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A PhD Project on a Learner's Dictionary for Chinese Learners of English

1. Introduction

The progress in lexicographic practice is generally attributed to the development of linguistics, positively supplemented by distinguished lexicographers' expertise and skills (Cowie, 1999; Bogaards, 2003; Atkins and Rundell, 2008; Welker, 2010). In contrast to the applause for the continuous improvements made in lexicographic practice, lexicographic theory is a rather elusive term in the traditional meta-lexicography research (Nielsen and Tarp, 2009; Tarp, 2012b, Tarp, 2013). The ambiguous conception of the affinities between lexicography and linguistics elicits a total denial of the existence of the theory of lexicography (Bejoint, 2010: 361) and some doubts about the necessity for a theory of lexicography (Tono, 2010: 3). On the other hand, there is a continuing call for systemic study of variables involved in a dictionary and dictionary consultations (Atkins and Rundell, 2008; Tono, 2010).

The modern functional theory of lexicography developed at the Center for Lexicography, Aarhus University (Bergenholtz and Tarp, 1995, 2003; Nielsen, 2008; Tarp, 2008, 2009a, 2009b; Nielsen and Tarp, 2009) presents a systemic theoretic framework for lexicographic research and practice. The gist of the modern functional theory lies with the concept of function. Here, the function of a dictionary is defined from the lexicographic rather than the linguistic perspective as satisfying the specific users' needs arising in specific user situations. The functional theory centralizes users' needs rather the linguistic data presented in a dictionary, when conceiving a dictionary. The functional theory definitely upholds the essence of linguistic data in a dictionary, but insists that the inclusion and presentation of the linguistic data is subject to dictionary users' needs in connection with specific user situations.

As a matter of fact, dictionary users' needs have been repeatedly highlighted and unreasonably ignored in the past lexicographic research and practice (Cowie, 1999; Atkins and Rundell, 2008; Tarp, 2009a, 2011b). It goes without saying that the gradual improvements are made here and there on the updated dictionaries over years. For example, various usage notes like pragmatic notes and error markings have been supplemented in the updated version to serve users. Such minor modifications may occasionally increase the efficiency of the realistic consultations, but is not much reliable in general consultations as shown in quite many user research (Welker, 2010). The functional theory fills the lacuna and proposes a complete theoretic framework to conceive and construct a user-oriented dictionary. It does not mean that this functional framework is a panacea for all the weaknesses with the existing dictionaries, but this framework presents an alternative for lexicographers to rethink and move further to assisting dictionary users in an individualized way.

My PhD project starting in 2008 at the Center for Lexicography is an attempt to extend and develop the functional theory to help a specific group of users (Chinese learners of English) in a specific social-cultural context (Mainland China).

The paper briefly reflects over the three-year's PhD project on conceptualizing lexicographic principles to construct a production-oriented learner's dictionary for Chinese learners of English. The reflections over the PhD project show the dynamics and potentials of the functional theory of lexicography for further development in different socio-cultural settings. The ultimate purpose of the functional theory is to optimize the utility function of a lexicographic tool in terms of providing individualized lexicographic assistance for specific users in connection with certain type of user situations. The specification of the functional theory to help Chinese learners in this PhD project indicates that the individualized assistance highly demands a clear delimitation of users' profile as well as the type of user situation eliciting the action of dictionary consultations. The quality of the lexicographic data required to fulfill users' needs also deserves its due attention in terms of minimizing the information retrieval cost. With space extension and various interactive options, the e-lexicography presents great potentials for accurately defining users' profile and needs, and hence can approximate the provision of individualized assistance to users. This paper holds that the development of e-lexicography in turn can contribute to reforming the lexicographic tools in paper form.

2. The extension of the modern functional theory to China English learning context

The cultural dimension of dictionaries is well acknowledged (Yong&Jin 2009; Tarp, 2008, 2013). Dictionary users' needs arising in concrete user situations could be influenced by their language and culture background (Nesi, 2000; Humble, 2001; Tarp, 2008). Thus, it is essential to take dictionary users' ethnic and language background into consideration, when including and presenting the lexicographic data to serve them. Otherwise, the utility function of the dictionary can hardly be actualized. With all this in mind, my PhD research project at the Center of Lexicography made an attempt to extend the modern functional theory to constructing lexicographic tools to help Chinese dictionary users (Xue, 2011).

This research project (Xue, 2011) addressed the questions concerning the Chinese learners' productive needs, the quality of the relevant lexicographic data as well as the optimal presentation of the required data to satisfy such needs. The modern functional theory of lexicography was taken as the umbrella theory, mainly supplemented by the theory of error analysis. This project took deductive methods to define Chinese learners' lexicographic needs in productive situations and the linguistic data required to fulfill such needs, supported by the abstracted data from corpora on Chinese learners of English (Gui and Yang, 2003; Wen, Wang and Liang, 2005; Wen and Wang,

2008). This PhD project highlighted four kinds of lexicographic data, namely nominal countability, collocation, usage labels, and usage notes, given the scope limitation of a single project. This project proposed general principles for the selection of data, and explored the optimal ways to include and present the relevant data from the perspective of Chinese learners in production situations. The principles conceived in this project were plainly demonstrated through the model articles for further discussion. These principles were specifically delimited with Chinese learners in mind and hence demanded necessary adaptations when used to help learners of English with different language and culture background.

3. The potentials for offering individualized lexicographic assistance to users

The functional theory provides a general theoretic framework open to further development and elaboration in concrete social contexts. This PhD project was an attempt to individualize the general framework of functional theory to serve Chinese learners of English in China. The highlights in this individualization are to define the profile of Chinese learners of English and their specific needs in connection with user situation and the quality of the required data. The ultimate purpose is to conceive a productive dictionary to offer individualized lexicographic assistance to Chinese learners of English. Therefore, the necessary lexicographic data as well as their presentation are characterized with the quality of Chineseness to offer individualized assistance to Chinese learners. The completion of this PhD project was deeply indebted to the inspiring and dynamic discussion in the seminars, workshops and regular meetings held at the Center for Lexicography.

Over the individualization journey of this project, there remain quite many challenges. To accurately delimit Chinese learners' profile was highly challenging, given the geo-economic gaps and cultural diversities in China. As a result, the specifications of Chinese learners' needs for lexicographic assistance might suffer from a hazard of deviation to some extent. The profile defined through various user researches may run the risk of being incomplete and skewed (Tarp, 2009a; Welker, 2010), and may be taken as references when conceiving a printed dictionary but definitely not sufficient for constructing an online dictionary which is expected to provide much more individualized assistance for individual users. The integration of information science with functional theory presents potentials for defining the profile of dictionary users in a relatively accurate and reliable way. Bothma (2011) states as follow:

“User profiling can be accomplished through user supplying the system with specific data, by the system tracking user behavior and thereby automatically constructing a profile of the user or a combination of the two” (Bothma 2011: 84).

Tarp (2012a: 259) further proposes that “user profile, as a rule, can be made once and for all and only needs to be refined when the users’ relevant characteristics change”. Certainly, “the description of the situation has to be supplied to the system when starting each new task, for which reason this part of the profiling cannot be tracked automatically” (Tarp, 2012a: 259). Therefore, the analysis of log files and interactive options on the e-lexicographic tools deserve due attention in lexicographic research and practice. All this will contribute to a refined definition of users’ profile and hence would lead to the provision of much individualized lexicographic assistance in the end.

The e-lexicographic tools also offer great potentials for users’ quick and easy access to their required data. Admittedly, e-lexicographic tools serve the users better than their printed counterparts in terms of the easy access to the required data and quick cross-references, especially with the hyperlinks to extra-lexicographic sources. But the issue of information cost in dictionary consultation cannot be averted in either the e-tools or the printed ones. This project explored the quality of the data required to satisfy the users’ lexicographic needs and proposed that the data on their own should be sufficiently transparent for users’ effortless information retrieval. Otherwise, users may not obtain help at all even if the relevant data are neatly presented for their quick and easy access. Thus, the description of linguistic phenomena in a learner’s dictionary is far more than the condensation of linguistic facts. For users’ proper information retrieval, the linguistic description or prescription should be as transparent as possible to eliminate any misinterpretations. It goes without saying that the integration of information science into lexicographic tools speeds up users’ locating their required data and offers alternatives to the smart presentation of the relevant data, but the quality of the data still leaves much to be desired. In sum, the individualization of lexicographic assistance depends on an accurate definition of users’ profile and their actual needs in connection their concrete situations (Tarp, 2012a). Certainly, a neat presentation of the required data and the transparency of the data for the users’ easy information retrieval definitely improve the efficiency of the individualized lexicographic assistance.

4. Conclusion

The extension of modern functional theory to help Chinese learners of English in China is a thought-provoking and fruitful academic journey. The functional theory presents a dynamic framework to actualize the individualized lexicographic assistance to users. The infiniteness inherent in information science will definitely contribute to the sophistication and subtlety of the individualized assistance provided by various lexicographic tools. The integration of information science into the functional theory offers great potentials for lexicographers to approximate the true function of a lexicographic tool to help users in the future.

5. Bibliography

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