

Meanings, Ideologies, and Learners' Dictionaries

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Abstract

Learners' dictionaries aim to give clear indications of meaning, but not all aspects of meaning can be neatly packaged up in definitions – even without the constraints of a restricted defining vocabulary. It is difficult, for example, to deal effectively with connotation and culture-bound meanings; to show evaluations clearly and consistently; or to explain even-handedly the ideological undercurrents of items, particularly where these relate to sensitive issues such as race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc. Learners' dictionaries over the last fifty years or so have made strenuous efforts to ensure that they treat such items appropriately and with care. But the changing mores and attitudes of the culture in which these dictionaries are written – specifically here the community of native-speakers of British English – may be at odds with the mores and attitudes of the markets and readerships to which the texts are presented: an interesting tension between language, lexicography, and receiver.

The aim of this paper, then, is to explore ideological meanings in learners' dictionaries. Racism and ethnocentricity, sexism and homophobia are obvious areas to discuss. Less discussed, however, is age and ageism: something evident not just in adjectives and nouns which reference age directly, but also many other items which embed or entail notions of age covertly or indirectly. This will be the particular focus of my paper, where, as a case study, I will be examining the lexicographical treatment of ways in which younger and older people are represented linguistically and lexicographically, not only in conventionally written dictionaries – the British big five – but in crowd-sourced texts too.

Language of Presentation: English