

Using an online bilingual dictionary

A. Introduction

Bilingual dictionaries can be used to translate from your mother tongue (L1) to a second language (L2) or vice versa. Naturally, L1 > L2 direction is most common for speaking or writing (productive) tasks and L2 > L1 direction for reading and listening (receptive) tasks.

There are a large number of bilingual dictionaries available free online, for example:

1. Reverso Dictionary: Includes 16 languages, using online dictionaries from well-known companies such as Collins, Merriam-Webster, Larousse & Oxford.
<https://dictionary.reverso.net/>
2. Collins Online Dictionary: Includes 8 languages (English, Chinese, French, German, Hindi, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish) <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/>
3. Japanese-English dictionaries: <https://ejje.weblio.jp/>; <https://jisho.org/> ;
<https://dictionary.goo.ne.jp/> ; <https://www.alc.co.jp/>

Choosing an appropriate bilingual dictionary is a very personal decision and will depend on such aspects as your L1 and L2 languages, proficiency level and areas of interest. When considering different options available, consider the following questions:

- (i) Can you find the words you want to translate in the dictionary?
- (ii) Does the dictionary give definitions for search words and can you understand them easily?
- (iii) Does the dictionary provide example sentences to show the words in context?
- (iv) Is the dictionary equally good in both directions (L1 > L2 and L2 > L1)?
- (v) Does the dictionary explain polysemous words clearly (i.e. those which have multiple meanings, such as *bank*)?
- (vi) Does the dictionary explain the differences between words that are close in meaning (e.g. 'ways of walking': *staggered/ strolled/ scampered/ plodded*)?



A good bilingual dictionary will provide a variety of information to help you choose the correct translation. Here is an example from the Collins English-Spanish dictionary for the word *fish*:

The image shows a screenshot of the Collins English-Spanish dictionary entry for the word "fish". The entry is annotated with 11 numbered callouts that point to specific linguistic information:

- 1. Search word:** Points to the word "fish" at the top of the entry.
- 2. Pronunciation:** Points to the phonetic transcription [fɪʃ] with a speaker icon.
- 3. Part of speech:** Points to the word "NOUN" below the pronunciation.
- 4. Translation (in blue font):** Points to the first translation "(alive) **pez** m" and the second translation "(as food) **pescado** m".
- 5. Plural form:** Points to the text "Word forms: plural fish or fishes".
- 6. Word frequency:** Points to the "Word Frequency" indicator, which consists of five colored circles (four red, one grey).
- 7. Information on meaning (context of use):** Points to the first translation "(alive) **pez** m".
- 8. Information on country of use:** Points to the idiom "IDIOM: I've got other fish to fry (informal) **tengo cosas más importantes que hacer**".
- 9. Gender (masculine/feminine):** Points to the second translation "(informal) (= person) **tipo (tipa)** (inf) m/f ♦ **tío (tía)** m/f (Spain) (inf)".
- 10. Register (formal/informal):** Points to the idiom "IDIOM: he's a (bit of a) cold fish (informal) **es un tipo frío** (inf)".
- 11. Example sentences in both languages:** Points to the example sentences under the intransitive verb section, such as "he goes fishing at weekends **sale a pescar los fines de semana**".

The dictionary entry itself contains the following text:

fish
[fɪʃ]

NOUN
Word forms: plural fish or fishes

1. (alive) **pez** m
(as food) **pescado** m

- IDIOM: neither fish nor fowl **ni chicha ni limoná**
- IDIOM: I've got other fish to fry (informal) **tengo cosas más importantes que hacer**
- IDIOM: there are other fish in the sea **hay otros peces en el mar**
- IDIOM: to be like a fish out of water **estar como pez fuera del agua**

2. (informal) (= person) **tipo (tipa)** (inf) m/f ♦ **tío (tía)** m/f (Spain) (inf)
odd fish **bicho** m raro (inf)
big fish **pez** m gordo

- IDIOM: he's a (bit of a) cold fish (informal) **es un tipo frío** (inf)

INTRANSITIVE VERB

pescar

[trawler] **faenar**

he goes fishing at weekends **sale a pescar los fines de semana**
I'm going fishing **voy de pesca**
to go salmon fishing **ir a pescar salmón**
to fish for [trout, salmon etc] **pescar**; [compliments, information] **andar a la caza de**
to fish (around) in one's pocket for sth **buscarse algo en el bolsillo**

- IDIOM: to fish in troubled waters **pescar en río revuelto**

TRANSITIVE VERB

[river, pond] **pescar en**
[trout, salmon etc] **pescar**

B. Familiarization tasks

1. Look up the English words: *shoulder*; *consent*; *excited* in two or three bilingual dictionaries for your own language and fill in the table below:

What information is available in each dictionary (put \checkmark or X)?

| Dictionary name | | | |
|---|--|--|--|
| 1. Translation L1>L2 & L2>L1 (same level of detail in both directions?) | | | |
| 2. Spelling | | | |
| 3. Pronunciation | | | |
| 4. Translation | | | |
| 5. Part of speech (noun, verb, etc.) | | | |
| 6. Information on meaning (context of use) | | | |
| 7. Example sentences | | | |
| 8. Grammatical information | | | |
| 9. Register information (formal/informal) | | | |
| 10. Information on country/region of use | | | |
| 11. Information on idioms (e.g. 'get cold feet') | | | |

Which bilingual dictionary do you prefer? Why?

2. Translate the following English sentences into your 1st language (L1):

i) *We had a drink at the theatre **bar** before watching the play.*

ii) *Can you buy me a **bar** of chocolate at the supermarket?*

iii) *Being a woman should not be a **bar** to promotion at work.*

iv) *The houses have **bars** on the windows to prevent burglaries.*

v) *All the gang members are now behind **bars**.*

Could you use the same word for 'bar' in all of your L1 translations? How did you check that you had the right meaning?

3. Translate the following sentences into your 1st language (pay close attention to the word in **bold**):

i) *The young woman **gazed** lovingly at the photo of her boyfriend.*

ii) *The sailor **peered** through the thick fog, trying to find a way past the icebergs.*

iii) *In Britain it is considered rude to **stare** at people.*

iv) *The witness only caught a **glimpse** of the mugger as he ran away.*

v) *The forensic scientist **examined** the crime scene carefully.*

4. Finding translations for fixed expressions, such as 'to foot the bill' can be more difficult. Search for 'main words' in the expression, rather than 'grammar words' (e.g. *foot* or *bill*, not *to* or *the*).

Translate the following sentences into your 1st language (pay close attention to the fixed expressions in **bold**):

i) *Your birthday present **cost an arm and a leg**.*

ii) *My ex-girlfriend **gave me the cold shoulder** at the party.*

iii) ***Off the top of my head** I'd say there were about thirty people at the meeting.*

iv) *Because he's rich, he **looks down his nose** at everyone.*

v) *I wish my boss would **get off my back**.*

5. 'False friends' are words or phrases that look similar to those in your 1st language but actually have different meanings. They can often cause communication problems, for example, the word *gift* means *present* in English but *poison* in German: saying "I'd like to buy you a gift for your birthday" in Germany might shock your hosts!

Check an online bilingual dictionary and find the L1 meaning and English meaning for the following false friends:

| False friend | Meaning in your language | English meaning |
|-----------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| e.g. Gift | Poison (German) | Present (English) |
| Smart (スマート) | | |
| Talent (タレント) | | |
| Unique (ユニーク) | | |
| Handle (ハンドル) | | |
| Claim (クレーム) | | |
| Cunning (カンニング) | | |
| Mansion (マンション) | | |

6. 'Reverse lookup' is a useful technique for verifying that you have chosen the correct translation for a search word. It includes the following steps:

Step 1: Search L1 > L2


Step 2: Translate the L2 suggestions back into the L1 using a bilingual dictionary to confirm the meaning

Step 3: Check the L1 and L2 translations in a monolingual dictionary for further confirmation

e.g. **Step 1:** An English speaker wants to find a French translation for the word *purple*. A search for *purple* in the Collins English-French dictionary (L1 > L2) suggests two possible translations, *violet(te)* and *pourpre*:

French translation of 'purple'


purple

[ˈpɜːpəl 

ADJECTIVE

(*bluish*) **violet(te)**

(*reddish*) **pourpre**

Step 2: A search for the word *violet(te)* in the Collins French-English dictionary (L2 > L1) gives *purple* and *violet*  while a search for *pourpre* (L2 > L1) gives *crimson*.



In other words, the French word *pourpre* is a 'false friend' for the English word *purple* because it is actually closer to the colour red.

Step 3: A search for *pourpre* in the Larousse French Dictionary says ‘Couleur rouge foncé’ (a dark red colour), while a search for *crimson* in the Oxford English Dictionary says ‘A rich deep red colour’ so the meanings agree.

Follow the 3 steps of ‘reverse look-up’ to find a good translation for the words in **bold** below:

i) **fuman wo iu** (Use ALC for this search)

人々は安楽な生活を望むため、課税政策に対していつも**不満を言う**。

Hitobito wa anrakuna seikatsu wo nozomu tame, kazei seisaku ni taishite itsumo **fuman wo iu**.

ii) **gimu** (Compare ALC and Goo for this search)

高等教育は法的**義務**ではない。

Koutou kyouiku wa houteki **gimu** dewanai.

iii) **jinzai** (Compare ALC and Goo for this search)

優秀な**人材**とは、必ずしも生まれながらの才能がある者とは限らない。

Yuushuna **jinzai** towa kanarazushimo umarenagara no sainou ga aru mono towa kagiranai.

Suggested answers for #6 (reverse look-up exercise)

i) *fuman wo iu* (Use ALC for this search)


人々は安楽な生活を望むため、課税政策に対していつも**不満を言う**。

Hitobito wa annrakuna seikatsu wo nozomu tame, kazei seisaku ni taishite itsumo **fuman wo iu**.

Step 1

A search of ALC for ‘*fuman wo iu*’ offers 4 possible translations: *rag*, *bitch*, *complain*, *holler*:

不満を言う を英語で
 ・該当件数: 46件
 不満を言う の類語
 類語: 愚痴を言う, 文句を言う

 **不満を言う**

他動
 rag 〈俗〉
 自動

1. *bitch* 〈話〉
2. *complain*
3. *holler* 〈話〉

Rag is marked as informal (俗) and a search of the OALD labels it as ‘informal’ with the meaning ‘to laugh at and/or play tricks on somebody’. Both the meaning and the register therefore suggest that *rag* is inappropriate.

Bitch is marked as spoken English (話) and a search of the OALD also labels it as ‘old fashioned’ with the meaning ‘to make unkind or critical remarks about somebody/something, especially when they are not there’. Although the meaning seems similar, this word is clearly inappropriate for academic writing.

Holler is also marked as spoken English (話) and a search of the OALD also labels it as ‘informal, especially North American English’ with the meaning ‘to shout loudly’. Both the meaning and the register therefore suggest that *holler* is inappropriate.

Step 2

A search of Weblio for *rag* suggests the translations からかう, いじめる and しかる which all have a different meaning from 不満を言う.

A search for *bitch* suggests the translations ひどく不満を言う (俗), 意地悪をする, 台無しにする which either have a different meaning from 不満を言う or are too informal.

A search for *complain* suggests the translations 不満を言う, 愚痴をこぼす, 病苦を訴える which have both the correct meaning and level of formality.

A search for *holler* suggests the translations 叫ぶ, どなる, しかる, 不平を言う. Most of these have the meaning of ‘shout’ and are therefore inappropriate.

From the results in Steps 1 and 2 *complain* therefore seems to be the best translation.

Step 3

A search of the OALD for *complain* gives the definition: ‘to say that you are annoyed, unhappy or not satisfied about somebody/something’.

A search of Goo for *fuman* gives the definition ‘not satisfied’ – these meanings seem to agree with each other.

Answer

人々は安楽な生活を望むため、課税政策に対していつも不満を言う。⇒ Since people prefer an easy life, they always **complain about** taxation policies.

ii) gimu (Compare ALC and Goo for this search)

高等教育は法的義務ではない。

Koutou kyouiku wa houteki **gimu** dewanai.

Step 1

A search of ALC for ‘gimu’, rather unhelpfully, gives 20 possible translations (some of them incorrect) and it would be time-consuming to choose an appropriate translation.

義務

allegiance (国家や支配者に対する)

one's baby (話)

burden

charge

commitment (契約上の)

devoir (文)

duty (道徳的・法的な)

fardh (回教) (【参考】 Tabilan)

imperative

imposition (人に課せられる)

incumbency

job

liability

need

obligation (慣習・協定・契約などから生じる)

onus (【複】 onuses)

ought (道徳的)

part (人が果たすべき)

responsibility (職務・義務として負っている)

wajib (アラビア語)

Goo is more convenient in this case because it offers only 2 suggestions, *duty* and *obligation*:

義務で始まる言葉

ぎむ【義務】

(a) duty, (an) obligation (▼dutyは良心、道義心、正義感などから果たさなければならないと思うこと,

ぎむ【義務】

duty; obligation 《責務》

Step 2

Reverse translation of *duty* and *obligation* in Goo gives the following meanings:

Duty: 義務, 本分, 義理

Obligation: 義務, 拘束, 責任, 責務

Obligation seems more appropriate here because it relates to social, rather than human, responsibility.

Furthermore, a search in the online corpus COCA gives the following hits:

| Corpus of Contemporary American English | | | |
|--|------------------|---------|-----------------------|
| SEARCH | FREQUENCY | CONTEXT | ACCOUNT |
| SEE CONTEXT: CLICK ON WORD OR SELECT WORDS + [CONTEXT] [HELP...] | | | |
| CONTEXT ALL FORMS (SAMPLE): 100 200 500 | | FREQ | iWeb LEGAL OBLIGATION |
| 1 | LEGAL OBLIGATION | 228 | |

| Corpus of Contemporary American English | | | |
|--|------------|---------|-----------------|
| SEARCH | FREQUENCY | CONTEXT | ACCOUNT |
| SEE CONTEXT: CLICK ON WORD OR SELECT WORDS + [CONTEXT] [HELP...] | | | |
| CONTEXT ALL FORMS (SAMPLE): 100 200 500 | | FREQ | iWeb LEGAL DUTY |
| 1 | LEGAL DUTY | 71 | |

Since 'legal obligation' has 228 hits and 'legal duty' has 71 hits, we can conclude that the former expression is more common/natural and is the better choice.

Step 3

A search of the OALD for *obligation* gives the definition: 'The state of being forced to do something because it is your duty, or because of a law'.

A search of Goo for *gimu* gives the definition (3) 'Binding imposed on people by law' – these meanings seem to agree with each other.

Answer

高等教育は法的義務ではない ⇒ Higher education is not a legal **obligation**.

iii) Jinzai (Compare ALC and Goo for this search)

優秀な人材とは、必ずしも生まれながらの才能がある者とは限らない。

Yuushuna **jinnzai** towa kanarazushimo umarenagara no sainou ga aru mono towa kagiranai.

Step 1

A search of ALC for 'jinzai' offers 4 possible translations: *human material*, *human resources*, *manpower*, *personnel resources*:

人材

human material

human resources (【略】HR)

manpower (【無性表現】human resources; personnel; staff; employees; workforce)

personnel resources

A search of Goo for 'jinzai' offers 4 possible translations: *talented person, an able person, competent person, human resources*:

人材で一致する言葉

じんざい【人材】

〔才能のある人〕 a talented person ; 〔能力のある人〕 an able person 人材を抜擢ばってきする

じんざい【人材】

competent person; talent(ed) person; human resources

Only one of the translations is the same for Goo and ALC (human resources) which is not very helpful!

Step 2

A search of Goo for *human material* gives no matches, suggesting that this expression is not natural.

A search of Goo for *human resources* gives 3 possible translations: 人的資源, 人材, 人事課. None of these expressions carries the meaning of 'talented' or 'competent' and they are therefore inappropriate.

A search of Goo for *manpower* gives 2 possible translations: 有効総人数, 人的資源. Neither of these expressions carries the meaning of 'talented' or 'competent' and they are rather uncommon and therefore inappropriate.

A search of Goo for *personnel resources* gives no matches, suggesting that this expression is not natural.

A search of Goo for *talented* gives 2 possible translations: (生まれつきの) 才能のある, 有能な. These expressions carry the meaning of 'ability' or 'natural ability' and therefore *talented* seems to be appropriate here.

A search of Goo for *competent* gives 3 possible translations: 有能な, 力量がある, 適格な・適任の. These expressions carry the meaning of 'ability' or 'suitability (for a job)' which also seems appropriate here.

Step 3

A search of the OALD for *talented* gives the definition: 'Having a natural ability to do something well.'

A search of Goo for *jinzai* gives the definition 'talented, useful and able' – these meanings seem to agree with each other.

A search of the OALD for *competent* gives the definition: 'Having enough skill or knowledge to do something well or to the necessary standard'.

In this context, *competent* is a more accurate translation of *jinzai* and *talented* is closer to the meaning of 生まれながらの才能がある.

Answer: 優秀な人材 とは、必ずしも生まれながらの才能がある者とは限らない ⇒ A **competent** person is not necessarily naturally **talented**.