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Dictionary defining language

(On problems of semantic standardisation)

ABSTRACT: The article deals with the problems of semantic standardisation in monolingual dictionaries intended for a wide range of users. The need for the formation of an explicit and defined dictionary defining language (metalanguage) is proposed in this paper. On the one hand, this language should avoid the reductionist approach of dictionaries written only for specialists, on the other hand, it should be more explicit and intentional in using the defining words. An example of causative verbs analysis is introduced to illustrate a procedure.

We should like to deal with problems of the semantic standardisation of dictionary entries. This task is important not only for the compilation of a new, improved dictionary for a wide range of users but also for a complex work on creating a lexical knowledge base – i.e. the computational lexicon (Boguraev 1991, 164). On the one hand, we understand the term SEMANTIC STANDARDISATION as an intentional activity striving for a semantic homogenization of dictionary definitions as far as the lexical subsystems (lexical fields and/or groups) are concerned. On the other hand, it is also the results of this activity¹ (i.e. semantically standardized dictionary definitions).

It seems that semantic standardisation has, in general, manifested itself more in practice (in the single dictionaries) as a result of intentional (cf. "Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English" 1978) and/or intuitive lexicographers' work and less attention has been paid to it theoretically (e.g. Filipec 1973; Pisárčiková 1984; Tibenská 1991; the treatment of ergative verbs in two English dictionaries – Fontenelle 1990, 1991). Perhaps the most remarkable manifestation of semantic standardisation can be found (in currently available dictionaries) in lexical groups of nouns with more or less clear-cut hyperonymic relations (e.g. different types of animals, plants, instruments, etc.) and in groups of derivationally motivated words, which are linguistically transparent enough to be defined in a similar way. The alphabetic ordering of a dictionary, as it is known, shadows the semantic relations among single lexies (the term LEXIE is taken from E. Pottier and denotes a bilateral linguistic unit with its form and one meaning [Pottier 1963; Coseriu-Geckeller 1974]; this means that a polysemous word will have as many lexies as it has meanings and a monosemous word represents only one lexie). The result of the completed semantic standardizing work should be represented by THE DICTIONARY DEFINING LANGUAGE (or METALANGUAGE; henceforth DDL). It is not expected here to establish a kind of strictly "formal dictionary" in the sense of the Explanatory Combinatory Dictionary (Mel'čuk 1988, 166) because it is supposed to be used by a wide range of users (not only by specialists). That is why it should avoid an extreme reduction of the defining

words (not going into the basic level of the semantic primitives at all costs) and artificiality in defining meanings of the words. In fact, the ideal situation would be represented by forming a conceptual (onomasiologic-semasiologic) dictionary at first (cf. Kipfer 1986), using its own metalanguage – identical with DDL – which would represent an interstage to a new semantically standardized dictionary.

An example of semantic standardisation will be shown here using the causative verbs which have been studied in the on line version of the "Krátky slovník slovenského jazyka" (1987; The Concise Dictionary of the Slovak Language; henceforth KSSJ) containing about 50 000 lexies. It represents a type of monolingual explanatory dictionary for a wide public, in particular for native speakers.

The causative verbs themselves are not defined in the same way in linguistic studies (e.g. "Tipologija kauzativnyh konstrukcij" 1969; Lyons 1978, 488-494; Daneš-Hlavsa 1981). From the sentential semantic point of view they represent predicates where the semantic participant – CAUSATOR (sometimes the external and internal agents are distinguished here – Daneš 1971; Daneš-Hlavsa 1981²) causes the action/process expressed by a causative verb. The result of the causative action/process is usually a turning of the former (primary) situation into a different one. From the lexical semantic point of view the causative verbs can be identified by the lexical substitution realized by the basic causative verbs (e.g. *spôsobil'*, *zapričiniť*, *urobiť* <to cause, to make> + the other semantic component of a verb; e.g. *osviežiť* <to refresh> – *spôsobil' občerstvenie/urobiť sviežim* <to make fresh>³). In our approach we adopt a wider concept of causative verbs (both groupings of lexies with so-called external and internal agents are included).

The causative verbs in Slovak (and in many Slavonic languages (cf. Horecký 1984) are distinguished from the ergative verbs in English (cf. Fontenelle 1990) formally (i.e. the inchoative [intransitive] member of an ergative pair has often the reflexive particle "sa" [e.g. E. *The door opens* – Sl. *Dvere sa otvárajú*] while the causative verbs are expressed without the particle *sa* in Slovak [e.g. E. *John opens the door* – Sl. *Jano otvára dvere*]).⁴ The sentential semantic difference from inchoative verbs – the expression of agent/causator (and patient in the sentences with external agent/causator) – exists in both languages.

We have proceeded in the following way in acquiring the causative verbs from on line version of the KSSJ: we defined the basic causative defining verbs which we supposed to occur in causative verbal definitions i.e. *spôsobil'/spôsobovať* <to cause>, *zapričiniť/zapričinovať* <to cause>, *urobiť* <to make>, *vyvolať/vyvolávať* <to initiate>, *zbaviť/zbavovať* <to remove; or to cause a loss in a wide sense> (the verbs are mostly given in both perfective and imperfective aspects). Moreover, we have identified in the course of the work some other – less frequent – causative verbs which we have found in the definitions of some verbs (e.g. *zväčšiť/zväčšovať* <to enlarge>, *vzbudiť/vzbudzovať* <to initiate>, *kaziť* <to spoil>, *ničiť* <to destroy>, *trápiť* <to trouble>). Naturally, we had to exclude those definitions where a defining verb had a different (non-causative) meaning (it was not the aim of the authors of the KSSJ to form a strictly delimited dictionary defining language). E.g. the defining verb *urobiť* <to make> besides the causative meaning can also have non-causative – realizing meaning i.e. "vykonať", "spraviť" <to realize> or, less frequently, the other meanings "vyrobiť" <to produce>, "zmeniť" <to change>.

The highest occurrence was of the verbs: *urobiť* <to make>, 689-times total occ., 317-times with causative meanings; *zbaviť* <to remove or to get rid of>, 258-times total occ., 243-times with causative meanings; *spôsobil'* <to cause>, 190-times total occ., 182-times

with causative meanings. The others reached less than 100-times occ. either in total or in causative meanings only.

We have divided the causative lexies obtained into the following lexical groups (a somewhat different classification was introduced by Apresjan 1972, 205-209):

1.a) to cause a rise (e.g. *stvorit'*, *splodit'*⁵, *nakličit'* <to create, to beget, to pre-germinate>; b) to cause an extinction (e.g. *zahubit'*, *zabit'*, *usmrtil'* <to annihilate, to kill, to put to death>);

2. to cause a change of state (mainly of persons): a) mental (e.g. *zneistit'*, *strémovat'* <to make sb uncertain, to arouse a stage fright>; b) physical (e.g. *poranit'*, *poškodit'*, *poštípat'* <to injure, to damage, to bite>; c) mental and/or physical (*prospiet'*, *ublížít'*, *unavit'* <to benefit, to hurt, to make sb tired>);

3. to cause/initiate feelings (emotions): a) positive (pleasant) (e.g. *potešit'*, *vzrušit'*, *poštekliť'* <to cheer up, to excite, to tickle>; b) negative (unpleasant) (e.g. *sprotivít'*, *znechutit'* <to disgust, to displease>; c) the evaluation is irrelevant (e.g. *dojat'* <to move>);

4. to cause a change of property: a) physical (and/or qualitative) properties of an entity (object) [volume, length, height, width, density, shape, colour, sharpness, temperature, etc.] (e.g. *sploštit'*, *predl'žit'*, *rozšířit'*, *zvýšít'*, *zhustit'*, *zdeformovat'*, *opálit'*, *zaostrit'*, *oteplít'* <to flatter, to lengthen, to raise, to condense, to deform, to sunburn, to sharpen, to make warm(-er)>; b) quantitative properties of an entity (e.g. *zdvojnásobit'*, *znásobit'*, *rozmnóžit'*¹ <to double, to multiply>);

5. to cause a rise or a loss of property: a) mental property (e.g. *posmeliť'*, *odradit'*, *demoralizovat'* <encourage, discourage, demoralize>; b) physical property (e.g. *posilnit'*, *vyčerpát'*, *zoslábit'* <to strengthen, to exhaust, to weaken>;⁶

6. to cause a change of relations among entities (e.g. *podmienit'*, *podriadiť'*, *pričlenit'* <to condition, to subordinate, to affiliate>;

7. to cause a change in the intellectual (rational) comprehension: a) in the positive sense (e.g. *objasniť'*, *priblížit'*, *vysvetliť'* <to make clear, to elucidate, to explain>; b) in the negative sense (e.g. *znejasniť'*, *zastrieť'*, *zviest'* <to obscure, to disguise, to mislead>; c) the evaluation is irrelevant (e.g. *ovplyvniť'* <to influence>);

8. to cause a movement (of an entity): a) to start a movement (e.g. *rozbehnúť'*, *rozkrútiť'* <to start st, to start spinning>; b) to finish a movement (*zastaviť'*, *ukončiť'* <to stop, to finish>);

9. to cause a change (of position) in the space (e.g. *postaviť'*, *usadiť'*, *premiestniť'* <to put up, to seat, to displace>);

10. to cause a change of activity (e.g. *donútiť'*, *natisnúť'*, *vnútiť'* <to force, to exert pressure on sb, to make sb>);

11. to cause a change in time (e.g. *posúriť'*, *spomaliť'*, *zdržať'* <to urge, to slow, to stop sb from doing st>);

12. to cause an effect of sound (e.g. *vť zgať'*, *zašelestiť'* <to make a creak, to sigh>;)

13. to cause an effect of light (e.g. *rozsvietiť'*, *zjasniť'*, *zatieniť'* <to light up, to clear up, to shadow>;

14. complex causative meanings (to cause + x + y...) (e.g. *privolať'*, *zbiť'* <to call in, to pound>).

We have examined the paradigmatic relations of the given causative lexies (mainly synonymy and antonymy) and we have found the other 193 causative lexies whose meanings were not manifested by a basic⁷ causative verb in their definitions. They indi-

cated the following deviations from the complete standardized lexicographic definition (i.e. a descriptive definition including a frequent causative verb and one or a few synonyms⁸; cf. Wolski 1989, 621):

1. the definition is represented only by a synonym (91 occ.);
2. the definition is represented by a rare (not basic) causative verb without a synonym (35 occ.);
3. the definition is expressed by a rare causative verb with a synonym (59 occ.);
4. the definition is represented by a non-causative verb without synonym (1 occ.);
5. the definition is represented by a non-causative verb with a synonym (7 occ.).

It would be possible and necessary to make the semantically non-standardized definitions introduced more exact. We anticipate a reduction of the causative defining synonymous set. The maximal reduction would be represented by only one verb – *spôsobiť* <to cause> which denotes an elementary meaning – a semantic primitive). The extreme reductionist approach is justified only in highly technical linguistic dictionaries (e.g. the Explanatory Combinatory Dictionary mentioned above). This approach could not be completely justified in dictionaries written for a wide public and, more likely, it could arouse a negative attitude from its users. The usage of causative synonyms in the definitions of semantically related lexies should be intentional and conscious. Simultaneously, it is necessary to avoid ambiguity of the defining verbs (e.g. the verb *urobiť* <to make> should be applied only in causative definitions, not in other non-causative meanings (e.g. "to realize", "to produce").

By delimiting the defining words (and their basic synonymous sets) a high degree of defining standardisation can be reached and such a dictionary is more reusable for other lexicological and lexicographic projects (e.g. for compiling a synonymous or conceptual dictionary). For the causative verbs themselves we would propose the usage of five verbs (in both aspects depending on the verb defined): *spôsobiť/spôsobovať* <to cause>, *zapričiniť/zapričiňovať* <to cause>, *urobiť* <to make>, *vyvolať/vyvolávať* (<to arouse>; this verb includes the start of an action), *zbaviť/zbavovať* (<to remove, to cause a loss>, for the verbs which encapsulate implicit negation). These causative verbs should cover the causative component in the meanings of all Slovak causative verbs and they could ensure typification and uniformity of the definitions belonging to one lexical subsystem and unambiguity of the defining verbs. (For obvious reasons we could not pay attention to the other aspects of verbal definitions – e.g. valence, grammatical properties, pragmatic features.)

We assume that in this way it can be proceeded by the semantic standardisation of other (verbal and non-verbal) dictionary definitions. The complete delimitation of defining words could enable us to form a dictionary defining language as such. To realize this work completely means to view all the word-stock from the onomasiologic-semasiologic point of view (i.e. lexical group/field after a lexical group/field) and to work out the conceptual (onomasiologic-semasiologic) dictionary in two versions – non-alphabetical (thematic) version and alphabetical one (both accessible, at least, on the lexicographer's computer) which could be utilized in compiling individual dictionary entries. The higher homogeneity and linguistic transparency (in particular, in its semantics) of dictionary definitions would be the other result of this procedure.

Endnotes

- 1 It seems that the term semantic standardisation (unification, typification) of dictionary definitions has not yet been established; though it can be usefully applied for the concept here defined.
- 2 Tibenská 1989, 27) distinguishes a participant role of "realizer" instead of the internal agent (e.g. *Ludia naplnili ulice*. <People filled the streets>; and she speaks about causative constructions only in the case of the external agent (e.g. *Ludia naplnili nádrž vodou*. <People filled a basin with water>).
- 3 A few examples introduced in some studies among causative verbs are not able to pass the lexical substitution test (e.g. *operovať*, *stohovať*, *krompáčovať* <to operate on sb, to stack, to mattock> – cf. Horecký – Buzássyová – Bosák et al., 1989, 164; *získať*, *predávať* <to gain, to sell> – Daneš – Hlavsa et al. 1981, 83) and they lack the causative syntactic semantic features (e.g. the participant role of causer). That is why we shall not order them among causative verbs. The checking of causative meanings has to consider different levels of the causative meaning encapsulation in a semantic structure of a lexie (the first definition – e.g. found in a dictionary – sometimes does not indicate causativity, which can appear only after further deeper semantic analysis). Not unusually, the checking of lexical paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations can contribute to elucidate a lexie's causativity or non-causativity.
- 4 About the decausative function of the particle *sa* in Slovak see Ružička (1977), Kačala (1979, 322). There are also the other formal means to distinguish causative and non-causative verbs in Slovak, i.e. derivational ones (cf. Kačala 1981).
- 5 The number index after a verbal lexie introduces the meaning ordering in the KSSJ; the verbs which have no numbering in the dictionary are given without any number.
- 6 The gradual acquisition of a property is mostly expressed analytically in Slovak (*vzbudit záujem*, *lásku*, *obdiv* <to arouse interest, love, admiration>).
- 7 We assume that the "basic" causative meaning (CAUSE) is expressed by a set of synonyms of which the most frequent (considered here) are the following: *spôsobiť*, *urobiť*, *zapríčiť*; *vyvolať*, *zbaviť* <to cause, to make, to initiate, to remove>.
- 8 It should be noted that the authors of the KSSJ often introduced only synonyms in the definitions as one of the defining possibilities (see KSSJ 1987, 19-20).

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