

The Place of Dictionaries in English as a Foreign Language

Amanuel Gebru*

1. The Language Learning Dictionary

The Language learning dictionary is reputed by many to be a very rich language learning and improvement tool containing almost all kinds of linguistic information that are of vital importance to language students, teachers and other people of different professions who want to be proficient in the language they speak and write. This language learning device is believed to provide reliable guidance in moments of doubt and to resolve arguments, for instance, about a word, its spelling, pronunciation and the situations in which the word may be appropriately used. For this reason, many people see the dictionary as an "authority" and look up to it as a "law-giver" and arbiter whose decision is final. This powerful word is suggestive of legislative authority, scholarship, and preciseness (Landau 1984).

Many linguists and language instructors believe that for the native as well as for the non-native learner the dictionary is of paramount usefulness, both as a reference and self-study book. For the non-native learner to have a good dictionary means to have an efficient native speaker who can be consulted at all times on many kinds of questions related to proper language use. For the student of English as a first language also, to have a good dictionary and to make a constant use of its resources means to engage in a fruitful language learning activity the possible aim of which is a high degree of perfection in one's tongue.

Certainly, few grammar books, if any, can be as comprehensive in their contents as the

dictionary can be. Few ELT books provide the learner as much useful linguistic information as dictionaries such as the OALD (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary) and the LDCE (Longman's Dictionary of Contemporary English) do. Many linguists and language teachers bear witness to the authenticity of this claim. Ilson (1985: 1) for instance argues rightly that "the dictionary is the most successful and significant book about language". To show the dictionary's success he presents statistical evidence according to which the book was found in over 90% of households in England as against the Bible which was found in 80% of households in 1983 in the same country.

Another language instructor, Underhill (1985:103) underlines the usefulness of the dictionary in language learning. He believes that "of all books available, the MLD [Monolingual Learner's Dictionary] can ... answer a greater number of students' questions about English than any other single book." This does not, however, mean that "the dictionary is the only useful or easiest source of linguistic knowledge needed to understand and write or speak English" (summers: 111)

As might be expected also, one cannot study the whole of a dictionary as one would the whole of a grammar book. The point rather is that the dictionary can often be used alongside the standard textbook as an aid to comprehension and production. Thus while reading a passage or writing a composition, the learner might seek the help of a good dictionary and while consulting his dictionary, according to Underhill (1985: 104) he can find two kinds of information. He calls these

*Lecturer, Institute of Language Studies, Addis Ababa University

"Specific Information" and "Incidental Awareness". Specific Information, is the particular answer or piece of information the student gets from the dictionary, whether this be the pronunciation of a word, its spelling or stress. On the other hand, Incidental Awareness is the extra information the learner sub-consciously absorbs while referring to his dictionary for specific Information. For instance, while looking for the meaning of a word, he may be impressed by the example sentences, synonymous or derivatives and may notice either or all of these aspects of the word, for which he had originally no desire.

The uses of a good dictionary generally are many and varied. Given for word entries, among others are:

1. Spelling (British and American)
2. Syllabication
3. Pronunciation and Stress
4. Parts of speech
5. Meanings (of words, idioms, phrases)
6. Usage Levels
7. Derivatives
8. Synonyms
9. Antonyms
10. Grammatical information

Following, the most important of these will be dealt with in detail under separate headings.

1.1 The Dictionary and Vocabulary Learning

Dictionaries are primarily designed to give the meanings of words. They provide different contexts in which a word may be used thus helping the learner to decode its meaning as used in a certain context. Of course, the preferred way of teaching or learning vocabulary is contextual. There is a belief that lexical items taught in isolation are not well-retained. This does not, however, make the dictionary useless as an aid toward learning. It

retains its value as a means to comprehension because the learner cannot always guess the meaning of every new or difficult word in a passage. Unguessable lexical sets may be prevalent because there may be no clues to help the reader to infer their meanings as in the case of technical or specialised words. In such cases, the only tool the learner can have is the dictionary.

In fact, in a research made by Koller and reported by McCarthy, et al, (1988: 121) even native speakers failed to deduce the meanings of "not necessarily infrequent words". Surprisingly, the native speakers were not able to infer accurately the meanings of 75% of the twenty-five words given in context. There may be little doubt that if these subjects were Ethiopians (non-native speakers), they would be able to guess at a much lower number of the lexical items given. This shows that the dictionary is still, particularly for foreign learners, an indispensable pedagogical tool for comprehension or vocabulary learning.

Even if the learner already knows the meanings of the word in a passage, the dictionary can still be helpful. It can help the learner as a tool for a deeper comprehension and a more detailed understanding, if he looks up the words he already knows. With the assistance of a good monolingual dictionary, he can improve his lexical competence. He can discriminate between the meanings of similar words as some dictionaries show the difference of similar lexical sets under Usage Notes. For instance, the following differentiation is shown for the words "old", "ancient", "antique", "venerable", and "archaic" in the LDCE, under "old":-

Usage 1. Note that "old" is used when measuring age: "How old is the baby?" "He is 3 weeks old; 2. The opposite of "old" is "young" (people or animals) or new (things). "Ancient" is used for very old things, periods or civilizations: "an ancient Greek bowl",

"an ancient lady/car/dress.." "Antique" means valuable as well as old: "an antique French writing desk," When we use "venerable" of someone we mean that we should respect him because he is old: "a venerable white haired priest." "Archaic" is sometimes used of very old works of art, but when used of words or ideas it means that they are no longer used or believed in.

Such semantic differentiation of a word from other similar words is sure to increase the student's effectiveness of comprehension.

Examples of usage as given in some dictionaries are also important to the student's development of comprehension and may also serve as models for him to produce his own sentences. The following example is taken from the ALD;

"Defense" (US=" defence") "... "money needed for national defense"; "to fight in defense of one's country"; "weapons of offense and defense"; "I never fight except in self-defence"². Coastal defenses, against attacks from the sea.. "A thick overcoat is a good defense against the cold.."

In addition, with the help of the dictionary, students can learn to produce lexically acceptable sentences and to use more expressive words. Dictionaries record many kinds of words and place on many of them "restrictive labels". These labels enable the learner to use appropriate lexical items in the appropriate context. Words labeled "colloquial" are not to be used in formal circumstances. Conversely, words with "formal" label are not to be used in informal circumstances. Otherwise, there can be unnecessary formality or informality in the learner's speech or writing. Some words may be out of current use and dictionaries may label them "archaic" or "obsolete" and thereby advise people not to use them. Some words

are region specific; they may be used in a certain region or country or, they may have different meanings in different environments. The dictionary may label them "American", "Irish", "Scotch", or "New Zealand". This differentiation is useful to the foreign learner because English is a global tongue spoken in many different countries of the world and a knowledge of these variants is important for effective communication. Still some words may be technical or specialist, belonging to a particular field, for example, medicine, law, sport or music. Good dictionaries give them respective labels. Certain other words are slang, substandard, poetic or literary and a good dictionary shows their restricted use. Words that may be used in all circumstances are not labeled.

In all these cases, the dictionary offers guidance to proper word use, which is an integral part of language proficiency.

This is not all. Good dictionaries give the meanings of idioms, a knowledge of which is essential for effective communication and which, without the help of the dictionary, are not understandable since they are fixed expressions that do not show the meaning of the component parts. In addition, phrasal verbs, which are kinds of idioms believed to present the most difficulty to the non-native learner are given an inadequate treatment.

1.2 The Dictionary and Grammar

Almost all dictionaries present grammatical information though how much they present may vary from one dictionary to another. Some dictionaries particularly the ALD and the LDCE provide the advanced foreign learner with much of the grammatical information he needs, even more sufficiently than many grammar books do.

Most dictionaries at least present word-class labels for each word contained in them. This has its own advantage. A lexical item labeled

"verb" suggests that the word can be used to describe an action in the present, past or future. Similarly, a word with "noun" label implies that the word may be pluralised, though this may not hold true of some nouns (e.g. Wisdom. Love) which do not usually have a plural. In the ALD and LDCE, however, there are indications that these (mass) nouns can't be pluralised. In the prefatory pages of these dictionaries, sufficient information as to pluralization rules, is given. Of course, these rules apply only to regular plurals of nouns. There are no laws governing plural formation in irregular nouns. However, in the entries for irregular nouns (e.g. information, equipment, furniture, etc.), there are indications. These show which nouns, and which semantic varieties of nouns may be used in the plural, and which may not, except with a change of meaning. If a noun entry is followed by [c], or if [c] is placed after one of the numbers marking semantic varieties, it is a noun standing for something that may be counted. On the other hand, if [U] is used, the noun stands for something that can not be counted. "Formality" may be taken as an example. Definition one is marked [U] and there is an example to illustrate this: "There was too much formality." Definition 2 is marked [C], with examples of plural; "legal formalities"; "comply with all formalities"; "a mere formality".

In the case of irregular verbs and irregular noun plurals, good dictionaries give inflections. For instance, the plural of the noun "datum" is given as "data", "criterion" as "criteria", and the past tense of the verb "swear" is given as "swore", and the past participle "sworn". The comparative and superlative forms of some adjectives are given in the knowledge that they are unpredictable. Adjectives with one or two syllables are given inflectional suffixes (-er, -est). Those words of three or more syllables taking "more/'most" may remain unmarked. Adjectives that take both forms are given marks. This is no doubt important to the foreign learner.

No less important than this is the grammatical information given in "Verb Patterns" particularly in the ALD and LDCE. Here essential information is given as to "which clause patterns a verb may enter, what complementation a verb may take, which items are obligatory or optional or deletable" (Jackson, 1985: 56). This specification of the syntactic operation of the English verb is important because it can help the foreign learner to produce grammatically accurate sentences. Regarding the importance of "Verb Patterns", Hornby writes:

For any one who is learning to speak or write correct English, the most important word in a sentence is the verb... "Verb Patterns" show the learner how to use verbs to form correct sentences.

A person learning English as a foreign language may be tempted to form sentences by analogy. For example, he hears or sees such sentences as, "please tell me the meaning" and "please show me the way". By analogy he forms the incorrect sentence "please explain me the meaning" (instead of "please explain the meaning to me"). He hears or sees such sentences as "I intend to come", "I propose to come", and "I want to come", and by analogy he forms the incorrect sentence, "I suggest to come" (instead of "I suggest that I should come...").

(Hornby, 1974: XXVII)

Grammatical errors such as these can be avoided with the help of "Verb Patterns". Each verb is coded and when in doubt the learner can refer to the table containing "Verb Patterns". For example, one of the patterns given for "envy" is [VP12C] and the examples presented are "I envy you your good fortune; I don't envy him his bad-tempered wife." It is usual, however, to hear Ethiopian students saying "I envy by him; they envy about my grade", which are good examples of incorrect

sentence formation using "envy". For these students, a look at the Verb Patterns is no doubt important in that it can help them avoid such incorrect sentence constructions.

Another kind of grammatical information that can be found in the dictionary is in the example sentences or instances of correct grammatical usage. This information may be overtly or covertly stated, and may be consciously or unconsciously absorbed by the learner who may produce his own sentences based on the given models of correct grammatical usage.

Function words particularly in the ALD and the LDCE are treated in such a way that they are specially useful to the non-native learner. The information given for grammatical words such as "must", "shall", "a", "the", "after", "when", etc. is indeed unmatched in its exhaustive treatment. The following is part of the information given under "that" in the ALD.

...2. (Although "who" is usually preferred to "that", "that" is preferred to "who" after superlatives, "only", "all", and "it is" or "it was"):

"Newton was one of the greatest men that ever lived." "He is the cleverest man that I ever met." "You're the only person that can help me." "Any one that wants to succeed must work hard." "It is you that I want to speak to, not Paul..."

Such kind of grammatical information is not adequately treated in many textbooks of grammar. Usage Notes such as the above one make the dictionary preferable to many course books in grammar which often superficially treat grammatical usage differences.

1.3 The Dictionary and Pronunciation

It is very well known that for effective communication English language learners should have good pronunciation skills. Rivers sums this up as follows:

Since language is a means of communication, it is not just enough for our students to learn words, phrases grammatical features etc. if they will not be able to produce these in a way which makes their utterances comprehensible to speakers of other languages.

(Rivers, 1968: 203)

Several means of learning pronunciation may exist; nonetheless, there are usually not many books on pronunciation as there are on grammar. It is the dictionary that is usually the only comprehensive book for teaching pronunciation. It is peculiarly important in giving learners fairly complete phonological information.

This information in the dictionary is presented in various ways, depending on the kind of dictionary. Respelling, diacritical marks, or IPA Symbols may be used. Of these IPA is by far the most recent and popular, used in many renowned dictionaries such as the ALD and the LDCE. According to Wells (1985: 45) three forms of IPA exist - "Jones", "Windsor Lewis" and "Gimson". The ALD has selected the easiest of these.

Related to pronunciation, there is stress. For language fluency, a knowledge of how words and phrases are stressed is important. It is not enough for students to know pronunciation. It is also important that they know the syllable on which the stress falls because a word may be misunderstood or may not be understood at all, if it is pronounced correctly but stressed wrongly. The same words may have different meanings or uses depending on where the stress falls (e.g. rebel 1/'rebl/n. and 2/rɪ'bl/v.). The dictionary uses the sign (') to show primary, secondary or tertiary stress, not only for words, but also for phrases and idiomatic expressions. For the foreign learner, this job of the dictionary is very valuable indeed.

1.4. English Monolingual and Amharic-English-Amharic Dictionaries: A comparison

These dictionaries (bi- and monolingual) are primarily designed for use by the non-native learner of English. They are aimed at helping the foreign learner by giving the meanings of lexical sets. In the monolingual learner's dictionary, meanings are presented through definitions. In bilinguals, semantic information is given in the form of equivalents in the target language. Here are parallel entries from the two kinds of dictionary.

OALD

- a) bank³ /bank/n/establishment for keeping money and valuables safely, the money being paid-out on the customer's order (by means of cheques) . . . "have money in the bank", have savings; "bank-clerk", clerk working in a bank, "bank bill", bill drawn by one bank upon another. "Bank book", book containing a record of a customer's account with a bank...

Amsalu Aklilu's English-Amharic Dictionary

- b) bank ባንክ በ(ባንክ) የገንዘብ

Amsalu's Amharic-English Dictionary

- c) ባንክ bank n. (institution)

It can be safely said from this that the bilingual dictionary is mostly useful for comprehension, since it gives no sentences as examples of usage. The monolingual dictionary, however, can be useful for both comprehension and production. The example sentences given can serve as models for the learner to produce his own sentences. In addition, for a fuller comprehension, as shown in the above examples, the monolingual one is much better. It does not, for instance, limit the meaning of "bank" to a financial institution; the bilingual one, however, does so thereby giving the learner an incomplete understanding of the word. Still the monolingual dictionary gives collocation here collections of the word

"bank": "bank bill". The bilingual dictionary, however, gives only an Amharic equivalent, a single word.

However, in spite of the advantages the monolingual dictionary has over the bilingual one, students may prefer the latter simply because the bilingual dictionary gives them immediate solutions and hence satisfaction. Nonetheless, this can retard their progress in the target language by preventing them from internalizing it. In the case of the monolingual dictionary, however, "users have to think in English and meanings have to be understood in terms of other English words, promoting a more rapid expansion of passive vocabulary" (Jackson :104).

Another limitation the bilingual dictionary suffers from is that it gives no usage information for lexical items that are close in meaning. Here is an example, for "people".

ALD

- a) People/pi:p/n (collective, with pl.v.)

Note that For one human being, it is preferable to use "man", "woman", "boy", "girl" and not "person", which in definitions, may be derogatory or formal. Persons in general: "streets crowded with people"

Here the ALD gives notes on usage. However, the bilingual dictionary gives no such information.

- b) people ህዝብ

Still another drawback with regard to bilingual dictionaries is that they cannot present the accurate pronunciation of English in Amharic. Amsalu and Mossback (1988: iii) write that "...no system of English pronunciation using Amharic letters can give the exact sounds of English". The only accurate English pronunciation is given by monolingual dictionaries using IPA symbols.

Other limitations of the bilingual dictionary are that:

- a) It often does not deal with phrases and idiomatic expressions;
- b) It contains no stylistic information;
- c) It may give inexact and misleading target language equivalents;
- d) "heavy duty words" (such as "go", "take", "come") are not dealt with exhaustively.

To conclude about the two types of dictionary - both are helpful to the learner of a foreign language (English). However, the monolingual dictionary offers a more important and reliable help. Of course, in the case of the monolingual dictionary, which translates English through English, meanings may not always be understood. In the bilingual dictionary, however, meanings are almost surely understood since the target language equivalents are given in the first language. At times, the bilingual dictionary, translating the first language into English may also be more important than the monolingual one, for productive purposes such as writing, in case the learner has a very limited vocabulary of the target (second) language. He may not know the English equivalents of his mother tongue and the monolingual dictionary can offer little help. All this reminds us that each type of dictionary has its own advantages; however, in the long run, the monolingual dictionary will prove more useful. It develops in learners a feeling of self-sufficiency and gives them a joy of self-discovery, gradually making them autonomous users of the language.

Conclusion

The various kinds of much-needed linguistic information the dictionary contains have been shown. Yet this linguistic wealth seems to be largely untapped.

According to a study by Amanuel (1991) the dictionary's richness, notwithstanding, many students do not have a correct understanding of its various resources, and hence do not use it to

the full. More than half of the subjects in his study reported to have or own a dictionary, but they are not serious users. Thus summers' (1988) statement that dictionaries have been disregarded as a wealth of books on grammar by linguists and language teachers seems true also true of the Ethiopian college context.

According to Amanuel (1991) most of the freshmen did not earnestly read the introductory pages of the dictionary which could help them to effectively use it. More than half are clumsy dictionary users who are often engaged in a laborious and awkward dictionary use. More than 50% do not use the dictionary to increase or improve their vocabulary. Still more than half of them are ignorant of the phonetic alphabets of English and rarely study pronunciation with the help of the dictionary.

On the other hand, as might be expected most instructors (90%) have the awareness that the dictionary has a very rich fund of linguistic information. Most (65%) agree that regular dictionary use would help achieve high standards of language efficiency. More than half (55%) also feel they should train their students in dictionary use, but only 30% have done so. Only 50% advise their students to use the dictionary regularly and seriously. The rest have yet to do so.

It is often believed that language learning is a task which to be very effective has at best to be performed by the learner himself. This does not, however, preclude teachers decisive guidance or direction which is admittedly important. Yet, probably the most successful language learning is the one which has a lot of room for self-teaching, with the assistance of self-study books such as the dictionary. Watered down, Johnson's advice about learning to speak and write well "give your days and nights to a wise study of your dictionary" (in Wykoff and Shaw, 1962) may indeed be useful.

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