

Lexicographical Definition of Terms in Hungarian Dictionaries

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Abstract

Today, terms that belong to and are defined in relation to many domains migrate into general language. It has become necessary to include such terms in general language dictionaries and provide a lexicographic definition for them. The lexical migration processes were examined from several perspectives, Meyer (2000), for example distinguishes several types of lexical migration of terms. This migration process can be examined from the point of view of lexicographic description. The purpose of this paper is to present an analysis of the lexicographic definitions of terms found in Hungarian monolingual dictionaries. I examined the definition of terms, such as *laser*, *hologram*, *holography*, that have migrated into general language from the domain of optics, and that are included in Hungarian general monolingual dictionaries.

1 Introduction

It is a feature of the information society that as communication systems become more and more developed and widespread, the isolation of special fields decreases. Not only professionals of the given field but those of other fields as well become familiar with certain technical conceptual systems. With the development and interconnection of telecommunication and information technology, with the creation of the internet and other networks, today a great quantity of important information can rapidly be obtained and forwarded. The conceptual systems and terminological systems of professions also get into close connection and influence each other. To facilitate mutual understanding it is essential to provide clear definitions of terms and to compare and harmonize such systems.

In the Proceedings of EURALEX 2000, Ingrid Meyer was looking for similarities and differences of lexicographic and terminological viewpoints through an analysis of some very familiar computer words. She noted that in today's knowledge society the boundaries between terminological language and general language are increasingly blurred. Meyer emphasised that for terminographers the unit of lexicographic description is the term, while lexicographers have a broader view. Since terminological description of a term focuses on one single domain, the definition involves a lot of detail; on the other hand, lexicographic description of a term encompasses several domains and general language. Therefore, such a description will not include details so that people not thoroughly familiar with the domain can understand it. Most of the lexicographic works approach the question from various points of

view (Bergenholtz and Tarp 1995, Hartmann 2001, etc.). One of the important fields of terminological-terminographic works is to find out and designate the characteristic features of the given concepts, as well as the sign/signs used to represent them within a specific domain (onomasiological approach). The lexicographic works approach the question from the perspective of the linguistic sign: they examine what certain lexemes mean in different domains and in the language form (semasiological approach).

Languages change continuously, and, today more words from terminological language get into general language than ever before. These words and expressions have to be included in general language dictionaries. Linguists disagree on which words should be considered part of the general language, and when to include them in general language dictionaries. According to lexicographical practice, a new word is part of the general language when it appears in literary works, course books, and in the text of mass communication, regardless of the fact that it first appeared in literature, specialised literature, a political text, common speech or a technical manual (cf. e.g. Elekfi 1988). The appearance of the new word – or the previously domain specific word – in the above mentioned areas means that speakers of the language use it in everyday conversations (in writing or speaking); therefore, it belongs to the lexis of general language. Consequently, the word may be included in a general language dictionary.

Meyer analyses the crossing over of computer words from IT language to general language. She divided this lexical migration process into several parts (Meyer 2000: 44-49):

1. Semantic changes
 - a) Retention of fundamental domain sense
 - b) Significant dilution of original domain sense
2. Changes in level of language – pragmatic changes
3. Grammatical changes
4. Re-activation of original general-language sense

Here, I have to point out that the Hungarian examinations correspond to Meyer's approach, according to which terms migrate between the various linguistic layers (lexical migration process), and this process takes place in a more and more intensive way. I, however, do not agree with Meyer who also mentions this process as *de-terminologization*, since the former disintegration of the professional branches that characterised both the research and professional activities, has been replaced by a strong sense of integration: the main questions are solved in the framework of interdisciplinary co-operation among various scientific and professional fields. As a result, today the classification of terms is not carried out according to the old procedure, that is, adjusted to the usage of the given professions, but adjusted to the major subject matters and on the basis of the given domains. Therefore it is reasonable to apply the following practice accepted in international terminological literature:

terms are not classified according to which language form they are used in a term is a sign that represents a concept inside a domain (cf. Bessé et al 1997, Cabré 1998, Fóris 2005b).

In dictionaries with a lexicographic purpose, it is necessary, on the one hand, to define the meaning of a new word clearly in the sense that it was used when it was created and, on the

other hand, to provide its new meanings in the general language if the given term underwent a change of meaning.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the first type of semantic change based on the definitions found in Hungarian monolingual dictionaries: I examine the case in which the term retains its original meaning in a new domain or in general language.

2 Inclusion of terms in general language dictionaries – lexicographers' considerations

Those who do not belong to certain groups of professionals in most cases do not need to be familiar with the exact and detailed meanings of terms, the description of concepts (that the professionals of the domain know well), and, therefore, in most cases they do not need those defining elements that provide such details.

Dictionaries with a terminographic approach and those with a lexicographic approach should – according to their target audience – be different in their content and wording when they define headwords. A terminographic definition provides the meaning of the word within a certain domain. A good example of this is the dictionary of mineralogy, in which *diamond* is defined as a mineral; while a dictionary of jewellery defines *diamond* as a precious stone. A lexicographic definition provides the general description of *diamond*, using the method of abstraction. It selects the most important characteristics of the separated senses of *diamond* in various domains, and thus creates the general meaning of the word. The main task of dictionaries is to define a word at the level in accordance with the needs of the user and provide information on the use of the lexical item (cf. e.g. Svensén 1993, Bergenholtz and Tarp 1995, Hartmann 2001).

In the case of a concrete concept, any type of dictionary has to have the same word as headword, since the linguistic sign refers to the same concept, object or process. However, speakers of various professional backgrounds relate to the given headword (the given term) in different ways; therefore, dictionaries created for specialised target users have to provide the meaning of the headword in different ways. In each dictionary the definition belonging to the headword contains different elements depending on the intended target users: lay people or professionals.

Having the general user of the language in mind, dictionaries with a lexicographic approach do not necessarily need to include the encyclopaedic knowledge that is linked to the conceptual definition of the term. The compiler or editor of a dictionary is in a different position because a) either they rely on other dictionaries and accept and adopt the definitions from them, or b) they are familiar with the encyclopaedic knowledge as well and provide useful information by abstraction.

3 Definition of terms in general language dictionaries

In the general language monolingual dictionaries that have been published recently, there are numerous definitions that contain false information. In my paper, I present the terms *laser*, *hologram*, and *holography* from the domain of optics. Due to the process of lexical migration, these terms have entered the general language, and thus are included in general language dictionaries. In my presentation, I analyse the characteristics of the definitions that are provided in their entries.

There is no Hungarian monolingual dictionary or any terminological dictionary of physics or quantum mechanics; this is why I used technical books as reference works. Some parts of the results have already been published in Hungarian (Fóris 2005a, 2005b). In this presentation I elaborate on the general conclusions.

3.1 *The improper use of the Hungarian terminology*

A term is used that is different from the terminology of the given professional field and either a) has no accepted specialised meaning or b) is used with a different meaning.

- The proper Hungarian equivalent of the English term *stimulated emission* is “*kényszerített emisszió*”. Instead of the proper term, however, we can find the Hungarian standard language equivalent – “*serkentett*” and “*gerjesztett*” – of the English standard language word “*stimulated*”.

- Instead of the term “*kemény anyag*” (hard material), the improper term “*ellenálló anyag*” (resistant material) can be found.

- Instead of the term “*párhuzamos*” (parallel), the improper term “*irányított*” (guided) or the equally inappropriate “*nem szóródó*” (non-scattering) can be found.

- Instead of the term “*nagy energiájú lézernyaláb*” (high energy laser beam), the term “*fényes lézernyaláb*” (brilliant laser beam) can be found.

3.2 *The definition contains deceptive statements*

- “*elektromágneses rezgéseket keltő és erősítő*” (generating and amplifying electromagnetic vibration) – This wording refers to the generation of electro-technical vibration and not to the generation of optical radiation.

- The meaning of the term *lézer* (laser): “Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation.” The description of the process and the definition of the instrument get mixed up – the word *lézer* (laser) has already been lexicalised its meaning is not the same as the basic process taking place when in operation.

- “*kvantumeffektusokat használ fény előállítására*” (uses quantum-effects to produce light) – Every kind of light emission is a quantum-related process, so this is not exclusively typical to laser; therefore, it can not be used to separate lasers from other light sources.

3.3 *The concept is not defined by its distinctive features*

In the definition of the headword, such features are used that do not characterize each entity of the concept, only certain groups of the concept.

- “*a sugárzott fény párhuzamos*” (the radiated light is parallel) – In the case of several types of lasers, the beam of lights is not parallel but divergent.

- “*nagy energia*” (high energy) – Many types of laser can be characterized by the fact that they emit light with little or medium energy.

- “*egyszínű*” (*unicoloured*), “*monokromatikus*” (*monochromatic*) – *There are lasers that emit a high band-width of white light.*

3.4 There are inaccurate statements in the definition

When interpreting the concept, inaccurate wording could lead to errors that greatly distort reality.

- “*a lézerefény nem szóródik*” (laser light does not scatter) – The opposite is true: a special kind of scattering process takes place in the case of laser light, on the basis of which new disciplines and new material testing methods have come into being.

- One dictionary describes a light absorptive and light emitting “*gerjesztési láncreakció*” (exciting chain reaction) that does not exist in reality. This statement is either a misinterpretation or mistranslation of the light amplification process.

3.5 Unjustified use of technical terms in standard language dictionaries

- “*fényerősítés*” (light amplification)
- “*koherens nyaláb*” (coherent beam), “*koherens fény*” (coherent light)
- “*kényszerített emisszió*” (stimulated emission)
- “*monokromatikus*” (monochromatic)
- “*kvantumeffektus*” (*quantum effect*)

4 Conclusion

Terms are decisively present not only in terminography but also in the field of lexicography. The above presented examples illustrate that when terms are included in dictionaries, they lose their connection with their conceptual system. Most of the difficulties arise from the fact that the writers of the entries did not take the concept as their starting point and did not examine the most basic question: “Does the term refer to an object, a concept, a process etc.? This is the reason why the name of the object, *hologram*, is given as a synonym for the abstract concept *holography*.”

In general, the following statements can be concluded on the basis of the examinations:

- One of the most important conclusions that could be drawn from the research is that knowledge and use of terminological systems is essential when compiling a dictionary.

- The definitions of the examined terms in the entry frequently include such misunderstandings, mistakes that go beyond a simple lack of inaccuracy. Frequently, it is not the abstracted concept that is given in the meaning of the terms of general concepts, but the major features of one or more sub-concepts. It happens that the meaning of the term of an abstracted concept is interpreted by giving another term as its synonym (*holography=hologram*).

- Frequently, the same, sometimes literally the same mistakes are repeated in the dictionaries published successively, as in the absence of special dictionaries and adequate terminological database, the new dictionaries use the former ones as their source. Therefore, the inaccurate interpretations are frequently repeated, and the entries of the recent dictionaries do not reflect the changes that took place in the meaning of terms as a result of the general development.

- The imperfections of terms published in dictionaries clearly show that the requirement

to apply professional and linguistic knowledge together is not met when compiling the various dictionaries.

- It is widely known that besides the appearance of new concepts, the content and scope of old concepts also change slowly but constantly. This should be followed by the constant classification of terminology. Today, the Hungarian dictionaries pay little attention to this. The change in the meaning of *picture* is a typical example. People have been aware of the method of producing three-dimensional pictures since the 1950-s. We come across this fact day by day and yet the dictionary entries do not mention that beside the two-dimensional ones three-dimensional pictures also exist. The entries have not been corrected even in those dictionaries that already include the term *hologram*, whose entry does contain the *three-dimensional pictures*.

- The minor languages, including Hungarian, have a quite unique situation. Scientists communicate in English and when informing the Hungarian general public, they provide the exact Hungarian terms (that are also used in Hungarian education). They rarely define the terms in the description of instruments and in research reports. Since only a few people work on certain fields of science, no Hungarian database, dictionaries and special dictionaries are compiled (as a result of the low number of researchers, there is no demand for them). According to the EU recommendations (Hartmann 1999), adequate reference works would be needed, since in the absence of these, the general language dictionaries and certain professions – where a given research tool appears as an applied instrument – are unable to rely on them, and consequently unable to keep the fundamental principals of lexicography.

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