

Turning the New Ground: Critical and Pedagogical Reflections on the Production of the First Japanese–Lithuanian Dictionary

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This paper is based on author's own experience of compiling the first Japanese–Lithuanian character dictionary (in Japan there are converse Lithuanian–Japanese dictionaries). It contains hermeneutical, pedagogical and pragmatic reflections on the production of bilingual dictionaries, and discusses the problem of how to make Japanese studies attractive in a country with no tradition of the studies. To create the basis for the studies, not only an intellectual background, but also linguistic material, such as textbooks, dictionaries, etc. is needed. In the case of a country where Japan has just recently become an object of academic studies, such reference book for language learning could also become the primary source of information on the country in which the language is spoken.

The Context: Vilnius University

Vilnius University is one of the oldest universities in Eastern Europe, with a fascinating history as a significant player in European intellectual life. Japanese studies started in Vilnius University in 1992. We had an open course for university students and also for adults coming from outside. In 1995 a Japanese minor diploma program was established, and in 2000 the B.A. programme of Comparative Asian Studies was started, with Japanese Studies as a part of it.

I was the first lecturer of the Japanese language and was (and continue to be) charged with building Japanese studies at Vilnius University with the collaboration of colleagues. The Center of Oriental Studies of Vilnius University specifically designed the curriculum to develop materials for 'self-access' use by the students, although it is difficult to actually find the human resources able and willing to perform the task. And it requires time, which – in Lithuania nowadays – means money. Time we may have.

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Money, we surely do not. Furthermore, Lithuanian is not a 'commercial' language. No one expects a Lithuanian dictionary to hit the bestseller list. Lithuania is a small country, and we have always known more about others than they know about us. But if we want others to learn about us, do we show enough attention to others and their languages? As the interest of the Japanese language increased rapidly in Lithuania over the past few years, the question became more and more relevant and the need became evident to construct Japanese–Lithuanian linguistic material. The first task on this trip was the creation of a dictionary, and I set my mind to that.

A dictionary in the teaching–learning process

The basic form of teaching and learning is the didactic process with a teacher and a student involved. However, we talk about university education where independent work and research occupy an important place, and in the case of self-education rich educational environment is needed, consisting of various simple and complex, traditional and electronic didactic means, i.e. media. Media as sources and transmitters of information enable the students to perform multiple activities, multi-sensory cognition of reality and knowledge about the world, shaping skills, systems of values and attitudes. In self-education, the teacher's functions are taken over by these media, including the textbook and the dictionary. A student becomes an autonomous person, which takes a research attitude towards the reality by observing the world, creating hypotheses, making experiments and drawing conclusions. The effectiveness of learning depends on the internal resources, so-called cognitive structures or, to put it another way, on the knowledge attained during the previous experience. But it also depends on the information from the outside world. Thus, emotional elements during the learning process become entwined with informational ones. Curiosity, aspiration, hope and other emotions arise while a learner is operating on information.

Although the so-called media, and dictionary as part of it, have always been limited to the illustrative or secondary role of 'environment', the relation between a learner and a dictionary approaches a kind of interpersonal standard. Dictionaries can become (to a certain extent) alternative teachers. It may be said that the learner 'communicates' with the dictionary, thus reaching a social interaction with it, and the communication, especially during the learning process, is more articulate when it is carried on in native language as a starting point.

This consideration may help answer the question about the necessity of a Japanese language dictionary in Lithuania whose language is qualified as LWULT, the abbreviation for 'less widely used and less taught' languages. It certainly is one of the 'minor' languages, but so are most of the other 6000 languages that, according to the statistics, existed in the year of 2000 (see, for example, Crystal, 2000, 11), and although global intellectuals move among world regions of cultures and states, most global citizens live in territories where the local language is not global and never will be.

Bilingual dictionaries, and character dictionaries in particular, involve a number of ‘languages’: not only Japanese and the target language, Lithuanian in our case, but also the symbolic language (word and graphic messages), the language of visual messages and, to some extent, also the Chinese language. If the target language is not his/her native, a learner is burdened by yet another, so-called third language, and the usage of the dictionary results in inadequacies and ambiguities. By making a double translation of a word we rob it of something very important. It becomes distant, ephemeral since you are never completely sure of the meaning. This statement is especially relevant to idioms where the cultural context is particularly dense. Meanings are often misunderstood if they are gathered from third-language dictionaries. Language is the intellectual and cultural and historical code to societies and individuals. When one uses a foreign language as a vehicle, one’s code is practically always reduced. When one uses one’s own language, it may be the case that the reception of the signal is reduced or incomplete, but still, there are many hints that help clarify the meanings of words and cultural situations.

A dictionary in cross-cultural communication: Hermeneutical considerations

A domestic dictionary in any language is an important instrument for its systematization and standardization. Dictionary is not only a description of the lexicon of a language but also a description of the culture of its speakers codified in the words. This quality makes them also tools for learning language as part of cultural identity. The idea that any list of words could be a comprehensive and neutral codification of language and culture is, of course, debatable, but we tend to think of dictionaries as authoritative despite our common sense. Producing a bilingual dictionary, much like creating and viewing a stereoscopic image, involves yet a more complex process of perception and decoding.

In China, first dictionaries were monolingual. The appearance of the first character dictionary goes back to Later Han when *Interpreting Words and Analyzing Characters* (《说文解字》 *Shuo wen jie zi*) was completed by Xu Shen (许慎; ca. 55 – ca. 149 C.E.) in the year 100, as the first systematic and comprehensive dictionary of Chinese characters. In Europe, on the other hand, the history of dictionaries starts from the bilingual ones. The Greeks did not have a dictionary, even though “lexicon” is the Greek word for it. They had no need for foreign language dictionaries, because there was no literature in a foreign language they cared to read. Education based on foreign literature begins with the Romans who went to school to Greek pedagogues, and became cultivated through contact with Greek culture. It is not surprising, therefore, that the first dictionaries were glossaries of Homeric words (Adler, 1941). Thus, the

history of dictionaries in Europe started at the point of intersection of languages and cultures.

With the language one gains access to the cultural heritage of a country, but culture is not solely concerned with art, literature, or music; it encompasses everything that people learn to do, all aspects of human life. It includes personal behaviour, the patterns of everyday life, all points of interaction between the individual and the society, since whatever one does, is done in a cultural context. Students of foreign languages have to make cultural choices at every moment of their cultural existence. The concept of culture affects the everyday modes of behaviour, including communicative practices. There are great cultural variations in how people use their speech acts, employ the element of silence, use non-verbal cues, direct and indirect communication, etc.

The core concepts and cultural assumptions stem from the same source. But even if we share the same art history, the same music history, the same general history, their expression in the text may differ from culture to culture, and must be revalidated time and again. Text, which determines the very existence of dictionaries, is thereby open to multiple interpretations and vivid communication.

Since it is the process of 'communication', we contribute our own perspectives to the cultural understanding of a foreign text. Those perspectives may be our views of the world, our sensibility, knowledge, cultural experience and, finally, our language, which is intimately connected to our perception and interpretation of the world. Each language has its own history, and its speakers have a particular manner of self-expression.

Language in Lithuania has always been one of the most important elements of ethnical and cultural distinction. It could be said – with some exaggeration – that the concept of Lithuania in the 19th century re-originated in script, in reading, generally speaking, in language, and since then we traditionally stick to the concept of the association of language with national identity and distinctiveness. This concept should be, however, modernized. Language should be perceived not only as a national value but also as an expression of free society and free individual, and therefore should be made popular by using attractive forms. Compilation of bilingual dictionaries provides a possibility to link our own language with another one and incorporate it into a broader context.

We do not talk here about the attempt of revival or survival of the language by compiling as many bilingual dictionaries as possible. This is not the case. Lithuanian is the only state language of Lithuania and an official language of the EU thus attaining the international status. But the European identity always comes from a national one. According to the Thomist doctrine of the *ordo caritatis* (the order of preferential love), we owe our greatest love not to the most outstanding object, but to the closest one. A culture whose final goal is impersonal is inhuman culture. International approval is important in legitimating the results of our research, but the originality of our

revelations more often than not comes from the national background, which provides the possibility of an important comparative prospect.

Thus, it is essentially important to activate the Lithuanian context of the scholar of Japanese Studies, and a Japanese–Lithuanian dictionary is one of the best ways to solve the problem, even if the number of speakers of Lithuanian amount only to some four million people all over the world. If the Lithuanian cultural context has something unique to say to the Japanese–Lithuanian dialogue, then language is primary to this dialogue. Dictionary, as the codification of a language, is a book about words, not about things, but its users turn to “pass from words to things, from names to natures” (Adler, 1941), and in this sense a dictionary provides means for the circulation of experiences and values.

Pragmatic and pedagogical considerations

Considering that a dictionary, however intended, is primarily an educational instrument, there are many options for a compiler of any dictionary to consider before launching the project. The question is which dictionary can best meet learner’s needs and also be a user-friendly ‘wonder book’. Two basic decisions a lexicographer has to take are, first, what part of the total vocabulary of a language the proposed dictionary will cover and, second, to what type the proposed dictionary will belong. If the dictionary is Japanese, the first option is whether it will be a phonetic dictionary listing Japanese words in alphabetical order by their readings or a character dictionary. When one sets out to compile a dictionary of a foreign language with but a few learners, there is also a problem of how to make it attractive for a broader public in a country with no tradition of the studies. Since the Japanese studies of Lithuanian students are often based on sheer enthusiasm of cultural type, the main point of attraction to the Japanese language studies is the cultural background and exotic flavour, which are still associated with the subject in Lithuania. A character dictionary has more of the ‘exotica’ and is visually more appealing to those readers who are beginners, but it presents a problem of the Chinese-language involvement in the case, and how much space has to be opened for it, for example, whether original Chinese readings have to be given in the character entry and whether evolvment of its graphics should be demonstrated.

We started from the idea of a portable kanji-learning dictionary, but gradually changed our preferences for a larger one. Books like handbooks and guides are used as kanji reference tools by many learners, particularly at the initial level, but their entries are generally confined to the general-use characters, their common pronunciations, and a few illustrative compound words for each character. It did not seem enough, so finally we settled on the project of a comprehensive dictionary for a small number of users, which could nevertheless invite a playful reading or game of research and engage a non-professional reader / user in a hot pursuit of the mysteries of the Japanese writing system.

However, a sober use of a dictionary comes above fascinations, and the principal function of any character dictionary is to enable the user to look through the unknown characters and compounds as quickly and efficiently as possible. Japanese character dictionaries are arranged using some identifiable aspect of the individual kanji, such as a radical component shape and the count of strokes. Therefore it is important, firstly, to choose if the characters will be arranged according to the time-honoured radicals or according to any of significantly improved or newly invented systems. The indexing system of a character dictionary is of critical importance, because assuming that the pronunciation of a character is unknown, it determines the speed at which desired characters and compound words can be located. *The Japanese–Lithuanian Character Dictionary* retained use of the traditional 214 radicals (bushu). The traditional radicals were preferred in the dictionary, since it is this arrangement that students of Lithuania learn in the first place. The fact had also to be considered that before the production of a Lithuanian dictionary most Lithuanian learners relied on the ‘grandfather’ of modern Japanese–English character dictionaries, Andrew Nelson’s *The Modern Reader’s Japanese–English Character Dictionary*, (1962), updated by John Haig in 1997, which basically uses the same system. However, we did not create arbitrary rules as Nelson did, nor did we add ‘radical-like’ elements, (, , and) as Haig did.

While any dictionary functions as an effective look-up tool, another primary aim is to address the intricate meanings of words. The semantic area of a word is important. A word has the memory of its usage, and this is probably even more applicable to the characters that are rooted in the Chinese tradition, transplanted into the Japanese soil and then translated into Lithuanian or any other language. A word is a highly complex linguistic phenomenon, and a dictionary is supposed to alert us to the problems regarding many aspects of its use. Characters are marks intended for writing and therefore physical things. And they are man-made signs, which mean and signify natural things and phenomena. That is why every word has a history, just as everything else humankind makes has a time and place of origin, and a cultural career, in which it goes through certain transformations.

The Lithuanian dictionary presents more than 3,700 different *kanji* most frequently used in modern Japanese texts, and approximately 15,000 multi-character compounds (*jukugo*; word or phrase written with several kanji). Each character entry lists its Chinese-derived readings (except the *kokuji* symbols that were made in Japan and, but one exception, have no Chinese readings), native-Japanese readings and their Lithuanian meanings, plus most important multi-character compounds to show how a particular character is used in combination.

Although the dictionary is not encyclopaedic, it does contain cultural and also historical information reflected in the variety of meanings and the order according to which they are listed in the dictionary. In a culture with a history as long as Japan’s, it is fascinating to learn about its long and turbulent past through its language. However, an

expression, even if it is a culture-specific word, was only described in the dictionary, but not explained in great detail. The common ground between Japanese and Lithuanian was sought while preserving cultural difference.

The Chinese dictionary *Shuo wen jie zi* was intended for a limited audience, mainly as an aid to reading literature, and character dictionaries are meant exactly for this purpose till present. Reading is one of the ways of how to develop cultural understanding. There are a number of factors, both linguistic and socio-cultural, why reading is highly significant in cross-cultural interaction. Reading is the process in which readers use both information from the text and their own background knowledge so as to be able to communicate. Reading texts is much more than a simple deciphering of words in the text. It involves an active and critical engagement and provides many opportunities for learning culture through language and language through culture, especially if it is a foreign language. Major Japanese texts can only be familiarized in Lithuania through translations into Lithuanian, and the translation is not just a linguistic enterprise but also a cultural one. Needless to say, dictionaries are indispensable in such enterprise. Upon setting out to compile a Japanese–Lithuanian dictionary we decided on a dictionary which would be targeted at professional needs, and the needs considered were primarily those of a professional translator.

Since a translator has to deal with different kinds of material, we listed as many alternative meanings of the entry characters as possible, even the nuances, or so-called “senses”. Similar Lithuanian meanings are separated by a comma, but meanings which differ more sharply are marked off by a semicolon. However, Japanese lexical units included into the dictionary are not numerous, since most of the *on* readings do not represent separate words, and we did not open much floor for the compounds and their meanings, selecting only those that are most commonly used. Besides, the dictionary presents neither words of foreign origin, written chiefly in *katakana*, nor conjunctions, particles and other function-words written in *hiragana*. There is also a fact to be considered that new words are constantly coming into existence, particularly from scientific fields, so a dictionary is never really finished. Although it is generally thought desirable for dictionaries, especially bilingual dictionaries used by students, to have representative clauses and sentences showing the usage of words, the compilation process of the Japanese–Lithuanian dictionary using volunteers did not lend itself to the task of generating and including such examples. Since the problem of the Chinese language involvement was solved in favour of the maximum concentration on Japanese, information after the kanji does not include readings in Chinese and Korean.

The readings of the Chinese characters in the dictionary are not transliterated into the Roman alphabet but given in two Japanese syllabaries – *hiragana* and *katakana* – which is the usual system of the character dictionaries published in Japan. By having chosen not to transliterate the *on-kun* readings into the Roman alphabet but give them in *katakana* and *hiragana* respectively, we expect readers either to have primary

knowledge of hiragana and katakana or learn both syllabaries in the process by referring to the charts inside the back covers.

However, as I have already mentioned, the first Japanese–Lithuanian dictionary was planned also for a broader audience including those who might purchase it as an exotic decoration for their bookshelves but then by turning over the leaves get the notion of the language itself and hopefully become interested in the culture of its speakers. That is why the pronunciation index at the back of the book has the syllables and words romanized in order to entertain those who have no command of Japanese but want to check generally known loanwords like *kimono* or *bonsai* in the dictionary.

The introduction chapter provides information about the history, orthography, usage, reading and writing of *kanji*. Learning a correct stroke order is considered an important element of kanji acquisition. A basic instruction is given in the introduction but is not particularized for each entry character. A map of modern and ancient Japan, as well as appendices updating on Japanese Emperors and Era Names, Japanese Geographical Names, Weights and Measures, Japanese Zodiac, etc., are targeted both at those who refer to the dictionary out of professional interests and those who have only an accidental interest in the facts.

Conclusions

To sum it up, the dictionary under discussion is a bilingual linguistic dictionary as it is concerned primarily with the lexical units. However, encyclopaedic information finds a place in the introduction chapters and appendices. Although the dictionary is concerned with combinatorial properties as revealed in the compound words, it is not a syntagmatic dictionary, as would be dictionaries of idioms, phrases or collocations, the syntagmatic aspect only providing a supportive database. The entries are arranged systematically according to the traditional radical system, but alphabetic arrangement is used in the indexes.

On the basis of the internal dimension of coverage of the vocabulary, it is a restricted dictionary, since words listed have been selected only from the kanji-written part of the total lexicon of the Japanese language. The target group of the dictionary is students, teachers and translators but also general public including word founders who would be willing to play word games. As an instrument for reference, it is designed less for those who are reading everyday, non-technical material, than for translators, or anyone who is reading high-level material. Although the list of compounds is not extensive, the exhaustive range of entries virtually guarantees that the users will find the desired character without having to consult another reference. Therefore, the dictionary fulfils the needs of both general types, first, information since it is provided for the users who seek the help of the dictionary to check the meanings or pronunciation

of the words, and, second, operations since it is also provided for those users who perform the tasks of reading, writing or translating.

Finding equivalents in Lithuanian of the Japanese words and making them a standard is important in solidifying the basis and concentrating the otherwise dispersed efforts of Lithuanian scholars. Even a small number of copies printed of a pocket-type dictionary can make a big difference in the studies since it helps foreign culture speak to the public in their native language and thus come closer to their understanding. For the dictionary, however, to become the definitive 'Japanese–Lithuanian' dictionary depends on how it is received by users and on how it compares with other Japanese–Lithuanian dictionaries. Although the *Japanese–Lithuanian Character Dictionary* has originally been compiled as a reference tool, it is also the most comprehensive self-instructional tool available for learning the new kanji and vocabulary in Lithuania, since it is the only Japanese–Lithuanian dictionary currently in print. I hope it will not last long as such, since another team is working now on the compilation of a Japanese–Lithuanian dictionary based on pronunciation.

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