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The Chinese Broken Marks Dictionary

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Teaching Chinese as a foreign language began centuries or millenia ago. However, in recent decades, with the development of China and the Chinese government’s determination to spread its culture internationally, it has gained unprecedented momentum. Pedagogical grammars, textbooks and learners’ dictionaries are indispensable for the teaching and learning of Chinese as a foreign language. However, of these three, learners’ dictionaries have lagged far behind, in quality and in quantity. What is worse, a majority of such dictionaries are monolingual Chinese dictionaries targeting advanced learners of the language, ignoring the largest and most important learner groups, the beginning and intermediate learners of Chinese. Due to their limited proficiency in Chinese, these users will understandably require a bilingual decoding Chinese–English dictionary (henceforth C–E dictionary). However, such dictionaries have been in short supply both within and outside of China. Also, the once acclaimed ABC Chinese–English Comprehensive Dictionary (DeFrancis 2003) has become outdated with the passage of time.

*The Chinese Broken Marks Dictionary* (henceforth *CBMD*) is a bilingual decoding dictionary designed specifically for speakers of English. In the foreword of this work Galil Walker states that it ‘is an intermediate step toward the efficient use of standard Chinese language reference works’.

This dictionary has various strengths. First, it is based on an extensive study of users’ needs. Taking advantage of the capacity of Professor Huang as president of the Confucius Institute at Miami University in Ohio and his connections with Chinese universities, shortly before the project was initiated the compilers conducted a survey of 300 learners of Chinese, ranging from first to fourth graders at Miami University, and another survey of a total of 143 international students from 31 countries who were learning Chinese in four Chinese universities, in order to get feedback on the needs of dictionary users.
Second, it uses a very user-friendly and efficient character indexing system. As an addition to the traditional indexing systems available in any common Chinese dictionary, i.e. the regular radical and stroke, Chinese phonetic pinyin and English–Chinese indexing systems, the compilers have invented the unique Broken Marks Indexing System, which is both powerful and easy to learn. The system, designed with ease-of-use and efficiency in mind, enables the dictionary user to find a character within 60 seconds in three steps: counting a character’s total marks (TM), picking its first mark (FM) and then discovering the character number (CN) by going to the ‘Broken marks index for simplified Chinese characters’ (or the ‘Broken marks index for traditional Chinese characters’). Each of the 2,000 characters treated is assigned a CN based on its TM and FM. More importantly, the method of counting the TM and identifying the FM is rather simple, which, according to my own testing, can be mastered within less than 10 minutes.

This invention is significant, because finding a character quickly in a Chinese dictionary is a well-known challenge for beginning learners of this language, as DeFrancis notes in the foreword to his dictionary (2003); Galil Walker says in the foreword to the work under review that in their eyes, ‘characters will appear to be a jumble of strokes that seem to randomly follow one another’. The difficulty, however, is rooted in the essential difference between native Chinese speakers and non-native speakers in the process of learning Chinese. The former generally learn the pronunciation of a character first, then its meaning and finally its form, while the latter learn the pronunciation and form almost at the same time and then the meaning. For the former, the pinyin indexing system is sufficient and the radical and stroke system is used on very rare occasions when they do not know how to pronounce a character. The latter, however, have to use the radical and stroke system very often to reassociate sounds, characters and meanings. It is, therefore, highly commendable that the CBMD has such an easy-to-learn indexing system.

Third, the CBMD has incorporated other noteworthy innovations which should ameliorate some difficulties of learner users of dictionaries. For one thing, it has provided many noun entries with the measure words that collocate with them. For example, the entry for 激战 ‘a fierce battle’ is supplied with the measure word 场 to show the collocation 一场激战 ‘a fierce battle’.

Also, it has a ‘Related words’ column under each head character; this will enhance a dictionary user’s understanding of the character’s usage in sentences. Unlike written English, in which each word is separated clearly from the words adjacent to it, in written Chinese all the characters (of which words are composed) appear together without any spaces between them. Learners must compose a word using a given character combined with one or more other characters. Even if they can identify a character’s radical and count its strokes correctly, for example the character 讲 ‘say’ in the sentence 他不讲人情 ‘He is unreasonable’, they may still have difficulty figuring out which word 讲 is part of in this particular sentence. Should it be combined with the character 不 to its left to form 不讲 or with the character 人 or the sequence
人情 to its right to form 讲人 or 讲人情? Or does it form a word all on its own? Learning characters is fruitless if one cannot identify the word in which the character is used.

The compilers of the CBMD have at least partly solved this problem, first by listing words starting with a head character as word entries, and then by having the ‘Related words’ column after the word entries. The column consists of the most frequent words that contain the character, regardless of whether the character’s position in the word is at the end or in the middle. For instance, the ‘Related words’ column under the head character 厂 ‘factory; mill; plant’ contains such words as 工厂 11 ‘factory’, 水厂 151 ‘water plant’, 出厂 256 ‘(of products) to leave the factory’, and 药厂 1385 ‘pharmaceutical factory’. By looking through the list of all the related words, learners can spot the appropriate usage for each particular sentence. Note also the number after each word. It is the CN, which efficiently steers the dictionary user to where this word appears in the dictionary.

In addition, the illustrative examples are skilfully designed. The characters Jack and his Chinese girlfriend TingTing appear in many of the example sentences. Witty and humorous, these sentences describe their perseverance and hard work, the difficulties they face and the successes they enjoy. Their touching story not only makes the examples vivid, but also makes checking the dictionary fun. Many examples contain similar words that are placed together to highlight their differences and increase the pedagogical function of the dictionary. For instance, 汉语是一种很难学的语言, 其语音、语调、语词和语法都很难学 ‘Chinese is a very difficult language to learn: its pronunciation, tone, words and phrases, and grammar are all difficult’, an example for 语言 ‘language’, contains several words (put in bold face) that could confuse learners. Now, with the help of the English translation, they can quickly figure out the differences between them, and their understanding of these words is enhanced.

Another positive feature of this dictionary is that the entries and their English translations have been made consistent with respect to part of speech. Given the vagueness of the part of speech of many Chinese words, this is especially praise-worthy, as it greatly facilitates the dictionary user’s learning process. For example, in one Chinese–English dictionary 挨边儿 is marked as a verb, but its glosses involve adjectives (‘close to; connected with the topic; relevant’) and a prepositional phrase (‘to the point’). The CBMD, however, marks the term as both a verb and as an adjective and has the glosses ‘to keep off to the side’ and ‘close to the truth or fact of the matter’, respectively.

Finally, this dictionary prepares the learners for the HSK, a Chinese proficiency test equivalent to the TOEFL. According to the Office of the Chinese Language Council International, the number of foreigners sitting this test reached 370,000 in 2013 alone and 1.88 million in total during the 23 years from the official launch of the test in 1990. Therefore a Chinese learner’s dictionary should be able to help those studying for this test. The CBMD has entries for 2,000 of the most frequently used Chinese characters, which lead to more than 20,000 of the most common Chinese words, including 5,000 words which must be mastered for the HSK.
As good as it is, the CBMD has some weaknesses. Aside from the facts that some examples are not idiomatically translated and that some part of speech indications are incorrect, three weaknesses of lexicographical significance should be mentioned. First, the dictionary lacks examples which would help learners choose between synonyms. For instance, both 擦光 and 擦亮 are glossed as ‘to polish’ without any examples being given; this is misleading, since these terms have different collocational behaviours in Chinese. It would have been better if entries had been supplied with examples showing collocational differences. Second, in its entries the CBMD fails to distinguish between polysemy and homonymy, which could cause users to mistakenly think that meanings of items are cognitively related to each other. For example, 下场 ‘to go off the stage’ and 下场 ‘end or fate’ are homonyms, but are treated as a single polysemous word, which is neither lexicographically correct nor pedagogically useful. Third, as the targeted audience is beginning and intermediate level Chinese learners, it would have been good if all the characters in entry examples had also been given in pinyin, so that these learners could familiarize themselves with more Chinese characters and phrases through reading their pinyin pronunciations.

Despite these issues, the CBMD deserves special credit for its innovations, which make it stand out among dictionaries of a similar nature. As an important lexicographic work, it is sure to benefit foreign learners of Chinese and offer food for thought to lexicographers in this field.

Reference