A Quarter of a Century's Lexicographical Conferences

R.R.K. Hartmann

65 Conferences

My paper has three purposes: to introduce a wide-ranging discussion in sympo-sium[1] form, to present factual information not otherwise available, and to draw some general conclusions for the field of lexicography. My arguments are based on a detailed analysis of conference statistics covering a period of at least 25 years. As far as I am aware, this has not been done before (with the possible exception of Her-bert Ernst Wiegand's running commentary on recent conferences in the prefaces of the 6-volume *Studien zur neuhochdeutschen Lexikographie*, 1981-88). I gratefully acknowledge the help I have received from the many people to whom I have sent requests for information, notably Edward Gates, the tireless pioneer and secretary of the Dictionary Society of North America, which has held no less than 6 biennial conferences since 1977, and Bernard Quemada, who let me have a 43-page printout from his conference database.

My survey of 65 conferences covers the years between 1960 and 1988. It starts with the most famous of all lexicographical meetings, the conference held in 1960 at Indiana University in Bloomington (proceedings edited by Fred Householder and Sol Saporta, published 1962). I think I have managed to include most general, supra-regional, international gatherings for the world's major languages. I have deliberately excluded specialised local meetings, and I have ignored conferences that have not resulted in proceedings.

The reader will probably find the figures in the summary table of interest. These show the distribution of the main topics dealt with at the 65 conferences. Incident-ally, there is no one-to-one correlation between papers read and topics treated: there were 17 papers presented at the Bloomington, Indiana Conference, for example, but they represent only about 8 of the possible topics listed.

5 Problems

Before analysing the details, I must mention a few of the difficulties I had in managing the data.

The first problem is the sheer bulk of material, as a time-span of over 25 years involves the processing of large amounts of data. Some of this information is incomplete, some is irrelevant, some is the more meaningless the further back we move.

The second problem is my own inadequate knowledge of the languages, disciplines and experts which would be required to do full justice to this enormous subject. Even in my selection there are still 17 languages in which over 1300 authors reported on over 3 dozen topics! Even if I only concentrated on English and Ger-man, where the literature is relatively accessible to me, I could not hope to evaluate

progress properly. And I am bound to have missed a few important conferences, simply because there are still no centralised documentation channels available (the *DSNA Newsletter* was often helpful, but only in the most superficial way).

The third problem is selectivity, or where to draw the line between what to include and what to discard. The criterion of published proceedings eliminates some informal or irregular meetings which may nevertheless turn out to have been quite influential, such as those of the International Committee of Slavists, whose Commission on Lexicology and Lexicography has held at least 6 conferences since 1973. I have also tended to prefer self-contained conferences to sectional groupings within larger organisations, such as congresses of linguists specialising on particular languages or language families. One such casualty is the Modern Language Association of America (the MLA Lexicography Discussion Group is holding its 15th meeting in December 1988); I have also had to leave out commemorative symposia dedicated to classics like Johnson, Grimm and Littré, and expert workshops in neighbouring fields like information technology, terminology, onomastics, dialectology, semantics and etymology.

The fourth problem is that of generality, or the question of how many of the issues and techniques developed for one language group or discipline are relevant to the totality of the lexicographic enterprise. Ladislav Zgusta, who has more than once criticised lexicographers for ignoring relevant literature because it happens to have been published in another language, drew explicit attention to this problem by subtitling the 1978 Urbana Conference papers 'Western and Non-Western Perspectives'. It is certainly true that much lexicographic practice is still carried out in relative isolation, but the problem will remain with us until we can devise world-wide abstracting and digesting services.

The fifth and last problem concerns the conference organisers' ability or inability to publicise and communicate the results of the meetings. In some areas of the world, and in some special fields, the media are simply too limited to achieve the kind of dissemination that would be appropriate. To give just one example: the proceedings of the 1970 Mysore conference held in India took 10 years to materialise!

4 Findings

What then are the main findings of our survey?

Topics

The first thing we notice is the very uneven distribution of topics, both in terms of the contents of papers and of themes of conferences. The figures range from 45 down to 1. By far the most popular subject is that of 'semantic information' in dictionaries (which occurs at least 42 times), often in combination with approaches to the explanation of meaning, or 'definition' (which occurs 29 times). At least 2 conferences (in Germany) have been devoted to problems of definition, and at least one (in Poland) to semantics and lexicography. The popularity of these subjects is no

doubt due to the rapid development of linguistic semantics, and the availability of several competing theories, during the period under review.

The treatment of 'grammar' is also a frequent topic, sometimes in combination with two other favourites, particular items of 'vocabulary' or certain aspects of 'computing'. Each of these topics scores around the 40 mark. Only one conference has so far been solely concerned with grammar in the dictionary: Essen 1984. Computer aspects have been thematised at least 7 times, especially in the annual conferences of the Centre for the New OED at the University of Waterloo in Canada, since 1985.

Another pair of items will perhaps attract the reader's attention, viz. 'critical review' and 'entry structure'. These are very diffuse categories, covering a wide range of approaches, but both are important for achieving progress and change, and both are on the increase. I noticed, with a little surprise, I must admit, that the critical spirit tends to surface in North America rather than Europe, for instance at the biennial meetings of the DSNA.

Another fact that surprised me was that the 'bilingual' dictionary has pushed the 'period' dictionary into second place. I do not know whether this heralds the decline of the historical approach or the rise of other subjects (like 'terminology' and the 'learner') into a more prestigious position. It may be significant that although the academic-historical or period dictionary still figures as a conference theme occasionally, sometimes in association with computer techniques, the first two Round-table meetings at Florence in 1971 and at Leiden in 1977 have not maintained the impetus and produced a third.

There is not enough space to comment on *all* the figures (e.g. I am glad to see 'fieldwork' and 'corpus' problems coming into focus again, probably enhanced by recently developed information technology), but I must say something about the *lower* end of the spectrum and note, with regret, the virtual absence of certain topics, like 'author' dictionaries, or the place of 'proverbs', 'names' and 'pictorial illustrations' in the dictionary, from the programmes of the major conferences. Even topics like 'spelling' and 'pronunciation' do not seem worthy of attention these days. One topic which *is* receiving more coverage than it used to, I am glad to say, is the so-called 'user perspective', i.e. what can be done to increase the effectiveness and intelligibility of dictionaries for the benefit of their users.

Frequency

My second finding, not unexpectedly, was that the frequency of conferences is increasing, almost at an alarming rate. If we consider the data in intervals of 5 years, the trend becomes quite obvious:

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1960-64  :    2 conferences
1965-69  :    0 conference
1970-74  :    5 conferences
1975-79  :   13 conferences
1980-84  :   23 conferences
1985-89  :   25+ conferences
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More and more of these meetings are held in series at regular intervals. I have already mentioned the meetings of the Dictionary Society of North America (6 since 1977), of the MLA Discussion Group (14 since 1974), and of the Waterloo Centre for the New OED (3 since 1985). Three other North American conferences constitute an informal series: Bloomington IN 1960; New York Lexicography in English 1972; and the 1985 Colloquium at Ann Arbor MI.

In Europe we have already noted the short sequence of two 'Round tables' on the period dictionary at Florence and Leiden and the conferences of the Slavists in various places (6 since 1973). The most impressive series so far are the 4 International Symposia since 1982, which have created a useful forum in Copenhagen to discuss problems of German and English lexicography in relation to Scandinavia. They have been held in two-year intervals, the last two in the same years as our own EURALEX congresses (cf. Hartmann 1984, Snell-Hornby 1988, and this volume). There are also a number of colloquia in Germany which are linked by various themes and personalities, but they have not managed to establish an international tradition. Another colloquium that had ambitions of becoming a regular event, Augsburg 1983, never made it beyond the first meeting. In contrast to the busy conference calendar in the Federal Republic, though, some countries have not seen even a single meeting on lexicographical topics. This is possibly another area where EURALEX can make an impact, by bringing an international gathering to more isolated places, thus counteracting the dangers of concentration and the formation of a supranational 'circuit'.

Specialisation

My third finding is that languages other than the major world languages and smaller countries or poorer regions get an unfair deal in the conference market. This is difficult to prove with figures (and my sample may be biassed), but I have the distinct feeling that certain lexicographers are under-represented in our roll-call of conferences. Let me give you a few examples. Take the Baku Conference on Idioms and Idiom Dictionaries. An important topic, you will agree, in an important language, but practically none of this material has filtered through to the average mainstream lexicographer west of Budapest. And I have been unable to obtain the book to this day.

Another example is the 1979 Colloquium in Neuchâtel on the national Swiss dictionares. It contained 14 fascinating papers, but I wonder how many of us before ZüriLEX '86 had any idea of whether any of them were relevant to the rest of the lexicographical fraternity?

I could go on in this vein, asking similar questions, e.g., about Rabat 1981, Sydney 1982, Tallin 1985, and Yerbabuena 1988. Anyone who has been involved in the organisation of a conference will know the producer's problems, and those who try to keep up with their reading of the literature will know the consumer's difficulties.

Communication

The fourth and last thing I conclude from my survey is that in spite of the ever-growing conference industry there is still room for improvement in an area for which conferences were created in the first place, viz. communication. Communication between lexicographers of different nations and specialisations, communication between theoreticians and practitioners, communication between lexicographers and people outside lexicography, and - yes - between those who attend conferences and those who do not.

The paradox that communication can break down in spite of the over-abundance of conferences can perhaps be explained in terms of the familiar metaphor of 'macro-structure' and 'micro-structure'. When we look at the macro-structure of the complete list of conferences, we find it hard to perceive patterns, apart from the superficial ones of chronological order or repetition of ticks and circles. This was indeed one of my frustations in trying to make sense of the proceedings as a whole: is there anything like a logical progression from one conference to another? Could we, by examining the papers presented at the three EURALEX congresses in Exeter, Zürich and Budapest measure the growth of our field? I am not sure whether we could, even if we assume that the quality of the contributions has been kept at the same high level throughout.

The micro-structure of the individual conference, say again that of each of the three EURALEX congresses, is just as complex to fathom out. Every paper carries with it the personal background and viewpoint of the presenter, and this may not even become apparent in the course of the presentation. So there is ample scope for misunderstanding and non-communication during and between conferences. I suppose that is why participants often claim that they learn more in the unofficial than in the official programme.

Conclusion

If there is a conclusion to be drawn at the end of my deliberations it is this: Conferences are no guarantee for reducing the barriers to communication: sometimes they can create new barriers.

I hope I have given an accurate picture of the lexicographical scene through the prism of its conference record. What is clear to me is that conferences are certainly one important means for exchanging information. We can all help to improve this information flow and thus raise the general level of knowledge in and about our field by ensuring that adequate documentation and dissemination facilities are made available, by being aware of what has been done before and in other places, and by generally encouraging openness and frankness.

This imposes responsibilities both on organisers and participants. The organisers must provide a good atmosphere for exchanges, must concentrate the subject matter without losing control of general intelligibility, and above all must carefully select papers of quality and relevance. The participating speakers must be informed about their own specialism and relate to their audience, the people listening must be willing to learn something new from the speakers.

Note

References

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1960—1988: 65 Conferences 1317 + Papers

	Frequency of topics treated	Topic as conference theme
Dictionary Typology	13	
Bilingual Dictionary	38	1
Multilingual Dictionary	4	
Encyclopedic Aspects	6	
Systematic/Thematic Dic.	13	
Period Dictionary	31	5
Author Dictionary	3	
Dialect Dictionary	25	2
Learner's Dictionary	19	1
Historical Aspects	33	4
Biographical Aspects	7	
Theory/Training	17	
Semantic Information	42	1
Grammatical Information	45	1
Spelling Information	7	
Phonetic Information	16	
Etymological Information	18	1
Social/Norm Aspects	23	
Idioms/Collocations	17	1
Translation (Equivalence)	16	1
Terminological Information	27	
Definition	29	2
Proverbs		1
Names	4	
Critical Review	37	6
Entry Structure	38	
Text Aspects	18	
Fieldwork/Corpus	34	
Usage Labels	21	
Vocabulary Items	42	1
Computer Aspects	40	7
Contrastive Aspects	9	
Interference/Borrowing	17	
User Perspectives	27	1
Psychological Aspects	6	
Pictorial Illustration	4	

17 (major) Languages