

Defining Political Terms in Lexicography: Recent Past and Present

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Abstract

The paper views treatment of definitions of political terms in monolingual English, Russian and Latvian desktop (including learners') dictionaries over the last 50 years. The author examines the practice of totalitarian lexicography as well as the main ways of dealing with political terms in general dictionaries. Such a study is, first, important to understand the relations between the language and language attitudes and ideology in order to see how terms and notions are represented and misrepresented in dictionaries. Secondly it can suggest ways of a fairer definition as most dictionaries are developing products and inaccuracies in dictionary entries can be changed and corrected in later editions. The study attests to a great variety in the selection of political terms to be included, a great variety of treatment of these terms and a great inconsistency in lemmas. Lack of systematicity is especially striking as regards genus proximus for fairly hyponymic terms - **practice, doctrine, theory, views, belief, policy, system**, etc.

In the postmodern and global world there is an ever-increasing need for correct and functional communication and understanding across cultures. Thus after the events of 11 September there was much discussion of what the word **jihad** really means. Dictionaries offer rather diverse and in most cases changing definitions, e.g.:

religious war by Muslims against unbelievers [Oxford 1980],

a holy war fought by Muslims against those who reject Islam [Oxford 2000],

religious war of Muslims against unbelievers [Concise 1982]

a holy war undertaken by Muslims against unbelievers [Concise 2001],

a holy war which Islam allows Muslims to fight against those who reject its teachings [Collins 1987],

a holy war which Islam allows Muslims to fight against those who reject its teachings [Collins 2001],

a holy war (for the Muslim faith) [Chambers 1983],

holy war, against infidels, fought by Muslims on behalf of Islam [Chambers 1999],

a holy war by Muslims against unbelievers or enemies of Islam, carried out as a religious duty [Webster's 1976],

a holy war undertaken as a sacred duty by Muslims [Webster's 1996],

a holy war against infidels undertaken by Muslims in defence of the Islamic faith (Times 2000).

Dictionaries play a certain role in the process of perception and education as they provide people with explanations and definitions. In some countries dictionary definitions are actually used in court cases, as the defining instrument [Moon 1989 :60]. Dictionary definitions do not reflect the reality perfectly, but they do carry an authoritative function and influence in society. Correct, precise and succinct information provided by dictionaries should assist the user also in crossing cross-cultural barriers. Especially English monolingual (including learner's) dictionaries are in a particular position in this aspect as being tool for the most widespread foreign language they are also used by a large number of speakers of other languages and to some extent can create and consolidate biased perceptions of the meaning of various language units.

The great diversity and change in defining political terms even within one language and/or one period can be explained by

1. semantic change, as lexicon of a living language is in a state of flux and dictionaries reflect this change
2. historical change of perceptions reflected in dictionaries (dictionaries reflect not only the linguistic change but also change in attitudes),
3. variety of definition approaches,
4. various changes reflecting lexicographers' individual perceptions.

The last three factors can be viewed as indirect reflections of society's attitudinal views that affect meaning perception. These tendencies can be seen not only in various new dictionaries but also in revised editions of one and the same dictionary.

Definition in General

Defining is far from an easy task. A. Wierzbicka has stated that already "Aristotle realized better than many contemporary linguists do, there are few things harder than constructing a good definition" [1996: 267]. The logical Aristotelian approach to meaning consists in perception of the object as having defining characteristics which provide necessary and sufficient conditions (genus proximum and differentia specifica) for the individual object to be a member of the set of objects defined. Thus it is included in a class of a higher hierarchy, then specified by its prominent traits. In lexicography there can be a difference between the logical definition and linguistic definition [Heyvaert (1994)]. As words are hardly ever used independently to express a message – they are used in a sentence and are components of meaningful expressions – often it is the referential value that is involved, not the concept that it evokes. Accordingly lexicographic definition defines units of a linguistic system [Solomonick 1996] while logical definitions attempt at defining reality phenomena, things. Lexicographic definition allows various types of explanation: definition by paraphrase, definition by synonyms and/or antonyms, definition through wordbuilding schemes, definitions by exemplifying or citations, definitions by etymology.

The difference between the definition types is in fact similar to that between dictionary and encyclopaedia. While dictionaries describe mainly linguistic units, and encyclopedias – phenomena and facts, there is an overlap. Some words are more "encyclopedic" than others. These are content words and in case of political terms we are dealing with some of the most abstract and broad content words. These abstract and to some extent vague notions, are

mostly defined by the classical, analytic or intensional [Svensen 1993:122] definition referring to the content of the concept. Political terms are practically always defined according to the system of stating the superordinate concept/hyperonym and then specifying and demarcating it by additional information:

A-ism = *theory that believes in...*
 definiendum = *genus proximus differentia specifica*

This poses several interesting issues – what are the superordinate concepts for various political “-isms”, like **theory, belief, views, practice, doctrine, ideology** and what are the specification points. One could expect a consistency in the choice of genus proxima and consistency in the distinctive features, as well as a uniform manner of wording. The distinctive features should be typical and not too many, yet enough to differentiate. A comparable depth of distinction could be expected. Definitions should also be correct as regards the contents – but correctness is of course relative as in this case we are dealing with notions that involve social and historical paradigms as well as subjective evaluations of the concepts as such. It is after all easier to agree on what is a **chair** (even if we have different ideas about defining it) than on what is **liberalism** or **postmodernism**.

Definition can be viewed as formal statement about the meaning taking into account evidence of lexis (contextual) use. This can be the result of our experience and analysis, or a summary of a collection of citations, or in modern days can be based on a large material offered by corpus (which at least theoretically ensures a more comprehensive picture of the use). Yet meaning in general is an abstract quantity/value determined by the functioning of language in general, so it is a changing, incomplete quantity with various connotations and possibly even various denotations. Dictionary meaning can only be an approximation [Farina 1992: 72] of the lexical meaning. Even more, there are limitations and constraints imposed on lexicographic definition by size of the dictionary, thus striving for maximum inclusion might either render the definition too vague or too long -- as Gold has suggested -- if all views were to be presented the definition would turn into an encyclopedic article [1985: 233]. Lexicographical definitions are affected also by the supposed or assumed knowledge of the target audience (depth of the definition, style and complexity of the language of the definition), etc.

Historical, Social, Individual Aspects

Time inevitably brings certain correctives in our understanding of various notions. It is enough to thumb through some of the older dictionaries to see definitions which today do have an air of strangeness, e.g. an early Hornby's Learner's Dictionary [Learner's 1948] definition for

Imperialism *1. the policy of maintaining the safety and protecting the welfare of the various parts of an empire (by warlike defence, close trade relations, and other lawful means).*

There seems to be a different connotation and a different point of view at looking at the term today.

First we should view the huge difference between a dictionary made under totalitarian system and democracy. In the first case the dictionary is not so much a tool for the user,

rather an ideological weapon, a tool for indoctrination that has to conform to the ruling ideology. Totalitarian and authoritarian governments engineer dictionaries as part of the total ideological control [Veisbergs 2002] – it would be unreasonable to expect them to leave a dent in a system that is supposedly coherent and monolith. This affects not only political terms but even simple words that one might not always perceive as being politically significant. The meaning was “subordinate to the conscious reinforcement of the ultimate authority, the reigning political ideology” [Farina 1992:70]. Some of the traits of totalitarian lexicography have been well described in the above paper as well as others [Farina 1995]. On confusing meaning with ideological desiderata, see also Wierzbicka [1995]. In general one could say that societal influence (though it does not represent all the society) affects definitions much more under totalitarian regimes.

Totalitarian systems can

1. ban the “wrong” words from dictionaries. Missing words can be also the result of unwelcome authors having used the terms (as was the case of Latvian Dictionary of Literary Language [Latviešu 1972] when citations were removed from the galleys because some of the authors cited had suddenly fallen in disrepute) as well as the result of sanitized and weeded corpus [Veisbergs 2002], e.g. no modern writers or emigres in the Soviet Latvian citation corpus.

2. misrepresent the meaning going by political expedience, thus distorting the reflection (there are interesting studies of the lexis of the former GDR and West Germany). E.g. some notions are defined in an extremely broad fashion, e.g.

Marxism - theory about the most general laws of development of nature and society.. (Ozhegov 1982).

Others are biased and often deviate from the traditional definition type by offering much additional information, e.g. a dictionary [Tautsaimniecības 1944] published in Latvian during the German occupation in defining **civilization** contrasts the term with **culture**, followed by lengthy references to Spengler and finally describes it with negative connotations.

Dictionaries often use the officially approved dysphemisms for unwelcome notions:

Cold war – hostile and aggressive policy of the reactionary circles of the imperialist powers towards the USSR and other socialist countries [Ozhegov 1982],

Reaction political or economic resistance of classes doomed for annihilation against the social progress, obscurantism [Svešvārdū 1951].

3. There is often an amazing dictionary space allocated to political terms. While many are absent, the ones provided often get much more space than other comparable terms. Thus **bolshevism** in the above mentioned dictionary [Tautsaimniecības 1944] receives 81 line, while a broad and polysemantic term like **loss** on the same page only 8 lines. In Ozhegov’s dictionary [1982] **revisonism** gets 6 lines, while much broader **revision** with three senses also 6 lines. **Opportunism** receives 7 lines, while **opponent** - 2 lines. This testifies to the importance laid by political terminology.

4. A steely uniformity is imposed on many notions with strict and clear cut ideas of what the word should mean or designate. The similarity of lemmas in various Russian dictionaries are of enviable homogeneity. Such a unified approach taken from a neutral position would in fact be quite welcome, but here we deal with a specific uniformity, e.g. definitions of all unwelcome political trends have the attributive superordinate phrase – a trend hostile to Marxism-Leninism/ Marxism/ science, e.g.

Maoism – a petty bourgeois nationalist trend hostile to Marxism-Leninism... [Sovetskij 1979],

Trotskyism – a petty bourgeois ideo-political trend hostile to Marxism-Leninism in working class movement... [Sovetskij 1979],

centrism an opportunistic trend hostile to Marxism.. [Latviešu 1972],

opportunism a trend hostile to Marxism-leninism.. [Latviešu 1972],

phenomenalism reactionary, trend hostile to science.. [Svešvārdū 1951].

5. Usually definitions are hierarchically structured according to the reigning ideology, e.g.

Socialism – the first phase of communism, a social system that comes after capitalism... [Ozhegov 1982],

Imperialism the highest and the last stage of capitalism... [Ozhegov 1982],

Imperialism the highest and the last stage of capitalism... [Latviešu 1972].

This affected also special editions of Western dictionaries published in the USSR. Many political entries in the Soviet edition of Hornby's learner's dictionary [Oxford 1982] were rewritten: **communism, socialism, capitalism, totalitarianism, internationalism, patriotism, fascism, soviet, materialism, imperialism, class**. Here follow some examples of the original entry [Oxford 1980] and the rewritten one [Oxford 1982]:

Bolshevik (hist) follower of the revolutionary Marxist party that came to power in Russia in 1917; (colloq) supporter of the system of government by soviets; (colloq) person favouring Marxism or Communism,

bolschy (sl) rebellious; stubborn.

Bolshevism (hist) revolutionary Marxist trend of political thought in World Labour Movement, which appeared in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century, embodied in the proletarian party founded by Lenin (1903) **Bolshevik** supporter of ~.

It would be interesting to learn whether the changes in the entry and deletion of **bolschy** was because of the "wrong" English connotations or to save the extra space for a longer, "more correct" definition of **bolshevism**.

Zionism (hist) political movement for the establishment of an independent state for the Jews; (mod use) movement concerned with the development of Israel a Jewish political and religious state,

Zionism (hist) nationalistic movement for the emigration of all Jews to a single state; (mod use) ideology and policy of the bourgeoisie in Israel, supported by certain imperialists.

Marxism political and economic theory that class struggle has been the major force behind historical change, that the dominant class has exploited the other classes and that capitalism will inevitably be superseded by socialism and a classless society,

Marxism teaching on the main laws of development of nature and society, on the revolution of the exploited masses, on the victory of socialism and the building of Communism; ideology of the Working Class and its Communist Party. *Marxism-Leninism*, Marx's ideas developed by Lenin.

Some entries however remained unaffected **anti-Semitism, revolution, rightwing, left-wing, hegemony, religion, conservatism, nationalism, working class, dissident, colonialism**. Similar alterations were carried out in the soviet edition of the Students dictionary (Oxford 1983).

6. On the other hand also under totalitarian system political terms are subject to changes – general long term ideological changes as well as sudden U-turns, when some ideas and people representing them fall out of favour or are rehabilitated. e.g. **fascism** after Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, **Stalinism** after Khrushchev's thaw, **cybernetics, all-human values** (a false bourgeois term) etc. Some of these sudden shifts affected longer lexicographical projects. Finally one could mention that lexicographers were often not affected by market demands and pressures (time, competition).

However, some of these distortions in milder form can be as well seen in democratic countries. On the inclusion-exclusion issue, it took years for many non-standard (four-letter) words to find their way into dictionaries, and I daresay, it was not always the issue of prescriptiveness versus descriptiveness in lexicography, but mainly the issue of *attitude* to the words as such.

The issue of ideological neutrality is a difficult one. R. Moon states that "there is no such thing as a politically neutral definition [Moon, 1989:77]. H. Bejoint goes further: "for words used to refer to social or political values or systems... objective definitions are simply impossible [2000: 131]. Any expression of thought in a way can be qualified as ideology. Ideology becomes part of the meaning of lexical items, but is also compounded into mental structures - which may be different for different ideological groups. This suggests that we can talk about ideological polysemy [Dieckmann 1975]. No dictionary is likely to be able to satisfy all the variety of perceptions and that seems to be the main reason why there should be an attempt at "neutrality of description" [Dieckman 1991: 838] at escaping value judgement.

Every society and time has its ruling ideology and all lexicographers at least to some extent are affected by it as well as have some of their own views. Landau speaks of a dictionary as a reflection of social values: "dictionary definitions represent the views and prejudices of the established, well-educated, upper classes. It is no conspiracy. [1984: 303]. Algeo [1990: 2006-2007] suggests that dictionaries give a reasonably accurate idea of what is valued, or on the contrary stigmatized by the more prestigious social groups. Good rejects neutrality principle as such: "Middle of the road definitions raise questions about whose road it is and who decides where the middle is [1987:7].

Also individual lexicographers are likely to be deeply imbued with their own culture, that might make it difficult to know what information is in fact culture and education specific. Plus one should not disregard the varied life experiences that shape our perceptions and understanding. Thus often the compiler or editor can take the perspective of one of many speakers' groups. "Often unacknowledged even to the editors themselves, the disparity of treatment of different kinds of terms reflects an implicit judgement" [Landau 1984: 302].

Modern Dictionaries

In corpus-based lexicography the definitions are abstractions and formal constructions based on a variety of uses in context/texts. Thus definition can be elucidated from an attempt of maximal inclusion yet independence from context. However also corpus-based dictionaries both directly and via their compilers are affected by various other considerations – social, cultural, time-linked and individual e.g. modern German dictionaries tend to avoid Nazi terms. And finally technical aspects such as dictionary space, target audience language proficiency are to be reckoned with.

As stated above, lemma for political terms normally consists of genus proximus and specification. The latter can be long or short, often referring to historical or personal information.

Genus Proximus

It is hard to work out an all-encompassing and ideologically neutral definition for political terms, however one could expect a certain systematicity at least as regards superordinate words. However we have observed in definitions a huge variety in superordinate terms used for relatively similar concepts. When isolated it does seem indicative and connotes varying and biased attitude, e.g. various parallel *-isms* in Concise Oxford Dictionary 10th edition [2001]:

Capitalism – system

Socialism – theory

Communism - theory or system

Fascism – system of government

Imperialism - policy

Maoism – doctrines

Stalinism – ideology and policies

Thatcherism – policies

Colonialism – policy or practice

Neocolonialism -- use of pressures

Trotskyism - principles

Marxism – theories

Absolutism – belief in principles

Feudalism – social system

Atheism – theory or belief

Nationalism 1. feelings, principles, effects; 2. advocacy

Internationalism 1. advocacy; 2. principles

Similarly in a Latvian dictionary [Svešvārdu 1999]

<i>liberalism</i>	<i>theory and position</i>
<i>radicalism</i>	<i>position</i>
<i>centrism</i>	<i>trend</i>
<i>conservativism</i>	<i>attempts</i>
<i>communism</i>	<i>theory, form</i>
<i>socialism</i>	<i>teaching, formation</i>
<i>capitalism</i>	<i>system</i>
<i>fascism</i>	<i>ideology, regime</i>
<i>nationalsocialism</i>	<i>ideology, policy, practice</i>
<i>imperialism</i>	<i>policy</i>
<i>maoism</i>	<i>doctrine, movement</i>
<i>internationalism</i>	<i>principle</i>
<i>nationalism</i>	<i>ideology and policy</i>

None of the relatively similar *-isms* in the two dictionaries studied in fact have identical superordinate components of the definition! Whether this is a coincidence, lack of editing or presents a significant and profound decisions, is not quite clear.

Differentia Specifica

In some cases the compilers have proceeded from the original theoretical definitions that the originators or the movement would prefer (a very tactful and courteous approach when the practice of the movement is often quite different from its theory), while in others a description of the phenomenon is much more critical, e.g. compare:

communism a theory or system of social organization in which all property is vested in the community and each person contributes and receives according to their ability and needs [Concise 2001],

fascism an authoritarian and nationalistic right-wing system of government [Concise 2001].

It seems the first is a definition of the theory while the second is a definition of the practice while both use the superordinate term *system*.

Occasionally explanations are used where the ideological polysemy dimensions are very apparent in order to suggest a variety of views or attitudes or region of use. This is normally done by larger dictionaries that can accommodate much information, smaller ones usually concentrate on the description, not the bias; e.g.

bolshevist and extreme revolutionary communist (of any country) – loosely used by opponents [Chambers 1983],

bourgeoisie – the middle class; in Marxist contexts the capitalist class [Concise 2001].

Lexicographic definition in the broad sense also includes labels and citations, as they add elements of meaning missing in the brief overt definition. Use of evaluative labels as concerns political terminology is rather rare and normally consists of the labels *disapproving/derogatory* in various degrees. E.g.

Bolshevik *a violent revolutionary Marxian communist, anarchist, agitator, cause of trouble (used loosely as a term of disapprobation [Chambers 1983],*
Imperialist *(usually disapproving) a person, such as a politician, who supports imperialism [Oxford 2000],*
socialistic *(often disapproving) having some of the features of socialism (Oxford 2000),*
nationalist *(sometimes disapproving)[Oxford 2000],*
nationalistic *(usually disapproving)[Oxford 2000],*
nationalism *a strong feeling of love and pride in one's own country: (sometimes derog.) [Oxford 1995].*

Many dictionaries often use a shortened lemma directing the user to a related political term (often a proper name – author, originator of the movement, party implementing the idea, etc.) this approach allows avoiding giving specifications, e.g.
National Socialism – *the policies of the National Socialist Party [Chambers 1983],*
Nazism *the principles of the Nazis, the Nazi movement [Chambers 1999],*
Nazism *the principles or methods of the Nazis [Webster 1996].*

One can also discuss the policy of examples (especially in learners' dictionaries) – the constraints of space especially in desk top dictionaries means that the choice has to be well thought over and subtle. E.g. compare the relatively balanced policy of examples of the last 3 editions of Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary:

colonialist
 -- [Oxford 1980],
European colonialists. colonialist suppression [Oxford 1995],
European colonialism. colonialist laws [Oxford 2000].

Marxist
Marxist criticism, a Marxist party [Oxford 1980],
have Marxist views. a Marxist government [Oxford 1995],
Marxist theory/doctrine/ideology [Oxford 2000].

Left-wing
left-wing militants [Oxford 1980],
veteran of the left wing; on the left wing of the Conservative Party; left-wing ideas/intellectuals/policies; she is very left-wing [Oxford 1995],
He is on the left wing of the Conservative Party; Labour left-winger. [Oxford 2000].

Right-wing
 -- [Oxford 1980],
right-wing opinions; this newspaper's views are very right-wing; He was barracked by Tory right-wingers. [Oxford 1995],
right-wing opinions/policies/views; She is a prominent Tory right-winger [Oxford 2000].

Finally there is, of course, the issue of the essence of the dictionary – whether it gives a comprehensive synchronic description based on usage records or it also acts as a progressive influence in furthering changes, forming the users understanding in some particular direction. However prescriptive that sounds, this is seen in, among other things, furthering

gender neutral language and some other issues, e.g. the language situation in South Africa [Carstens 1994] or in Political Correctness campaigns [Busse 2000] that aim at changing the mentality of people proceeding from a rather Whorfian point of view, where words are condemned to be units of ideology. One should also recognize that there are different dictionaries with their individual functions – and this may lead to a different balance of prescriptive versus descriptive. Yet even the most descriptive dictionaries have certain prescriptive effect.

In conclusion, we have observed that there has been a change of contents over time which is a natural development. Definitions of political terms have become more neutral and less biased. At present., but often with a left wing bias.

Nevertheless the variety and inconsistency in definitions, both concerning *genus proximus* and *differentia specifica* is alarmingly large. Dictionaries are reference tools and as such we might expect them to provide objective information which means there is a long way to go yet.

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