Italian-English Bilingual Dictionaries and the Prevention of Users’ Lexical Errors

Bilingual dictionaries are aimed at providing users with knowledge about a language they are less familiar with than their first language; in this view, all bilingual dictionaries are pedagogical (Nuccorini, 1989). Besides, it has been demonstrated that learners tend to privilege bilingual to monolingual dictionaries (Kirkness, 2004; Folse, 2004). However, some studies have shown that users find the appropriate solutions they are looking for in dictionaries only about 50 per cent of the times or less, owing to their inadequate search methods as well as to the dictionaries’ intrinsic features (Bogaards, 1988; Tono, 1989), and make frequent errors in using the information found in the dictionary (East, 2008); errors increase when the items looked up are polysemic words or idioms (Bogaards, 1988). Among the many types of mistakes, the most serious in terms of communicative efficacy are lexical errors, namely deviations “in meaning […] of a target-language lexical word” (Llach, 2011).

The purpose of this study is to examine the presence (or absence), in bilingual Italian-English dictionaries, of covert and overt strategies to prevent users from making lexical mistakes in their production in the English language, to devise a taxonomy of these strategies, and to analyze and classify their features. The study compares contemporary general-purpose and learner’s, mono- and bi-directional, unabridged and compact, paper, electronically stored and online dictionaries. The fully described strategies include noticing-facilitating devices, lexical notes, info boxes, common errors flagging, corpus-based examples, cross-references, consciousness-raising activities and more. Consideration is also given to the theoretical soundness and to the coherence and consistency of the design in the macro- and micro-structure of each dictionary.

The further development of this research is to focus the investigation on the effectiveness of the existing error prevention strategies and to promote more and new strategies that may enhance the users’ ability to draw upon the information they find in bilingual dictionaries, as advocated by prominent scholars (Bogaards & Hannay 2004; Laufer & Levitzky-Aviad 2006).

References


