

# **KOKUGO DICTIONARIES AS TOOLS FOR LEARNERS: PROBLEMS AND POTENTIAL**

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## **Abstract**

For second-language learners, monolingual dictionaries can be useful tools because they often provide more detailed explanations of meanings and more extensive vocabulary coverage than bilingual dictionaries do. While learners of English have access to many monolingual dictionaries designed specifically to meet their needs, learners of Japanese must make do with Kokugo dictionaries, that is, monolingual dictionaries intended for native Japanese speakers. This paper, after briefly describing Kokugo dictionaries in general, analyzes a typical entry from such a dictionary to illustrate the advantages and challenges of the use of Kokugo dictionaries by learners of Japanese.

## **Keywords**

monolingual; Japanese; kokugo; dictionary; learners

## **Izveček**

Enojezični slovarji so lahko koristno orodje pri učenju tujega jezika, saj pogosto ponujajo bolj podrobne razlage pomenov in pokrivajo bolj obsežno besedišče kot pa dvojezični slovarji. Medtem ko imajo učenci angleščine kot tujega jezika na voljo veliko enojezičnih slovarjev, ki so bili izdelani prav za njihove potrebe, pa morajo učenci japonščine uporabljati enojezične slovarje japonščine, imenovane Kokugo, t.j. slovarje, ki so namenjeni govorcem japonščine kot maternega jezika. Pričujoči članek - po kratki splošni predstavitvi slovarjev Kokugo - skozi analizo slovarskega članka iz takega slovarja oriše prednosti in izzive rabe slovarjev Kokugo za učenje japonščine kot tujega jezika.

## **Ključne besede**

enojezični; japonščina; kokugo; slovar; učenci

## 1. Introduction

In the past few decades, learners of English as a second language have benefited from the publication and rapid development of many monolingual dictionaries designed specifically to meet their needs. These dictionaries, which include *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, *Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner's English Dictionary*, and similar volumes from Cambridge, Longman, Macmillan, and Merriam-Webster, have incorporated many learner-friendly features, including a controlled defining vocabulary, greater attention to collocations and idioms both as headwords and in definitions and examples, extensive use of corpora for meaning explication and example selection, and new macro- and microstructure designs. (For more information on these dictionaries, see Cowie, 1999, and Béjoint, 2010, pp. 163–200.) The rapid innovations in these dictionaries have been driven not only by advances in lexicography and corpus linguistics but also by the huge global market for English-learning materials, making learner's dictionaries, despite the large investment necessary for their creation, a potentially lucrative source of income for publishers.

Learners of Japanese, however, have not been nearly as fortunate, as there are no monolingual dictionaries of Japanese currently available that meet the needs of intermediate and advanced learners.<sup>1</sup> Learners fluent in English, Chinese, or Korean, which have reasonably good bilingual dictionaries with Japanese, might not suffer significantly from this lack, but speakers of most other languages are at a severe disadvantage when trying to learn Japanese. Furthermore, at least in the case of English, most of the bilingual dictionaries used by learners of Japanese were in fact written for native Japanese speakers and thus lack many features needed by second-language learners, including explanatory definitions for difficult-to-translate headwords, verb-conjugation categories and other grammatical information, and usage notes. Perhaps the greatest drawback of bilingual dictionaries published for fluent Japanese speakers, when considered from the learner's perspective, is the omission of headwords that Japanese users are not likely to seek when using a bilingual dictionary into another language, including slang, dialect, archaisms, variants, and proper names.

Some of these drawbacks of bilingual dictionaries of Japanese can be overcome through the use of a type of dictionary often overlooked in Japanese-language education: monolingual dictionaries of Japanese aimed at native speakers of the

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<sup>1</sup> The monolingual *Dictionary of Basic Japanese Usage for Foreigners* was published by Japan's Agency for Cultural Affairs in 1971. This dictionary incorporated features useful for learners, including explanatory definitions written in relatively simple language, many example sentences, and full conjugation information for verbs and adjectives. Although a second edition appeared in 1975 and a third with about 4,500 headwords in 1990, the dictionary is no longer in print, let alone available in digital form. Two companion volumes, listed in library catalogs but not consulted for this study, were *Dictionary of Chinese Characters for Foreigners* [外国人のための漢字辞典 *Gaikokujin no Tame no Kanji Jiten*] (1966) and *A Specialized Scientific Dictionary for the Foreigners: Physical Science* [外国人のための専門用語辞典〈自然科学系〉 *Gaikokujin no Tame no Senmon Yōgo Jiten: Shizen Kagaku Kei*] (1966), are also out of print.

language. Usually called *kokugo jisho* [国語辞書] or *kokugo jiten* [国語辞典], these dictionaries are readily available in both paper and digital versions from commercial Japanese publishers, and they have many advantages over bilingual dictionaries: their definitions are often explanations of the headword's meaning, rather than mere synonyms; they indicate conjugation categories of verbs; and, while their inclusion of slang and other nonstandard language is sometimes limited, they do contain a wider range of vocabulary than most bilingual dictionaries. Because these dictionaries were written for native speakers of Japanese, however, they present significant hurdles to learners, particularly in the comprehensibility of their definitions and examples. This paper therefore examines the typical features of these monolingual Japanese dictionaries—called Kokugo dictionaries here—and discusses the advantages and disadvantages of those features for people learning Japanese as a second language.

## 2. Contemporary Kokugo Dictionaries

A wide range of Kokugo dictionaries are currently available for native speakers, from the 14-volume *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten*, a comprehensive historical dictionary of the language from the earliest recorded times to the present, to small, inexpensive dictionaries sold in 100-yen stores that are intended mainly to provide the meanings and orthography of “hard” or often misunderstood words.<sup>2</sup> Although dictionaries all along this spectrum can be used profitably by learners, this paper will concentrate on two categories of Kokugo dictionaries that are likely to be most useful: midsized dictionaries that focus on contemporary general vocabulary, and comprehensive dictionaries that also include historical vocabulary and encyclopedic entries.

Among the many midsized dictionaries aimed at general users are *Shinmeikai Kokugo Jiten*, *Iwanami Kokugo Jiten*, *Sanseidō Kokugo Jiten*, and *Meikyō Kokugo Jiten*. These dictionaries typically claim to have about 70,000 entries, and their paper editions have between about 1400 and 1900 pages, including front and back matter. Their headwords, senses, and examples primarily reflect the modern Japanese language, and they contain few encyclopedic entries. (The second edition of *Meikyō Kokugo Jiten*, for example, contains brief entries for *Nihon* “Japan” and *Chūgoku* “Chugoku region; China” but none for *Tōkyō* or *Amerika*.)

One-volume comprehensive dictionaries are printed in a larger format and contain more pages, usually around 3000, and claim to have around 230,000 entries. Three comprehensive dictionaries that, as of 2012, have been updated recently are *Kōjien*, *Daijirin*, and *Daijisen*. (Many similar dictionaries have been published in the past century, but most are no longer being updated.) In addition to the contemporary

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<sup>2</sup> Okimori, Kurashima, Katō, & Makino (1996) contains a full list and descriptions of Kokugo and other dictionaries published in Japan up through the mid-1990s. Some of the many books in Japanese about the history and characteristics of Kokugo dictionaries are Kurashima (1997), Ishiyama (2007), and Kurashima (2010).

vocabulary covered by the midsized dictionaries, the comprehensive dictionaries also contain archaic headwords and senses, and citations are often taken from classical or canonical literary works. They also contain many proper names and technical words that are missing from the midsized dictionaries. Perhaps the most important difference among these dictionaries for learners is the sense order: while *Kōjien* orders the multiple senses of a headword with the earliest or most basic meanings first, *Daijirin* and *Daijisen* give the most common contemporary meanings first.

As of 2012, all of the dictionaries named above are available in paper form. Most are also available in digital formats, which might include cd- and/or dvd-roms, portable electronic dictionaries, free and/or subscription-based Web sites, and smartphone, tablet, and personal computer applications. Data on dictionary sales in Japan are held closely by publishers, but anecdotal evidence, including observations of the dictionaries used by university students and the space allocated to paper dictionaries in bookstores, suggests that the era of paper dictionaries is coming to an end. While digital versions do offer some distinct advantages to students, including faster lookup times, intra- and inter-dictionary links, and, on some devices, handwritten input, the actual content of digital Kokugo dictionaries is so far largely identical to that of their paper versions. For this reason, and because the rapid progress of digital and network technology makes it difficult to predict how Kokugo dictionaries might be delivered to users in coming years, this paper will focus only on the content of dictionary entries, not their medium of presentation.

### 3. A Typical Entry in a Midsized Dictionary

To see the advantages and challenges of the use of Kokugo dictionaries by learners of Japanese, let us examine in detail an entry for a word that an intermediate or advanced learner might want to look up in a dictionary: the verb *satoru*. This word was chosen because one of its two main senses is used in general contexts in the contemporary language while the other is limited to a particular cultural domain. The entry for *satoru* from the second print edition of the midsized *Meikyō Kokugo Jiten* (2010) appears below. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the entry's components and the implications of each component for a learner accessing the entry. In the explanations, the romanization of each component is given in italics for the convenience of readers.

さと・る【悟る（°覚る）】 [[他五] ①ものの本質や意味などを（直感的に）はつきりと理解する。また、隠されていたことなどをはつきりと認識する。  
「車の重大さをー」「敵にー・られないように注意せよ」 ②仏教で、心の迷いを去って永遠の真理を会得する。悟りを開く。「仏法の真理をー」 [可能]  
悟れる [名] 悟り

### 3.1 Headword

The headword is listed in kana order based on the pronunciation of its unmarked imperfective form, さとる *satoru*, not by its usual orthographic representations (悟る or, less commonly, 覚る). Thus the preceding word in the paper dictionary is さとり *satori* and the following word is サドル *sadoru*. For learners using paper Kokugo dictionaries, this pronunciation-based listing can be frustrating, as often a word one wishes to look up appears in a text at least partly in kanji, rather than entirely in kana; if one does not know the reading of the kanji, one cannot find it easily in a Kokugo dictionary.<sup>3</sup> This problem is usually alleviated with electronic dictionaries, which, depending on the hardware and software, allow kanji-containing words to be looked up using cut-and-paste, stylus or finger input, optical character recognition, or selection of kanji components (multiradical lookup).

In *Meikyō*, the boundary between the verb stem さと *sato-* and suffix る *-ru* is indicated by a *nakaguro*, or black dot (・); the same symbol is used in this dictionary to separate the stems and suffixes of adjectives. *Meikyō* also uses a hyphen (−) to separate the parts of compound words; the word サドンデス *sadondesu* “sudden death”, for example, appears as a headword as サドン−デス. Neither the black dot nor the hyphen would appear in those words in a regular text. These markers, which are normally omitted from bilingual dictionaries, can provide useful clues to learners about the morphemic structure and etymology of headwords.

One of the challenges for learners using most dictionaries of Japanese, including all currently available Kokugo dictionaries, is that words can be looked up only by their canonical, unmarked form. If a reader encounters a conjugated form of the verb *satoru*, such as the potential *satoreru* or the negative passive participle *satorerarenakute*, and wants to find the meaning of the word in a dictionary, he or she must be able to deduce that the plain imperfective form is *satoru*. A fairly high level of grammatical knowledge is therefore necessary before a learner can use such dictionaries effectively.<sup>4</sup>

### 3.2 Orthography

Because this verb can be written not only in kana but also with kanji, the two usual kanji representations follow the headword in brackets: 悟る (覚る). The lack of any marking or further bracketing of the first version, 悟る, indicates that this is a standard

<sup>3</sup> Some printed Kokugo dictionaries, including *Iwanami Kokugo Jiten* and *Daijirin*, have indexes of kanji and “hard-to-read” kanji combinations (*jukugo*), but those indexes exclude many word forms that learners would need to look up. A complete kanji and kanji-compound index to the second edition of the comprehensive dictionary *Daijirin* was published in 1997 as a separate volume (*Kanjibiki Gyakuhiki Daijirin*), but its bulk makes it unwieldy for casual use.

<sup>4</sup> An exception is Jim Breen’s WWWJDIC, a free online Japanese-English dictionary. Searches for most conjugated or declined forms of words lead to the standard headword forms.

written form of the verb. The second version, 覚る, is both enclosed in curved parentheses, indicating that it is a nonstandard form, and marked with the symbol ♪, indicating that, while the kanji 覚 appears on the *Jōyō Kanji* (常用漢字) list of characters designated by the government for everyday use, *sato-* is not an officially designated reading for that character. Other symbols are used in this dictionary to indicate when kanji do not appear on the *Jōyō* list at all, when a reading is in an annex to the *Jōyō Kanji* list, and when a combination of characters has a special reading.

This detailed information about the status of different written forms of words can be useful to learners for at least two reasons. When a reader learns from a dictionary that the written form of a word he or she has encountered in a text is nonstandard, the reader can often infer something about the text’s provenance: it might predate the government’s postwar orthographic standards, it might not have been subjected to the rigorous editing applied to newspapers and some other publications, or it might reflect the author’s individual preferences or literary sensibility. The orthographic labeling also helps the learner decide what form to use when writing in Japanese; a person composing a university report or a job application letter, for example, might decide to use the standard forms even if he or she prefers the nonstandard forms.

### 3.3 Part-of-Speech Information

The next item in the entry, 他五, consists of two abbreviations of verbal categories. The character 他 indicates that the headword is a transitive verb (他動詞 *tadōshi*), while the character 五 shows that it follows the *godan* (五段) conjugation pattern. For other headwords, this information might be 名, for 名詞 (*meishi*, “noun”); 形, for 形容詞 (*keiyōshi*, “adjective”); 形動, for 形容動詞 (*keiyō dōshi*, “adjectival verb”); 代, for 代名詞 (*daimeshi*, “pronoun”); etc.

This grammatical information, especially about verb categories, is usually omitted from bilingual dictionaries aimed at native speakers of Japanese. Learners opening a *Kokugo* dictionary for the first time, however, are likely to be confused by them, as the abbreviations might refer to grammatical categories that the learners know by very different names. *Godan* conjugation verbs, for example, are often called “consonant-stem” verbs in textbooks of Japanese written in English, and understanding the term *godan* and similar expressions requires familiarity with Japanese grammar as it has been taught in Japanese schools. *Kokugo* dictionaries also often indicate the categories of verbs for the literary language (文語 *bungo*), which many students do not need to learn. In order to get the most out of this section of *Kokugo* dictionary entries, therefore, students would have to make a conscious effort to learn the abbreviations and their meanings in the context of traditional Japanese school grammar.

### 3.4 Definitions

This entry for *satoru* has two senses, marked with the numbers ❶ and ❷. Within each sense is a definition followed by an example or two.

The definition of the first sense is ものの本質や意味などを（直感的に）はつきりと理解する。また、隠されていたことなどをはつきりと認識する。Mono no honshitsu ya imi nado o (chokkanteki ni) hakkiri to rikai suru. Mata, kakusarete ita koto nado o hakkiri to ninshiki suru. This might be translated as “To understand clearly (intuitively) the essence, meaning, etc. of something. Or, to recognize clearly something that is hidden.”

The definition of the second sense is 仏教で、心の迷いを去って永遠の真理を会得する。悟りを開く。Bukkyō de, kokoro no mayoi o satte eien no shinri o etoku suru. Satori o hiraku, which might be translated as “In Buddhism, to cast away confusions of the soul and to obtain eternal truth; to achieve *satori* [enlightenment]”.

It is here, in the definitions, that Kokugo dictionaries offer the greatest potential for learners of Japanese but also present the greatest challenges. To see why, compare the above translation of the first sense with the corresponding definitions in three Japanese-English dictionaries (sense specifiers in Japanese have been omitted):

perceive ((that)); realize ((that)) (Shogakukan Progressive Japanese-English Dictionary, 4th ed.)

1 see; notice; perceive; discern; guess; sense; wake to...; be alive to...; be aware of...; get wind of...

2 understand; comprehend; apprehend; realize. (*Kenkyusha's New Japanese-English Dictionary*, 5th ed.)

(1) to perceive; to sense; to discern; (2) to understand; to comprehend; to realize (*Jim Breen's WWWJDIC*)

While the bilingual dictionaries offer only short glosses, the *Meikyō* definition gives a full explanation, incorporating semantic elements that would be difficult to discern from the English translations. These include *honshitsu ya imi nado* “essence, meaning, etc.”, as examples of things that might be the objects of the verb, and *chokkanteki ni* “intuitively” and *hakkiri to* “clearly”, as modifiers of the verb *rikai suru* “to understand”. The second half of the first definition can also aid the learner’s understanding by indicating that the object of the verb might be something that has been hidden.

For the second sense, where bilingual dictionaries give some variation on “be spiritually awakened; attain enlightenment” (*Progressive*), the Kokugo dictionary provides helpful additional information, particularly the explicit reference to Buddhism and the explanation *kokoro no mayoi o satte* “cast away confusions of the soul”. A reader unfamiliar with Buddhism and seeing the word *satoru* used in the Buddhist

sense for the first time is likely to understand the concept much better after reading the *Meikyō* definition than the English glosses.

Most definitions in Kokugo dictionaries are similarly explanatory, and as such they should be more useful to learners than mere glosses. The problem, of course, is that learners must be able to read and understand the explanations. Because the dictionaries are written for native speakers of Japanese of normal educational attainment, the definitions assume that users have a fairly wide vocabulary of Japanese and know at least the *Jōyō Kanji*. While the first definition of *satoru* might be understandable to higher-intermediate learners, the second definition, in particular the transitive use of the verb 去る *saru* “to get rid of something undesirable”, will be more difficult to grasp. Most learners would have to look up at least several words contained in the definition, a time-consuming task that, while not uneducational in its own right, would be distracting if the learners’ immediate purpose is to understand what *satoru* means in a particular text. It is this issue—the difficulty in understanding definitions—that presents the greatest hurdle to the effective use of Kokugo dictionaries by learners of Japanese.

### 3.5 Examples

The entry for *satoru* contains three short examples. For the first sense, the examples are 車の重大さを— *kuruma no jūdaisa o [satoru]* “realize the importance of automobiles” and 敵に— られないように注意せよ *Teiki ni [sato]rarenai yō ni chūi se yo* “Be careful not to be noticed by the enemy.” For the second sense, the example is 仏法の真理を— *Buppō no shinri o [satoru]* “realize the truth of Buddhism”. (Like many Kokugo dictionaries, *Meikyō* replaces the headword or headword stem with a dash (—) in examples, presumably to save space.) While brief, these examples can provide useful information to learners: the use of *satoru* with the object particle *o* in the first and third examples reinforces the fact that this is a transitive verb; the use of *jūdaisa* “importance” and *shinri* “truth” as the verb’s object shows that it often takes an abstract noun as an object; the second example shows that, when used in the passive, the verb can take a personal noun as its subject. All of these insights, of course, assume that the reader knows the readings and understands the meanings of the other words in the examples; if the examples contain unknown vocabulary, it can be a difficult, time-consuming task to figure out the meanings of examples, especially with paper dictionaries.

As with most examples in midsized Kokugo dictionaries, the origins of these phrases and sentences are not indicated. In general, such dictionaries seem to use a combination of verbatim corpus examples, modified corpus examples, and examples invented by the lexicographers to illustrate meanings and show typical collocations.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The examples (as well as definitions) in one widely used Kokugo dictionary, *Shinmeikai Kokugo Jiten*, have been the target of criticism, praise, and affection because of their specificity, opinionatedness, and

Comprehensive dictionaries also contain many examples with citations, usually from literary, often classical, sources. Of the six examples for three senses of *satoru* in the sixth edition of *Kōjien* (2008), for example, two are from the 11th-century *Tale of Genji* and one from the 13th-century *Tale of the Heike*. The third edition of *Daijirin* (2006) has an example from 20th-century literature, the 1906 novel *Kusamakura* (English title: *The Three-Cornered World*) by Sōseki Natsume. This heavy use of examples from classical and canonical literature—a result of the dictionaries’ historical association with the scholastic field *kokugoka* (国語科), that is, the study of Japan’s national language and literature—contrasts sharply with the examples in recent English-English learners’ dictionaries, which rely largely on citations taken or adapted from corpora that cover a wide variety of contemporary spoken and written sources.

As a first impression, the examples in midsized Kokugo dictionaries are likely to seem more accessible to learners than those in the larger comprehensive dictionaries. Often, however, mixed in with the comprehensive dictionaries’ literary examples are contemporary phrasal examples similar to those in midsized dictionaries; if learners know how to distinguish the contemporary from the classical examples, they can obtain as much benefit from the examples in the comprehensive dictionaries as from those in the midsized dictionaries.

### 3.6 Other Information

The entry for *satoru* in *Meikyō* ends with two derived forms of the headword, 悟れる *satoreru* and 悟り *satori*; the abbreviation 可能 *kanō* indicates that the former is the potential form of the verb and the abbreviation 名 *mei* that the latter is the nominal form. Other information that might be included in entries in this and other Kokugo dictionaries include the historical kana spelling of the headword, an abbreviation indicating the headword’s pitch accent pattern,<sup>6</sup> etymologies, grammar and usage notes, and information about synonyms and antonyms. In addition to the entries themselves, many dictionaries also contain explanatory columns on meaning and usage, illustrations, appendices on various topics, and other supplements designed to give “added value” to the dictionaries and make them more attractive to consumers.

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occasional humor (see, for example, Nishiyama et al., 1992, and Akasegawa, 1996). The eccentricity of *Shinmeikai*’s examples is probably a disadvantage for learners, but its examples have advantages as well, particularly their larger number compared with other dictionaries of the same size and the inclusion of brief glosses to explain the meaning of idiomatic expressions. For example, the entry for the noun *sanaka* contains the examples 夏の— [=暑い盛り] *natsu no [sanaka]* (= *atsui sakari*) ‘the *sanaka* of summer (= the hottest period)’ and 冬の— [=最も寒い時] *fuyu no [sanaka]* (= *mottomo samui toki*) ‘the *sanaka* of winter (= the coldest time)’. The brief explanations, though intended for native speakers, can be useful for learners as well. No other Kokugo dictionary offers such extensive glossing of examples.

<sup>6</sup> Of the dictionaries mentioned in this paper, only *Shinmeikai* and *Daijirin* give accent information. When asked by the author about the widespread omission of this important element of Japanese pronunciation from Japanese dictionaries, several Japanese lexicographers have pointed out that pitch accent in Japanese varies widely by dialect and that native Japanese speakers rarely seek that information in dictionaries.

#### 4. An Imperfect Yet Still-Valuable Tool

Compared with English-English learners' dictionaries, which incorporate a wide range of useful innovations made possible by recent advances in corpus linguistics and lexicographic theory and practice, Kokugo dictionaries are not nearly as useful tools for students of Japanese. The vocabulary of definitions and examples is not controlled sufficiently for learners, the grammatical information is inadequate for people who have not yet mastered Japanese grammar, and the word-lookup system, especially with paper versions, can be frustrating for students still learning kanji. These inadequacies are, of course, due to the dictionaries' omission of features that are usually not needed by native Japanese speakers.

Nevertheless, Kokugo dictionaries do offer some advantages over bilingual dictionaries. Their explanatory definitions can often be enlightening to a learner who has been unable to figure out what a word means based on brief bilingual glosses. The information on orthography, grammar, and usage is more detailed than that in many bilingual dictionaries, especially those aimed at native Japanese speakers. The larger comprehensive dictionaries define many archaic, slang, dialect, and technical words that might be difficult to find elsewhere, and their compact explanations of Japanese people, places, and things can greatly assist readers trying to learn not only the Japanese language but also the history and culture of Japan. Perhaps most importantly, like all monolingual dictionaries, Kokugo dictionaries offer an immersive experience in the language: beginning students, who might struggle even to find headwords listed in the yet-to-be-mastered kana order, are at least exposed to the Japanese writing system while trying to use the dictionaries, while more advanced learners will have a chance to guess at the meanings of words that they are likely to encounter again in the future. Combined with the explanatory definitions, this immersion also helps to protect learners from one of the greatest dangers of bilingual dictionary use: assuming that a word given as the translation of a headword in a dictionary can be used to translate that same word in any context.

Of course, Japanese learners would benefit even more from learners' dictionaries similar to those available for English. Unfortunately, however, no such dictionaries exist today, and the author has not heard of any under preparation. The reason is not hard to guess: the number of learners of Japanese is tiny compared to that of English, and commercial publishers, already suffering from a drop-off in sales of their conventional dictionaries, cannot make the huge, long-term investment necessary to design and produce an entirely new type of dictionary. Until the Japanese government, or perhaps a private foundation, decides to support such a project in the future, it seems likely that Japanese learners who want the advantages of a monolingual dictionary will continue to need to use Kokugo dictionaries, imperfect as they may be.

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