

## Supremacy of Online Dictionaries: A Case of Persian to English Translation

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With the bloom of technological advances, various fields of studies attempted to seize the day and try to make the most out of its repercussions to their own advantage. Language studies in general and translation in particular were not an exception, though. This empirical study aims to investigate possible potentials of online dictionaries in translation of Persian articles into English. In order to construct a picture, this study investigates the issue both quantitatively and qualitatively in two phases. In the opening phase of the project a questionnaire was given to 230 Iranian translators in seven Iranian state universities to investigate the type of dictionaries they use while translating Persian articles into English. In the main phase of the study, four groups of translators with different types of dictionaries, hardcover, computer software, mobile, and online dictionaries were selected and given a task of translating three Persian article abstracts, and their translations were assessed in terms of the accuracy of the words and expressions of the source text and the speed of the job. Results indicated that translators using online dictionaries rendered the texts more accurately and much faster than the other two groups. Translators using computer software occupied the second rank, hardcover dictionary users were the third, and mobile dictionary users, bringing up the rear, were the last group to finish the job. This study shows how online dictionaries can provide help that satisfies the need of translators when translating Persian articles into English.

*Keywords:* dictionary, online dictionary, translation, speed, accuracy

### Introduction

Since the emergence of Translation Studies as an independent field of study, translation aids also gained special momentum in the scholarly circles of translation. Among all types of translation tools, dictionaries were always prominent and very common to translators. Dictionary types vary from hardcover versions to computer software, online dictionaries, etc.. Although dictionaries have proved themselves quite practical in language teaching, few works have been done in this area and the use of dictionaries has drawn relatively little attention in the field of L2 acquisition (Scholfield, 1997). This problem is much more salient in the field of translation. The studies are not only few in number but also thematically limited. A small body investigated learners' general patterns of dictionary use through a survey (Baxter, 1980; Bejoint, 1981; Tomaszczyk, 1979) which is,

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somewhat, rear in the field of translation. In recent years, more efforts have been made to shed light on the use of dictionaries in language learning and translation. Pastor and Alcina (2010) diverted attentions into the application of electronic dictionaries, mainly for the purpose of translation. They elaborated techniques through which translators could search efficiently in the electronic dictionaries. L'Homme (2010), specifically, highlighted the role of specialized dictionaries for language learners and suggested strategies to designing terminological dictionaries. Nielsen (2010) focused on the role of dictionaries on translation abilities of language learners. It was not until recently that thanks to the extensive developments in internet industry, online dictionaries came up the stage. These dictionaries soon became available to many language learners in almost all languages. Although many experts have attempted to shed lights to the significance of dictionaries on learners' reading comprehension, vocabulary learning, their search techniques and the like, it is somewhat disappointing that not much has been done to analyze the effects of online dictionaries on the process of language learning. The application of online dictionaries in translation seems to be much more common and more complicated than that of vocabulary learning, yet not much research has been carried out to show the extent of which this particular type of dictionaries can provide help and facilitation. This study tries to elaborate more on the capacity and applicability of online dictionaries, and examines their advantages in comparison with other types of dictionaries in terms of translation works.

### **Methodology**

In the first phase of the project, 230 Iranian translators from seven Iranian state universities with different levels of experience were given a questionnaire to tell the type of dictionaries they use while translating Persian articles into English. This phase was conducted to give a general view over the use of dictionaries, specifically online dictionaries, among Iranian translators. In the second (main) phase of the study, 20 translators have been chosen to render three Persian article abstracts as fast and as accurate as possible. They were divided into four groups: In the first group, there were five translators who used hardcover dictionaries while doing translation work. The second group consisted of five translators who used computer software dictionaries. The third group consisted of five translators who used mobile dictionaries while translating. And the last group consisted of five translators who used online dictionaries while translating. All of these translators are B.A. graduates of Translation Studies, and they are also M.A. students of Translation Studies with three to five years of professional experience who are cooperating at least with one of the translation agencies of Iran. To identify translators' language proficiency level, Oxford Placement Test was administered among the participants. The results indicated homogeneity in the proficiency level of the translators.

### **Research Questions**

- (1) What type of dictionaries do Iranian translators use while translating Persian articles into English?
- (2) What groups of dictionary can users translate faster and more accurate?
- (3) Is there any advantage in using online dictionaries in comparison with other types of dictionaries?

The second or main phase of the study was carried out in three stages: a pilot study, a translation task, and an interview with the translators.

### Pilot Study

Three experienced translators other than the main participants were asked to translate the text. The aim was to detect the challenging elements in the text. Results of the pilot study showed that some words, expressions, and concepts were challenging for the translators. These challenging points are then the focus of the translation evaluation.

### Translation Work

In the main phase of the study, four groups of translators—each using a particular type of dictionary—were given a task of translation. The texts to be translated were three paragraphs from the introduction section of three Persian articles that were randomly selected from 15 Persian papers waiting to be translated in a translation agency in Isfahan, Iran. They were asked to translate the below texts as fast as possible. They were allowed to use and bring as many dictionaries as they deem necessary, yet they should have been in one of the aforementioned categories of hardcover, computer software, mobile, or online dictionaries.

### Interview

The final stage of the main phase of the study was an interview with the translators to see to what extent dictionaries were helpful to them.

### Results of the Survey (The First Phase of the Study)

In the first phase of the project, our survey that was conducted with the cooperation of 230 Iranian translators indicated that 132 translators (57.3%) used hardcover dictionaries, 63 translators (27.3%) computer software dictionaries, 25 translators (10.8%) mentioned mobile dictionaries, and 10 translators (4.3%) chose online dictionaries (see Figure 1).

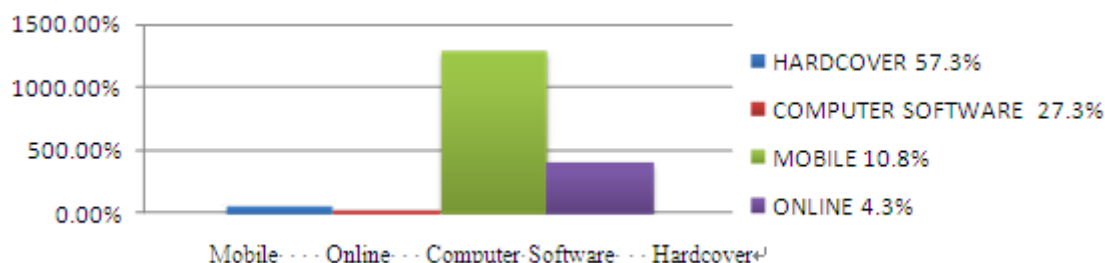


Figure 1. Types of dictionaries Iranian translators use while translating informative texts.

Interestingly, this survey showed that there is a positive relation between the use of hardcover dictionaries and the experience of the translators. Results showed that 119 translators out of 132 (about 90%) who used hardcover dictionaries had more than 10 years' experience and 13 translators (about 10%) had the experience between five to 10 years. On the other hand, for the case of computer software dictionaries, we realized that only 17 translators had the experience of more than 10 years, 21 of them had some experience between five to 10 years, and 25 translators had less than five years' experience. Experience of translators can be significant if we notice that none of the translators who used mobile dictionaries for their translation works had more than 10 years' experience. Eighteen of them had one to five years' experience and seven translators had five to 10 years' experience. Strikingly, results of the survey showed that all online dictionary users had one to five years of professional experience (see Table 1).

Table 1

*The Relationship Between the Use of Different Types of Dictionaries and the Experience of Translators*

Type of dictionary	Number and percentage of translators	Experience
Hardcover dictionary	119/132 (about 90%)	More than 10 years
	13/132 (about 10%)	Between 5-10 years
Computer software dictionary	25/63 (about 39%)	1-5 years
	21/63 (about 33%)	5-10 years
	17/63 (about 26%)	More than 10 years
Mobile dictionary	18/25 (about 72%)	1-5 years
	7/25 (about 28%)	5-10 years
Online dictionary	10 (100%)	1-5 years

**Discussion of the Survey (The First Phase of the Study)**

This survey tried to show what types of dictionaries Iranian translators mostly use while translating texts, specifically when translating Persian articles into English. Results portrayed positive relationship between the experience of the translators and the types of dictionaries they use, indicating that the more experienced the translators the more tendency they have towards the more established types of dictionaries. It also demonstrated that less experienced translators, which is safe to assume that they are younger generations of translators, have inclinations toward mobile or online dictionaries for their translation works.

**Introduction to the Main Phase of the Study**

In the main phase of the study, there were four five-member groups each using a particular type of dictionary. The first group used hardcover dictionaries; members of the second group used computer software dictionaries; the third group consisted of five translators with mobile dictionaries; and the last group were five translators who consulted online dictionaries for their translations. Each group was tested separately. They were given the text and were asked to translate it as fast and as accurate as possible. There was no time limit and they were allowed to bring and use as many dictionaries as they need. Translations were analyzed in two aspects: first, speed of the translation process; and second, meaning accuracy of the expressions and concepts.

**Results (The Second Phase of the Study)**

As mentioned above, each group was tested separately. In order to provide a natural environment for translators similar to what they had when translating in real life, the researchers decided to go to translators' offices for the case of hardcover dictionary users. This would give them the opportunity to have all their dictionaries without bothering to take them somewhere else. However, since the problem of transferring and moving dictionaries was not problematic for the other three groups, they were tested separately in a classroom environment with their laptop computers and mobile phones at their disposal. As soon as each translator of each group finished their translation task, their finishing time was checked by a stop watch.

**Speed of the Translation Work**

Results indicated that the average finishing time of the first group, hardcover dictionary users, was 38:13. The average finishing time of the second group, computer software users, was 29:00. The average finishing time

of the third group, mobile dictionary users, was 33:21. And the average finishing time of the fourth group, online dictionary users, was 27:21 (see Table 2).

Table 2

*The Average Finishing Time of Each Group*

Group 1 (Hardcover dictionary users)	Average time
T1 = 34:34	
T2 = 36:12	
T3 = 37:18	38:13
T4 = 38:16	
T5 = 39:53	
Group 2 (Computer dictionary users)	
T1 = 24:40	
T2 = 24:57	
T3 = 25:39	29:00
T4 = 27:36	
T5 = 28:36	
Group 3 (Mobile dictionary users)	
T1 = 29:34	
T2 = 31:19	
T3 = 32:09	33:21
T4 = 34:06	
T5 = 34:13	
Group 4 (Online dictionary users)	
T1 = 23:25	
T2 = 24:57	
T3 = 25:23	27:21
T4 = 26:32	
T5 = 27:04	

### Accuracy of Translation

Evaluation of the accuracy of the expressions and concepts of the text was done basically on the basis of error-free rendition of the target expressions and concepts. Errors in this study were defined as those mistranslations which seriously impair the transference of meaning. An important point that needs to be mentioned is that other translation quality criteria such as naturalness or the like were not the focus of analysis in the translation assessment and analysis of the present study. The conveyance of the meaning of the specific pre-determined expressions and concepts was the yardstick in the evaluation.

To ensure the reliability of the evaluation of the translations, two raters who were professional translators, cooperatively, analyzed the translation according to the pre-defined criterion.

Results exhibited that the average number of errors committed by the members of the first group, hardcover users, was six. The average number of errors committed by the members of the second group, computer software users, was, however, 6.4. The average number of errors committed by the members of the third group, mobile

users, was 6.8. And the average number of errors committed by the members of the fourth group, online users, was 4.4. Interestingly, all errors committed were, as expected, among the challenging elements once detected in the first stage of the study (see Table 3).

Table 3

*The Average Number of Errors Committed by Each Group*

Group 1 (Hardcover dictionary users)	Average number of errors
T1 = 5 errors	6
T2 = 5 errors	
T3 = 6 errors	
T4 = 6 errors	
T5 = 8 errors	
Group 2 (Computer dictionary users)	
T1 = 5 errors	6.4
T2 = 6 errors	
T3 = 6 errors	
T4 = 7 errors	
T5 = 8 errors	
Group 3 (Mobile dictionary users)	
T1 = 6 errors	6.8
T2 = 6 errors	
T3 = 7 errors	
T4 = 7 errors	
T5 = 8 errors	
Group 4 (Online dictionary users)	
T1 = 3 errors	4.4
T2 = 3 errors	
T3 = 4 errors	
T4 = 6 errors	
T5 = 6 errors	

### Interview

After they had finished the translation task, the participants were asked a few questions. The purpose was to know more about the application of dictionaries by the translators. Questions were as follows: Question 1: How long have you been using this particular type of dictionary?; Question 2: How many of the underlined items did you know without getting help from your dictionaries?; Question 3: Has it ever occurred to you that you do not want to look up a word or expression, and make a guess, because of difficulties of searching them?; and Question 4: How many dictionaries were at your disposal while translating the text?.

Analysis of Q 1: Participants' responses showed that translators of Group 1 and Group 2 had averagely about four years' experience of working with their particular types of dictionaries. And members of Group 3 and Group 4 had averagely about three years' experience. These amounts of experience show that they were not novice in their work with those types of dictionaries.

Analysis of Q 2: Responses showed that two of the underlined words (except for the proper nouns) were known to 18 translators without consulting their dictionaries. Answers showed that a good number of words and expressions were not familiar to the participants. Hence, they needed to use their dictionaries.

Analysis of Q 3: In Group 1 (4 of 5) answered YES to this question. In Group 2 (2 of 5) answered YES. And in Group 3 (3 of 5) answered YES to this question. Finally in Group 4 all the translators answered NO to the third question. Responses show that hardcover dictionary users had high tendency towards trying to guess the meanings of words or expressions or even leaving them aside rather than troubling themselves to checking them all. On the other hand, online dictionary users seemed to be quite comfortable with their own dictionaries.

Analysis of Q 4: Responses to this question were as follows. In Group 1, the average number of dictionaries was about two (Minimum No. 2/Maximum No. 5). In Group 2, the average number of dictionaries was about three (Minimum No. 2/Maximum No. 7). In Group 3, the average number of dictionaries was about three (Minimum No. 3/Maximum No. 6). In Group 4, the average number of dictionaries was about three (Minimum No. 3/Maximum No. 5). Answers to this question showed that the number of dictionaries translators of each group had used were close to each other.

### **Discussion of the Main Phase of the Study**

Analysis of the data indicated that users of online dictionaries had better performance both in terms of the speed of translation process and the accuracy of concepts and expressions. This might be as a result of the special capabilities of state of the art online dictionaries in translation of technical terms, proper nouns, compound words, etc., in one hand and the ease of use of these dictionaries on the other hand. In contrast, performance of other groups regarding the slower performance and most importantly the less accurate translations may point the finger at the deficiencies of dictionaries and the tiring process of word finding. This was consistent to Kobayashi's (2005) study that demonstrated new types of reference materials like electronic dictionaries can enhance learning and language performance. It is worth mentioning that Hesabi and Jelveh (2012) conducted a similar study and examined the effects of different dictionaries in translation of journalistic texts. Their findings showed that mobile dictionary users were the fastest and the most accurate translators in translation of English journalistic texts into Persian.

### **Conclusions**

Our survey that was conducted in Iranian state universities showed that 57.3% of Iranian translators used hardcover dictionaries while translating Persian articles, 27.3% of translators used computer software dictionaries, 10.8% used mobile dictionaries, and the remaining 4.3% used other types of dictionaries including online for their translation works. The survey results showed that there is a positive relationship between the experience of translators and the types of dictionaries they use. The more experienced the translators, the more tendency they have towards the hardcover types of dictionaries, and younger generations of translators have inclinations toward computer software, mobile dictionaries, or online dictionaries for their translation works. This research showed that in a comparison among four groups of translators (hardcover dictionary users, computer software users, mobile dictionary users, and online dictionary users), online dictionary users were the fastest group to finish their translation job, a three-paragraph Persian text that was to be translated into English,

and hardcover dictionary users were the last group to finish the job with significant margin. In terms of accuracy, too, findings showed that mobile users committed more errors than the other three dictionary types but online dictionary users were the group who made the least number of errors than the other three groups. The interview phase of this research also showed that all translators had enough experience in the use of their dictionary types and most of the words and expressions were not known by the translators, hence they were in severe need in using their dictionaries. Interview feedbacks showed that hardcover dictionary users were highly prone to search-process exhaustion which usually leads to leaving the vocabulary search or merely guessing them. Conversely, online dictionary users made no complaint about the hardships of searching vocabulary in their dictionaries. Quantitatively speaking, translators' responses showed that the number of dictionaries translators of each group had at their disposal was close to each other.

This study showed that online dictionaries, contrary to the expectations, have potentials to be highly practical for the translation of Persian texts where the focus is on the accuracy of meanings. This study also showed that online dictionaries are important in terms of the swiftness of translation process. This factor is highly valuable for translation agencies that are usually in challenging needs for servicing their clients with correct and fast translations.

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