Towards the Meaning of a Word

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Abstract

In gnosiology the image is a fundamental category and is used in connection with sensuous reflection and abstract thinking.

The presence of a **conceptual image** in a word is beyond doubt. As for the **sensuous image** in a word, it is only intuitively noted by scholars.

The paper argues that the extralinguistic reality is reflected in the form of a sensuous imprint but developed into a sensuous image in the process of formation of a word as a second signal system (I. Pavlov's theory on two signal systems).

The author regards the sensuous image existing in a word as a **linguistic image**. A linguistic image is enclosed in every word but is called forth when figurativeness of the word is created.

The acknowledgment of a linguistic image in a word permits us to present the meaning of a word as a correlation of three main components: the sound form of a word as its nomination, the conceptual image as the significatum and the sensuous image as a linguistic image.

The afore-presented study of the meaning of a word appears to be of great importance in translated matters especially when translating poetry that abounds with occasional word-combinations.

Keywords: sensuous imprint; linguistic image; three components of the meaning of a word.

1   Introduction

The practice of lexicography, as its history says, is as old as, if not older, than many religions. As we know the first models of lexicographic works were more like lists, mostly bilingual to record the similar words of two languages, and it took thousands of years before the dictionary became organized in the way we know it to be today. But in all cases any dictionary aimed to study and describe words and their meanings.

The very first English dictionary was written in 1604 by Robert Cawdrey and contained about 3,000 entries, but the word "lexicography" was created in the late 17th century as that derived from the Greek – "lexikos" and "grapho". In 1755 *the Dictionary of the English Language* by Samuel Johnson was published. The dictionary contained over 42,000 entries and remained the most comprehensive British reference text until the first edition of the great *Oxford English Dictionary*, published in 1884.

The same XVIIth-XIXth centuries are marked with serious dictionary making attempts in Georgia. A Georgian writer, politician and public figure, Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani (1658-1725) in 1685 starts to compile a Georgian Dictionary and accomplishes it in 1716, though it was first published in 1884, by another Georgian lexicographer, writer and public figure Raphiel Eristavi (1824-1901).

The year of 1884, as the date of publication of the Georgian Dictionary, absolutely coincides with the date of the first edition of the great Oxford English Dictionary. Earlier in 1840 Georgian-Russian-French dictionary was published in St Petersburg. The compiler of the trilingual dictionary was the Georgian lexicographer and Professor of the University of St Petersburg, David Chubinashvili (1814-1891).

The practice of compiling dictionaries successfully continued and four volumes of Oxford English Dictionary, the last of which was published in 1928, contained over 400,000 entries. In 1950 Georgian Academy of Sciences published the Dictionary of the Georgian Language in eight volumes.

I actually needed this short survey to emphasize the main dates of dictionary compiling in two countries, in Britain and in Georgia as far as English as an international language is one of the main working languages of the XVII EURALEX International Congress, and Georgia is the country that welcomes this Congress on Lexicography. As we see the dates of compiling dictionaries in Britain at some extend coincide with periods of compiling dictionaries by Georgian lexicographers.

Lexicography is an art of dictionary-making but a dictionary itself is the most accurate and ample resource for information about words as the leading treasurer of language, that is extremely vital to the literacy of speakers of a certain language. Lexicography at the same time is a scholarly discipline based on the study of words and the analysis of their meanings. The latter i.e. the meaning of a word has been an object of profound studies of many academic fields.

The question of the meaning of a word has been widely discussed especially in linguistics and claims for further development in accordance with current attitudes towards the process of reasoning and consciousness.

The aim of the present article is to present a new approach towards the meaning of a word but based on the most popular and essential attitudes towards the problem.

2   A Famous Semantic Triangle

In connection with the problem of the meaning of a word, we offer to consider a famous semantic triangle suggested by C. K. Ogden and J. A. Richards (Ogden & Richards 1923) according to which the meaning of a word is represented as a relation between the sound form of a word, its concept and a referent as an object of the real world (see figure 1). All the debates to study the meaning of a word, that span almost 100 years are numerous attempts to define these three points and correlation between them as in a system of a language as well as in speech. Ferdinand De Saussure's dichotomy (De Saussure 1977) became exceptionally important for the studies.
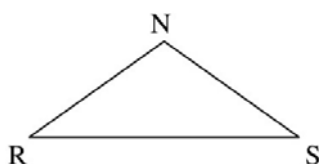

Figure 1: Semantic triangle by Ogden & Richards.

At the same time it should be noted that alongside with a deep, thorough and scrupulous study of a word and its meaning in the second half of the twentieth century linguists of the same period appear to be carried away by the perspectives of a new and systematic approach which regards text as a whole and is known as textlinguistics. Though this new branch of linguistics succeeded in revealing new dimensions and categories of a text as a whole it never declared the word as the main unit of a text, that in my opinion created a serious gap in the studies devoted to the meaning of a word.

The frame of one article never permits to present a broad observation on the subject (Merabishvili 2005) but firstly we will focus attention on the above presented semantic triangle and mostly on a referent, as one of its points.

We argue, that a word with its meaning is a linguistic phenomenon but a referent as an object of reality is always extralinguistic. The question is: **how does a referent as an extralinguistic phenomenon**

participate in the formation of the meaning when we are aware of the fact that any word of a language as a system is a reflection of extralinguistic reality that is implied in its meaning but in active speech be it oral or written a word with its nomination and concept refers to a concrete object of reality?

In current linguistics the most popular term for referent is denotatum. Due to the dichotomy of language we offer to distinguish two types of denotatums: a **general denotatum** implying a class of objects a certain word stands for in a language as a system, and a **concrete denotatum** implying a concrete object of reality the word refers to in speech. These two denotatums could be indicated by the following two signs accordingly: **D** and **D$_1$**.

When a word is used in its usual meaning, the concrete denotatum represents the corresponding whole class of objects that is implied under the word in language as a system. This could be indicated in the following way: **D≈D$_1$**. E. g. if we say "the book is on the table and you can read the story in it", i. e. the concrete denotatum of the word "book" is one of the class of books the word implies. In such cases significatum reflects denotatum and is equal to it: **S≈D.**

When occasional meaning is developed we observe that these two denotatums are not of equal qualities. A word reflecting a certain class of real objects can signify in speech an object of reality that is not implied by that class of objects the word stands for in a language: **D≉D$_1$**, therefore in such cases significatum or a word does not equal to concrete denotatum: **S≉D$_1$**. Before illustrating this phenomenon by an example we have to note that the imbalance between the two denotatums results in great changes in the concept of a word i. e. in significatum that could be proved by componential analysis.

3   Componential Analysis of a Word

A popular method of componential analysis permitted linguists to decompose a significatum of a word into semas i. e. minimal units of meaning that have different semantic weight. Decomposition of the meaning of a word into semas goes back to Michael Breal and his famous book "Essai de semantique" (Breal 1883). Linguists realized the perspective of uncovering the mechanism of word relations in speech that seemed very obscure before.

Nowadays we may compare this process with the decomposition of an atomic nucleus, especially when it encourages new waves of research.

Semas of maximum weight create the kernel of the meaning. The other semas are of less weight and surround the kernel as secondary features. Graphically we may present it in the following way (see figure 2).
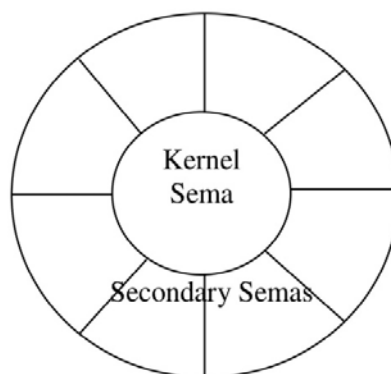

Figure 2: Kernel structure of a word.

If a word is used in occasional meaning, we observe decomposition of the meaning, actually of its concept into different semas where under the influence of context they are newly rearranged creating a new kernel surrounded by new secondary semas.

Describing a struggle of dawn with night, the American poetess Amy Lowell attributes the word "sun" by an unusual word "tiger", thus creating an occasional word-combination "the tiger sun":

Night Clouds

The white mares of the moon
 rush along the sky
Beating their golden hoofs
upon the glass Heavens;
The white mares of the moon are all standing
 on their hind legs
Pawing at the green porcelain doors
of the remote Heavens.
Fly, mares!
Strain your utmost,
Scatter the milky dust of stars,
Or the tiger sun will leap upon you
and destroy you
With one lick of his vermillion tongue.

From the point of view of language as a system the noun "sun" comprises the leading lexical sema "the luminous celestial body, around which the earth and other planets revolve, from which they receive heat and light". This sema can be presented as a kernel sema that is surrounded by a number of different secondary semas, such as of colour: "golden", "yellow", "red", etc., temporal semas: "winter", "spring", "summer", "autumn", or "dawn", "morning", "afternoon", "of sunset", "twilight" etc. Among secondary semas are many others, such as "bright", "powerful", "destructive", "active", etc (see figure 3).
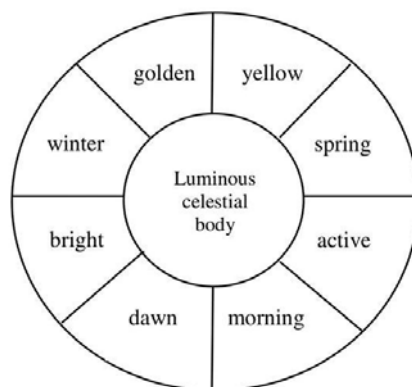

Figure 3: Kernel Structure of the word "sun".

The presence of secondary semas certainly implies the increase of their relevance in active speech and leads to their transformation from the surrounding into the kernel of the lexical meaning. The noun "sun" in usual word-combinations can be attributed by a number of words, the lexical meaning of which correspond to the aforementioned secondary semas such as "golden", "hot", "warm", "strong",

"powerful", "destructive", "active", etc. Secondary semas, that become relevant in the speech, enlarge the kernel of the lexical meaning, but the latter appears to be more concrete and precise, e.g. "hot summer sun", "cold winter sun", etc. This is the way in which usual word-combinations are created and realized in speech.

But in contrast to the aforementioned we have an unusual combination of words in "the tiger sun". It is clear that in the poem "Night Clouds" the poetess strives to express the destructive power of the rising sun towards the night clouds, trying at the same time to depict the colourful scene of that mysterious change in nature. And this is done artistically in the most unexpected way (that is characteristic for poetry) by choosing the word "tiger" as an attribute to "the sun".

What is the basis for their connection? The significatum of "tiger" comprises the whole number of qualities that are to characterise the rising sun, but in a very compact, laconic and artistic way. Unexpected contrast adds to the impressive power of the newly created word-combination. From the point of view of language as a system the lexical meaning of the noun "tiger" comprises the following kernel sema: "a large Asiatic carnivorous mammal of the cat family having a tawny coat transversely striped with black". The kernel of the meaning is surrounded by a number of secondary semas, such as "wild", "fierce", "active", "destructive", etc (see figure 4). In the word-combination "the tiger sun" the noun "tiger" does not designate an animal, but is meant to designate certain characteristic features of the sun such as "strong", "active", "destructive", etc. These semas appear to be common both for "tiger" and "the sun" that leads to their actualization in the kernels of the meanings of these words.
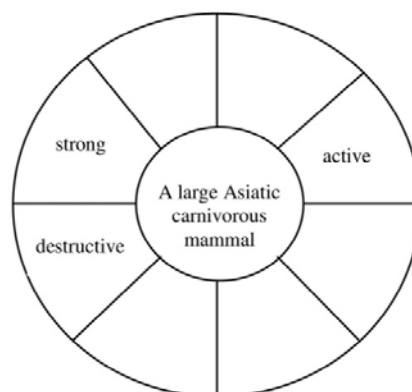

Figure 4: Kernel structure of the word "tiger".

Due to the change of the meaning of "tiger" we observe changes in its significatum, namely when its kernel sema is substituted by secondary semas creating the new kernel of a newly formed meaning.

But what happens to the former kernel sema of "a large Asiatic carnivorous mammal of the cat family"?

An imaginary presence of a tiger as of an animal is easily proved by the further development of metaphors: "the tiger sun will leap upon you" and "with one lick of his vermillion tongue". "Vermillion tongue" on the one hand adds to the image of the animal but on the other hand – to the colour of the rising sun.

The above presented was never intended to introduce the method of componential analysis to lexicographers and linguists who have been familiar with it since its establishment but we considered it necessary to illustrate what happens to the meaning of a word when its usage is occasional. In order to answer the question we applied to the fundamental findings of human physiology.

4   A Word as a Second Signal System

According to I. P. Pavlov's theory on two signal systems (Павлов 1949: 163; Pavlov 1940-49), a word represents a second signal system that has great power of generalisation and abstraction. The first signal system implies all that we have in the form of impressions, feelings and ideas that we receive from the outer world besides the words that we hear or see.

A word as the second signal system represents a signal of the first signal system or "the signal's signal", that forms our additional and particularly human advanced reasoning. Due to the latter or the second signal system, a human being differs from an animal. The first and second signal systems are indivisible and the excitation of the first signal system that is caused by signals of objects and phenomena of the outer world passes on to the second signal system. Knowing this we put further questions for discussion:

What kind of changes do we observe when the first signal system is transformed into a word?

Is a word the result of abstract reasoning only, the final product of which is a concept?

Can our knowledge on an object or phenomenon, as that reflected in a word, be equated to the concept of that word?

Human consciousness exists beyond the concept of a word and makes the word concretely real and emotionally charged in certain instances of speech. I. P. Pavlov was certainly bound to acknowledge the sensuous aspect of a word when noting: "If you want to use a word, every time imply the reality beyond the word" (Павлов 1949: 163).

Can a word in speech realize any kind of relation to sensuous impressions? The latter implies the imprints of audio, visual or other kinaesthetic impressions that each person receives from the outer world during the process of sensuous cognition of the world.

As observed, an imprint of sensuous impressions is constantly present in each word as a kind of standard. Otherwise we would never control what kind of reality could be meant by the use of this or that word that is unimaginable from the point of view of language as a social phenomenon. The objective nature of that sensuous imprint in each word certainly implies the presence of a subjective factor that, as a result of individual perception is permanently characteristic for the author of the speech on the one hand and its receiver (receptor) on the other.

In contrast to animals, in human speech the "imprint" belongs to the first signal system and takes part in the formation of a word as a second signal system. For living systems of high organization, the meaning of a signal usually exists in the form of an ideal image, by means of which only the reflected object is presented as a real one.

In gnosiology image is a fundamental category and is used in connection with sensuous reflection and abstract thinking as well. Sensuous and conceptual images differ according to the level of reflection – sensuous or conceptual.

The presence of a **conceptual image** in a word is beyond doubt. As for a **sensuous image** in a word, it is obvious that its presence is felt but intuitively only. The fact that a referent was placed in the semantic triangle as its constituent part by Ogden and Richards, confirms the aforementioned and therefore calls for its acknowledgement.

5   A linguistic Image and a New Semantic Triangle

The above presented sensuous image existing in a word I offer to regard as a **linguistic image**.

The co-existence of a linguistic image and a significatum as a conceptual image within the limits of one word is a precondition of creating a word as a linguistic, social or psychological phenomenon.

Linguistic image and significatum (concept) are always dialectically connected with each other in as far as they represent results of reflecting one and the same object of reality within one word.

The acknowledgment of a linguistic image in a word permits us to present the meaning of a word as a correlation of three main components:

sound form of a word or its nomination;

significatum or concept;

linguistic image.

Graphically, we present this correlation again in the form of a triangle, where "**I**" - indicates "image", "**N**" – "nomination" and "**S**" – "significatum" (see figure 5).
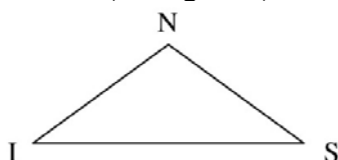

Figure 5: Semantic triangle offered by Innes Merabishvili.

A further study of the points of the presented triangle permits to say that specific weight of each unit depends upon the usage of a word. In neutral speech significatum is the leader but it may enlarge its informative capacity in artistic speech (text). In artistic speech nomination may acquire additional emphasis due to alliteration, sound symbolism, etc., when in special cases nomination can become a leader. In artistic texts, especially when the words develop figural meanings, informative capacity of a linguistic image is enlarged and it becomes the leader. In ordinary speech its presence is imperceptible and unostentatious. In language as a system a linguistic image is as if in deep slumber on the bottom, but is reincarnated in the hands of a wordsmith. No wonder Baudelaire called poetry "a magic spell" (Якобсон 1987: 85) and A. Losev spoke about the magic nature of a word in his "Philosophy of Name" (Лосев 1993: 627).

The article argues that magic power of a word, its being an inexhaustible source of influence and flexible informative capacity is due to the existence of a linguistic image enclosed in every word of a language as a system.

It is a word with all three points that reflects general denotatum (D) but in speech (text) it refers to a concrete denotatum (D_1) i. e. a referent that is an object of extralinguistic reality (see figure 6).
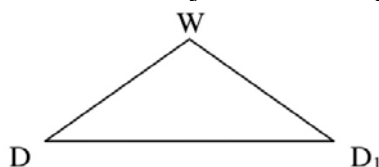

Figure 6: A semantic triangle of the word's connection with extralinguistic reality.

We express hope that lexicography may invite and register more cases of figurative meanings of words especially those that were developed from their occasional usage. On the other hand it is a dictionary with its articles and precise definition on a word that permits us to discuss the meaning of a word and develop our scholarly analyses.

6   The Importance of Distinguishing a Linguistic Image for Text Linguistics and Translatology

6.1   Image Bearing Stratum of Text Content

Textlinguistics offers a vast scope for analysing content of any text with subsequent differentiation of this category. We agree with I. R. Galperin who distinguishes three main levels of text content: factual, conceptual and subtextual (Гальперин 1981). The first two strata are characteristic for any written text, but the third one, subtextual level, for literary texts mainly. All of them are equally significant but differ according to the complicacy of interpretation. In this aspect we have to mark the subtextual information. This is the most hidden stratum of content and is disclosed only be means of a special literary skill and keen artistic flair of the reader. The disclosure of a linguistic image in the meaning of a word permitted to argue that an artistic text is endowed with an image bearing stratum of content.

6.2   Linguistic Image in Translating Activities

The afore-presented study of the meaning of a word appears to be of great importance in translated matters especially when translating literary texts and poetry that frequently abound with occasional word-combination.

Translation of poetry as well as of any literary text involves at least two necessary stages, textual interpretation and its artistic realization in a different language.

When creating an occasional word-combination or using a word with a new accidental meaning a poet intuitively makes emphasis on a linguistic image of a word that together with its conceptual image creates a new artistic meaning. Regretfully translators in most cases neglect linguistic images and translate occasional word-combinations through conceptual images only, in other words, in target language a translator chooses a word in which the corresponding conceptual image is prevailing i. e. a translator avoids to render the created contextual meaning by using corresponding direct meanings of words (examples are presented below).

Actualization of linguistic images is especially characteristic of the twentieth century poetry. At the outset of the twentieth century the modern poet faced the problem of giving expression to the upheavals caused by technical and political revolutions. The distorted and convoluted images of the avant-garde became fashionable and accepted; poets and artists sought new symbols and fantastical images to express their heightened vision of their worlds. The French and European avant-garde – Expressionism, Cubism, Dada, Suprematism and Surrealism – took their place in the imagination of poets and artists with the inevitable and complex changes required in style and expression.

Among the Georgian poets of that period who is distinguished for avant-garde writing was Galaktion Tabidze (1891-1959). Though he never became a follower of any of the contemporary movements, he had mastered the finest traditions of his native poetry to give new life to Georgian verse and, thus, to establish a new style in verse that, in reality, meant the creation of a new poetics and a new poetical form. Though his enigmatic expressions resist easy analysis and explanation, his poetry has always caused infectious emotions and has found a ready response among his readers, but not translators. Actually, with very rare exceptions, there developed an opinion that his poetry was untranslatable.

When translating Galaktion Tabidze I tried to maintain artistic images of his lines as those based on linguistic images of words. E. g. when the poet says "ვარდთა დიოდა ნელი სურნელი", that in verbatim translation means "roses smelt with slow fragrance", in one of the Russian translations was rendered as "нежный запах роз", that actually means "tender odour of roses". Here we offer a stanza comprising the above presented poetic line in my translated version:

Dome of the church and walls on fire,
Slow fragrance of roses was spread,
Prayer of women, hopeful and tired,
Sounded but desperate and mad (Tabidze 2011: 59).

We developed the same attitude when translating Galaktion's line „სტიროდა სული ცისფერ დვინოებს" from a poem of the same title:

გალაკტიონ ტაბიძე

სტიროდა სული ცისფერ ღვინოებს

სტიროდა სული ცისფერ ღვინოებს,
ღვინო ეძებდა სულ სხვას პირიქით
და შემდეგ უცნობ პიანინოებს
ატრიალებდა ტანჯვის ლირიკით.

როგორც მრავალი ვარდების მფენი,
მას სული ჰქონდა უხვად ციური,
მასში მრავალი იყო შოპენი
და პაგანინი ფანტასტიური.

მას საქართველომ გადაუზნიქა
ვერხვები შორი ალაზანისა
და აი, ეხლა მისი მუსიკა
ჩვენი ისლების რხევამ დანისლა.

მშვენიერია ეფექტი მისი
იქ, სადაც სიტყვა თავდება ძველი,
ოდეს თავისი და არა სხვისი
ცრემლებით თვალი უბრწყინავს სველი.

Galaktion Tabidze

The Soul Wept Out With Light Blue Wines

The soul wept out with light blue wines,
But wine then searched for someone else
And whirled the piano keys meanwhile
With lyric of tormenting tense.

With gift of spreading blooming roses
The soul was full of Heaven's spell,
Contained it much of Chopin's music
And Paganini's fancy realm.

Tall aspen trees of Alazani[1]
By Georgia bent low for man's fame,
Its music then, all of a sudden,

---

[1] *Alazani* – river running in the East of Georgia.

Got misty through our Carex waves.

Effect is fine and overwhelming,
Plain words are over, worn and old,
And eyes in tears, gently melting,
Are sparkling wet but never cold (Tabidze 2011: 96-97).

Here I present the semantic analysis of the above noted line to illustrate the choice of translating it with corresponding words used in direct meaning: "The soul wept out with light blue wines". The most unusual point about this line is the word combination "light blue wines" in so far as wine is normally used to imply either a dark red colour or the light colour of grapes, but never blue or light blue. The leading lexical sema of the noun "wine" is "an alcoholic drink made from grapes or other fruits". Next to the leading sema we find other semas of the lexical meaning such as "getting drunk", "frank", "brave", "lacking precaution", "illogical", "elated", etc., to say nothing of the semas of colour. On the other hand the adjective "light blue" comprises such semas as "resembling heaven", "heavenly", "unearthly", "pure", "clear", and so on. All the above-mentioned semas of "light blue" might be attributed to fit the secondary lexical semas of the noun "wine", thus converting the direct meaning of the word into the figural meaning of "high spiritual condition". Therefore the combination of "soul" with "light blue wines" through the verb "to weep" seems less unusual.

7   Conclusion

We argue, that a word with its meaning is a linguistic phenomenon but a referent as an object of reality the word refers to in speech or text is always extralinguistic.

The acknowledgment of a linguistic image in a word permits us to present the meaning of a word as a correlation of three main components: sound form of a word or its nomination, significatum or concept and linguistic image.

The disclosure of a linguistic image in the meaning of a word permits to argue that an artistic text is endowed with an image bearing stratum of content alongside with factual, conceptual and subtextual strata distinguished by I. R. Galperin.

The afore-presented study of the meaning of a word appears to be of great importance in translated matters especially when translating literary texts and poetry that frequently abound with occasional word-combination.

The presented analysis of the meaning of a word against the background of lexicography encourages to draw a conclusion that linguistics and lexicography as two scholarly disciplines are firmly interwoven.

It is the dictionary definition that enables us to perceive a word and its usage to treasure the most valuable property of a man – a word, that does miracles in human life and relations.

New English-Russian Dictionary in two volumes, edited by Professor I. R. Galperin was published in Moscow in 1972. I had a good fortune to be his PhD student in stylistics and textlinguistics. Therefore I could also witness his creative work as of a lexicographer. The introduction to the volumes by Professor I. R. Galperin opens with a poem by Samuel Marshak (1887-1964), I. R. Galperin's friend, a well known poet, literary critic and a translator, to confirm the attitude we share towards a dictionary:

Самуил Маршак
Словарь

Усердней с каждым днем гляжу в словарь.
В его столбцах мерцают искры чувства.

В подвалы слов не раз сойдет искусство,
Держа в руке свой потайной фонарь.

На всех словах – события печать,
Они дались не даром человеку.
Читаю: «Век. От века. Вековать.
Век доживать. Бог сыну не дал веку.

Век заедать, век заживать чужой…»
В словах звучит укор, и гнев, и совесть.
Нет, не словарь лежит передо мной,
А древняя рассыпанная повесть.

Samuel Marshak
Dictionary

I probe the dictionary deeper every day.
Beneath its columns sparks of feeling gleam.
Within its wordy vaults art gropes its way,
With secret torch flicks on its frequent beam.

Upon each word events have stamped their gauge.
And not for naught words yielded man reply.
I read: "An age. Of ages. Last an age.
Reach ripe old age. Too young an age to die.

A ruthless age, an age of tooth and nail."
In words ring blame and rage, and conscience cries.
No, not a dictionary page before me lies,
It is an ancient fragmentary tale.

Translated by Walter May

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