Lexicography for the English Language Learner

Ernesto Johnson

University of North Florida

Lexicography for the English Language Learner (ELL)

It is never with great ease to bring criticisms to that which has been canonical for ages. As of now, standard dictionaries serve a near universal place in education, especially for ELLs. Lexicographers go through a number of processes to determine how they arrange the layout of dictionaries. “Dictionaries can also help learners to expand their vocabulary by encouraging them to think of words as belonging to a family as opposed to being isolated items” as Stark (2011) suggests (p. 234).

Thus, advocacy in this paper will suggest that a more familial approach can be made through a part of speech arrangement. The benefit of this arrangement can be observed in three ways: most textbooks of second language acquisition follow this convention with their vocabulary banks, parts of speech can potentially demystify idiosyncrasies of a second-language, and such arrangement can deliver more clarity because it removes a barrier of confusion created by canonical dictionaries.

**What is already out there in second-language acquisition?**

Parts of speech arrangement is not a new idea. In textbooks destined for second language acquisition, any attentive student will recall a section in a chapter that introduced new vocabulary. In these vocabulary sections, words are grouped to facilitate clarity. Grammatical groupings are made to provide enlightening associations to delineate the role a word plays in the language. When one can identify the word’s role, it filters out whole set of impossibilities never be associated with the word in question. Although lacking a precise definition of the new word, a gist of meaning is carved out of the unknown.

When examining various second language textbooks, it is very difficult to refute the rendered facility of categorizing vocabulary. It serves as a crutch that associates the words by function. Value is gained by organizing the way vocabulary is presented. When analyzing other foreign languages, parts of speech arrangement can be a powerful tool. This is the main reason why second language vocabulary is introduced into absorbable chunks, namely categorical lists. Here is a typical vocabulary chart from a French textbook.

Table 1

Vocabulary Table from *Scènes et Séjours* Textbook.

NOMS

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| \*l’arrondissement (m.) | *District* |
| \*le contrôleur | *Conductor* |
| la minute | *Minute* |
| la place | *space, room , seat* |
| le tarif | *Fare* |
| Le travail ; pl. les travaux | *work, job* |

VERBS

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| \*doivent; devoir | *to have to* |
| se passer | *To happen* |
| Pousser | *to push* |
| refuser (de) | *to refuse (to)* |

ADJECTIFS

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| complet, -été | *Full* |
| situe, -e | *Located, situated* |
| Suivant, -e | *Following* |

MOT-OUTILS ET EXPRESSIONS

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| l'autre | *the other* |
| un/une autre | *Another* |
| avoir envie de | *to want* |
| chacun, -e | *Each* |
| \*chacun a son tour | *everyone in turn* |

Note. Adapted from  *“Scènes et Séjours*” by A. Valdman, S. Belasco, and F. Steiner, 1972, p. 25. Copyright 1972 by Glenview: Scott Foresman

All things considered, dictionaries are merely immense word banks. As Landau (2001) purports “grammatical information is more essential to a person who is trying to speak or understand the foreign language than the native speaker” (p. 144). This notion is heavily evidenced in the composition of second-language textbooks. As such, he to come to this conclusion: “It is not surprising, then, that ESL dictionaries should provide considerably more grammatical help in dictionaries for other audiences (Landau, p. 114, 2001).

**Are canonical dictionaries confusing to ELLs?**

Any second language learner can potentially gain by approaching new vocabulary through parts of speech. In fact, it is quite easy to imagine how a less organized set of information causes greater confusion than that which is more organized. This is the typical scenario for ELLs interfacing with an enumerative dictionary. It is essentially unnatural and un-meaningful to language processing to learn new words alphabetically. “It is argued that dictionaries (by implication, A-Z semasiological ones) are only of limited usefulness because alphabetical order usually places near-synonyms at different locations in the wordlist rather than side by side” (Stark, p. 234, 2011). Thus, dictionaries aimed for ELLs should model similar conventions exhibited by word banks in second language textbooks and not the jaded canons of alphabetization.

There is a beneficial gain in arranging nouns in a single category in a dictionary. One would not need much imagination to envision the opportunity to easily tackle noun gender if they were sorted by gender. In most romance languages gender is an intrinsic part of nouns qualifiers. Examples are the sophisticated relative pronouns in French and Spanish which require knowledge of antecedent gender. Here are some examples.

La voiture est laquelle le garçon veut.

Hay la mesa la que Roberto rompió.

English speakers can run into serious trouble with these pronouns if one does not know the gender of substantives in Romance languages. Nevertheless, these examples show how adding grammatical referencing to dictionaries can expose the idiosyncrasies of a language to non-native speakers.

**Can parts of speech tell us about a language?**

It can be said that languages possess an identity which distinguishes it from another. It is even suggested that English is one of the most difficult languages to learn due to pervasively exceptional cases in its syntax. Phrasal verbs for example can create mass opportunities for ELL confusion. “Take on” and “take in” share the exact same infinitive which is “to take”. The former verb can have many different meanings, but for the sake of brevity, discussion will have to settle for the meaning “to challenge”. The latter verb can mean “to shelter”. Save for the fact of one letter, these verbs are virtually identical for a non-English speaker. The problem with current canonical practices is that alphabetic referencing does not distinctively illustrate that these are in actuality two completely different words because they are in fact two different lexemes. They are merely grouped together because they are orthographically similar and this condones book-cover judgments on the part of non-natives.

When examining a conventional dictionary in the beginning part of the A’s, one can find a typical order of “aardvark”, “Aaron”, “aback” followed by “abandon” listed alphabetically. This ordering, which is canonically accepted, conceals three functional categories namely; nouns, adverbs and verbs. A word’s function as a component of active speech coincidently lends to identifying the gist of its meaning. Typically in a class, English Language Arts teachers suggest to students to identify an unknown word in a text by using context clues to distinguish its part of speech. If this is the case in meaning troubleshooting, why is this not employed in dictionaries whose major purpose is to convey the meaning of words?

In the midst of canonical acceptance, alphabetic dictionaries can incite an active-filter in the ELL’s progress which hampers language proficiency and overall knowledge acquisition via the usage of the second language. Native speakers have the luxury of a primary language which allows them to absorb linguistic complexities instinctively, whereas ELLs must do so explicitly. These linguistic complexities show up the usage of reference materials. Native speakers use instinctive knowledge to navigate the idiosyncrasies of language: a skill in which an ELL is linguistically speaking disabled.

The bottom structure reorganizes a set of words from “commune” to “communicate” into a part of speech arrangement exemplifying Stark’s idea of grouping words in a family:

Table 3

Reformatted Structure for Parts of Speech Referencing

NOUNS

commune: a group of people living together and sharing possessions and responsibilities

communicant: a person who receives Holy Communion

communication: 1. the act of communicating. 2. A letter or message

communications: means of sending information for travelling, such as telephone lines and roads

ADJECTIVES

communal: shared or done by all members of the community

communicable: able to pass to other people

VERBS

communicate: 1. share or exchange information. 2. pass on or convey an emotion, disease, heat, but the etc. 3. having a common connecting door

Note. Adapted from *“Oxford dictionary of current English*” by Soanes, C., Hawker, S., & Elliott, J., 2006. Copyright 2006 by Oxford University Press

The point being made here is that a great deal of clarity can be generated by isolating similarly orthographic data into functional and familial groups. It is an extra but needed step to reduce data cluttering for ELLs. Value is created in the domain of ELL instruction because parts of speech arrangement provides more meaningful information allowing the ELL to get the job done, which is to make meaningful connections to new words.

Conclusion

For the ELL, a dictionary must serve as a linguistic compass leading the student though the intricacies of the English language. This being the case, a teacher involved with ELLs must provide students the appropriate tools to navigate the troubled waters of English learning. “All languages seem to have words that function like nouns and others that serve as verbs. Humans describe their world by naming objects and actions, and these categories may be part of Universal Grammar” (Freeman, p. 186, 1999). This aspect of universal grammar can be applied to render a more formulaic design. ELLs and English speaker alike can then develop a better command of the language because their active-filter is greatly reduced.

References

Freeman, D. E., & Freeman, Y. S. (2014). *Essential linguistics: what teachers need to know to teach ESL , reading spelling, and grammar*. Portsmouth, NH : Heinemann, c2014

Landau, S. I. (2001). *Dictionaries : The art and craft of lexicography* Cambridge ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 2001; 2nd ed. Retrieved from <https://login.dax.lib.unf.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat00488a&AN=unf.020621849&site=eds-live&scope=site>

Soanes, C., Hawker, S., & Elliott, J. (2006). *Oxford dictionary of current English* Oxford ; New York : Oxford University Press, 2006; 4th ed. Retrieved from <https://login.dax.lib.unf.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat00488a&AN=unf.025277516&site=eds-live&scope=site>

Stark, M. P. (2011). *Bilingual thematic dictionaries*. Berlin: De Gruyter. Retrieved from <https://login.dax.lib.unf.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=407478&site=eds-live&scope=site>

Valdman, A., Belasco, S., & Steiner, F. (1972). *Scènes et séjours*. Glenview: Scott Foresman.