

DEFINITION OF PROPER NAME VERSUS ITS DICTIONARY DEFINITION

Svetlana CORCODEL

Catedra Traducere, Interpretare și Lingvistică Aplicată

Intenționăm ca, prin cele ce urmează, să aducem unele clarificări cu privire la natura raportului dintre *sens* și ceea ce numim „definiție lexicografică” a sensului unui cuvânt. Lăsând la o parte, pentru simplificare, celelalte părți de vorbire, se poate spune că numele (propriu și/sau comune) împreună cu adjectivele au ca denotate clase de obiecte, înțelegând prin obiecte toate entitățile cu care este populat universul nostru. Generalizând, putem spune că, în cele mai multe cazuri, o definiție lexicografică nu poate servi la definirea propriu-zisă a unei clase-denotat. Aceasta se întâmplă din cauza faptului că definiția lexicografică a unui cuvânt nu este sensul cuvântului, ci aproximația sensului acestui cuvânt – o dovedesc și definițiile aceluiași sens în dicționare diferite.

Caracteristicile comune pentru un semn sunt observabile, dar nu în mod necesar și definitoriu. Lexicograful nu face decât să selecteze una sau mai multe trăsături comune obiectelor denotate de un semn, conferindu-i, prin ipoteză, un caracter definitoriu. Caracterul de ipoteză al acestei selecții nu este explicit în formularea definiției. Admițând că sensul poate fi aproximat printr-o definiție lexicografică, atribuim sensului o interpretare conceptualistă.

“Definition – a statement which captures the meaning, the use, the function and the essence of a term or concept.” [12]

Definition is one of the most crucial issues in any science; an improper understanding of it can vitiate the success of the whole enterprise not because valid theorems will fail to appear, but because their import will not be grasped. The subject has been much discussed, and many different kinds of definitions – distinguished – one recent work lists eighteen and another still more recent gives simple instructions for generating seventy two. The Wikipedia Encyclopedia distinguishes a number of different kinds and techniques of definitions including the: *lexical definition, contextual definition, intensional definition, extensional definition, ostensive definition, operational definition, theoretical definition, definition by genus and difference, recursive or inductive definition, circular definition, stipulative definition, précising definition and persuasive definition* [11].

Socrates believed that there were three kinds of definition: real, stipulative and lexical [13]. He believed that real definitions are eternally true statements that capture the essence of the concepts they define, while stipulative definitions are created when people bring new words into being by some kind of creative act, and lexical definitions are descriptions of how words are used by particular groups of people at particular times and places. Unlike stipulative definitions this can be true or false.

The concept of definition has had a long and tortured history dating back to the ancient Greeks, and in its long history, many strands have become tangled together, so that “definition” has come to mean many things to many people. One Oxford philosopher, Richard Robinson, found that “definition” has been used variously to describe relations between: Words and Other Words, Words and Things and Things and Things.

Robinson’s analysis of “Word-Thing” definition revealed two variants: Lexical and Stipulative definitions. Lexical definitions seek to pinpoint what was meant by some word to someone at some time. These definitions reflect the way language is used. Dictionaries may be considered to be compilations of lexical definitions, as they are intended to assist listeners/readers and speakers/writers in using the language being defined. Dictionary definitions of words are not god-given or absolute: they are a social agreement at a particular time and place amongst particular people, and thus belong to history rather than science.

Richard Robinson even suggested that a definition is anything in virtue of which we teach another person how to use a linguistic term. “We need a name for the mere process of imparting the rule that this word means this thing... And the name marked out for it by the history of language is definition” [2, p.48-49]. Any teaching that a certain word is the name for a certain thing should be called “definition”.

According to the Cambridge International dictionary of English (2001): [5] a definition is a “statement that explains the meaning of a word or phrase”. Therefore, a definition is considered a highly structured text, rich in the following types of knowledge:

- **Lexical knowledge** (rich semantic structure, associative patterns between words, feature structure);
- **World Knowledge** (ontology, organization of concepts);
- **Semantic knowledge** (word, sentence, text meanings, predicates).

Dictionary entry construction: The entry consists of two parts: in the first part (which is frequently called the lemma), the lexical unit itself is indicated; the second part contains all the other information.

The most important part of the lemma is the (entry word), which is the indication of each respective lexical unit in its canonical form. The purpose of the lemma is to identify the lexical unit, to locate it in the (formal, frequently morphological) system, and to describe its form. What follows the lemma is the main part of the entry; its basic purpose is to indicate the meaning of the lexical unit in all its aspects.

The basic instruments for the description of lexical meaning are [4, p.252]:

- the lexicographic definition
- the location in the system of synonyms, etc.
- the exemplification
- the Glosses

The lexicographical definition is said to be the most significant entry in the dictionary article. In this regard it functions as teaching device – on a formal and informal level. The lexicographer takes the relevant definition as a result of citations taken from spoken and written languages. [1, p.130] They are said to be *reportive* definitions. They are true or false depending on whether they do or do not accurately report and regulate common usage. It thus becomes possible to say of a given person that s/he is misusing a particular term. If a person's use of a term is at great variance with how that term is being used in a specialized nonstandard way, then s/he is using that term incorrectly.

It enumerates the most important semantic features of the defined lexical unit, which suffice to differentiate it from other units.

As regards the problem of the encyclopedic elements within a dictionary, a neat solution will be possible, if extremely difficult, only in a dictionary with purely scientific aims. In the case of a monolingual dictionary, there will always be some, preferably not too many, such elements. The lexicographic definition should consist exclusively of words which are explained in the dictionary. Nor should the lexicographic definition contain words more difficult to understand than the explained word itself. The defined entry - word must not be used in its definition;

The definition usually has the form of an endocentric phrase. The definition will frequently take into consideration the grammatical status of the defined lexical unit: a substantive will be defined by a substantival construction. But this circumstance must not be conceived as an absolute requirement to be observed in every case.

As far as *set expressions* are concerned it is quite natural for a dictionary to explain the meaning of idiomatic expressions especially if it cannot be deduced from the meaning of their constituent parts. In smaller dictionaries they are listed at the end of the whole entry; not frequently, this "phraseological" part of the entry is separated from the preceding part by a special sign, or these expressions are set in another type than the examples of free combinations.

The same lexical unit may vary from one dictionary or scholar, to another. The fact that different dictionaries have different presentations of the same thing can render equally good services, provided they are materially, factually corrects.

Understanding a dictionary definition: So much information is packed into the typical dictionary definition that some of it is likely to be overlooked if you are not careful.

1. *The entry word.* The word to be defined is called the *entry word*. It appears in heavy type. You use the entry word to locate a definition, to get the correct spelling of a word, and to find out how it is divided into syllables, if it has more than one syllable. Most dictionaries also indicate words that are capitalized by beginning the entry word with a capital letter. However, capitalization may be indicated in other ways. A dictionary occasionally gives two *spellings* for a word: **Lux·em·bourg** and **Lux·em·burg** [8]. Both spellings are correct. In most cases the first spelling listed is the one that most people prefer to use. You will never go wrong by using the first spelling given in any dictionary.

2. *Illustration.* Sometimes the best way to indicate the meaning of a word is through an illustration. The definition *tells* you the meaning of the word while the illustration *shows* it.

3. *Pronunciation.* The pronunciation of a word is usually indicated immediately after the entry word by means of special respelling. This information usually comes immediately after the entry word and is enclosed within small bars or within parentheses e.g: in the Romanian Language = **Andorra la Vella** (andora lave-lia) [6] and in English = **An·dor·ra la Vel·la** [an dāvwrə lə vèllə] [10].

4. *Definition.* The definition gives the meaning or meanings of a word. When a word has more than one meaning, each meaning is defined separately in a numbered definition. (Some dictionaries use letters to distinguish between meanings so closely related that they are defined in a single numbered definition.)

5. *Illustrative example.* For many words, and for different meanings of the same word, sample contexts are provided to show how the word is used. Illustrative examples often provide the clues that will prevent us from making mistakes in usage.

6. *Synonyms.* Synonyms are words that have similar meanings. Usually, words that are synonymous are alike in some senses and different in others. For example, *broad* and *spacious* [3, p.450] are synonyms when the subject is a landscape. When a list of synonyms is given for an entry word, the list is often accompanied by an explanation of the special meaning or meanings of each word.

7. *Usage label.* Not all words entered in a dictionary are equally acceptable in all situations. A usage label is a mild warning that people use a word only in certain situations.

8. *Run-on entry.* Many English words have companion forms that are closely related to them in meaning. At the end of the Proper Name –*Luxembourg*- [7] for instance we may find the notation - Lux·em·bourg·er **or** Lux·em·burg·er **noun**, – Lux·em·bourg·i·an **or** Lux·em·burg·i·an **n, adjective**. Although often no definitions are given in a run-on entry, a part-of-speech label is provided for each companion form. Some dictionaries also give pronunciation for companion forms.

9. *Part of speech.* The part of speech of a word is indicated by an italicized abbreviation: *n.* noun; *adv.* Adverb; *pron.* Pronoun; *prep.* Preposition; *v.* or *vb.* Verb; *conj.* Conjunction. Many English words can be used as more than one part of speech. For such words, a dictionary will indicate how the definitions are related to the part-of-speech labels. In some dictionaries, all the definitions for one part of speech are grouped together after the label. Other dictionaries provide numbered references to the definitions with the part-of-speech labels.

Dictionaries provide information as follows:

Origin (for some words only): Such information may appear at the beginning of the definition, or at the end of it. In either case it is usually enclosed in brackets.

Encyclopedic information: A small number of dictionary entries deal with people and places. However, if all you need is a general identification or location, the dictionary will usually provide it, as in the following entry:

Ex: Arthur, Chester Alan - 1829-1886. Twenty-first president of the United States, b, Fairfield, Vt. Collector of Port of New York (1871-79). Vice president, United States (Mar.-Sept, 1881); president (1881-85)- on death of Garfield [9].

- In English, proper nouns are **capitalized** while common nouns are not. Sometimes a word should be capitalized in one sense but not capitalized in another. In such a case, the dictionary indicates which meaning requires a capital. For example, *Pole* meaning a native of Poland, is printed with a capital; *pole*, meaning a slender piece of wood, is not capitalized [3, p.457].

- A dictionary divides all words into syllables. For example: **Dub·lin** [10], knowing the syllables of a word may help us to divide a word at the end of a line when we are writing, we must know the syllables to divide correctly.

- In words of two or more syllables, one syllable is always pronounced with greater force than the others. A dictionary indicates which syllable needs emphasis by using an **accent mark**. Most dictionaries use one of two kinds of accent marks: either the mark ´ appearing before the syllable or the mark ˘ placed after the syllable. Both marks appear well above the center of a letter. In a word of three or more syllables, a dictionary usually indicates two accent marks, one primary, and the other secondary. When the mark (ˈ) is used to indicate primary accent, the secondary accent is indicated by a weaker mark (˘) or by two marks (ˈ ˘).

- A dictionary uses pronunciation symbols to indicate the pronunciation of a word. Most symbols are regular letters of the alphabet, but they are used more strictly than in ordinary writing. For example, the letter *c* can have several different pronunciations, as in the words *city*, *control* and *cello*. A dictionary would indicate the beginning sounds of these words as *s*, *k* and *ch*. To show the pronunciation of vowels, which is harder to

indicate than the pronunciation of consonants, a dictionary uses *diacritical* marks – special symbols placed above the letters. Indicating pronunciation is among the dictionary maker's most difficult tasks; and thus it is not surprising that dictionaries should vary in their use of symbols.

Diacritical marks are used by most dictionaries:

To indicate a long vowel, a dictionary generally uses **a diacritical mark** called *a macron* – a long straight mark over the vowel. When a macron is used, the *long vowel* is said to have the sound of its own name.

Dictionaries differ in their methods of showing the sound of **short vowels**. One method uses a symbol called *a breve* over the vowel. Another method is to leave short vowels unmarked.

Ex.: mat (măt) or /mat/; head (hĕd) or /hed/; bid(bĭd) or /bid/.

Sometimes, when all that we say in an unaccented syllable is the sound of the consonant, the pronunciation in certain dictionaries may omit the short vowel altogether.

Schwa: most recent dictionaries use an upside-down *e* as a symbol to represent the blurred, unclear sound of “uh.” This sound occurs in the phrase *the pen* (thə pen) and in the following words: minute (min'əte); Karen (Kar'ən). Most dictionaries use the schwa only in showing the pronunciation of unaccented syllables and in one-syllable words.

As a conclusion to the above mentioned statements it must be said that the problem of including or not a proper name in a lexicographic source lives place for further discussion and in present this depends only on the wish of the dictionary/encyclopedia editor, but it is obvious that proper names form a huge class of words that are of big importance for every language.

References:

1. Botha Willem J. Lexicography // Journal of Language Teaching. - 2004. - Vol.38 (1).
2. Robinson Richard. Definition. - Oxford: Carlendon Press, 1962.
3. Warriner John E. Sheila Laws. Warriner's English Grammar Composition. Second Course. - Graham, 1977.
4. Zagusta Ladislav. Manual of Lexicography. - Praha, 1971.

Dictionaries:

5. Cambridge International Dictionary of English. - Cambridge University Press, 2001.
6. Dicționar Enciclopedic Român. - București: Editura Politică, 1966.
7. Frederick C. Mish, William A. Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary. - Springfield, Massachusetts (USA), 1983.
8. Merriam-Webster's. - Incorporated Springfield, Massachusetts (USA), 1994.
9. Webster's New Biographical Dictionary. - Merriam-Webster inc., Publishers Springfield Massachusetts, 1988.

Web site resources:

10. http://encarta.msn.com/dictionary_/Portugal.html 09.02.06 Encarta® World English Dictionary, North American Edition
11. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Definition> Wikipedia Online Encyclopedia, 2.03.06
12. <http://samvak.tripod.com/define.html> Sam Vaknin, The definition of definition, 28.03.06
13. <http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~jbeebe2/define.htm> James R. Beebe, “Socrates, Concept of Definition”, 26.03.06

Prezentat la 06.03.2007