket bilinguals habitually lurking in their bookbags.

6. Conclusion

To an extent, bilingual dictionaries (unlike native speaker dictionaries and encyclopedias) are not factual: they provide guidance rather than ready-made solutions, and it falls to the reader to use what they suggest appropriately. This demands prior knowledge both of the scope of the dictionary (ie, just how far can the information it provides be taken at face value) and of the nature of translation itself. Pre-intermediate learners do not have this knowledge, and the dictionary must take this into account. The Junior tries to assume little or no prior knowledge, and says "Mind the step!" when a known pitfall appears. Its content, structure and layout have been designed to help its young reader acquire vocabulary in context. Like all good bilingual dictionaries, its examples are its backbone. Like all good learning tools, it knows where the real problems lie, and provides guidance wherever it is needed.

An extract from the French-English part of Robert Collins Junior Bilingue