

**The bilingual dictionary and the Algerian learner  
of English as foreign language**

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**Abstract**

Cet article se propose d'examiner le rôle du dictionnaire et particulièrement le dictionnaire bilingue dans l'enseignement et l'apprentissage de l'Anglais comme langue étrangère au niveau universitaire en Algérie. Dans ce bref exposé, nous espérons pouvoir mettre en évidence certaines insuffisances constatées dans ces dictionnaires tant au niveau microlinguistique qu'au niveau macrolinguistique, notamment la limitation dans la discrimination du sens surtout en polysémie, les restrictions de co-occurrence et le manque d'information relative à l'aspect pragmatique, connotatif et culturel de la langue.

This paper attempts to show the role played by the dictionary and more particularly the bilingual dictionary in an E.F.L. ( English as a Foreign Language ) context at university level in Algeria and to examine some of the problems encountered by the students in the use of such dictionaries. In this short account, we hope to be able to shed light on some of the shortcomings in these dictionaries both at the microlinguistic and the macrolinguistic levels, namely limited meaning discrimination, collocability restrictions and insufficient cultural, connotative and pragmatic information across languages and sometimes even within one language.

First, it should be specified that the number of monolingual English dictionaries at the university of Constantine is rather limited and most of them, if not all of them, are British English dictionaries. The bilingual ones, whether Arabic-English or English-Arabic, are almost inexistent. Furthermore, due to lack of space, not all the students are allowed to use the library which was, until recently, exclusively used by fourth year students and by teachers and therefore not all students could consult a dictionary. This very limited access to the library in which very limited documentation is found is of very limited help to E.F.L. students whose reference needs are very important and fall into various types:

receptive as in listening and reading comprehension and productive as in speaking and writing. It goes without saying that these receptive and productive skills are needed in all the modules, whether language modules such as oral expression, written expression, grammar etc., or content modules which include all the other components of the 'licence' such as linguistics, literature ( British and American ), civilization ( British and American ) etc., and to practice all these skills successfully, the students and even the teachers must have access to reference materials which must be sufficient in number and variety. These two factors are very important because the students should be made aware of the cultural varieties of the language they are studying and how these varieties operate in the language in question, how they are reflected and so on in order to avoid oversimplification, overgeneralization and cross-cultural interference. Unfortunately, what the students often use here, because of the conditions mentioned earlier, does not always go hand in hand with their intrinsic needs, hence all the language problems and

difficulties encountered particularly as far as meaning discrimination, collocability restrictions and cultural specificities are concerned as mentioned in the introduction of this paper.

Bilingual dictionaries, at least the very few ones available here and a few ones consulted elsewhere, offer very little information in the sense that the lexical entry for a word in one language may contain a series of possible equivalents or possible correspondents in the other language without any further specification in which case the dictionary user will have a lot of difficulties in selecting the appropriate lexical item which he needs in his encoding or decoding linguistic performance since the dictionary does not provide any contextual clues, linguistic and pragmatic, as a facilitating device. This is generally the case with the Arabic-English and English-Arabic dictionary which does not discriminate between the various lexical items in the sense that it does not provide the semantic specificities or 'nuances' associated with the words which contract a near-synonymy or co-hyponymy relationship in one language but which may have one and the same equivalent or correspondent in the other language. For example, the Arabic verbs **dja:ʔa**, **ʔata:**, **ʔaqbala**, **qadima** are listed under the English verb **come** without further information as to the context in which one is preferred to the other or one is more appropriate than the other and without information as to their collocational behaviour, i.e., their possible co-occurrences and restrictions etc.

The reverse is also possible, i.e., one item in Arabic corresponds to a series in English in which case the Arabic learner will not be able to select the appropriate item in the foreign language due to insufficient linguistic, connotative and pragmatic information as explained earlier. A similar case was reported by El-Kasimi ( 1983, p. 160 ) who gives the example of an English student of Arabic who finds in an English-Arabic dictionary the Arabic word « al-rabee » and its English equivalent « spring » but who cannot decide which of the senses of the word « spring » is equivalent to the word « al-rabee ».

The polysemic nature of certain words makes the task even more complicated for the foreign language learner who, if not provided with the full information about the syntactic and semantic distribution of words, will not be able to use them correctly and appropriately. For example, the verb **apply** varies semantically according to whether it takes an animate

subject or an inanimate one, whether it takes or not an object complement etc., as in the following strings respectively,

*He will apply for the job tomorrow*  
*You must apply to the minister for a leave*  
*The law applies to all of us*

They apply scientific discoveries to industrial production methods hence the relevance of the information about the collocational environment in the dictionary entry of words.

Therefore, bilingual dictionaries should provide meaning discrimination in the entry of polysemic words, i.e., words with more than one meaning, and synonymous words within each language and cross-linguistically, identify the distributional properties of words, their co-occurrence possibilities and restrictions in the form of syntactic and semantic information such as types of complementation, permissible subject and object collocates etc., and their use in typical contexts and situations which would reflect not only the core meaning of words but also the other associated meanings which are culture specific.

So far, the existing interlingual dictionaries, at least some of them, do not have all these requirements hence they have generally been criticized for being too selective, for being deficient as a communicative tool in the sense that they are based on a strict interpretation of linguistic accounts and fail to relate the language data to the extra-linguistic world of experience or real life knowledge .

Such reference materials will certainly not satisfy the communicative needs of the learners and this also applies to certain monolingual dictionaries. However, it should be specified that not all dictionaries are designed for the same purpose and therefore they do not include the same information. For example, the semantic field based dictionaries such as the Roget's Thesaurus, though based on concepts and gives a much wider range of items relating to the same object, yet does not list these items in context. As already mentioned, different dictionaries are designed for different functions and in the preface to the new edition ( 1983 ), Lloyd, S.M. states:

*As Roget points out in his introduction, a thesaurus is just the opposite of a dictionary in that a dictionary offers meanings for a given word, while a thesaurus offers words to express a given meaning.*

However, on which basis is the foreign learner going to select one word or expression instead of another since the thesaurus says nothing about how or where or when words differ from each other in the set. Though it lists words under the same semantic area and certainly contributes to increasing our vocabulary, it does not always help, especially a foreign learner of English, in the choice of the word or words he wants to use in a given situation precisely because of the large number of words included under that same area even if these words are grouped into sub-sets according to the same idea because some of them, if not most of them, are still unknown by the advanced learner. Let us take the example of the student who comes across the word **straphanger**.

He looks it up in the index of the thesaurus which sends him to the word **traveller** by giving him a simple numbered reference. The lexical entry of the word **traveller** contains the following set: **itinerant, wayfarer, viator, peregrinator, explorer, adventurer, path-finder, cragsman, rubberneck, straphanger** etc. to give but just a few of which the following members **cragsman, rubberneck** and possibly **wayfarer, peregrinator** etc. are also unknown by the student who may spend a lot of time looking them up, one after the other, in the thesaurus without necessarily being satisfied because of the missing information mentioned earlier and without which the foreign language student feels frustrated.

The same thing applies to the bilingual dictionaries consulted so far in English-Arabic or Arabic-English in which words are translated from one language into the other without further specification as exemplified earlier.

However, it should be pointed out that the Algerian students also resort to the bilingual English-French and French-English dictionary hoping to get further and more relevant information about the target language, here F.L.2, using the previously learnt language, here F.L.1. Nevertheless, the place occupied by each language in the dictionary, i.e., whether each language stands as the source or the target language, is very important

since the semantic range of words will be affected accordingly. In other words, the lexical entries of items such as **appliquer** and **apply**, for instance, will vary in each case, i.e., whether we are moving from English to French or from French to English. Consequently, this intermediate process, i.e., resorting to French, may turn out to be a never-ending process due to the insufficient knowledge and the limited exposure of the students in F.L.1. In other words, looking up the words in the various dictionaries and going from one language to the other, here Arabic, French and English, will be a time-consuming process without success. Therefore, as stressed by Tomaszczyk ( 1983, p. 47 ), There is thus an urgent need of a productive L1/ L2

*dictionary, at least one for each language pair that would include a higher proportion of culture-specific vocabulary and treat it more adequately than has usually been done.*

This is where contrastive lexical studies including culture become relevant. They would, as specified by Dimitrijevic ( 1978, p. 41 ) , « offer enough language material for a special kind of cultural dictionary. » and he states ( *ibid.*, p. 37 )

*A contrastive dictionary would be equally useful to students, teachers and textbook writers helping them to develop an awareness of the different connotative meanings and differences which 'the same words' may have in two languages.*

It goes without saying that such an awareness will enable the students to try to satisfy their communicative needs and express themselves appropriately in the foreign language.

In conclusion, we hope that this paper has, at least, succeeded first, in identifying some problems the Algerian E.F.L. learners face due to limited reference material and to inadequacy of the existing material and second, in raising questions and initiating a discussion which would contribute to the understanding of the needs and requirements of Algerian students in order to improve their learning conditions and formulate research projects which would meet such requirements. Finally, we end up with this

concluding statement by R. Ilson (1986, p. 70) in his comparison of British and American lexicography, « in lexicography, as elsewhere, we must understand the world before we can change it for the better. »

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- Phonetic identification of certain transliterated consonants and vowel used in the Arabic examples :

- dj voiced affricate
- q voiceless uvular fricative
- ? glottal stop
- a: long vowel

## NOTES

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