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DEFINING MEANINGS IN HISTORICAL DICTIONARIES

The Case of the Electronic Dictionary of the 17th- and 18th-Century Polish

Abstract This article addresses a crucial topic in lexicography and metalexicography, namely the challenge of defining meanings in historical dictionaries. Its aim is to present an overview of the criteria for crafting effective definitions by semanticists, logicians, and lexicographers, primarily tailored to meet the demands of contemporary dictionaries, to apply these principles to an academic historical dictionary of the Polish language and to assess the feasibility and justification of their implementation. The analysis encompasses: a) types of dictionary definitions; b) fundamental tenets of effective definitions, such as adequacy, substitutability, translatability, and analyticity; c) common pitfalls in the formulation of definitions (inadequate definitions – overly broad or narrow definitions, direct or indirect circular definitions, *ignotum per ignotius*); and d) the lexicographer's perspective, including the linguistic versus encyclopedic nature of definitions, the quandary of categorization (taxonomy) and valuation. The basis for the analysis is the *Electronic Dictionary of the 17th- and 18th-Century Polish*. The theory of definitions and its practical implementation in this dictionary are discussed. References are also made to other Polish historical-philological lexicons to elucidate comparable challenges and facilitate generalization.

Keywords lexicography; historical metalexicography; definition; historical dictionary; Polish

1. Historical Dictionaries and Their Characteristics

Historical dictionaries constitute a lexicographical endeavor that often exist on the periphery of contemporary metalexicographic discourse, likely for a very simple reason. Decisions to embark upon such an extensive project are infrequent, and the labor involved is both protracted and arduous. Historical dictionaries, extensive and paramount in their purview, typically evolve over decades. While bearing witness to emerging scholarly paradigms, they tend to assimilate these trends belatedly and with diminished impact. The pre-established conceptual framework obliges successive contributors to consistently adhere to the original guidelines to ensure the project's completion within the initially envisioned scope. While digital technologies have facilitated certain, sometimes automated, revisions in electronic dictionaries, the principal nature of lexicons cannot be subjected to fundamental changes.

The identification of specific characteristics and defining elements of historical dictionaries is significant, as it informs their structure and helps establish expectations for their content. These features may not always be immediately apparent due to their diversity and heterogeneity (Bielińska, 2020, pp. 318–321). Given the existence of numerous publications

titled ‘Historical Dictionary of [specific subject]’, such as *Historical Dictionary of Baroque Art and Architecture*, *Historical Dictionary of the Republic of Cameroon*, or *Historical Dictionary of Polish Cinema*, which *de facto* serve as lexicons documenting non-linguistic phenomena, it is imperative to clarify that this analysis focuses on a dictionary whose primary task is to describe linguistic facts.¹ Tentatively categorized as ‘historical-philological’, it distinguishes itself from historic dictionaries compiled in previous centuries.²

Based on criteria envisioned by various typologies (increasingly multifaceted and integrated, nowadays also because of digital technologies),³ a dictionary of this nature can be classified as scholarly, academic, general, monolingual, explanatory, documentary, or intended for professionals, notably qualified linguists, philologists or historians. Unlike commercial publications,⁴ it remains largely unaffected by publisher pressures (particularly when developed in electronic format), market dynamics,⁵ and is typically established under the auspices of the Academy of Sciences. What constitutes an essential aspect of metalexigraphic discourse is the user. Dictionaries are designed with users’ needs in mind, and significant emphasis is placed on ensuring their alignment with users’ capabilities.⁶ Nevertheless, as the authors of a well-known textbook observe, “This doesn’t imply a superficial concern with ‘user-friendliness’, but arises from our conviction that the content and design of every aspect of a dictionary must, centrally, take account of who the users will be and what they will use the dictionary for” (Atkins & Rundell, 2008, p. 5). In the context of a scholarly dictionary, the question remains whether its task is to be faithful to the theory or to the reader.

In discussing the purpose of scholarly dictionaries, Żmigrodzki (2003, p. 231) considers the “documentation of the linguistic material covered” and the concentration on “recording linguistic facts” their “primary function.” While historical dictionaries compiled, for example, in the 19th and 20th centuries prioritised the acquisition of material, which then had to be recorded and described, contemporary advancements in terms of access to sources through text corpora and digital libraries could potentially shift focus away from the processes of material collection and recording, which can now

¹ While Zgusta (1971, p. 199) argues that “It must also be remembered that the division of dictionaries into encyclopedic and linguistic ones is not necessarily an either-or matter,” Grochowski (2004, p. 9) presents a different approach.

² Although their definitions seem to differ slightly from those adopted in this article, Hartmann & James (2002, p. 68) also make a distinction between a ‘historical dictionary’ and a ‘historic dictionary’.

³ Aware of their complexity, Podhajecka (2009) offers a synthesis of many of these criteria.

⁴ “For all but scholarly or historical dictionaries, market forces come into play here: the new work will have to sell against existing dictionaries produced by competitor publishers” (Atkins & Rundell, 2008, p. 18).

⁵ “(...) there are two main types. The first is the scholarly and historical dictionary, a work often with few length constraints, and sometimes little pressure to complete within a specific time period – but also with a tendency to run out of money around letter C, or take 50 years to get there” (Atkins & Rundell, 2008, p. 31). It must be acknowledged that, unfortunately, there is a significant amount of truth in this somewhat blunt summary.

⁶ Given certain similarities to bilingual dictionaries, we could draw on the experiences of specialised and pedagogical dictionaries, whose authors distinguish various categories of users, such as laymen, semi-experts and experts (Bergenholtz & Tarp, 1995, p. 19). However, it is important to note that no contemporary editor can ever be a full expert in historical Polish.

be partially automated, to those of material description and semantic interpretation that could be further developed methodologically due to the advancement of theory. As Zgusta (1971, p. 201) says: “In a historical dictionary, the semantic developments are at least as important as those of the form of the word.” Given that historical-philological dictionaries are scholarly dictionary prototypes, it is expected that their definitions should adhere to academic standards. The feasibility of this expectation is explored below.

2. Defining Meanings in Historical-Philological Dictionaries

The formulation of definitions is considered one of the most difficult and also most creative stages of lexicographers’ work. There are many types of definitions, derived from diverse methodologies and perspectives on the world and language.⁷ Polish general lexicography has been dominated by the model proposed by Doroszewski (1958–1969) in his *Dictionary of Polish*. He delineated the ‘real-meaning’ definition, the structural-semantic definition, the scope definition, the synonymic definition, and the grammatical definition (Doroszewski, 1968). This model, along with the subsequent commentaries and discussions (e.g., Bartmiński, 1988; Bogusławski, 1988; Grochowski, 1988; Bańko, 2001; Piotrowski, 2001), has served as a reference point for all dictionaries, except for the COBUILD-inspired *Inny słownik języka polskiego* (‘A Different Dictionary of Polish’) edited by Mirosław Bańko, which features context-induced definitions.

Semanticists, logicians, and lexicographers specify the principles of effective (classical) definitions, such as adequacy, substitutability, translatability, and analyticity (employing semantically simpler elements in the *definiens* in relation to the *definiendum*). Additionally, they address fundamental errors in definitions, including definition inadequacy manifested by overly broad or narrow definitions, direct or indirect circular definitions, and the fallacy of explaining the unknown by the unknown (*ignotum per ignotius*). These guidelines are collected and discussed, *inter alia*, by Żmigrodzki, who as the editor of *Wielki Słownik Języka Polskiego Polskiej Akademii Nauk* (‘Polish Academy of Sciences Great Dictionary of Polish’; hereinafter: WSJP PAN), directly refers to the possible implementation of the semantic findings in the modern general dictionary, trying to apply them in practice.⁸

⁷ For example, see Svensen (2009, pp. 205–252).

⁸ In the *Principles for the preparation of WSJP PAN*, Żmigrodzki (2022, p. 30) says: “One of the recurring criticisms directed at the authors of subsequent dictionaries of Polish is the inconsistency of their definitions with specific semantic description proposals for respective linguistic units outlined in scholarly publications dedicated to lexical semantics. When embarking on the development of WSJP PAN, our aim was to address this issue and leverage the advancements of modern semantics to a greater extent than previously attempted. However, it must be acknowledged that this endeavour was not entirely successful. There are two primary reasons for this: firstly, the rather hermetic metalanguage of the definitions, rendering their straightforward integration into WSJP PAN impossible (the dictionary is intended for a broad audience); and secondly, the relatively limited availability and scope, compared to the planned number of entries in WSJP PAN, of units featuring descriptions (mainly abstract vocabulary and so-called functional expressions). Consequently, even if it were possible to adapt the scholarly explications to meet the requirements of the dictionary, a substantial portion of entries would necessitate the addition of such descriptions, or alternative methods of definition would have to be employed.” For more information on attempts to implement semantic theories into dictionaries, see also Żmigrodzki (2003, pp. 34–41) and Żmigrodzki (2008).

Svensen (2009, p. 205) states that “The purpose of the monolingual dictionary is to describe and explain the meaning and use of lexical items in one language by means of that language itself. The meaning of a certain object-language item is thus specified by means of one or more items belonging to the same language.” It is important to note that old language dictionaries encompass lexis from the ‘different world’, a bygone era. They often include terms that reflect concepts or contexts unfamiliar to contemporary users, which is why they are sometimes referred to as ‘peculiarly bilingual’ (Gruszczyński et al., 2018, p. 231). When preparing contemporary language dictionaries for native or non-native speakers, lexicographers have access to ample material and can rely on their own linguistic competence and knowledge to identify and describe the definitional and connotative features of entry words. However, when working on old language dictionaries, challenges emerge due to the limited availability of source material and the lack of the linguistic expertise required to provide comprehensive definitions with absolute certainty. Given a limited number of extant source texts, lexicographers are unable to create diagnostic contexts or conduct contradiction tests (Gruszczyński et al., 2018, p. 230). Moreover, crafting context-induced definitions poses significant risks due to the need for the partial reconstruction of meanings. Authors of definitions may rely on their scholarly intuition; however, a complete cultural and linguistic immersion is unattainable. While a linguistic competence can be developed to a certain level, its accuracy remains unverifiable. This raises questions regarding the practical implementation of methodological principles when compiling a historical dictionary. Which of them can be applied and to what extent?

In addition to typical theoretical and practical challenges faced by lexicographers, a shift is observed (at various levels, e.g., at the chronological one) in the descriptive layer with regards to the material described. It has significant implications, theoretically rendering the implementation of certain conditions for a good definition impossible. For instance, the 21st-century text layer of a contemporary definition would be incomprehensible and thus fraught with multiple logical errors to 17th-century language users. Moreover, achieving a semantic balance between the *definiendum* and the *definiens* to ensure that both are equivalent and thus substitutable, sometimes requires adding a pragmatic comment to the *definiens* (for example, the dictionary title specifies the chronological scope and thus acts as the label ‘17th and 18th century’). These observations lead to the conclusion that, logically, the *ignotum per ignotius* argument necessitates a distinct embrace of a modern perspective and a precise delineation with regards to what something is unknown or semantically simpler. Contemporary researchers lack full access to the semantic structure of old language. Compliance with the analyticity requirement poses a challenge, as it is difficult to determine whether contemporary lexical units are semantically simpler than their old counterparts.

Another issue that warrants attention is whether the definition of the entry word *czerwony* (‘red’) in *Słownik polszczyzny XVI wieku* (‘Dictionary of the 16th-century Polish Language’, hereinafter: SPXVI), described as ‘*mający barwę czerwoną lub zbliżoną do czerwonej*’ (‘having a color that is red or close to red’), should be regarded as an *idem per idem* error or a circular definition, or, similarly to the *ignotum per ignotius*, this rule should perhaps also be suspended due to the said temporal (and

stylistic) shift in the descriptive layer relative to what is described. Such changes may be observed in various aspects, such as categorisation (the addition of a hypernym that may not have existed or may have differed at the time, as evidenced by the shifts in the meaning of the word *sprzet* ('equipment')), taxonomy (terms classified as 'a fish' in the 17th century could be reclassified as 'a reptile' in the 20th century or perhaps as something else entirely in the 21st century), and attribution of value/valuation (e.g., what and for whom constituted heresy). Our knowledge of the world is not the same as that of our predecessors; old meanings and connotations do not resonate the way their modern counterparts do today. There is a risk of anachronism when historical material is described from the perspective of a modern person whose perception of the world is influenced by contemporary scholarly categories and therefore differs from that of 17th- and 18th-century Polish language users.

This leads us to the question, frequently raised not only with regards to old language dictionaries, whether it is necessary to include definitions of words such as *matka* ('mother'), *krew* ('blood') or *mleko* ('milk'). Will contemporary language users seek definitions of these terms, for example, in SPXVI, or will they be more interested in information on how their meanings have changed compared to contemporary usage? The absence of a definition and the inclusion of context references only, sometimes seen in dictionaries, could indicate that the meaning of a given entry word overlaps with how it is understood today. Perhaps definitions of such terms could be 'outsourced' from a modern academic dictionary provided that it could be done systematically and upon authors' consent. Yet, this solution might not fully satisfy the editors of the definitions. A viable alternative could be to generate a database of dictionaries (and dictionary definitions) that would provide all definitions of a selected (standardised) entry word from numerous philological dictionaries, from Old Polish to Modern Polish, and allow to display them simultaneously for semantic comparison purposes. Currently, work is underway on the first database of this type in Poland – perhaps *Baza Historycznych Leksykonów Polskich BazHiLek* ('BazHiLek Database of Historical Polish Lexicons') could serve as a starting point for similar experiments.⁹

A review of the introductions or dictionary instructions of Polish historical-philological dictionaries – *Słownik staropolski* ('Old Polish Dictionary'), SPXVI and *Słownik języka polskiego XVII i 1. połowy XVIII wieku* ('Dictionary of the 17th-century and First Half of the 18th-century Polish'; hereinafter: SXVII) – conducted to assess their authors' declared adherence to semantic developments and their incorporation into the dictionary entries, reveals a primary focus on practical aspects. However, one must bear in mind that the concepts of these dictionaries were developed several decades ago, some as early as in the 19th century, making expectations of contemporary theory references not always justified. An example of an attempt to incorporate them into a historical-philological dictionary is *Elektroniczny Słownik Języka Polskiego XVII i XVIII wieku* ('Electronic Dictionary of the 17th- and 18th-century Polish').

⁹ The coordinating institution of the project is the Institute of the Polish Language of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

3. The Electronic Dictionary of the 17th- and 18th-Century Polish: Specific Problems and Solutions

The *Electronic Dictionary of the 17th- and 18th-Century Polish* (hereinafter: e-SXVII) offers a relatively robust theoretical framework for semantic description. This finding is unsurprising, given the editor and the recent development of the dictionary instructions (hereinafter: *Instructions*). Consequently, the editors of the *Instructions* (Gruszczyński & Adamiec, 2022) not only aimed to incorporate theoretical principles into the fundamentals of lexicographic descriptions but also had an opportunity to align with contemporary advancements in semantics. In Chapter 9, *Semantic Information*, the editors address key issues related to defining entries in the dictionary.¹⁰ They discuss the language, nature and types of definitions, the issue of authors' worldviews and specific problems regarding entry word descriptions by parts of speech.

Regarding the language of definitions, the editors argue that definitions should be formulated in contemporary Polish. They caution against the use of words not present in today's language to elucidate the meanings of lexical archaisms. This is why, for example, *angulowy* ('angular') is defined as '*tworzący kąt*' ('angle forming') rather than '*tworzący anguł*' ('angulus forming'¹¹). Authors of entries should prepare their definitions based on source contexts in which forms of the characterised lexical unit appear, while also drawing on their knowledge of history (culture and politics), historical-linguistic expertise and information from other historical-philological dictionaries (such as *Old Polish Dictionary* and SPXVI) (Section 9.3 of the *Instructions*).

There are two primary types of definitions: semantic and functional (Section 9.4). The most basic and frequently utilised form of semantic (objective) definitions is an analytic definition, wherein the *definiens* is a phrase composed of elements simpler than the *definiendum*. Based on this principle, it should be possible to substitute the unit constituting the *definiendum* with a sequence that is its *definiens*, without compromising the semantic correctness of the text (Section 9.4.1). Definitions of this type start with a hypernym followed by features distinguishing a given class. Sometimes, only a hypernym can be indicated when information about the meaning of the term is insufficient. Alternatively, a synonymic 'definition' may be employed, particularly for lexical archaisms where it is sufficient to provide the modern equivalent or equivalents like in *angul* ('angulus') – '1. mat. "kąt"' ('1. math. "angle"'). A combination of objective and synonymic definitions is also used. Semantic definitions must meet the translatability criterion.

¹⁰ Selected information is presented by quoting or paraphrasing excerpts from the *Instructions*.

¹¹ However, there are instances where 17th-century words not used in contemporary Polish become necessary, particularly when defining words derived from the names of designates that no longer exist (substantive archaisms), e.g., *arkabuzer* ('harquebusier'), *arkabuzerski* ('related to harquebus'), *arkabuźnik* ('harquebusier'). In such cases, definitions containing 17th-century words must follow a special formula to ensure that readers do not mistakenly assume that these words should be part of their (even passive) vocabulary (Section 9.2).

Scope definitions (Section 9.4.1.1.) indicate that the entry word pertains only to a limited range of referents, as exemplified by:

bąkać ('to hum'):

1. 'o owadach: *brzęczeć, bzyczeć*' ('of insects: to buzz, to emit a low, continuous droning sound');
2. 'o człowieku: *mówić cicho, szeptać*' ('of people: to utter an indistinct sound, to speak quietly, to hem');
3. 'o człowieku: *wolać, krzyczeć; także z radości*' ('of people: to call out, to shout also out of joy');
4. 'o ssakach: *wydawać donośny głos, ryczeć*' ('of mammals: to make a loud noise, to roar').

Functional definitions are metalinguistic in nature and do not adhere to the principle of translatability. They commonly refer to the grammatical features (grammatical definitions) or pragmatic features (pragmatic definitions) of the defined term, such as surnames, dog names or village names (Section 9.4.2).

The editors of e-SXVII emphasise their principle of avoiding encyclopaedic definitions. Definitions should focus on describing the properties of linguistic expressions rather than the characteristics of their referents. While elements of encyclopaedic knowledge are permissible and sometimes even necessary when defining historical terms (historisms), they can be included in the 'Additional Information' field (Section 9.4.1.2). The authors also address the issue of evaluation and worldviews in definitions, arguing that

Definitions of meanings should not be formulated from the point of view of the editor's system of values. In the case of e-SXVII, the most significant "risk" arises when defining terms related to religion. Definitions must not absolutise the concepts to which the defined lexical units refer. Instead, scope definitions such as "in Christianity" or "in Islam" should be used (Section 9.7).

The subsequent section of the *Instructions* (Section 9.8) delves into the specifics of defining various parts of speech. They outline specific formulas for defining nouns, such as agent nouns, proper nouns, feminine nouns, natural names, nouns describing nature and names of measures. The latter category is elaborated upon:

The following guidelines were accepted to standardise the definitions in entries pertaining to measures: the term "measure" (rather than "unit" or "measurement unit") is used in definitions with the information what it refers to – length, volume or mass (rather than "weight"); if it is possible or necessary, additional context is provided regarding the purpose of the measure, such as a volume measure for loose solids, a

volume measure for liquids or a mass measure used by pharmacists. Additionally, if possible, a conversion to modern measurement units should be offered; for example, see the definition of the term *funt* ('a pound') – '*miara masy o zróżnicowanej lokalnie wielkości równa 2 grzywnom, czyli 32 lutom; zwykle pomiędzy 0,4 a 0,5 kilograma*' ('a mass measure of locally varying magnitude, equal to 2 *grzywnas* or 32 lots; typically, between 0.4 and 0.5 kilogram') (Section 9.8.1).

In definitions of botanical terms,

we focus on the essential (particularly regarding the Baroque reality) characteristics of the described plant. We include information on its use if such knowledge is available based on source texts. Encyclopaedic knowledge and plant taxonomy descriptions are avoided. For example, [...] the definition of the term *dąb* ('oak') will be '*duże, rozłożyste drzewo liściaste o twardym drewnie, Quercus*' ('a large, spreading hardwood deciduous tree, *Quercus*') rather than '*Quercus Robur (Rost); drzewo z rodziny bukowatych (Fagaceae)*' ('*Quercus Robur (Rost)*; a tree in the beech family (*Fagaceae*') (an encyclopaedic definition) or '*rodzaj drzewa liściastego*' ('a genus of deciduous tree') [...] (too general). We aim for a cognitive definition that also considers semantic connotations and non-scientific information which in our opinion could have been important to users of the 17th- and 18th-century Polish language. The contemporary Polish botanical name is provided at the end of the definition, after a comma (if it can be determined and is not identical with the entry word, as in the case of 'oak'), along with the Latin name (Section 9.8.4).

Importantly, the authors explicitly refer to cognitive definitions in terms of botanical names, while the names of primary colours are defined by means of prototypical objects associated with a specific color, e.g., *czerny* ('red') is defined as '*koloru krwi*' ('of the color of blood') (Section 9.9.4). This signals an expanded spectrum of definitions and methodologies in this historical dictionary compared to its predecessors. For example, see the excerpt on definitions in SXVII, whose section covering entry terms starting with letter 'A' was published before the dictionary was transformed into e-SXVII:

Various types of definitions are used depending on the requirements dictated by the material: explication definitions, e.g., *cyrkiel* ('compass') – '*przyrząd służący do kreślenia kół, do mierzenia powierzchni*' ('an instrument used for drawing circles and measuring surfaces'); structural and explication definitions in derivatives, e.g., *alembikowy* ('alembic') – '*dotyczący alembiku, będący częścią alembiku*' ('related to an alembic, a part of an alembic'); structural definitions in derivatives, typically in adjectival and adverbial entry words, and less frequently in noun entry words, e.g., *alabastrowy* ('alabaster') – '*przym. od "alabaster"*' ('adjective derived from [the noun] "alabaster"'); [...] scope definitions, e.g., *agitować, aitować* ('agitate') – '*o sprawach: poruszać, omawiać*' ('1. of matters: to move, to discuss'); translational definitions, e.g., *addycja* ('addition') – '*dodawanie*' ('summation') [...]. All types of definitions can be supplemented with synonyms, e.g., *absolucja* ('absolution') –

‘zwolnienie od kar kościelnych, rozgrzeszenie’ (‘exemption from church penalties, release, remission’). In some cases only synonyms are provided, e.g., *błyszczek* (‘trinket’) – ‘klejnot, błyskotka’ (‘an ornament, jewellery’) (SXVII, 1999–2004, p. XIV).

The dictionary analysed in this article, e-SXVII, might be the first Polish historical-philological lexicon whose *Instructions* refer to the theory of definition. While these instructions were developed based on practice, they also incorporate the knowledge of metalexigraphy. In view of certain insufficiencies in the structuralist paradigm highlighted by Gruszczyński, the dictionary opened to the inclusion of elements from other trends in semantics. A detailed discussion based on the material included in the dictionary may be found in his article (Gruszczyński et al., 2018).

4. Conclusions

Historical-philological dictionaries can be considered both fundamental and niche, but they are unique in many respects. According to Merkin (1983, p. 377), “The historical dictionary is therefore the most comprehensive type of scholarly academic dictionary, usually covering a national language with a long recorded history.” In their popular textbook on lexicography, *The Oxford Guide to Practical Lexicography*, Atkins & Rundell (2008, p. 121) highlight the specific character of these lexicons, by adding “except in the case of historical dictionaries” in most contexts relating to this type of works.

The fundamental question about the role of contemporary historical-philological dictionaries persists: Are they primarily intended to document and explain entry words, or also to help users decode their meanings (cf. Atkins & Rundell, 2008, p. 408), such as in the case of enthusiast of historical Polish writing novels or participating in reenactments? A plausible solution may entail crafting a smaller, popular dictionary, for example, a differential one that contains only meanings different from those used today, or an original dictionary of ‘false friends’ from the 17th and 18th centuries. However, it seems that what defines a dictionary as ‘academic’ is not hermetic definitions alone – especially since they are likely to be understood by an average educated user (e.g., e-SXVII complies with many ‘user-friendly’ requirements).

Views on the presence, role and shape of definitions in historical dictionaries are varied. For example, Atkins & Rundell (2008, p. 407) state: “It could be argued that definitions exist in order to catalogue the meanings in a language, and this is perhaps their chief function in a serious historical dictionary.” Conversely, Aitken (1971, p. 3) and Merkin (1983, p. 377), quoting the former author, believe that “the definitions and descriptive notes, which are also a normal feature of such dictionaries, may be regarded as fulfilling a somewhat secondary purpose, that of signposts or labels to the particular subset of quotations which follows” (similarly Żmigrodzki, 2003, p. 231). This shows that definitions may serve either a primary or secondary role.

Additionally, a concept articulated regarding another historical dictionary – *A Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* (DOST) – warrants consideration:

It is the quotations and not the definitions which carry the main burden of what the dictionary has to offer and are its primary concern. In effect, the dictionary is an alphabetically indexed and analysed collection of quotations, and in principle it should be possible for the user of the dictionary to work out for himself the word's semantic range, the chronological and regional distributions and so on, simply from the quotations and their arrangement without recourse to the definition at all' (Aitken, 1973, p. 6).

This raises questions not only about the role of definitions but also about that of lexicographers. Today, after years of employing text corpora for lexicographic purposes, it is well established that the approach of “all that is required is to feed a large historical corpus into a computer, press a button or click a mouse, and out comes the ready-made historical dictionary” (Pajz, 2000, p. 249) may not be sufficient. The mere accessibility of quotations does not equate to the reconstruction of meanings, and ordinary language users are often unable to deduce meanings despite having open access to extensive material.

The question arises whether the role of a definition in a historical dictionary should be reduced to merely serving as a label for a subset of quotations illustrating the same meaning, or whether it should resemble a classical scholarly definition or the reconstruction of what Apresjan refers to as ‘naïve worldview’. In our case, it would involve reconstructing the old worldview (with all due proportion), whereby the 17th- and 18th-century material would be approached like folk material and described from the perspective of language users from that era. These ideas are implemented in practice, for example, by *Słownik symboli i stereotypów ludowych* (‘Dictionary of Folk Stereotypes and Symbols’), where *wieloryb* (‘a whale’) is categorised as a fish (Bartmiński, 1988, p. 20). Perhaps a two-stage definition should be considered. Some entries could offer two definitions, allowing users to switch between the one written from the contemporary perspective and another reflecting the worldview typical of the Baroque or Enlightenment.

Durkin (2016, pp. 2–3) states that “the historical dictionary, rightly or wrongly regarded by many as the ‘prestige’ dictionary par excellence, is also associated by some with old-fashioned methods, academicism, stuffiness, or even a certain hauteur.” An opportunity for a revision of similar diagnoses may be found in resources like *Elektroniczny Korpus Tekstów Polskich z XVII i XVIII w.* (‘The Electronic Corpus of 17th- and 18th-century Polish Texts’), completed in December 2023 and currently numbering nearly 27 million tokens (Gruszczyński et al., 2023). This corpus, together with its digital index, has significantly increased the number of existing attestations of word units from that period. Its gradual integration with e-SXVII (Bronikowska et al., 2020; Bilińska-Brynk & Rodek, 2020) has presented a variety of challenges and opportunities for lexicographers to improve both theory and practice. Similarly, the BazHiLek database may also prove helpful in this regard. It may be necessary to

develop additional rules for creating definitions that will correspond to contemporary semantic developments while remaining functional, useful and economical from the perspective of lexicography. The search for alternative ways of defining meanings in academic dictionaries of historical language is bound to contribute to the evolution of general lexicographic principles.

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