Capturing Semantic Relativity in Dictionary Definitions – the Case of Defining "imaginary" Beings and "imaginary" Attributes –

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Abstract
All languages contain words that have to be defined relative to some other larger knowledge structure. In this paper the problem of encoding the relativity of beliefs about the existence of entities (e.g.. God) and beliefs about the truth of attributes of entities (e.g., that sangomas have power of divination) are analysed in detail. It is indicated that lexicographers utilise a variety of descriptive mechanisms for this purpose, but there is no generally accepted lexicographic principle(s) guiding their use. A number of topics that need urgent research to guide the use of various descriptive mechanisms to encode relative meaning in dictionary definitions are discussed.

1 Introduction

The recent world-wide outcry of Muslims because of a series of cartoons in which the Prophet Mohammed is perceived to be ridiculed, and the controversy ranging in America between Darwinists and proponents of the philosophy of Intelligent Design, are but two examples of peoples' sensitivities around core beliefs and the hefty reactions that can be evoked when these beliefs come under threat. These examples are also a strong reminder to lexicographers to be aware of the need to be sensitive to the cultural contexts of their target users when constructing dictionary entries.

In this paper the focus falls on the way in which dictionaries of various types encode target users' core beliefs about the existence of entities and of the truth of their defining attributes in dictionary definitions. In section 1.1 the concepts of "relative existence" and "relative truth" are introduced and defined within the framework of frame/cognitive semantics. Section 2 focuses on the various ways in which these concepts are encoded in dictionaries and the problems that may arise with current practices. Section 3 outlines a number of areas in need of further research.

1.1 Relative existence and relative truth

As has be convincingly argued by proponents of frame semantics (cf. Fillmore 2003) all languages contain lexical items (and whole lexical fields) that denote concepts or meanings that can only be defined relative to some other larger meaning construct, or whose meaning only makes "sense" if it is understood within the context of such a larger knowledge construct. A specific subset of these are lexical items that denote entities that are postulated to exist in some world other than the empirically verifiable one, and whose meaning can only be defined relative to this other world.

Typical examples of such lexical sets are the English words *God, god, heaven; hell, angel, spirit,* and *ghost,* or Zulu lexical items such as *tokholose, mamlambo,* and *(i)mpundulo (bird).* Both of these lexical sets denote entities which belong to the domain of religion and thus to the spiritual world, or the supranatural world. A third example is the set of English words *dragon, unicorn, witch, wizard, fairy, goblins, ghosts* and *grim reaper* from Greek mythology, fairy tales, and other narratives. CIDE classifies the entities to which they refer as "imaginary creatures", figments of human imagination, "not real", because they are created by and only exist in the world(s) we create in our minds on the basis of narratives such as Greek mythology and fairy tales (cf. CIDE, p. 704).

All three these lexical sets illustrate the relativity of the meaning of existence and the relativity of the meaning of truth. Firstly, because the existence of the entities denoted by these lexical items are defined relative to a specific world (e.g. "fairies exist, but then in the world created by fairy stories"). Secondly, because the attributes ascribed to these entities are held to be true, but then in the world in which they are postulated to exist (e.g. in fairy stories, fairies have magical powers).

2 Encoding relative existence and relative truth

How do dictionary definitions encode the concepts of relative existence and relative truth? As I will indicate below, this is done by a number of presuppositions and a few descriptive markers, an encoding procedure which is never spelt out to dictionary users and, as I would venture, to lexicographers themselves.

The first presupposition that lexicographers work with is that (i) in most explanatory dictionaries the empirically verifiable world is taken as the default world/cosmos against which existence and truth are defined, and (ii) that when other worlds act as reference points/justificatory contexts, this deviance from the default position must be signalled to the dictionary user.

The first part of this claim becomes evident in the oddity of a definition of a natural kind, such as a frog, if the issue of its existence and truth of its attributes have to be specifically labeled with ontological or truth markers:

(1) **frog** ANIMAL (***LIVING IN THE EMPIRICAL/NATURAL WORLD***).. a small animal which (***IS COMMONLY BELIEVED TO HAVE***) smooth skin, (IS COMMONLY BELIEVED)to live in water and on land, has long powerful back legs with which it jumps, from place to place, (IS COMMONLY BELIEVED TO HAVE) no tail, and is usually greenish-brown in colour
(Adapted from NOEDE, p. 785)

The second part of the claim is supported by the fact that lexicographers use a variety of descriptive markers to indicate when another world should be taken as reference point for the issue of existence and truth. The following definition in NODE of the lexical item *God* and the use of the label (*in Christianity and other monotheistic religions*) is a typical example:

(2) God ... ***(in Christianity and other monotheistic religions)*** the creator and ruler of the universe and source of all moral authority; the supreme being

Dictionary entry (2) could be paraphrased to mean '*God* (the lexical item) means 'the creator and ruler of the universe and source of all moral authority; the supreme being" (CONCEPT) within or relative to the larger belief system of Christianity and monotheistic religions (BELIEF SYSTEM/FRAME), where the latter is typically, but not exclusively, encoded in a label.

However, a definition such as (2) presupposes that the lexical item *God* refers to a being that exists, and of which it is accepted that it is true that it exists, but then only in the world/cosmos as defined in Christian and monotheistic religions, a belief which atheists, for example, do not share. Secondly, it presupposes that the entity referred to has a number of attributes ("the creator and ruler of the universe, the source of all moral authority, the supreme being) which are held to be true, but then, again, in the world/cosmos as defined in Christian and monotheistic religions.

Support for these assumptions come from reference semantics. As Lyons (1977: 209) explains, both reference and denotation with the help of language depend on and presupposes the existence of the entities and their attributes to which lexical items refer. This view is termed the axiom of existence, i.e. that whatever is denoted by a lexical item must exist, just as whatever is referred to by means of lexical items must exist, but then, as indicated above, relative to some defined world.

Secondly, the label in a definition such as (2) is more than simply just a label – it defines Christianity and monotheistic religions as an epistemological framework, as a lens through which issues of existence and truth are defined and against which these concepts have to be understood. In cognitive semantics such frameworks are called frames, cultural models or, more generally, Idealized Cognitive Models (Fillmore 2003) which act as justificatory contexts for certain beliefs about existence and truth. For example, a number of religions define a world or cosmos, and thus a reality that includes not only the physical world but also a spiritual world with places equivalent to the Christian heaven and hell. Holy scriptures and religious dogma, as well as religious metaphysics, are the sources of these realities and they dictate how the real world is to be construed, populated, and how these worlds, their creatures and the logics or laws within such a cosmos interact.

As ventured above, if existence within the empirical world operates as the unmarked case, then all other forms of existence have to be marked relative to some other 'world'/possible world. This other world may refer to a very broad range of entities, for example, the worlds created by religious and secular texts, the worlds inhabited by spiritual beings, and all kinds of worlds we create in our selves as part of our imagination.

Secondly, it is postulated that a lexicographic meaning description carries a presupposition of truth with regard to the attributes ascribed to an entity, i.e., for example, that it is true

that in our physical world a frog belongs to a cognitively salient category (the category SMALL ANIMAL) and that it is true that it has the attributes listed in definition (1). We also trust that lexicographers will provide us with true information with regard to the beliefs associated with a lexical item. However, the basis for the acceptance of such claims about existence and truth is its verifiability in terms of our sensory experiences of the empirical, physical or natural world, or, as additional justification, the theories and findings of the natural sciences. The reality against which both the issue of the existence of a frog and the issue of the truth of its attributes are defined, is thus a reality as defined by what we consider to be the empirical, physical or natural world.

By the same logic we would accept that the attributes 'the creator and ruler of the universe and source of all moral authority; the supreme being' is true of the being denoted by the lexical item *God*, but then in the world created by Christian and monotheistic religions.

Deviance from the default empirical world view as justificatory context is signalled in modern dictionaries by means of a wide range of explicitly encoded ontological and epistemological markers. These are labels and phrases which are presented as parts of definitions and which relativise the question of the existence of entities and the truth of attributes of entities to some possible world or a domain of experience and understanding (and thus of meaning) that acts as reference point for issues of existence and truth. The examples are meant to be illustrative and are by no means exhaustive of all the possible ways in which the world of reference can be marked:

(3) **dragon** ... a large fierce ***imaginary*** animal, usually presented with wings, a long tail and fire coming out of its mouth

(CIDE, p. 418)

(4) **heaven** ... the place where God or the gods ***are supposed*** to live; place of complete happiness where the souls of good people go after death

(LDOCE, p. 524)

(5) **hell** ... ***in some religions***, the place where some people ***are believed*** to go after death to be punished forever for the bad things they have done during their lives

(CIDE, p. 661)

(6) **fairy** ... a ***mythical*** being ***of folklore and romance*** usu. having diminutive form and magic powers dwelling on earth in close relationship of man

(Webster's 3, p. 816)

Other cases where the complexity of encoding relative truth arises are illustrated by words such as *sangoma*, *lucky* charm and *cancer bush*. Respectively, these words denote the belief that sangomas have the power of divination, that a lucky charm brings one luck, and that the cancer bush can heal cancer. What is at issue here, is not whether or not the denoted entities exist, but the truth of the attributes ascribed to them. Once again, it is a question of relative truth: these beliefs are said to be or accepted as true by certain sources, although they may not be empirically verifiable. Compare the following examples:

(7) **lucky charm** she always wears a lucky charm (= one that ***she thinks*** will cause good things to happen by chance)

(CIDE, p. 846)

(8) **sangoma** ... An African witch doctor, usu. a woman ***often claiming*** supernatural powers of divination

(DSAE, p. 306)

(9) **(i)mpundulu bird** ... The lightning bird ... An evil spirit ***about which there are various beliefs#***. It is invoked by witches, and freq. cited before judges as the instigator or cause of crime.

(DSAE, p. 231)

Issues of existence and truth in terms of some world are, however, not always clear cut. Compare the following two examples of doubt:

(10) **mamlambo** ... A river snake ***mythical or actual***, about which there are varied beliefs

(DSAE, p. 211)

(11) **witch** ... a woman ***who has, or is believed to have***, magic powers, esp. who can cast spells on people

(LDOCE, p. 1264)

On the face of it, relativizing the questions of existence and truth to some domain of experience and understanding opens up the possibility for the lexicographer to "objectively" describe ontological and epistemological commitments/beliefs of members of a language community. However, this is no easy way out. The first problem is that the empirical world is used as default justificatory and explanatory context which implies a commitment to and prioritization of the physical/empirical world. In as much as such a world view defines, for example, the supranatural as deviant, it is likely to be rejected by those who belief in a reality or a world of which the supranatural is part and parcel.

Secondly, as suggested by Fillmore (2003), for people who 'live' the frame', i.e. for whom the world indicated in a label is their point of reference, such explicit marking is irrelevant. Relativising aspects of existence and truth to some justificatory context only becomes relevant for dictionary users who don't live the frame. This suggests that lexicographers need to know what the relevant world frames are of the intended users of their dictionaries. Homogeneity with regard to a dominant world view simplifies the lexicographer's task as only deviances from th dominat paradigm have to be marked; heterogeneity, on the other hand, forces one to make an explicit choice for a default world view and all deviances have to be marked.

The point is, however, that one can hardly construct an explanatory dictionary and do so in an objective way, i.e. without making a specific choice as to what will be taken as the default position, either with regard to the concepts that are defined relative to some other concepts or those against which other concepts are defined. Deciding on what the default position should or could be, could be a rather troubling exercise as lexicographers would somehow have to come to grips with what the linguistic communities of their intended dictionar-

ies see as the baseline /default position from which they see, experience their worlds and define these experiences. This would have to be done by a careful analysis of the cultural model(s) of the linguistic communities whose language will be the object of description. Such models may or may not coincide with those of the lexicographer, but obviously those of the linguistic community should have priority.

3 Further areas of research

Relative existence and relative truth are complex phenomena of which only a few dimensions have been covered in this paper. Furthermore, very little has been forthcoming in lexicographic research on how lexicographers could or should go about encoding these concepts in dictionary definitions and side-step the problems indicated above. Both the semantic phenomenon and its description in dictionaries are thus in dire need of further research.

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