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Towards a Comprehensive Theory of Lexicographic Definitions

Abstract

These theses are devoted to one of the most important lexicographic issues: that of definitions for lexical units dealt with in different dictionaries. The main problem in our view is to build the relevant and coherent theory of **lexicographic definitions**. Today we mostly rely on **logical theory of definitions.** Though it is relevant for our purposes, it meets only partially our particular needs. On the other hand, we have at our disposal many purely linguistic means useful for creating lexicographic definitions. The author tries to construct the theory based mostly on linguistic foundations. The resulting outline may cover most types of definitions for different kinds of dictionaries aimed at quite various audiences.

1. Lexicographic definitions vs. logical ones

The latter kind means the definitions of things and phenomena in the real world around us, whereas the former (the topic of our discussion) means the definitions in dictionaries, in lexicography. The contradistinction between the two was delineated in detail by L. Zgusta (1971: 252–254), and in this starting point I am following in his steps.

In my opinion, it is necessary to extend the implications from the contrast of the two interconnected and, at the same time, opposite phenomena. **The theory of logical definitions,** first formulated by Aristotle, has a long history and immense tradition; **the concept of lexicographic definitions** is a recent construct that has not yet been completely formulated. Lexicographers tend to mix the two, failing to discern the specificity of definitions they are dealing with in their work.

And yet the problem is central for our metier. Howard Jackson (1988:126) writes: "Dictionaries are popularly conceived as reference works in which we look up meaning of words. Giving meaning is seen as the central function of dictionaries. And dictionary definitions are accounts of meaning, the attempt to express the meaning of each word distinctly". So it is most important to lay down (even sketchily) some basic principles of **a specific theory for lexicographic definitions.** While the above-mentioned authors and many others have made significant contributions towards this goal, a complete and consequential

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theory is still lacking. It is my hope that the following considerations will contribute to its creation.

As was mentioned, the theory of logical definitions was first formulated by Aristotle. In his "Topics" he wrote that definitions must consist of what was later called *genus proximum* and *differentia specifica*. That is, it must be first included in a class of a higher hierarchy than the *definiendum* (the defined object) and then specified by its prominent traits. This approach holds up to the present moment. Over the centures it has been detailed and accomodated to different particular cases. Thus, in the third century AD, a neoplatonic Porphyry built what was called "Porphyry's tree". In it he gave an example of concepts development from simple to more inclusive (and vice versa): his ladder presented a chain from 'substance' (on the highest level) down to 'animated matter', down to 'animated matter non-including plants', to 'concious creatures' and finally to 'man'. The implication is clear – in defining 'man' one should refer to the nearest higher level ('concious creatures') and not skip over it. Thus, to the Aristotle's rule was added a significant restriction of going to the nearest *genus proximum*.

I leave off innumerable other additions and corrections to the rock-solid premise, formulated by Aristotle, which was kept intact in its substance. I only want to mention some restrictions which time and again cropped up on account of using purely linguistic means for definitions. In the 'Port-Royal Logique' (1662) the authors devote to definitions a lengthy chapter, their principal effort being to discriminate between 'material and verbal definitions'. They accept the first and strictly warn against the latter ones. This cautiousness towards different 'verbal' definitions was deeply inplanted in all logical schools at large and was specified by various restrictions in choosing linguistic means for defining things. The so-called **circular definitions** (practically speaking, definitions through synonyms) were strictly forbidden and ridiculed. Logicians include among their ways of definitions the "philological method": *democracy* may be defined as "people's power", because of the Greek origin of this word (demos + cratos). Still, logicians constantly warn against extensive use of the method, eclipsing the classical Aristotle's approach. Their admonitions are included in many lexicographic works and adhere to many dictionary-makers (more in theory than in practice).

My claim is: our rules for defining words and other lexical units in dictionaries must be severed from the rules of logicians. They must be rotated 180 degrees, because **logical definitions are aimed at defining things and phenomena in reality (whatever it might be), and lexicographic definitions – at defining units of a linguistic sign-system, called language. These are two different frames of reference**

and they demand two different approaches to defining their corresponding units. We should not reject the logical definitions completely, but use them restrictively and only when they are really needed. They must find their place among many other ways and means for lexicographic definitions. As you see, mine is the other way round: as the logicians restrict philological aids for their use (allowing them in necessary cases), we can delegate to logical definitions only a limited and strictly cooperative position among other lexicographic props.

2. Classification of lexicographic definitions

First of all, we must discriminate between holistic lexicographic definition and its three main parts. Definition in its entirety is understood here as **everything in dictionary entry, but the headmorpheme, the headword or the headphrase itself**. Any other components of the entry, short of its heading, should be considered as the latter's definition and may be called **lexicographic definition in the broad sense**.

This latter has three principal components:
   a) All the extralinguistic elements of the entry;
   b) Definitions by grammatical notations;
   c) Definitions by words (or **formal definitions**).

The extralinguistic elements of the entry include: the layout of the entry, all poligraphic means for the design of the entry and singling out of its parts (fonts, bold, indents, etc.), numbering of successive parts of the definition, various graphic illustrations, and so on.

Grammatical definitions include the designation of parts of speech, syntactical relations of the defined unit, etc. These are not obligatory for all kinds of dictionaries, whereas the two other classes are always present in the entry in this or that specific form.

Formal definitions may be given as follows:

   logical definitions;
   definitions by descriptions;
   definitions by paraphrase;
   definitions by synonyms and/or antonyms;
   definitions through wordbuilding schemes
     (like: sky + scraper);

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definitions by exemplifying or with the help of citations;
definitions by ethymological devices (like: demo + cratis);
stylistic definitions of the unit register and spread
(archaic, dialectal, etc.).

Even a cursory glimpse of the above scheme illustrates, that **most of the lexicographic means for definitions in the broad sense of the word** have nothing to do with the logical approach or rules. I specially singled out logical definitions, in order to show their proper weight in the whole of our scheme. And though they have a very important place in our everyday work and in theoretical discourse, they cannot embrace all the rest. Each defining device must be utilised and used whenever it is needed. Each deserves profound and manifold treatment both in practice and in theory. In this context I am bereft of the possibility to deal with this extensively and shall limit myself to different constellations of these means in various types of dictionaries. In the long run, **the type of the dictionary unit based on words of different maturity** and **objectives of the proposed dictionary** impose their decisive inprint on each of the above stated components. Two additional parameters will be also taken into account: **the kind of entry heading** and the **proposed audience of dictionary users**.

3. Different constellations of lexicographic definitions in view of different parameters for dictionary-making

3.1 You may have noticed above, that I differentiate between **headmorphemes, headwords and headphrases** as separate dictionary entries. It is my view, on which I cannot dwell at length here. Those interested may turn to my report at the EURALEX Congress in Tampere (Solomonick, 1992:405). Still it is hardly necessary, since any lexicographer knows that we deal with the three categories in practical work. Clear enough, that for defining morphemes we mostly use grammatical definitions and exemplifying; for defining phrase-units we deal usually with paraphrasing; and for word-units all the mentioned ways of definitions are equally used whenever necessary.

3.2 In most dictionaries we deal with words as heads of entries, so we must be prepared to combine all lexicographic devices at our disposal for their definitions. In choosing these devices we can be guided by **different maturity of words, included in this or that dictionary**. This notion (*word maturity*) is built on the assumption that most words in any

language develop from one stage of *linguistic maturity* to another 'higher' stage. I distinguish four consequential stages of word development, based on extralinguistic causes, and one – on intralinguistic cause. The extralinguistic causes responsible for the development of words are all types of human activity and their reflection in human mind and in languages. The intralinguistic path to word development is their *grammatical refinement.*

3.2.1. I assume that **most words in any language came into being for the sake of naming various concrete objects of reality, for the sake of designating these objects and processing them later in speech as linguistic signs**. There are many arguments for this point of view and they are given elsewhere (Solomonick 1994). This stage of word development I call the first stage of their absorption in the language. Many words stay for ever in this stage; they are called Proper names; and there are many special dictionaries reflecting only Proper names, confined just to this category of words (yet a lot of Proper names are included in other types of dictionaries, especially in 'general ones'). These words demand specific lexicographic treatment; and their definitions use mostly **descriptions of the included names:**

> **Moscow** is the capital of Russia.
> **Waterloo, Battle of** – the battle where Napoleon's army was defeated by allied armies of adverse states; took place near the village of Waterloo, Belgium in 1815.
> **Lampedusa Giuseppe Tomasi di** 1896–1957. An Italian writer, the author of *The Leopard* (1960).

Each of the above definitions may be extended to a rather lengthy description, depending on the aims of the dictionary in which it is included. It may grow into an encyclopedic entry, dwelling on many particulars about geographic, historic or biographical detailes. But the main fact remains intact: each entry is dealing with a concrete event or object through their names.

3.2.2. Very early in linguistic development names **became notions – collected terms, denoting a whole class of analogous things or occurrences**. It was preceeded by a revolutionary leap in understanding that similar things may be called by one word and treated mentally as a single unit. Primitive thinking is prone to call any separate phenomenon in the surroundings by a special Proper name, while the more sophisticated mind quickly comes to notional denotations. Today we are far advanced

in the process, *and most words in our languages are notional words.* Correspondingly, the lexicographic treatment of this kind of word differs from that of Proper names: it is not the concrete description, but the description of a class. And here we usually use **logical definitions** aided by different lexicographic devices, because among other language units notional words are the most evasive and difficult for exact definition. Beginning with ancient times, meanings of notions appeared enigmatic for human knowledge. Suffice it to mention the medieval controversy on the Universals, the controversy that had the meaning of notions as their topic and lasted for centuries long.

3.2.3. It was exactly this quality of notional words (their vagueness in meaning), which made them unacceptable for the developing science. In the scientific discourse (within one linguistic community or internationally), absolute clearness of the used term was conditio sine qua non. That is why, during the advance of sciences since the Renaissance a new trend of linguistic activity -- that of creating **concepts for each scientific topic** -- became more and more prominent and growing in scope. This class of words gets its own characteristics and nowadays dominates in a special branch of linguistics (LSP) and in special terminological dictionaries. The definitions of concepts are more precise, abounding in technical wording and exact characteristics. **Water** is not defined simply as 'liquid for drinking or for industrial purposes' (which would suffice for the notional definition), but also as chemical substance having hydrogen and oxigen components; and sometimes its chemical formula H_2O is also cited. The concept definition is likely to grow into an encyclopeadic item with comparison of the definiendum and bounding cases, with explanation of its hidden and less known traits, etc.

3.2.4. Thus we have analysed three classes of words which constitute the main word stock in any language. Any member of the linguistic community must know at least some of them to take part in this language use. But when he comes to using it in actual speech, he is constantly encountered with cases when his linguistic potential appears to be lacking, and he has to invent new units or adjust the old ones in the new way. Thus, in actual speech, appear new lexical units: **idioms, coined phrases, puns, etc.** These novelties may be incorporated in the existing arsenal of lexical units. They are studied separately; and in our time we are witnessing the surging interest in this kind of linguistic proceeding. They are explained in special dictionaries, where they **are defined mostly by paraphrases and citations**. Usually, the first written examples of their use appear in citations.

3.2.5. Grammar notations are used in all kinds of dictionaries to give the additional characteristics to the defined lexical unit. Besides, there exist special dictionaries for presentation of this axis of language maturity. Then morphemes of various grammatical meaning and duration become the object of lexicographic treatment. We are witnessing the appearance of roots or affixes dictionaries, where these latter **are explained and demonstrated in their functioning in a particular language**. Such entries appear also in general dictionaries.

3.3. Potential groups of dictionary users influence drastically the choice of lexicographic definitions in the dictionary. This is obvious enough, but I want to give two examples. Moving up the age axis of potential users for our dictionaries, we repeat in some manner the phylogenetic history of word maturing, mentioned above. In order to get to notional understanding of surrounding reality, manhood was to gather different images of analogous revelations to unite them later in one notion-word. The same happens ontogenetically with any human being. Addressing our dictionary to very young people, we must also revert to the lower strata of the notion formation. That is why our dictionaries for children abound in graphic illustrations as colorful and picturesque as possible (we address ourselves to the prelinguistic phase of cognitive development in order to crown it with linguistic attire).

The second example concerns the case when future readers of the dictionary are likely to know some of its notions from their personal experience. In this case many lexicographers propose to skip over the definitions of such notions completely or deal with them in a nutshell. The case may be illustrated by the famous (in special literature it became notorious) example of one Italian dictionary, where the notion **cat** was defined as 'a well-known domestic animal'. I do not see anything repulsive in the example. Omitting definitions of the words regularly formed from other parts of speech is not only acceptable, but even necessary for any large dictionary.

3. 4. We may decide on different parameters of the proposed dictionary along the line from as simple as possible towards an encyclopedic one. This decision results in changing the choice of possible definitions and their dimensions. The starting point is the decision on the scope of our dictionary, later though the composition of dictionary entries to the applied types of definitions and their characteristics. The scope of the dictionary may lead to complete exclusion of some types of definitions otherwise possible and resourceful.

This is a very concise and incomplete outline of a wide and prolific subject. I am aware of the fact that many important features of it are missing or presented insufficiently. Yet my aim is to draw the attention of lexicographers to one of our central issues, which seems to be in eclipse. Only our concerted efforts, to which the abovesaid is but a humble contribution, may work it out to our mutual satisfacion.

References

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