

# PASSWORD News

A forum for discussion about the semi-bilingual English dictionary. Your comments are welcome.

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**Editor & Publisher:** Lionel Kernerman  
**Managing Editor:** Ilan Kernerman  
**Copy Editor:** Stephen Lubell  
**Production Manager:** Nili Sadeh  
**Photos:** Merav

Published by  
Kernerman Publishing Ltd  
and Password Publishers Ltd  
18 Pinchas Rosen Street  
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Tel. 972-3-492715  
Fax: 972-3-493712

## *The Advent of the Semi-Bilingual Dictionary* by Lionel Kernerman

Historically, the monolingual learner's dictionary was the outcome of the Direct Method in foreign language teaching. This meant total immersion in the target language without the use of the mother tongue, i.e. without any translation.

Given the fact that learners do not have an extensive vocabulary in the target language, learner's dictionaries employ a limited, basic vocabulary (usually 2,000-3,000 words) in order to explain meanings and to give example sentences or phrases showing how the word is normally used. Some learner's dictionaries also point out particular problems pertaining to the grammatical use of a word, its spelling, or its pronunciation.

While many professionals recognize the superiority of the Direct Method over the Indirect or Translation Method, they have also observed that monolingual dictionaries are not frequently used by learners.

Apparently bilingual dictionaries remain the choice of most learners (if given a choice) despite their drawbacks, such as misleading lexical translations.

It is now acknowledged that the vital element in the acquisition of a new language is associated with one's native tongue. Thus, the semi-bilingual dictionary was a natural progression in dictionary development. It contains the advantages of the monolingual learner's dictionary, combined with the native tongue translation found in the bilingual dictionary. The ambiguity of the bilingual dictionary is thus automatically eliminated. Learners are encouraged to read the definitions and examples of usage in English, since only the headwords are translated.

Eight years after its first appearance, it is clear that the semi-bilingual dictionary was indeed a step in the right direction.

### **Bi-directional adaptations**

Semi-bilingual dictionaries can be made bi-directional by having the computer retrieve all the translations, arrange them alphabetically and provide their English equivalents. The list must then be edited to exclude those translations which are not suitable as dictionary entries.

The remaining list does not contain all the headwords one would normally find in a dictionary, since the translators do not necessarily make use of all the words in their translations. Therefore, some headwords must be added. Otherwise, the resulting list would be merely an index of the translated words, which could have important words missing.

Such indexes, however, have been included by publishers of the

Bulgarian, Finnish, French, Italian, Portuguese and Slovenian editions, with several more currently in preparation. It should be taken into account that the addition of an index increases the size of the dictionary by about one sixth.

### **British vs. local settings**

The English-English core of *Password* dictionaries is British oriented. But it is possible to make changes in the basic dictionary text, in order to make it suited to other geographical or cultural areas.

Publishers may delete certain words, expressions, definitions or examples which they find are unnecessary for users in their countries, or which are culturally unsuitable for their target populations. On the other hand, it is

also possible to add material to suit local requirements, as was done in the case of the Finnish, French and Hebrew editions.

### **Workbooks**

An important feature of the semi-bilingual dictionary is its simplicity of design and format which eliminates the need to explain how to use it. Nevertheless, some publishers have prepared additional material for teachers and/or pupils, which provides extra classroom or home practice in dictionary skills.

Workbooks or worksheets were produced for the French, Hebrew and Spanish editions, and are provided free of charge. From the publisher's viewpoint, this is a good way to promote sales in schools.