

## **GENERAL AND SPECIALISED FREE ONLINE DICTIONARIES**

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### **Introduction**

Dictionaries in general are an essential tool for (autonomous) language learning. However, they have been devoted little attention as part of the language learning process. Researchers such as Aust, Kelley and Roby (1993) indicate that the use of hyper-reference dictionaries promotes a higher consultation rate than that of paper dictionaries, which in turn will probably enhance vocabulary acquisition. But as Sobkowiak (2002) rightly suggests in the last issue of *Teaching English with Technology*, motivation to use dictionaries on the part of the learner very much depends on the teacher's knowledge of available reference tools. It is hoped that the online dictionaries referred to in this article are varied enough to motivate both teachers and their students.

The emergence of a wide range of available dictionaries on the Web should be welcome by language learners in general and by ESP students in particular. It is a well-known fact that specialised dictionaries are much more expensive and difficult to obtain than general ones, and they do not always satisfy the needs of language learners but rather those of professionals. Online dictionaries fill in two important gaps in this respect: there is a wide specialty dictionary offer for the various knowledge areas and some websites offer the opportunity to simultaneously search general and specialised dictionaries at the same time.

CD-supported or Machine Readable Dictionaries (MRD) together with web or online dictionaries have expanded the dictionary typology in which their paper counterparts were classified regarding the categories of range, perspective and presentation as described in Malkiel (1967). Some products are available both online and as MRDs, others offer an online demo and advertise the CD. In this paper we will focus only on Web dictionaries although most features are shared with CD dictionaries (See Walter, 2002 to learn more about the advantages of CD dictionaries). Several features stand out as typical of online as opposed to paper dictionaries:

## **I. THE MEANS OF ACCESS:**

### **1. Accessing from one part of the dictionary to another**

In paper dictionaries the user decides which entry to look up first and then continues the search consulting other entries if the first choice was not successful. Much of this look-up process is filtered out in online dictionaries because searches are carried out by typing in words that allow Boolean searches yielding one or several results, thus simplifying the whole look-up process. *AllWords.com*, for instance, allows the user to find words starting, ending, containing, or matching the search, and select one or several languages in which to translate the results (<http://www.allwords.com/>). Cross-referencing is also speeded up by means of links which directly take the user to related words or concepts (see for instance: synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, hypernymy, and meronymy in *WordNet* <http://www.cogsci.princeton.edu/~wn/w3wn.html>; or the conceptual organisation in the *Global Legal Information Network (GLIN) Thesaurus* at <http://www.loc.gov/pmei/lexico/liv/brsearch.html>).

### **2. Linking the dictionary to external and/or other types of information**

From the pedagogical perspective the most interesting advance is made in terms of the alternative information sources that usually appear in online dictionaries. Links may be both internal (within the dictionary) and external (to other sites). The most frequent options are:

- links to other pedagogical materials (such as grammars, vocabulary tasks and the like), or to specific information on usage, grammar, worksheets, etc. Thus, *Cambridge Dictionaries Online*, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>, provides links to activities in which the dictionary may be used: <http://uk.cambridge.org/elt/reference/activity.htm>, while *AllWords.com*, quoted above, provides links to pedagogical materials, and especially lexical resources including other dictionaries and thesauri. Furthermore, a dictionary may be integrated as one of the tools in a language learning site (*The Linguist List* at <http://www.emich.edu/~linguist/www-vl.html>; or *Online Resources for ESL Students and Teachers* <http://chabotweb.clpccd.cc.ca.us/maj/lahum/esl/resources.html>). Thus, we have both online dictionaries taking us to other sites and educational sites with the dictionary as a resource.

- links to educational pages (directed to the teacher, the learner or both) or professional pages (in specialised dictionaries, addressed to a particular community which may provide access to research groups and other links to various online materials).

An excellent material for the use of dictionaries in the classroom is found at *KiDs*, part of the *Macquaire Dictionares* (<http://macquarienet.com.au>), which comprises, among other things,

comprehensive notes for the teacher, worksheets, overhead transparencies and very detailed lesson procedures.

A specialised glossary with internal links to related pedagogic material is *The Biocomputing Glossary* (<http://www.cryst.bbk.ac.uk/BCD/bcdgloss.html>), with extra material on how a biologist deals with computer programs and their use. *The Dictionary of Computing and Digital Media* is defined as Digital Media Reference Source (<http://www.hansenmedia.com/>) and provides tables, tutorials, and annotated links to URLs. *Glosario de Términos: Laboratorio de Genética*, incorporates sound, statistics, images and links from the term to research in that area (<http://www.geocities.com/maorera/hglaes2n.htm>).

A peculiarity of some online dictionaries is that some sites have taken the dictionary format to organise their contents and lead the user to further explanations and advice. Thus, there are dictionaries for community special needs as *Diabetes Dictionary* which includes the latest information, advice and testimonies from children with diabetes (<http://www.childrenwithdiabetes.com/dictionary/>).

– links to encyclopaedic information on special topics, an example is *Webopedia*, a dictionary and search engine for computer and Internet technology (<http://pcwebopedia.com/>). It should be noted that the boundaries of what is a dictionary and what is an encyclopedia are somehow blurred on the Web since online references are frequently integrated (*Diccionario del Vino Español*: <http://www.filewine.es/dictiona.htm>).

### **3. Multiple dictionary access**

The possibility to carry out a search in more than one dictionary has been made easier regarding two online possibilities. On the one hand, some online dictionaries carry out searches in more than one dictionary and from that outcome the user may choose which information to look up and where. Examples of this kind are: *Xrefer*, <http://www.xrefer.com/>; and *OneLook Dictionary*, <http://www.onelook.com/>, which we shall comment on below. On the other hand, there are several sites which provide an extensive list of available online dictionary pages. *The Linguist List* quoted above includes an index of dictionaries. Other examples are:

- *A Web on Online Dictionaries* (<http://www.yourdictionary.com>). This is a very comprehensive site including dictionaries classified according to language and specialty. It also includes links to other reference works and pedagogical online material.

- *1000Dictionaries.com* is an excellent source for specialised dictionaries and other specialised reference materials arranged according to thematic categories (<http://www.1000dictionaries.com>).

- Several Internet guidebooks devote one of their sections to dictionaries related to the topic of the book, as in <http://www.ifgb.uni-hannover.de/extern/ppigb/glossary>, which is part of *Plant Pathology Internet Guide Book*.

#### **4. Bi-/Multilingual access or using the dictionary in one of several languages**

The information in both general and specialised bilingual and multilingual dictionaries is accessed in an easier way than when used online. Additionally, some of these dictionaries instantly translate the whole page into one of the languages of the dictionary. The following are examples of specialised multilingual dictionaries: in *The Technical Translator* (<http://www.mouli-net.com/translator/>) one word is translated into another language according to field, thus "power" has different uses and translations whether used in agriculture, electricity or mechanics. *The Astronomy Thesaurus* hyperlinks allow the search of specialised terms which are translated into English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. The pages may be accessed in any of these five languages (<http://msowww.anu.edu.au/library/thesaurus/>). The *Multilingual Glossary of Cereal Cultivation* is compiled in four languages: English, Spanish, French and Italian (<http://www.inea.it/udi/>).

## **II. THE "WORD OF THE DAY" FEATURE**

A new dictionary feature that has come up with the introduction of online dictionaries is the "Word of the Day" and other similar proposals in which the dictionary puts forth an entry each day with the intention of drawing the user's attention to strange or less used words, or simply to learn about a word that is chosen daily to provide a full explanation.

*New Words in English*, (<http://www.owl.net.rice.edu/~ling215/NewWords/page1.html>) includes the *Word of the Day* in *Wordsmith.org*, organised by date, theme and alphabetically; today's and yesterday's words include sound, definition and example (<http://wordsmith.org/awad/index.html>); the *Word Play*, a long list of several web pages related to words (<http://www.wolinskyweb.com/word.htm>); the *Word of the Day* in *OED* (<http://oed.com/cgi/display/wotd>); the Collins Cobuild Idiom of the Day (<http://titania.cobuild.collins.co.uk/Idiom.html>); or pages such as *The Monthly Idiom* (<http://www.comenius.com/idioms/>), where the user has a definition and may listen to a short conversation in which the idiom appears.

## **III. THE QUALITY OF IMAGES AND THE INCORPORATION OF SOUND**

Related to the images is the concept of design. While paper dictionaries achieved improvements in design according mostly to letter size and type as well as page layout, online dictionaries make the most of colour, movement, sound and the use of icons that take the user to different kinds and sources of information. Good quality images may be found in different specialised dictionaries: *Biotech Life Science Dictionary* (<http://biotech.icmb.utexas.edu/search/dict-search.html>); *Online Biology Book Glossary* (<http://gened.emc.maricopa.edu/bio/bio181/BIOBK/BioBookgloss.html>); or *Medical Herb Garden. Pictures/Data Accessible by common or Botanical Name*, a glossary with more than one picture and close-up shots per term (<http://nmlm.gov/pnr/uwmhg/index.html>).

Images improve not only in quality and size but also in the possibility to add movement or animation and even sound where required. A good example of considerable improvement as opposed to paper dictionaries is the case of movement in sign language dictionaries. See for instance *A Basic Dictionary of ASL Terms* (American Sing Language) at <http://www.masterstech-home.com/ASLDict.html>.

Sound may be used as illustration for certain words (*whistle, quack, beep, weep*), as in *Sounds of the World's Animals* (<http://www.georgetown.edu/cball/animals/animals.html>); as decorative element of the device, that is, background music; and to inform about the pronunciation of words, a feature that has been gradually incorporated in most online general and some specialised dictionaries. Learners usually welcome the option of listening to the pronunciation instead of interpreting phonetic symbols as this requires less effort.

Music Dictionaries and Encyclopedias obviously improve with the inclusion of audible files as in *Online Music Encyclopedia*, with both high quality pictures and files for listening to music (<http://library.thinkquest.org/10400/html/>).

#### **IV. THE CHOICE OF DICTIONARY**

One of the advantages of using dictionaries on the Web is that sites containing a classified list of dictionaries have become a useful guide for dictionary choice (i.e., dictionary typology) both for teachers and students. This may be seen for instance in the first page of *A Web of Online Dictionaries*, the user soon realises that there are different categories: monolingual dictionaries organised alphabetically by language, specialty dictionaries, general multilingual dictionaries, bilingual or multilingual dictionaries designed for translation purposes, and the *'nyms* category which contains thesauri, acronyms and pronunciation and others.

Another important step in dictionary choice for ESP learners is made in online dictionaries such as *X.Refer* and *OneLook Dictionaries*. In the former (<http://www.xrefer.com/>) the user may select the

domain or topic so that the information is only searched in that domain. *X.Refer* also highlights the looked-up word and provides a sample sentence and the reference media from which it has been taken in order that the users may decide which of the options is more convenient for her/him. Moreover, the entries in some of the dictionaries and encyclopaedias included have linked cross-references.

*OneLook Dictionaries* (<http://www.onelook.com/>) is a very useful site too. Here the user may ask for the spelling and the language of the definition, and then results are classified according to fields (starting by general dictionaries and following with an alphabetical classification of different domain areas). This dictionary is an excellent solution to the problem we pointed out at the beginning of this paper, namely that specialised dictionaries do not always satisfy the needs of language learners but rather those of professionals. In *OneLook Dictionaries* the student may use both the information in general learners dictionaries and in the specialised ones complementing each other. In this way the learner has access to grammar, pronunciation, examples, etc. in an "easier" format and may also enter the (usually) more detailed definitions found for particular terms in specialised dictionaries.

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