School Dictionaries for First-Language Learners

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Abstract: Acknowledging the ambiguity of terms like *school dictionary, children's dictionary, first language, mother-tongue* this article motivates a specific use of *school dictionary, first language* and *learner* and focuses on various problems in these dictionaries. The typical functions of these dictionaries are discussed with reference to the lexicographic needs of first-language learners. Looking at a few existing dictionaries, suggestions are made for the inclusion and presentation of certain data types. The importance of the use of natural language in the paraphrases of meaning is discussed. It is emphasised that lexicographers should consult teachers and curriculum experts when planning school dictionaries and that the grade and age of the target user needs to be taken into account. The aim of this article is not to give final solutions to the questions raised but merely to recommend that a number of factors — or variables — are taken into account when planning future school dictionaries. In this respect, a number of questions are formulated that need to be answered when planning the compilation of school dictionaries.

Keywords: CHILDREN'S DICTIONARY, DICTIONARY CULTURE, FIRST LANGUAGE, LEARNER, LEXICOGRAPHIC FUNCTIONS, LEXICOGRAPHICAL NEEDS, LEXICOGRAPHY, MOTHER-LANGUAGE, PARAPHRASE OF MEANING, SCHOOL DICTIONARY

Opsomming: Skoolwoordeboeke vir eerstetaalleerders. Met inagneming van die dubbelsinnigheid van terme soos *skoolwoordeboek, kinderwoordeboek, eerste taal, moedertaal* kies hierdie artikel vir 'n spesifieke gebruik van die terme *skoolwoordeboek, eerste taal* en *leerder.* Die fokus is op verskeie probleme in hierdie woordeboeke. Die tipiese funksies van hierdie woordeboeke word bespreek met verwysing na die leksikografiese behoeftes van eerstetaalleerders. Na aanleiding van 'n paar bestaande woordeboeke word voorstelle gemaak vir die opname en aanbieding van sekere datatipes. Die belang van natuurlike taal in die betekenisparafrases word bespreek. Dit word beklemtoon dat leksikograwe ook onderwysers en kurrikulumdeskundiges moet raadpleeg wanneer skoolwoordeboeke beplan word en dat die graad en ouderdom van die teikengebruiker in ag geneem moet word. Die doel van hierdie artikel is nie om finale oplossings te gee vir die bestaande probleme nie maar eerder om aan te beveel dat sekere faktore — of veranderlikes — in ag geneem moet word wanneer skoolwoordeboeke beplan word. In hierdie verband word 'n paar vrae geformuleer waarop antwoorde gevind moet word wanneer beplanning gedoen word vir die daarstel van skoolwoordeboeke.

Sleutelwoorde: BETEKENISPARAFRASE, EERSTE TAAL, KINDERWOORDEBOEK, LEER-DER, LEKSIKOGRAFIE, LEKSIKOGRAFIESE BEHOEFTES, LEKSIKOGRAFIESE FUNKSIES, MOEDERTAAL, SKOOLWOORDEBOEK, WOORDEBOEKKULTUUR

1.   Introduction

In discussing the development of reference sources, including dictionaries, McArthur (1986) classifies these tools as "containers of knowledge". Today the average member of a literate speech community still regards a dictionary as one of the most important sources from which information regarding language and a variety of other matters can be retrieved. Dictionaries are practical tools and as such the nature and extent of their use should never be underestimated. One of the many environments where a user relies on "the" dictionary is within the school system where teachers ever so often refer learners to dictionaries for solutions regarding a wide-ranging series of problems. Unfortunately very often the dictionary consultation does not help to solve the problems of these users. This is due to different reasons, e.g. a school dictionary that is not really directed at the needs of its intended target users, the teacher referring the user to a dictionary used in school that is not really a school dictionary or even, and quite often, the lack of dictionary using skills.

A limited knowledge regarding school dictionaries is often the result of the lack of a dictionary culture. When referring to the notion of dictionary culture, cf. Hausmann (1989), a distinction can be made between a societal and an individual dictionary culture, cf. Gouws (2012). A societal (also known as a collective) dictionary culture implies that a general and wide-spread dictionary culture prevails within a given speech community. In contrast, an individual (also known as ideolectal) dictionary culture prevails within the individual member of a speech community, in spite of the lack of a societal dictionary culture. Where a given speech community lacks a societal dictionary culture the notion of *school dictionaries* is likely to be treated in an insufficient or haphazard way.

One way to enhance a societal dictionary culture and ensure a more scientific approach to the notion of school dictionaries is to introduce both dictionary using skills and intensive dictionary using opportunities in the early and later school years. This can only be done if school children have sufficient access to well-devised school dictionaries. In this regard government intervention may be necessary. A practical example of such an intervention is the education system in Brazil where policy demands that each student in school must have his/her own monolingual dictionary of Brazilian Portuguese.

Wiegand (1989: 251) maintains that lexicography is a scientific practice, aimed at the production of dictionaries, so that a further practice, i.e. the cultural practice of dictionary use can be initiated. One of the problems regarding school dictionaries is that this scientific practice has not always been done in a sufficiently scientific way. The planning and compilation of school dictionaries

should be seen as a team effort, combining lexicographic, curriculum as well as pedagogical expertise. The lack of any one of these fields of expertise will lead to a dictionary of a lesser quality.

Different typological classifications of dictionaries exist, cf. Malkiel (1967), Zgusta (1971), Geeraerts (1984) and Gouws (1989), to name but a few. One of the problems experienced in the use of dictionaries at school level lies in the fact that in many classifications the category of "school dictionary" is such a vague and ambiguously defined typological category. The main problem with this category resides in its general and unspecific nature. Where the notion of school dictionary is defined as a dictionary used in school it can be interpreted that each and every dictionary that is used in a school, and not only those specifically compiled for use in schools, can be regarded as a school dictionary. This leads to the above-mentioned problem where school learners consult a dictionary that is not a school dictionary and the consultation does not lead to the required results.

A competing term to *school dictionary* is *children's dictionary,* cf. Tarp (2011). This term is often used for dictionaries primarily compiled for use by pre-school children but they are also used during the foundation phase. A dictionary like the *Oxford Children's Thesaurus* clearly states on its back cover that it is directed at users of 8 years of age and older, i.e. school-going users. In comparison the *Collins Junior Illustrated Dictionary*, with a title that seems to be identifying a slightly more advanced user group, indicated on its back cover that the target users are of the age of six years plus.

In this paper the focus will be on school dictionaries for first language learners. However, in the title of this paper there are at least three problematic concepts, i.e. *school dictionary, first language* and *learner*. These terms need to be disambiguated for the purpose of this paper.

It is currently a widely accepted criterion that one of the core components in the planning of any dictionary has to be a clear identification of the intended target user of the envisaged dictionary. Quite often one finds an indication of the target user, e.g. *learners*, in the title of a dictionary. The word *school* often prevails in the titles of dictionaries but when looking at the functions, structures and contents of the dictionary it is not clear at all why this word occurs in the title. In some instances it merely indicates that the dictionary is of a more restricted extent. This typically prevails when the so-called school dictionary is a reduced version of a more comprehensive dictionary. This reduction is typically done by deleting some articles or by omitting some entries in certain articles. This leads to a version that often has a higher degree of textual condensation than its more comprehensive counterpart and is even more difficult to use. Such a dictionary is not a school dictionary. The term *school dictionary* refers to those dictionaries specifically compiled for use in schools, albeit that some of them are also used in a pre-school environment, cf. Tarp (2011). Whether they are titled *school dictionary* or *children's dictionary* or even have a title with no reference to the school environment, if they are planned and compiled to be used

in schools they are regarded as school dictionaries. A school dictionary therefore is a dictionary with the genuine purpose to assist users that are school learners to find the solution for problems related to their school work. It is important that school dictionaries should clearly be distinguished from other dictionaries used in school but not specifically planned and compiled with school learners as their envisaged target user group. Dictionaries of the latter type are not regarded in this paper as school dictionaries.

The term *first language* is also problematic because different terms like *mother tongue, native language, home language* and *primary language* are often used to refer to the same thing. All these terms are problematic. Within South African schools the term *home language* is used in opposition to *additional language*, with the first term implying a language subject with a higher academic level than the second. Yet, this term does not imply that it is the best language of the student. A student could have language X as the language used at home and the language in which he/she is the most comfortable. Due to a variety of reasons this student may opt for or be compelled to take language Y as the higher level language at school. In this paper the intricacies of these terms will not be discussed. The term *first language* is used here to refer to the higher grade language, with the implication that in the majority of cases it will be the language in which the student is the most comfortable, which often will be the language he/she uses at home and typically will be the language used as his/her medium of instruction at school. However, it is not necessarily the student's home/mother/native/primary language. The focus on dictionaries for first language learners motivates the decision to exclude bilingual dictionaries from the discussion.

The term *learner* is problematic because in different environments different interpretations are attached to this term. In the typological classification of dictionaries the *learner* referred to in the category *learners' dictionary* indicates a specific category of users, i.e. those users, mostly adults, who study a foreign language. Within the South African educational environment a learner refers to a student attending a school, i.e. from the first to the last school year. Yet again, this paper will not endeavour to judge the decisions by either lexicographers or educationalists regarding the selection of a given term. In this paper the term *learner* refers to a student attending school, i.e. a student more or less from the age of five up to the age of eighteen.

This paper should not be seen as a once-off or isolated investigation. It links directly with an earlier paper, i.e. Tarp and Gouws (2010), and is partially based on presentations by both Tarp and Gouws in two workshops focusing on school dictionaries, one in Stellenbosch (2010) and one in Pretoria (2011), as well as a workshop in Namibia (2011).

This paper primarily refers to printed dictionaries and uses examples from these dictionaries. However, the underlying theoretical principles are not only directed at printed dictionaries but could also be applied to electronic dictionaries. This links with an important approach in lexicography that electronic

dictionaries do not need a separate theory. A general theory of lexicography should rather be formulated in such a way that it can form the basis for the planning and compilation of both printed and electronic dictionaries, albeit it that provision needs to be made for certain medium-specific aspects.

The world of school dictionaries for first language learners is full of problems. This paper will not endeavour to give solutions to these problems but will rather identify and discuss some of the problems and make a few suggestions that could play a role in working towards a better dispensation. The paper will not take a contemplative view by only looking at existing dictionaries, but will also have a transformative approach with proposals for an improved lexicographic practice.

2.   Functions of school dictionaries for first-language learners

Existing school dictionaries for first-language learners vary a lot in form and content, not only from one country or language community to another, but even within the same country and language community. This variety may not only be explained by the different traditions but also by the fact that school dictionaries by their very nature may have a big number of different functions in terms of the foreseen user group which has to be categorised according to age (grade) and the corresponding intellectual, linguistic, cultural, and encyclopedic development of the school children, as well as in terms of the various types of learning situations where the children may need to consult or use a dictionary. The publishing houses inevitably have to adapt to this reality and focus on one or a few aspects as no single dictionary will be able to cover the whole spectrum of needs of a highly heterogeneous user group in all the relevant situations. The inevitable result is the existing variety of school dictionaries of which many claim to cover a much bigger group of users and situations than they actually do, a fact that contributes to the lowering of the prestige and quality of the dictionaries.

In order to evaluate existing school dictionaries for first-language learners and come up with recommendations for future dictionaries it is first and foremost necessary to establish the real needs of the potential users of these dictionaries, i.e. the school children studying to improve their first language. These needs are not only intimately connected with the personal characteristics of the user group itself but also with the various learning situations where lexicographically relevant needs may occur for this group.

Most publishers of school dictionaries refer to reception and production of written and oral texts when they explain in which situations their dictionaries may be used, and it is a fact that these two communicative situations are the fundamental situations that have to be covered by school dictionaries although they may be further subdivided into "normal" text reception and production and exercise-related reception and production.

To these communicative situations should be added two fundamental

cognitive situations, i.e. vocabulary learning and grammar learning, where the children — frequently together with the teacher — use the material provided by the dictionary to study and assimilate these two basic components of the language. However, it is important to stress that vocabulary learning most often — and especially for the younger children — goes together with encyclopedic and cultural learning as you cannot learn a word without knowing what it refers to. In this respect, school dictionaries may also assist the school children in a third cognitive situation, i.e. learning about the world, getting world knowledge as a basis for vocabulary learning and interwoven with this. Dictionaries directly conceived to assist vocabulary building contain, as a rule, thematic sections — mostly with illustrations, and sometimes even with illustrations as "lemmata" — whereas dictionaries assisting grammar learning contain special sections — in printed dictionaries frequently placed in the front or back matter — where inflection, word formation, punctuation and other grammatical phenomena are treated in a systematic way. In these cases, the school dictionaries are not primarily used as consultation tools but as mini-text books which can be studied section by section instead of using "normal" text books.

Apart from the two communicative and the three cognitive situations mentioned, all of which are directly related to the learning of a language, school dictionaries in some countries may also provide assistance in a another type of cognitive situation where the children need to know something about their language. This is the case when the national curriculum, for instance in South Africa, requires that the school children in specific grades should learn about the origin and history of their language and its words. However, it is important to note that the corresponding etymological function displayed by various South African school dictionaries has nothing to do with the learning of the language, but only with acquiring a learned knowledge about the language.

Finally, some school dictionaries, especially the so-called children's dictionaries, may have an additional underlying function of a operational character, i.e. to assist the school children in getting into the habit of using dictionaries and developing dictionary skills (for more about operational situations, cf. Tarp 2008a). In fact, Martínez de Sousa (1995: 158), in his Spanish dictionary of lexicography, exaggerates this function and defines a "children's dictionary" solely as a "dictionary especially conceived to initiate the children in the use of this type of work".

To sum up, school dictionaries for first-language learners may have the following seven fundamental communicative, cognitive, and operational functions, of which only five are directly related to the learning of the first language:

Communicative functions directly related to language learning

1.   To assist school children with text reception (written or oral)

2.   To assist school children with text production (written or oral)

Cognitive functions directly related to language learning

3.   To assist school children with the learning of the grammar

4.   To assist school children with vocabulary learning

5.   To assist school children with learning about the world

Cognitive function not directly related to language learning

6.   To assist school children with learning about etymology

Operational function not directly related to language learning

7.   To assist school children in developing dictionary skills.

It goes without saying that several of these fundamental functions are restricted only to school children of a certain age (grade) and that the individual school dictionary — even when being a high quality product — does not have to display the functions that are not relevant to the age and grade of the foreseen user group. Apart from that it should be noted that each of these fundamental functions may be further subdivided as a result of the necessary categorisation and subdivision of the highly heterogeneous user group composed of school children of different grades and ages.

As already mentioned, we believe that the most important situations where dictionaries may provide assistance in the learning of the first language are text reception and text production, because the cognitive situations in the first place give rise to increased *knowledge* about this language whereas communication is the mediating element through which the information provided by dictionaries may be transformed into language *skills* which is the main objective of first-language (mother-tongue) learning. Tarp (2008b: 134-135) writes:

> If a person at a certain language level has difficulty in understanding or formulating a mother-tongue text, the solution may be to consult a reception or production dictionary, since the successful communication resulting from this consultation (which is its direct purpose) can reflect on and increase the mother-tongue skills which are always the basic precondition for any successful communication.

For this reason, in the following we will concentrate on the two communicative situations without any disrespect for the other situations where dictionaries may also provide assistance.

3.   First-language learners' lexicographical needs

If an abstraction is made from the specific characteristics of the heterogeneous

group of school children in terms of their variation in age and corresponding intellectual, linguistic, cultural, and encyclopedic development, it is possible to make a list of lexicographically relevant needs that this potential user group may experience in relation to text reception and text production.

When school children irrespective of age or grade experience problems in understanding written or oral text, they may need information about the *meaning of individual words*, *idioms* or *proverbs*, and when these reception problems lead to a lexicographical consultation they may furthermore need an *adequate access system* as well as information about *orthography*, *part of speech* and *irregular inflection forms* in order to confirm that they have actually found the right article and the corresponding lexicographical data from which they can retrieve the information needed to solve their original reception problem.

When the same children experience problems in relation to text production they may need information about *orthography*, *pronunciation*, *inflection*, *pragmatic restrictions*, *word formation*, *syntactic properties*, *collocations*, *synonyms*, *antonyms* etc. In order to access the dictionary and confirm that they have found the right article they may need an *adequate access system* as well as information about *meaning* and *part of speech*.

However, when one focuses on the specific characteristics of school children in terms of their intellectual, linguistic, cultural, and encyclopedic development, then a relatively big differentiation has to be made not only regarding their lexicographically relevant needs but also with respect to the type of access system, the amount and types of lemmata, the amount and types of lexicographical data included, and the way these data are presented. The problem is not only the evident fact that the needs vary and change as a function of the school children's increase in age and mental development but also that too few and too simple lexicographical data may not satisfy the needs of upper grade learners, whereas too many and too complicated data may hamper or even obstruct the consultation process for the lower-grade learners and prevent them from accessing the relevant data and retrieving the needed information. Two examples from existing school dictionaries will illustrate this problem:

> **length lengths**
> NOUN **1** The **length** of something is the distance that it measures from one end to the other.
> NOUN **2** The **length** of something like a holiday is the period of time that it lasts.

Article from the *Collins Junior Illustrated Dictionary*

> **length** /…/ noun **1** [C/U] MATHS, SCIENCE a measurement of the distance from one end of something to the other. In a **two-dimensional** object, length is the greatest **dimension**: *The boat was 16 feet* ***in length***. * *He ran half* ***the length of*** *the pitch with the ball*. * *Measure* ***the length of*** *the line*. **2** [C/U] a measurement of how long something takes to do or of how long it lasts: ***The length*** *of you talk must be at least 10 minutes*. **3** [C/U] a measurement of how long a book or piece

of writing is: *His latest novel is twice **the length of** his previous one*. **4** [C] a piece of something that is long and thin: ***a length of** rope*

PHRASES **at (great/some) length** for a long time and with a lot of detail: *Austin was questioned at length by detectives.*

go to great/extreme/any etc lengths to try in a very determined way to achieve something: *They have gone to great lengths to make us feel welcome.*

the length and breadth of sth every part of a large area

Article from the *Macmillan School Dictionary*

A first-language learner at grade 10 or 12 having text reception or production problems will hardly get any help in the (relatively) over-simplified article designed for school children of much lower grades, whereas the latter will probably get completely lost in the (relatively) complex data included in the article conceived for the former.

4.   Giving a paraphrase of meaning

Over many years different research projects focusing on the needs of dictionary users have indicated that the explanation of meaning is usually regarded as the type of data for which monolingual dictionaries are the most frequently consulted. Lexicographers have different opinions regarding the term with which to classify the item giving the explanation of meaning. In the majority of dictionaries the term *definition* is used to refer to this item. Well-founded criticism against this term can be found in Wiegand (1985). Where a definition, as used within the field of logic, presents the meaning of a given word, the explanation of meaning in a dictionary conveys that part of the meaning relevant to the target user. Gouws (2011: 62) shows the varying extent of the explanation of the meaning of the word *bridge* in five different dictionaries. The item giving the meaning should actually be referred to as the *paraphrase of meaning*, cf. Wiegand (1985, 1989a), because it paraphrases the meaning as deemed appropriate for a given user group and user situation. Important is not only the extent of the explanation but also the way in which it is given.

When looking at the data presentation in school dictionaries it is therefore important to pay particular attention to the contents and presentation of the paraphrases of meaning used in a given dictionary.

One of the problems users often have when consulting a dictionary is to understand and correctly interpret the entries in the dictionary article. This is due to high levels of textual condensation and the use of unnatural language in conveying the data. For many members of a speech community a school dictionary is their first introduction to the world of reference tools. It is extremely important that school dictionaries should present data in such a way that the intended target user can achieve an optimal retrieval of information without being impeded by strange codes, abbreviated entries and syntactically reduced paraphrases of meaning or a mere presentation of a synonym as the explana-

tion of meaning. Tarp and Gouws (2010: 479) already referred to the importance of the use of natural language to improve the comprehensibility of the paraphrase of meaning. Albeit that they are directed at learners of different age group the difference in ease of comprehension between the following two paraphrases of meaning should convince lexicographers rather to opt for the use of natural language in the paraphrase of meaning:

> **magnet magnets**
> NOUN A **magnet** is a special piece of metal. It pulls or attracts iron or steel towards it. Magnets can also push other magnets away.

> Article from the *Collins Junior Illustrated Dictionary*

> **magnet** (say **mag**-nuht) *noun* (*plural* **magnets**)
> a piece of metal, rock or other substance that can make metal objects move towards it.

> Article from the *Oxford South African School Dictionary*

In these paraphrases of meaning the difference between the two articles does not only reside in the one using natural language and the other not. It also comes to the fore in the fact that the *Collins Junior Illustrated Dictionary* employs more than one sentence to explain the meaning, instead of trying to put a full explanation into a single non-sentential phrase.

Lexicographers of school dictionaries should consult teachers to find out whether learners are able to understand the presentation of data in their first-language dictionaries. The dictionary using skills of the learners need to have an influence on the way in which the paraphrase of meaning is presented. Proposals to enhance the quality of the paraphrase of meaning in order to ensure that the target users of school dictionaries will achieve an optimal retrieval of information need to be preceded by user studies that involve school learners. Lexicographers need to utilise the results of these studies and need to join hands with teachers and curriculum designers to plan and compile new school dictionaries.

5.   Indicating the learners' age and school grade

In an overview article on children's dictionaries Hausmann (1990: 1365) provides the following detailed description of existing dictionaries of this type:

(1)   The layout is especially clear. Space is not saved. The letters are bigger than in general dictionaries. Colours are generally used. The dictionaries often are of a big format.

(2)   All the lemmata, or a considerable part thereof, are illustrated.

(3)   There are no definitions; or when there are, they are not conventional.

(4)   Narrative texts (lexicographic story-telling) substitute the traditional microstructure.

(5)   There is no information about the lemma, or when it is given, it is only very little.

(6)   Abbreviations are not used.

(7)   Exercises are given.

(8)   The macrostructure is very selective, never with more than 5 000 lemmata. Generally it is between 200 and 2 000 lemmata.

(9)   In most cases, the lemmata refer to concrete things.

(10)   The users are children below 10 years.

Hausmann — in the same vein as Bergenholtz et al. (1997) and Hartmann and James (1998) — also notes that there is no clear dividing line between children's dictionaries and school dictionaries. This difficulty in establishing a coherent typology seems to be based on the fact that all these authors mainly look at the features — and not at the purpose or functions — of the two "types" of dictionaries. In an attempt to correct this focus, Tarp (2011: 227) writes:

> There seems to be a problem with the *logical linguistic relation* between the terms used and their conceptual content. In most countries, children start in school between the age of 5 and 7, are considered children at least up to the age of 12 or 14, and continue in school up to the age of 15 or 16. This means that they, for a long period, are school children. Consequently, if a school dictionary is defined as a dictionary conceived to be used by pupils in school, most school dictionaries are at the same time "children's dictionaries".

If this logic is followed, the features described above by Hausmann (1990) are actually the features that characterise — or should characterise — school dictionaries adapted to the linguistic and mental development of first-language learners in the first grades. However, although it is evident *that* the specific lexicographical needs of school children vary according to their age and grade, it is far from evident *how* it varies and *which* should be the lexicographical consequences. A comparison between two South African school dictionaries from the same publishing house but designed for learners of grades 3-7 and grades 8-12, respectively, illustrates the problem:

> **record**[1] (*say* **rek**-ord) *noun* (*plural* records)
> **1** a written list of things that you have done, seen, or found out. *He keeps a* **record** *of the money he spends*.
> **2** the best that has been done so far. *Tamara's time for the race was a* **record**. *Zweli broke the* **record** *for high-jump*.

Article from the *Oxford South African Illustrated School Dictionary* (grades 3-7)

record¹ /rek-ord/

noun **1** information kept in a permanent form, especially in writing. **2** (*Computing*) a number of related pieces of information dealt with as a unit.

3 a disc on which sound has been recorded; a piece of music recorded on a disk.

4 facts known about a person's past life, performance, or career *He has a superb record at Wimbledon *a criminal record*. **5** the best performance or most remarkable event etc. of its kind that is known *she holds the world record for the100 metres*.

Article from the *South African Oxford Secondary School Dictionary* (grades 8-12)

These two articles — and the two dictionaries as such — share the following data categories:

—   Lemma

—   Pronunciation

—   Part of speech

—   Inflection

—   Definition

—   Examples

—   Usage notes

—   Etymology

—   Word formation

As to the differences, the most important ones are that the *Oxford South African Illustrated School Dictionary* includes:

—   Bigger letters

—   More space

—   Search fields in terms of senses

—   Illustrations (few)

—   More data on inflection

—   The alphabet repeated on each page

—   Exercises in dictionary use

whereas the *South African Oxford Secondary School Dictionary* is characterised by:

—   Many more lemmata

—   Many more senses

—   Exercises in writing

—   Tables with word groups

Generally, the shared data categories are presented in a more or less similar way in the two dictionaries. The explanation of meaning, for example, are in both cases provided in the form of small "unnatural-language" paraphrases of meaning that vary very little in terms of abstraction level. Four questions arise immediately from this analysis:

1.   Can first-language learners at grade 3 really make use of the *Oxford South African Illustrated School Dictionary*?

2.   Do the data included in the *South African Oxford Secondary School Dictionary* really satisfy the lexicographical needs of first-language learners in grade 12?

3.   Are the differences between the two dictionaries justified by school children's transition from grade 7 to grade 8?

4.   Is it possible to design school dictionaries for first-language learners that cover five or more grades each?

The complexity of these questions is underlined by the fact that the same publishing house has also produced a third school dictionary — the *Oxford South African School Dictionary* — which according to the front page is designed for first-language learners from grades 4 to 9, i.e. covering a total of 6 grades. This dictionary seems to place itself somewhere in between the two former ones, following the same principles and with a little more lemmata and senses than the one designed for grades 3 to 7 and a little less than the one designed for grades 8 to 12. The following article will illustrate the similarities to the corresponding one in the two other dictionaries:

> **record**[1] (*say* **rek**-awd) *noun* (*plural* records)
> **1** notes about things that have happened: *Keep a **record** of all the books you read*.
> **2** a thin round piece of plastic that makes music when you play it on a special machine: *a **record** company * Put another **record** on.*
> **3** the best, fastest, highest or lowest that has been done in a sport: *She holds the school **record** for long jump. * He did it in **record** time (= very fast). * She's hoping to break the **record** for the 100 metres* (= to do it faster than anyone has done before).

Article from the *Oxford South African School Dictionary* (grade 4-9)

As a rule, the four questions above cannot be answered by lexicographers alone but require expert knowledge also from language teachers and designers of national curriculums. However, when it comes to printed dictionaries Tarp and Gouws (2010) have strongly suggested that there should be elaborated at least four different dictionaries for different grade clusters for first-language learners

in a 12-grades school system. In this respect, school dictionaries for the upper grades should contain the data really needed to assist not only text reception but also text production, meaning that they should also include data categories such as *syntactic properties* and *collocations*, i.e. data absolutely necessary to back up the fluent text production expected from upper first-language learners but seldom found explicitly and to the necessary extent in English school dictionaries for first-language learners, even when also designed for the upper grades.

6.   Some challenges

Many publishing houses are perfectly aware of the fact that high-quality school dictionaries can only be produced when integrating expert knowledge from various disciplines. In his *Introduction* to the *Macmillan School Dictionary*, the editor-in-chief Michael Rundell for instance writes that in planning the dictionary, one of its two "very valuable sources" used was:

> expert advice: at every stage, experienced teachers, textbook writers, and syllabus designers have contributed their expertise, giving us a clear idea of what the dictionary's users really need to know.

The *Macmillan School Dictionary* is according to its own presentation a school dictionary conceived "for students learning through the medium of English" without specifying the age or grade of the intended user group. There is little doubt that "experienced teachers, textbook writers, and syllabus designers" are necessary not only to give an idea of what the "users really need to know" but also of what they are still not prepared for to assimilate. Although the quoted expert knowledge may have contributed to the high-quality lexicographical product that the *Macmillan School Dictionary* surely constitutes in terms of *upper-grade* "students learning through the medium of English", many *lower-grade* and even *intermediate-grade* school children learning through the same medium may most probably find many of its articles — e.g. the article *length* shown above — too complex and too over-loaded when consulting the dictionary for assistance in text reception or production. That was at least the comments from some of the experts participating in the workshop in Pretoria (2011) where this specific article was discussed. In this respect, it is important that non-lexicographical expert knowledge is used to its full extent, i.e. also to define the limits of the group of school children that can really make use of a particular dictionary.

The second "very valuable source" that Rundell refers to in his *Introduction* is a 20-million word corpus "containing hundreds of school textbooks and exam syllabuses, for every subject from agriculture to zoology". Such a well-composed corpus is surely a very valuable source, especially for the selection of lemmata and additional data to be included in the articles, and many school dictionaries published today are in fact corpus-based, e.g. the three South African school dictionaries from Oxford quoted above. Rundell rightly states:

> Using state-of-the-art software to analyse this corpus, we have built up a detailed picture of the terms and concepts that are vital for the study of the main school subjects. We know, for example, which words are used most frequently in textbooks about plant science, religious studies, the environment, or information technology. This gives us a reliable scientific basis for selecting the words to include in the dictionary and for deciding how much information is needed about each word.

What could be added here is that a well-composed corpus of text books and exam syllabuses may also give a reliable scientific basis for determining the amount and complexity of the lexicographical data which lower and intermediate learners are actually able to handle and assimilate without getting lost in data primarily destined to satisfy the needs of upper-grade students. This challenge is related to another comment which Rundell makes in his *Introduction*:

> But the corpus helps us in other ways too. It shows us how concepts are explained in the textbooks that students actually use in the classroom, and this gives us a model for our own definitions — ensuring that they are always relevant and easy to follow.

We have received information from quite a number of lexicographers and teachers in South Africa and Namibia according to which school children of a specific grade frequently prefer to consult dictionaries designed for learners of a lower grade because they have certain difficulties in extracting the needed information from the dictionaries that are supposed to assist learners at their level. This does not only apply to the South African and Namibian situation, cf. De Schryver and Prinsloo and (2011). There may be several linguistic, cultural, regional and social reasons for this, basically related to the learners' first-language proficiency level and dictionary culture. We are not aware of any statistically reliable user research in this respect, and it cannot be excluded that the problem also extends to the explanations provided in text books which for this reason should maybe not be considered models for lexicographical definitions, especially not when the school dictionary in question is designed for users of various grades. The *Macmillan School Dictionary* informs that its definitions are "written in simple English" and it must be admitted that this seems to be the case. However, the problem — at least in South Africa and Namibia — seems to be that there is a certain contradiction between the requirements formulated in the official curriculum and the way the corresponding dictionaries live up to these requirements in terms of user-friendliness. Although learners should be able to retrieve the information defined by the curriculum and corresponding to their specific grade from a dictionary covering this grade, it does not exclude that the dictionaries should be more user-friendly, e.g. with the paraphrases of meaning written in an even simpler language, the appropriate lexicographical data simplified and presented in a more didactic way, and the access system improved.

The proper understanding of the fact that school children pass through a vigorous linguistic, intellectual, cultural, and encyclopedic development during their years in school is paramount to the production of high-quality lexicographical tools adapted to this very heterogeneous group of dictionary users. The aim of this article is not to give final solutions but merely to recommend that a number of factors — or variables — are taken into account when planning future school dictionaries. In this respect, we think that theoretical lexicographers, publishing houses and curriculum designers should consider and find answers to the following questions:

(1)   In which of the following learning situations are — or could — dictionaries be used by first-language learners of the different ages and grades:

    a. Text reception — normal or in combination with special exercises?

    b. Text production — normal or in combination with special exercises?

    c. Vocabulary learning and training?

    d. Grammar learning?

    e. Encyclopedic and scientific learning?

    f. Learning etymology?

    g. Learning dictionary skills?

(2)   Which amount and types of lemmata and other lexicographical data categories do these situations require in order to satisfy the learners' information needs in the different grades sufficiently? And in which grades should the respective data categories be introduced?

(3)   Is it possible to meet the needs occurring in all these learning situations in the framework of one school dictionary or should the future vision be to design dictionaries of which each only assists the users in one — or a few — of these situations?

(4)   Which data categories introduced to benefit learners at an upper level do actually disturb data access and information retrieval for learners at a lower level because the latter may find it difficult navigating in articles with too many and too complex data categories included?

(5)   How should explanations (paraphrases of meaning) be written and provided in the various grades in order to avoid being too difficult for learners of a specific grade, compelling them to resort to dictionaries designed for lower grades?

(6)   Is it possible to design printed school dictionaries for first-language learners that cover 4, 5 or even more grades each? Or should there be a further sub-classification, e.g. as proposed by Gouws and Tarp (2010) for

school dictionaries for first-language learners of Afrikaans: grades 1-3, grades 4-7, grades 8-10, and grades 11-12?

(7)   Are there local or regional differences in school children's first-language proficiency that make it almost impossible to design school dictionaries for a specific grade? And should publishing houses instead give very detailed information about the content of their respective school dictionaries in order to empower the individual schools and first-language teachers to evaluate and decide which dictionaries are most apt for their specific group of school children?

(8)   Which consequences may it have for future school dictionaries that South African school classes most often incorporate children from various linguistic backgrounds?

(9)   Is it an option in the multilingual South Africa — now or in the near future — to design electronic school dictionaries that could be adapted to each type of school child in terms of first-language proficiency and dictionary skills, and to each type of learning situation where dictionaries are or could be used in school?

7.   Conclusions

From the discussions that we have had with publishers and other experts in the workshops organised in Stellenbosch (2010) and Pretoria (2011) it has become clear that a major obstacle in the production of a range of high-quality school dictionaries adapted to the needs of first-language learners in different grades is the relatively limited sales and the publishing houses' corresponding lack of interest in making investments in the necessary (but also risky) product development. In this respect we consider that the South African school system could learn from two other "third-world" countries, i.e. Brazil and Cuba. As already mentioned above, during the last decade the Brazilian government has provided each school child with a Brazilian-Portuguese first-language dictionary, a fact that has not only raised commercial sales but also given a strong impetus to the whole dictionary culture and the corresponding theoretical reflections, cf. Welker (2008). In Cuba, a country with relatively few resources and a population a quarter of that of South Africa, the 1 200 pages, 2-volume *Diccionario Básico Escolar*, now in its third edition, has until now been printed and distributed (some of it freely) in more than 100 thousand copies and at a ridiculously low price of less than one dollar per volume due to both subventions and the use of very cheap paper that may not be that fancy and last so long but nevertheless serves its purpose, cf. Tarp (2012).

We do not necessarily recommend that these two examples are copied in South Africa or any other country, but they could and should be used as inspiration in order to find solutions to a very serious problem, i.e. a low societal

dictionary culture and the alarming lack of the required high-quality lexico-graphical tools that can meet the growing information needs in society and thus contribute to its development. We are convinced that the problem starts in early school and therefore should be addressed here through the promotion, in one way or another, of school dictionaries adapted to the real needs of first-language learners of the various grades.

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