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THE COMMUNICATIVE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOME LEXICOGRAPHIC CONVENTIONS

Introduction

Every lexicographic convention is meaning-bearing. Taken together, they constitute a system in which, as Saussure said about language itself, tout se tient - everything is interrelated. Yet the meanings of many dictionary conventions are implicit rather than explicit, so that dictionary users, and indeed lexicographers, are often unaware of them. The original title of this paper was "Dictionaries and the secret language". That title emphasized this lack of conscious awareness. The present title is more hopeful. It suggests that what was unconscious can be made conscious, and perhaps, being conscious, can be used more carefully and effectively.

Most dictionary conventions are of three types:
(1) conventions of order and arrangement;
(2) conventions of appearance or form;
(3) conventions of language.

I should like to discuss one or two examples of each type.

Conventions of order and arrangement

Conventions of order are manifold. One French scholar has suggested that if the compound lutte de classes 'class struggle' is placed under classe, the placement implies a left-wing ideology, whereas placing it under lutte is right-wing. The Merriam-Webster dictionaries, to simplify their policy somewhat, distinguish between verb + preposition combinations and verb + adverb combinations by making the former sub-entries and the latter main entries. Thus run into is an idiom under run, whereas run in is a headword with own-place entry. However, I want to concentrate on one of the most basic and important of all dictionary ordering conventions. The COLLINS ENGLISH DICTIONARY (CED), like many other dictionaries, has an entry for sing in which the forms sing, sings, singing, sang, and sung precede the definitions, but the forms singable and singingly follow the definitions as run-ons. What is the meaning of this placement? From a communicative point of view, it means that the definitions are meant to cover not only the headword sing, but also the forms sings, singing, sang, and sung. But the definitions are not meant to cover singable and singingly. The user who wishes to infer their meanings must combine appropriate meanings of sing (or singing) with appropriate meanings of the suffixes -able and -ly, for which CED provides separate entries. From a linguistic point of view, the definitions cover the inflectional paradigm of the head-word, but not its derivatives, thus showing that the rather subtle distinction between inflection and derivation has been being made by lexicographers for quite some time.

In the light of this, what are we to make of the fact that at walk, CED gives the derived run-on walkable but no inflections at

all? As with many other conventions, the absence of information is as significant as its presence. No inflections are given for walk because they are all regular, and hence predictable: walks, walking, walked. Their regularity and predictability make them a fact of grammar rather than of lexis, and so, in the judgment of CED lexicographers and most other lexicographers, they need not be mentioned at walk. This decision to omit them is strikingly reminiscent of Bloomfield's principle that "The lexicon is really an appendix of the grammar, a list of basic irregularities" (1933:274).

Conventions of appearance or form

Perhaps the most obvious difference in appearance between a European dictionary and a work of discursive prose is that a dictionary uses more kinds of type. The most typical typefaces are roman, italic, small capitals, and bold. There is by no means complete agreement among lexicographers as to the distribution of these typefaces. Nevertheless, some generalizable meanings emerge. The central meaning of bold is "The buck stops here". The item in bold (typically a main entry, sub-entry, or 'hidden entry') is treated here rather than anywhere else in the dictionary. By contrast, the central meaning of small caps is exactly the opposite: "The item you seek (typically a cross-reference) is not treated here, but elsewhere in the dictionary (typically at its alphabetical position)". Roman is the typeface of definitions and other kinds of explanation: usage notes, synonym essays, and the like. And italic is, by and large, the typeface of metalanguage, such as part-of-speech indicators and labels.

The virtue of making such generalizations is that it enables us to comment on divergences and departures from the norm. For example, CED uses bold not only where other dictionaries do, but also where other dictionaries use small caps; in other words, to fulfil two functions which are not just different, but exactly opposite. I call that confusing - especially as CED continues to use small caps for cross-references in its etymologies. Merriam-Webster dictionaries use small caps, not roman, for what other dictionaries call 'synonymous definitions' but Merriam-Webster also call 'synonymous cross-references'. Thus, the entry for can of worms in WEBSTER'S NINTH NEW COLLEGIATE DICTIONARY (W9) is:

E_1: can of worms ... : PANDORA'S BOX

The communicative significance of this use of small caps is that Pandora's box is not itself a definition of can of worms so much as a cross-reference to a place where a definition can be found - a definition that will cover both Pandora's box and can of worms. Finally, it is worth looking at the typeface of dictionary examples. Most dictionaries put them in italic. But two that use roman are Merriam-Webster and the OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY (OED). It would seem that for most dictionaries, examples are a variety of metalanguage, or commentary on the explanation. But for Merriam-Webster and OED, they are part of the explanation itself. It may be appropriate to remember in this connection the reliance of Merriam-Webster and OED upon citational evidence, and the fact that both use citations as attributed examples.

Conventions of language

It may seem surprising that I should claim that the language in dictionaries bears implicit as well as explicit meaning. But all practising lexicographers are aware that this can be so. They have all begun the definitions of adjectives with a variety of formulas like 'of or relating to', 'characterized by', 'marked by', and so forth. These formulas carry their meanings in ordinary language, and therefore must be chosen with great care, but they carry a special coded lexicographic meaning also. They indicate that the word being defined behaves adjectivally, as do prepositional phrases beginning with *of*, and participial phrases beginning with *-ing*-forms (like *relating*) or *-ed*-forms (like *characterized* and *marked*). I do not want to discuss this convention further, because it has been treated so well by Philip Gove in his two-part article "On defining adjectives" (1968). But it is an accessible example of what I call 'coded' language, or, if you will, lexicographese.

An important but lesser-known example of 'coded' dictionary language concerns the use of such words as *stated* or *specified*. The first sense of *put* is defined by W9 as:

E_2: to place in a specified position or relationship

by the LONGMAN DICTIONARY OF CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH (LDOCE) as:

E_3: to move, set, place, lay, or fix (someone or something) in, on, or to a stated place

by the OXFORD ADVANCED LEARNER'S DICTIONARY OF CURRENT ENGLISH (ALD) as:

E_4: move (sth) so as to be in a certain place or position

and by the CHAMBERS UNIVERSAL LEARNERS' DICTIONARY (CULD) as:

E_5: to place in a certain position or situation

In these definitions, the words *specified*, *stated*, and *certain* have, besides their ordinary meanings, the coded dictionary meaning that the phrase in which they occur is an adverbial phrase of which a representative *must* be present when the verb *put* is used in this sense: we say *put it there*, not just **put it*. In other words, in this sense *put* takes the pattern SVOA as described in *A Grammar of Contemporary English* (Quirk et al. 1972), which corresponds to [X9] in LDOCE and [15] in ALD.

Once this convention is recognized consciously, it can be applied more consistently. Thus, the verb *place* can also function in the pattern SVOA, but the corresponding definitions are quite different (E_6:W9, E_7:LDOCE, E_8:ALD, E_9:CULD):

E_6: (2a) to put in or as if in a particular place : SET

E_7: (1) to put or arrange in a certain position

E_8: (1) put (sth) in a certain place ...

E_9: (1) (more formal than put) to put (in a particular place or position)

Of these four dictionaries, only ALD uses the same code-word (certain) for both put and place.

There is much more to be said about the specified/stated convention, but I must now turn to a second type of special language in dictionaries. Shrimp is defined by W9 as in E_{10}, by CED as in E_{11}, by THE CONCISE OXFORD DICTIONARY OF CURRENT ENGLISH (COD) as in E_{12}, and by the LONGMAN NEW UNIVERSAL DICTIONARY (LNUD) as in E_{13}.

E_{10}: any of numerous ... decapod crustaceans ...

E_{11}: any of various ... decapod crustaceans ...

E_{12}: small aquatic ... edible decapod crustacean ...

E_{13}: any of numerous ... 10-legged crustacean animals ...

LNUD has changed decapod to 10-legged. At first sight this change seems excellent, as decapod is a 'hard word' and 10-legged has the same explicit denotative meaning. But I believe that decapod has another, implicit meaning: a classificatory meaning which is actually more important than its explicit meaning. It is less important to know how many legs a shrimp has than what sort of creature a shrimp is. A user who looks up decapod in W9, CED, or COD will find out lots more information about shrimps - and will also find that the decapod order includes not only shrimps, but such other creatures as lobsters and crabs. But a dictionary user cannot infer that from 10-legged, because 10-legged has only denotative meaning, not classificatory meaning. And of course 10-legged is not a dictionary entry.

I do not, however, mean to dismiss the problem of hard words in dictionary definitions. It may be possible to preserve both the simplicity of 10-legged and the classificatory power of decapod. LNUD has changed crustaceans to crustacean animals. It might also have changed decapod to decapod (10-legged), producing something like E_{14}.

E_{14}: any of numerous ... decapod (10-legged) crustacean animals ...

The problem of hard words in definitions is complicated further by the use of certain words which besides their explicit denotative meaning bear also not a classificatory meaning but a purely 'registral' meaning reflecting the technicality or level of the discourse in which they appear, or an 'indexical' meaning reflecting the scientific sophistication of the lexicographers who know how to use them. Such words include incident, when referring adjectivally in physics to light or radiation falling on a surface, and the botanical indurated, which means little more than 'hardened' (though W9 has entered it as an adjective with a more specific meaning). Indurated can be safely replaced in definitions by hardened with no significant loss of meaning, and incident can be changed to falling or often be omitted altogether.

The treatment of terminology in general-purpose dictionaries is an important and pressing issue, but the issue can only be confused by treating classificatory language as though it were merely registral or indexical.

Anomalous definitions

I do not know whether any dictionary language is purely communicative, in the sense of having only denotative meaning without additional coded, classificatory, or registral/indexical meaning. Perhaps 10-legged by contrast with decapod is an example. But in recent years several definitions have attracted critical comment because of their denotative meaning, and I should like to investigate two of them to see what they were really communicating.

The first is the definition of cup in the unabridged WEBSTER'S NEW INTERNATIONAL DICTIONARY, Second Edition (W2, 1934). It begins as follows:

> E_{15a}: (1) A small open bowl-shaped vessel used chiefly to drink from, with or without a handle or handles, a stem and foot, or a lid ...

In his memorable paper "The boundaries of words and their meanings", William Labov picks on the phrase with or without a handle or handles, making about it one of those brilliantly simple comments that are obvious - once someone has thought of them:

> Such a phrase is hardly specific to cups; it can be applied to any object in the universe. I myself, for example, come with or without a handle or handles. (1973:350)

What is going on here? It is worth investigating this definition first from the point of view of lexicography, then from that of cognitive psychology. The definition continues:

> E_{15b}: specif., a handled vessel of china, earthenware, or the like, commonly set on a saucer and used for hot liquid foods such as tea, coffee, or soup. ...

In general, when a definition is of the form X specif Y, the X part states what the definiendum describes and the Y part states what the definiendum names. What the definiendum names is perhaps best understood in the light of some work that was getting under way when Labov's paper was published. Eleanor Rosch and her colleagues claim (summarized in Clark and Clark 1977:464-5) that, especially for objects of the natural world and man-made artefacts, we have in our minds an image of the ideal example, or prototype. Other things are considered to be of the same kind as the prototype to the extent that they resemble it. Interpreted in this way, W2's definition ends with a depiction of the prototypical cup, which is indeed 'handled'. So what the first part of the definition is communicating by the phrase "with or without a handle or handles" is that although the prototype cup has a handle, other things can be described as cups even if they do not have handles. Once this implication is recognized consciously, the definition can be improved. After his own psycholinguistic experiments, Labov ultimately suggests (1973:365):

> The expression with or without a handle can now be read as usually with a handle, sometimes without ...

I myself would prefer a form of words more directly related to prototype semantics - and shorter:

> typically with a handle

The second definition is that in CED of motorcycle, which begins:

> E_{16}: a two-wheeled vehicle, having a stronger frame than a bicycle, that is driven by a petrol engine ...

Randolph Quirk comments (1982:75):

> Much of this is obviously 'encyclopedic' (indeed incidental), threatening the definition of other words with hair-raising implications which fortunately are not often realized. (We are not told, for instance, that a bus has a larger engine than a car.)

Once again we must ask: what is this definition communicating? Why does it compare motorcycle with bicycle when bus is not compared with car? If W2's definition of cup was an implicit commentary on the prototype of the referent of cup, than perhaps CED's definition of motorcycle carries an implicit commentary on the form of the word being defined. Motorcycle shares a morpheme with bicycle. Indeed, W9 says that etymologically motorcycle is a blend of motor and (bi)-cycle. This fact of morphology means that there is a closer link in our minds between motorcycle and bicycle than between bus and car, and consequently a more urgent need to compare and differentiate the first pair. Once we are conscious of this, the definition can be improved by being made explicitly comparative, as in E_{17} from THE WORLD BOOK DICTIONARY.

> E_{17}: a vehicle like a bicycle but larger and heavier, run by a motor. ...

Conclusion

Both W2's cup and CED's motorcycle bore implicit meanings besides their explicit meaning. Once the implicit meaning was made explicit too, the definitions could be reformulated and improved. It has been the purpose of this paper to make explicit the implicit meaning of various lexicographic conventions in the hope of improving dictionaries. However, the dictionary is a social artefact, no doubt with a 'prototype' of its own, whose users become familiar with its conventions unconsciously - just as lexicographers do. The 'secret language' of dictionaries is often better understood, in practice if not in theory, than sophisticated linguists claim. But the proliferation of dictionaries in the English-speaking world has been accompanied by an increasing diversity of their conventions, and the rise of the learners' dictionary has meant that people must now grapple with dictionary conventions they were not brought up on. These developments make essential what would in any case be desirable: to become conscious of what was unconscious heretofore.

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