

Response to Donald F. Reindl, review of Simon Krek, ed. *Veliki angleško-slovenski slovar Oxford*. Vol. 1 A-K. Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 2005. 1035 pp., SIT 52,500 [= \$280] (2 vol.) (cloth). ISBN: 86-341-1559-3.

The reviewer of the *Veliki angleško-slovenski slovar* (VASS) *Oxford* is quite positive in the introductory paragraph, admitting that the work is a “rare and noteworthy lexicographic achievement,” but concludes on a rather negative note by claiming that despite being “destined to become an indispensable tool,” the dictionary is, in general, “somewhat disappointing” due to its “unevenness” and “not corresponding to its impressive credentials.” Portions of the review are supported by flawed and surprisingly contradictory arguments, with hints of a negative attitude toward the work as a whole. As a consequence, the editors feel obliged to respond.

The first part of the review, where general conclusions are drawn regarding the work’s scope and value, is based almost exclusively on articles in Slovene periodicals publicizing the launch of the first volume, and on the promotional material provided by the publisher.<sup>1</sup> This seems to be the source of a number of invalid conclusions on the part of the reviewer.

The first of these results from a gross oversimplification of the internal division of work and the listed contributors’ responsibilities. This is all the more unfortunate as “an unmet expectation based on the human resources” is one of the two key premises on which the reviewer founds his critical argument. In reality, nowhere in the preface is it stated that “90 lexicographers and university experts” worked on the project for ten years. Strictly speaking, in the list of contributors only twenty people are credited as lexicographers.<sup>2</sup> Nor does it say in the preface that all of the people credited actually participated full-time (and/or) for the entire duration of the project, which would be a precondition for the kind of extraordinary hypothesis about the potential

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<sup>1</sup> Erroneously referred to by the reviewer as Državna založba Slovenije; the publisher’s official name has been DZS, Založništvo in trgovina, d.d. since before work on the VASS *Oxford* even started.

<sup>2</sup> Apart from the editor-in-chief, two consultants, eleven Slovene editors, one English editor, one pronunciation editor, one coordinator of the terminological section, the latter consisting of a number of specialist subject consultants and special contributors.

number of years and amount of work invested in the project. Indeed, the very idea that specialist subject consultants could have been engaged on a full-time basis over a number of years is preposterous. The reviewer also fails to recognize the many months it took to train the staff to do complex dictionary work competently.<sup>3</sup>

The reviewer's inconsistency is made manifest in his claim that, even though the native speaker's task of detecting spelling mistakes seems to have been well performed, "the complete quality control of some 100 non-native speakers is a task that clearly exceeds the capacity of a single non-linguist." Paradoxically, he problematizes the fact that only one native speaker was used, and, at the same time, downplays the fact that the Grad *Veliki angleško-slovenski slovar*,<sup>4</sup> a work of ca. 72,000 headwords, mentioned by the reviewer for the sake of comparison, credits only three authors for the entire task of compiling, editing *and* controlling every other aspect of the dictionary—not to mention Pleteršnik,<sup>5</sup> obviously a source of inspiration for the reviewer, as *the sole* author of a work of ca. 112,000 headwords. We agree, in principle, that no one person should be expected to tackle such an individual task in the complex process of making a dictionary,<sup>6</sup> but the role of the English editor was seen as somewhat specific. Unfortunately, once again the reviewer's conclusions result from a number of false assumptions about the nature of the native speaker's task in such an undertaking. It was

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<sup>3</sup> Let us merely point out that a recent edition of one of the most widely used high-quality bilingual dictionaries, the *Collins Robert*, lists fifty-seven contributors (Duval and Back 1998, vii)—and this is merely a fourth *revision* of a work that is smaller than our own! This figure, moreover, does not include a single field consultant.

<sup>4</sup> Grad, Škerlj & Vitorovič, *Veliki angleško-slovenski slovar* (Ljubljana: DZS, 2004; first published in 1978 and never revised).

<sup>5</sup> Pleteršnik, Maks, *Slovensko-nemški slovar*. 2 vols. (Ljubljana: Knezoškofijstvo, 1894). Needless to say, even Pleteršnik was, in fact, only one in a small army of those who contributed to 'his' dictionary, the preparations for which had started more than 30 years before it was published in 1894. In the introduction to volume one (A-O) of the *Slovensko-nemški slovar* the reviewer can find a detailed history of the project, in which the editor fairly credits all of its contributors.

<sup>6</sup> After all, this has been our leading editorial policy, which, paradoxically, the reviewer seems to mock rather than acknowledge. It should be added here that the number of contributors is not only related to the quantity of the work, but first and foremost to its quality.

certainly not to check translation equivalence or spelling,<sup>7</sup> nor to make any other kind of linguistic judgment, but simply to verify, from the perspective of an English speaker, that the source language used was natural and idiomatic.<sup>8</sup> It is understandable that for a general dictionary user the absence of mechanical errors, such as spelling mistakes, is often an indicator of the overall quality of the work, but the weight placed on it by the reviewer is perhaps disproportionate compared to all the elements of lexicographic relevance which could have been scrutinized, but were not addressed at all.

Apart from the above, it is important to know that the vast majority of illustrative material in the VASS Oxford has been taken from authentic English and American texts, as obtainable from linguistic corpora and corpus-based materials. The role of the native speaker was, therefore, that of identifying potential errors appearing during the editing process carried out on a limited segment of authentic illustrative material, and that of solving specific problems highlighted by the editors in the process of compilation.

Perhaps an even more curious claim of the reviewer is that the VASS Oxford's 120,000 entries are somehow a sign of "the unremarkable size of the work," "because this is comparable to other standard English-L2 dictionaries." Even if we ignore the strange logic here, and disregard the fact that there are in fact very few bilingual dictionaries of this size available today for any language pair, we must fault this kind of reasoning on two counts: first, mere numbers without any microstructural facts (say, the average number of words per entry, a criterion suggested and used by Ken Kister [1977, 20]) do not necessarily mean much—and can be downright misleading; second, a

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<sup>7</sup> A rather extraordinary line of thinking, namely that *one* native speaker of English could have been drafted (primarily) to check *spelling* on a 120,000-entry dictionary and, even more so, to be somehow responsible for "the complete quality control" of work done on a comprehensive dictionary by an entire team, reveals a lack of the ABCs of lexicography and naive trust in the omnipotent native speaker.

<sup>8</sup> The (VASS) Oxford editorial policy may deviate on this point from a common (but rather clichéd) standpoint that only a linguist is able to do this. In our view any educated native speaker who is capable of reflecting upon the use of his/her language is fully equipped for such a task.

bilingual dictionary totalling 120,000 entries in over 2000 large-sized three-column pages *is remarkable* in terms of size by any standards.

Still on the same subject, the reviewer observes that the VASS Oxford “makes no pretense of being an unabridged dictionary of English— Webster’s 3<sup>rd</sup>, for example, includes 207 additional items within the same span.” It really takes little lexicographic sophistication to realize that a comprehensive bilingual dictionary created today is — must be—miles away from a “national” monolingual dictionary created in the 1940s and 1950s (and published in 1961 and never revised except for the Addenda section) in terms of basic aims, compilation methods, coverage, tradition, target audience, etc. Even the very notion of *unabridged* makes little sense in a bilingual framework.

The second argument the reviewer makes concerns the policy of inclusion/omission of lexical items, or, as he puts it, “a number of shortcomings in the selection of terms.” It needs to be pointed out that it would be unrealistic to expect that any given dictionary could match the expectations of any given user in terms of language excluded or language included—the selection criteria in any dictionary are optimal rather than perfect. Basing a critique on exclusion or inclusion of specific words is very problematic without reference to the overall inclusion policy. It does, of course, make sense to look for serious omissions within the core vocabulary. As the reviewer himself determines, in the VASS Oxford there are no significant gaps in the general lexicon.<sup>9</sup> Let us comment on some of the examples cited in the review which apparently substantiate the claim that “the selection does not appear to be based on frequency or cultural relevance, and therefore gives an impression of chaos”:

- 1) US state abbreviations (included *AK, CA, CT; Calif., Colo., Conn.*; omitted *AL, AR, AZ; Ala., Ariz., Ark.*)—It is true that in this closed set of vocabulary the principle of consistency is violated. According to the relevant sources, all of the above abbreviations should have been included. During the

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<sup>9</sup> To ensure the most comprehensive coverage of the general English lexicon (including the basic technical terminology) together with a high proportion of culturally relevant encyclopedic data, such as abbreviations and proper names, we have consistently and thoroughly examined a number of carefully selected British and American English monolingual dictionaries as well as linguistic corpora.

process of compilation the editorial decision was changed from one of not including any abbreviations in international use to one where US state abbreviations would be an exception to the rule due to their cultural relevance. Unfortunately, for purely technical reasons not all of the necessary changes were made in the letter A. So inconsistency does indeed exist, but should be limited to a very narrow section of the material.

- 2) Chemical elements (included *actinium*, *aluminium*, *americium*; omitted *dysprosium*, *erbium*, *francium*)—It can be argued that this is a group of closed-set lexical items similar to, for example, days of the week, but it is also risky to equate the two sets. Obviously, some chemical elements are more present in general language use than others, thus *The Oxford Hachette French Dictionary* (Corréard and Grundy eds. 1994) with ca. 80,000 entries, lists only the first three elements. The number of hits in the *British National Corpus*<sup>10</sup> (BNC), which shows the item's relative frequency in British English, tends to support the existing selection (*dysprosium* 1, *erbium* 0, *francium* 0; *actinium* 1, *aluminium* 1040, *americium* 3). An Internet search on Google produces similar results, showing a considerably higher frequency only for *erbium* (*dysprosium* 149,000, *erbium* 423,000, *francium* 107,000; *actinium* 170,000, *aluminium* 6,230,000, *americium* 185,000).
- 3) Constellations (included *Aquila*, *Boötes*, *Cassiopeia*; omitted *Antila*, *Apus*, *Argo*)—As above, the argument cannot simply be that of a closed set of vocabulary. A natural selection based, of course, on extra-linguistic factors is present and is reflected by the linguistic corpora. In the BNC, there are hits for two of the included items, namely *Aquila* and *Cassiopeia*, but zero hits for any of the omitted items, namely *Antila*, *Apus*, and *Argo*. Also, in *The Oxford Reference English Dictionary* (Pearsall and Trumble 1995), a desk-size encyclopedic dictionary which was a primary source of proper names for the VASS Oxford, of all the cited

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>.

constellations only *Aquila*, *Boötes*, *Cassiopeia* are listed as entries.

Considering all of the above, the selection of items is anything but random, let alone chaotic. On the contrary, the differences in frequency, even in closed sets, are legitimately reflected in the policy of inclusion. Having said that, it is obvious that relying solely on frequency in the corpora for inclusion/omission purposes does not necessarily guarantee an optimal selection of terms. The reviewer himself points out that “in some cases, however, sheer frequency need not be the sole criterion for inclusion of an item.” On the whole, consulting corpora should only partly affect, and serve the purposes of, the inclusion policy. The VASS Oxford remains largely based on the existing entry list, statistically treated and put forward by the OUP, as explained in the introduction.<sup>11</sup>

In view of the fact that the reviewer emphasises “the judicious use of an Internet search engine such as Google,” it needs to be said that there is still a significant difference between the nature of corpus evidence and the results obtained via “Google linguistics.” The latter are valid and helpful primarily as a means of obtaining a “second opinion” on the original selection, but should on no condition be the main or the only criterion for inclusion. Consequently, the reviewer’s examples based on a Google count are undeserving of serious attention because they are too arbitrary. It simply does not make much sense to try to come up with a handful of items not listed in the VASS Oxford; the reviewer himself finds exactly two (*erbium* and *Erlenmeyer flask*) to constitute “a serious omission.”

Finally, entries such as *Carniola* and *Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes* would, generally speaking, be useful additions, as would undoubtedly be some other omitted items. However, as is clear from the preface, the VASS Oxford is intended for Slovene speakers for

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<sup>11</sup> However, numerous other types of invaluable information can be obtained from corpus analysis. In fact, many of these have been successfully exploited to the benefit of both the English and Slovene sides in the VASS Oxford, but the reviewer never attempts to investigate any of them properly (e.g. meaning/sense distinctions, accuracy/idiomaticity of translations, labeling of register and search for stylistic equivalence, topicality of illustrative material, the overall quality of English and Slovene text).

the purposes of decoding, i.e. to help these users understand spoken and written English, with the additional aim of providing relevant information about, primarily, Anglo-American culture, i.e. the culture of the source language, and historically related cultures. Accordingly, the selection of encyclopedic headwords was determined by the English side.<sup>12</sup> One exception to this rule was granted, namely the inclusion of a broader range of personal and geographical names, where the only criterion was a difference in orthography between the two languages. Hence the inclusion of, one might argue, rather obscure names such as *Kančenjunga* ('Kančenjunga'). As previously explained, the range of geographical proper names included was, of course, based on a pre-existing selection. In this light, one (the reviewer) should not wonder "whether they were merely included to pad the dictionary." Moreover, in a bilingual decoding dictionary, padding is virtually nonexistent—unless nonexistent source-language items are included.

On the subject of the orthography, the dictionary is said to follow "the older BrE (and Oxford) standard of using *-ize* (e.g., *harmonise* > *harmonize*)." In fact, *-ize* forms are (with a handful of exceptions such as *surprise* or *advise*) largely American, as most authoritative sources observe, for instance the *Longman* corpus-based grammar: "The suffix *-ize* is particularly common in academic prose ... This suffix is normally spelled *-ise* in BrE" (Biber et al. 1999, 402).

As to the Slovene side of the dictionary, the reviewer notes shortcomings in the number of translation equivalents—quite astonishingly, supported by a single listed example, namely *fluvial*, amongst nearly 70,000 recorded senses of the first volume. The omission of the translation equivalent 'rečen' should, in our view, be considered an imperfection in the treatment of one particular entry—something no dictionary can be entirely without—rather than a sign of generally poor synonymy. On the contrary, it is clear from even a cursory glance at the

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<sup>12</sup> *Carniola* and *Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes* are items relating to Slovene history and the history of Southern Slavs respectively, and were in this sense not the target object of description. But even if they had been, the decoding orientation of our dictionary could well have made us enter the former but not the latter, a fact the reviewer is apparently unaware of. There is no doubt, however, that both of the items mentioned would and will be included in the planned Slovene-English Oxford dictionary.

entries that the VASS Oxford offers an overwhelming range of synonyms to choose from, which, as a rule, are accompanied by illustrative examples to help select translations for specific contexts.

Similarly, the examples provided of translation slip-ups seem to be dubious. A basic misconception about the purpose of a bilingual dictionary, particularly a corpus-based dictionary, is demonstrated by the examples quoted: the existing '(perutninska) drobovina' vs. the suggested 'užitna perutninska drobovina'. While the latter can at best be defined as 'an explanation', only the former can function as a true translation equivalent. Translation equivalents are not about distinguishing between meanings, but about the accuracy of translations. It is hard to see how the suggested gloss would be more useful than the existing one in, for example, *chicken giblets*. In the decoding processes, in fact, context itself is likely to provide the information that the reviewer suggests should be included in the translation. As shown by the BNC, *giblets* most commonly appears in cooking recipes, so we must assume that it is something edible. On the other hand, the suggested 'rajželjč' for *chitterlings* is problematic as a translation equivalent: it is typically related to a calf rather than a pig, and is narrower in meaning. The reviewer's objection to glossing *kindergarten* as 'otročki vrtec' is based on the same presupposition that a bilingual dictionary should provide explanations of notions rather than their semantic or functional equivalents. That, of course, is the role of monolingual dictionaries and, even more so, of encyclopedias. On the subject of false friends, too, the reviewer finds *gymnasium* glossed as 'gimnazija' objectionable, assuming that it is "an archaic or exceedingly rare sense of the English word." In actual fact, it is not: it is increasingly common in this sense in English too—this may be even a neologistic sense in today's English, particularly in British English, thanks to Britons being more and more involved in the European education systems; witness e.g. sense #2 of *gymnasium* in one of the best English dictionaries of today, the *Collins English Dictionary* (Butterfield ed. 2003): (in various European countries) a secondary school that prepares pupils for university. And what is wrong with *ignorant* being translated also by 'ignorantski'? An *ignorant remark* ('caused by a lack of knowledge and understanding' [Summers ed. 2003]) can certainly be 'ignorantska pripomba', as far as we can say. So perhaps it is not quite so "regrettable that these false friends and translators' traps have been perpetuated for another generation."

As to the reviewer's final argument on certain entries being glossed first as the less frequent senses rather than the more common ones, it can only be said that, once again, decisions regarding the inclusion of senses and their order were made strictly on the basis of the best English sources currently available.

Sidney Landau, in his classic *Dictionaries* (1984, 236), observes that dictionary work requires humility: "...nothing cuts one down to size as quickly and finally as dictionary work. There is so much one doesn't know, and more, so much of great importance that one doesn't know, that one soon gets a proper estimation of one's own place in the universe." Need we say more?

Objective and constructive criticism based on more extensive analysis would be more than welcome. We feel, however, that the negativity of the reviewer's discourse in the review of this "unarguably the best English-Slovene dictionary produced to date," based almost exclusively on the inclusion policy, does not do *Veliki angleško-slovenski slovar Oxford* justice.

Mojca Šorli, Senior Editor  
Dušan Gabrovšek, General Consultant  
Simon Krek, Chief Editor

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