The structure and function of definitions

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My purpose in this paper is to follow up suggestions made or implied previously by Schofield, Wiegand and others, and consider the differences in structure and function between traditional lexicographic definitions in monolingual dictionaries and those explanations of meanings which have come to be termed 'folk definitions'. By the latter I mean the kind of casual explanation of the meaning of a word or phrase that any person familiar with a word may give to another person who queries its meaning. Specifically I wish to examine whether the structures used in such folk definitions might be exploited by monolingual lexicographers and what the implications of such exploitations might be.

I have used as data examples of folk definitions which are offered by Manes (1980) supplemented by examples from the Birmingham corpus and a few overheard conversations. A sample of these are given as an appendix to this paper.

Comparison between lexicographic and folk definitions

It is clear that the two styles of definition are markedly different and I should like to begin by looking at the reasons for this. The first reason that immediately springs to mind is the difference between the actual situations in which the definitions are given in terms of context. Folk definitions are provided within the framework of the context of the discourse in which the enquiry is made. Lexicographic definitions are, by comparison, presented in what might be termed a contextual vacuum, unrelated to the discourse which may have motivated an enquiry as to meaning, and presented in an entry which is related textually possibly only to an entirely different lexical item which happens to be alphabetically similar.

One would also expect there to be a difference in length. Folk definitions can in theory be as long as the definer requires to complete his or her explanation or as long as the listener has patience for. Lexicographic definitions are generally competing for space against other elements in the dictionary – pronunciations, etymologies, etc – and more particularly against the extent of the headword list itself.

Thirdly, lexicographic definitions carry the weight of a prescriptive authority. As lexicographers we base our work on the assumption that we are describing the 'language'. We aim at the ideal of an objective balanced account of how a language is used. Nonetheless we are, of course, aware that the *readers* of our

dictionaries are by and large taking what we write to be linguistic gospel. The corollary of this is that lexicographic definitions must be 'accurate'. Folk definers do not have this responsibility. After all, if they lose their nerve or if they are challenged, the dictionary can always be consulted in its role of arbiter of the truth.

Lexicographic definitions

In part as a result of these constraints on lexicographic definitions, lexicographers have developed (or retained) the notion that the traditional analytic definition which is substitutable for the headword is the ideal form of definition. Thus because of decontextualization there is felt to be a need to write definitions which will cover the requirements of an infinite number of instances of the lexical item in actual use. Hanks (1979) makes this point explicitly.

> The lexicographer is in the impossible position of a man who undertakes to answer people's questions, but since he does not know at the time of compilation what questions exactly his public will ask, he has to try to word his entries so as to answer all possible questions about them. The attempt is inevitably doomed to failure . . .

This leads to the emphasis on providing in a definition all the necessary conditions which are required for the lexical item to denote. Zgusta (1971) suggests that even in the case of those lexical items which are least susceptible to ideal-definition treatment, such as function words and 'pragmatic' words, we should attempt to model definitions as far as possible on the logical model.

> The most important thing for the lexicographer is to find out what information they [that is function words and 'pragmatic' words] carry, how they are used in a meaningfully relevant way, and to conceive and present this on the model of the designatum of the designative words.

And:

> On the whole it is the lexical meaning of the designative words . . . which serves the lexicographer as basis and model for his treatment of all words.

Further, by the use of a severe framework for definition style which restricts the contents to criterial conditions (eschewing 'encyclopaedic' information) and places the genus word early in the definition, the length can be kept within reasonable bounds without too much potential for loss of meaning.

Finally the requirement for the definition to be substitutable for the headword allows some means of checking or validating the accuracy of the definition.

However, the difficulty which arises with the notion of the ideal definition is the difficulty that it *is* ideal. It is a style which is extraordinarily difficult to approximate to over a wide range of lexical items. It is, in fact, suitable only for concrete nouns. For example, it is difficult to find a satisfactory defining style

for adjectives. Typically, under the influence of the analytic definition technique, adjectives are converted, so to speak, into honorary nouns by means of an introductory formula such as 'of or characteristic of' which then allows the lexicographer to proceed with a nominal definition. Even more of a problem is that of function words. It is not really possible to use a style analogous to analytic definition in order to define function words, and dictionaries have generally to be satisfied with providing a series of explanatory notes.

The notion of substitutability itself is more hypothetical than real. The following definition for *mango* is fairly typical of the technique used in native-speaker monolingual definitions for what are the least exacting class of headwords in terms of the ideal definition – those which are perceived as belonging to a taxonomic hierarchy. (The following example is taken from COLLINS ENGLISH DICTIONARY.)

> 1. a tropical Asian anacardiaceous evergreen tree, *Mangifera indica*, cultivated in the tropics for its fruit.

It would take some ingenuity to understand a text in which the following definition of the fruit itself,

> 2. The ovoid edible fuit of this tree having a smooth rind and sweet juicy orange yellow flesh

was inserted in place of the actual lexical item *mango*, and it would be even more complicated if we had to embed the complex botanical definition into the definition of the fruit to explain the reference to 'this tree'.

It is clear therefore that having constructed a notion of the ideal definition to which lexicography should aspire, lexicographers are very far from matching up to this ideal over a broad spectrum of the language. Furthermore in recent years there has been a distinct change in orientation in evaluating the material which makes up both a lexicographic entry and a dictionary. The question we ask today is 'Does this meet the needs of the user?' And we continue to ask it despite the notorious difficulties involved in finding out what the user *does* need. It seems to me therefore that this is a period in which there is significant reevaluation of how dictionaries present information and what information they present. I hope it will thus be seen as timely to look at what ordinary people actually do, away from the constraints and difficulties of presenting definitions in dictionaries.

Folk definitions

The folk definitions which I have looked at exhibit a variety of techniques, though very few resemble typical dictionary definitions. For the purpose of this paper I have grouped a number of them very loosely as defining in terms of function, example, context, synonym and register.

Function

Classically a lexicographic definition will begin by describing an object, that is by giving a description of the object with an account of its function tacked on, as it were, at the end. So as a definition for *thimble* the LONGMAN CONCISE ENGLISH DICTIONARY offers:

> a pitted metal or plastic cap or cover worn to protect the finger and to push the needle in sewing.

Similarly dictionary definitions for *colander* wrestle with a description first:

> a perforated bowl-shaped utensil for washing or draining food [LCED].

In each case, however, the folk definition for the same words ignores the visual description altogether and goes straight for the function:

> [Thimble] A thimble is used when you want to sew things. You can use it when you put a needle through something so you won't hurt your finger.
>
> [Colander] It's what you strain spaghetti with.

Example

I have used the notion of defining by example to characterize a technique in which, rather than explain the lexical item itself, an example of the lexical item is given, taking it as a superordinate term. An instance of this is the explanation of *fuel*:

> Q: Do you know what fuel is?
> A1: It's like gas [petrol] for cars.

which is then followed up with the more general statement:

> A2: It's the thing that makes it go.

Context

In view of the fact that folk definitions occur within a context known or knowable by both definer and user, one might expect that when these are presented in written form, extracted from those contexts, they would appear partial or even occasionally baffling. This is not often so. In a surprising number of cases the context, or rather a typical context, is worked into the explanation. Thus *unpredictable* is explained as:

> The day is unpredictable in the sense you don't know what's going to pop up,

thus locating the definition within a specific frame of reference. Another similar example is *irrelevant*:

> Q: What does irrelevant mean?
> A: Something that you say, that it doesn't have anything to do with the subject.

Synonym

The structure of an analytic definition is primarily hierarchical and taxonomic in orientation, the lexical item being 'placed' in terms of a superordinate term, with the differentiae added to mark it off from other hyponyms of the superordinate. Some of the folk definitions use a fairly similar technique, but instead of the superordinate term they select a synonymic term. They describe the lexical item as being 'like' something else, then give the distinguishing features between the lexical item and the synonym, where these are thought to be necessary. So:

Q: A minibike. What's that?
A: It's like a motorcycle.

Similarly:

Q: What's a snooker table?
A: It's like a little kind of game, like pool. English gentlemen play it.

where the superordinate term is immediately followed by the comparative. (The explainer simply defines *snooker* here, leaving table as, presumably, understood — much as the dictionaries do.)

Mathiot (1979) calls this technique 'prototypic comparison'. In the answers she received to her questions on the meaning of colour words she finds a significant group where one term is used as a prototype, to serve as a point of reference from which others may be differentiated. So *reddish* is described as:

sort of like pink but it's darker than pink.

Register

In some cases the register, or a clue to register, of the lexical item is incorporated into the explanation. The clearest example is *emollient*, where the main point of the explanation is a point about register.

Emollient is just a fancy word for mixture. That word throws everybody.

In lexicographic definitions register is normally divorced from the explanation of meaning and added as a label, perhaps 'fml' or 'tech'. In fact a lexicographic entry is generally very much a collection of discrete parts, with the information given about the lexical item separated into sections: inflections, pronunciations, register label, field label, definitions, example, etc., and punctuation and change of typeface is utilized to emphasize the distinction between the parts. The single exception is that of syntax where, although syntax may be given separately as 'vt', 'nc', 'adv', etc it is also, by convention, coded into the definition itself. Verb definitions traditionally being with a to-infinitive, noun definitions with a noun or nominal group, and so on. Some dictionaries go further than this and use the definition to convey information about transitivity and countability. The folk definitions are not necessarily syntactically restricted in the same way. The definition of *exodus* uses the *to*-infinitive as if it were a verbal definition.

Q: That word exodus what does it mean?
A: Exodus . . . exodus just means to leave somewhere in large numbers.

Similarly *erosion* is defined as:

it's an erosion when they do something which infringes upon your personal freedom.

A final and rather striking point about the folk definitions that I have looked at is that, although one might expect lengthy, even garrulous explanations, in fact many are short and pungent — oddly enough shorter than their lexicographic counterparts. The brevity is achieved by a drastic reduction in information given. So one of the folk definitions given of *coup* is, perhaps cynically, simply:

A military take-over,

as compared with:

a sudden violent or illegal seizure of government (CED).

Similarly *mango* is described in the folk definition as simply:

a Caribbean fruit.[1]

Applications to lexicography

It would certainly seem that should lexicographers be prepared to consider jettisoning the ideal of the substitutable analytic definition, then a review of folk definition techniques offers a somewhat heady collection of alternative styles to choose from. The studies that have been done on this type of definition so far, however, do suggest that there is a strong tendency for typical patternings to occur. Manes found that the groups of definitions elicited by researchers in three different languages, Papago, Latin American Spanish and American English showed remarkable similarities in choice of technique. Furthermore, and rather startlingly, she notes that "words in the same semantic field tend to be defined using the same semantic relationships, and that different definitions of the same term frequently include much of the same information". If it proves to be the case over a large body of data that there are natural choices for selection in the contents of a definition, this might well indicate a set of guidelines for lexicographic definitions based on an alternative to the available theory.

In my own experience lexicographic definitions, however elegant and logically constructed (indeed particularly when elegant and logically constructed) can be unhelpful as an aid to learning new meanings. Lexicographic definitions have a curious tendency not to stick in the mind, whereas the immediacy, the accessibi-

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[1]   Though 'Caribbean' is clearly misleading, the OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY giving the origin of the word as, indeed, Tamil mān-kāy.

lity and the vividness of folk definitions often make them more memorable and consequently more likely to be of help in both decoding and encoding.

One major difficulty with lexicographic definitions is that they can easily become so intricately constructed with 'hedges' such as 'esp', 'usu', etc and with typographical conventions such as brackets, that they prove difficult to read. The more that this is so, the more they become constructs for the connoisseur rather than explanations for the ordinary reader. Rundell (in this volume) has exhorted makers of monolingual learners' dictionaries to convey their information in a way which is more accessible to the user. I should like to see this expanded into a plea to make dictionaries of all types, including native-speaker dictionaries, more accessible, which would lead to greater simplicity. In particular the examples given above of folk definition techniques suggest four areas in which lexicographers might consider new departures in style.

Firstly, and perhaps most contentiously, we might sometimes consider brevity at the expense of attempting to cover all necessary conditions. The contrast in the definitions of *mango*, already mentioned, provide an interesting starting point. Neither is necessarily selective of the most appropriate information, but the folk definition is certainly snappy and simple.

Secondly, an explanation of the function of a utensil such as a colander may be more helpful than a description of what it looks like. Physical descriptions are often difficult to convey clearly and succinctly in words, and artwork can often perfom the task more satisfactorily.

Thirdly, I can see no justification for coding the syntax into a definition when the syntactic behaviour of a word can be more easily shown in examples of the lexical item in use. Many definitions would be easier to write and would read more easily if the lexicographer were freed to select naturally expressive syntax in his or her explanations.

Finally, we may take note that the register of a lexical item is not perceived as being in some way distinct and separable from its meaning by people engaged in folk definition. Assigning register labels is a fiendishly difficult task for lexicographers, not least because we limit ourselves to a small number of, as it were, boxes, labelled 'tech', 'lit', 'arch' 'infml', and so on. Because none of these boxes or labels ever seem to quite fit the word one is working on when writing an entry, they are applied inconsistently. A more fluid approach to register would not only help the lexicographer as well as the user, but it might also lead to a reexamination of what sorts of remarks about register are genuinely useful.

In conclusion I would say that an examination of the techniques used in folk definitions could be extremely worthwhile for lexicographers to pursue. If we are prepared to orient ourselves towards a new and more functional approach to the evaluation of definitions by testing for usefulness to the dictionary user, then we

can allow ourselves a wider variety of strategies and approaches to defining. This in turn would mean greater accessibility and greater comprehensibility for the reader and would bring the rewards of greater flexibility for the lexicographer. I should say that writing definitions, though nearly always a satisfying task, can also be a very difficult one and I am certain that the greater our range of available strategies the easier it would be to write good definitions.

Appendix

binocular vision

A: Owls have binocular vision, which means they see straight in front. (Corpus/spoken)

crapulous

Q: What's crapula [sic]
A: Its' the feeling of — it's debauchery the morning after, the feeling of yech . . . (Manes)

culture shock

A: Culture shock is the effect that immersion in a strange culture has on the unprepared visitor. (Corpus/written)

foul

A: Now there's also what they call a foul, okay? A foul is when you're attempting a shot, or any other time, where a number of the defensive team would either hit you or trip you or punch you or pull or grab, shove, anything like this. (Manes)

grimace

Q: What's grimacing?
A: It's when you screw your face up [doing so]. (Manes)

hypothermia

A: . . . the single most important cause of hypothermia — death through loss of body heat. (Corpus/written)

inquest

A: An inquest is an enquiry into the medical cause and circumstances of death. It is held in public. (Corpus/written)

irrelevant

A: What does irrelevant mean?
B: Something that you say, that it doesn't have anything to do with the subject. (Manes)

miserable

Q: What does miserable mean?
A: Well kind of raining and cloudy and cold and not very nice. (Overheard conversation, child and parent)

paperback

Q: What's a paperback?
A: It doesn't have a hard cover. (Manes)

quasi-particle

A: . . . what are sometimes called quasi-particles which means atoms in effect, but slightly changed. (Corpus/spoken)

ready about

A: 'Ready about' is the order to turn around. (Manes)

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