



## Online Dictionary Use in the Digital Era: A Survey among Italian Users of English

Ivano Celentano<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*Since their first compilation dictionaries have become important tools for the speakers of any language. Monolingual, bilingual dictionaries, dictionaries for specific purposes like synonyms or technical ones have been edited in order to help people in the challenge of using a language appropriately. In the recent decades, ICT and computer technology in collaboration with some branches of Applied Linguistics such as Corpus Linguistics have changed the habit of many people and also influenced the criteria in which dictionaries are currently compiled and published. Since the predominance of paper dictionaries few years ago, the market demand has experienced a fast shift towards digital editions on CD or DVD devices. Still, the creation of online dictionaries is currently leading to another major change avoiding any physical device guaranteeing a permanent update in terms of entries and examples.*

*After a brief preliminary review of the major evolution in the field of lexicography during the last century, the study examines the use and perception of online dictionaries in Italy taking advantage of a survey administered to Italian L2 speakers of English of different ages. The study highlights a number of innovative trends and approaches to the use of linguistic resources. Above all, the results show how more and more users understand the need of a tool which alongside with adequate definitions also reports some examples of language in use. Based on the data emerged from this research, some possible implications are provided in order to frame this study in the context of a wider research.*

*Particular emphasis is also placed on the role language corpora in the development of new online digital resources for a permanent and reliable update of linguistic data. This paper may also stimulate further research on this evolving topic.*

### 1. Introduction

The advent of the Digital Era has brought major changes in people's habits in many different aspects of life. Lexicography is no exception. At the beginning of the 1990's Meijs stated "I would not be surprised if for most general uses dictionaries in book-form will be antiquated before the end of the century" <sup>[1]</sup>. As a matter of fact, the technological revolution has indeed condemned to death a lot of paper-based dictionaries, leading the editors to move their attention and economic interests towards the digital innovation. After a period in which traditional dictionaries were only transferred on CDs or DVDs, nowadays editors have chosen to rely on the internet to enhance their offer providing more complex platforms where the user, mostly for free, can customize his/her query and receive suggestions, curiosities, elaborated by the system on the base of the users' own previous visits. In the attempt to offer a comprehensible classification of the resources offered on the web, online databases can be divided into four categories:

1. *Single-word translators*: software that provide the users with quick and general translations of single lemmas frequently without any context or specific definition (eg. Google Translate)
2. *Printed dictionaries online*: the exact copy of the paper based editions uploaded online. (eg. Oxford Dictionary of English, Macmillan Dictionary)
3. *Dictionary aggregators*: term coined by Yongwei<sup>[2]</sup>, they are websites which offer the users an authoritative index of references either with a direct link to other dictionaries or reporting definitions by different important editors. (eg. Dictionary.com, Collins English Dictionary)
4. *Linguistic resources online*: websites that offer the users the possibility of a more complex insight into the language, allowing to consult samples of authentic text containing the required lemma. (eg. Wordreference.com, bab.la)

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<sup>1</sup> Freelance



## 2. The survey

### 2.1. Context, participant and research questions

The survey was administered to 410 people with a minimum age of 14 years of age; 21 of them (5.1%) are between 14 and 18 years old, 227 (55.5%) between 18 and 24 and 161 (39.4%) 25 or more years old. All the participants are Italian mother tongue speakers. Concerning their activities 271 (66.3%) of them stated to be students and the remaining 138 (33.7%) defined themselves as workers. The survey was digital and was delivered posting a link on different social media community groups (eg. Facebook, Google Groups etc.).

The main aim of this research, carried out during *summer 2016*, was to outline a profile of Italian L2-*English speakers' dictionary use*. The key goals of this investigation can be summarized within these three main research questions:

1. Collect information about the dictionary users (the frequency of their use, possible difficulties and their causes)
2. Find out the users' attitude towards different reference books (traditional dictionaries, online dictionaries, linguistic resources, etc.)
3. Users' awareness of the tools which lay beyond these new resources, particularly language corpora

### 2.2. Data commentary

However Italy can be considered a conservative country and the majority of working activities and school or academic studies are delivered in Italian, the present research claims that 43.9% of the students and 51.4% of the workers use English dictionaries at a daily basis. Surprisingly, workers are still those who use English the most with 55.1% of them who declare to use English for their job. Among the youngers thus 36.6% of them use the dictionary for their homework and 30.2% for leisure such as for example videogames etc.

Table 1 Dictionary typology owned by the responders in percentage

Typology	Students	Workers
General dictionary	79%	79%
Special subject dictionary	12.1%	15.9%
Bilingual dictionary	95.6%	89.9%
Dictionary of Synonyms	50.4%	56.5%
Encyclopaedia	33.1%	34.8%
Foreign Language	69.5%	64.5%
Monolingual dictionary		
Other	2.6%	6.5%

More into details, general, learner and bilingual dictionaries seem to be a frequent item to be found on Italians' bookshelves, with very high percentage which are almost equivalent for both the categories under investigation. Only the half of them owns a thesaurus such as a dictionary of synonyms as extra support to common reference books

At the question about the use of online references responders had only to choose between the paper-based or digital dictionary. As presumable, 62.9% of the students and 68.1% of the workers claimed to use digital dictionaries much more than the classic paper-based dictionary. Quite surprisingly, the questionnaire indicates that students more often use paper dictionaries if compared to workers. At first glance, this result may seem strange, but as a matter of fact, online dictionaries totally meet workers expectations of *fast* and *accurate* results in only few seconds. Students in some circumstances instead, are still obliged to rely on paper-based support such as for example during a test at school. More generally thus, these responses clearly confirm the tendency to move towards digital references.



The graph below shows what type of online resource they give preference to:

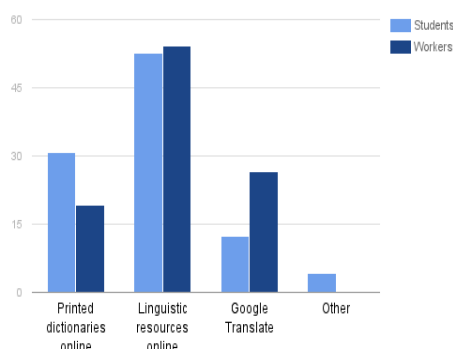


Figure 1 Online resources preferred by students and workers in percentage

Linguistic resources are largely the most used both by workers and students, Google translate thus is reasonably common among workers, probably for single terms translations or simple compounds.

The final part of the survey goes more into details on users' aptitudes towards word querying. With another question, the survey reports how more than 60% of both workers and students consider the *examples* provided by the linguistic reference they are using as the most useful and interesting data to pay attention to when using a dictionary. Those samples of language can give them a reliable help solving doubts of any kind involving language. The other half of the total is equally occupied by attention to translations and definitions. This is a very important finding as common people in Italy come from a very classical grammar-transitional approach to EFL, this results raise an innovative tendency in the field of L2 speakers' language awareness.

At the end of the questionnaire, the participants are asked their knowledge of what lays beyond the linguistic resources they use.

At this question 48.9% of the responders indicated to be *aware* of the existence of corpora and to know what they are for. This confirms the emerging role of corpus linguistics not only among scholars but in the eye of a larger public. 94.5% of those met corpora at school or at university, only 3.5% instead learnt about them in newspapers or specialized magazines. The high percentage reports the strict relation between corpora and the academic world from where they originated. If the academic world remains the starting point, what was learnt during the academic lectures seems to touch students and workers' personal daily lives in the different context, where they usually operate.

### 3. Conclusions

Contrary to what many people may argue, dictionaries are still very much used in a very wide range of fields, from school, to everyday working activities, from tourism to videogames. People needs are probably much different than before but for the purpose of this research what is important is that users keep referring to a codified language (it does not matter if formal or informal).

If on the one hand, the need of dictionaries remains important, on the other what definitely changed are the attitudes and the expectations that the users have from the same product. Digital editions on CDs and DVDs have been left a side for more flexible and up-to-date resources. Users nowadays seem to look for a reference that allows to use the language clearly in the specific contexts which every single speaker requires. Successful modern online dictionaries consequently will be those which will allow the higher level of customization.

In order to reach this target, corpora has been pointed out as crucial both on the developers' and users' perspectives.

The results of this research open up to many more in depth studies on the relation between corpora and lexicography, which are likely to be developed in the next future.

### References

- [1] Meijs, W. J. "Morphology and word-formation in a machine-readable dictionary: Problems and possibilities." *Folia Linguistica: Acta Societatis Linguisticae Europaeae* 24.1-2: 45-71.1990



- [2] Yongwei, G.. *Online English Dictionaries: Friend or Foe*. Proceedings of Euralex 2012, Oslo, 7-11 August 2012.

### **Dictionaries:**

Bab.la <http://www.bab.la/>

Collin Dictionaries <http://www.collinsdictionary.com/>

Dictionary.com <http://www.dictionary.com/>

Google Translate <https://translate.google.it/>

Macmillan Dictionary <http://www.macmillandictionary.com/>

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary <http://www.merriam-webster.com/>

Oxford Dictionary of English <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/>

Wordreference.com <http://www.wordreference.com/>