

# DICTIONARY USAGE IN THE TRAINING OF HISPANIC TRANSLATORS IN EFL SETTINGS

By Guillermo Cortés

Este artículo pretende mostrar de forma sucinta las fortalezas y debilidades del uso del diccionario monolingüe de la lengua inglesa en la formación de traductores en un medio colombiano donde predomina el aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera. Si bien el diccionario es una herramienta muy útil, en manos de estudiantes inexpertos los procesos de traducción no pasarán más allá de una simple transcodificación en los planos lexical y gramatical. Corresponde al docente guiar crítica y razonadamente a los aprendices con el fin de explotar al máximo las ventajas del diccionario.

Palabras claves: diccionarios monolingües, tesauros, traducción, falsos amigos, internet.

Les dictionnaires unilingues en anglais sont des outils utiles pour les apprentis traducteurs de même que pour les étudiants en langues. Néanmoins, s'ils ne savent pas les utiliser, leurs traductions ne seront qu'un transcodage lexical et grammatical. Il en revient donc à l'enseignant de les guider dans une utilisation sans risque de ces dictionnaires.

Mots-clés : dictionnaire unilingue, thésaurus, traduction, faux-amis, dictionnaires on-line.

This article shows the strengths and weaknesses of the usage of the English monolingual dictionary for training translators in Colombian settings where English is spoken as a foreign language. If not properly guided by teachers and trainers the use of the dictionary may lead students to make unfaithful and word for word translations at the beginner's stage. It is the teacher's responsibility to help learners find the best way to exploit one of the translators tools.

Key words: monolingual dictionary, thesauri, translation, false friends, on-line dictionaries.



This article makes reference to the different uses that teachers and students can make from the English monolingual dictionary in the training of translators, and even with students of English as a foreign language. First we will see the importance of the dictionary by means of what experts have quoted regarding its correct use. Later we will discover what kind of information we can find in the dictionaries (including an evaluation to test one's dictionary). The "Dictionary Evaluation" is a subjective questionnaire considering information collected from American, Australian, British, and Canadian dictionaries that will let the reader think of what kind of dictionary he/she has and which one(s) should be gotten. On the final part of the paper there are some brief definitions and examples of English-Spanish "faux amis", and last but not least, there is a list of on-line (English and Spanish) dictionaries and related sites.

Before developing some considerations dealing with the use of the dictionary I will quote what doctor Brian Mallet wrote in a Colombian newspaper concerning the topic being discussed. This cite belongs to the Spanish version of the book *El Cirujano de Crowthorne*, and I think it really fits as introductory words to this paper.

«Con sus 12 volúmenes de tamaño de piedra sepulcral, más de medio millón de definiciones y casi dos millones de citaciones ilustrativas en su primera edición de 1928, el Oxford English Dictionary -fruto de cincuenta años de labor monumental- es sin lugar a dudas el diccionario más celebrado del mundo. Su importancia tanto histórica como humana trasciende las fronteras del idioma que constituye su campo de investigación lingüística, convirtiéndolo en obra literaria por derecho propio.

El diccionario común y corriente, tal como lo conocemos hoy, es una invención relativamente nueva. Por ejemplo, no existía ningún diccionario de inglés (ni de otros idiomas vernaculares) hace 400 años, en la época de Shakespeare, y los primeros compendios que aparecieron en el siglo XVII tomaron como base las palabras 'difíciles', raras o exóticas, que poco tenían que ver con el lenguaje de todos los días. De ahí el valor capital del famoso Diccionario del doctor Johnson, para quien el lenguaje merecía el mismo respeto que los otros temas que la ciencia estaba en vías de investigar en aquel entonces, y cuya obra maestra trató por primera vez y de una vez por todas, de fijar los límites del inglés y de mantener su pureza.» (Mallet, 1998).

Though low level translators and beginner students of translation may consider the dictionary the most valuable tool to translate, if it is not used properly, it may become a very dangerous weapon in hands of learners who oversee the dictionary as the only one means to do «accurate» translations. It must be clear since the very beginning that the dictionary is not the only resource translators regularly use, indeed, as Van Hoof (1997: 229) asserts, "to the lay person, translators and dictionaries go hand in hand..."

Most monolingual dictionaries, rather than bilinguals, have useful information such as derivations of words; guides of usage; word division; idioms and slang; and a great quantity of other important information. Therefore an excellent dictionary should be at the disposal of anyone who is interested in pursuing successfully in the field of translation.

In all circumstances the best to use is an unabridged dictionary because it contains extensive words, terms and definitions of the standard language that are labeled into different categories. However, considering that unabridged dictionaries are cumbersome and

expensive to afford (specially to students), a good updated abridged dictionary is recommended.

*Didactically, it is important that students realize that the overuse of the dictionary leads to focus the reader's attention on words, while we take for granted that the core point is to concentrate on ideas, concepts and generalities to grasp the sense of the source language text.*

But what kind of dictionary should the learners get? According to Puello, this choice depends largely on the age, level and the purpose that they have in mind. Whether it is a bilingual or a monolingual dictionary, it should include appropriate information about the meaning in a very clear way.

"[...] in a monolingual dictionary, the students need some skill to understand the definition of English words by means of other English words. In this case, we must recommend a dictionary that provides definitions in English using words the students can understand. Therefore, it would be desirable to avoid dictionaries where the definition is as difficult as the word which is being defined." (Puello, 1997: 105).

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matter how much information we find, the dictionary can provide with definitions that most of the time are isolated and out of a communicative context. By the time a serious training translators session of class devoted to the use of the dictionary is begun, students would have looked up in the dictionary, of any sort, usually to find the correspondance of a word in their native tongue or in the foreign language to translate non or misunderstood words, therefore, teachers and guiders should assume the commitment to integrate the valuable use of the dictionary devoting as much time as required for the students to get to know their own tools.

Then, some time should be spent in helping learners and trainees discover what kind of information dictionaries contain and provide, and how to best find what is being looked up. Regarding this point Delisle and Bastin quote that:

«Los diccionarios monolingües con-  
signan los sentidos más usuales que  
han adquirido las palabras tras ser  
usadas repetidamente en el discurs-  
o. Como "museos lexicográficos",  
conservan las múltiples acepciones  
sedimentadas e institucionalizadas  
de los vocablos del patrimonio lin-  
güístico de una colectividad. Sin  
embargo, tocan muy superficialmen-  
te el sinnúmero de efectos de senti-

do que pueden tener las palabras en  
la práctica de la lengua. [...] Sería  
utópico querer establecer la lista de  
todos los sentidos que una palabra  
pueda tener en los actos del habla.»  
(1997: 72).

So, at this point, it seems to be mandatory to talk about the advantages of the dictionary, but without forgetting what should be taken as a golden rule: the translator who just picks up the meaning of the first entry may give a wrong sense to the text itself, word for word translations, based upon the dictionary are not to be trusted. Teachers must encourage pupils to go ahead from "denotative definitions" (first definition) that lead to a word by word reading from the first sentence.

## DICTIONARY EVALUATION

After an exhaustive analysis, comparison and evaluation of different dictionaries we can assert that monolingual dictionaries contain the following information:

### Abbreviations

**Accent marks.** The heavy mark shows the primary accent

**Accepted spelling (or spellings) of a word**

**Comparison of irregular adjectives**

**Cross references.** These indicate

where to find more information

**Derivation and etymology of a word**

**Division of words into syllables**

**Foreign words** (some dictionaries put these into a separate section.)

**Hyphenation**

**Geographical labels.** These indicate that the usage is current in a certain part of the world

**Information about persons and places** (either in the main part of the dictionary or in special sections at the back)

**Irregular forms of the word** (past tense, plural, etc.)

**Meaning of idiomatic phrases in which the word is used**

**Numbered meaning** (different entries a word may have)

**Parts of speech** (if a word is a verb, adjective, noun, etc.)

**Pictures, maps and tables**

**Prefixes and suffixes**

**Principal parts of irregular verbs**

**Pronunciation**

**Proper nouns and adjectives**

**Rules for spelling, punctuation, compounds and capitalization**

**Specialized meanings**

**Synonyms and antonyms.** Sometimes, the synonyms are discriminated; that is, the shades and nuances of their meanings are explained

**Tables of the system of weight and measures used in English**

**Usage or labels of a word (these labels**

**show the present standing of the words so marked such as colloquial, slang, formal, archaic, poetic, etc.)**  
**Variant spellings** (different ways in which a word may be written).

Students (and teachers) must realize that dictionaries are not all alike, and this statement must be proved while working on different workshops, activities and exercises in or out of class such as usage, evaluation and selection of several sorts of dictionaries. Students might think that thesauri<sup>1</sup> are dictionaries, and, EFL dictionaries such as *Advanced*, *Intermediate* or *Beginner* dictionaries for foreign language students should be used carefully, since they are very limited and for graded purposes.

## PRACTICAL ASSESSMENT

Since it is not easy to say the last word on the quality of dictionaries and a careful choice must be done before buying one, the best is to work to get to know how good or bad is the dictionary the beginner actually has at home or in the shelves of the university library or resource center. As Alvarez Calleja says:

"Desde el punto de vista del traductor, convendría recordar que el diccionario siempre es atrasado; que muchas de las expresiones que incluye ya no son de uso común; que



las expresiones que se catalogan como coloquiales o substandard pueden haber cambiado a un uso más formal, y sobre todo, que hay nuevas expresiones en uso que aún no están consignadas en el diccionario." (Alvarez Calleja, 1995: 116).

We propose the following exercise to answer as many of the questions as possible based on a dictionary research.

1. Name of the dictionary

2. Place and date of publication (include the year)

3. Size (number of pages, sections, etc.)

4. Price

5. Where and when was *George Byron* born?

6. Divide the words *climatology*, *desoxyribonucleic*, *autobiography*, and *facetiousness* into syllables

7. What is the plural form of the words *drachma*, *axis*, *thesis*, *amoeba*, *data*?

8. What is the origin of the words *pharmacopoeia*, *electric*?

9. Define the meaning of the following phrases and or expressions

«*Toe the line*»; «*Cuddly toys*»; «*Over my head*»

10. What countries have common borders with Croatia? with Azerbaijan?

11. What does «*copy cat*» mean?

12. What does *VC* stand for?

13. What do *ABM*, *CZ*, *REM* and *DWI* mean?

14. Give at least two antonyms of the following words: *bewitching*; *bumbag*; *demist* (verb); *lager scoff*

15. Which is larger in population Burkina Faso, New York city or Saskatchewan?

"[...]el único consejo importante al respecto es el de permanecer siempre alerta. El aprendiz de traductor tiene una sorprendente tendencia a dejarse llevar por el magnetismo de las palabras del original. Una vez más, es importante no utilizar asociaciones de significado pre-establecidas[...]" (Tricás Preckler, 1995: 145)

16. Give two synonyms to the following words: *ironmongery*; *mingle*; *nappy*; *courgette*; *plimsolls*.

17. Give a definition of «*fanny*» that is used in British and Australian

English

18. What are the atomic weights, symbols and # of *unnihexium*, *lawrencium* and *nobelium*?

19. What is to «*run amok*» «*run amuck*»?

20. What is the English Australian word equivalent to «*diaper*»?

21. What is the British English word equivalent for the American «*zucchini*»?

22. What are the differences of the word *FAG* for British English and American English?

23. Give at least three different meanings for the word «*faggot*»

24. Give the definition of «*modem*»

25. What does «*moggy*» mean?

26. Explain what «*namby-pamby poems*» are

27. Write the English definitions for the following foreign words and phrases:

*Cogito, ergo sum*

*Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott*

*Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis*

*Veni, vidi, vici*

*Verbatim ac litteratim*

28. Identify the following abbreviations: *Sci - fi*; *Faq*; *Ammo*; *Hi - fi*

Robert's in her «*Initiation à la recherche documentaire*» presents a dictionary typology divided in diverse

items such as:

**1. Types according to the number of languages covered**

- 1.1 Unilingual
- 1.2 Bilingual
- 1.3 Multilingual

**2. Types according to size of dictionaries**

- 2.1 Unabridged dictionaries
- 2.2 Semi-unabridged dictionaries
- 2.3 College dictionaries
- 2.4 Desk dictionaries
- 2.5 Paperback or pocket dictionaries

**3. Types according to scope of coverage by subject**

- 3.1 General dictionaries
- 3.2 Special-field dictionaries

**4. Types according to aspect of language covered**

- 4.1 General dictionaries
- 4.2 Special-purpose dictionaries
  - (a) Etymological dictionaries
  - (b) Pronunciation dictionaries
  - (c) Synonym dictionaries



- (d) Dictionaries of slang, taboo words, obscene words
- (e) Dialect dictionaries
- (f) Dictionaries of neologisms
- (g) Usage dictionaries
- (h) Other special-purpose dictionaries: spelling, rhyming, etc.

**5. Types according to size and type of lexical items**

5.1 General dictionaries

5.2 Dictionaries restricted to specific items

- (a) Dictionaries of idioms
- (b) Dictionaries of proverbs and quotations
- (c) Dictionaries of collocations
- (d) Dictionaries of abbreviations and acronyms

One last but not least word: the English language does not have a dictionary approved by an academy of the language as the authority, and therefore students (and teachers) should be aware of it, before selecting the dictionary that best fits to their academic and professional needs.

**FALSE FRIENDS**

A false friend is a word in a foreign language which looks or sounds similar to a word in your own language but does

not have exactly the same meaning. Baker says that:

“False friends, or faux amis as they are often called are words or expressions which have the same form in two or more languages but convey different meanings. Some false friends are easy to spot because the difference in their meaning is so great that only a very inexperienced translator is likely to be unaware of it.” (Baker, 1997:25).

The English language has many words which are false friends for speakers of other languages, and there are two main reasons for that: English words often have the same origins as similar words in other languages, but sometimes different meanings of the words have developed in the different languages; English words have been borrowed by other languages, and sometimes these have been given new or different meanings. A word of advice is expressed by Tricás Preckler when she warns that

“[...] el único consejo importante al respecto es el de permanecer siempre alerta. El aprendiz de traductor tiene una sorprendente tendencia a dejarse llevar por el magnetismo de las palabras del original. Una vez más, es importante no utilizar asociaciones de significado pre-establecidas[...]” (Tricás Preckler, 1995: 145)

Here is where the teacher must warn his/her students about these tricky words (and others) that are taken for transparent and equivalent; this false procedure, should not give us an excuse to be lazy and forget the subtle shades of meaning in the languages with which we work (Palmer, 1997: 12). Learners must be sure that such a biunivocal relation between words involving more than one language and culture does not exist at all. Here we offer just a sample of the false cognates we collect as a matter of illustration.



ÍNTIMO I. Serie "Presencia" (1995. Óleo. 79.5 x 37 cm.). Marta Elena Arango P.

<i>English</i>	<i>Meaning</i>	<i>False friend</i>	<i>Say</i>
abuse	maltratar	abusar	take unfair advantage
acomodation	hospedaje	acomodar	adaptation
actual	verdadero	actual	present, current, topical
adequate	suficiente(s)	adecuado	suitable
affluent	acaudalado	afluyente	tributary
agenda	temario	agenda	address book
adept	hábil	adepto	follower
agonize	atormentarse	agonizar	to be dying
alienation	alejamiento	alienación	derangement
alumnus	graduado	alumno(s)	pupil, student
anticipate	esperar	anticipar	take early
apertura	abertura	apertura	opening
application	solicitud	aplicado	industrious
attend	asistir	atender	pay attention, listen
apology	disculpase	apología	statement of support
apt	probable	apto	suitable
argument	discusión	argumento	plot
artist	pintor	artista	actress, actor
assault	agresión	asaltar, asalto	held up



## ON-LINE DICTIONARIES AND RECOMMENDED WEBSITES

In this segment we present a list of our preferred on-line websites, and it is important to clarify that we do not intend to provide an extensive nor comprehensive unabridged list of reference, first because such a task would be impossible to accomplish, and second, because these are the sites we currently recommend to the students, both at undergraduate and graduate level, and colleagues to start searching and surfing to get accustomed to the newest tools that will permit translators, students and of course, teachers to be updated through the Internet. Obviously, as Sofer says, (1997: 95) "the best of dictionaries and reference sources become dated the day they are published, and will never answer all your questions" thus, this paper and these addresses will have to be revised within at least half a year from now, or preferably sooner, if you claim to keep up with all the circulating information worldwide. No doubt that dictionaries and reference literature resemble telephone books which are reissued every year, and so is applicable to the Internet.

### ENGLISH LANGUAGE

<http://www.facstaff.bucknell.edu/rbeard/diction.html>

It is (to us) the best place to find literally what you want. From Dictionary Search Engines to Thesauri, Acronyms and Abbreviations, Antonyms, Synonyms to Lexical Data Bases and even Etymology. The page is nicely presented and the languages are grouped in large akins as follows:

Germanic Languages which include among others Afrikaans, Danish, Dutch, English, German, Icelandic, Norwegian, Swedish and Yiddish.

Hellenic Languages such as Greek Indo-Iranian and Ancient Languages such as Sanskrit and Avestan

Modern Languages such as Kurdish, Hindi, Farsi, Bengali, etc.

Romance Languages such as Latin, Etrusco, Catalan, French, Galician, Italian, Occitan, Portuguese, Romanian and Spanish.

Semitic Languages like Algerian, Arabic, Hebrew or Maltese.

Sino-Tibetan Languages like Burmese, Chinese, Japanese, etc.

Slavic Languages which are subdivided in East Slavic (Belarusan, Russian, Ukrainian), West Slavic (Czech-Slovak, Polish, Sorbian) and South Slavic Languages such as Bulgarian, Croatian-

Serbian and Slovene.

Uralic Languages such as Estonian, Finnish, Hungarian, Saami, etc.

It is included also a Sign Languages. Undoubtedly a mine for the professional and amateur translator, and the foreign language learners and teachers.

<http://www.icaen.uiowa.edu/~jszydlik/tools/dicts.html>

<http://philby.ucsd.edu/cgi-bin/http>

<http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book>

<http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/mweb>

<http://www.vocabulary.com/>

### SPANISH LANGUAGE

<http://www.efc.es/lenguas/>

This is the official page of the Agencia Española de Noticias Efe, where you can consult the Manual de Español Urgente.

<http://arcom.net/belca>

This page is supported by BELCA Estudio Integral and offers a MANUAL DE ESTILO para preparación de ori-

ginales y para corrección de pruebas.  
<http://www.act.es/act/idiomas.htm>

<http://spanish.mining.co.com/msub2.htm>

[http://redobrin.oswego.edu/LAC/dictionaries/dict\\_mult](http://redobrin.oswego.edu/LAC/dictionaries/dict_mult)

<http://www.xai.com/dic.htm>

<http://www.uwasa.fi/comm/termino/collect/index.html>

<http://www.activa.arrakis.es/>

<http://www.lhs-1t.de/en/products/btlwoerter.htm>

<http://www.vox.es/>

### CONCLUSIONS

Though to the lay person, translators and dictionaries go hand in hand, as Van Hoof said (1997: 229) these tools are not the only one to the translator. We have to be aware that no matter the dictionary contains words of a language with their meanings, pronunciation, etymologies, etc., the words are listed without context.

Problems of individual words are often solved contextually in the "active" translation process.



There are excellent dictionaries that provide with specialized terminology in a determined subject area, so do not expect that the monolingual dictionary will solve all lexical or terminological doubts and problems.

The explanations and definitions provided in the monolingual dictionary are helpful to the beginner since they take students to familiar examples, similes and contrasts.

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<sup>1</sup> Thesauri are reference books of synonyms and antonyms but are not dictionaries

## NOTAS SOBRE EL AUTOR

Guillermo Cortés holds a BA in Languages (English-Spanish) and a graduate degree as Specialist in Translation from the University of Antioquia. He works as a full time English - Spanish Translation teacher at the Faculty of Education at the University of Tolima.

[mery@angel.ut.edu.co](mailto:mery@angel.ut.edu.co)

[gacortes@ut.edu.co](mailto:gacortes@ut.edu.co)



FLOR Y ROSTRO I. Serie "Flor y rostro" (1995. Óleo y pastel. 50 x 35 cm.). Marta Elena Arango P.

