

# Cuban School Dictionaries for First-Language Learners: A Shared Experience\*

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**Abstract:** One of the reasons why many publishing houses hesitate when allocating resources to the development of more advanced concepts of school dictionaries for first-language learners is the relatively poor sales and corresponding profits coming from this category of dictionaries. A major challenge is therefore how to change the situation, stimulate the use and sales of school dictionaries, and guarantee the necessary investment in product development. This contribution will take up this challenge. It will give no final answer, but it will discuss an experience with a Cuban school dictionary which has reached its target users in large numbers. The contribution will particularly look at the multi-faceted relation between lexicographers and users which characterises the Cuban dictionary project. The objective is not to copy this or any other experience but to inspire lexicographers looking for alternative solutions to a problem which is affecting both school children and lexicographers in many countries and language communities.

**Keywords:** PEDAGOGICAL LEXICOGRAPHY, PEDAGOGICAL DICTIONARIES, SCHOOL DICTIONARIES, FIRST LANGUAGE LEARNERS, MOTHER-TONGUE LEARNERS

**Opsomming: Kubaanse skoolwoordeboeke vir eerstetaalleerders: 'n Gedeelde ervaring.** Een van die redes waarom baie uitgewerye huiwer wanneer middele toegewys word aan die ontwikkeling van meer gevorderde konsepte van skoolwoordeboeke vir eerstetaalleerders, is die relatiewe swak verkope en ooreenstemmende profyte wat van hierdie kategorie woordeboeke afkomstig is. 'n Belangrike uitdaging is dus hoe om die situasie te verander, die gebruik en verkope van skoolwoordeboeke te stimuleer en die nodige belegging in produkontwikkeling te waarborg. Hierdie bydrae sal dié uitdaging aanvaar. Dit sal geen finale antwoord gee nie, maar dit sal 'n ervaring met 'n Kubaanse skoolwoordeboek bespreek wat sy teikengebruikers in groot getalle bereik het. Die bydrae sal veral kyk na die veelfasettige verhouding tussen leksikograwe en gebruikers wat die Kubaanse woordeboekprojek kenmerk. Die doel is nie om hierdie of enige ander erva-

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ring na te boots nie, maar om leksikograwe te inspireer wat vir alternatiewe oplossings van die probleem soek wat sowel skoolkinders as leksikograwe in baie lande en taalgemeenskappe raak.

**Sleutelwoorde:** OPVOEDKUNDIGE LEKSIKOGRAFIE, OPVOEDKUNDIGE WOORDEBOEKE, SKOOLWOORDEBOEKE, EERSTETAALLEERDERS, MOEDERTAALLEERDERS

## 1. Introduction

During November 2011, a workshop on school dictionaries for first-language speakers was organized at the University of Pretoria (cf. Gouws and Tarp 2012). The informative discussions showed, among others, that a major reason why most South African publishing houses hesitate when they have to allocate resources to the development of more advanced concepts of school dictionaries is the relatively poor sales and corresponding profits coming from this category of dictionaries. This is a general problem in South Africa with the possible exception of Oxford's monolingual school dictionaries of English. Low use of school dictionaries, low sales, low profits, and low interest in the development of more user-friendly and attractive school dictionaries: all of this undoubtedly constitutes a classical vicious circle! A major challenge for these engaged in pedagogical lexicography is therefore how to break the circle:

What can be done to change the situation, stimulate the use and sales of school dictionaries, and guarantee the necessary investment in product development?

There is certainly no simple answer to this question but it may be worth studying positive experiences from other countries. In this respect, it may be interesting to look at a Cuban experience. Although having a different social system, Cuba is a developing country like many African countries; the available resources are limited and have to be used carefully according to priorities. On this island, a school dictionary, *Diccionario Básico Escolar*, has in a few years been distributed in a total of 126.800 copies among a population only 20 per cent the size of the South African population and with an even lower percentage of children of school-going age. In addition, the *Diccionario Básico Escolar* has been published on CD and has been made freely available on the Internet from a Basque server as well as on the Cuban national Intranet which can be accessed from all Cuban schools, Joven Clubs (Internet Cafés) and a small but growing number of private homes — a fact which does not seem to discourage the interest in the printed version, perhaps quite the opposite.

What is the "secret" behind this notable achievement?

In order to answer this question, one of the organizers of the Pretoria 2011 workshop has joined forces with one of the collaborators in the Cuban dictionary project. Our intention is not to tell others how to do their work. We do not propose that the Cuban experience should be copied by anybody. We believe that each dictionary project must have its individual characteristics adapted to the specific context and tradition in the respective country and language com-

munity. But we hope that this experience may inspire other lexicographers engaged in the production of school dictionaries to find alternative ways to improve their products and reach the school children in need of such tools when learning their first language. With this in view, in the following, we will describe the *Diccionario Básico Escolar* with focus on the close and peculiar contact between lexicographers and users in the pre- and post-compilation phases.

## 2. The preparatory work

Edited by Eloína Miyares Bermúdez, the *Diccionario Básico Escolar* has been planned, prepared, compiled and actively promoted by collaborators from the Centro de Lingüística Aplicada (Centre for Applied Linguistics), located in the eastern Cuban City of Santiago. The preparatory work started back in the early 1990s. Between 1990 and 1995 researchers from the Centre carried out a study of the active-functional vocabulary of Cuban primary-school children between the 2nd and 6th grade. The study was based on a total of 7.001 (5.873 written and 1.128 oral) compositions collected in both rural and urban areas in nine of Cuba's then fourteen provinces.

The result of this detailed study, which was later published in Miyares Bermúdez et al. (2006), did not only allow the researchers to establish the urban and rural school children's growing — and varying — active vocabulary over five grades (8 to 12 years). They also retrieved valuable information about the pupils' specific problems in terms of oral and written text production. All this allowed the researchers to compose a corpus of 700.000 codified words which constituted the central (but not only) part of the corpus which eventually assisted in the compilation of the *Diccionario Básico Escolar* and its twin sister, the *Diccionario Escolar Ilustrado*. The latter is designed to initiate the pupils in the world of dictionaries and attend to their lexicographical needs in the first four grades of Primary School.

In his analysis of Spanish school dictionaries, Hernández (2003: 24) writes that "there is not a single school dictionary which clearly informs about the sources of its nomenclature". The Santiago-based *Centro de Lingüística Aplicada* has acted differently. From the very beginning, it has been very informative about its sources and methodology which have been explained in great detail in various publications, for instance Ruiz Miyares and Miyares Bermúdez (1992), Ruiz Miyares (1994), Ruiz Miyares (1997), Miyares Bermúdez and Ruiz Miyares (2006), and Miyares Bermúdez et al. (2012).

In this respect, it is worth noting that what distinguishes the lexicographical basis of the *Diccionario Básico Escolar* (and its twin sister) is not so much the existence of a corpus. Corpora composed of textbooks, exercises, etc., are generally used in the compilation of school dictionaries, cf. Michael Rundell's (2004) Introduction to the *Macmillan School Dictionary*. The real interesting thing is the fact that the corpus in this case includes texts composed by the target user group itself, allowing the lexicographers to obtain a much more profound knowledge of the real problems and needs of this group which Wiegand (1977: 59)

once called the "well-known unknown".

The authors of the Cuban school dictionary have a very profound knowledge of the users and their real problems and needs. The 7.001 written and oral compositions collected among the foreseen target users represent a statistically reliable basis for determining these needs and the corresponding lexicographical solutions. In addition, the main editor, Eloína Miyares Bermúdez, has an academic background first as a teacher and later as a researcher in linguistics and first-language learning, while other collaborators have similar experience but also other types of expert knowledge.

The team working on the *Diccionario Básico Escolar* is interdisciplinary; it includes experts in linguistics and computer science. This kind of team work is very important for lexicographical research. The informatics experts developed three important systems: the computer system to analyze and process the 7.001 written and oral compositions, the editor of the *Diccionario Básico Escolar* as well as its digital version (for CD and the Internet), cf. Ruiz Miyares and Miyares Bermúdez (1992), Ruiz Miyares (1994), Ruiz Miyares (1997), Alegría, Iñaki et al. (2006a), Alegría, Iñaki et al. (2006b), and Alegría, Iñaki et al. (2006c). Both the editor and the digital version were prepared in collaboration with researchers and specialists from the University of the Basque Country.

### 3. Short presentation of the dictionary

The first edition of the *Diccionario Básico Escolar* was published in 2003; subsequently it appeared (until now) in two other editions (2008, 2009) with two reprints of the third edition (2010, 2012) for a total of 126.800 copies. As explained by Miyares Bermúdez and Ruiz Miyares (2006: 104), it is designed to meet the lexicographical needs of school children attending the "second circle" of Primary School (Grades 5 to 6), the Basic Secondary School (Grades 7 to 9) and High School (Grades 10 to 12), i.e. a total of eight grades with children from about ten to eighteen years old. According to the Introduction to the third edition, also students of "polytechnic centres and the users of the Joven Clubs", i.e. students within the same age group, should be added to the expected user group. As to the learning situations and activities in which the defined target users can use it, Miyares Bermúdez (2009: ix) writes:

This third edition comprises more than 10 500 entries and about 20 000 senses, all of them basic and fundamental for the *knowledge and normative use of the language*. The majority of the entries express different spheres of reality, especially aspects of social life, nature, science, culture, sport, and other novel elements that allow *the actualization of the knowledge* of the young and also the adult people.

Miyares Bermúdez and Ruiz Miyares (2006: 104, 110) provide further details:

Its main objective is that the school children achieve an *enlargement* and *better knowledge* of the Spanish vocabulary as well as an *improved orthography* and *proper use of the words* according to their function.

The major impact of the *Diccionario Básico Escolar* is of a social and educative character because the pupils of the second circle of Primary School, Basic Secondary School and High School in Cuba can count on this work that will assist them in their *linguistic, cultural, scientific, ethic and patriotic formation*.

From the above it results that the dictionary is, in the first place, designed to assist school children of Grades 5 to 12 having lexicographically relevant information needs related to text reception, text production and their cognitive formation. The more than 10.500 lemmata have been selected from various sources: the corpus described in the previous section, textbooks from various grades, Cuban newspapers and magazines for young people, as well as a special corpus based on a study of the school children's use of affixes in Grades 7 to 9. The selection represents modern Spanish language including a number of Cubanisms, Americanisms and, to a less extent, Anglicisms and Gallicisms as well as hundreds of terms taken from scientific disciplines studied in the various grades. The individual articles always contain:

- part of speech,
- explanations,
- example sentences,
- hyphenation,
- and inflection (of nouns, adjectives and verbs, in this last case with indication of past participle and reference to a list of 83 model verbs in the back matter of Volume II).

To this should be added the frequent inclusion of:

- underlining of certain letters in the lemma in order to warn against typical orthographic mistakes,
- gender,
- explicit grammatical data,
- diatechnical, diatopic, diaintegrative and diastratic marking,
- pronunciation (when it is a foreign word, e.g. *iceberg*),
- synonyms, antonyms, and cognate words,
- locutions, phraseologisms, and proverbs,
- explanation of locutions, phraseologisms, and proverbs,
- example sentences with locutions and phraseologisms,
- diminutives and augmentatives, and
- references to 19 thematic tables with a total of 584 illustrations.

The following four articles provide an idea of the design and content of the articles:

**electricidad** sf. Fenómeno físico producido por el movimiento de electrones de los átomos, el cual se manifiesta en la atracción y repulsión que aparece entre ellos. La electricidad no se crea ni se destruye. Es una forma de energía de empleo cómodo por lo fácil de su conducción; y muy útil, pues tiene muchos usos: se puede transformar en mecánica en los motores; térmica, en las resistencias de calefacción; luminosa, en el alumbrado eléctrico, etc. *El descubrimiento de la **electricidad** fue un hecho de gran importancia para el hombre.*

e-lec-tri-ci-dad

**gota** sf. **1** Porción pequeña de un líquido que al caer adopta la forma de una esfera. *Noté que el tiempo cambiaba cuando sentí caer de repente dos **gotas** de lluvia sobre mi brazo.* **2** Poca cantidad de algo. *Me ha servido una **gota** de comida.* Sin. pizca. **3** Enfermedad que produce dolor en las articulaciones y a veces afecciones viscerales. *Los enfermos de **gota** tienen un tratamiento médico intenso.* // loc. adv. **ni gota**. Nada, ninguna cosa. *No encontré **ni gota** de lo que me pediste.* // fras. **sudar la gota gorda**. Esforzarse mucho para conseguir algo. *Sudó la **gota gorda** para llegar hasta aquel lugar.*

go-ta; gotas (pl.); gotica (dim.)

**gracioso, a** adj. **1** Se dice de lo que tiene cierto atractivo en su aspecto. *Las muchachas celebran a los jóvenes **graciosos**.* Sin. bonito, atractivo, simpático. Ant. feo. **2** Se aplica a aquello que resulta chistoso, cómico o que nos hace reír. *Nos pareció **gracioso** el espectáculo.* Sin. divertido, agradable, cómico. **3** Se atribuye a la persona que hace chistes, cuentos, etc. *Jorge era el actor más **gracioso** de ese elenco.* Sin. ocurrente.

gra-cio-so, a; graciosos, as (pl.)

**parecer** vintr. (27) **1** Tener algo determinado aspecto físico o apariencia. *El trabajo que le encomendaron **parecía** fácil. Su padre nos **pareció** muy amable.* **2** vpr. Tener alguien o algo un aspecto o apariencia semejante o común a otra persona o cosa. *Odilia se **parece** mucho a su hermana.* Sin. semejarse. **3** vintr. Haber o existir razones para creer una cosa. ***Parece** que va a salir el Sol.* (Solamente se emplea en tercera persona). // loc. adv. **al parecer, según parece**. Como se observa o por lo que se sabe. ***Al parecer, a Carlos se le hizo tarde. El profesor, según parece, está enfermo y no vendrá hoy a clases.***

pa-re-cer; perecido (p.p.)

As to the three functions discussed above, the *Diccionario Básico Escolar* complies with the requirements in this regard, at least in terms of the data catego-

ries necessary to meet the school children's lexicographical needs. As to *text reception*, the short explanation of the lemmata as well as of the locutions, phraseologisms and proverbs, written in a simple and clear language, and always followed by an example sentence, is virtually what is needed to help the children understand the words — and their various senses — included in the dictionary. As to *text production*, the *Diccionario Básico Escolar* contains a variety of data categories providing information about orthography, pronunciation, part of speech, inflection, locutions, phraseologisms, proverbs, synonyms, antonyms, cognate words, diminutives, augmentatives, and hyphenation which are all highly relevant for text production. Although some of these data categories are seldom found in Spanish school dictionaries, they are nevertheless absolutely necessary not only in order to assist the children in composing texts in correct Spanish, but also to develop and produce a rich and varying language in terms of words and expressions. Finally, as to its *cognitive function* in its various aspects, a look at the article *electricidad* shows how a relatively complex concept is explained with plain words.

#### 4. Reactions to the dictionary

The *Diccionario Básico Escolar* has been reviewed various times by international scholars, both in Spanish (e.g. Forgas and Bargalló 2006, and Nomdedeu Rull 2012), and in English (e.g. Corpas Pastor 2005, and Tarp 2012). The reviews have generally been positive, although it has been remarked that the dictionary pretends to embrace too many grades (and years of age), "a maybe too excessive ambition" because of the "big cognitive and academic difference" between the users of the upper and lower grades covered by the dictionary (Forgas and Bargalló 2006: 254). Apart from this, almost all reviewers have coincided in appreciating the meticulous work performed by the authors and their efforts to adapt the dictionary to the school children's linguistic, mental, cultural, and encyclopaedic development.

In Cuba, the feedback has also been positive; this is, among other things, reflected in the many copies sold as well as in the new editions where the authors have made improvements and modifications taking into account the many opinions expressed by the public. In this respect, the opinion of parents, teachers and students has exceedingly contributed to the development of the *Basic School Dictionary* thanks to a series of initiatives which we will describe in the following.

#### 5. Secrets

A dictionary is the brainchild of its authors. The major desire of any lexicographer, who has dedicated much work and love to a specific dictionary, is that the expected target users utilise and appreciate it. This is even more so when the dictionary in question is a school dictionary and the target users are

children being initiated in the marvellous world of their first language. This is true in Cuba, Africa, and elsewhere. However, too often the lexicographers' brainchild is taken out of their hands when they have finished the last article of the last letter. The promotion and distribution is put in the hands of marketing experts and other professionals from the publishing houses — well-prepared people who may do their job well but probably without the same feelings and personal involvement as those who produced the dictionary in the first place. This may lead to a certain degree of "business as usual".

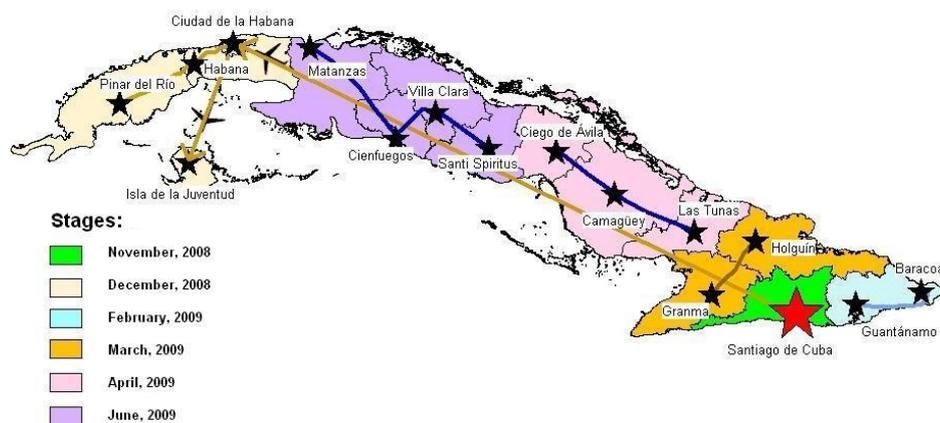
Eloína Miyares Bermúdez and the other lexicographers at the Centro de Lingüística Aplicada cherish their school dictionary. They have therefore decided to play an active role in its promotion and distribution. This distribution follows, on the one hand, the normal channels for books and school material in Cuba. On the other hand, however, the authors have taken a number of initiatives which, it could be said, represent a *reunion with their users*. We will here briefly mention three of these.

The first initiative is not completely unknown to lexicographers in other countries. In Cuba, there is an annual FERIA del Libro (Book Fair) starting in Havana, the capital, with subsequent sessions in provinces all over the island during the months of February and March. Hundred thousands of Cubans participate in this very popular event, among them many parents together with their children looking for "normal" books as well as educative material — and the authors of the *Diccionario Básico Escolar* do the same. They have made use of the FERIA del Libro to present their dictionary. The result is impressive: apart from the opportunity to talk directly to their end users and their parents, during February 2011 they sold 50.000 dictionaries in one week in Havana only. If the number of printed copies had been larger, even more dictionaries could probably have been sold.

The second initiative is unique. During the past years, the Centro de Lingüística Aplicada has organised "caravans" which until now have visited 36 of Cuba's 168 municipalities and sponsored meetings where the authors themselves have introduced — and donated — the dictionary to teachers and other relevant people interested in it. This has allowed the establishing of direct links to the schools and, ultimately, to close the circle that started several years before with the research into the school children's active-functional vocabulary.

Since 1992, the Centro de Lingüística Aplicada has organized these Scientific National Caravans on initiative of the two founders of the Centre, Dr Vitelio Ruiz Hernández and Dra Eloína Miyares Bermúdez. The fundamental aim of these caravans, which are also supported by the Cuban Ministry of Education, is to spread the results of the Centre's scientific research across the whole country to raise the Spanish language culture of all students of elementary, secondary and high schools. Within the framework of these caravans, workshops and meetings are held where the researchers expound these scientific results and explain to the participants how to use them. In the most recent visit of the caravans (2008–2009), the printed and digital (CD) versions of the

*Diccionario Básico Escolar* were distributed freely in 3.800 and 3.000 copies respectively. Simultaneously, the books *Ortografía Integral* (Integral Spelling) and *Léxico activo-funcional del escolar cubano* (a study of the active-functional vocabulary of Cuban primary-school children) were handed out among the participants in 2.000 and 1.000 copies, respectively. In Figure 1, the route and stages of the caravan (2008–2009) are indicated.



**Figure 1:** The route taken by the National Scientific Caravan in 2008–2009

In the various workshops and meetings organised by the caravan all over the country, more than a 1.000 persons participated, among them teachers, parents, students and executives who subsequently played the role of multipliers of this linguistic-pedagogic experience when they took it to the Cuban classrooms. Additionally, in these meetings, the scholars from the Centro de Lingüística Aplicada received many suggestions and ideas aimed at improving and extending their scientific work. One of these was to produce a digital version of the *Diccionario Escolar Ilustrado*, i.e. the dictionary for the youngest school children. The corresponding software has now been developed and it will be presented at the meetings planned to take place in 2013 and 2014 during the next caravan. Information about the caravans can be found on the website of the Centro de Lingüística Aplicada ([www.linguistica.santiago.cu](http://www.linguistica.santiago.cu)).

The third initiative is also related to the *Diccionario Básico Escolar*. It consists of the annual organisation of lexicographical "marathons" at school, municipal and provincial level (still not at a national level), where school children are stimulated to consult dictionaries and compete in terms of their lexicographical skills. These marathons are a new initiative taken by the founders of the Centro de Lingüística Aplicada and have been held in the eastern province of Santiago to stimulate a general dictionary culture among Cuban school children. The basic idea is to organise a competition where the time the partici-

pants use to search for words in the dictionary is measured, and where the one who uses the least time is declared the winner of the marathon. The participants in these competitions are mainly children from secondary school. Since 2009, tens of thousands of children at school level and more than 2.000 at municipality and province level have participated in the first five occurrences of the marathon using the *Diccionario Básico Escolar* as instrument of competition; as such, it also has an important impact on the use of this dictionary. The marathons have until now only been organised in the province of Santiago de Cuba but it is now planned to extend the competition to the rest of the country. Some of the results of the marathons can also be seen at [www.linguistica.santiago.cu](http://www.linguistica.santiago.cu).

## 6. Accessible price

There are several additional factors contributing to the success experienced by the authors of *Diccionario Básico Escolar*. Since 1959, the Cuban government has regarded education as one of its most important priorities and has invested considerable amounts of money in this sector. As a result of this policy, the educational system in Cuba today is among the most esteemed in the world. This also means that present-day parents are much more conscious of their children's needs in this respect. This positive attitude may partially explain their willingness to buy school dictionaries for their children.

However, it must not be ignored that salaries in Cuba are not particularly high. As most families in Africa, Cuban families have to mind their money and prioritise on what it is spent. They will not be able to afford any price — even for the benefit of their children.

In this respect, two measures have been taken to ensure an accessible price of the *Diccionario Básico Escolar*. First, the authors received a donation from the Basque government to print and distribute the second edition (3.800 copies) at a reasonable price. Later they received funding from the Instituto Cubano del Libro (Cuban Book Institute) which permitted the printing of 120.000 dictionaries. Together with the use of cheap paper and printing techniques, the funding has made it possible to offer the third edition of the *Diccionario Básico Escolar* — 1.200 pages in two volumes — at the very low price of 30 Cuban Pesos (about 11 South African Rand) thus making it accessible to any Cuban family with school children.

## 7. Conclusion

Each new edition and impression of the *Diccionario Básico Escolar* has been quickly sold out in spite of the considerable number of printed copies. Various factors may explain this remarkable success. Government funding and the low distribution prices are undoubtedly important factors. But just as important is the quality of the dictionary and the efforts made by the lexicographers to

make their product known among the school children and their parents. The caravans to various municipalities, the meetings with local educational authorities and first-language teachers, the direct encounters with school children and their parents — all of these contribute to the promotion of the dictionary. In addition, the stimulation of a dictionary culture in the classrooms by means of lexicographical marathons should not be ignored either.

The Cuban experience shows above all that a multi-faceted relation between lexicographers and users — not only in the preparation and compilation phases, but also in the post-publication phase — is mutually inspiring for both parts and, hence, highly recommendable. As we wrote in the beginning of this contribution, we are very much aware that the specific experience described is embedded in a particular cultural tradition and context, and that it therefore cannot be copied. We are convinced that there are also other roads leading to Rome. But we hope at least to have provided some material for reflection and inspiration — for the benefit of school children, parents, and lexicographers.

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