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Didactic Lexicography between Tradition and Innovation: going back to the roots to grasp the future

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The introduction of cutting-edge technologies into lexicography, in particular artificial intelligence, implies not only new ways of compiling traditional dictionaries, including didactic ones, but also the development of entirely new classes of lexicographical artefacts. Surprisingly, some of the new products seem to have much more in common with early lexicographical products such as glosses than with later ones such as dictionaries, whether printed or digital, in that they are problem-oriented rather than lemma-based.

The paper deals with one of these products, a multilingual AI-based writing assistant for Spanish learners, which is currently under construction in an interdisciplinary collaboration between lexicographers and computer specialists from a high-tech company. It begins by explaining the motivation behind the creation of this new type of didactic tool, its overall design and its functionality, which includes the detection of possible problems, wake-up calls, alternative suggestions, glosses and supplementary explanations of grammatical, orthographic and semantic challenges typical of Spanish learners.

The paper then describes the different phases and tasks of the construction process, focusing on those in which lexicographers are directly involved: building a set of parallel Spanish corpora for internal training purposes, generating validation data, and writing explanations for the future users. It shows how the introduction of ChatGPT has completely changed the whole process, with both new production techniques and new tasks, resulting in a significant increase in productivity and the establishment of three different types of relationships between human and artificial intelligence, between the lexicographers and the chatbot. In this respect, it is argued that the new reality requires even more knowledge, more general culture, more skills and more linguistic intuition for lexicographers to be able to interact appropriately with the chatbot, to give it precise and guiding instructions, to check the texts it generates, and to cut it off when it simply does not serve the desired purpose.

Rundell (2012) was certainly right when he predicted that future lexicographers would not do the same as their predecessors, only that the future already seems to be here.