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## DICTIONARY USE IN GREEK EDUCATION: AN ATTEMPT TO TRACK THE FIELD THROUGH THREE EMPIRICAL SURVEYS

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## DICTIONARY USE IN GREEK EDUCATION: AN ATTEMPT TO TRACK THE FIELD THROUGH THREE EMPIRICAL SURVEYS

### Abstract

This paper presents selected findings of three empirical surveys concerning dictionary use in the Greek educational system. Dictionary use was examined by means of a questionnaire administered to 192 primary school pupils, 340 undergraduate university students, and 182 primary school teachers and Greek language teachers in secondary schools. The three surveys provided first-hand data for findings that revealed certain tendencies and offered answers to basic questions in one of the least examined areas in Greek educational research. The findings may also be useful to other researchers internationally.

### Keywords

Dictionary use, language teaching, dictionary training, pedagogical lexicography

### Resumo

Este artigo apresenta alguns resultados de três estudos empíricos – nos quais foram aplicados questionários – sobre o uso de dicionários em escolas e universidades gregas. Os informantes do primeiro estudo foram 192 alunos escolares, do segundo, 340 estudantes universitários, e do terceiro, 182 professores de escolas de Ensino Fundamental ou professores de Grego no Ensino Médio. Os dados das três enquetes revelam certas tendências e fornecem respostas a algumas questões básicas referentes a um dos assuntos menos examinados na pesquisa educacional da Grécia. Os resultados podem ser úteis também para pesquisadores em outros países.

### Palavras-chave

Uso de dicionários; ensino de línguas; treinamento do uso de dicionários; lexicografia pedagógica

## 1. Introduction

Greece is a country with a rather recent lexicographic tradition, where lexicography and metalexicography developed much later and at slower rates than in other European countries for various reasons,<sup>1</sup> although nowadays numerous dictionaries of various kinds are available. Hence, it may seem normal that there is still a lack of theoretical studies and empirical research of dictionary use, especially in educational practice, in contrast with the numerous studies of dictionary users that have been conducted in several other countries, mainly since

the late 1970s (COWIE, 1999, p. 177). Moreover, the basic undergraduate training of primary and secondary school teachers, as well as their further instruction, may be characterized as at least inadequate as regards dictionary use and the teaching of dictionary skills. The state does not seem to make any systematic effort to acquaint the teachers with the dictionary and train them in its use. No school dictionaries are officially prescribed in either primary or secondary schools. However, some academic teachers have made direct or indirect efforts in recent years to convince the state and the educational community about the importance of dictionary use in schools and education in general. Thus, specific teams of authors have been commissioned by the state to compose dictionaries for primary and secondary school – the end-products of this initiative are to be introduced in schools in the coming academic years.

For all of the above reasons and because we regard the dictionary as a basic means of initiation into the process of continuous and autonomous learning (ANASTASSIADIS-SYMEONIDIS, 1997), as a valuable resource (for language learning among other things) (HARTMANN, 2001, p. X) and as a useful tool in language teaching, we undertook to investigate dictionary use in the Greek educational system. We conducted three empirical surveys, two of which may be characterized as case studies (those concerning dictionary use by primary school pupils and by undergraduate university students); the third survey investigates dictionary use from the point of view of primary school teachers and Greek language teachers in secondary schools). It must be pointed out that it is not safe to draw conclusions about the entire pupil, student and teacher population of Greece based on these three questionnaire surveys of the use of dictionaries by Greek primary school pupils, undergraduate university students and primary and secondary school teachers of the Greek language; nevertheless, the data presented below reveal certain attitudes towards dictionaries and illustrate perspectives on one of the least examined issues in Greek educational research. As in every questionnaire survey, we are here addressing indirect evidence, not the process of looking up words, the consulting habits or the teaching process itself. We present what the subjects think (their opinions on dictionary use) and what they say they do (which does not necessarily coincide with what they actually do).

Selected findings from the three above-mentioned studies are presented below.

## 2. Primary school pupils on dictionary use<sup>2</sup>

The first inquiry was carried out during the last ten days of November 2004 and concerns the use of the dictionary by pupils attending the last two classes in five primary schools of Alexandroupolis. The sample group consisted of 192 pupils. In

<sup>2</sup> The findings of this brief investigation of dictionary use by primary school pupils were presented at the 26<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Philosophy, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, entitled "The teaching of mother tongue today: challenges and perspectives". See Chatzidimitrou (2006).

<sup>1</sup> Social 'diglossia', which tormented Greek speakers for decades, is one of the basic ones. See Papanastasiou (2001).

far outstrips the others; the encyclopedic dictionary follows with 14% and the bilingual one with 13.6%.

c) *Categories of information sought.* We predicted that the majority of the pupils would consult the dictionary 'often' or 'very often' in order to determine the meaning of a word, which proved to be the case with 51.6%. A percentage of 48.7% employed the dictionary 'often' or 'very often' to check the spelling of a word and 21.9% to look up synonyms.

d) *Level of difficulty in the use of each dictionary type.* 90.3% of our subjects claimed to have 'little' or 'no difficulty' in using the bilingual dictionary (the bilingual dictionary was the one they used most frequently at home, as presented in topic b). 89.1% had 'little' or 'no difficulty' in using a Greek general dictionary and 86.1% in using an encyclopedic dictionary, which presumably presented the most difficulty.

It is notable that the subjects appeared very confident about their dictionary-using competence,<sup>3</sup> as they claimed to have very little difficulty in dictionary use, even though they most probably were never instructed in dictionary-using skills.

e) *Encouragement by teachers and parents.* Subjects were asked how often their teachers and their parents encouraged them to use the dictionary in general, and the following answers were given: 50% of the sample were encouraged 'often' or 'very often' by their teachers, whereas 33.8% were encouraged 'often' or 'very often' by their parents to do so.

It is quite disappointing that one out of two of the subjects' teachers appeared to be rather indifferent towards the dictionary and its use.

f) *Ownership of an electronic dictionary, frequency of its use and level of difficulty in its use.* 47.1% of our sample declared that they owned an electronic dictionary at home and 52.9% that they did not. 45.4% of the subjects who owned an electronic dictionary apparently used it 'often' or 'very often', while 54.6% used it 'rarely' or 'not at all'. Regarding the level of difficulty in its use, the vast majority (93.2%) of the pupils who had one at home had 'little' or 'no difficulty' when using it, and only 6.8% answered that they had 'much' or 'very much' trouble.

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It might be useful to cite some other findings from the cross-tabulation of the variables:

- The pupils of the 6th grade were encouraged by their teacher to use the dictionary on a more frequent basis than the pupils of the 5th grade.

- Pupils who achieved a high performance at school had parents with a high

<sup>3</sup> About the term 'dictionary-using competence' see Herbst and Stein (1987).

the questionnaire we examined a) whether they owned a Greek general dictionary, an encyclopedic and/or a bilingual one, b) the frequency of the use of each type at home and in school, c) the frequency of dictionary use intended to gain access to semantic or spelling information or information about synonyms, d) the level of difficulty in the use of each dictionary type, e) whether teachers and parents encouraged pupils to use the dictionary, and f) whether the pupils owned an electronic dictionary, the frequency of its use and the level of difficulty in using it.

The five schools were randomly selected and the questionnaires were collected two days after their distribution, with the invaluable help of the schools' principals. The analysis and the elaboration of the questionnaire data were carried out with the use of the statistical programme "Statistical Package for the Social Sciences" (SPSS). We performed a frequency analysis of all the variables and a cross-tabulation between the independent and dependent variables<sup>3</sup> (between dictionary use and gender, the class attended, the pupils' performance and the level of their parents' education).

#### General personal details:

The picture that emerged from the analysis of the general personal details of the subjects is the following: The number of the pupils involved in the research was 192, 103 of whom were male (53.9%) and 88 (46.1%) female. 51.6% attended the 5th grade and 48.4% the 6th grade of primary school. Regarding their school performance, three quarters of our sample (75.1%) had passed their previous academic year with the mark 'excellent'. Finally, the majority of the parents of our subjects were high school graduates, the next largest group being university graduates.

The topics we chose to investigate were the following:

a) *Ownership of dictionaries.* The answers of the subjects indicated that 86.3% owned a bilingual dictionary at home, 83.6% had a Greek general dictionary and 76.4% an encyclopedic one.<sup>4</sup>

b) *Frequency of use of each dictionary type at home and at school.* The following answers were given to the question about the frequency of use of each dictionary type at home: 53.4% answered that they 'often' or 'very often' used the bilingual dictionary, 48.8% the Greek general dictionary and 43.6% the encyclopedic one.

As expected, the figures for the frequency of dictionary use at school are much lower; at school the frequent use of the Greek general dictionary (37.3%) by

<sup>3</sup> The same method of statistical analysis was followed in the other two surveys, too.

<sup>4</sup> We clarified that the term 'encyclopedic dictionary' included the genre of reference work which shares the features of a general dictionary and an encyclopedia - see Hartmann and James (1998, p. 49) - as well as a 'pure' encyclopedia.

level of education, owned a bilingual dictionary at home and used it more often than poorly performing pupils.

- Pupils with a poor school performance encountered more difficulties in the use of the Greek general dictionary and its encyclopedic counterpart, compared to the pupils with higher achievement levels.

- Pupils who appeared to have difficulties in the use of one dictionary type also had difficulties using the other dictionary types, whereas the subjects who often used the dictionary apparently had no difficulties in its use and were urged to use it by their teachers and their parents on a frequent basis.

- Pupils encouraged by their teacher to use the dictionary were also encouraged by their parents to do so; these pupils often used the dictionary, especially the electronic one.

### 3. Undergraduate university students on dictionary use<sup>6</sup>

The second inquiry presented briefly in this paper concerns dictionary use by undergraduate students of the Department of Primary Education in the School of Education at the Democritus University of Thrace. It is a questionnaire survey, whose data were collected in the period of May-June 2006. The research sample comprised 340 students, who were in their second, third, fourth or higher years of study.

#### General personal details:

The ratio of male to female is 18% to 82%; it reflects the fact that female students far outnumber male students in the Departments of Education in Greek universities. 39.3% of our sample were in their second year, 38.4% in the third, and 22.3% were in the fourth or higher year of study. As to their performance so far in their university studies, 8.4% had a 'good' performance, 82.9% a 'very good' performance, and 8.7% an 'excellent' performance. The vast majority of students (95.9%) knew a foreign language, while 54.4% knew two or more foreign languages.

#### Topics investigated:

a) *Ownership of dictionaries.* Owners of a bilingual dictionary amounted to 92%, followed by owners of a Greek general dictionary (87%) and an encyclopedic one (57.1%).

b) *Frequency of use of each dictionary type.* In keeping with pupils' answers, the students of our sample stated that the type of dictionary they used most fre-

quently was the bilingual dictionary – 35.6% used it 'often' or 'very often'. The Greek general dictionary followed with 33.9% and the encyclopedic dictionary came last with 'frequent' or 'very frequent' use (17.5%).

c) *Categories of information sought.* Again in keeping with what pupils of our first inquiry stated, the university students of this sample 'often' used the dictionary to look up a word at a rate of 36.4%. The information categories following are: spelling (27.0%), synonyms/antonyms (17.5%), etymology (16.6%), examples of usage (12.7%).

Apparently, investigation of meaning was the main motive for dictionary use, followed by enquiry into spelling and synonyms, in parallel with the findings of a much larger scale survey in Great Britain of dictionary use at Exeter University (HARTMANN, 1999).

d) *Level of difficulty in the use of each dictionary type.* The percentage of the subjects finding 'no difficulty' in the use of the Greek general dictionary was 89.9%, in the use of the bilingual dictionary 79.4% and 77.6% in the use of the encyclopedic dictionary.

e) The subjects were asked about their (dis)satisfaction with their competence in using a dictionary. 97.1% of them answered that they were satisfied with their relevant competence. This extremely high percentage, which may reflect an exaggerated feeling of self-confidence (HARTMANN, 1999, p. 47), may suggest that the students are unaware of what the mastery of the full range of dictionary-using skills really means; making the best possible use of a specific type of dictionary, which means making full use of the various types of information which the dictionary provides, is a competence not so easily obtained, as it requires repeated and constant practice (HERBST; STEIN, 1987; LANDAU, 2001, p. 26; HERBST; KLOTZ, 2003, p. 287). Clearly, the students' answers contradict educational reality, where the teaching of dictionary skills is hardly a priority. The answers given to this question may also be attributed to one of the drawbacks of the questionnaire's use as a research tool, namely the subjects' possible need to give a positive image of themselves or, at least, to avoid making a bad impression (ALTRICHTER; POSCH, 2007, p. 175).

f) In the question about the persons encouraging them to use the dictionary, the answers 'nobody' and 'their parents' rank first, followed by 'primary school teachers', 'secondary school teachers' and 'university teachers' (in order of appearance).

g) *(Dis)satisfaction with the information provided by the Greek general dictionary.* 87.8% of the students of our sample seemed to be satisfied with the information provided by the general dictionary they used.

This may suggest either that Greek general dictionaries have improved greatly in the last years and fulfil the needs of their users (the students' needs, in this case) or that the students do not expect very much from their dictionaries on account of their personal low dictionary awareness.

<sup>6</sup> These data are derived from my Master thesis in the Democritus University of Thrace.



#### 4. Teachers on dictionary use<sup>7</sup>

The main aim of this research was, first, to investigate the views of primary school teachers and Greek language teachers in secondary schools regarding the measures that have/have not been taken by the state to institute dictionary use and dictionary teaching in education, and, second, to investigate teachers' attitude towards the dictionary and its use. All the teachers in the study were employed in primary or secondary experimental schools, which are under the supervision of the Pedagogical Departments or the Faculties of Philosophy at universities.

In order to achieve these goals, we collected questionnaire data from the beginning of November 2005 to mid-December 2005. Having calculated the exact number of primary school teachers and teachers of Greek language in the secondary schools, we sent 202 questionnaires to be completed and received 182; the response rate of 90.1% is highly satisfactory.

##### General personal details:

The majority of the subjects were female teachers (71.3%), a proportion also found in the conventional schools. 66.5% were primary school teachers and 33.5% secondary school teachers. As expected, the majority of our sample had increased qualifications (further studies -second degree, Master, PhD-) whilst only 28.6% had pursued no further studies at all. They also had some kind of further instruction, usually in the form of seminars, by a large percentage, whereas 29.7% had none.

##### Some of the topics investigated:

a) *Dictionary ownership at home and at school.* Almost all of the teachers had a general dictionary at home and at school. The dictionaries they most commonly had under their possession were the three most widespread in the Greek market (*Great Greek Dictionary* by Tegopoulos/Fytrakis, *Modern Greek Language Dictionary* by Babinotis and *Dictionary of Modern Greek* by the Manolis Triandafyllidis Foundation). It also seems that they more often kept a dictionary at home than at their workplace.

b) *Knowledge of dictionary ownership by their students.* A high percentage, 77.3%, answered that they knew whether their students had a dictionary at home. This may mean that teachers discuss with their students the educational material they have at home.

<sup>7</sup> This section is based on my PhD thesis entitled "The dictionary in didactic praxis and educational planning", which was defended in the Aegean University, Rhodes/Greece, in November 2007. Some of its findings have also been presented in the 5<sup>th</sup> Panhellenic Congress of the Pedagogical Society of Greece (Thessaloniki, 24-26 November 2006). See Chatzidimitrou and Vrisiliakias (2007).

h) *Reasons for dissatisfaction.* Among the subjects who said that they were not satisfied with the information given by their dictionary, the majority attributed their dissatisfaction to the insufficiency of information, followed by the lack of examples of usage, the paucity of entries and the vagueness of explanations.

k) *Teaching of dictionary use at the various levels of the Greek educational system.* When asked if they were taught to use a dictionary, the subjects answered that they were taught to do so 'more than once' in primary school at a proportion of 30.3%, 22.1% in the Greek "Gymnasium" (first three years of secondary school), 16.0% in the Greek "Lykeio" (last three years of secondary school), and 8.9% in the university. These rather low rates indicate that the teachers do not appear to be interested in cultivating their students' ability to use the dictionary appropriately. They underestimate dictionary-using competence; thus, the teaching of dictionary-using skills is apparently regarded as unnecessary and not as a basic component of language teaching. Pupils and students are expected to acquire dictionary-using skills on their own, outside the classroom (HERBST; STEIN, 1987) or are expected to have already acquired them in their previous academic life (as far as students are concerned), even though they were never systematically initiated into dictionary use.

l) *Necessity of dictionary skills teaching at the various levels of the Greek educational system.* 94.0% of the students of our sample argued that it was necessary to teach the use of the dictionary in primary school, 89.3% in the Greek "Gymnasium", 67.7% in the Greek "Lykeio" and 61.3% in the university.

The answers given to this question are rather encouraging, as they indicate the students' consensus in favour of instituting dictionary use and teaching dictionary skills at the various levels of the Greek educational system.

The cross-tabulation of the variables revealed a number of interesting correlations, some of which are stated below:

- Female students had a better performance than men in high school and in university, they used the Greek general dictionary, the encyclopedic dictionary and the bilingual one more often, and had less difficulty in using the Greek general dictionary.

- Students with high university performance more often owned an encyclopedic dictionary, used the bilingual dictionary more frequently, used the general dictionary more often to find examples of usage, and had less difficulty in using the Greek general dictionary and its encyclopedic counterpart than those with low performance.

- Students with knowledge of a foreign language had parents with a high educational level and used the bilingual dictionary more often than students who did not speak foreign languages.

- Secondary school teachers used more than one dictionary in preparation for teaching, unlike primary school teachers.
- Primary school teachers 'often' used the dictionary in the teaching process for spelling purposes, whereas their colleagues from the secondary schools did so mainly for other purposes, particularly for semantic information.
- Teachers who knew one or more foreign languages appeared to be more familiar with dictionary use.

## 5. Conclusions

As mentioned above, despite the fact that the findings of the three empirical surveys presented briefly in this paper do not apply generally to the entire educational community of Greece, they reveal certain tendencies and provide some answers to fundamental questions concerning dictionary use by primary school pupils, undergraduate university students of Primary Education and teachers in the classroom. The surveys attempt to explore empirically certain aspects of the identity of the dictionary user, the so-called '*the familiar stranger*', '*der bekannte Unbekannte*' (HARTMANN, 2001, p. 80; WIEGAND, 1977, p. 59, 62).

Both the group of pupils and that of the university students own and use the bilingual dictionary more frequently, followed by the Greek general dictionary and the encyclopedic dictionary. The pupils as well as the students mainly seek semantic information, followed by information on spelling and synonyms, and have most trouble using the encyclopedic dictionary. Interestingly enough, the pupils seem to have less difficulty in employing the electronic dictionary, which approximately one out of two of them owns (a percentage rather smaller than that of the other dictionary types).

It is essential that dictionary awareness be raised in all levels of education, especially since the teachers appear to regard the dictionary as a highly significant reference book and value its contribution to the process of language teaching. According to the pupils' and the students' answers, the frequency of the dictionary skills teaching at school is quite low; nevertheless, the students regard it as necessary, especially at the lower levels of education (primary and secondary school), but also university. However, they evaluate themselves very positively as to their dictionary-using mastery. In order to raise dictionary awareness, the universities and the state should provide to future teachers explicit and systematic instruction in dictionary reference skills and in dictionary training, by means of introductory and further instruction courses. The need to emphasize the teaching of dictionary-using skills to teachers is all the more urgent because teachers do not seem to pay much attention to the dictionary's preface (which usually provides valuable information about the dictionary's use) and only about half of them use more than one dictionary during their preparation for the teaching - the other half only use one dictionary or none at all. Furthermore, education officials ought to be up-to-date and to inform teachers about dictionaries in use.

c) *The importance of the dictionary as a reference book and as a book for answering language questions.* The vast majority of the teachers believed that the dictionary was 'very important' both as a reference book (86.3%) and as a book for answering language questions (87.8%). These answers indicate the tendency of the general public to turn to the dictionaries whenever there is some doubt about linguistic matters.

d) *Dictionary contribution to the vocabulary enrichment of its users and to language teaching in general.* 76.4% and 70.2%, respectively, responded that the dictionary contributes to a 'large extent' to the vocabulary enrichment of its users and to the language teaching in general.

e) *The use of the various dictionary types in the process of the school teaching.* 76.2% of the teachers of our sample answered that they used the printed general dictionary in the teaching procedure 'often', 52.6% used the encyclopedic dictionary 'often', 8.3% the electronic general dictionary, and 10.6% the electronic encyclopedic dictionary.

In addition, 38.2% of our sample used the spelling dictionary more frequently, 36.8% the defining dictionary, 20.4% the etymological dictionary, and 4.6% the dictionary of synonyms.

f) *Level of consultation of the dictionary's preface before its use in the teaching procedure.* 15.0% of the subjects declared that they did not read the preface of the dictionary 'at all' before using it, 51.1% read it 'to a small extent', and approximately a third of them (33.9%) 'to a large extent'.

g) *Reasons for dictionary use during the teaching procedure.* 83.8% of the subjects of our sample answered that they used the dictionary 'often' for spelling matters, 79.3% used it to enrich the students' vocabulary, 74.4% in order to improve the students' language usage, 72.2% for text comprehension, 68.7% to enforce the students' linguistic competence, 68.1% to increase students' motivation, 57.8% for text composition, 53.3% to familiarize students with the alphabetical word classification, 35.7% in order to develop students' critical thinking, and 28.0% in order to convey to students information on the history of their language.

h) *Resources of information about the various dictionary types.* 34.5% noted that they were informed about the various dictionaries by the newspapers, 33.8% by the bookstores, 15.2% by scholarly journals, 6.9% by their colleagues, 6.2% by pricelists of publishing houses, 0.7% by school advisors, 0.7% by another source, and 2.1% had not been informed at all.

k) *Methods of students' work with the dictionary.* 39.5% of the teachers answered that they assigned optional dictionary work to their students, 62.2% assigned obligatory exercises, 66.3% individual exercises, while 43.5% assigned group exercises.

Some of the findings from the cross-tabulation of the variables are the following:

eral, which they do not seem to do at all at the moment.

Finally, concerning the electronic dictionary, it would be meaningful to improve its range and use in the classroom. Teachers seem to employ it rarely compared to the other dictionary types, whereas pupils do not seem to have difficulties in using it. Consequently, it could be exploited to a larger extent in order to more generally train pupils in information retrieval strategies. The role of the state is, indeed, decisive; hence the material and technical infrastructure of the school units needs to be radically improved.

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