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## Dictionary-using skills of translation students

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## DICTIONARY-USING SKILLS OF TRANSLATION STUDENTS

### *Umiejętność korzystania ze słowników przez studentów przekładu*

#### Summary

The paper presents the survey conducted among the students of English Philology at the Pedagogical University of Cracow concerning dictionaries and other resources used by them in translation assignments. The results confirm a general trend observed in practice, i.e. departure from traditional dictionaries. Considering the fact that online resources often offer highly reduced content, it is postulated that a translation course should include activities focusing on evaluation of such aids.

**Keywords:** translator's education, dictionaries, translator's tools

#### Abstract

W pracy opisano wyniki badania przeprowadzonego wśród studentów Filologii Angielskiej Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego w Krakowie na temat słowników i innych narzędzi wykorzystywanych podczas tłumaczeń pisemnych. Badanie potwierdziło powszechną tendencję odchodzenia od tradycyjnych słowników na rzecz narzędzi internetowych. Rezultaty ankiety nasuwają wniosek o konieczności realizowania ze studentami specjalizacji tłumaczeniowej zajęć z zakresu oceny przydatności i wiarygodności takich źródeł.

**Słowa kluczowe:** dydaktyka przekładu, słowniki, narzędzia tłumacza

### 1. Introduction

Dictionaries belong to the main tools used in the work of a translator even today, when the old fashioned pen to paper approach is being gradually superseded with computers and printers, and the traditional image of a translator *writing or typing behind a heap of dictionaries and with a bunch of books behind him* [Jiménez, 2011, p.1] has been replaced with the image of a professional with a computer and the access to the Internet. Regardless of the nature of the consulted resources, a novice translator is expected to progressively acquire a certain level of proficiency in using tools available for him or her.

The study presented in this paper was conducted at the Pedagogical University of Cracow among students of translation specialisation with the aim to verify the hypothesis concerning the generally observed shift in the profile of a translation specialist as regards the preferences concerning dictionary resources and aids. Another objective of the research was to get insight into translation tools used by the students to allow the teacher to design the translation course in such a way as to help the students develop their information mining skills, with particular focus on their critical mind skills, defined as criteria for evaluating the

reliability of documentary sources accessible on the Internet or any other medium [ETM, 2009, p.6]. Such a well-grounded evaluation is perceived as a prerequisite for developing strategies aimed at effective management of terminological research, i.e. improving thematic competence [ETM, 2009, p.7].

## 2. Dictionary-using skills in the translation competence framework

Translation competence is generally perceived as a set of various sub-competences, which are interrelated and which complement each other. One of such sub-skills would certainly be the skill of dictionary use, as the use of dictionaries is perceived as an inherent element of the translator's work. Since the categories of translating competence differ depending on the competence framework applied, it is worth analysing the place of the dictionary-using skill in various approaches. According to the work carried out by the PACTE (Process of Acquisition of Translation Competence and Evaluation) Group [2003], which has been conducting holistic, empirical and experimental research into translation competence and its acquisition, translation competence is made up of five sub-competencies – bilingual sub-competence, extra-linguistic sub-competence, instrumental sub-competence, knowledge about translation sub-competence and strategic sub-competence, considered as playing a crucial role in the translation process, affecting other competences and making up for their deficiencies. The above mentioned five skills are additionally supplemented with psycho-physiological components. The model emphasizes the operative nature of the knowledge required and its expert character, which is derived from the fact that not all bilinguals possess it. Using this model as the starting point, we can place the dictionary skills within the instrumental sub-competence, which is defined as *predominantly procedural knowledge related to the use of documentation resources and information and communication technologies applied to translation (dictionaries of all kinds, encyclopaedias, grammars, style books, parallel texts, electronic corpora, search engines, etc.)* [PACTE, 2003, p.59].

Another translation competence model, put forward by the EMT Expert Group, working on establishing a European reference framework for Master's in translation programmes, i.e. for competences applied to the language professions through the European Union, proposes a different classification of basic competence, namely translation service provision competence, language competence, intercultural competence, information mining competence, thematic competence and technological competence [EMT, 2009]. Within this framework, dictionary use skills would fall within the information mining group of competences, which is described, among others, as *Developing strategies for documentary and terminological research and Knowing how to use tools and search engines effectively (e.g. terminology software, electronic corpora, electronic dictionaries)* [EMT, 2009, p.6]. Interestingly enough, information mining competences slightly overlap at this point with technological competences related to mastery of tools, defined among others as *Knowing how to use effectively and rapidly and to integrate a range of software to assist in correction, translation, terminology, layout, documentary research (for example text processing, spell and grammar check, the internet, translation memory, terminology database, voice recognition software)*. For the sake of comparison, it is worth referring at this point to the third model of translation competence, namely the model put forward by Göpferich [2009, p.21], who emphasizes the role of three competences: communicative competence in the source language and the target language, domain competence, and tools and research competence, which plays a dominant role, with other sub-competences being translation routine activation competence, psychomotor competence and strategic competence. In the framework proposed by Göpferich, dictionary-using skills would fall under the tools and research competence, which comprises the ability to use translation-specific conventional and electronic tools, reference works such as dictio-

naries and encyclopaedias (either printed or electronic), term banks and other databases, parallel texts, the use of search engines and corpora to the use of word processors, terminology and translation management systems as well as machine translation systems, and generally corresponds to the PACTE group's "instrumental sub-competence" [Göpferich, 2009, p.22].

As can be observed from this brief outline of various translation competence models, effective use of dictionaries as translator's tools, both in conventional and electronic forms, belongs to the basic skills possessed by professional translators, and as such should be acquired and mastered. Yet, this skill has not been given satisfactory attention in the research on translator's training, although various authors examined this issue from various perspectives [cf. Mcintosh, 1998; Atkins and Varantola, 2008; Kołodziejczak, 2009; Kopczyńska, 2013]. Dictionary skills are typically discussed in the context of research on foreign language acquisition and research on perception and use of dictionaries by students usually focuses on second-language learners [cf. Tomaszczyk, 1979; Hartmann, 1983; Piotrowski, 1994]. What is common for those studies is the conclusion that dictionary skills are not practiced enough, since they are actually taken for granted and assumed to be very high. However, this assumption is not confirmed in empirical studies, which clearly point out to a significant gap between the sophisticated structure of lexicographic resources and inadequate reference skills of average dictionary users [Lew, 2008; Tarp, 2010]. The issue worth emphasizing is the fact that although the skill of using dictionaries and encyclopaedia makes a part of the core curriculum for primary schools in Poland, it is not mentioned in programmes for junior and senior secondary schools. Another question requiring consideration is whether the findings concerning the use of traditional, printed dictionaries are still relevant in the situation when the profile of professional translator's competence is so heavily shifted towards electronic tools and resources.

## 2. Survey

The study presented in this paper was carried out in the form of a survey conducted among sixty-three students of English Philology at the Pedagogical University of Cracow. The participants were students of the third year of the BA level and of the first year of the MA level, who decided to pursue translation specialisation. The students were asked six questions concerning the dictionaries and other resources they use in their written translation assignments. In the first four questions, they were asked to specify the frequency of using a given translation tool (bilingual dictionaries in a paper form, specialist dictionaries in a paper form, online (electronic) dictionaries and other online resources, e.g. translators' forums), by marking one of four options: always, usually, from time to time, never. In the question pertaining to translator's forums and communities, the students were requested to mark the checkbox denoting an active mode of consultation (asking for advice) or a passive mode (looking for previously provided answers). In the fifth question, students were asked to specify any other translator's tools they use (dictionaries of collocations, thesauruses, visual dictionaries, TM or CAT tools), while the last question concerned their general opinion on the use of online as compared to printed resources. A week after completing the questionnaire, the students were presented with the results of the survey, which became the starting point for a group discussion on various tools available for modern translators.

The survey by questionnaire is considered the earliest and still very popular research tool, especially when it is used for the purpose of examining large populations. Nevertheless, its serious disadvantages cannot be disregarded, in particular in terms of reliability and the correspondence between the responses and the expectations of the researcher, since we do not know whether the subjects completing the questionnaire are *saying here what they do, or what they think they do, or what they think they ought to do, or indeed a mixture of all*

*three* [Hatherall, 1984, p.184; after Lew, 2004, p.40]. As other studies prove [Okuyama and Hiroko, 2007, p.14], data concerning dictionary use obtained through survey and another method, e.g. think-aloud protocol, can significantly differ for the same subjects. Consequently, the methodology of dictionary use [Hulstijn and Atkins, 1998, p.12] suggests application of more than just one research method to ensure a more objective approach and to monitor the activities studied. Self-reporting by dictionary users can be also accompanied by questionnaires addressed to their teachers [Lew, 2004]. Therefore, the survey research presented in this study was supplemented with process-oriented direct observation of students working on their translation assignments in the class setting.

#### 4. Results

The results of the study, presented below in Figs. 1 to 5, are consistent with the general trend observed in the translation classes and in translation practice in general, namely a departure from traditional paper dictionaries, which are used in total by 70% of students. 46% of the respondents indicated that they used them only from time to time, 16% chose the answer “usually”, and only 8% admitted that they used them always. Less than one third (30%) of translator trainees claim they never use paper versions.

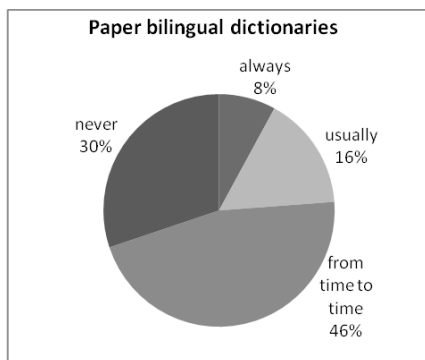


Figure 1. Use of paper dictionaries by students, own study

On the other hand, online dictionaries are used by 100% of the survey participants, of whom even 75% selected the answer “always”, and 25% – “usually”.

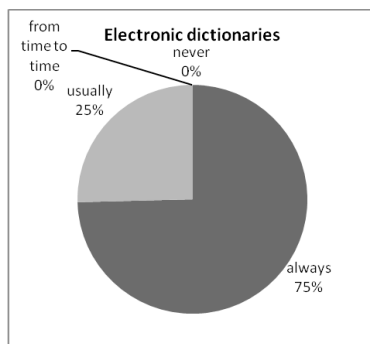
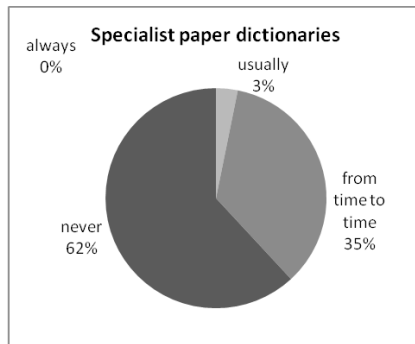


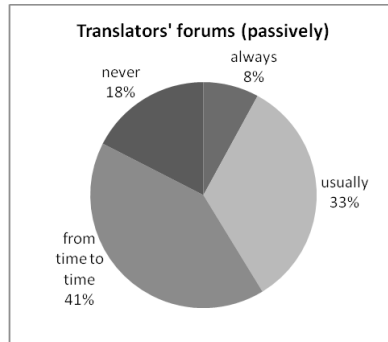
Figure 2. Use of electronic dictionaries by students, own study

What is worth emphasizing is the fact that students are not frequent users of printed specialist bilingual dictionaries (62% never use them and 35% use them only from time to time). Students explained that they did not feel the need to use such professional publications, as everything they looked for was available on the Internet. They also expressed an opinion that paper dictionaries were never up-to-date in view of the rapid development of science and technology and that high prices of specialized dictionaries acted as a deterrent. However, they were not able to point out to any specific specialists resources available online free of charge.

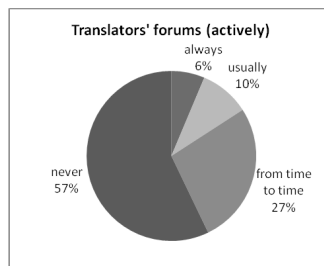


**Figure 3. Use of specialist paper dictionaries by students, own study**

As for the reasons explaining their preference for online dictionaries, students mainly mentioned a possibility of quickly finding a required vocabulary equivalent and cost-effectiveness, as they did not have to spend money on expensive books. Additionally, translator trainees strongly emphasized convenience of aids that can be accessed even with their mobile devices. Nevertheless, it should be observed that some of the dictionaries specified by the students (e.g. diki.pl, bab.la, glosbe.com) offer very limited content and do not serve the purpose of developing vocabulary skills in general, but only provide them with a ready-made answer, which does not have to be the right one. Although some students claim to use monolingual online dictionaries (e.g. www.oxforddictionaries.com or www.merriam-webster.com), the observed use of such resources in translation classes is marginal, as students prefer to quickly find a relevant equivalent. Usually, when asked to justify their vocabulary choice in a translated text, they explain that the given word “just sounds good”. Novice translators often consult translators’ forums and online translators’ communities (mainly Proz.com), but generally as passive users (in total, 82% of students use translators’ forums to search for ready provided answers, with 33% claiming to usually consult such sites, while only 43% of the respondents use such communities to ask about their specific translation problems). Thus, it seems that students treat those online resources not as an opportunity for exchanging knowledge, but as another online terminology tool, which suggests that this type of web-based services should also become an area of terminological studies.



**Figure 4. Passive use of translators' forums, own study**



**Figure 5. Active use of translators' forums, own study**

The students participating in the survey do not use any portable electronic dictionary devices, so popular in Asian countries [cf. Tang, 1997; Weschler, 2000; Kobayashi, 2006], heavily relying on the access to the Internet and their mobile phones. Interestingly enough, they do not use electronic dictionaries on CD-ROMs either and they treat dictionaries in this form as a digitized version of the hard copy edition, believing that the advantage of such a medium consisting in easiness and speed of accessing individual entries is outweighed by its price.

#### 4. Conclusions

The results of the conducted survey point out to the need to implement into the translation course certain activities that would focus on application of various tools and resources available for translators, with particular emphasis on evaluation of usefulness and reliability of such materials. Online dictionary-using skills can be developed through guided practice, including in-class activities designed for this purpose. Such activities may include presentation of special features offered by dictionaries in an electronic form (CD-ROMs, USB flash drives), e.g. advanced search options, such as complex searches by combining any number of features like domain, register or grammatical behaviour in a Boolean search or how to explore valuable lexical information provided by dictionaries. Students should be sensitized to the issues of false friends (e.g. *audycja* or *frekwencja* in Polish-English translation), to translation of phrases whose meaning differ from the meaning of individual constituent words (e.g. *fresh water* or *natural gas*) or to translation of words with different equivalent variants (e.g. *ekonomiczny* – “economic/economical”). Of course, at this level of language proficiency, students are aware of such language problems, yet the use of online dictionaries very often leads to errors of this type, which could be avoided with a higher level of attention given to the

translation task. Practical exercises sensitizing students to such “translator’s traps” can be found in Belczyk [2007], but can be also designed by the translator trainer, who could make use of a wide range of errors occurring in student translation assignments. Another point worth emphasizing in translation classes is the concept of collocations. Students can be encouraged to look up their collocations in the resources available online, paying special attention to the origin of the source consulted (country code top-level domain, institution/entity publishing the material, credibility of the person providing information (anonymous users vs. renown authors) and improving at the same time their web searching skills, with the translator trainer providing useful advice on the use of such features as Google search operators. Additionally, the trainer might encourage students to use the graphic feature of the web search engine, e.g. to look for specialist terms (e.g. *plytka chirurgiczna*) in graphic web resources, to analyse them, and then to substitute the term searched for in graphics with target language equivalents suggested by online dictionaries (e.g. *surgical tile* vs. *surgical plate*). Also, translation trainees should be reminded that even their native language can set some traps for them and that before using a term provided in a dictionary, they must be absolutely sure they properly interpret the original utterance, e.g. *Ogól praw i obowiązków każdego współnika może być przedmiotem rozporządzenia* (regulation vs. disposal). To find the exact meaning of the term, the students should be encouraged to look for parallel texts and to practice the skill of quick comparison and analysis, always paying attention to the reliability of the resources. The aim of such activities is not to entirely discredit online bilingual dictionaries so willingly used by students, but rather to increase the level of awareness as to the credibility of online materials and the correctness of ready-made equivalents provided by various websites. Such an approach will not only contribute to the development of dictionary-using skills, but will at the same time strengthen other translation sub-competences, especially bilingual competence (by vocabulary enrichment), and strategic competence (informed choice and decision making skill), thus leading to professional development of a translator-to-be.

Technological development has changed the form and the use of dictionaries, and consequently, those new media and applications require the translator trainer to devise innovative and inspiring activities leading to improvement of dictionary-using skills of translation students, also by exploring various features offered by modern electronic tools and resources.

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