

# On J. M. Dixon and His Dictionary Together with a Couple of Examples of Its Influence on Contemporary Dictionaries

MASAKO SUZUKI

## 1. Introduction

This paper aims to show some details of who J. M. Dixon was and how it was that he compiled a dictionary that is still in print today and this dictionary has had influence on proverb descriptions in English-Japanese dictionaries published in the last one hundred years<sup>1)</sup>.

The vast majority of proverbs have remained unchanged since their first publication until the present day. This is quite natural since the meaning of the proverbs is stable and unchanged and neither has the English language changed. However, there are proverbs, which, for a variety of reasons, should be updated. To ascertain whether the descriptions of these proverbs were kept unchanged or were changed over the years, I studied 18 English-Japanese dictionaries published in the last one hundred years (Suzuki). The result was both yes and no. While there were some changes properly made, there were some cases where no changes have been made when there should have been: firstly in order to meet changes in English and secondly in order to correct the “mistakes” made in earlier days. Where these changes were not made and mistakes not corrected, I found the considerable influence of *Dictionary of Idiomatic English Phrases* (hereafter *DIEP*) compiled by James Main Dixon.

## 2. James Main Dixon (1856–1933)

For such a well-known person credited with compiling dictionaries

still revered by scholars a hundred years after publication, there is surprisingly little biographical information readily available to the layman making a cursory search. There is very little information about his parents, siblings, wife and children, if any. This is not to say that the information cannot be found anywhere but a simple search on the Internet or over general reference books will only reveal the bare bones which are: he was born in Scotland and graduated from the University of St. Andrews in 1879 and was appointed scholar and tutor of philosophy there in the same year. However, in the same year, 1879, he was requested to come to Japan to be a professor teaching English at Kobu-Dai-Gakko, the Imperial College of Engineering which became the Faculty of Engineering at the Imperial University of Japan in 1886. Amongst his students, there were Hidesaburo Saito (1866–1929), who wrote books on English grammar and compiled dictionaries, Yoshisaburo Okakura (1868–1936), who edited *Kenkyusha's New English-Japanese Dictionary on Bilingual Principles*, and Soseki Natsume (1867–1916). In 1892, he moved to America together with his American wife and taught English literature and later Oriental studies and comparative literature in American universities until he died in 1933.

The reason why Dixon came to Japan when he was just appointed scholar at the University of St. Andrews and when he did not have much experience of teaching at the age of 23, was that his elder brother, William Gray Dixon, was a professor teaching English at the Imperial College of Engineering, and it was this position that James took over from his brother (Dyer 4), from January the 1st in 1880 (Omura 147). According to *the Annals of the Free Church of Scotland*<sup>3)</sup>, James had 2 brothers and 4 sisters. The eldest sister, Jane Gray Dixon who was referred to as Mary Jane Gray Dixon, was also living in Tokyo at the same time as James and in 1885 she married Cargill Gilston Knott, who was a professor of Physics and Engineering at the Imperial University. James himself married in 1885 an American, Clara Belle Richards, who was teaching at the Imperial Conservatory of Music.

While he lived and taught in Japan, he published several “books” on English language and literature. These “books” were mostly his written teaching material including *DIEP* which started as a list of idiomatic phrases that his students collected from works of fiction. The list eventually grew to over 3,000 entries. James at 23 might have been young to be professor at the Imperial College of Engineering but he appears to have been hard-working and aggressive with a wide-ranging interest in everything about him including the Ainu and Japanese etiquette.

### 3. Review of the *Dictionary of Idiomatic English Phrases (DIEP)*

There seems to exist at least three versions of *DIEP* as follows.

#### 3.1. *Dictionary of Idiomatic English Phrases (DIEP) in Japan*

The full title of the dictionary published in Japan by Kyoyekishosha is *Dictionary of Idiomatic English Phrases Specially Designed for the Use of Japanese Students*, and this title explains that the dictionary was basically made for his students. It seems the dictionary was highly recommended even then. A book review magazine *Geppyo* reviewed this dictionary in March 1888 and said that the dictionary is quite valuable for English researchers and its reasonable price makes it easier for students to purchase and use (113). It must truly have been popular amongst Japanese students studying English at that time, as some following phrase books name his dictionary as one of their reference books (Eigo Kyojyu Kai, Kanda & Nannichi).

It seems that the publishing year of the first edition has been ambiguous; some mention 1887 and others 1888 (Takenaka 28–29). The fact is that 1887 was the year of acquiring the copyright license and that 1888 was the year of printing and selling of the first edition (Toyoda 114–115).

The size of the book is about 12x18cm, and the contents of the first edition are as follows: Title Page, Preface, Explanation of Signs, Dictionary of English Idioms, Supplement, Appendixes, List of Authors Quoted, and Colophon. In all there are 352 pages. From the second

edition an Appendix of 25 pages was added. Idioms are listed alphabetically according to their headwords. One remarkable point with this dictionary was signs he used; “P. Good Prose, C. Conversational, F. Familiar, and S. Slang.”

### 3.2. *Dictionary of Idiomatic English Phrases (DIEP) outside of Japan*

*DIEP* was not only published in Japan. It was also published by Nelson and Sons with offices in London, Edinburgh and New York. The title was changed from the Japanese edition to *Dictionary of Idiomatic English Phrases* only. Again the publishing year had been unclear, and Takenaka did not conclude the exact publishing year of *DIEP* by Nelson and Sons (30–31). However, it is now available on the Internet and one to look at is a copy published in 1891, and I assume that this year, 1891, is the publishing year of the first edition based on the following facts: Dixon himself wrote in his biography “My *Dictionary of English Idiomatic Phrases* [*sic.*] appeared in Tokyo in 1888, and was published by the firm of Nelson and Sons in London and New York in the following year” (Dixon 1895), and the Bibliography of the *Oxford English Dictionary* says “Dixon, James M. *Dictionary of Idiomatic English Phrases* 1891” (Simpson and Weiner).

The size of the book is about 14.5x19.5cm, slightly bigger than the Japanese version. Even though the title sounds mostly the same, the preface was rewritten by Dixon himself for the English/American readers. The contents seem mostly the same as well: Title page, Preface, Explanation of Signs, Dictionary of Idiomatic English Phrases, Appendix, and Authors, Anonymous works, and Journals Quoted. There are 384 pages in all. It seems that Dixon did not add any more content to this version, and I have also looked at one copy published in 1896.

As mentioned the preface was rewritten and it was probably edited by the publishing company Nelson and Sons. In other words, the preface of the Japanese version seems a little unprofessional, such as the way he wrote his reference books in the preface. He doesn't use

Table 1 Comparison of the first 10 pages of *DIEP* (1891) and *DIEP* (1888)

|                             | <i>DIEP</i> (1891) | <i>DIEP</i> (1888) |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Number of Entries           | 78                 | 36                 |
| Number of Example Sentences | 8                  | 17                 |
| Number of Quotations        | 107                | 23                 |

italics for the titles. This indicates also that the dictionary was originally his material and no other native speakers had read it when it was published in Japan. As for the contents, compared with the original Japanese version published in 1888, it seems that the supplement of the Japanese version was mostly added into the contents, but none of the appendix, which was added after the second edition, was included. Checking the first 10 pages of the *DIEP* published in 1891, it was amended significantly, even only a couple of years later.

Firstly, in the first 10 pages, the number of entries is more than doubled: 9 entries from the supplement of *DIEP* (1888) and 33 new entries. Secondly, the number of quotations is drastically increased, while the number of example sentences, which were probably made by Dixon, is reduced. Ten quotations were taken from the supplement while 3 were deleted from *DIEP* (1888). There are also some amendments, both deleted and added, made in the explanations. This shows clearly that these dictionaries, with similar titles by the same compiler, are different, while the basic structure stays the same.

### 3.3. *English idioms*

There is one more version of *DIEP*, renamed *English Idioms*, but published by the same publishing company Nelson and Sons. Its publishing year is again unclear, and it seems impossible to clarify the year, as its publishing year is not printed on the title page. Some mention 1927 (Omura 147), and others mention 1912 (Deki and Takanashi 215). The oldest publishing year information I could find on the Internet is 1912<sup>3)</sup>, but it could be that it was published earlier. This dictionary is also published as part of Nelson's encyclopaedic library.

The size of the book is much smaller compared to the others, about 11x16cm. Even though the title was changed from *DIEP* (1891), the preface is mostly the same as *DIEP* (1891), just slightly reduced, and the contents stay almost the same. I checked the first 10 pages and there was only one typo, which differs from the earlier copy.

This dictionary whether with the title *Dictionary of Idiomatic English Phrases* or *English Idioms* is still on the market. Other than used books, there are several publishing companies reprinting this dictionary with both titles as it is now free from the copyright, and they are also available as e-books. Moreover, in 1939, *English Idioms* was also published in Braille.

### 3.4. Summary of the above three versions

As explained in the above, Dixon's dictionary has at least three versions in English. The following table shows how similar/different they are.

For his first version, as he mentioned in the preface he had to supply the supplement to cover deficiencies in especially the first few letters of the alphabetical list (Dixon 1888). Appendixes of *DIEP* (1888) consist of "old sayings", "equivalent expressions", and "an additional list of such expressions", and that of *DIEP* (1891) "old sayings", "equivalent expressions", and "similar expressions". For *DIEP* (1891) Dixon added two expressions in "equivalent expressions" and deleted one and added two in "similar expressions". In *DIEP* (1888), the complete title of "List of authors quoted" is "a list of authors, anonymous works, and journals quoted in the dictionary", and in *DIEP* (1891) and *English Idioms* "authors, anonymous works, and journals quoted". From *DIEP* (1888) to *DIEP* (1891), 40 entries are added and one deleted, and some entries were corrected to follow in alphabetical order. In *English Idioms*, there are fewer explanations about the entries and 41 entries, both authors and journal titles, were deleted for some reason.

Table 2 Three versions of Dixon's dictionary

|                        | <i>DIEP</i> (1888)                 | <i>DIEP</i> (1891)              | <i>English Idioms</i>          |
|------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Publishing company     | Kyoyekishosha                      | T. Nelson and Sons              | Thomas Nelson and Sons         |
| First edition          | 1888                               | 1891                            | 1912?                          |
| Availability           | Not available (Up to 8th edition?) | Still available                 | Still available                |
| Special editions       | None                               | With Chinese translation (1909) | Braille version (1939)         |
| Size                   | 12x18cm                            | 14.5x19.5cm                     | 11x16cm                        |
| Preface                | 3 pages                            | 3 pages                         | 2 pages                        |
| Body text              | 295 pages                          | 365 pages                       | 271 pages (2 columns per page) |
| Supplement             | 44 pages                           | None                            | None                           |
| Appendixes             | 2 pages                            | 1 page                          | None                           |
| List of authors quoted | 10 pages<br>225 entries            | 11 pages<br>264 entries         | 10 pages<br>223 entries        |
| Appendix               | 25 pages (from 2nd edition)        | None                            | None                           |

#### 4. Reference books used by Dixon

In *DIEP*'s preface, Dixon mentions Kwong Ki Chiu's *Dictionary of English Phrases with Illustrative Sentences* in New York and other cities, including Yokohama, published in 1881, which seems to be the most referred to English idiom book in Japan at that time (Ichikawa 7, Toyoda 101). The dictionary must have gained a certain popularity in Japan, so that it was later re-edited and published with Japanese translation in 1899 and also reprinted in the original in 1901. However, although Dixon has some praise for Kwong's dictionary, he also criticizes it as follows:

The objections to the work are, first, that *British*, as distinguished from *American* phrases, are conspicuous by their absence; secondly, that the arrangement is arbitrary and confusing; thirdly,

that the examples, though apt and good in themselves, do not bear the very useful *imprimatur* of some well-known author's name. They are made for the occasion, instead of having been picked up in reading. A fourth objection to the work is, that it is largely made up of definitions of single words.

(Dixon 1888 preface)

Then as his reference, he names some dictionaries at the end of the preface: They are: Cassell's *Encyclopædic Dictionary*, the *Supplementary English Glossary* of Rev. T. L. O. Davies, Wright's *Provincial Dictionary*, the fourth edition of Dr. Samuel Johnson's *English Dictionary*, and *Slang Dictionary* published by Messrs. Chatto and Windus. Furthermore, he mentions in the preface in *DIEP* (1891) and *English Idioms* "At least eighty per cent of the phrases are freshly gathered".

## 5. Some examples

In this chapter, I will introduce two actual cases, on how the following English-Japanese dictionaries referred to *DIEP*.

### 5.1. "Nine tailors make a man"

Firstly, the proverb, "nine tailors make a man", has some variations in English, such as "nine tailors go to a man" and "three tailors make a man", but the Japanese explanations are basically the same in various English-Japanese dictionaries<sup>4)</sup> published in the last one hundred years. However, this Japanese explanation "nine tailors make one man, as tailors are weak" does not match to that of the English proverb; a gentleman must select his attire from a number of sources (cf. Manser, Speake). As this proverb is not included in *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, the first edition published in 1911, various English dictionaries, which were published before 1915 and were then available in Japan, were checked. Then, *A Dictionary of English Phrases with English and Japanese Explanations* published in 1909 says:

nine (or ten or three) tailors make a man.

A popular saying in contempt of tailors. A tailor is often called

the ninth part of a man.

While *A Thesaurus of English Phrases with Japanese Equivalents* published in 1905 says:

Nine tailors make a man  
a popular saying in contempt of tailors. A tailor is o ten [*sic.*]  
called the ninth part of a man.

Their explanations are identical in English, so they must have referred to the same source. As reference books, both dictionaries name Dixon and Kwong in the prefaces. Kwong did not include this proverb, and *DIEP* says:

Nine tailors make a man  
a popular saying in contempt of tailors. F. A tailor is often called  
the ninth part of a man

There is no doubt that the above mentioned two dictionaries referred to *DIEP*, and thereafter followed various dictionaries in Japan. Why Dixon explained the proverb in this way is impenetrable. I have checked all the reference books, which Dixon named in the preface, but none of them seems to include this proverb<sup>5)</sup>. However, Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, published in 1898, says "The present scope of this expression is that a tailor is so much more feeble than another man that it would take nine of them to make a man of average stature and strength", so Dixon's explanation must have been reasonable then.

Though, the meaning of the proverb seems to have various stories behind. For example, Brewer introduces a story about an orphan lad who applied to a tailor for alms, and a story about the tolling bell; at the death of a man it is rung thrice three tolls. Manser explains "The original sense was that a gentleman should choose his garments from a wide range of tailors. The expression is also sometimes linked to bell-ringing: a *tailor* being a *teller* or "stroke" in a funeral knell; nine tailors referred to a man (six, a woman; three, a child)".

I am not saying that Dixon's explanation is wrong, but only it seems

an out-of-date idea nowadays. The description in contemporary English-Japanese dictionaries should therefore be revised.

## 5.2. “Pitchers have ears”

Here is one more example, “pitchers have ears”. Usually “little pitchers have long ears” is considered as a proverb, and it means children are apt to overhear. “Little pitchers” here indicate children. Therefore, if only pitchers, then it does not fully make sense. Dixon includes both expressions in *DIEP*. In the 1888-version, he puts “little pitchers have long ears” under “ear” and “pitchers have ears” under “pitcher”. His explanations are as follows:

Little pitchers have long ears – children are able to repeat things which they have listened to. Beware of speaking freely before children. C.

I’ll tell you again, not now. *Little pitchers have long ears* (some smart children are present).

Pitchers have ears — there are listeners who may hear. C. A proverbial expression. See *ear*.

Pitchers have ears, and I have many servants. *Shakspeare*. [*sic.*]

Then in the 1891-version, Dixon changes his explanation a little. No entry under “ear”, but only “pitchers have ears” under “pitchers”.

Pitches have ears — there are listeners who may hear. C. A proverbial expression. Also, “Little pitchers have long ears,” – young persons are quick of hearing.

Pitchers have ears, and I have many servants. — SHAKESPEARE.

The child might be somehow mistaken, or the old woman might have misread the address. But that was unlikely; and if it had been so, surely Miss Gray, knowing that little pitchers have ears, would have corrected the mistake. — SARAH TYTLER.

Dixon’s quotation “pitchers have ears” was used in Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*, and Shakespeare also used the expression in

another work *Richard III*, where pitchers clearly indicate children. The usage of “pitchers have ears” could be Shakespeare’s original way of writing based on the proverb “little pitchers have long ears”. There is no entry of “pitchers have ears” but “little pitchers have large/big ears” in various dictionaries (Brewer, Kwong, Manser, and Speake).

Even though the expression “pitchers have ears” could be used in English, it must be somehow related to the proverb “little pitchers have long ears”. Dixon himself combined two expressions to one entry, so he must have sensed some kind of connection there. No one can tell why he decided to prioritize “pitchers have ears” to “little pitchers have long ears”, but I assume the usage by Shakespeare had a certain influence.

There is one more thing to be considered; that is the Japanese translation. *DIEP* has no Japanese explanation, and *A Thesaurus of English Phrases with Japanese Equivalents* does not include these expressions, but *A Dictionary of English Phrases with English and Japanese Explanations* includes both as follows:

Pitchers have ears “Kabe ni Mimi ari” (literally, ears on wall) — there maybe listeners overhearing us: a punning proverb.

Little pitchers have long ears “Kodomo wa Hayamimi” (literally, children are quick-eared) — Little folk or children hear what is said when you little think it.

I cannot say that this was the first Japanese translation ever made, but most of the contemporary English-Japanese dictionaries follow them other than *Saito’s Idiomatical English-Japanese Dictionary* and *Inouye’s English-Japanese Dictionary*, that both only include “little pitchers have long ears”<sup>6</sup>). However, the translation of “Kabe ni Mimi ari” sounds not suitable, as there is the equivalent English proverb to that; “walls have ears”.

There are two problems in their descriptions in contemporary English-Japanese dictionaries. Firstly, whether “pitchers have ears” should be considered/entered as an independent proverb, and secondly how the proverb should be translated into Japanese.

## 6. Conclusion

It is obvious that *DIEP* had, and probably still has, a great influence on the dictionaries and researchers that followed. The way Dixon collected phrases and presented expressions alphabetically must have been sobering at that time, and this could be one reason why his dictionary is still valued now. However, readers are not aware of the situation, how Dixon produced this dictionary. He was young and inexperienced in a foreign country without having so many English-speaking colleagues/friends, while he had to teach English as a professor to elite students at the university. His work is definitely marvelous, but again readers are not aware of the existence of three versions. The fact that he himself corrected and added rather many entries, as well as explanations and quotations, to his revised *DIEP* (1891) shows that the original *DIEP* (1888), which was “specially designed for the use of Japanese students”, was in a way deficient.

English-Japanese dictionaries in their early days referred a lot to English-English dictionaries, which was inevitable at that time. As for phrases, *DIEP* (1888) could have been the primary source amongst Japanese compilers. Some of the “mistakes” caused by Dixon were corrected by later compilers. An entry “to make a mountain of a molehill” mentioned in *DIEP* and used by a couple of dictionaries<sup>7)</sup> was corrected in the other dictionaries to “make a mountain out of a molehill”. However, as for proverbs, it seems that dictionaries that came later did more or less copy previous descriptions, including those from *DIEP*, without further research. Since proverbs are not fixed all the time but organic, their descriptions in dictionaries should not just stay there but should be checked and revised accordingly.

## NOTES

1) Started from ones published in 1915, *Inouye's English-Japanese Dictionary* and *Saito's Idiomatic English-Japanese Dictionary*.

2) <http://ecclegen.com/> (20. Dec. 2015.)

3) [http://antiques.gift/english-idioms\\_9705754.html](http://antiques.gift/english-idioms_9705754.html) (20. Dec. 2015.), and <http://www.worldcat.org/title/english-idioms/oclc/714029087?referer=di&ht=edition> (20. Dec. 2015.)

4) Such as *Saito's Idiomatic English-Japanese Dictionary* (1915), *Kenkyusha's New*

*English-Japanese Dictionary on bilingual principles* (1927), *Shogakukan Random House English-Japanese Dictionary* (1973), *Kenkyusha's English-Japanese Dictionary for the General Reader* (1984), *Taishukan's Unabridged Genius English-Japanese Dictionary* (2001), *Grand Concise English-Japanese Dictionary* (2001), and *Kenkyusha's New English-Japanese Dictionary 6th edition* (2002).

5) The following reference books are available on the Internet now. 20. Dec. 2015. Cassell's *Encyclopaedic Dictionary*, *A Supplementary English Glossary*, Wright's *Provincial Dictionary*, Dr. Samuel Johnson's *English Dictionary*, and *Slang Dictionary*.

6) Such as *Kenkyusha's New English-Japanese Dictionary on bilingual principles* (1927), *Iwanami's Comprehensive English-Japanese Dictionary* (1970), *Shogakukan Random House English-Japanese Dictionary* (1973), *Kenkyusha's English-Japanese Dictionary for the General Reader* (1984), *Taishukan's Unabridged Genius English-Japanese Dictionary* (2001), and *Kenkyusha's New English-Japanese Dictionary 6th edition* (2002).

7) They were *Saito's Idiomatic English-Japanese Dictionary* (1915) and *Kenkyusha's New English-Japanese Dictionary on bilingual principles* (1927).

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