

On the borders of semantic invariance: Connotation and the dictionary

ABSTRACT: Throughout its history lexicography has been practised on the assumption of semantic invariance of lexical phenomena within linguistic areas and historic periods. It has seen its chief task and raison d'être in providing invariable denotations. Both, premise and aim, are questioned in this paper. It will be argued that connotation possibly plays a much larger rôle than denotation in all types of language use, with significant consequences. Lexicography will be shown to have been more committed to theories about language than to actual language activity.

1. Some remarks on the concept of denotation in lexicography

"Modern lexicographers, who have grown up with the linguistic thinking of the past forty years have been faced with a paradox: disclaiming authority but claiming scientific authoritativeness, praising change but making permanent records, exalting speech but writing books distilled from writing, believing in equality but finding hierarchies, believing in relativism but finding the absolutely persistent concept of 'better and worse,' assuming determinism but hoping to encourage the 'patterns of tendencies that have shown themselves in the drift of the English language.' (Fries 1949, 44)" (Baker 1972, 139)

Subjected to the powerful influence of scientific thinking, lexicography in the present age indeed finds itself in a quandary. Recognition of the dynamism of language seems to conflict with the very essence of dictionaries as stabilizing social instruments. For, to the extent that lexicography aims to provide semantic information, it has always considered the meaning of lexemes stable enough to warrant their description in decontextualized alphabetical format claiming general validity. Charles Richardson's contention at the beginning of the 19th century, that 'words have only one meaning, which is immutable,' (Sledd 1972, 131) is evidence of a long tradition of speculation that has its roots in classical antiquity and that regarded words as natural properties of the things they designate (Hadas 1961, 89f.). The hope giving rise in the late 18th century controversy on the origin of language, of identifying a universal language, was in due course dashed by the rise to triumph of historicism only to be rekindled in the concept of language universals in the 20th century. Looking back to Samuel Johnson, lexicography today seeks a model in the achievement of his dictionary; yet it would be more comfortable with the earlier Johnson of the *PLAN OF AN ENGLISH DICTIONARY* who considers it his highest aim in the dictionary-to-be-compiled to stabilize the language and save it from corruption. His hopes reduced in the end to "circumscribing" the chaos of human language by

“limitations”, Johnson represents the sort of split mind that has made lexicographers by turn deluded legislators and resigned apologists of general usage (Weinbrot 1972, 93).

From the notion of linguistic stability and semantic invariance to the adoption of the concept of lexical denotation it was but a small – indeed inescapable – step with lasting consequences. Denotation still is a concept central to lexicography and its attitude towards semantic function. That semantic function has – explicitly or by implication – been sought in, and attributed to, the isolated individual word. Even the advent of text linguistics has apparently had little, if any, influence on the principle of word denotation in lexicography, although in other respects the rise of modern linguistics has visibly affected the purpose and structure of dictionaries. While the problem of syntagms and their treatment has, for example, inspired new approaches in general as well as in specialized lexicography in Britain and elsewhere and has stimulated the growth of a whole new field of research, none of that inquiry seems to be directed at the question of denotation itself. In fact it appears not to be seen by lexicographers as a problem at all, which is strange.

At the heart of the matter lies the relationship between concepts and words on the one hand, and words and lexemes on the other: it is the question whether lexemes in dictionaries can be considered fair representations of words. After all, words are instantiations, occurring in the actual process we call language; lexemes, by contrast, are abstractions from a finite number of recorded instances of such real use. Those abstractions, superimposed and amalgamated in dictionary glosses and definitions are assumed to yield incontestable, universally valid denotations. Indeed they do so, but with an important limitation: that which is denoted is the substance, not of actual words, but of lexemes, which remains invariable until a new text base is chosen on which to establish the same lexemes in a different set of contexts. It would be a fallacy to assume that such synthetic denotation equals words, i.e. specific articulations in pragmatic settings. It is on the contrary to be expected that, the more near-perfect a denotation is in achieving the desired sharp outline of a concept, the less the corresponding lexeme will represent any actual word in the above sense.

In order to examine this possibility, we need to consider how words acquire meaning and also the circumstances in which we use them. The “prevailing scientism” (Baker 1972, 140) in recent linguistic thinking would make of language a system operating by fixed and rational laws that make language behavior essentially predictable. Such a view suggests a clear and one-dimensional operation at the verbal level in the human mind, which we know to be a convenient fiction. Semantic denotation in reality is the outside chance, a borderline case of systematicity that is not the normal condition in natural language but occurs only in highly-controlled forms of communication typical of such areas as mathematics and mathematics-based sciences. By contrast, in real language, as Vigotsky once claimed, “the meaningful word is a microcosm of human consciousness.” (Weinbrot 1972, 16)

A convincing new approach to word meaning contributed by recent linguistic research provides safe ground to such claims. In his study *THE COGNITIVE LEXICON* (1991) Dunbar places the notion of flexibility in lexical meaning at the center of his analysis. Noting that words show subtle shifts in meaning as their context changes, he investigates the phenomenon of lexicalization, i.e. of the representation of concepts through language signs established through convention. At the basis of language he sees the formation of

"lexical concepts" in the individual mind in accord with changing information available from "currently active theories". This means that lexical concepts are ephemeral, fuzzy phenomena, ad hoc creations with the properties of proto-types which depend on the ensemble of procedural and world knowledge the individual recalls in a given instant. Comprising local as well as global "theories", such knowledge is not structurally homogenous and does not lend itself to simple transfer: "It is futile to attempt to isolate the essential meaning of a noun by studying its denotation when it appears as a bare noun. To be interpreted, it has to be built into a phrase . . ." (Dunbar 1991, 89)¹. What distinguishes words from lexemes is that they are animated by an imprecise conceptual activity; lexical entries, on the other hand, do not contain concepts (Dunbar 1991, 53).

If that view of language and word use is accurate – the assumption can hardly be doubted –, context-dependent multidimensionality governs word semantics, and denotation, at least in the interpretation it has thus far received, has lost its persuasiveness as an irrefutable basis of lexicography. It is precisely the descriptive claim of dictionaries and their purported fidelity to usage which seems incompatible with denotation as the chief target of dictionaries. The obvious question to be asked in this situation is, does the opposite to denotation, i.e. connotation, hold a better promise? Can the concept of connotation account for the quintessential semantic quality of words in a more satisfactory way? As a variable of venue and world knowledge, connotation clearly falls outside the realm of the invariance principle. Does that fact make it entirely unsuitable as a lexicographic fundamental or are there ways of combining the concepts of invariance and connotation to make them mutually supportive in the context of lexicography?

2. Invariance as a condition for lexicalization

While it is true that words operate in the framework of individual consciousness with its ever-changing state and conditions, it is equally true that they function as conventional signs in a society of speakers. They are able to play this interpersonal rôle owing to a certain fundamental flexibility which is the result of the conceptual imprecision noted by Dunbar providing a momentary focus in the shifting microcosm which Vigotsky identifies in the speaker, they permit at the same time in the perceiving individual the construction of a semantic frame to be filled by available near-equivalents. Though no less tinged by individual experience, that frame nevertheless acts as a wide net designed to apprehend the contingencies of alien experience in an approximate way and it fulfills its task by permitting connotation to supply the particular "mesh" that seems best suited to retain the conceptual content of the perceived word string. In the meeting of transmitting and receiving consciousness, and with the connotational implications in either mind, not all the fish may get caught in the net, but the wide and hazy range of either frame – the "fuzzy" nature of the netting – ensure a sufficient measure of agreement and compatibility so as to result in a common semantic area which may be considered the denotation of the word in this particular communicative instant.

Obviously this sort of denotation has little in common with the denotation established for lexemes in dictionaries. It claims neither invariance nor permanence, nor does it function with any predictability. In turn, and *en revanche*, it produces the continuity of the communicative act, in fact providing for the very possibility of successful verbal inter-

course. If we regard, with Hjelmslev, connotation as something added to denotation, we may equate it in fact with Dunbar's concept of precization and identify it as a vehicle of referential function that must accompany general language concepts in order to make them viable. The problem which this would raise is that it seems to turn the invariance question around: the same lexicalized concepts used conventionally for precization are revealed as the invariant element with denotative tendencies, while the underlying basic concepts alone appear flexible. The paradoxical appearance of such logic can be explained by a fundamental difference in word function between production and reception, between words as acts and words as signs; their flexibility in the speaker's mind requires a tantamount degree of precization on the part of the receiver whose understanding is enhanced by the invariant character of such precization.

3. Invariance and connotation

Invariance is a condition at the *definiens* level where it characterizes words as fixed signs to the receiver. By contrast lexical concepts – the *definienda* – in the speaker's mind are situated very low on the flexibility-invariance scale while they are still in the process of turning into words. It is the *definiens*, then, which exercise the denotative function, yet what it denotes is not necessarily the *definiendum* in the speaker's mind; it denotes merely in terms of conventionality. The *definiendum* is therefore removed from its addressee by the double refraction of the encoding and decoding process which is the price that has to be paid for precization.

Connotation has its place somewhere at this juncture. On the one hand it is tied to the single instant of the *definiendum*; on the other it is supposed to give further precization to the denotative quality of the *definiens*. This leads us to postulate an operating mechanism for connotation which may be essentially different from that of denotation, dissociating it from the opposition bind to the latter concept. Operating on a middle level between concept and word, it plays the rôle of precization without the effect of lexicalization; that is to say, it operates only within the individual's mind, being inaccessible from beyond its borders. Not being a classical independent concept, it cannot be directly communicated but requires a "culture" of lexical concepts to sustain it. This view of connotation makes it variable of the instantiation of such concepts sharing attribute and circumstance of that process on the conceptual as well as the denotative end.

The difficulty in discussing and applying the notion of connotation in relation to invariance lies precisely in its casual nature. If connotation were an invariant, it would in fact have to be regarded as a part of denotation. Still, in order to be at all operative as a communicative device, word connotation must to some degree be inter-individually valid; there must, in other words, exist some measure of shared world knowledge and knowledge structures among speakers. Such shared experience constitutes the necessary minimum of invariance which is indispensable to any social function. It undoubtedly exists as a dimension of language on the communal, regional or national level, where it results in a variety of sociolects and dialects.

Connotation may partake of this social dimension of language, yet it is not, as we saw, dependent on it. The privacy of its function in the individual mind may, however, still permit development of an identifiable idiosyncrasy of language behavior in individual

speakers, thus transforming the ephemeral connotative situation into some sort of conventionalized metaphor. At this rare point connotation and invariance can indeed be said to meet.

4. Is connotation a viable argument in lexicography?

Dictionaries derive their authority essentially from the use of socially approved language models. Corpora have therefore been based on canonical literature or – occasionally – dicta. In the past 100 years the validity of the canon has been increasingly questioned for various reasons, the chief one among them being perhaps that the component elements of the canon have become partly obsolete as descriptive indicators of a verbal culture, and novel ways of generating corpora based on quantitatively more representative and more contemporary data have been devised, particularly for purposes of specialized dictionaries. General language dictionaries have in that respect been much more traditional, reflecting the continued practice of contrastive methods adopted from linguistics, attempting to establish interlanguage correspondence or description through the comparison of literary texts with their translations. Insofar as imaginative literature reflects connotative qualities in language, which are private and fall outside its norms the dubious merit of falling back on *belles lettres* as a source of information and authority in descriptive lexicography is evident, demonstrating the fundamental contradiction in the claim to lexical denotation.

But given the case we do not subscribe to the questionable principle of denotation in lexicography: would the idea of connotation bring an improvement? From the user's point of view, it would be useful and hence, desirable, to find help at this level of language use in dictionaries devoted to special problems or target groups (Kassai 1991). The creative parameter of connotation contributes essentially to imaginative literature but also – although less systematically, and at a lower level of consciousness – to all general language use where referential function is less obvious and calculated. Even if the direct benefit of dictionaries compiled with special reference to connotation may be slight in connection with explicit instances of consultation (owing to ambiguity, intercultural incompatibility or problems of description), they could play a significant rôle in sharpening general linguistic awareness in their users.

Before we turn to the lexicographer's perspective and enquire into questions posed in the implementation of a connotation-sensitive dictionary, a distinction postulated by Kassai needs to be discussed. As a philologist and translator of imaginative literature, he notes the hermetic nature of many instances of connotation. This leads him to assume a private type which he considers generally inaccessible to reception and interpretation, and therefore outside the lexicographer's interest; and on the other hand, a socially-shared type of general currency which he would like to be the object of a "dictionary of connotations." Such a distinction may represent an oversimplification. One objection that might be raised concerns the static character of his understanding of the concept, which leads him to speak of lexeme-like connotation units in the plural form, which we have seen to be untenable. Yet the neat division of connotation into a "private" and a "public" variety seems also highly questionable in the light of the generally fluid and intra-personal process as which we have identified connotation. What is inter-subjectively shared

in the use of connotation, is the association of certain elements of world knowledge with particular lexical cues; “public connotation” is thus little different from handling other lexical concepts and subject to the same differentiating criteria used in lexicography to account for meaning in its various forms and shades. The real question is here that about world knowledge: is there a way to “standardize” it to a certain degree at which the operation of connotation can be considered to have attained a “proper” level of efficiency? It is only if that question can be satisfactorily answered that a connotation-sensitive dictionary can at all be approached.

Kassai follows Hjelmslev in actually extending his understanding of connotation to encompass the notion of a language “genius” at the basis of all national linguistic activity, which raises an almost insurmountable obstacle to treating connotation in bilingual dictionaries, as he admits himself, whether it is at the phonetic or the morpho-syntactic level. Yet even in the case of ordinary collectively-shared connotation, equivalence in a foreign language may be hard to establish, as his example of the French *parisien* which, besides its geographic denotation of location, also produces connotation of certain behavioral qualities to members of French culture in a collocation like *une réunion très parisienne*. Similarly, “the name *Milano* connotes industrialization and money as opposed to the poverty of the southern provinces” (Kassai). Another interesting example of collectively-shared connotation cited by the same author is a sentence from a French radio broadcast commenting on a particular case of voting behavior in a French election: “La politique s’inquiète, les poissons aussi.” Identifying voting abstention as the salient feature that gave rise to the cited sentence, Kassai points out that such abstention is commonly known as “aller à la pêche” in France, which serves to explain the otherwise opaque statement “les poissons aussi” in the given context.

The last-named example is at the same time a useful reminder of the indirect representation of connotation in a large number of cases. Kassai lists a variety of such factors which are apt to pose serious problems to the lexicographer intent on rendering their connotational value: patterns of morphology, syntagmatic effects, psychological factors, allusion to texts belonging to the classical repertoire of a culture. Adding to this the evanescent character of our world knowledge, a good portion of which is short-lived and subject to local variation, we must conclude that the practical difficulties involved may actually draw rather narrow limits to what a connotation dictionary can achieve. Conventional dictionaries furthermore do make allowance for connotational phenomena indirectly under various formal headings in their microstructure, albeit to a very small – and perhaps ineffective – degree, when the ensemble of their methods is considered: lemmatization, tagging, highlighting of morpho-semantic indicators like qualifying pre/suffixes, collocation, or the range of contextual documentation can all contribute to the desired purpose.

What seems important in any discussion of a dictionary of connotation is the fact that connotation cannot be dissociated from its underlying semantic signals, wherever they may occur. Two things follow from this. Firstly, connotation in a dictionary is not viable without its complement, lexical meaning, however close this may be to denotational invariance. Lexemes based on collectively shared knowledge and glossed by way of abstraction from their historical instantiations, must not only underlie the mention of connotation; they must actually, be physically represented in the dictionary in order to provide access to their connotational effects. Where the latter derive from syntagmatic

conditions, obvious procedural difficulties will result for the lexicographer. Secondly, a generally valid interpretation of connotation can at best be achieved in such instances where social sanction has prepared the ground for an eventual lexicalization and where connotation may be considered a transitory stage on the way towards full abstraction. This practically excludes the spontaneous and individual quality from view which becomes evident in the single concrete act. Precization would only be possible on the basis of accidentally-selected samples of text, with limited assurance of reliability of interpretation. It appears that lexicography will have to continue living with the fiction of semantic invariance.

Endnote

- 1 Dunbar tests his hypothesis by placing nouns in changing syntagmatic environments and registers their passage from the mass to the count category as a certain "precization" in their referential function takes place as when *iron* (mass) becomes *an iron* or *irons* by what he calls "conventional specification of additional meaning." (67)

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