

## Dictionaries – too many words?

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### 1. Robots – Extraterrestrial beings – Human beings

The right side of a dictionary entry with its explanatory paraphrases and commentaries must be interpreted by a user. Such a user is neither a robot nor a being from outer space, but rather a linguistically competent fellow human, equipped with the following linguistic skills:

If there is a sign on the door saying “Please knock”, we do not feel compelled to knock every time we pass the door. The sign is read but not acted on – or only when there is occasion to enter the room. We are familiar with the hierarchy of linguistic functions and know when a sign acts as a signal or a symbol. We are also capable of reading and handling meanings dynamically. We can juggle with variations and prototypes (Holenstein 1980: 69); we know how meanings adjust and bow to context. We understand modalities. We can use the whole/part relationship syntactically and rhetorically. We sense what is the same, similar and dissimilar, which is a vital skill for users of a dictionary. And finally, we frequently resort to paraphrase in ordinary discourse.

One day, six-year-old Tobias asked his mother, “Du was isch das schu wider? Weisch, Hänkiplatz, öppis mitem Meer.” (Hey, what does that mean? You know, hangplace, something on the beach.) His mother was, of course, at a loss; her lexicon did not list that word even though she could recognize its components: hang and place. She tried making some guesses:

<b>Hänkiplatz</b>	(hangplace)
Schrank	wardrobe/closet
Garderobe	cloakroom
Anlegeplatz	landing stage
Bootshaus	boathouse
Landeplatz	landing field
Richtplatz	square for public hangings
Guillotine	guillotine
Gefängnis	jail
Schafott	scaffold

Tobias rejected them all but was lucky enough to have a patient and curious mother. She kept trying:

Seil	rope
Brett	plank
Stange	pole
Gerüst	scaffolding
Henker	executioner
Galgen	gallows

On hearing the word *Galgen*, the little linguist's face lit up. That was the word he had been looking for, that was the word that had been on the tip of his tongue for so long. But what do gallows have to do with the seaside? His mother realized that there was still a hitch somewhere and continued to probe. "Hm, seaside, salt water . . ." And then it dawned on her. "You mean ALGEN (algae)!" *Algen* was the word Tobias had been looking for. This strange and new word had been wrapped in the familiar word *Galgen*. Incidentally, Tobias was not at all pleased with himself for having made what he considered such a silly mistake in his inner lexicon.

We are obviously endowed with sophisticated lexical skills long before we have ever been confronted with a dictionary. We can make guesses and formulate hypotheses within a given context, such as, "It is somehow connected with the beach." We can also sense whether a particular word is the one we want (words on the tip of the tongue). The child's lexicon is not ordered alphabetically but according to sounds, that is poetically, an effective and natural order. Moreover, he uses his speaking partner to test his hypotheses. Inappropriate substitutions are rejected but only after they have been carefully weighed (Schelbert 1985: 35).

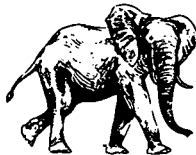
All of these admirable linguistic skills come into play when a human being consults a dictionary. Nevertheless, dictionaries tend to underestimate such skills. Let us look at three definitions from DUDEN 10:

**Elch**, der; -[e]s, -e: /ein Tier/  
(siehe Bild).



Elch

**Elefant**, der; -en, -en: /ein Tier/  
(siehe Bild).



Elefant

**Zaunkönig**, der; -s, -e: /ein  
sehr kleiner Vogel/ (siehe Bild).



Zaunkönig

Fig. 1

The use of pictures to support the right side of a dictionary entry saves words and long explanations. It is also fun. Here, two semiotic systems complement each other; there is an exchange between talking and showing. But why is every picture prefaced with a generic term — "an animal", "a bird"? We can see that in

the picture. And is it necessary to say *siehe Bild* (see illustration) if the illustration immediately follows the entry? Lastly, why repeat the headword again under the picture – *Elch, Elefant, Zaunkönig*? Why so many words? Why all these tautologies? Our semiotic competence allows us to coordinate headword and picture.

On the other hand, the elimination of information such as “almost hairless four-footed animal” is encouraging. DUDEN 10 takes a great deal for granted – and rightly so. The reader is allowed to interpret how big the animals are since the pictures are all the same size. We must distinguish between the individual (the picture) and the species (the word) and between parts and wholes. For instance, we are shown the whole elephant but only the head of the elk. The bird is sitting, not flying, the elephant is cheerfully marching off the page, the elk is already a trophy on a wall.

Assuming that there are a thousand illustrations (as the cover says), then the words *siehe Bild* occur 1000 times, the headword is repeated 1000 times, and the generic terms occurs 1000 times. Added up, these words would amount to approximately six full pages that could be used for more important linguistic data, like proverbs, as in “an elephant never forgets” or synonyms, as in *Dickhäuter*.

## 2. Too many metonymical shifts

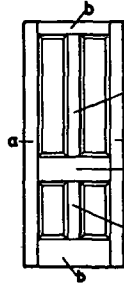
Meanings are not fixed, they can be stretched and adapted: an advertisement shows a picture of a paper clip; the text reads, “I was a can.” In order to examine how dictionaries deal with metonymical shifts, let us look at the definition of the word *door* in W3 reproduced on the following page.

Subdivision 1a calls a ‘door’ “a movable piece of firm material” and 2a calls it “an opening in a wall.” Well, what is it? Is it part of the wall or a space? It belongs to the nature of doors that when they are opened, they leave a hole in the wall. Subdivision 1b even distinguishes between doors through which people may pass and doors through which they may not pass. In 4a and 4b, the metonymical distinctions go so far as to set up the equation, *door* equals ‘house’, thus creating a subdivision of meaning out of a synecdoche in which a part has been substituted for the whole.

The illustration stems from W3 but the problem is common to dictionaries in general. Excessive subdivisions of meaning are counterproductive. We could do with less metonymical information. “Why go into all that detail about the different ways in which doors move and the kind of enclosures they give access to?” (Hanks 1979: 33). A door is a door no matter what it is made of, regardless of whether it is open or shut, for people or things, a space or an object, and regardless of whether it stands for the whole house (4a) or the family (4b).

door \ˈdɔːr, -b(ə)r, -dɔːr, -b(ə)s\ n -s [ME *dor*, fr. OE, *door*, gate & ME *dure*, fr. OE *duru*; akin to OHG *tor* & *turi* door, gate, ON *dyrr*, Goth *daur*, L *fores*, Gk *thyra*, Skt *dvār*]

1 a : a movable piece of firm material or a structure supported usu. along one side and swinging on pivots or hinges, sliding along a groove, rolling up and down, revolving as one of four leaves, or folding like an accordion by means of which an opening may be closed or kept open for passage into or out of a building, room, or other covered enclosure or a car, airplane, elevator, or other vehicle — see KALAMEIN DOOR, PANEL DOOR b : a similar part by which access is prevented or allowed to the contents of a repository, cabinet, vault, or refrigeration or combustion chamber 2 a : an opening in a wall of a building, room, or a side or rear of a vehicle by which to go in or out ; DOORWAY b : one of two openings  $3\frac{1}{2}$  ft. wide in the wall of a court-tennis court between the first and second gallery 3 a : a means of access, admittance, participation, or enjoyment (the opening of our ~s to all the distressed peoples of Asia — M.R.Cohen) (leaving the ~ open for a settlement) (opening with the magic of storytelling the ~s to the world's great treasure-house of literature — Nancy K. Hosking) b : an opening or route that suggests or resembles a door in giving physical access, entrance, or exit (this pass was the ~ through which the invaders poured into the doomed country) (slipped into Switzerland by almost the last remaining ~ out of France — Robert Payne) 4 a : one of the entranceways to buildings in a row; esp : one facing on a street (he resides three ~s beyond the church) (living next ~ to you) b : one's home and immediate family or one's personal knowledge and experience (striving to keep scandal from his ~) (this fact was not left to Japanese research to discover: it was brought to their ~ — A.M.Young) 5 : a gateway at the threshold of some supernatural realm or giving escape from the normal human state (the old statesman lingered for several weeks at death's ~)



door 1a: a stile, b rail, c mullion

Fig. 2

### 3. Too many metaphorical leaps

In addition to part/whole relations, there is also vast potential in relations of similarity. A concrete item like a door can be used figuratively or metaphorically to refer, for instance, to 'spiritual' doors. Sense division 3b in W3 explicitly states that an opening or route can resemble [!] a door. The treasure chest of metaphorical doors in inexhaustible and dictionaries love rummaging through them. W3 is no exception:

- 3a: a means of access, admittance, participation or enjoyment (the opening of our ~s to all the distressed peoples of Asia — M.R. Cohen) (leaving the ~ open for a settlement) (opening with the magic of storytelling the ~s to the world's great treasure-house of literature — Nancy K. Hosking)
- 3b: an opening or route that suggests or resembles a door in giving physical access, entrance or exit (this was the ~ through which the invaders poured into the doomed country) (slipped into Switzerland by almost the last remaining ~ out of France — Robert Payne)

Doors leading to supernatural worlds are even treated to a sense division of their own:

- 5: a gateway at the threshold of some supernatural realm or giving escape from the normal human state (the old statesman lingered for several weeks at death's ~)

Metaphorical sense divisions are all too dependent on the immediate context. There are as many as there are quotations for them, since meanings can be stretched to adapt to any new situation. This chewing-gum elasticity is, of course, indispensable to the inventiveness of signs and is a salient feature of language in action, but dictionaries should restrict themselves to potential rather than actual meanings.<sup>1</sup> One explanatory reference to the metaphorical use of a word would suffice, thus leaving room for more quotations. Not each quotation needs explaining, nor does it merit a separate sense division. Whether the metaphorical door opens onto heaven, hell, purgatory, Switzerland, Japan or discussions, it is still and always a door. Too many metaphorical explanations obstruct dictionary meaning. Since users are quite capable of interpreting and integrating meanings, dictionaries can restrict themselves to satisfying the user's need for citational evidence of metonymical and metaphorical tropes. (For a different view, see John Ayto, in this volume.)

#### 4. The myth of exactitude

Large dictionaries undoubtedly contain a great store of useful and intricate distinctions in their descriptions of word content, but they also contain much that could easily be jettisoned: definitions that depend on only one context or illustration, definitions of the obvious, definitions that are uncontrolled, wordy, unnecessarily comprehensive and confusing. The culprits are the explanations of metaphors and metonymies that slip into definitions, making them at times either too superficial as in the equivalence of door and house, or too profound as in the explanation of supernatural doors.

Dictionaries forget that their users are not robots but poetic beings. It is semantically superfluous to burden the definition of a door with the materials out of which it might be made. Any supposedly exact step in this direction is wrong *a priori*. It shatters the unity of meaning and blocks the path to more important aspects, for instance that doors can consist of living material, as shown in the following passage by Karl von Frisch (1975: 103).

Some species of [ants] build their nests in tree trunks and connect them to the outside world by a tiny hole which is only just large enough for one ant to pass through. A community includes a not very numerous caste whose entire mission in life is to act as doorkeepers. They have enlarged heads, flattened in front, that fit exactly in the entrance hole so that they can function as live plugs. ( . . . ) A doorkeeper will sit for hours in the entrance hole. She admits only members of her community demanding entrance by taps with their antennae, . . .

<sup>1</sup> See the forgotten controversy between Noah Webster (1758–1843) and Joseph Emerson Worcester (1784–1865). Worcester was all too aware of the pitfalls of isolated situational equivalents in compiling his *Dictionary of the English Language*, 1st ed. 1830, but he lost the battle (Schelbert 1972: 88–99, 117–152).

The employment of gatekeepers to guard buildings is an age-old human custom. But the ants are unique in having gatekeepers that block the entrance with a strongly armored part of their own body, camouflage it at the same time, and let no one enter without the correct password.

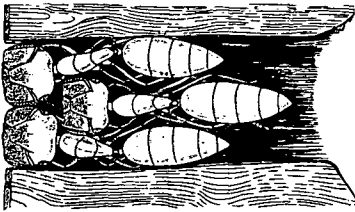
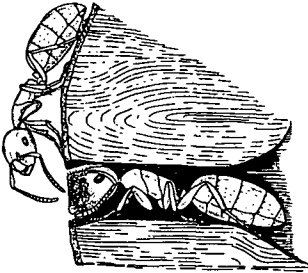


Fig. 3: Top, entrance to an ant colony (*Colobopsis*) in a tree trunk, blocked by the head of a doorkeeper. A worker is demanding admission. Below, a larger entrance hole is kept blocked by a group of doorkeepers.

As this illustration shows, the function of doors is clearly more important than what they are made of or how they close. A description of materials could fruitfully yield to a description of function, whose summary treatment in dictionaries hardly does justice to its semantic potential. Furthermore, if animal doors do appear in dictionaries, they should not be classified as metaphors or curiosities. Semantically speaking, animal and human communication are not discrete. Doors do not simply open and close; they separate areas of activity, they keep people and looks out, they keep warmth in, they are eye-catchers and status symbols, they get knocked on or – if you are an ant – tickled. They are meeting places studded with ritual. Mistletoe hangs in doorways at Christmas. Horseshoes are nailed onto the door to ward off the devil. Semiotic information of this kind is more enlightening than the “barren subtleties of Genus and Differentia” (Ogden 1923: 109).

## 5. The Zurich School of Semantics

The notion of contrived multi-meaning and the integration of meaning was advanced by Ernst Leisi at the University of Zurich. In the foreword to his edition of Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, Leisi distinguishes between “full meaning” and “situational meaning” (1964: 27–28). He demonstrates his thesis by reducing twelve meanings of the substantive *trick* to one integrated meaning.

Numerous works fruitfully exploring the concept of semantic integration have since been published under the auspices of the English Department in Zurich.<sup>2</sup> In *Fliegersprache*, Urs Weidmann applies the technique of integration to distinguish words of similar meaning, as in his detailed analysis of *check, test* and *monitor*. In his work on verb-particle constructions, Mario G. Pelli refers to the problem of splitting up words into too many meanings in the chapter "Integration vs. Atomization." Mary Snell-Hornby discusses the problem of constructed polysemy in her astute analysis of the modificants used in definitions of descriptive verbs (1983: 47–51). Nevertheless, the misconception still prevails that the quality and exactitude of a dictionary depend on the quantity of its sense and subdivisions (cf. Rundell, in this volume).

## 6. Conclusions

- Since ordinary dictionary users are experts at shuttling between talking and showing, they do not need a running commentary in order to interpret pictures. DUDEN 10 has taken a fruitful step in this direction by showing us a picture of an elephant instead of telling us that it is a large, four-footed mammal, but it could go even further and omit the pleonasm "elephant" as well.
- Users of dictionaries are poetic beings who understand metonymical shifts and metaphorical leaps. Citations illustrating these tropes speak for themselves. Let the users do their own guessing; in this respect, they are certainly as competent as dictionary makers are.
- A false sense of precision obstructs the integration of meaning and results in a benign neglect of function. A functional viewpoint is more useful at times than explanations that draw on the hierarchical ramifications of genus and differentia.

In a nutshell: let pictures and functional explanations do the talking instead of genus and differentia!

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<sup>2</sup> For instance: De Zordi, G. (1972), *Die Wörter des Gesichtsausdrucks im heutigen Englisch*, Zürich, Bern (Diss.); Waldvogel, Jörg (1983), *Licht- und Glanzwörter im modernen Englisch*, Bern; Glutz-Maier, Barbara (1985), *Angst und Schreckangst im Neuenglischen*, Zürich, Bern (Diss.).

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