

The Sintra Variations – Thinking Outside the Box in Designing Online Dictionaries

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In music, variations and improvisation on a theme are a common creative technique: existing material is modified step by step in melody, rhythm or harmony. If this succeeds, something completely new and unexpected can arise. In a similar way, the decomposition and (re)composition of a product is a common problem-solving strategy in design to achieve new solutions for old problems.

In our talk we apply this technique in the field of dictionary interfaces. To this end, we will focus on one dictionary entry with one particular, but characteristic, problem, i.e. that the entry is too long to show all content on one screen. Typically, a dictionary entry is structured in a horizontal (different senses of one word) and in a vertical line (different kind of information on one sense). So, the dictionary designer is confronted with the issue of which information to present first at the expense of others.

In most of the current online dictionaries, an expandable text structure is the method of choice. Other common design solutions are tab views or more print oriented options with signposts or menus (cf. e.g. Kopleinig & Müller-Spitzer, 2014; Dziemianko, 2015). It is less widespread to use more vertical screen space. However, this could also be an interesting solution for mobile devices (cf. e.g. Storjohann, 2018).

We will show how variations and rearrangements of the basic building blocks of a dictionary entry can be used to create new and completely different interfaces. With focus on usability and new hardware devices, we will compare different design options and try to figure out potential advantages these new interfaces may have over standard ones.

Our “variations” may not be suitable for productive use. But similar to concept studies in the automotive industry, they may help us to get a better understanding of our design problems and hint at directions we can pursue, when revising existing dictionary interface forms.

Keywords: user interface; adaptive design; user-centred design; online dictionaries

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