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

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

Keywords Online Q&A communities · Social media · Dictionary user needs · Research methods

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1 Introduction

Understanding the dictionary user involves finding answers to several important questions: the types of dictionary information sought by users, the ways users interact with dictionaries or dictionary information, and the characteristics of dictionary users in terms of their habits and past experiences, their preferences, attitudes and expectations. However, dictionary use is usually a “private” practice (Nesi and Haill 2002, p. 277) and the dictionary is rather a marginal topic in language classroom discourse, so to look closely at how dictionary users actually use their dictionaries, a variety of data elicitation instruments have been employed, the most popular being questionnaire surveys, interviews, observations, protocols, tests and experiments (Welker 2010).

Since the seminal studies conducted by Quirk (1973) and Tomaszczyk (1979), the questionnaire survey has proved to be a very effective tool in dictionary user research, highly amenable to the investigation of general behaviours and attitudes. Questionnaires are also perhaps the sole possible means of eliciting information about the long-term and historical aspects of dictionary use (Lew 2002), but studies adopting more directly observational or experimental approaches have revealed interesting patterns of behaviour which cannot be captured by the questionnaire survey method (Harvey and Yuill 1997; Nesi and Meara 1994; Neubach and Cohen 1988; Tono 2001; Wingate 2004). Written protocols (Harvey and Yuill 1997) and log-file monitoring (Laufer and Hill 2001) can identify which dictionary information components users choose when they engage in particular linguistic tasks, and think-aloud data (Neubach and Cohen 1988; Wingate 2004) can discover pertinent deficiency patterns when users try to locate target information or interpret a dictionary entry. Experimental studies and direct observations (Nesi and Meara 1994; Tono 2001) can also reveal the strategies dictionary users deploy. Findings accumulated so far have enabled us to identify various aspects of the relationship dictionary users have with their dictionaries, with practical implications for both the design and the use of dictionaries today.

Needless to say, each of these different data collection instruments has its own strengths and weaknesses. They all use structured elicitation techniques to target specific user groups within set time periods, with the intention of eliciting information about normal, authentic dictionary use. In so doing, however, they remove dictionary look up from its normal context (McDonough 1999), and in many cases depend rather too much on the user’s ability to explain their own consultation behaviour (Nesi 2013). Moreover, the data eliciting prompts used in these approaches are provided by the researchers themselves, and thus may fail to capture issues beyond the research context and the researchers’ own imaginative scope. To overcome this limitation, structured elicitation methods are sometimes supplemented by open-ended questions. For example, a recent survey conducted by Bae (2011) included an invitation to participants to formulate their own questions about dictionary use, instead of simply responding to questions devised by the researcher. Open-ended survey questions are intended as a way of representing dictionary users’ own perspectives, but are not perhaps the best means to achieve

this aim; survey participants are often happier to tick boxes than to express their own ideas in depth, as Bae (2011) discovered.

Over the past 10 years or so the rapid rise of social media communications has begun to provide an alternative means of investigation. Online general-purpose Q&A services such as *Yahoo! Answers* are particularly interesting because they hold large amounts of contemporary, user-initiated questions on matters of concern to the general public. Questions posted to these communities are anonymous, and people can make any kind of query, however trivial it may be, without the fear of losing face. Since participation begins only when an asker perceives a need for specific knowledge, dictionary knowledge needs reflected in the postings are more likely to arise from normal, authentic contexts of dictionary use. Moreover, such questions are not associated with any particular institution or dictionary developer, and generally seek answers unbiased by marketing considerations. Dictionary issues raised on Q&A sites may thus have the potential to reveal a fresh picture of users' dictionary knowledge needs.

2 Background to this study

Social media communications view knowledge as a shared community asset, drawing on assumptions about the wisdom of crowds (Surowiecki 2004) and the availability of volunteer contributions (Wasko and Faraj 2000). They encompass a wide variety of information sharing practices, including multimedia sharing (e.g. *Youtube*), social networking (e.g. *Facebook*), social bookmarking (e.g. *StumbleUpon*), collaborative knowledge construction (e.g. *Wikipedia*) and knowledge exchange (e.g. *Yahoo! Answers*). Q&A sites such as *Yahoo! Answers* allow users to interact in real time, but archive every question and its answers on an on-going basis to form a fully-retrievable knowledge-base. They have two distinct advantages over services such as *Wikipedia* or specialised online newsgroups (see for example Noguchi 2006): participants need little in the way of technical expertise or computer skills, and there are no restrictions on question topics. Q&A sites are also distinct from online information-providing services such as FAQ sites or web archives, in that questions and answers are the sole forms of interaction, and information is never unsolicited or directed to the public at large.

All these attributes make online Q&A communities unique information sources. The authority and the quality of the information these sites provide may be open to question (Fichman 2011), but their ease of access, their interactivity, their non-technical approach and their capacity to deal with focused, local information have resulted in their rapid and continuing growth, and online knowledge-sharing is becoming an important research topic in information-intensive disciplines such as the computer sciences, library and information sciences, and business and knowledge management studies. In these fields attempts have been made to obtain better understanding of the patterns of interaction, the content characteristics, and the factors which sustain or hinder participation. There is, for example, considerable research interest in what motivates participants in web Q&A forums to contribute their knowledge and expertise (Wasko and Faraj 2000; Jin et al. 2013; Nam et al.

2009). Wasco and Faraj (2000) found that participants in specialised online newsgroups are more motivated by intrinsic values such as moral obligation, satisfaction, and self-efficacy than by extrinsic rewards such as reputation or the usefulness of the information they receive. In Nam et al. (2009) study of the Korean Q&A forum *Knowledge-iN* the most active participants were found to be motivated by business interests (i.e. “promoting a user’s business through answers”) (Nam et al. 2009, p. 783), but many users were also motivated by altruism, as in Wasco and Faraj’s study (2000). Researchers in the computer sciences have examined interaction in Q&A forums with a view to improving service quality, finding that users typically concentrate on just a few *Yahoo! Answers* categories (Gyöngyi et al. 2008), that multiple answers are more useful than a single ‘best answer’ (Liu et al. 2008) and that user rankings are not always an objective indication of an answer’s accuracy and quality (Bian et al. 2008).

Individuals generally ask questions to fill knowledge gaps, monitor their own knowledge, or seek confirmation from others. Questions posted to Q&A sites seem to largely include these cognitive motives. Q&A site questions also commonly reflect users’ social and emotional needs, however; participants may request advice on personal matters, or seek emotional support. Rodrigues and Milic-Frayling (2009) identified the following query types from an analysis of questions posted to two community Q&A sites: (1) factual information, (2) general advice, (3) personal advice, (4) general opinion, (5) personal opinion, (6) chatting (e.g. “I am eating a slice of a home-made pie. Anyone want some?”), (7) entertainment (e.g. “Besides ‘War’ and ‘Bush’—is just getting out of hand”). Nam et al. (2009) further divided ‘general advice’ into ‘procedural’ (i.e. “How do you build a computer?”) and ‘task-oriented’ (“Can you write a program in C to do X?”) query types. Kim et al. (2012) collected *Yahoo! Answers* postings about H1N1 (i.e. swine flu) during the 2009 H1N1 outbreak, and compared them to the swine flu coverage in official FAQ postings. Whilst the most frequently asked question topics were related to medical issues (i.e. disease, medicine, symptoms, shots, evidence), nonmedical issues containing keywords such as *doubt*, *child*, *feel*, *North American*, and *emotion* also appeared fairly frequently. The factual information sought from these sites tended to involve very specific, numerical concepts and would have been hard to obtain from a conventional database (e.g. “Can’t figure out how much Thimerosal is contained in a child’s dosage of flu vaccine from the CDC website?”) (Kim et al. 2012, p. 213). These findings suggest that interactions in online Q&A communities meet needs neglected by more conventional information providers, dealing not only in information but also in emotional support, and catering for the general public’s local needs in a particularly timely manner.

The present study was motivated by the assumption that dictionary-related questions posted on general-purpose Q&A sites can provide new knowledge about public information needs, within authentic contexts of dictionary use. For the content analysis of dictionary questions we chose two popular and highly active online Q&A communities: *Knowledge-iN* at naver.com (South Korea) and *Yahoo! Answers* (UK and Ireland). *Knowledge-iN* (<http://kin.naver.com/index.nhn>) was launched in 2002 by the South Korean portal service, NHN Corporation. It has accumulated 200 million DBs and has an average of 60,000 questions every day

(NHN Overview 2011). The site has 14 broad categories and over 3,500 subcategories; the three largest top categories being ‘Computer/Telecommunication’, ‘Entertainment & Arts’ and ‘Education’ (Nam et al. 2009). *Yahoo! Answers* was initially launched in 2005 in the USA, and its current archives contain billions of questions and answers. The site is divided into many regions including the UK and Ireland, the sector chosen for this study.

The following research questions guided the study:

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

In considering the second research question, it needs to be first noted that our main aim does not lie in carrying out a direct comparative analysis of question topics in two quasi-equivalent dictionary user groups, but to overview the characteristics of dictionary-related knowledge needs in two distinct discourse communities (i.e. the South Korean site and the UK/Irish site). Also, when we say ‘discourse communities’, rather than two regionally or culturally different communities, we intend to emphasise our understanding that it is very difficult to identify the representativeness of questioners solely based on the provenance of the online sites in question. Since online communication is less restricted by regional boundaries, we cannot simply assume that questioners at, for example, *Yahoo! UK/Irish* are British or Irish citizens. With this limitation in mind, our assumption is that the term discourse community may best describe these two cohorts in this specific online domain.

3 Data collection and analysis

The sites were keyword-searched using “sah-jeon” (for *Knowledge-iN*) and “dictionary” (for *Yahoo! Answers*). A time range of 2 years (2011–2013) was selected. As the main aim of this study was to identify the knowledge needs of the dictionary-using public, only questions were gathered for analysis, without any accompanying answers. A content analysis based on the structural coding method (Saldaña 2009) was adopted to extract major categories and themes from the question archives. Structural coding applies “a content-based or conceptual phrase representing a topic of enquiry to a segment of data to code and categorise the data” (Saldaña 2009, p. 66). This method is considered to be suitable when dealing with semi-structured data sets involving multiple participants. Since the content to be analysed belonged to the same discourse type (i.e. questioning), this served as the broadest structural framework. For the analysis of question content, the specification of dictionary reference skills developed by Nesi (1999) was used as a basis and was subsequently modified to accommodate emergent topics and themes.

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

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

Initially 528 ‘dictionary’ questions were extracted. Since the Korean characters, sah-jeon, have several different meanings (denoting beforehand, encyclopaedia, etc. as well as dictionary), the questions were manually filtered to exclude those which did not refer to linguistic reference materials. The list was narrowed further by eliminating duplicate or irrelevant questions, to arrive at 468 queries. Each page view of the questions was saved as a PDF file using NCapture; then the screen-captured data were processed using NVivo (v. 10).

3.2 Collection and analysis of dictionary-related questions at *Yahoo! Answers* UK

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

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

Subcategory	Questions	All Q&A
Financial aid	0	1
Higher education	12	25
Home schooling	2	3
Homework help	21	94
Preschool	0	2
Primary & secondary education	10	43
Quotations	5	19
Special education	3	11
Standards & testing	8	15
Studying abroad	1	8
Teaching	8	26
Trivia	4	16
Words & wordplay	265	740
Other	10	45
Total	349	1,048

Although these categories were interpreted very loosely by questioners, and in some cases were entirely disregarded, the overwhelming emphasis on ‘Words and Wordplay’ is telling, and seems to corroborate the London student survey finding that 57 % of dictionary use in parental homes is in relation to word games (Quirk 1973) (a finding that ‘can err only in being too low’ according to Crystal (1986)).

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

4 Findings

4.1 Dictionary questions at *Knowledge-iN*

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

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

4.2 Dictionary questions in *Yahoo! Answers*

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

- Information about word meanings (53 %)
- Information about correct usage (10 %)
- Word origins (8 %)
- Dictionary evaluation (7 %)
- Choosing dictionaries (7 %)
- How to use dictionaries to improve language knowledge/skills (6 %)
- Understanding principles of dictionary-making (3 %)
- Interpreting dictionary information (2 %)
- Others (4 %)

4.3 A comparison of questions to *Knowledge-iN* and *Yahoo! Answers*

Both *Knowledge-iN* and *Yahoo! Answers* seemed to serve as a means of sharing dictionary-using habits and seeking validation:

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

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

There were, however, some major differences between the *Knowledge-iN* and *Yahoo!* question categories. In the *Knowledge-iN* archive ‘Choosing dictionaries’ took up the greatest number of coding frequencies (59 %) whereas in the *Yahoo!* archive ‘Information about word meanings’ was most often sought (53 %). The top three *Yahoo!* question categories, ‘Information about word meanings’, ‘Information about correct usage’ and ‘word origins’, were not listed amongst the *Knowledge-iN* question categories at all. There are two possible reasons for these differences. Requests to *Knowledge-iN* for direct translations of definitions or L1 equivalents of English words were concerned with word meaning and word usage, but were consigned to the ‘Others’ category; 18 of the questions to *Knowledge-iN* were of this type, making up approximately 3 % of the total. Perhaps more significantly, users of *Knowledge-iN* had access to *Naver’s* dictionary menus and may have referred to them for information about word meanings before arriving at the *Knowledge-iN* forum. The dictionary menus is one of the *Naver’s* own featured services and is different from directories of dictionary websites provided by *Yahoo!* UK. Whilst *Yahoo!* UK provides lists of linked dictionary websites through its directory services, users of *Naver* can directly access dictionary entries which consist of licensed contents from various local as well as global dictionary publishers. When the user of *Naver* is curious about meanings of a word, they are more likely to go to the dictionary menus right away rather than visiting one of the linked dictionary websites for the information. Indeed the difficulties *Naver* users encountered whilst engaging in dictionary consultation may have prompted them to ask questions to the forum. This would also help to explain why there was such a high proportion of questions in the *Knowledge-iN* ‘Interpreting dictionary information’ category (45 % of all the questions coded, as compared to 2 % in the *Yahoo!* archive).

Knowledge-iN questions which asked whether specific types of dictionary existed, which (type of) dictionary was better or best, and how to choose the most suitable dictionary were classified in the ‘Choosing dictionaries’ category:

“I believe knowing two synonyms means understanding the differences of their usages, grammar, and nuances. Is there a thesaurus that explains not only meanings of synonyms but also the differences of their nuances in detail? I need one with example sentences in particular. I don’t need just an English–English dictionary” (*Knowledge-iN*)

“I’m trying to memorize words. Between an English–English dictionary and an English–Korean dictionary, which is better for me? I am currently living in England (It hasn’t been long since I got here.) Please consider that I am 17 years old” (*Knowledge-iN*)

“I’d like to buy an English–English dictionary. I’m thinking of buying one among Oxford, Collins, and Macmillan. However, these are British–English dictionaries, which makes me worried. Would it be okay if I bought one of these and studied English?” (*Knowledge-iN*)

Users seemed to value word-of-mouth advice, despite the fact that participants in knowledge exchange communities are unlikely to be experts. This was presumably because the information the questioners required is hard to obtain in formal educational contexts. Many questions were simple requests for recommendations such as the following:

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

“There are dictionary entries from three different publishers—YBM, Doosan-Donga, and Oxford—in the dictionary section on Naver.com. Which would help me to study English the most? Probably it would be hard to choose. Then, which dictionary is the most common?” (*Knowledge-iN*)

Korean users wanted the “best” reference tool, and this often involved making choices between a monolingual and a bilingual dictionary, a British and an American dictionary, or a vocabulary learning device and a PED. There were few such queries in the UK/Irish ‘Choosing dictionaries’ category. Instead the UK/Irish participants displayed an unrealistic preoccupation with coverage and completeness. For example there were a number of questions of the following type:

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

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

The Korean questions in the category ‘Using dictionaries to improve English’ were likely to be concerned with the amount of dictionary use that was necessary, the best way of recording dictionary consultations, and the long-term effect of using English monolingual dictionaries. Such questions seem to reflect Korean English learners’ deeply rooted image of the dictionary as “a teacher who cannot talk” (Chi 2003, p. 7), an image also shared by Chinese and Japanese learners (Chi 2003;

Table 2 Correlation of coding frequencies for the two categories: ‘Choosing dictionary’ and ‘How to use dictionaries to improve English’

Choosing dictionaries	Coding frequency	How to use dictionaries to improve English		
		Recording dictionary entry for English learning	Using dictionaries for English learning	Validating question
Choosing dictionaries	274	2	25	1
Request for recommendation	144	0	11	0
Specific purpose dictionaries	47	0	0	0
Which dictionary	74	1	17	0

Ronald 2006). Dictionary user research has discovered much about dictionary users’ immediate reference needs, but the role of the dictionary as a pedagogical tool as opposed to a reference tool has only been discussed sporadically (Béjoint 2010; Cowie 1987; Tarp 2008), and as yet relatively little is known about this secondary dictionary function. Analysis of *Knowledge-iN* users’ questions suggests that the public’s image of the dictionary is a strong motivational factor which affects decisions about dictionary use. There was a high correlation, for example, between the frequency of *Knowledge-iN* questions in the categories under ‘Choosing dictionaries’ and ‘How to use dictionaries to improve English’, as shown in Table 2.

On the other hand many of the UK/Irish questions in the category ‘How to use dictionaries to improve language knowledge/skills’ were concerned with learning how to spell correctly, or how to build vocabulary size. Dictionary use was often referred to as just one of a number of possible ways of acquiring word knowledge:

“I’m forgetting how to spell all the words I used to know such as appalling I want to be a lawyer when I’m older will this stop me? Could I use an electronic dictionary at work to check my spelling or should I give up on law. Also I’m fifteen stop is my memory loss something medical? If I don’t become a lawyer I’d like to be a dentist would my spelling end this hope too?” (*Yahoo! Answers*)

“I want to increase my vocabulary, not massively! But everyday use like *sanctuary, keeping up with ones strides* etc.! I tend to go on urban dictionary a lot to look up some words people would use on their facebook status to know what they mean! Lol. Any ideas Thanks” (*Yahoo! Answers*)

“How to learn new words every single day?:

I keep searching the meaning of a word in the dictionary. Example *dedication* meaning *commitment* then I have to find this word meaning if u know what I mean. Is there a way to do this the east way. Finding a word easy for that meaning” (*Yahoo! Answers*)

Users often seemed to turn to *Yahoo! Answers* because their dictionaries had failed to provide the information they needed, or because they in some way doubted the information their dictionaries did provide:

“How do you know if a word in the dictionary isn’t spelled wrong?” (*Yahoo! Answers*)

“How do you spell *mutilise*? It’s a word that the online dictionaries can’t cope with” (*Yahoo! Answers*)

‘Interpreting dictionary information’ was also an important category for the Korean questioners, and included requests for information about IPA, dictionary symbols and abbreviations. The symbols that confused users most were those which have grammatical and syntactic functions, such as [U], [C], or verb patterns used in particular dictionaries, such as [VN] in OALD. Also, punctuation marks such as the colon and semicolon, less often used in the Korean writing system, caused problems. In some cases users were bewildered by fairly transparent symbols and codes, such as [synonym], BrE, and even ‘sth.’ and ‘sb.’ Such difficulties may be on the increase with the widespread use of electronic dictionaries, as user guides are less accessible in e-dictionaries than they are in print dictionaries:

“Does ‘flood [C U]’ mean that it can be used both as a countable noun and an uncountable noun?” (*Knowledge-iN*)

“When you look at English dictionaries, you see something like ‘palm—손바닥[*the palm of your hand*]; 야자나무[*palm tree*]’. What does ‘;’ in between mean?” (*Knowledge-iN*)

“When you look at English dictionaries, you see ‘sb, sth’ under the explanation or the example sentence of a word. What does ‘sb, sth’ mean? Does ‘sth’ mean ‘something’? Then, what does ‘sb’ mean?” (*Knowledge-iN*)

Some of the Korean questions in the category ‘Finding target information’ revealed ignorance of general lexicographical principles regarding headwords—for example “Why ‘young age’ is not in the dictionary?” or “I’ve heard ‘dead body’ many times in American television shows, but no dictionary includes this expression. What’s the reason?”. However, compared to the number of questions relating to ‘Interpreting dictionary information’ (45 %), the ‘Finding target information’ category was rather small (10 %, a total of 28 references). Few problems with the location of phrases were recorded, probably due to the fact that lexical databases from various sources have now been integrated, and phrases are readily retrievable via search terms. Now, for example, when ‘young age’ is keyed into the *Naver* dictionary menus, the results page gives five idioms containing the phrase, and hundreds of example sentences.

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

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

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

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

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

“What does *denizen* mean? I want to know the exact definition, please put it in your own words, don’t submit a dictionary answer” (*Yahoo! Answers*)

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

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

“What is a word that means “wanting to live”? I have to write a paragraph for English, and my teacher told me I need better word choice. I wrote “he learned to never lose faith in survival” but she said that “never lose faith in survival” wasn’t good enough. I’ve looked all over dictionary.com and stuff! Could someone please help find a word or two that means “wanting to live”?” (*Yahoo! Answers*)

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

“How do you spell *Whith*? As in *the length and the whith*. How wide (the *whith*) I’ve tried online dictionaries to no avail” (*Yahoo! Answers*)

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

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

“My teacher told us to find the meanings of *ball* in these two sentences. We have to give the two meanings in the next exam. Please help me! 1. One day the king invited all the young ladies of the land to a grand ball. 2. A round thing used for throwing, hitting, and kicking in sports: a tennis ball”. (*Knowledge-iN*)

Such homework questions are fairly common in web Q&A forums (Gazan 2007), and this may imply that online question-and-answering has come into people’s information environment and they perceive it as more accessible than other reference assistance such as encyclopaedias, dictionaries, or even other types of web documents.

Alongside extrinsically motivated requests were queries driven purely by curiosity or a sense of fun, especially in the case of *Yahoo! Answers*. UK/Irish questioners sought the opinion of others regarding word class changes, and new words they had invented:

“Is there a word for ‘a person who disappoints others’? I thought ‘dissapointer’ was a word but it doesn’t exist in any online dictionaries” (*Yahoo! Answers*)

“Is *locomote* a verb? Certain online dictionaries include it as a verb, but the Oxford dictionaries don’t which makes me doubt it. What is a suitable substitution for it if it isn’t a verb? I need it for a report for grouped behaviours including walking, running, jumping and climbing...I refer to them collectively as “locomotion”, but don’t know what verb to use when discussing them. “Move” just doesn’t sound right” (*Yahoo! Answers*)

They also wondered about the origins of expressions that they knew (“What is the origin of the phrase ‘cat got your tongue’?”; “Where originated the word ‘haggle’?”). Queries about word meanings also sometimes involved anagrams, acrostics, crosswords and Scrabble problems, as well as tongue-in-cheek postings such as “What can you tell me about confidentiality?”, and the old chestnut “Why is the word gullible not in the dictionary?” No such queries appeared in *Knowledge-iN*, but this is unsurprising given the status of English as a foreign language in Korea.

5 Conclusion

This overview of dictionary-related questions collected from two Q&A forums reveals something of the knowledge needs and concerns of two distinct

communities. The questions posted to *Knowledge-iN* indicate that South Korean English learners perceive dictionaries as important language learning tools, but need help choosing which ones they should use and how. Despite their high estimation of dictionaries, their questions displayed widespread ignorance of dictionary-specific conventions and discourse, a situation which indicates directions for the development of EFL dictionaries and for the teaching of dictionary skills. The questions posted to *Yahoo! Answers*, on the other hand, indicated that the public in the UK/Irish domain is less concerned about lexicographical conventions, less in awe of the authority of dictionaries, and more willing to exploit the medium as an alternative, instant search channel for lexical information.

This study was small in scale. We narrowed the focus to questions, as opposed to questions and answers, and since our intention was to overview the characteristics of dictionary-related knowledge needs in general terms, we decided to exclude some rather specific search categories such as ‘buying/mending PEDs’ or ‘downloading dictionary mobile applications’. It is also possible that our keyword-searching method may have missed some important questions relating to dictionary use simply because they did not include the exact word ‘dictionary’ or ‘sah-joen’. There is thus clearly scope for further work with more extensive data sets, obtained by systematically mining entire Q&A sites in the manner described by Kim et al. (2012). More thorough analysis of both questions and answers would reveal more about the dynamics of interaction in these discourse communities, and their belief systems concerning dictionaries and dictionary use. There also remains the need for the assessment of the usefulness of such Q&A communities in terms of answer quality and accuracy.

Some important demographic information was obviously missing from our data (i.e. L1, age, education, origins, location of questioners). However, during the process of analysis we found the unstructured data highly pertinent to certain research aims, providing insights which would not have been obtainable by other means. Further comparative studies across language communities, especially where the language of the Q&A forum is not a global language, might yield interesting results. Furthermore, question topics and their frequency might be studied diachronically to reveal trends in dictionary users’ needs and concerns, or Q&A data might be analysed in terms of dictionary types, dictionary titles, and reported situations of dictionary use.

Quirk (1973: 80) argued long ago that dictionary makers needed to step outside their own small world and listen to the dictionary-using public. If they did, they would find that “some of the dictionary features which seem of particular centrality to lexicographers are decidedly peripheral to the ordinary user”. Thanks to social media we can now find out what ordinary users have to say, to an extent Quirk would not have dreamt possible. Their questions may sometimes annoy us, but also have the power to touch us, amuse us, and perhaps even shock us into new ways of thinking about lexicographical practice.

Appendix

<i>Knowledge-iN</i> categories and codes	References
Choosing dictionaries	274
Dictionary choice according to level	9
Request for recommendation	144
Recommendation/biligualised	1
Recommendation/bilingual	8
Recommendation/electronic download	1
Recommendation/general	22
Recommendation/handheld	51
Recommendation/internet site	11
Recommendation/mobile application	18
Recommendation/monolingual	29
Recommendation/paper only	3
Specific purpose dictionaries	47
Which dictionary	74
Which is better for me	34
Which/British vs. American	8
Which/learning device vs. dictionaries	12
Which/mono vs. bilingual	12
Which/PED vs. mobile application	2
Which/print vs. electronic	6
Dictionary evaluation	23
Evaluation	4
Quality of examples	1
Quality of voice pronunciation	3
What's the difference	15
Finding target information	28
Deciding what to look up	2
Finding inflections	1
Knowing the structure of dictionary	1
Lack of knowledge about the typical lexical information	7
Locating headwords	4
Locating phrases	4
Not found in the dictionary	7
Right-hand field search	2
How to use dictionaries to improve English	55
Recording dictionary entry for English learning	7
Using dictionaries for English learning	45
Validating question	3

Appendix continued

<i>Knowledge-iN</i> categories and codes	References
Interpreting dictionary information	212
Applying dictionary information	4
Distinguishing relevant sense	3
Interpreting definition	21
Interpreting dictionary convention of language description	22
Interpreting examples	12
Interpreting IPA	9
Interpreting morphological information	5
Interpreting symbols and abbreviation	123
[U] [C]	10
Symbols denoting British or American English	1
Colon and semicolon	9
Frequency information	3
Grammatical symbol	13
Other symbols and abbreviation	72
Symbols/sb. sth.	4
Syllabication	3
VN in Oxford dictionaries	8
Interpreting syntagmatic information	13
Techniques for electronic dictionaries	16
Downloading dictionaries	9
Electronic search techniques	4
How to use dictionaries on CD-ROM	1
Using mini dictionaries	2
Understanding principles of dictionary-making	19
Suggestions for new words to be included	1
Understanding lexicographical principles and practices	18
Others	79
Dictionary errors	6
Language specific question	29
Mobile trend	6
Other questions	16
Simple requests for translation	18
Very local question	4
<i>Yahoo! Answers</i> categories and codes	References
Information about word meanings	182
For reception	87
For production	32
To distinguish between similar words	21
As part of jokes and word play	12
For homework	12

Appendix continued

<i>Yahoo! Answers</i> categories and codes	References
For games	9
In order to explain meanings to others, e.g. children	5
To identify connotations	4
Information about correct usage	34
Grammar	18
Spelling	11
Pronunciation	4
Upper and lower case letters	1
Word origins	27
Etymology	22
Meaning of proper names	3
Borrowing from other languages	1
Deconstruction of word meaning	1
Dictionary evaluation	26
Evaluating the authority of the dictionary	6
Identifying missing words or information (compare 'Not found in the dictionary' for Knowledge-iN queries)	11
Querying dictionary information	9
Choosing dictionaries	24
Differentiating dictionary titles	3
Requests for word lists	3
Requests for recommendation	12
Recommendation/the most complete	9
Recommendation/free	2
Recommendation/tablet format	1
Which dictionary	4
Which is the best for students	3
Which contains sentence examples	1
Specific purpose dictionaries	2
Understanding principles of dictionary-making	11
Suggestions for new words to be included	6
Understanding lexicographical principles and practices	4
Asking about the number of words in a dictionary	1
How to use dictionaries to improve language knowledge/skills	10
Memorising words	2
Reading/memorising an entire dictionary	2
Using a dictionary whilst reading	2
Using a dictionary to expand vocabulary	2
Using a dictionary for spelling	1
Interpreting dictionary information	7
Interpreting examples	1
Interpreting grammatical information	1

Appendix continued

<i>Yahoo! Answers</i> categories and codes	References
Interpreting the pronunciation key	1
Interpreting definitions and conventions	4
Others	24
Questions about exam regulations and cheating	8
Simple requests for translation	6
Obtaining dictionaries/giving them as presents	4
The dictionary-using habits of others	4
Citing dictionary sources	2

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