Using a French Dictionary

Bilingual dictionaries are essential tools for the *second language learner.* Using them correctly requires more than just looking up a word in one language and picking the first translation you see. Similar to the English language, French words may have more than one possibility including *synonyms, varying registers* and *different parts of speech.*

Bilingual dictionaries use specialized terms and abbreviations, a *phonetic alphabet* to indicate pronunciation, and other techniques to provide a great deal of information in a limited amount of space.

Must know: There is a lot more too bilingual dictionaries then meets the eye. Here are a few tips to help your child succeed in using a French dictionary.

Look up unmodified words

Many words have more than one form: nouns can be singular or plural (sometimes masculine or feminine), adjectives can be comparative and superlative, and verbs can be conjugated into different tenses and so on.

Dictionaries list the uninflected word: the singular noun, the basic adjective (in French, this means the singular, masculine form, while in English it means the non-comparative, no superlative form) and the infinitive of the verb.

Example: you may not find a dictionary entry for he word serveuse, so need to replace the feminine ending- euse with the masculine- eur, and then when you look up serveur, you'll find it means "waiter" so serveuse means "waitress".

When you wonder what tu sonnes means, you have to consider that sonnes is a verb conjugation, so the infinitive is probably sonner, sonnier or sonre look those up to learn that sonner means "to ring"

Likewise, reflexive verbs such as s'asseoir and se souvenir are listed under the verb, asseoir and souvenir, not the reflective pronoun se- otherwise that entry would run to hundreds of pagers.

Find the important words

When you first look up an expression, there are two possibilities: you might find it in the entry for the first word of the expression, but more likely it will be listed in the entry of the most important word in the expression.

Example: The expression "du coup" is listed under coup rather than du. Sometimes there are two important words in an expression, the entry for one will cross-reference the other. In looking up the expression "tomber dans les pommes", you start by looking up tomber, where I found a hyperlink to pomme, when I looked up pomme, you find that the expression translates as "to faint/pass out".

Try it
Pick a few expressions and look up the different words to get a feel for how your dictionary works to get a feel for how your dictionary tends to list them.

Keep it in context: Even after you know which word to look up, you still have to work to do both. French and English have a lot of homonyms, or words that look alike but have more than one meaning.

Making up a list of words: This isn't always the right idea, if you don't look them up right away, you will have no context to fit them into. You're better off looking up the words as you go, or at the very least write down the whole sentence that the word appears in so you know what context they are used in.

Automatic translators
There is the reason software and websites aren't very good- they are unable to consider context in order to decide which meaning is most appropriate.

Know your parts of speech
Ssome homonyms can even be two different parts of speech. The English word "produce" for example can be a verb (they produce a lot of cars) or a noun (they have the best produce). When you look up the word "produce" you'll see at least two French translations: the French verb is produire and the noun is produits.

Fact: if you do not pay attention to the part of speech of the word you want to translate, you may end up with a big grammatical mistake in whatever you're writing.

Gender: remember to pay attention to French gender, may words have different meanings depending on whether they are masculine or feminine (let's call them dual gender nouns). So when you're looking up a French word be sure you're looking at the entry for that gender. And when looking up an English noun, pay extra attention to the gender it gives for the French translation.

Understand your dictionary's shortcuts

Remember the first dozen or so pages in the front of your dictionary hold a lot of really important information! We're not talking about things like the introduction, forewords and prefaces but rather the explanation of conventions used throughout the dictionary. In order for dictionaries to save space, dictionaries use all kinds of symbols, which most dictionaries use to show pronunciation. Your dictionary will also have a list of abbreviations that it uses throughout such as adj (adjective) arg (argot), Belg (belgicism) and so on.

Abbreviations and symbols: these all provide important information about how, when and why to use any given word. If you're given a choice of two terms and one is old fashioned, you probably want to choose the other. If it is slang, you shouldn't us it in a professional setting. If it is a Canadian term, a Belgian might not understand it.

Pay attention to figurative language and idioms: Most words and expressions have two meanings: a literal meaning and a figurative one. It is easy to translate literal language but not so much figurative terms.

Example: the English word "blue" literally refers to a color- its French equivalent is bleu. But "blue" can also be used figuratively to indicated sadness, as in "to feel blue" which is equivalent to "avoir le cafard: if you were to translate "to feel blue" litterall you'd end up with the nonsensical "se sentir bleu". The same rules apply when we are translating French to English.

Try it in reverse: Once you have found your translation
  o After considering context
  o Parts of speech
it is still a good idea to try to verify that you've chosen the best word. A quick and easy way to check is with a reverse look-up, which simply means looking up the word in the new language to see what translations it offers in the original language.

Example: if you look up purple, the dictionary might offer violet and pourpre as the French translation. When you look these two words up in the French-English dictionary you'll find that violet means purple while poupre means crimon or red-violet.

Compare definitions: another good technique for double checking your translation is to compare dictionary definitons.. Look up the English word in your monolingual English dictionary and the French in your mnonolingual dictionary and see whether the definitions are equivalent.

Example: the definition of hunger in the American Heritage dictionary says a strong desire or need for food. Whereas the grand Robert dictionary says for faim, sensation qui normalement,

accompagne le besoin de manger. These two definitions say pretty much the same thing, which means that "hunger and faim is the same thing.

Go native: the best way to find out whether your bilingual dictionary gave the right translation is to ask a native speaker. Dictionaries make generalizations, get outdated, and even make a few mistakes, but native speakers envolve with their language- they know the slang and whether this term is too formal or that one is a little rude, and especially when a word "doesn't sound quite right" or "just can't be used like that"

A la francais forum: if you don't know any native French speakers don't despair, the a la français forum has native speakers who are more than willing to answer any of your questions, just post a not in the forum. On www.French.about.com.

Top bilingual French dictionaries:
When buying a French dictionary, you need to consider your language proficiency and what you'll be using the dictionary for. It is also important to keep in mind that bilingual dictionaries are great tools, but can have discrepancies.

1. **Collins Robert unabridged dictionary**
   o This is the largest and best French-English dictionary with more than 2,000 pages. Entries include slang, regionalisms and expressions. There is also a useful section on "language in use" with vocabulary and expressions grouped by categories.

2. **HaperCollins Rober French College Dictionary**
   o Abridged version of the above, suitable for advanced students.

3. **Larousse Concise French-English dictionary.**
   o A paperback dictionary with 100,000 entries including slang, culture, and more. Intermediate students will find that this dictionary has everything they may need.

4. **Collins Pocket French Dictionary**
   o Nice basic bilingual dictionary, beginners and travelers can get by with it, but if they use it regularly, they'll soon realize this dictionary's limitations as it is only big enough for the essentials.