Putting lexicography on the professional map

Training needs and qualifications of career lexicographers

B. T. Sue Atkins[1]

Lexicography is a subject that is exploding into the 1990s. The working environment of career lexicographers[2] is being transformed by advances in technology and in linguistic research that bring new resources, new products, new tasks and new responsibilities; as a profession we must respond to these changes by assessing what skills we have and what further skills we need to develop if we are to rise to the challenges that face us today. I propose to describe the current situation, as it appears to me, and then make some proposals for a response to the demands that this situation makes on our profession.

Current situation

In this section I shall outline the current working situation of the career lexicographer (what the job consists of, and how lexicographers are trained today) and highlight new opportunities that are changing everything.

Employment conditions

Lexicography, in my view, is a craft: like all crafts, it demands from its successful exponents both an innate flair for the job, and acquired skills in performing it. It is important to remember this when discussing lexicographers' training, as there is little point in academic lexicography qualifications for people who lack the flair needed to write dictionary entries. Lexicographers have to be born before they are made. This point lies behind much of what is said later in this paper about professional training and qualifications. Furthermore, the skills that dictionary compilers learn during their apprenticeship period are extremely difficult to specify, and require much laborious application. Most experienced dictionary editors will, I believe, agree that without the laborious application, without many months —perhaps years— of dictionary writing, it is impossible to acquire the necessary skills. This again is an important truth and one which cannot be ignored in any discussion of lexicographers' training.

The career lexicographer has no clear job definition: for every advertised post there may be over 100 applicants, few with relevant skills or experience. It is current practice in many establishments to give aptitude tests to selected candidates before interview, and often to hold further aptitude tests before appointment. There is still

1. My thanks go to the many colleagues who have taken time to discuss this subject with me; however, the opinions and suggestions here are my own, and should not be construed as being endorsed by my employers, nor should the current employment conditions described in this paper be taken as reflecting the situation obtaining at Oxford University Press.

2. This term designates people earning their living as compilers or editors of A to Z (lexical) dictionaries; it is not meant to include people from other professions.

considerable wastage as it becomes clear that in some cases —even after such a thorough initial assessment— the necessary flair is simply not there. Thus, despite the flood of applications which every advertisement brings, publishing houses can never find enough good lexicographers to meet their needs.

This is hardly surprising. There are at present no recognised qualifications for the job, no defined career structure, and therefore no clear path into the profession for those who may wish to enter it. In parenthesis, one side effect of this situation is a lack of information on the size of the labour force: I estimate (but this may be far from the truth) that there are around 130 full-time professional lexicographers in the UK, working within publishing houses, and probably three or four times as many freelance workers, often part-time, and often not working exclusively on dictionary compiling, since many of them also do editing, indexing, translating or similar work.

As is common in occupations where no formal qualifications are required and where the bulk of the labour force is freelance and part-time, lexicographers in most establishments suffer from low status and low pay, not only in relation to their own managerial colleagues but also *vis-à-vis* occupations demanding a similar level of education and professional skills, such as university teaching or business administration. This results in a constant dissipation of lexicographical talent; often, experienced lexicographers become publishing executives simply in order to survive economically.

Lexicographers' training

At present, most lexicographical skills reside in the employees of large publishing houses and are acquired by lexicographers in an *ad hoc* way in the course of their work on commercial dictionaries. If there is a full-time in-house initial training course (not always the case, by any means), it probably lasts not much longer than two or three weeks. Publishing houses as a whole do not invest much time, energy or money in training their compilers; it is not unknown to hear of a publisher's xenophobic fear that when fully trained the compiler will instantly leave for a rival establishment. Consequently, lexicographers tend to learn both lexicographical techniques and related skills, such as lexical analysis or proof-reading, on the job. This is not only extremely labour-intensive (virtually dedicating one skilled lexicographer to each new recruit for long periods of the working day), but in the absence of a conceptual structure in which to place the new information, it is also uneconomic in terms of the learner's investment of time and energy. Nonetheless, many experienced dictionary editors are convinced that the best way to teach beginners is to let them do it wrong before telling them how to do it right.

Furthermore, dictionary editors and publishers tend to believe that each dictionary project is so different from any other that training can be done only within a project. Indeed I have heard colleagues claim to have «little or nothing in common» with other dictionary compilers on different projects, which simply highlights the need for training in the theory as well as the practice of lexicography. Such an attitude leaves out of account my own view of the lexicographical process as consisting of two distinct operations: analysis, which is independent of the constraints of any specific project, and synthesis, or the compiling of one particular dictionary.

Outside publishing houses, academics interested in lexicography and aware of the situaton are developing their own courses in lexicography (cf. Hartmann, this volume). However, while universities are clearly equipped to give would-be lexicographers a serious foundation in relevant subjects, they are, I believe, clearly not equipped to give practical lexicographical training or qualifications; this is a task for the profession itself to undertake. Some publishers (as reported in Ilson, 1986) have openly expressed their mistrust of and reluctance to employ applicants with academic lexicographical qualifications and no relevant experience. Amongst the professional dictionary editors of my acquaintance, even the most theoretically inclined would maintain that lexicographical skills can be taught only by those who possess them, and that in order to acquire them one must —whatever one's other qualifications— spend at least one year, preferably longer, as a full member of a professional team.

To summarise the current training situation: although some dictionary publishers offer some structured in-house training, many still expect their employees to develop their lexicographical expertise by osmosis, during an unstructured apprenticeship period. None consider a purely academic qualification in lexicography to be a benefit for, far less a prerequisite of, a career as a dictionary writer.

Opportunities

Ironically, there have never been more exciting opportunities in the field of lexicography: many of the tools of the trade, and its products too, will soon be unrecognisable to practitioners who do not make a conscious effort to keep up with the changing times.

In linguistic research the focus is on the Word, as never before. Theoretical work in many areas of cognitive science, and in lexical semantics in particular, offers lexicographers the chance to learn more about the mental lexicon, the ultimate object of their own analyses. The research findings of theoretical linguists provide a powerful stimulus to lexicographers to improve their description of how the language works.

Recent advances in technology have opened a rich vein of new resources. Electronic text corpora offer lexicographers an *embarras de richesses*; lexical tools incorporating statistical and linguistic routines already go some way towards providing a workstation that will enable these riches to be exploited adequately (at present we are simply scratching the surface, but what a difference this has already made); machine-readable dictionaries may be parsed and manipulated, yielding databases —stores of lexical knowledge— to be mined for systematic and structured linguistic information. These electronic developments enable lexicocographers to learn much more about how the language is used.

The technological advances which give us new resources also push us towards developing new products. With the advent of electronically accessed dictionaries on CD-ROM and with machine-assisted compiling of larger and more complex lexical databases, new vistas are opening; the electronic dictionary cannot be simply the paper dictionary in drag. If new methods of access (breaking the iron grip of the alphabet) and a hypertext approach to the data stored in the dictionary do not result in a product light years away from the printed dictionary, then we are evading the responsibilities of our profession. Now that we know how to build better dictionaries, and how to build them faster, we must be able to exploit this happy situation to the full. This will demand new skills, and consequently a new approach to training lexicographers in the 1990s.

There are of course other «products» of lexicographical work that are not sold in shops: applications of natural language processing, ranging in scope from simple spelling checkers to sophisticated techniques of machine translation, information retrieval, text understanding and the like. It should be noted here that dictionary publishing is no longer the only outlet for lexicographers' talents. Many software houses, universities and other research institutes are now engaged in lexicography of one kind or another. Unfortunately, within these establishments the lexicography is often carried out not by trained lexicographers but by theoretical linguists, computer scientists or members of sister disciplines. There is a regrettable tendency to believe that lexicography is so simple that it may be confided to an untrained graduate student. It is up to the profession to convince potential employers outside publishing proper of the need to employ —and of the benefit of employing— trained lexicographers to do lexicography. For this to happen, the profession must take a long hard look at its present skills and future training needs.

Abundant opportunities, richer resources, better tools, different products, demanding new jobs: this is a challenging time to be a lexicographer. We must consider how lexicographers can move with these exciting times. What skills and qualifications do they need to equip them to take their rightful place in this new world? Where can these skills and qualifications be acquired? Who is to train the lexicographers of tomorrow?

Proposals for change

In this section, I shall make some concrete proposals regarding the educational qualifications and practical training of career lexicographers, and outline a possible framework in which these might be acquired.

Who should train the lexicographers of tomorrow?

In this context, several of the points already made are highly relevant: practical lexicographical skills can by taught only by those who possess them already; in order to acquire such skills a period of at least a year must be spent on A to Z dictionary compiling in a professional environment; to do this work at all a certain innate flair is essential, and the possession of such flair is apparent only during real compilation. Inexorably, one is led to believe that decisions on the training and professional qualifications of lexicographers must be made by experienced career lexicographers. The lexicography profession must give some thought to professional exicographical training.

My thesis is this: lexicography may be compared to engineering, accountancy, law and medicine[3], in that it requires not only a basic academic training compatible with the demands of the tasks, but also a professional formation period during which the trainee acquires hands-on experience, and undergoes further structured training, before taking qualifying examinations administered by a body whose members are

3. In proposing this I acknowledge the inspiration of an anonymous (to me) contributor to the 1989 New OED Conference in Oxford, where this subject was discussed.

themselves members of the lexicography profession. This is of course not to deny academics a role in the education of people who subsequently become lexicographers, nor to deny them a contribution to the theoretical training of lexicographers themselves. Universities and colleges by their very nature cannot provide practical training[4] (the pressures of time and space which so much contribute to the honing of lexicographical skills can never be reproduced by cockpit simulation methods), but by teaching relevant theoretical subjects these institutions can —and indeed should— supplement the practical training of career lexicographers.

Proposed training structure and qualifications

Lexicographers require not only a broad-based general education upon which to build their professional formation, but also a mind trained in analytical techniques, able to select relevant facts and summarise them accurately and clearly. Consequently, the initial qualification must be a good degree, preferably to honours standard; in my view, the actual subject is of no account, since a dictionary team must unite people of varied skills, backgrounds and knowledge. Scientists are in particularly short supply. Gates (1986) makes the sombre comment that «the kind of reading and writing that one does beyond the baccalaureate may render one's own style unreadable», but many survive even linguistics courses.

For the aspiring lexicographers the first step on the ladder after graduation should be an articled apprenticeship in a commercial dictionary publishing house; the initial aptitude tests and other selection procedures will weed out many of those who have no flair for the work. (In the present situation, those without flair who do a degree in lexicography before attempting any may eventually wish they had chosen another option.) «Articled apprenticeship» means a period of structured, in-house practical training in dictionary writing, during which time the trainee will start compiling, under the tutelage of an experienced professional. The salary should of course be commensurate with the work, and here comparison with trainee solicitors and accountants is useful. As in those professions, too, the employer has the responsibility of providing a valid all-round training, including a certain amount of classroom-type instruction during the one- or two-year apprenticeship period. The employing publisher will therefore be expected to ensure that the trainee lexicographer is given a grounding in all the skills necessary for a basic compiler, including for instance copy-editing, proofreading and relevant technical aspects of book production.

At the end of this articled apprenticeship, the trainee will have earned the basic professional qualification in practical lexicography. Publishers employing a lexico-

4. Cf. Rey 1986: «I am certain that lexicographical training should be given... inside teams of lexicographers, rather than in universities or schools... a school of lexicography within the traditional university structure would probably be more efficient in training authors of dissertations on lexicography rather than lexicographers proper.» Here I must agree with Alain Rey, who is of course a highly respected and very experienced career lexicographer. Hartmann (1986, and this volume), Hausmann (1986) and —to a lesser extent— Sinclair (1984) articulate the opposing point of view. Gates (1986) offers an attractive compromise solution in university lexicography courses taught by people who have been career lexicographers.

grapher with this qualification may be confident of selecting someone who has the necessary flair for the work, together with a solid knowledge of all the aspects of dictionary writing needed by a member of a compiling team. A non-exhaustive list of these would include: studying citations for a headword (either from an electronic text corpus or other source of evidence) and from these constructing an analysis of the word's meaning into different senses, as appropriate to the dictionary being compiled; writing a clear definition or —for bilingual dictionaries— providing an adequate target-language equivalent of each sense; following a style guide intelligently and accurately in respect to all aspects of lexicography, in particular multiword lexemes; providing examples appropriate to the dictionary, and handling all other, aspects (grammar, style and register labelling, pronunciation, etymologies, usage notes etc.) of the entry as required. Also, possession of the basic lexicography qualification should be an indication that the lexicographer has adequate keyboarding skill, is careful, accurate and reliable, and can proofread dictionary text.

Senior editors, however, require more than these basic skills. They have the responsibility of designing new dictionaries, writing style guides, training teams of compilers, accurately assessing workloads and managing large dictionary projects so that they are completed within budget and on time. For such professionals, a period of further study is suggested, during which time they may acquire advanced skills and relevant theoretical knowledge.

Here it is useful to think in terms of lexicography-oriented modules (devised as part of a lexicography diploma) taught within universities or other institutions and taken by senior lexicographers on sabbatical leave. The full course of customised modules should lead to an advanced professional qualification equivalent to a postgraduate diploma. Subjects of study should include —among others— writing skills, theoretical linguistics (lexicology, semantics, syntax, morphology, etymology, etc.), computational linguistics and lexicography, and basis computer skills. Here too it is appropriate to incorporate a background course in metalexicography (types of dictionaries, dictionary macro- & microstructure, history of lexicography, evaluation of dictionaries, etc.). It should also be possible for students to develop useful specialisms (e.g. terminology, another language, basic logic and set theory, statistics and probability theory) during this course.

The practicalities of finance and teaching provision may make this ideal impossible to achieve, but it is to be hoped that universities will be flexible enough to offer customised modular courses for senior lexicographers, perhaps with the option of completing their advanced studies by writing a master's thesis (on a topic relevant to their current dictionary project) while continuing in paid employment.

Probably only a few people, however, will move through the system from undergraduate to senior lexicographer without diversions en route. This is as it should be. As Whitcut (1989) notes: «An essential requirement for the good lexicographer, about which his or her formal qualifications tell us nothing, is wide general knowledge and knowledge of the world... Very young lexicographers often fail here because... they have simply not lived long enough or 'been around' long enough.»

In addition to an adequate lifespan, appropriate extra-lexicographical experience makes a good lexicographer into a better one. Dictionaries are so many, and so varied, that it is impossible to specify categorically a «preferred» background. Suffice it to say that certain types of professional experience are peculiarly appropriate to certain types of dictionary. Teaching, especially English or a foreign language, is relevant to most dictionary compiling. Compilers of EFL dictionaries are expected to have taught English as a foreign language, a good formation for bilingual lexicographers too. The latter must of course have lived in the other-language community and have very considerable other-language skills. Primary school teaching, or indeed parenthood, provides good training for the editors of schools dictionaries. Work in the various professions —law, medicine, sciences, etc.— is a good background for specialist editors.

Framework for such training

In the UK, there is a government-sponsored training scheme incorporating a system of National Vocational Qualifications[5], or NVQs, already being developed in other branches of the publishing industry. The immediate aims of this scheme are to develop standards of competence and to improve the training record of British industry; its long-term objectives are to ensure the increased competitiveness of British industry, to combat the shortage of skills and to produce a more flexible workforce. The publishing industry is already engaged, within a national framework, in devising vocational qualifications relating to some of its activities, notably production, design and copy-editing. This NVQ scheme seems to provide an excellent framework within which to develop professional lexicographical qualifications, in the first instance the basic training and eventually also the advanced diploma.

The basic NVQ in lexicography, as in other aspects of publishing, could take the form of a certificate of vocational competence, achievable in Units (each representing one work activity and consisting of several Elements of Competence). Such a certificate would be awarded by the Publishing Qualifications Board (PQB), which makes all awards within the industry, on the basis of a Performance Assessment Record identifying all the Elements of Competence and their attendant Performance Criteria. The PQB evaluates a portfolio of work assembled by the candidate, which consists of samples of real work with the candidate's commentary on each, designed to show the achievement of specific competences. The portfolio is assembled under the guidance of the candidate's Assessor, who could be for instance a more experienced colleague, or the candidate's line manager or other suitable person. Assessors are trained by the PQB, and work within a Centre (ideally the candidate's employers, but this could be another company or a college or other institution operating the NVQ system, supporting candidates and assessors, and able to provide training for whole NVQ Units). The whole training and qualification process is controlled by Verifiers, who are appointed and trained by the PQB, and whose responsibility it is to maintain consistency of standards, and thus to guarantee a national standard.

There is of course an international angle on all this.[6] Bilingual lexicography is obviously one of the areas in which consistent standards across national boundaries are to be desired. An international professional lexicography qualification would also

5. I am indebted to Dag Smith, Director of the Publishers' Association Book House Training Centre, for information on the NVQ scheme.

6. EURALEX has indicated its willingness to co-sponsor with Book House Training Centre discussions into this aspect of lexicographers' training.

simplify employment possibilities in the field of natural language processing, particularly within the European Community. And of course it is in everyone's interest to make better dictionaries.

Conclusion

A structured scheme of training, with nationally (and internationally) accepted professional qualifications, would benefit employer and employee alike in dictionary publishing. Higher and more consistent standards of lexicographical expertise would create for the employers a readily identifiable pool of qualified labour; the skills of this workforce would be clearly definable and measurable, and the workers themselves would be more flexible overall, with a broader base of experience and a wider range of skills.

Lexicographers would greatly benefit from improved training, higher status and better career prospects. With such professional qualifications, they would rightly expect a structured career path, offering systematic choices according to their particular skills and needs, and allowing them to control their own career development (this is rarely possible today). Those with high qualifications might hope to receive appropriate remuneration. As a corollary, they might well be obliged to revise their attitude to dictionary-writing, and be prepared (with appropriate guarantees of credits page acknowledgement of work done) to switch from one project to another if their employers required this. The umbilical cord linking the dictionary to its creators might weaken. The ability of lexicographers to transfer smoothly from one project to another without a long period of initiation should certainly make the concept of training more attractive to publishers.

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