

Dialect dictionaries – a contradiction in itself?

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Without meaning to sound cynical, one might claim that the ideal object of a lexicographer's endeavour is a dead author. The corpus is finite (unless some overlooked piece of writing surfaces), all material appears in written form and in an identifiable context, and usage, traceable as it is to one and the same person, can be assumed to be reasonably consistent. No wonder the Classicists are, by and large, such a happy crowd. It is true that new inscriptions and new papyri might add a few apples to an already heavily loaded cart, but they are unlikely to upset it. Classicists can process them into vintage cider (or calvados) and bottle it in an intellectually and aesthetically pleasing manner, unless they aim at works of thesaurus dimensions, which have shown no less a tendency of getting bogged down than the ambitious comprehensive dictionaries of living languages.

Any dictionary covering more than the idiolect of a safely dead person is open-ended by nature, and any lexicographer aiming at completeness and reliability is immediately faced with difficult decisions. In the 19th century many may still fairly unquestioningly have accepted the concept of a national language (which usually was no more than the written language of the educated classes, of literature, schools and administration). In the meantime we have not only become increasingly aware of social and regional varieties of standard languages but also of the differences between spoken and written language, although many words and constructions once thought unprintable are now shocking or delighting readers. Books such as Queneau's *Zazie dans le métro*, not to speak of the many collections of bawdy songs or limericks or stories, have opened up new mines to the lexicographer (who is normally a bookish person rather than a shower-room eavesdropper), and he has to decide how far he wants to dig into them. Another difficulty facing him is that words carry no death certificate. If he sets out to enshrine the vocabulary of a living language, how much historical word material is he to include? Words may have gone out with objects and concepts no longer used but at least the historian will still want to see them recorded. And what shall he do with that essentially ephemeral flower, yesterday's slang and group jargon? Teenagers want their subculture to be taken seriously, but it is not only among them that verbal fashions change almost as quickly as in the realm of haute and basse couture.

Specific difficulties of dialect dictionaries

The dialect lexicographer has to cope with all these difficulties, too, but they are compounded by a host of others which the lexicographer of a standard language is mercifully spared. The greatest stumbling-block is transcription. Dictionaries are written compendia, and dialects are, not exclusively but in most cases, vehicles of oral communication – in Switzerland the almost exclusive vehicle of oral communication. There are approved ways of transcribing oral utterances, and the International Phonetic Script, or some local adaptation of it, could theoretically provide the bridge to the printed page. But although learning the phonetic symbols is probably less demanding than mastering, say Greek or Cyrillic script, reader resistance can be assumed to be overwhelming. There are dialect dictionaries, usually of a restricted area, that have tried a combination of standard-alphabet and phonetic transcription, e.g. the *WÖRTERBUCH DER TIROLER MUNDARTEN* by Josef Schatz and its South Tyrolean supplement by Hans Fink, but most authors of such dictionaries felt they had to stick to the Roman alphabet, at least for the head-words, although they had to make compromises, e.g. by combining *b/p*, *d/t*, *k/q/c* in initial position if not throughout. In the late 1930s, when the threatening growth of totalitarianism in central Europe led to a re-assertion of Swissness in all walks of life, Eugen Dieth, Professor of English at the University of Zurich and for a number of years a member of the Swiss Dialect dictionary team, came up with a laymen's transcription system designed to accommodate, phonologically if not phonetically, all Swiss German dialects. By using *ä*, *ë* and *e* to distinguish three mid-front vowels, for the open varieties of rounded vowels, *y* (in accordance with an old Swiss writing tradition) for closed (and, normally, long) /i/ and doubling to indicate length of vowels or consonants, he arrived at a consistent and unambiguous system covering a large variety of dialects and avoiding the pitfalls of standard German orthography. It was widely, though not uniformly, adopted in regional and local dictionaries and grammars published over the last four decades; the only innovation of his that has not been accepted was the adoption of the phonetic symbol *f* for the clumsy German tri-graph *sch*. One advantage of Dieth's script was that it could be simplified where features such as open and closed vowel varieties were phonemically irrelevant. It is true that for an uninitiated non-Swiss it could be misleading. He might not identify *k* as an affricate /kχ/, *gg* as a voiceless unaspirated stop /k/ and the aforementioned *y* as /i:/.

Dieth's system does at first glance seem to have solved the problem which for dialect lexicographers has been even a worse headache than the difficulties of transcription in the absence of an acceptable set of graphemes doing justice to local and regional varieties of speech: how to find a common written denominator to words which are obviously identical in origin but may differ vastly in their local phonetic realisations. Should a particular dialect provide the head-word, under which all the variants are gathered? That would not go down well in Swit-

zerland, where local and regional jealousies are intense, and I do not think it would be acceptable in many other places either — dialects are, after all, an escape from linguistic hierarchies. Dieth conceived his system as a tool for transcribing dialect in a particular instance, not for the purpose of being used in a dictionary covering a number of divergent dialects. One of the most complex phenomena in High German dialects is the lengthening of originally short stressed vowels under certain conditions, e.g., does 'hare' appear as *Has* or *Haas*. In a system where length is indicated by a double letter, the two varieties would in alphabetical order be separated by a mass of other material, unless you warn or train the reader to ignore the doubling of graphemes for the purpose of alphabetisation. But what about words like 'to drink', which in Swiss dialect appears as *tringge*, *trinke*, *trinche*, *tryche* and *treiche*, not to speak of initial d/t alteration? There is no way a general instruction could make the reader find them all under one form, unless you refer him to the standard German word, but there is not such a standard equivalent in all cases. The spectre of thousands of cross-references is one that has haunted many a dialect lexicographer.

The desired common denominator has traditionally been found in attested or assumed historical forms, forms from which the dialect varieties could be derived in accordance with specific regular sound developments. The study of language history and the study of dialects developed hand in hand in the 19th century. It was a mutually fruitful relationship, history providing the rationale of dialect differentiation, and present-day dialects illustrating historical stages and historical developments. In a period where history was seen as the base of civilisation and national identity, this connection of present-day linguistic fieldwork with historical exploration and documentation was only too natural. For the linguist trained in Young Grammarian sound laws, working from historical premises was both a joy and the only respectable scholarly method; for the layman user of the dialect dictionaries — and they were, after all, meant to be used by a majority of the speech community — such a lay-out was much more difficult to handle, and it may indeed have meant that, rational and logical as these dictionaries were to the linguist and philologist, they reached rather less than their desired audience.

Dialect words in historical dress

The man who set the pattern, indeed, the first to compile a dialect dictionary with scholarly ambitions, was Johann Andreas Schmeller, an army officer of the Napoleonic Wars turned linguist, whose *BAYERISCHES WÖRTERBUCH* appeared in 1827–37. (The idea occurred to him when, while in Spain, he borrowed a Swiss periodical from a friend and found in its samples of a Swiss 'idioticon' compiled by the clergyman Franz Joseph Stalder, the father of Swiss dialect research.) A friend of Jacob Grimm's and sometime curator of manuscripts in the Bavarian State Library, his purpose was from the outset to provide both a Bavarian

idioticon, i.e. a recording of dialect words or meanings deviating from standard German, and a glossary for the older written sources of Bavaria. Noting the variability of vowel sounds and the instability of unstressed syllables, he took the consonant structure of the stem syllables as his basic unit and ordered their realisations according to the succession of vowels in the alphabet, using as head-words not the contemporary dialect forms but their common basis, which for the most part were roughly identical with the forms that appeared in late medieval texts. A sort of abstract, ideal Middle High German has since provided the form of head-words also in the *SCHWEIZERISCHES IDIOTIKON*, which started appearing in 1881, while the *WÖRTERBUCH DER ELSÄSSISCHEN MUNDARTEN* by Martin and Lienhard (1897–1907), though still sticking to the consonant structure of the stem syllable as the basic unit, made more concessions to the user who only knew New High German, and did not include much historical material. Both Schmeller, in its revised second edition of 1872–7, and Martin-Lienhard had alphabetical word-lists at the end to give the layman a better chance of finding what he was after. The last of the big South German dialect dictionaries, the *SCHWÄBISCHES WÖRTERBUCH* by Hermann Fischer, appeared between 1901 and 1936. Fischer decided to follow the example of his predecessor as collector of Swabian dialect words, Adelbert Keller, and adopted the normal alphabetical arrangement for his head-words, with numerous cross-references. An eminent Swiss historian once told me that if he wished to look up a word in an old Swiss text and had enough time, he would consult the Swiss Dialect Dictionary; if he was in a hurry, he went for the Swabian one in the hope that the word in question was used north of the Rhine as well. This shows that shying away from using a dictionary where material is arranged according to historical principles of alphabetisation is not just a case of ‘Schwellenangst’, of doorstep anxiety, but can extend to old practitioners.

There is, however, in three of these dictionaries a device which helps to bridge both the gap between past and present and the gap between dialect and standard German: sounds which were once part of a word but then dropped out in the dialects, e.g. a nasal or an unstressed *e*, are rendered by small elevated letters, which count for alphabetical purposes but indicate disappearance in present-day dialects; the Alsatian dictionary even goes so far as to mark in this way unhistorical elements such as the *h* used in standard German to indicate vowel length. And the local realisations of the word follow immediately, whether in some form of phonetic script as in Martin-Lienhard or by an adaptation of the normal alphabet as in the Swiss and Swabian dictionaries. As a full listing of variants would be both cumbersome and repetitive, reference is often made to handbooks on the dialects in question. Both Schmeller and Fischer had published such works before they started editing the dictionaries, and the same applies to Kranzmayer and his *WÖRTERBUCH DER BAYRISCHEN MUNDARTEN IN ÖSTERREICH*, which began appearing in 1963, after a gestation period of fifty years, while Switzerland only got such a handy reference work with the beginning of the

publication of the *SPRACHATLAS DER DEUTSCHEN SCHWEIZ* in 1962. Again, the linguist with these tools at his elbow and in daily use may overestimate the layman's willingness and capacity of profiting from them – but then, the layman would normally use the dictionary for specific and limited purposes and may not need an exhaustive account of variant forms.

I have mentioned the marriage of synchronic and diachronic objectives as occurring almost by necessity under the conditions in which both historical linguistics and dialectology developed in the 19th century. There is no doubt that this marriage has been a mutually fruitful one, resulting in local equivalents of the *OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY* or Grimm's *DEUTSCHES WÖRTERBUCH*. A lot of older words and meanings would probably never have become accessible without the systematic efforts made to provide a broad and sound historical base for these dialect dictionaries, and the charting and analysis of modern dialect use could never have been done as reliably and informatively without the historical material. Yet there was a price to pay, both in practical and theoretical terms. The practical price was the unwieldiness of the resulting works and the long time it took to complete them. Collecting of material for the Austrian dictionary started in 1913, and publication has now reached the fourth volume and the letter D; it is safe to say that the child will be a nonagenarian or more by the time it is fully born. Work on the Swiss German dictionary started in 1862, and the fourteenth of its hefty volumes is now nearing completion. There is little doubt that it will extend into the 21st century, not counting the revision of the obsolete early volumes, which would be as necessary as that of the early Grimm volumes now in process in Göttingen and East Berlin. Only libraries and specialists can afford the space and the money for such monumental works (although it has to be said that for subscribers of the first hour, the expense came to be mercifully spread over several generations) while the layman is told, quite correctly, that a comprehensive and reliable concise version, which he needs and wants, cannot be produced before the big work is completed.

Limiting the unlimited

It is no accident that only the Alsatian dictionary, which concentrated on the spoken dialects and used historical material very sparingly, was completed within a decade and in manageable proportions – in two, admittedly quite heavy, volumes. This almost miraculous speed, it is true, was not *only* due to the lack of historical ballast. It was a smaller area than Swabia, Switzerland or Austria; the open Upper-Rhine plain made for a less diverse linguistic landscape than the inaccessible mountain valleys or heavily forested hill country of Swabia, Switzerland and Austria, and the Prussian Secretary of State for Alsace-Lorraine saw to it that the enterprise was properly funded, whereas some of the other dialect dictionaries ran into financial trouble time and again. Sometimes such considera-

tions forced a change of direction. The RHEINISCHES WÖRTERBUCH, initiated in 1904, was originally planned as a thesaurus with the full historical works, in best 19th century manner. After the First World War it became clear that this was much too costly an enterprise, both from the producer's and from the buying public's point of view, and that it had to be redimensioned. The decision was taken to stick to 19th and 20th century material, i.e. to the period for which there was a continuing oral tradition, and thanks to this limitation Josef Müller's nine fat volumes were completed within less than half a century, despite the intervening catastrophe of the Second World War. Mensing's SCHLESWIG-HOLSTEINISCHES WÖRTERBUCH, the five volumes of which appeared in quick succession between 1927 and 1935, presents a similar picture: With few exceptions it sticks to material from about 1840 onwards, although originally older sources were all processed, too.

The theoretical difficulties flowing from the synchronic-diachronic marriage are twofold. One is the assumption that material gathered from the modern spoken dialects and material gathered from older written sources are kittens of the same litter. Now it is true that a universally recognised written standard was slow to develop in the German-speaking countries, and hence written sources kept a local flavour for a long time. It is also true that *some* old written sources contain genuine dialect materials, especially minuted libel suits where the exact offensive wording was of legal significance. The Swiss German Dictionary has made good use of such sources, especially from the Zurich courts, and the editors of *Male-dicta* could cull a rich harvest from that dictionary. On the other hand it is also clear that most older written sources do *not* directly reflect the spoken language of their time and place, although they may be affected by it, but follow other written models or codes, not necessarily locally based; all the occurrence of a word means, then, is that it was known or understood in a particular place at a particular time. Under that criterion, most of modern standard German would have to be included, too, for it is, given the proper situation, part of the modern Swiss, Swabian or Austrian's communicative competence. Fischer defined the scope of a dialect dictionary as "whatever (linguistic material) is or has been customary in a given area", rejecting the postulated difference between 'idiotisms' and loans from other language codes as artificial, and Albert Bachmann, Professor of German in the University of Zurich and for four decades the hard-headed boss of the dialect dictionary, successfully resisted all attempts to scale down the range of the enterprise.

The second theoretical difficulty is the rapidity of linguistic change in combination with the long period of collecting and publication. The SCHWEIZERISCHES IDIOTIKON, as the senior among the works discussed, may serve as an example. Already back in the 1860s, universal schooling, military conscription, industrialisation, better communication and increasing mobility worked as levelling and accelerating factors; indeed, a powerful impulse for the enterprise was a fear or conviction (mistaken, as it turned out) that the dialects were on the way

out. The editors found that a lot of words recorded by Stalder around 1800 were no longer among the material that now flowed in, and they marked it accordingly in the published work. The first editors, Friedrich Staub and Ludwig Tobler, expected that the dictionary could be accommodated in four volumes and would take about 20–25 years to complete – in short, that they themselves would see it through. Their material was a wild collection of manuscripts, cards, scraps of paper; they knew the sources, the handwriting, the informants' geographical and social background and could dispense with exact identification of the material. Yet they both died in the mid-1890's, when three volumes were completed but it had become clear that the dictionary was going to be a much more massive and time-consuming work than anticipated. With the growing distance in time and the turnover of staff, the material collected as contemporary became both obsolete and harder to trace to its sources. The dialect material recorded from living oral tradition spans 125 years by now, and with linguistic change accelerating both by virtue of population movements and, more importantly, the universality of modern media, it is clear that much of the non-historical material has in the meantime become historical and that it is a very heterogeneous corpus. Yet to check in each individual case whether a word is still known, how widely, by whom, and in what sense, would add a further inordinate delay to the dictionary's completion. This is in stark contrast with the Swiss dialect dictionary's younger sibling, the Swiss German Linguistic Atlas (SPRACHATLAS DER DEUTSCHEN SCHWEIZ), where material was collected, on the basis of a comprehensive questionnaire, by field workers in face-to-face interviews. The six volumes published since 1962 can fairly be claimed to directly reflect dialect usage of the linguistically more conservative part of the German Swiss population in the 1940s and 1950s – but, of course, only for that part of the total vocabulary which could easily be elicited by a questionnaire of manageable proportions.

The lure of the written word

Direct versus indirect method, selectiveness, speed and homogeneity versus comprehensiveness, slowness and the vagaries of laymen's transcriptions have long been bones of contention among dialectologists; the tape recorder was probably the invention that finally tipped the balance in favour of the direct method (the Swiss atlas material was still taken down by hand). The direct method has been tried by lexicographers, too; Joseph Schatz sent out his students from Innsbruck into all the Tyrolean valleys until the Second World War claimed them, in many cases for good, and Walter Mitzka toured the refugee settlements after the Second World War to collect and check material for his Silesian dictionary. Yet on the whole, lexicographers tend to remain wedded to the written word; it is as if they shied away from the merely spoken word as from an unlimited mass of fluid phenomena. Once a dialect word has been written down and filed, it will almost

never fail to make its way into the published dictionary, although there may be some wariness to accept what may be individual coinages by dialect authors of literary ambition. The minutest scrap of paper from the last century is pondered and analysed in the Swiss Dialect dictionary offices, yet there has been no systematic attempt to collect new material from oral sources since the 1860s, at least for the whole of German-speaking Switzerland. The Austrian dictionary, in the 1950s, made tape recordings of about 1500 dialect speakers from 1000 different places, yet in the introduction to the first published volume it is deplored that it had not been possible systematically to exploit these resources for the dictionary because of the bulk of the material and the time and trained personnel needed. This innate inclination to base the description of a primarily oral medium primarily on written resources has undoubtedly had a distorting effect. Dialect material in printed or written-down form tended to be included without much of a frequency check made (no compiler of a standard dictionary would list words for which he has only one or two instances of use), while much more frequent words in the spoken language can be missed. In some instances, especially in the case of loan words, they may have been dismissed by the compilers as passing fads. One example: the universal and long-standing Swiss German word for 'playing soccer' is *tschutte*, and it has sprouted secondary meanings as in the compound *verschutte* 'to dispose of sth. carelessly, without consideration of its value'. Deriving from English *to shoot*, it ought to have appeared towards the end of vol. VIII, which was published in 1920, in accordance with the historical-etymological fashioning of head-words. It did not, either because nobody in the editors' circles of family and friends ever kicked a ball around or, more likely, because they considered the expression as ephemeral schoolboys' slang not worthy of being included among families of words most of which could trace their ancestry to medieval or even to Indo-European times. Fortunately for a word that has proved both hardy and common, the present-day editors have found it a substitute niche towards the end of the T section. In short, while dialect dictionaries may have avoided the trap of trying to pin down every passing butterfly, they have also acquired a somewhat archaic slant and tend to be far from up-to-date. But then, not many dictionaries are, even with the most sophisticated recording techniques and speedy means of production.

Comprehensive versus local dictionaries

Editors of comprehensive dialect dictionaries must often have envied their colleagues who had the advantage of working with the dialect of a smallish homogeneous region or a single city. Switzerland has over the last few decades produced quite a few of these regional dictionaries, and in other German-speaking parts they are numerous too. The speedy progress of Wrede's Cologne dictionary or of the Frankfurt dictionary shows now much less cumbersome such a task is, al-

though city dialects undoubtedly have their share of complexities, too. The question, rather, has to be asked whether the concept of comprehensive dialect dictionaries was a sound one to start with. They are, in origin, children of the 19th century, the age of nationalism, although in their dedication to the local and particular they would appear to be an antidote to the centralising and generalising forces of nationalism. Corporately, however, the dialects were thought of as just another embodiment of the national spirit, hence the ambition of producing national dialect dictionaries, some of which are still indispensable reference works today such as SVENSKT DIALEKT LEXIKON produced in the 1860s by the priest and historian Johan Ernst Rietz or Joseph Wright's ENGLISH DIALECT DICTIONARY of 1898–1905. Today, with a more realistic appreciation of the variances and limitations of speech communities as applying to individuals, even the tribal or regional identity presupposed by comprehensive Swiss, Bavarian, Swabian dialect dictionaries would not go unquestioned. Such linguistic commonness is at best partial, as can be seen by the reluctance of television and radio stations in Switzerland (where dialect is the spoken norm!) to put on programmes in what they term 'extreme' dialects because of audience resentment ("heftige Publikumsreaktionen"). In the case of Switzerland, the dictionary plan was no doubt an assertion of common Swissness after the emergence of a more tightly bound confederation (after a short civil war in 1848 over the new common constitution), but also an assertion of common Swissness in the face of the accelerating development towards German unification. This was the era of great national festivals, national exhibitions and national pageantry: sharpshooters, singers, athletes, professional groups, political parties all revelled in the common cultural and political heritage. A national dialect dictionary was just another one of these enthusiastic national endeavours. Such factors may not have worked equally strongly in Germany and Austria but fervour for one of the empires and for a regional identity embodied in one of the territorial states did not exclude each other – in Bavaria that strength of allegiance can still be keenly felt. In short, the concept of German Swiss, Swabian, Bavarian dialect dictionaries presupposed a belief in natural linguistic-cultural-historical communities, a lower tier of nations, so to speak. The last few decades have everywhere in Europe witnessed a new desire for local identification, and a new interest in, and extended use of, dialect is an integral part of this movement. But it seems to me that it does not have the 19th century 'sub-national' flavour. It is a definite and local identity that is sought, and hence it may not be surprising that the regional and local dictionaries I mentioned seem to attract more interest than the national enterprise, not only for reasons of affordability. The ZÜRICHDEUTSCHES WÖRTERBUCH, for instance, which first appeared in 1961, came in a thoroughly revised third edition a few years ago. The editors managed to incorporate an impressive amount of additional material, both by inviting contributions of new word material from the public and by seeking it out.

It may well be that the interest of dialect lexicographers will follow this trend towards limited and properly focused tasks which can be managed with limited personnel and on a reasonable time scale: apart from geographically circumscribed dictionaries there may be vocabularies of sociolects, of limited periods of the past, or of individual authors. This does not do away with the need for comprehensive 'national' dialect dictionaries where the many particulars all come together. As one who could never have written his doctoral thesis without the benefit of such a national dialect dictionary, I have every reason to wish the four Swiss enterprises success and a happy completion, if there is such a thing for the lexicographer's never-ending task.

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