The Use of Ostensive Definition as an Explanatory Technique in the Presentation of Semantic Information in Dictionary-Making

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Abstract

Lexicography – The theory and practice of dictionary making – is a multifarious activity involving a number of ordered steps. It essentially involves the management of a language's word stock. Hartmann (1983: vii) summarises the main aspects of the lexicographic management of vocabulary into three main activities, viz. ***recording***, ***description*** *and* ***presentation****. The stages involved in dictionary-making may be outlined as follows (paraphrasing Gelb's(1958) five-step model): (a) Identification, selection and listing of lexical items (b) sequential arrangement of lexical units (c) parsing and excerpting of entries (d) semantic specification of each unit (e) dictionary compilation from processed data and publication of the final product.*

*The present article focuses specifically on one aspect of the intermediate stages of this rather complex process of dictionary-making: the stage that lexicographers generally consider to be the principal stage in the entire process and one that is at the very heart of the raison d'*être of every *monolingual linguistic dictionary, namely* ***semantic specification****. The main thesis being developed here is that semantic specification can be greatly enhanced by the judicious*

use of pictorial illustrations (as a complement to a lexicographic definition) in monolingual dictionaries, and as an essential lexicographic device. This feature is discussed under the broad concept of ***ostensive definition*** *as an explanatory technique in dictionary-making. The concept is discussed with specific reference to its application to monolingual dictionaries for African languages. Its role in the presentation of sense values of lemmas (headwords) as well as its limitations are briefly discussed within the framework of the semasiological approach to the presentation of semantic information.*

Keywords: Definition, ostensive definition, dictionary, monolingual dictionary, translation dictionary, lexicography, lexicon, lexeme, semantic specification.

Introduction

In his widely acclaimed work, **The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language** (1987:108), David Crystal draws the reader's attention to the rather obvious fact that "dictionaries come in all shapes (forms) and sizes." The word "dictionary" is indeed a generic term applied to a wide variety of reference "word-books" (lexicons), ranging from relatively slender and limited glossaries of specialised (or technical) vocabulary to the massive comprehensive linguistic dictionaries, such as the three-volume **Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language** (1961) or the multi-volume **English – Southern Sotho Dictionary** (1965), compiled and edited by Lucien Hamel, not to mention the monumental encyclopaedic works, such as the well-known New Encyclopaedia Britannica (1988), published in thirty volumes.

In lexicographical literature, various typologies have been

proposed for dictionaries (see, for instance, Gelb: 1958; Malkiel: 1967; Zgusta: 1971; and Landau: 1984). In these typologies different types of dictionaries are identified and distinguished on the basis of certain basic features. Each distinctive feature of a typology embodies a set of typical characteristics which distinguish them from one another. In one dictionary typology, based on the number of languages on which lexicographical information is supplied, a useful broad distinction is often drawn, at macrostructural level, between **monolingual** (explanatory) and **translation** (interlanguage) **dictionaries**. The latter are usually bilingual, though they can also be multilingual.

In this part of the African sub-continent (namely, Southern Africa) the commonest and most popular type of dictionary published, based on our indigenous languages, has been the translation dictionary – usually from one major European language to an African language or vice-versa. Missionaries, colonial administrators, anthropologists and amateur lexicographers have made a notable contribution to this enterprise, usually for specific pragmatic motives, with non-native speakers of the target African language in mind, as the potential user. Indeed, pre- theoretical African lexicography owes much to these foreign language enthusiasts and word-list compilers who pioneered work in this important area. As Burgess (1975:136) aptly observed, "colonial administrators, as well as planters, have not merely mastered the languages of Africa and the East but [they have also] **given them dictionaries, grammars [and] even literatures**" (emphasis mine). The earliest such dictionaries were first published in the latter part of the nineteenth century, as Doke (1945) indicates in his extensive annotated biography on grammatical, phonetical and lexicographical studies carried out on the Bantu languages between 1860 and the mid-1940s. For example:

(i) Charles Robert's **English - Zulu Dictionary** of 1880

(ii) A. Mabille's **Sesutho - English Dictionary** of 1876
(iii) John Brown's **Secwana Dictionary** of 1895

During the twentieth century, the post-world war 2 period witnessed a significant increase in the output of bilingual dictionaries, glossaries and phrase-books intended, primarily for missionary teachers and the medical expatriate personnel, colonial administrators and expatriate community workers, tourists and foreign traders. Mann (1994:2178-2179) highlights the important milestones in the development of African lexicography, showing that, indeed, most of the dictionary tokens for African languages, published during the past two centuries were of this type and targeted primarily non-native speakers of African languages. In bilingual dictionaries the preferred means of supplying meaning values for lexemes is to give **translation equivalents** in the source language of the intended dictionary user. For instance, a Sesotho-English dictionary may present the following pairing of lexemes and their corresponding equivalents:

ntja, *n* ~ dog
motho, *n* ~ person
ngata, *adj* ~ many
bina, *v* ~ sing

However, this is by no means as simple and as straight forward as the examples just cited above may tend to suggest. Culture-bound vocabulary, as well as scientific and technological terminology pose a particularly challenging problem to inter-language lexicography. One of the explanatory techniques that may help in the presentation of semantic information – at least for concrete nouns – is the ostensive definition, an age old technique of semantic explanation by pictorial depiction. This will be discussed in section 4 of the present article.

The Monolingual Dictionary

The monolingual dictionary for indigenous African languages is a relative new-comer on the reference-books scene. It is only fairly recently that some linguistic scholars have felt the need to compile and publish this type of dictionary. Since the introduction of literacy in our Southern African societies, those who have undertaken lexicographical work on African languages have (with but a few exceptions) followed in the proverbial footsteps of their predecessors by focusing on translation dictionaries to the almost total exclusion of other types of dictionaries. Mann (1994:2179) observes that "with the exception of Afrikaans, Amharic, Somali and Swahili, for which substantial monolingual dictionaries have appeared, most African lexicographical works have been bilingual and have been produced by foreign missionaries or administrators primarily for the acquisition of African language by outsiders." Similarly, T. W. D. Mohapi (1996:48), commenting on the lexicographic needs of Sesotho, notes that all dictionaries published for Sesotho, up to the mid-nineties, "were bilingual, trilingual and multilingual in nature." Evidently, the monolingual dictionary has largely been ignored, yet we observe that in other literate societies, particularly those with a long standing literacy tradition, the usefulness of this type of dictionary is hardly called into question. The monolingual dictionary, such as **Le Micro Robert** and **Le Petit Larousse Illustré** adorns the living room bookshelf of most modern French homes. Robert Ilson (1985) makes the observation that in Britain 90% of households possess a dictionary and that the monolingual dictionary accounts for most of the 90 per cent cited.

It is to this type of dictionary that I wish to devote the rest of my article. More specifically I wish to discuss one oft-neglected technique of semantic specification known as the ostensive

definition (literally: "definition by pointing"), variously called the **existential** or **denotative definition**. It is a defining method that seeks to provide the meaning of the **definiendum** (that is, a lexeme to be defined) by giving the example of the denoted entity or notion with the help of an illustration, a photograph or an imitation sketch – all of which are iconic in nature.

The salient distinguishing feature of monolingual dictionaries, as contrasted with translation dictionaries, is that in the former, both the lemmas (or definenda) and the verbal explanation of their meaning (technically called definiens) are supplied in one and the same language.

A monolingual dictionary may be comprehensive or limited in the scope of its selected lexical entries. A banal additional point to make here is that monolingual dictionaries may be subdivided into different types on the basis of the target user (the perceived potential dictionary user). According to this criterion, we distinguish monolingual dictionaries intended say, for mother tongue speakers, adults, children, advanced learners of the language, and so on and so forth. Other subdivisions, within the broad category of monolingual dictionaries, distinguished in lexicographical literature, are as follows:

Diachronic versus synchronic dictionaries
General versus limited dictionaries
Etymological versus historical dictionaries
Dictionaries of standard language versus dictionaries of technical language etc.

In western tradition, the monolingual (explanatory) dictionary is one of the most frequently consulted type by the average user of dictionaries who may seek in it various kinds of information contained in the dictionary articles (at microstructural level) such as:

(a) to ascertain the meaning of unfamiliar words or expressions.
(b) to look up the spelling of a word.
(c) to ascertain the current pronunciation of certain words and to check the various inflections of variable lexical forms.
(d) to find out the etymology of certain words.
(e) to ascertain correct grammatical usage.
(f) to ascertain correct collocational usage.

A good linguistic dictionary ought to cater for all these needs (and even for much else, not cited here) for it is often pointed out that the main function of a linguistic dictionary is to carry the essential information on those linguistic features of the word which the dictionary user needs to acquire and internalise if he is to use the word correctly.

At this juncture a brief incidental remark on the need to compile and publish monolingual dictionaries for African languages is in order here. Whereas no one seems to have any doubts about the usefulness and practical value of monolingual dictionaries in culturally and scientifically institutionalised languages of wide communication, such global languages like English, French and Spanish, there is still apparent reluctance (even on the part of some educated people) to recognise the valuable role that such a dictionary may play in an African language such as Silozi. Curiously there is the assumption that, since every native speaker of a given language has an "in-built" **theoretical dictionary** that he or she carries as part of his or her semantic competence (that is to say: his or her intuitive knowledge of the meaning of words and expressions of his or her first language) there is really no point in consulting a published dictionary to ascertain that he or she is using the lexical items correctlly, any more than he or she needs to consult a grammar book of his or her language to find out how to transform say, positive statements into the corresponding negative statements.

To correct this commonly held (albeit fallacious) assumption we turn to Leech (1974:203) who pleads the case of monolingual

dictionaries when he observes that:

The lexicon (…) is open-ended in a way that a grammar is not. Whereas we have learnt the grammatical rules of (our language) in all essentials by the age of five, we continue the process of acquiring vocabulary and new uses of vocabulary, right the way through our lives. The store of lexical information we carry with us is continually undergoing development and modification, through the written and spoken communications that we receive. Our linguistic education, in this respect, continues long past linguistic maturity in other respects (…). This pool of lexical information is what is embodied in the printed dictionary.

Indeed, "vocabulary," as Quirk (1968:151) points out, is the "open-end of language. It is always changing (…) new words are added and new senses for existing ones." To convince ourselves of the need to have monolingual dictionaries for indigenous African languages we simply need a moment's reflection on the many uses to which the native speaker of say, English puts his or her dictionary. We could similarly consult our monolingual dictionaries (when they are made available to us in African languages) for much the same purposes, especially as these languages begin to play an increasingly expanding role in the socio-economic and cultural life of their speakers.

Perspectives on Meaning

Kenworthy (1991:4) points out that the description of the meaning of a word is by no means a simple matter. On the contrary, it is a highly complex task which involves a number of perspectives. These perspectives form the object of lexicology and lexical semantics. This may be summed up as follows:

(a) The referential or denotative relation between the word and an entity in the extralinguistic world. This is technically known as **denotation.**

(b) The link between the word and other words in the language

– what is referred to as **sense relation**.

(c) The other words which habitually co-occur with it syntagmatically in the language – the technical term used is **collocation**.
(d) The use of the word in the language in terms of restrictions – the **communicative value**.

The present discussion is primarily concerned with the first of these four perspectives, namely denotation as applied to lexicography in linguistic dictionaries.

Explanatory Techniques or Methods: The Quest for a Satisfactory Presentation of Semantic Information

In lexicographical literature various methods of giving the sense values of lemmas are suggested. (See, for instance, Robinson (1954).

(a) The Analytical Aefinition

This is the kind of definition that enumerates the semantic features of the definiendum. For example, the word "cow" may analytically be described as a large, female herbivorous bovine farm animal which gives milk and beef. (Adapted from the Oxford advanced learner's dictionary, p. 269). The **genus** differentia type of the definition is reminiscent of componential analysis, as practised in semantics.

(b) The Synonym Definition

As the name of the method suggests, this is a definition of the lemma through the use of a synonym or synonyms. For example : carnivorous = meat-eater or meat-eating.

(c) The Ostensive Definition

In the context of this discussion we will describe this method

of defining words as "definition by pictorial depiction" coupled with a worded explanation. For example, defining the word "monkey" using words first, then supplying a picture of a monkey as an illustration so as to achieve greater semantic clarity or so as to enable the dictionary user to easily associate the linguistic symbol (significant) monkey with the animal of this type (signifié) when he or she comes across one in the real world.

The Use of the Ostensive Definition in Lexicography

The ostensive definition is an explanatory technique used in lexicography which has long been recognised as a helpful adjunct to the usual dictionary definitions stated in words. It is the sort of definition that is well-suited for the explanation of words with tangible referents, such as concrete objects, sentient beings, geometric forms, and others.

Some lexicographers frequently resort to the ostensive definition to supplement their verbal explanations (especially in dictionaries meant for young children) while others use it sparingly or even never use it at all. In this regard Quirk (1968: 151) noted a general difference in pictorial content between British and American dictionaries of English language when he states that:

"American dictionaries also provide useful diagrams (illustrating and naming the parts of an out board motor, for example) a service that has become rare in British dictionaries."

The most straightforward use of this type of definition is in encyclopaedic dictionaries when it is applied to words with a direct and unique reference, as in the case of proper nouns (Kenworthy: 1991:1). A photograph, a graphic artist's drawing, an imitation sketch, and others,. can be used to associate the

name with a specific extralinguistic entity being denoted in the external world. For instance, when explaining what the Taj Mahal is a photograph (or a sketch) of it may be displayed beside the printed explanation so as to give the dictionary user an idea of how this famous building looks like – something that, of course, would not be fully achieved if one relied solely on a verbal description. Moreover, the ostensive definition is also applicable to other categories of designative words, such as common concrete nouns, certain action verbs and adjectives; the same principle holds. For instance, for the referent **warthog** a suitable picture can more satisfactorily specify the meaning as well as portraying the type of animal in question.

> One important point to bear in mind here, however, is that the pictorial illustration does not render the verbal definition superfluous; it merely supplements it. As Swanepoel (1989:193) points out, "illustrations cannot replace the verbal definition in the dictionary because of their limited defining power. An illustration is at most an example of the denotatum of the word."

On the other hand, it must be remembered that certain lexicographic definitions can sometimes be informationally deficient and rather vague as when the dictionary simply defines **a shark** as "a large sea fish with sharp teeth that can attack people swimming." As can be seen from this authentic example, the worded definition fails to describe the denoted creature (in this instance, the shark) adequately. In other words, the definition is not specific enough as it does not furnish sufficient characteristic features of a shark that would distinguish it from words designating other types of large sea fish that may be its **co-hyponyms.** A picture supplements this definition by supplying a visual representation of a typical shark and thus providing useful information on such features as shape and general physical appearance. It is therefore a matter of

regret that most lexicographers who have compiled dictionaries for African languages have so far not availed themselves of the resources and potential of this explanatory technique. A quick survey of dictionaries currently available for African languages (at least in the Southern African region) reveals that, by far the majority of them are without graphic illustrations. Perhaps this was understandable at a time when emphasis was solely on translation dictionaries. [It must be understood, however, that the ostensive definition has its legitimate place in a translation dictionary as well]. But now that the monolingual dictionary is receiving a measure of attention from linguistic scholars, we ought to ask ourselves the question: What contribution can the ostensive definition make to the task of informing the dictionary user about the meanings of words? Today, with the aid of modern computer technology graphic design (in colour as well as in black and white) has become easier. Compilers of cultural dictionaries can derive much benefit from the use of this defining method. It helps in clarifying the meanings of artefacts which are culture-bound or culture specific. There are those who will be quick to argue that a linguistic dictionary should merely aim at describing those linguistic features of words that the dictionary user ought to possess in order to use the word correctly in context, rather than describing the referents or denotata to which the word refers. They point out that the description of the referents that include such extralinguistic information as shape, size, colour, texture, etc. belong to an encyclopaedia. While this is generally true, to a point, it is nevertheless true to say that linguists and lexicographers in general are of the opinion that incorporation of a limited amount of extralinguistic information can be helpful and indeed necessary, especially when formulating definitions of concepts relating to material objects or living organisms. It is precisely here that the ostensive definition can prove to be particularly helpful in the elucidation of meaning. Encyclopedic dictionaries will even be more lavishly supplied with illustrations, since they are oriented towards

the extralinguistic and thus often concentrate more on matters to which the lexemes refers rather than on distinctions in meaning between lexemes. They combine elements of a dictionary and an encyclopaedia.

Some Limitations of the Ostensive Definition

The ostensive definition (in the sense that we have consistently used the term in the foregoing discussion) is not a panacea to all our lexicographical problems and dilemmas. It has also certain inherent limitations of which only two will be mentioned and discussed briefly here.

(a) Certain types of words cannot be defined using this technique even in combination with a verbal definition. In this category one can cite such word classes as:
abstract nouns, grammatical words (that is, function words, such as conjunctions, prepositions, articles, et cetera), certain adverbs...
Moreover, the ostensive definition does not account for types of meaning other than denotative meaning. Subsidiary word meanings such as connotative meaning and metaphorical meaning are unaccounted for by this defining method.

(b) The pictorial illustration can oftentimes turn out to be polysemantic and lead to some misinterpretation. To quote Swanepoel (1989:193): "The greatest disadvantage of using illustrations is that they are open to all kinds of misinterpretations. Illustrations may contain images of entities in which all kinds of features are pictured which cannot be regarded as distinctive features of the word."
It is also useful to remember that this defining method is never used alone to define lexical items; it is always used in conjunction with a worded definition which it supplements. There are, of course, some considerations of cost and size of

the planned dictionary which influence the ultimate decision of whether or not to incorporate pictorial illustrations in the dictionary being compiled. (See also, Ilson,1987b).

Conclusion

The article has briefly discussed some dictionary typologies and has shown that the African language monolingual dictionary is still a relatively rare reference book in Southern Africa. The article has also shown that there are various perspectives on meaning and that the description of the meaning(s) of a word is a highly complex matter involving various perspectives.

The ostensive definition, as an explanatory technique in dictionary-making, has been discussed. The role of pictorial illustrations has been shown to be that of supplementing the semantic information supplied by the verbal definition. It enables the lexicographer to describe the meaning of lexemes in a much clearer way, bearing in mind the fact that it is used only in as far as it is relevant to the meaning that is associated with the word by the native speakers. Finally, the article acknowledges some of the limitations of this defining method in lexicography. The general conclusion drawn here is that this technique is especially useful for the elucidation of lexical items with tangible referents. Consequently, it enhances the user-friendliness of a dictionary. Lexicographers who include pictorial illustrations in their lexicographic reference works subscribe to the view expressed in the axiom that state that "a picture is worth a thousand words."

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