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Accepted version deposited in Coventry University Repository

Original citation:

Bae, S. and Nesi, H. (2014) Korean and English ‘dictionary’ questions: what does the public want to know? *Lexicography* (1) 1, 53-71. DOI: 10.1007%2Fs40607-014-0002-3

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007%2Fs40607-014-0002-3>

Springer Berlin Heidelberg

This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedit version of an article published in *Lexicography*. The final authenticated version is available online at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007%2Fs40607-014-0002-3>

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Korean and English ‘dictionary’ questions: what do the public want to know?

Susanna Bae and Hilary Nesi

Abstract

This paper proposes an alternative to questionnaire surveys and other methods of investigating dictionary user expectations, wants and needs: the examination of dictionary-related queries on web forums. Web postings are anonymous and are not associated with any particular institution or dictionary developer, so they tend to reflect the ordinary concerns of users looking for unbiased practical answers. Analysis of a random sample of approximately 500 English-medium Yahoo! queries and 500 Korean-medium Naver queries found a greater tendency to discuss dictionary choice on the Korean site, and more postings about word meanings and origins, and dictionary use for word games, on the UK/Irish site. Many Korean queries concerned dictionaries for English language learning and comparisons between different types of dictionary, while Yahoo! queries were more likely to reject dictionary information as incomplete or incorrect.

Keywords: online communities; social media; user needs; research methods.

1. Introduction

A variety of data collection instruments are available for the investigation of dictionary use; the most popular being questionnaire surveys, interviews, observations, protocols, tests and experiments (Welker 2010). Researchers using these instruments apply structured elicitation techniques within set time periods, and target specific user groups. They intend to elicit information about normal, authentic dictionary use, but their methods remove dictionary look-up from its normal context (McDonough 1999), and in most cases depend on the users’ ability to explain their own consultation behaviour (Nesi forthcoming).

Over the past ten years or so the rapid rise of social media communications has begun to provide an alternative means of investigation. Online Q&A services such as *Yahoo! Answers* are based on assumptions about the wisdom of crowds (Surowiecki 2004) and the availability of volunteer contributions (Wasco and Faraj 2000). The authority and the quality of the information these sites provide may be open to question, but their ease of access, their interactivity, their non-technical approach and their capacity to deal with focused, local information have resulted in their rapid and continuing growth (see for example Noguchi 2006¹, and Kim, Pinkerton and Ganesh 2012).

Online knowledge-sharing has become an important research topic in information-intensive disciplines such as the computer sciences, library and information sciences, and health sciences (Kim, Pinkerton and Ganesh 2012; Fichman 2011; Jin, Zhou, Lee and Cheung 2013; White 1998). Online Q&A services have helped librarians, for example, to understand library users’ information needs and enhance the design of information retrieval systems (White 1998). *Yahoo! Answers* postings about H1N1 (i.e. swine flu) were collected by Kim et al. (2012) and compared to the swine flu coverage in official FAQ postings. The *Yahoo!* interactions were found to meet needs neglected by more conventional providers, offering not only medical information but also emotional support. These kinds of studies suggest that dictionary-related questions to online forums might reflect the real concerns of dictionary users in authentic situations, and might thus be a valuable resource for research into dictionary use,.

¹ Noguchi, Y. *Web searches go low-tech: you ask, a person answers*. Available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/08/15/AR2006081501142.html> (accessed 15 May 2013).

The following research questions guided this study:

- 1) What kind of dictionary-related questions are posted to social media sites in South Korea and the UK and Ireland?
- 2) What are the similarities and differences between postings in the two regions?
- 3) What is the potential of this data source for dictionary user research?

2. Data collection and analysis

Two online Q&A communities were chosen, based on their popularity and the number of postings.² These were *Knowledge iN* at Naver.com and *Yahoo! Answers* U.K. The sites were keyword-searched using “사전[sah-jeon]” (for *Knowledge iN*) and “dictionary” (for *Yahoo! Answers*). A time range of the past two years (2011-2013) was selected. As the main aim of this study was to identify the knowledge needs of the dictionary-using public, only questions were gathered for analysis, without any accompanying answers.

2.1 Collection and analysis of dictionary-related questions to *Knowledge iN*

For *Knowledge iN* the search category was limited to ‘education→foreign language learning→English’ in order to see dictionary-related questions only in the context of English language learning, where English is learned predominantly as a foreign language. Although dictionary-related questions are very frequently posted in other search categories such as ‘computers / information’ or ‘shopping→electronic devices→learning devices’, these categories were excluded because most questions are related to purchasing or mending electronic dictionary devices or downloading dictionary applications. Although electronic dictionary purchase is an interesting topic it was considered to lie beyond the scope of this study. These categories were also excluded to minimize the number of ‘abuser’ postings by interest groups for marketing purposes.

Initially 528 ‘dictionary’ questions were extracted. Since the Korean characters, *sah-jeon*, have several different meanings (denoting *beforehand*, *encyclopedia*, etc. as well as *dictionary*), the questions were manually filtered to exclude those which did not refer to linguistic reference materials. The list was narrowed further by eliminating duplicate or irrelevant questions, to arrive at 468 queries. A structural coding method (Saldaña 2009) was adopted to extract major categories and themes from the question archive. The specification of dictionary reference skills developed by Nesi (1999) was used as a basis for the coding framework, and was subsequently modified to accommodate emergent topics and themes.

2.2 Collection and analysis of dictionary-related questions at *Yahoo! Answers* U.K

For *Yahoo! Answers* the search for the keyword ‘dictionary’ was limited to ‘Education & Reference’ (all subcategories) from the UK and Ireland. Items for analysis were distributed across the subcategories of ‘Education & Reference’ as shown in Table 1. The word ‘dictionary’ appeared in 349 questions and in 1,048 Q&A sequences.

Subcategory	Questions	All Q&A
Financial Aid	0	1

² *Knowledge iN* service (<http://kin.naver.com/index.nhn>) is known as the world’s first knowledge-sharing online community, launched in 2002 by the South Korean portal service Naver.com (NHN Overview 2011). *Yahoo! Answers* was initially launched in 2005 in the U.S.A., and it has now archived billions of question-and-answers, grouped by geographical community.

Higher Education	12	25
Home Schooling	2	3
Homework Help	21	94
Preschool	0	2
Primary & Secondary Education	10	43
Quotations	5	19
Special Education	3	11
Standards & Testing	8	15
Studying Abroad	1	8
Teaching	8	26
Trivia	4	16
Words & Wordplay	265	740
Other	10	45
Total	349	1048

Table 1: *Yahoo! Answers* dictionary queries within ‘Education & Reference’

Although these categories were interpreted very loosely by questioners, and in some cases were entirely disregarded, the overwhelming emphasis on ‘Words & Wordplay’ is telling, and seems to corroborate the London student survey finding that 57% of dictionary use in parental homes is in relation to word games (Quirk, 1975) (a finding that ‘can err only in being too low’ according to Crystal (1986)).

Every alternate query was selected from the 1,048 Q&A sequences to yield 524 questions, which were then manually filtered to exclude repetitions and questions which were not relevant to dictionary use. The data set was finally narrowed to 345 queries. Some of the questioners identified themselves as non-native speakers, but generally it was impossible to control whether the questions came from L1 speakers of English or language learners.

3. Findings

3.1 Dictionary questions at *Knowledge iN*

Sixty-one topic-related codes were drawn from the question corpus, and were then organized in terms of their thematic relations and hierarchy. Some questions were complex, and were assigned more than one code. Most of the question topics fell within the following seven categories:

- Choosing dictionaries (59%)
- Interpreting dictionary information (45%)
- How to use dictionaries to improve English proficiency (12%)
- Finding target information (10%)
- Dictionary evaluation (5%)
- Understanding lexicography (4%)
- Techniques for using electronic dictionaries (3%)
- Others (linguistic queries, simple translations etc) (17%)

3.2 Dictionary questions in *Yahoo! Answers*

Thirty-four topic-related codes were drawn from the question corpus, and were then organized in terms of their thematic relations and hierarchy. Queries tended to be short and simple, and were generally assigned a single code. Most of the question topics fell within the following eight categories:

- Information about word meanings (53%)
- Information about correct usage (10%)
- Word origins (8%)
- Dictionary evaluation (7%)

- Choosing dictionaries (7%)
- How to use dictionaries to improve language knowledge/skills (6%)
- Understanding lexicography (3%)
- Interpreting dictionary information (2%)
- Others (4%)

4. Discussion

Questions asking whether specific types of dictionary exist, which (type of) dictionary is better or best, and how to choose the most suitable dictionary, were classified in the ‘Choosing dictionaries’ category. Users seem to depend on word-of-mouth advice, notwithstanding concerns about the quality of advice provided by knowledge exchange communities. This is presumably because such information is hard to obtain in formal educational contexts. The questions were mostly simple requests for recommendations such as the following:

“Please recommend me a good mobile dictionary application which can be installed in my smartphone so that I don’t need to be connected to use it.”
[*Knowledge iN*]

Users wanted the “best” reference tool; for Koreans this often involved making choices between a monolingual and a bilingual dictionary, a British and an American dictionary, or a vocabulary learning device and a PED. There were few such queries in the UK/Irish sample. Instead there was an unrealistic preoccupation with coverage and completeness, for example:

“Where can I buy an English dictionary that contains every word in the English language?” [Yahoo! Answers]

“Can you buy an English dictionary and thesaurus with every single word in it? A website would be nice.” [Yahoo! Answers]

Many Korean questions about using dictionaries to improve language knowledge were concerned with the amount of dictionary use that was necessary, and the best way of recording dictionary consultations. UK/Irish questions, on the other hand, were more often concerned with expanding vocabulary knowledge and learning how to spell correctly. However both *Knowledge iN* and *Yahoo! Answers* seemed to serve as a means of sharing dictionary-using habits and seeking validation:

“I am a high-school girl, and recently I’ve decided to learn English only through English. I am learning English grammar only in English, and I started to use only English-English dictionaries. If I come across words I don’t know, then I keep looking them up, and so on, until I understand all the words. Am I doing right?” [Knowledge iN]

“I’ve always had a word for the day... I close my eyes, open up the dictionary, place my finger anywhere and then BAM! I write down my new word and its meaning. Today I got notorious- famous or well know for something... typically a bad quality or deed. Is this normal? Does anyone else do this? If so, what’s your word for today?” [Yahoo! Answers]

The Koreans were more concerned than the UK/Irish questioners with interpreting dictionary information such as IPA, dictionary symbols and abbreviations. Dictionary symbols that confused users most were those which have grammatical and syntactic functions, such as [U], [C], or verb patterns used in particular dictionaries, such as [VN] in OALD. Also, punctuation marks such as the colon and semicolon, less often used in the Korean writing system, caused problems. In some cases users were

bewildered by fairly transparent symbols and codes, such as [synonym], *BrE*, and even ‘sth.’ and ‘sb.’ Such difficulties may be on the increase with the widespread use of electronic dictionaries, as user guides are less accessible in e-dictionaries than they are in print dictionaries.

Some of the Korean questions in the category ‘Finding target information’ also revealed ignorance of general lexicographical principles regarding headwords – for example “Why ‘young age’ is not in the dictionary?” or “I’ve heard ‘dead body’ many times in American television shows, but no dictionary includes this expression. What’s the reason?”

Problems interpreting definitions were reported by both user groups. The highly condensed language typical of conventional dictionaries seemed to be a particular cause of difficulty:

“I looked up *haptic* in a dictionary, and it says “Relating to or involving the sense of touch”. Does *haptic* mean ‘relating something’?” [*Knowledge iN*]

“I know what communicate means, i have looked in a dictionary about communication, and it says ‘The act of communicating’. What does it mean by ‘the act of’ can anyone explain? thanks people.” [*Yahoo! Answers*]

In *Knowledge iN* forum, these questions often accompanied further requests for grammar-translation of each sentence constituent of the definitions in question. On the other hand, the UK/Irish questioners were more likely to reject dictionaries entirely in their search for information. They often demanded everyday language explanations of new words they had encountered:

“What does the word Semantic mean? I have looked at a couple of dictionary terms, but they all make it so complicated... Could someone please give me a SIMPLE (dumbed down, if you like) version of what it means, as I really don’t get it...” [*Yahoo! Answers*]

The UK/Irish questioners also claimed to be unable to find information in dictionaries because they knew the meanings but not the forms of the words they needed:

“Is there a word that describes a malicious or criminal prank?... I can’t find any alternative word in the English dictionary that is suitable but surely there must be one?” [*Yahoo! Answers*]

“How do you spell contravercial? It says I spelt it wrong? I can’t find the right spelling on spellchecker or in the dictionary. How is it spelt?” [*Yahoo! Answers*]

The numerous requests for word meanings in the UK/Irish forum have a certain similarity to the Korean requests for translations of English phrases. Such queries seem indicative of a desire for quick answers, perhaps because of poor time-management and/or a reluctance to follow traditional dictionary information retrieval procedures. Some queries about word meanings in *Yahoo! Answers* and English translation in *Knowledge iN* were presented as part of homework tasks which required students to consult an authoritative source. The messages could be rather urgent:

“Can someone with an Oxford English Dictionary... please give me the definition they give of "Romanization." I accidently got a different dictionary, and I have to formulate an argument based upon specifically the Oxford definition, and I have to give that argument in about 30 minutes... So quick and correct answer will get "Best" as soon as I can! thank you!!!!!!” [*Yahoo! Answers*]

“My teacher told us to find the meanings of *ball* in these two sentences. We

have to give the two meanings in the next exam. Please help me! 1. One day the king invited all the young ladies of the land to a grand ball. 2. A round thing used for throwing, hitting, and kicking in sports: a tennis ball.” [*Knowledge iN*]

Alongside extrinsically motivated requests such as these were queries driven purely by curiosity or a sense of fun. UK/Irish questioners sought the opinion of others regarding new words they had invented, and wondered about the origins of expressions that they knew (“*What is the origin of the phrase ‘cat got your tongue?’*”; “*Where originated the word ‘haggle’?*”). Queries about word meanings also sometimes involved games, jokes or wordplay, although not to the extent indicated by Quirk (1975) and Crystal (1986). Anagrams, acrostics, crosswords and Scrabble problems all featured, as well as tongue-in-cheek postings such as “*What can you tell me about confidentiality?*”, and the old chestnut “*Why is the word gullible not in the dictionary?*”. No such queries appeared in *Knowledge iN*, but this is unsurprising given the status of English as a foreign language in Korea.

5. Conclusion

This overview of dictionary-related questions collected from two Q&A forums reveals something of the knowledge needs and concerns of two distinct user-communities. The questions posted to *Knowledge iN* indicate that South Korean English learners perceive dictionaries as important language learning tools, but need help choosing which ones they should use. Despite their high estimation of dictionaries, their questions displayed widespread ignorance of dictionary-specific conventions and discourse, a situation which indicates directions for the development of EFL dictionaries and for the teaching of dictionary skills. The questions posted to *Yahoo! Answers*, on the other hand, indicated that the UK/Irish public is less concerned about lexicographical conventions, and more willing to exploit the medium as an alternative, instant search channel for lexical information.

This study was small in scale, and we narrowed the focus to questions, as opposed to questions and answers, in a few specified search categories. There is clearly scope for further work with more extensive data sets, obtained by systematically mining entire Q&A sites. During the process of data collection and analysis, we found the unstructured data highly adaptable to different research aims. A diachronic study of question topics and their frequency might reveal trends in dictionary users’ needs and concerns, for example, or the data might be analyzed in terms of dictionary types, dictionary titles, and the reported situations of dictionary use.

Quirk argued long ago that dictionary makers needed to step outside their own small world and listen to the dictionary-using public. If they did, they would find that “some of the dictionary features which seem of particular centrality to lexicographers are decidedly peripheral to the ordinary user” (1975:80). Thanks to social media we can now find out what ordinary users have to say, to an extent Quirk would not have dreamt possible. Their questions may sometimes annoy us, but also have the power to touch us, amuse us, and perhaps even shock us into new ways of thinking about lexicographical practice.

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Appendix

Knowledge iN Categories and Codes	References
choosing dictionaries	274
dictionary choice according to level	9
request for recommendation	(144)
recommendation_biligualised	1
recommendation_bilingual	8
recommendation_electronic download	1
recommendation_general	22
recommendation_handheld	51
recommendation_internet site	11
recommendation_mobile application	18
recommendation_monolingual	29
recommendation_paper only	3
specific purpose dictionaries	47
which dictionary	(74)
which is better for me	34
which_British vs. American	8
which_learning device vs. dictionaries	12
which_mono vs. bilingual	12
which_PED vs. mobile application	2
which_print vs. electronic	6
dictionary evaluation	23
evaluation	4
quality of examples	1
quality of voice pronunciation	3
what's the difference	15

finding target information	28
deciding what to look up	2
finding inflections	1
knowing the structure of dictionary	1
lack of knowledge about the typical lexical information	7
locating_headwords	4
locating_phrases	4
not in the dictionary	7
right-hand field search	2
how to use dictionaries to improve English proficiency	55
recording dictionary entry for English learning	7
using dictionaries for English learning	45
validating question	3
interpreting dictionary information	212
applying dict information	4
distinguishing relevant sense	3
interpreting definition	21
interpreting dictionary convention of language description	22
interpreting examples	12
interpreting IPA	9
interpreting morphological information	5
Interpreting symbols and abbreviation	(123)
[U] [C]	10
Brit.Amer.	1
colon and semicolon	9
frequency information	3
grammatical symbol	13
other symbols and abbreviation	72
sb. sth.	4
syllabication	3
VN in Oxford dictionaries	8
interpreting syntagmatic information	13
techniques for electronic dictionaries	16
downloading dictionaries	9
electronic search technique	4
how to use dictionaries on CD-ROM	1
using mini dictionaries	2
understanding lexicography	19
suggestions for new words to be included	1
understanding lexicographical principles and practices	18
others	79
dictionary errors	6
language specific question	29
mobile trend	6
other questions	16
simple requests for translation	18
very local question	4

<i>Yahoo! Answers</i> Categories and Codes	References
information about word meanings	182
for reception	87
for production	32
to distinguish between similar words	21

as part of jokes and word play	12
for homework	12
for games	9
in order to explain meanings to others, e.g. children	5
to identify connotations	4
information about correct usage	34
grammar	18
spelling	11
pronunciation	4
upper and lower case letters	1
word origins	27
etymology	22
meaning of proper names	3
borrowing from other languages	1
deconstruction of word meaning	1
dictionary evaluation	26
evaluating the authority of the dictionary	6
identifying missing words or information (compare 'not in the dictionary' for <i>Knowledge iN</i> queries)	11
querying dictionary information	9
choosing dictionaries	24
differentiating dictionary titles	3
requests for word lists	3
requests for recommendation	(12)
recommendation_ the most complete	9
recommendation_ free	2
recommendation_ tablet format	1
which dictionary	(4)
which is the best for students	3
which contains sentence examples	1
specific purpose dictionaries	2
understanding lexicography	11
suggestions for new words to be included	6
understanding lexicographical principles and practices	4
asking about the number of words in a dictionary	1
how to use dictionaries to improve language knowledge/skills	10
memorizing words	2
reading/memorizing an entire dictionary	2
using a dictionary whilst reading	2
using a dictionary to expand vocabulary	2
using a dictionary for spelling	1
interpreting dictionary information	7
interpreting examples	1
interpreting grammatical information	1
Interpreting the pronunciation key	1
interpreting definitions and conventions	4
others	24
questions about exam regulations and cheating	8
simple requests for translation	6
obtaining dictionaries / giving them as presents	4
the dictionary-using habits of others	4
citing dictionary sources	2