

The main problems of lexicography



The main problems of lexicography The most burning issues of lexicography are connected with the selection of head-words, the arrangement and contents of the vocabulary entry, the principles of sense definitions and the semantic and functional classification of words. In the first place it is the problem of how far a general descriptive dictionary, whether unilingual or bilingual, should admit the historical element. In fact, the term "current usage" is disconcertingly elastic, it may, for instance, be stretched to include all words and senses used by W.

Shakespeare, as he is commonly read, or include only those of the fossilised words that are kept in some set expressions or familiar quotations, e. g. shuffled off this mortal coil ("Hamlet"), where coil means 'turmoil' (of life). For the purpose of a dictionary, which must not be too bulky, selection between scientific and technical terms is also a very important task. It is a debatable point whether a unilingual explanatory dictionary should strive to cover all the words of the language, including neologisms, nonce-words, slang, etc. and note with impartial accuracy all the words actually used by English people; or whether, as the great English lexicographer of the 18th century Samuel Johnson used to think, it should be preceptive, and (viewed from the other side) prohibitive. Dictionary-makers should attempt to improve and stabilise the English vocabulary according to the best classical samples and advise the readers on preferable usage. A distinctly modern criterion in selection of entries is the frequency of the words to be included. This is especially important for certain lines of practical work in preparing graded elementary textbooks.

When the problem of selection is settled, there is the question as to which of the selected units have the right to a separate entry and which are to be included under one common head-word. These are, in other words, the questions of separateness and sameness of words. The first deals with syntagmatic boundaries of word-units and has to solve such questions as whether each other is a group of two separate words to be treated separately under the head-words each and other, or whether each other is a unit deserving a special entry (compare also: one another).

Need such combinations as boiling point, carbon paper, department store, phone box be sub-entered under their constituents? If so, under which of them? Or, perhaps, it will be more convenient for those who use the dictionary if these were placed as separate main entries consisting of a nominal compound or a phrase. As to the sameness, this deals with paradigmatic boundaries. How many entries are justified for hound'? COD has two — one for the noun, and the other for the verb: ' to chase (as) with hounds'; the verb and the noun are thus treated as homonyms. Chambers's Twentieth Century Dictionary" combines them under one head-word, i. e. it takes them as variants of the same word (hence the term " sameness"). The problem is even more complicated with variants belonging to the same part of speech. This problem is best illustrated by the pun that has already been discussed elsewhere in this book: Mind you, I don't mind minding the children if the children mind me (Understand, I don't object to taking care of the children if the children obey me). Here the dictionary-maker is confronted with the problem of sameness.

Should mind be considered one word with several semantic variants, and take one entry? Or is it more convenient to represent it as several words? The difference in the number of entries for an equal bulk of vocabulary may also depend on a different approach to the regularly formed derivatives, like those with -er, -ing, -ness, and -ly. These are similar to grammatical endings in their combining possibilities and semantic regularity. The derivation is so regular, and the meaning and class of these derivatives are so easily deduced that they are sometimes considered not worth an entry.

That is why the definition of the scope of a dictionary is not quite as simple as it might appear at first sight. There exist almost unsurmountable difficulties to a neat statistical evaluation. Some publishers state the number of entries in a subtitle, others even claim for the total coverage with the exception of very special terms. It must be remembered, however, that without a generally accepted standard for settling the problems of sameness and separateness no meaningful evaluation of the scope of any particular dictionary is possible.

Besides in the case of a living language the vocabulary is not stable, and the attitude of lexicographers to archaisms and neologisms varies. The arrangement of the vocabulary entry presents many problems, of which the most important are the differentiation and the sequence of various meanings of a polysemantic word. A historical dictionary (the Oxford Dictionary, for instance) is primarily concerned with the development of the English vocabulary. It arranges various senses chronologically, first comes the etymology, then the earliest meanings marked by the label obs. — obsolete.

The etymologies are either comparative or confined to a single language. The development is documented by illustrative quotations, ranging from the oldest to recent appearances of the word in question. A descriptive dictionary dealing with current usage has to face its own specific problems. It has to apply a structural point of view and give precedence to the most important meanings. But how is the most important meaning determined upon? So far each compiler was guided by his own personal preference. An objective procedure would be to obtain data of statistical counts.

But counting the frequency of different meanings of the same word is far more difficult than counting the frequency of its forms. It is therefore not by chance that up to now many counts have been undertaken only for word forms, irrespective of meaning. Also, the interdependence of meanings and their relative importance within the semantic structure of the word do not remain the same. They change almost incessantly, so that the task of establishing their relative frequency would have to be repeated very often. The constant revisions necessary would make the publication of dictionaries very expensive.

It may also be argued that an arrangement of meanings according to frequency would sometimes conceal the ties and relationship between various elements of the semantic structure. Nevertheless some semantic counts have been achieved and the lexicographers profited by them. Thus, in preparing high-school English dictionaries the staff under chief editor C. L. Barnhart was aided by semantic counts which Dr E. L. Thorndike had made of current standard literature, from children's books to "The Encyclopaedia Britannica". The count according to C.

L. Barnhart was of enormous importance in compiling their dictionaries, but the lexicographer admits that counts are only one of the criteria necessary for selecting meanings and entries, and that more dictionary evidence is needed, namely typical quotations for each meaning. Dictionary evidence normally exists in the form of quotation slips constituting raw material for word treatment and filed under their appropriate head-words. In editing new dictionaries the lexicographers cannot depend only on the scholarly editions such as OED.

In order to meet the demands of their readers, they have to sample the reading of the public for whom the dictionary is meant. This textual reference has to be scrupulously examined, so as to account for new words and meanings making their way into the language. Here again some quantitative criteria must be established. If a word or meaning occurs in several different sources over a wide range of magazines and books during a considerable period of time, it may be worth including even into a college dictionary.

The preface to "The Concise Oxford Dictionary", for instance, states that its authors find that sense development cannot be presented in every word, because obsolete words are as a rule omitted. Only occasionally do they place at the beginning a rare but still current sense, if it can throw light on the more common senses that follow, or forms the connecting link with the etymology. The etymologies are given throughout, but otherwise the compilers do not seem to keep to any consistent principle and are guided by what they think is the order of logical connection, familiarity or importance.

E. L. Thorndike formulates the following principles: " Other things being equal, literal uses come before figurative, general uses before special, common uses before rare, and easily understandable uses before difficult, and to sum up: that arrangement is best for any word which helps the learner most. " A synchronic dictionary should also show the distribution of every word. It has been traditionally done by labelling words as belonging to a certain part of speech, and by noting some special cases of grammatically or lexically bound meanings.

Thus, the word spin is labelled in " The Concise Oxford Dictionary" as v. t. & i. , which gives a general idea of its distribution; its various senses are shown in connection with words that may serve as subject or object, e. g. : " 2. (of spider, silkworm, etc.) make (web, gossamer, cocoon, or abs.) by extrusion of fine viscous thread ... 10. spun glass (spun when heated into filaments that remain pliant when cold); spun gold, silver (gold, silver thread prepared for weaving ...). " This technique is gradually being improved upon, and compilers strive to provide more detailed information on these points. The Advanced Learner's Dictionary ... " by A. S. Hornby, E. V. Gatenby and H. Wakefield supplies information on the syntactical distribution of each verb. In their " Notes on Syntax" the compilers state that one who is learning English as a foreign language is apt to form sentences by analogy, which at times may lead him into error. For instance, the student must be warned against taking the use of the verb tell in the sentence Please tell me the meaning as a model for the word explain, because *Please, explain me the meaning would be ungrammatical. For his purpose they provide a table of 25 verb patterns and supply the numerical indications in each verb entry. This gives

the student the necessary guidance. Indications are also supplied as to which nouns and which semantic varieties of nouns may be used in the plural. This helps the student to avoid mistakes like *interesting informations. Many dictionaries indicate the different stylistic levels to which the words belong: colloquial, technical, poetical, rhetorical, archaic, familiar, vulgar or slang, and their expressive colouring: emphatic, ironical, diminutive, facetious.

This is important, because a mere definition does not show these data. There is always a difference in style between the dictionary word and its definition. The word *digs* is a slang word but its definition 'lodgings' is not. Giving these data modern dictionary-makers strive to indicate the nature of the context in which the word may occur. The problem is also relevant for bilingual dictionaries and is carefully presented in the "New English-Russian Dictionary" edited by I. R. Galperin. A third group of lexicographic problems is the problem of definitions in a unilingual dictionary.

The explanation of meaning may be achieved by a group of synonyms which together give a fairly general idea; but one synonym is never sufficient for the purpose, because no absolute synonyms exist. Besides, if synonyms are the only type of explanation used, the reader will be placed in a vicious circle of synonymic references, with not a single word actually explained. Definitions serve the purpose much better. These are of two main types. If they are only concerned with words as speech material, the definition is called linguistic. If they are concerned with things for which the words are names, they are termed encyclopaedic.

American dictionaries are for the most part traditionally encyclopaedic, which accounts for so much attention paid to graphic illustration. They

furnish their readers with far more information about facts and things than their British counterparts, which are more linguistic and more fundamentally occupied with purely lexical data (as contrasted to *realia*), with the grammatical properties of words, their components, their stylistic features, etc. Opinions differ upon the optimum proportion of linguistic and encyclopaedic material.

Very interesting considerations on this subject are due to Alf Sommerfeldt. He thinks that definitions must be based on the fact that the meanings of words render complex notions which may be analysed (cf. componential analysis) into several elements rendered by other words. He emphasises, for instance, that the word *pedestrian* is more aptly defined as 'a person who goes or travels on foot' than as 'one who goes or travels on foot'. The remark appears valuable, because a definition of this type shows the lexicogrammatical type to which the word belongs and consequently its distribution.

It also helps to reveal the system of the vocabulary. Much too often, however, one sees in dictionaries no attention paid to the difference in distribution between the defined and the defining word. The meaning of the word may be also explained by examples, i. e. contextually. The term and its definition are here fused. For example, *diagonal* is explained by the following context where only this term can occur: A square has two diagonals, and each of them divides the square into two right-angled isosceles triangles. Very often this type can be changed into a standard form, i. . A diagonal is one of the two lines ... , etc. One more problem is the problem of whether all entries should be defined or whether it is possible to have the so-called "

run-ons” for derivative words in which the root-form is readily recognised (such as absolutely or resolutely). In fact, whereas resolutely may be conveniently given as a -ly run-on after resolute, there is a meaning problem for absolutely. One must take into consideration that in colloquial speech absolutely means ‘ quite so’, ‘ yes’ which cannot be deduced from the meaning of the corresponding adjective.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF BRITISH AND AMERICAN LEXICOGRAPHY

Although, as we have seen from the preceding paragraph, there is as yet no coherent doctrine in English lexicography, its richness and variety are everywhere admitted and appreciated. Its history is in its way one of the most remarkable developments in linguistics, and is therefore worthy of special attention. In the following pages a short outline of its various phases is given. A need for a dictionary or glossary has been felt in the cultural growth of many civilised peoples at a fairly early period.

The history of dictionary-making for the English language goes as far back as the Old English period where its first traces are found in the form of glosses of religious books with interlinear translation from Latin. Regular bilingual English-Latin dictionaries were already in existence in the 15th century. The unilingual dictionary is a comparatively recent type. The first unilingual English dictionary, explaining words by English equivalents, appeared in 1604. It was meant to explain difficult words occurring in books.

Its title was " A Table Alphabeticall, containing and teaching the true writing and understanding of hard usuall English words borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine or French". The little volume of 120 pages explaining about 3000 words was compiled by one Robert Cawdrey, a schoolmaster. Other

books followed, each longer than the preceding one. The first attempt at a dictionary including all the words of the language, not only the difficult ones, was made by Nathaniel Bailey who in 1721 published the first edition of his "Universal Etymological English Dictionary".

He was the first to include pronunciation and etymology. Big explanatory dictionaries were created in France and Italy before they appeared for the English language. Learned academies on the continent had been established to preserve the purity of their respective languages. This was also the purpose of Dr Samuel Johnson's famous Dictionary published in 1755. 1 The idea of purity involved a tendency to oppose change, and S. Johnson's Dictionary was meant to establish the English language in its classical form, to preserve it in all its glory as used by J. Dryden, A.

Pope, J. Addison and their contemporaries. In conformity with the social order of his time, S. Johnson attempted to "fix" and regulate English. This was the period of much discussion about the necessity of "purifying" and "fixing" English, and S. Johnson wrote that every change was undesirable, even a change for the best. When his work was accomplished, however, he had to admit he had been wrong and confessed in his preface that "no dictionary of a living tongue can ever be perfect, since while it is hastening to publication, some words are budding and some falling away".

The most important innovation of S. Johnson's Dictionary was the introduction of illustrations of the meanings of the words "by examples from the best writers", as had been done before him in the dictionary of the French Academy. Since then such illustrations have become a "sine qua non" in lexicography; S. Johnson, however, only mentioned the authors and

never gave any specific references for his quotations. Most probably he reproduced some of his quotations from memory, not always very exactly, which would have been unthinkable in modern lexicology.

The definitions he gave were often very ingenious. He was called "a skilful definer", but sometimes he preferred to give way to sarcasm or humour and did not hesitate to be partial in his definitions. The epithet he gave to lexicographer, for instance, is famous even in our time: a lexicographer was 'a writer of dictionaries, a harmless drudge ...'. The dictionary dealt with separate words only, almost no set expressions were entered. Pronunciation was not marked, because S.

Johnson was keenly aware of the wide variety of the English pronunciation and thought it impossible to set up a standard there; he paid attention only to those aspects of vocabulary where he believed he could improve linguistic usage. S. Johnson's influence was tremendous. He remained the unquestionable authority on style and diction for more than 75 years. The result was a lofty bookish style which received the name of "Johnsonian" or "Johnsonese". As to pronunciation, attention was turned to it somewhat later. A pronouncing dictionary that must be mentioned first was published in 1780 by Thomas Sheridan, grandfather of the great dramatist.

In 1791 appeared "The Critical Pronouncing Dictionary and Expositor of the English Language" by John Walker, an actor. The vogue of this second dictionary was very great, and in later publications Walker's pronunciations were inserted into S. Johnson's text — a further step to a unilingual dictionary in its present-day form. The Golden Age of English lexicography began in the last quarter of the 19th century when the English Philological

Society started work on compiling what is now known as "The Oxford English Dictionary" (OED), but was originally named "New English Dictionary on Historical Principles".

It is still occasionally referred to as NED. The purpose of this monumental work is to trace the development of English words from their form in Old English, and if they were not found in Old English, to show when they were introduced into the language, and also to show the development of each meaning and its historical relation to other meanings of the same word. For words and meanings which have become obsolete the date of the latest occurrence is given. All this is done by means of dated quotations ranging from the oldest to recent appearances of the words in question.

The English of G. Chaucer, of the "Bible" and of W. Shakespeare is given as much attention as that of the most modern authors. The dictionary includes spellings, pronunciations and detailed etymologies. The completion of the work required more than 75 years. The result is a kind of encyclopaedia of language used not only for reference purposes but also as a basis for lexicological research. The lexicographic concept here is very different from the prescriptive tradition of Dr S. Johnson: the lexicographer is the objective recorder of the language.

The purpose of OED, as stated by its editors, has nothing to do with prescription or proscription of any kind. The conception of this new type of dictionary was born in a discussion at the English Philological Society. It was suggested by Frederick Furnivall, later its second titular editor, to Richard Trench, the author of the first book on lexicology of the English language.

Richard Trench read before the society his paper " On Some Deficiencies in our English Dictionaries", and that was how the big enterprise was started.

At once the Philological Society set to work to gather the material, volunteers offered to help by collecting quotations. Dictionary-making became a sort of national enterprise. A special committee prepared a list of books to be read and assigned them to the volunteers, sending them also special standard slips for quotations. By 1881 the number of readers was 800, and they sent in many thousands of slips. The tremendous amount of work done by these volunteers testifies to the keen interest the English take in their language.

The first part of the Dictionary appeared in 1884 and the last in 1928. Later it was issued in twelve volumes and in order to accommodate new words a three volume Supplement was issued in 1933. These volumes were revised in the seventies. Nearly all the material of the original Supplement was retained and a large body of the most recent accessions to the English language added. The principles, structure and scope of " The Oxford English Dictionary", its merits and demerits are discussed in the most comprehensive treaty by L. V. Malakhovsky. Its prestige is enormous.

It is considered superior to corresponding major dictionaries for other languages. The Oxford University Press published different abridged versions. " The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles" formerly appeared in two volumes, now printed on thinner paper it is bound in one volume of 2, 538 pages. It differs from the complete edition in that it contains a smaller number of quotations. It keeps to all the main principles of historical presentation and covers not only the current literary and colloquial English but also its previous stages.

Words are defined and illustrated with key quotations. "The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English" was first published in 1911, i. e. before the work on the main version was completed. It is not a historical dictionary but one of current usage. A still shorter form is "The Pocket Oxford Dictionary". Another big dictionary, also created by joined effort of enthusiasts, is Joseph Wright's "English Dialect Dictionary". Before this dictionary could be started upon, a thorough study of English dialects had to be completed.

With this aim in view W. W. Skeat, famous for his "Etymological English Dictionary" founded the English Dialect Society as far back as 1873. Dialects are of great importance for the historical study of the language. In the 19th century they were very pronounced though now they are almost disappearing. The Society existed till 1896 and issued 80 publications, mostly monographs. Curiously enough, the first American dictionary of the English language was compiled by a man whose name was also Samuel Johnson. Samuel Johnson Jr. a Connecticut schoolmaster, published in 1798 a small book entitled "A School Dictionary". This book was followed in 1800 by another dictionary by the same author, which showed already some signs of Americanisation. It included, for instance, words like tomahawk and wampum, borrowed into English from the Indian languages. It was Noah Webster, universally considered to be the father of American lexicography, who emphatically broke away from English idiom, and embodied in his book the specifically American usage of his time.

His great work, "The American Dictionary of the English Language", appeared in two volumes in 1828 and later sustained numerous revised and enlarged editions. In many respects N. Webster follows the lead of Dr S.

Johnson (the British lexicographer). But he has also improved and corrected many of S. Johnson's etymologies and his definitions are often more exact. N. Webster attempted to simplify the spelling and pronunciation that were current in the USA of the period. He devoted many years to the collection of words and the preparation of more accurate definitions. N.

Webster realised the importance of language for the development of a nation, and devoted his energy to giving the American English the status of an independent language, distinct from British English. At that time the idea was progressive as it helped the unification of separate states into one federation. The tendency became reactionary later on, when some modern linguists like H. Mencken shaped it into the theory of a separate American language, not only different from British English, but surpassing it in efficiency and therefore deserving to dominate and supersede all the languages of the world.

Even if we keep within purely linguistic or purely lexical concepts, we shall readily see that the difference is not so great as to warrant American English the rank of a separate language, not a variant of English (see p. 265). The set of morphemes is the same. Some words have acquired a new meaning on American soil and this meaning has or has not penetrated into British English. Other words kept their earlier meanings that are obsolete and not used in Great Britain. As civilisation progressed different names were given to new inventions on either side of the Atlantic. Words were borrowed from different Indian languages and from Spanish.

All these had to be recorded in a dictionary and so accounted for the existence of specific American lexicography. The world of today with its ever-

growing efficiency and intensity of communication and personal contacts, with its press, radio and television creates conditions which tend to foster not an isolation of dialects and variants but, on the contrary, their mutual penetration and integration. Later on, the title "International Dictionary of the English Language" was adopted, and in the latest edition not Americanisms but words not used in America (Britishisms) are marked off.

N. Webster's dictionary enjoyed great popularity from its first editions. This popularity was due not only to the accuracy and clarity of definitions but also to the richness of additional information of encyclopaedic character, which had become a tradition in American lexicography. As a dictionary N. Webster's book aims to treat the entire vocabulary of the language providing definitions, pronunciation and etymology. As an encyclopaedia it gives explanations about things named, including scientific and technical subjects.

It does so more concisely than a full-scale encyclopaedia, but it is worthy of note that the definitions are as a rule up-to-date and rigorous scientifically. Soon after N. Webster's death two printers and booksellers of Massachusetts, George and Charles Merriam, secured the rights of his dictionary from his family and started the publication of revised single volume editions under the name "Merriam-Webster". The staff working for the modern editions is a big institution numbering hundreds of specialists in different branches of human activity.

It is important to note that the name "Webster" may be attached for publicity's sake by anyone to any dictionary. Many publishers concerned with their profits have taken this opportunity to issue dictionaries called "Webster's". Some of the books so named are cheaply-made reprints of old

editions, others are said to be entirely new works. The practice of advertising by coupling N. Webster's name to a dictionary which has no connection with him, continues up to the present day. A complete revision of N. Webster's dictionary is achieved with a certain degree of regularity.

The recent " Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language" has called forth much comment, both favourable and unfavourable. It has been greatly changed as compared with the previous edition, in word selection as well as in other matters. The emphasis is on the present-day state of the language. The number of illustrative quotations is increased. To accommodate the great number of new words and meanings without increasing the bulk of the volume, the editors excluded much encyclopaedic material.

The other great American dictionaries are the " Century Dictionary", first completed in 1891; " Funk and Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary", first completed in 1895; the " Random House Dictionary of the English Language", completed in 1967; " The Heritage Illustrated Dictionary of the English Language", first published in 1969, and C. L. Barnhart's et al. " The World Book Dictionary" presenting a synchronic review of the language in the 20th century. The first three continue to appear in variously named subsequent editions including abridged versions.

Many small handy popular dictionaries for office, school and home use are prepared to meet the demand in reference books on spelling, pronunciation, meaning and usage. An adequate idea of the dictionaries cannot be formed from a mere description and it is no substitute for actually using them. To conclude we would like to mention that for a specialist in linguistics and

ateacherof foreign languages systematic work with a good dictionary in conjunction with his reading is an absolute necessity.