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## **DICTIONARIES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING**

**Abstract:** Although many things concerning foreign language dictionaries have already been said and discussed in scientific papers, we can still add some facts that seem important at this moment. The main thing is the appearance of online dictionaries which are taking place of the print ones. The paper discusses the types of dictionaries and how their definitions have changed over time, compares the advantages and disadvantages of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, as well as the print and online ones, and says something about the situation in our country as far as the dictionaries are concerned.

**Keywords:** *dictionary, print dictionary, online dictionary, translation, monolingual, bilingual.*

Nowadays, anybody who wants to learn a foreign language can do it in many different ways. The most common ones, of course, are the regular school classes, but there are also language courses, learning at home by watching TV programmes or reading literature in a foreign language, chatting on the Internet with other people (the native language speakers, if possible), and many others.

But whatever way a person chooses to learn a foreign language, he/she must have a kind of a support, something that will help him/her in his efforts to accept the correct pronunciation, to manage the correct spelling and to acquire the ability to read correctly. The support is best when coming from an expert, a language connoisseur, or from someone who is a native language speaker. But most of the learners are not in everyday contact with such people, and can not use this kind of help. On the other hand, the development of information technologies and especially of the Internet enables users to approach the vast source of the applications made for facilitating learning; the fact that can also be useful in mastering a language.

Still, even today, the most of foreign language learning is done at school, with the English language starting from the first class of primary schools. Here, the role of the teacher is the most vital one, and in the beginning, the children rely on his/her help in mastering the new words and phrases of the language. The teacher usually writes the unknown words on the board or translates them directly to the pupils and that seems to be enough. But, as the learning of the language progresses, the pupils are taught to become familiar with other kinds of help, the help that would make them self-reliable in learning. And that is where the dictionaries come in.

## WHAT IS A DICTIONARY?

The definition in the Collins Cobuild Dictionary for Advanced Learners, the issue of 2001, says that „a dictionary is a book in which the words and phrases of a language are listed alphabetically, together with their meanings or their translations in another language“. However, a current definition found on the [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com) site says that dictionary is „a book, optical disc, mobile device, or online lexical resource containing a selection of the words of a language, giving information about their meanings, pronunciation, etymologies, inflected forms, derived forms, etc., expressed in either the same or another language; lexicon; glossary. Print dictionaries of various sizes, ranging from small pocket dictionaries to multivolume books usually sort entries alphabetically, as do typical CD or DVD dictionary applications, allowing one to browse through the terms in sequence. All electronic devices, whether online or installed on a device, can provide immediate, direct access to a search term, its meanings, and ancillary information“ ([www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)). The comparison of these two definitions ranging in a little more than fifteen years of time shows considerable differences. Fifteen years ago, a notion of a dictionary was solely that of a book, that is, either a hardback or a paperback issue. J. Baxter said that „indeed, a dictionary is the first thing an EFL student buys and learners carry dictionaries around, not grammar books as someone said“ (1980: 326). That might be true in 1980's, but nowadays, with many things changing everyday, the definition of a dictionary is much broader. We see that now a dictionary can be a CD or DVD device, or any other electronic device allowing the learner to browse the vocabulary terms of a language through. We can also assume that young people, being skillful with new electronic devices, will be more inclined to use the online dictionaries while the older population, used to concrete, material things, will rely on printed books. A random survey of the habits of our students about the use of dictionaries supports this opinion: only a few of them said that they had any kind of print dictionary at home, and most of them confirmed that they use online dictionaries whenever in need of looking up a new word, or that they simply go to Google Translator and solve the problem.

## TYPES OF DICTIONARIES

There are different classifications of foreign language dictionaries in use today. First classification is to monolingual, bilingual or multilingual dictionaries. This classification is based on the languages the dictionary uses to give the word explanations. Monolingual dictionaries explain the meaning of a word in the foreign language the one is learning, so both the entry and the explanation are given in the same language. A bilingual dictionary provides a translation or explanation using another language, usually the mother tongue of the learner. There are also multilingual dictionaries in which the explanations are given in more than one language, but they are not in wide use.

We can argue which type of a dictionary is better for a foreign language learner: a bilingual or a monolingual one? The fact is that our university students, who are not the students of foreign language faculties, find the bilingual dictionaries quite satisfactory for the needs they have. The main advantage of a bilingual dictionary is its brevity and simplicity. Bilingual dictionaries save time: when the unknown word is being looked up or found in the printed book, the meaning is understood immediately; there is no need to decipher the words from the explanation. The process of learning is made faster, and the amount of the material mastered is made bigger. But, for the students of foreign language faculties, the things are different. It is their profession to know all the nuances of the language they are studying, and to practice the language in all aspects possible, so for them, the monolingual dictionary is a need, more a textbook than an aid. That is why they have to start using monolingual dictionaries from the very beginning of their studies. The main advantage of monolingual dictionaries is that they provide more comprehensive information about the target language. This information can include additional meanings of a target word, more examples of how the word is used in context, and, embedded in these examples, useful information about the grammatical behavior of the word. The best thing then might be, for all learners, to check the word in the bilingual dictionaries first, and if they need more details, to go to the monolingual ones. Also, to argue for strictly one type is a major misjudgment as both have their good sides, though it would seem that the natural progression is from a bilingual to a monolingual one. A monolingual is unquestionably richer in information, but it is becoming increasingly clear that each kind helps students in performing certain activities at different stages in distinct ways which are not mutually exclusive. R. R. K. Hartmann emphasizes this point precisely by stating that “the idea of weaning away students from bilingual dictionaries is unsound, and that by focusing on how the languages contrast semantically, syntactically, pragmatically and culturally, bilinguals may assist learners in ways that monolinguals cannot“ (2003: 153).

Another classification of dictionaries is by their content. The first and the broadest group of dictionaries are so-called *general-purpose dictionaries*. A general dictionary covers the total language. The dictionary of any size can be a general dictionary. It contains words from all spheres of human activities and all areas of life of the speakers of that language. Most of these dictionaries are “unabridged” or comprehensive dictionaries, meaning that they have not been shortened by the omitting terms or definitions. But if the dictionaries are in the abridged size, they are commonly called „desk“ or „college-sized“ dictionaries.

There are also *scholarly dictionaries*. These dictionaries are not written for practical use by the general public but with a scientific goal of completeness in their chosen area. *The Oxford English Dictionary* remains the supreme completed achievement in all lexicography.

Many *specialized dictionaries* have also emerged during the past few decades. When we talk about foreign language dictionaries then we must mention that each area of lexical study, such as etymology, pronunciation and usage, can have a dictionary of its own. Especially interesting are the „slang“ dictionaries; one of the best known being the work by Harold Wentworth and Stuart B. Flexner *Dictionary of American Slang* (1960).

As we mentioned above, due to the changes in our world, to the appearance of new technologies and the quick development of languages, and with the new words swarming from everywhere and coming into the everyday use, a new classification of dictionaries appeared: the one to *print and online dictionaries*. There are advantages and disadvantages of both types that should be taken into consideration.

The advantages of print dictionaries can be the following:

- a) They are more resourceful. There is not only the meaning of a word given, but very often its etymology, context in which it is used and some historical or cultural background.
- b) They are a book printed on paper. It can be a rather large book or a smaller one, but you can take it wherever you go. You need not worry about the Internet connection if you are having your holiday in some forlorn place, so having a book to rely on prevents you from stress.
- c) A print dictionary does not need electricity.
- d) They are very useful to people who are not used to modern appliances or technologies and cannot manage them easily.
- e) The entries are given in alphabetical order, which is very important for brain practice, and also for the students of a foreign language who should become familiar with the foreign language alphabet from the very start of language learning.
- f) Print dictionaries are very often colorful. There are symbols, illustrations or pictures that follow the words: so looking up a word in a print dictionary can be very amusing and educative in some other areas of human knowledge.
- g) Another advantage of using a print dictionary randomly or having a look around when performing a specific lookup, is seeing words you have forgotten about. In browsing a print dictionary you can see a word whose meaning you have forgotten and read the explanation. In doing that you are revising your knowledge and becoming able to use that word again in some different context.
- h) A print dictionary can be used as a textbook.

The only real disadvantage of print dictionaries is that they are often like language dinosaurs, finding it hard to follow the changes that are happening everyday in every language and to respond to them quickly. Very often, with time, many entries in these dictionaries become obsolete, or the words go through a semantic shift and their meanings change. Also, new words are formed every day but the print dictionaries remain the same. The print dictionaries are simply not quick enough. In our time, nearly all modern print dictionaries are descriptive, in that they seek to find the words people actually use and record them. They are no longer primarily prescriptive in the sense of granting „good“ words official status while keeping slang and neologisms out. Lexicographers do not include the words in print dictionaries as soon as they appear, but only after some time, if the new words have been used for a long enough period of time or if they have enough citations to show that they are widely used. As Erin McKean, a lexicographer who used to work for Oxford Dictionaries puts it: „Include a neologism too soon, and the word may have fallen out of fashion before the ink on the first print run is dry“.

One more disadvantage is that the print dictionaries must often take care about their size, because the size determines the price. So, they sometimes omit some rare and strictly specific words belonging to narrow scientific fields.

The online dictionaries appeared with the progress of new technologies. In the past, the process of coining new words was left entirely to lexicographers or language experts. Nowadays, with the development of modern technologies, the process is made more democratic. Everybody is allowed to coin a new word and give it a try on social nets. So, if the participants like the new word, accept it and use it, they would also vote for it to be included in the dictionaries. Twitter is a great place for lexicographers to look: new and vogue words will spread quickly through the medium, and it encourages informal and unedited use of the kind lexicographers see as a sort of petri dish for the language.

The main advantages of online dictionaries are:

- a) They are prompt and react immediately to language changes.
- b) These dictionaries are auto-updated, and this fact allows every new word or terminology to be added in the database of online dictionary.
- c) They have the translation feature, that is can translate from one language to another, which is very important for language learners.
- d) They are convenient: any input, and the website search engine will do the rest of the work.
- e) The font size of online dictionaries is far more legible than that of the print dictionaries, because of the space allowed.
- f) Many of these online dictionaries are available for free.
- g) You can have instant access to several dictionaries at once.

But there are also some drawbacks of online dictionaries. The main, certainly is the question of dependability of the source. Some of them are made by non-professionals, so the entries might be quite wrong. The point is, we should know how to distinguish a good online dictionary from a bad one. Many users are aware that online dictionaries cannot often be the most reliable source and they regard these dictionaries merely as a supplement to print dictionaries, and not as their replacement. But, it is fair to say that most of the major English dictionaries (with the exception of OED) have their respective free online editions. We can mention some of the greatest publishers in this area and their online issues: Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionaries, The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, and Encarta World English Dictionary.

We said that online dictionaries have a translating function, but all the language users know the possible imperfections of this function. Very often, the translation is limited to only one use of the word, but there are also some comic situations in which the machine shows the lack of human nature and translates in a funny way; that is a drawback that can not only be amusing but a misleading and a dangerous one. Also, each website is full of banner-like information that very often distracts the user or draws his attention to something else.

The most popular online dictionaries (except the above-mentioned ones) are *Google Dictionary*, *Dictionary.com*, *The Free Dictionary* and *Urban Dictionary*.

### **WHAT IS THE PROBLEM WITH THE PRINT ENGLISH LANGUAGE DICTIONARIES IN SERBIA?**

The problem with the print English language dictionaries in our country seems to be really pressing. There are some monolingual dictionaries that could be used in teaching and learning, but as we said before, most of our university students are not that good at English, so they find this type of dictionary very difficult to deal with. Besides, these monolingual dictionaries are rather expensive since they are mainly published in the UK and the United States. Also, they are hard to find in the bookshops of small towns outside Belgrade. As for the bilingual English-Serbian dictionaries, the situation is even worse. There have been some attempts to print the bilingual dictionaries that contain up to 100.000 words, but these dictionaries are rather skimpy and very often come from a not very reliable source. In any case, they are not good for university students, even for those whose field of study is not a foreign language. There is one exception and that is the Oxford English-Serbian Student's Dictionary published first in 2006. This dictionary contains 95.000 words, phrases and examples, 88.000 translations and 14.000 directions for the language use. It contains idioms and phrases used in contemporary English and many technical terms, differences in pronunciation between the British and American English and grammar explanations. Except for this dictionary, the only reliable one is still the

English-Serbo-Croatian Dictionary by Morton Benson which was published in 1978. Students at philological faculties use the dictionary by Rudolf Filipovic, which is older than Benson's and could be found exclusively in Croatia. Although Benson's dictionary is also an old one, and rather old-fashioned in some parts, it is still irreplaceable in some situations. So, in this area of lexicography nothing valuable is being done so far. It is no wonder, then, that students are directed, and even forced to turn to online dictionaries.

## CONCLUSION

Because the situation with English-Serbian Dictionaries in our country is as it is, an effort should be made on behalf of the Serbian language experts to try and compose a reliable, useful and accessible dictionary of general type. The job is not easy, but if we want the print dictionaries not to lose their place in education, it must be done. We should direct our students to print dictionaries, recommend the good ones, and dedicate time at our classes to practice the use of the book. The mistake our students often make when translating a word, phrase or idiom is to reach for the first entry in a dictionary, without thinking about the other possibilities. It is how some funny and almost tragic situations happen. So, how to use a dictionary must become a part of our foreign language curricula.

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## РЕЧНИЦИ У УЧЕЊУ СТРАНОГ ЈЕЗИКА

### Резиме

Иако је много тога о речницима страних језика већ речено и продискутовано у научним радовима, можемо додати још нека запажања која изгледају важна и релевантна у овом тренутку. Најважнији моменат је појава online речника који све више преузимају примат штампаних издања. Рад се бави врстама речника и тиме како су се њихови уноси мењали током времена, пореди предности и недостатке монолингвалних и билингвалних речника, као и online и штампаних издања, и даје поглед на ситуацију у којој се налази издавачка делатност у нашој земљи сада, посебно када су речници енглеског језика у питању.

**Кључне речи:** *речник, штампани речници, online издања, превод, монолингвални, билингвални.*