Online Law Dictionaries: How to Provide Help for EFL Text Production by Law Students

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Abstract Online dictionaries that assist users in writing legal texts in English as a foreign language are important lexicographic tools. They can help law students bridge the factual and linguistic gaps between the two legal universes involved. However, existing online law dictionaries with English as the target language primarily focus on terms, but students also need to write the remainder of the texts in factually and linguistically correct English. It is therefore important to have a sound theoretical foundation before embarking on a dictionary project that aims to help law students communicate in English as a foreign language. The function theory of lexicography offers an appropriate basis as it focuses on three key concepts: user needs, user competences and user situations. It is proposed that online dictionaries should be designed to satisfy the lexicographically relevant user needs by containing the types of data that can best satisfy the needs of students at the three stages of legal text production: draft writing, revising and editing. The theoretical aspects discussed are supported by examples from the online *CISG Dictionary,* which is a lexicographic tool developed to help Danish law students writing assignments in English on a specific legal topic. The dictionary allows users to search a database with carefully selected lexicographic data in several different ways, depending on what type of help users are looking for, and the search results provide users with different data depending on the search option selected.

1 Introduction

Danish law students write legal texts in English in several different situations. They regularly write test papers, essays and thesis abstracts during their time at university and occasionally have student jobs at law firms or assist professors in communicating in English as a foreign language (EFL). The success of these communicative acts depends on the legal and linguistic competences of the students: they must be able to use the correct legal terminology and use grammatically correct collocations, phrases and sentences. They usually consult bilingual law dictionaries, but these are often insufficient as they do not meet the requirements of the users. As a result, law dictionaries that serve as tools to assist writers of legal texts in English should be designed and compiled to provide help in well-defined types of user situations.

Law is fundamentally a culture-dependent subject field. Each culture structures its legal system in a way that suits only that culture and the legal language used reflects the structure of the individual system. Consequently, the term *English* used in legal contexts may not only refer to the legal framework of a particular culture, such as US English or UK English, but may refer to varieties of English used in communication involving different legal systems. In true international contexts a variety of English, which can best be described as international English, is used in international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods (CISG). The aim is to produce texts that describe a regulatory

framework in a language that can be understood by and is acceptable to as many as possible whether or not they are native speakers of English and no matter which legal system they come from. Dictionaries for legal text production should therefore specify their geographical and cultural constraints. In this paper I discuss the theoretical foundation of online law dictionaries designed for the production of legal texts in English as a foreign language. This involves analysing the lexicographically relevant needs of users, the lexicographic functions of dictionaries, the types of data needed by users at different stages of text production as well as the ways in which users have access to these data. The general discussion is exemplified by reference to an existing online law dictionary.

2 Laying the foundation of online dictionaries

The foundation on which to build a specific dictionary includes general lexicographic as well as dictionary-specific elements. The point of departure of the discussion below is an existing online dictionary called *Dansk-Engelsk CISG Ordbog (Danish-English CISG Dictionary)*, which is a bilingual dictionary designed to provide help to writers of legal texts on international contracts for the sale of goods. In a theoretical framework, the dictionary falls within the type called sub-field dictionaries, i. e. specialised dictionaries that cover one sub-field within a general field, for example a dictionary of contract law, and give in-depth treatment of the sub-fields concerned in terms of LSP communication (Nielsen 1990: 132–135, Nielsen 1994: 38–43). Placing dictionaries within this typological framework is important because it impacts on the data types to be selected and the type of help dictionaries can provide. The *CISG Dictionary* is designed specifically to provide help to Danish law students (the intended user group) when they write legal texts in English as a foreign language.

Online dictionaries of any kind should have a solid base. To paraphrase the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce: any dictionary project needs a solid foundation on which the dictionary can be developed into a fully-fledged tool which the intended users can consult for the purpose of fulfilling certain needs in more or less well-defined situations (Peirce 1992: 286). The foundation stone of a Danish-English dictionary of law is the ontological position the lexicographers take, and they may start by asking themselves: What actually is a dictionary? It is surprisingly difficult to find a clear answer to this question in the theoretical literature, but figure 1 presents a representative definition.

> **dictionary**
> **1** a book that gives a list of the words of a language in
> alphabetical order and explains what they mean, or gives
> a word for them in a foreign language.

Figure 1: Excerpt from the article "dictionary" in Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary

The definition in figure 1 is a traditional one indirectly describing a law dictionary as a book containing legal words and their meanings or equivalents in another language. However, a definition like this has two major drawbacks. Firstly, it takes no account of dictionary users and the types of user situations in which dictionaries are consulted. Secondly, the definition makes real sense only if readers are laypersons with no idea of what a dictionary is. As lexicographers are familiar with the concept of a dictionary, this type of definition is of little use because to

lexicographers in the capacity of experts dictionaries are objects of analysis, examination and research.

An alternative description of a dictionary may provide a better foundation stone for electronic law dictionaries. Online dictionaries should be regarded as complex lexicographic tools. Based on Nielsen (2009: 215), dictionaries can be said to have several **surface features,** those features that are visible to users in the two-dimensional space, i. e. on the screen. Examples are search sites, result sites, and a number of supporting components such as user guides and appendices. Furthermore, dictionaries have three **underlying features,** which are features that form the theoretical basis and are not immediately visible to users, namely:

(1)   they have been designed to fulfil one or more functions;
(2)   they contain data that have been selected because they help to fulfil the relevant function(s);
(3)   they have structures that marshal the data into the task of fulfilling the relevant function(s).

It is important to appreciate that surface and underlying features are distinct but interrelated parts that together make up a coherent whole: the dictionary. Nevertheless, when laying the foundation of dictionaries, the underlying features play a crucial role, and the overriding consideration is to focus on the functions that dictionaries can have. Bergenholtz/Tarp (2010: 30) define a lexicographic function as "the satisfaction of the specific types of lexicographically relevant needs that may arise in a specific type of potential user in a specific type of extra-lexicographical situation". In addition to explaining lexicographic functions, this definition contains three key concepts, which will be addressed below: needs, users and situations.

Dictionaries may be helpful in various situations, and law dictionaries generally have two types of functions. Dictionaries with **communicative functions** provide help in ongoing or planned communicative situations and dictionaries with **cognitive functions** provide help to those who want to acquire knowledge about factual or linguistic matters. Online law dictionaries can therefore be designed to:

- provide help to translate legal texts
- provide help to produce legal texts
- provide help to understand legal texts
- provide help to acquire general or specific knowledge about factual or linguistic matters from one or more legal sub-fields

To sum up, EFL production dictionaries for law students are information tools which, through their surface and underlying features, provide help to students who produce texts pertaining to the field of law in English as a foreign language. In order to compile such information tools, it is relevant to study the extra-lexicographic situation, i. e. what happens when students write legal texts, which is a type of situation that has essentially nothing to do with dictionaries. The production of legal texts shares several elements with the stages in the production of texts in general and lexicographers should therefore attempt to identify those stages of the text production process where dictionaries can provide help.

3 Determining user situations: EFL text production

Dictionaries assisting users in the production of legal texts will invariably need to contain several types of data. These have one thing in common: the data should enable users to write grammatically correct utterances without compromising the substantive legal contents. As argued by Bergenholtz/Nielsen (2002: 14), the general purpose of dictionaries that have been designed for text production is to help users become aware of the elements of good writing within the field of law; this includes aspects such as grammatical, syntactic, stylistic and terminological questions that arise during the writing process. The objective is not to inform users of the theoretical linguistic rules and structures underlying the English language (langue) but to inform users of the rules and linguistic means that make it possible to actively use the language (parole). When identifying the steps in producing texts, lexicographers should try to find a method that is relevant to and workable in lexicography.

A general outline of the writing process may be used to determine the lexicographic choices that compilers of dictionaries have to make, and one way in which to shed light on the process of text production is to consult the existing research literature on the subject. An outline made by experts who have carefully studied and analysed the writing process is more manageable than a collection of idiosyncratic instances gathered from non-experts. Marsen (2003: 2–13) and Nielsen (2006: 49) explain that the process of writing texts can be broken down into three stages: a planning, an execution and a finalisation stage. Dictionaries are not usually appropriate tools for providing help in the planning stage, which is better covered by writing manuals. The authors of law dictionaries designed for text production should therefore focus on the execution and the proofreading stages. Rude (2002: 15–16) shows that the execution stage involves the writing of a draft text, followed by the revising and editing of the text, and that proofreading extends revising and editing into the finalisation stage. Law dictionaries for text production are thus tools that can be designed to help users with drafting, revising and editing provided the relevant data have been included.

The tasks of writing, revising and editing are carried out at two levels. At the macro-level, writers work with paragraphs and larger units of text and at the micro-level, writers work with words, collocations, phrases, sentences and textual conventions (Mossop 2007: 201). The micro-level is particularly relevant to law dictionaries because users need help at this level when writing texts in English as a foreign language. Mossop (2007: 27–33) explains that revising and editing involve several individual tasks: that writers check their texts to make sure they have followed generally accepted grammar and spelling rules; that writers have used the correct terminology and used it consistently; and that the finished texts are unambiguous. Finally, writers and copyeditors look for errors and amend them as appropriate. It follows that students writing essays and answering exam questions in English as a foreign language face serious challenges at the micro-level and lexicographers should therefore focus on this level when making online dictionaries designed to provide help to write texts.

4 Linking user competences to user situations

The types of data selected to support the production of legal texts in English should be linked to the competences of users. When lexicographers establish a working relationship between data and competences, it will be relevant to perform a general skills and competences check. The purpose of this is to look at the writing process, identify the relevant skills and compe-

tences of users and then select data that can satisfy user needs because the data help writers in those situations in which their skills and competences are insufficient. Researchers have proposed a number of ways in which to profile intended dictionary users but few methods focus on specialised lexicography. An appropriate profiling method is that suggested by Bergenholtz/Nielsen (2006: 286), who list a number of questions that relate to categories of skills and knowledge possessed by users. Based on those questions, the following list provides a profile of Danish law students who write legal texts in English:

- They master the Danish language at a high level
- They master English as a foreign language at a medium level
- Their experience in producing legal texts in English is at a low level
- Their general cultural and factual knowledge is at a medium level
- They master the subject field of Danish law at a low level
- They master the subject field of English law at a low level (or not at all)
- They master Danish legal language at a low level
- They master English legal language at a low level (or not at all)

This list of answers to the relevant skills and competences questions enables lexicographers to respond to the needs of the intended users of the *CISG Dictionary.* The answers tell lexicographers where students need help to produce legal texts in English at the micro-level and indicate which type of data to select for inclusion in the dictionary. However, in order to give the best possible help, lexicographers should consider the way in which writers proceed when drafting, revising and editing texts in foreign languages. Broadly speaking, the actual writing process is approached in one of the following ways:

- Writers think exclusively in their native language and translate into the foreign language
- Writers think partly in their native language and translate into the foreign language, think partly in the foreign language and write directly in the foreign language
- Writers think in the foreign language and write exclusively in the foreign language

These general approaches to writing texts in a foreign language determine which type of dictionary users consult. The above profile specifying the levels of skills and competences of Danish law students indicates that users of the *CISG Dictionary* adopt one of the two first approaches to writing essays and other types of legal texts in English. The result is that the *CISG Dictionary* is bilingual; if the intended users thought and wrote exclusively in the foreign language, it would have been a monolingual English dictionary. Whether they are mono- or bilingual, dictionaries intended to assist writers of legal texts offer different access routes to their data.

5 Accessing the lexicographic data

Users who consult online dictionaries are dependent on the surface features available. When a particular dictionary has been found, its homepage will appear on the screen, and this page is usually where the access process starts. Online dictionaries come in many shapes and sizes and figure 2 shows the homepage of the *CISG Dictionary.*

Figure 2: Homepage of the CISG Dictionary

The homepage is divided into several key parts. First of all, the meta-text is in Danish as this is appropriate for Danish law students taking their language competences into account. Secondly, the homepage contains a 14-line welcome text (mid-screen left), which explains the function of the dictionary, delimits the legal sub-field it covers and specifies the intended user group. Thirdly, the bottom half of the horizontal bar at the top of the page contains five links; from left to right: home, search for entry word, advanced search, show all, and user guide. Finally, the box to the right of the welcome text contains links to three documents, which support the text production function. The first link is to an informative document discussing various points relevant for Danish lawyers who intend to write legal texts in English. The other two links are to English translations of Danish statutes relevant for the sub-field covered: the Danish Contracts Act and the Danish Sale of Goods Act. Denmark adopted the United Nations Convention on the International Sale of Goods in 1988, but only in part. The Convention chapter laying down the rules for entering into legally binding contracts has not been adopted by Denmark, so the national rules regulating the formation of sale contracts apply. As Danish law students will be writing texts about legal matters covered by the Convention as well as the two Danish statutes, it is essential for the function of the *CISG dictionary* to link to the translations of the statutes, where users can find the English translations of relevant terms, collocations, phrases and entire statutory provisions.

Different surface features allow users to access the data lexicographers have selected in response to lexicographic needs. Based on the skills and competences identified by the profile of intended users related to dictionary function(s), lexicographers will select various data types for inclusion in the database. The database of the *CISG Dictionary* contains the following types of data placed in discrete data fields with a view to helping Danish students write legal texts in English:

- Danish lemma, i. e. headword
- Grammar note addressed to Danish lemma
- Word class indication addressed to Danish lemma
- Meaning discrimination addressed to Danish lemma
- English equivalent of Danish lemma
- Grammar note addressed to English equivalent
- Contrastive note addressed to Danish lemma and English equivalent
- Danish collocations
- English translations of Danish collocations
- Danish short phrases
- English translations of Danish short phrases
- Danish long phrases
- English translations of Danish long phrases

The data selection process is governed by a single principle: the **principle of relevance**. For the purpose of selecting data to be included in dictionaries, relevance means the quality of being directly connected with the subject field in question, the specified dictionary function(s), the types of user situation in which the dictionary is intended to be used and the skills and competences of intended users (Fuertes-Olivera/Nielsen 2011: 162). Relevance is a key concept as it is used to separate **useful lexicographic data** from data that are of no concern to intended dictionary users and here useful lexicographic data are data that directly support a lexicographic function. For example, collocations and phrases are selected because they are important when producing legal texts taking user skills and competences into consideration and not because they belong to a specific linguistic classification. The concept of relevance thus helps lexicographers to decide which data types to include in dictionaries; and relevance ensures that the data selected are actually connected with the EFL text production function. As a result, the *CISG Dictionary* contains lemmas, or headwords, from several word classes: nouns (single-unit as well as multi-unit terms), verbs, adjectives, adverbs and proper names. Even though the dictionary is based on the UN Convention, it also contains terms not found in the Convention, for instance terms signifying court documents and names of Danish courts. These have been included because they are relevant in the sense that students will often have to write texts in which such terms occur, for example when referring to or discussing court cases.

Access to data in online dictionaries is generally improved if access options are linked to user needs. If they focus on the needs of users in specific types of situation, lexicographers can allow users to retrieve data that satisfy a specific type of need and furthermore ensure that the data are presented in such a way that users can easily turn them into useful information. Pastor/Alcina (2010) and Fuertes-Olivera/Nielsen (2012) examine a number of specialised online dictionaries for learners and conclude that these dictionaries do not provide optimal access to the lexicographic data. The dictionaries examined are polyfunctional and therefore tend to show cramped pages with a lot of data and do not fully utilise the potential of the internet to make targeted searches in monofunctional dictionaries. The *CISG Dictionary* attempts to help Danish students who are writing essays, exam papers and other types of legal texts in the best way possible and therefore, it gives them a number of routes to useful lexicographic data. One option is to click on "vis alt" (i. e. 'show all') and then an alphabetically arranged list of lemmas is presented on the screen (see figure 3).

Dansk	Engelsk	Faglig markering	Detaljer
accept	acceptance		Klik her
acceptere	accept		Klik her
acceptfrist	period for acceptance		Klik her
acceptmeddelelse	notice of acceptance		Klik her
adfærd	conduct		Klik her
adgang	opportunity	mulighed	Klik her
adgang	right	rettighed	Klik her

Figure 3: Excerpt of alphabetical list of lemmas with the search option "show all"

The alphabetical list contains 752 Danish lemmas, which is the total number of headwords in the dictionary. When users have selected this search option, the dictionary presents selected data types from which users can gather information that is useful for text production. The list is divided into four columns: the left-most column contains all the Danish lemmas; the second contains the English equivalents to the lemmas; the third, headed "faglig markering", contains meaning discrimination in those cases it has been found appropriate so that students can select the correct equivalent; and the last column, headed "detaljer" (i. e. 'details'), contains links ("klik her", i. e. 'click here'), which users can click for further information if they find that this search option did not fully satisfy their needs. Users who want to know what a specific Danish term is called in English are likely to be content with the help provided by this search option. Those who want more help to write legal texts in English in connection with a specific Danish term, for instance *adgang* in the sense *rettighed* (i. e. 'right'), can click on the link in the right-hand column and will be presented with the full article, which can be seen in figure 4.

adgang		right	
Discrimination: rettighed		**Date:** 16-06-2003	
Note			
Collocations		adgang til at modregne: right to set-off; adgang til modregning: right of set-off	
Short phrases		miste adgangen til at hæve købet: lose the right to declare the contract avoided	

Long phrases	køber mister adgangen til at påberåbe sig manglen ved varen: the buyer loses his right to rely on a lack of conformity of the goods

Figure 4: The full article of the lemma "adgang"

The full article in figure 4 shows the constituent parts of articles: two boxes containing discrete data presentation fields. The top box has five fields: the Danish lemma, the English equivalent, meaning discrimination, the date of making the article and contrastive note. The bottom box has six data presentation fields containing collocations, short phrases, long phrases, and headings. These data types have all been selected because they can help Danish law students to write texts in English.

Another way of accessing the lexicographic data is to elect the search option "search for headword". Users who choose this option go to the appropriate search site, which is presented in figure 5. (Note: For practical purposes, the Danish metadata have been translated into English). Students who are looking for data on a specific Danish term can type their search word, for instance *sælger* (i. e. 'seller') in the search box and click the search button.

Search for headword

Danish>English

Type Danish word and click search   sælger   search

Figure 5: The search site for searching for headwords with a search for the term "sælger" (i. e. 'seller')

The search engine will search all data fields containing lemmas and return the result in a pre-determined way as illustrated in figure 6.

Dansk	Engelsk	Faglig markering	Detaljer
genussælger	seller of generic goods		Klik her
speciessælger	seller of specific goods		Klik her
sælger	seller		Klik her

Figure 6: Result of a search for the term "sælger" among headwords in the database

The result of the search is that the database contains three lemmas with the term *sælger*. The search engine will find all lemmas that are identical to the search word and all lemmas that

begin or end with the search word. The results in figure 6 provide writers with help concerning legal terms; if they need more data, they can click a link in the right-most column and go to the full article.

Users may want help to write English texts using linguistic units larger than terms. In this case, they can click the link for advanced search and a window comes up that looks basically like the one presented in figure 5. The only difference is that the advanced search site contains three search options that allow writers to target their searches in the database: one for collocations, one for short phrases and one for long phrases. Students who want help to produce short phrases in which the Danish term *ejendomsret* (i.e. 'property, right of ownership') occurs can type this term into the short phrases search box and click the search button. The search engine will search all data fields containing short phrases and the dictionary will present the phrases retrieved in a prearranged way (see figure 7). The search engine finds the search term in five short phrases and the dictionary presents users with the Danish phrases and their English translations. The first two phrases retrieved are identical because the same short phrase is included in two different articles. Again, if they are not fully content with the search result, users can click the links in the right-hand column and be directed to the full articles.

Dansk	**Engelsk**	**Hele opslag**
ejendomsretten til den solgte vare	the property in the goods sold	Klik her
ejendomsretten til den solgte vare	the property in the goods sold	Klik her
ejendomsretten til varen	the property in the goods	Klik her
forbeholde sig ejendoms-retten	reserve (the) property	Klik her
overdrage ejendomsretten til varen	transfer the property in the goods	Klik her

Figure 7: Result of a search for the term "ejendomsret" among short phrases in the database

The advanced search option has a number of advantages. Firstly, figure 7 shows that the search engine retrieves inflected forms of the search word, in this case the definite form of a noun. Secondly, users can also search for specific collocations and phrases (e.g. "ejendomsretten til varen" listed in figure 7) and the search engine will retrieve all exact matches found in searched data fields in the database. Finally, the dictionary offers quick access to collocations and phrases, because users do not have to guess in which of the possible articles the collocation or phrase is located.

At the micro-level of text production students often need help where terms and other words in the foreign language have properties that are different from those in the native language. This is particularly important when Danish law students master the English general

language at a medium level and English legal language at a low level or perhaps at a zero level (see the user profile in Section 4 above). In order to help students solve as many problems as possible, the *CISG Dictionary* presents various types of grammatical data. Where the English inflectional paradigm differs from the corresponding Danish paradigm, the dictionary explains those differences that users cannot be expected to be familiar with. This is, for instance, the case with compound nouns. In both Danish and English the general rule for regular inflection is that a plural marker (generally: in Danish *-r*; in English *-s*) is added to the final element of compounds, but many English compounds do not follow this rule. Danish orthographic rules provide that compound nouns are generally written as single words, whereas English compounds are often written as strings of separate words, and this causes problems for Danish students. As a result, the Danish term *leveringsbetingelse* forms the plural regularly by adding *-r* to the end of the word; its English equivalent, *term of delivery,* forms the plural by adding *-s* to the first constituent element, which is the general rule for compounds that consist of noun + preposition + noun. The dictionary therefore explicitly informs users that the plural of the English word is *terms of delivery* in a grammar note placed immediately below the English equivalent in the full article. Similarly, Danish law students cannot be expected to know that some English words change the last letter if it is a vowel when inflected for the plural. Therefore, the dictionary explicitly informs users that the plural of the English term *remedy* is *remedies* in a grammar note displayed directly below the term in the full article. Moreover, the spelling of the past tense of English irregular verbs is explicitly indicated in grammar notes so that, for example, users are told that the verb *sell* is spelt *sold* in the past tense; again, the intended users cannot be expected to know which verbs inflect irregularly and how. The above types of grammatical data, therefore, provide help for writing correct texts in English as a foreign language.

Another type of situation in which grammar notes are helpful is where Danish nouns are countable and their English equivalents are uncountable, or vice versa. In those cases, the dictionary explicitly informs users about the difference in notes placed below the English terms in the full articles. For example, the article dealing with the Danish countable term *rente* tells users that its English equivalent *interest* is always uncountable when it refers to the payment made for borrowing money.

Danish terms and other words may have properties that differ from their English counterparts and which need to be explained in greater detail. First, Danish terms may not have any equivalents in English. Nevertheless, Danish students may have to write about these legal concepts in English and in order to help them the *CISG Dictionary* offers suggested translations combined with contrastive notes explaining that the English equivalents offered are suggested translations. The Danish term *fordringshavermora* is one example, and the dictionary offers the translation *failure in accepting performance* followed by a contrastive note in Danish, which, in its English translation, reads as follows:

> English (UK) and American (US) law have no direct equivalent to the Danish concept. The expression "failure in accepting performance" is a suggested translation covering the meaning of the Danish term "fordringshavermora".

In contrast to the rules of the *CISG* and Anglo-American law, there is no obligation in Danish law for a party to a contract to accept the performance offered by the other party to the contract. When they occur, such events are not treated as breach of contract, as provided by *CISG* and Anglo-American law, and therefore an explanatory equivalent is offered, so that students

can write about such situations in their papers and at the same time signal to the reader that these are special Danish concepts.

Secondly, the intended users cannot be expected to be familiar with legal genre conventions in their own language, let alone genre conventions in English. For instance, the use of capital initial letters is one textual convention that makes English legal language stand out from general language, whereas the use of capital initial letters is not a characteristic feature of Danish legal language. In order to help students write English texts that comply with some of the English genre conventions, the *CISG Dictionary* informs users of differences in conventional usage in contrastive notes. One example can be found in the article treating the Danish term *lov* and its English equivalents *act/statute,* where users are informed about differences in usage. The English translation of the Danish contrastive note reads:

> The term "act" is always used to refer to a specific enactment, while the term "statute" is used in general contexts. In titles and references to a specific enactment a capital initial letter is used: Act.

Danish students who do not use capital initial letters in their translations in the cases indicated by contrastive notes will write texts that may be factually correct but which do not conform to the conventions used in English legal language. The *CISG Dictionary* attempts to make students aware of the divergent use of genre conventions so that, by using relevant English conventions, English readers of their texts will find the expected genre conventions and thus be able to classify the English texts as belonging to the legal text universe (Nielsen 2010: 76–78). 114 out of the 752 articles contain contrastive notes with explanations of factual and usage-related differences between Danish and English law and legal language.

6 Concluding remarks

Law dictionaries are important for producing legal texts in English as a foreign language, which forms part of student assignments and exams. By regarding the online dictionary as a tool with surface and underlying features and placing it in a functional framework, lexicographers have a sound basis for designing a law dictionary for EFL text production. It is then necessary to identify and analyse the factual and linguistic user competences, user needs and user situations as well as the stages involved in producing legal texts in English as a foreign language. The dictionary needs to include data about Danish, English, American and international (*CISG*) legal terms, their grammatical properties and their potential for being combined with other words in collocations, phrases and sentences in order to meet user requirements. Data items that deal with these aspects are necessary for the Danish user group who write subject-specific and register-specific texts in a foreign language, and the data items are relevant for the various stages in text production at the micro-level: draft writing, revising and editing.

The theoretical aspects discussed and supported by examples from the online *CISG Dictionary,* which is a lexicographic tool developed for law students who have to write assignments on a specific legal topic, illustrate the importance of having a sound theoretical basis when designing and making practical reference tools. The dictionary allows users to search the database containing carefully selected lexicographic data in different ways, depending largely on what type of help users are looking for, and the search results provide users with different data depending on the search option selected.   •

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