ARLETA ADAMSKA-SAŁACIAK
Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań
arleta@wa.amu.edu.pl

DICTIONARY DEFINITIONS: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS*

Abstract

The aim of the present article is threefold: to examine certain problems inherent in dictionary defining; to discuss the most important changes that have been implemented as solutions to some of the problems; to evaluate the new problems which have arisen as side effects of the solutions. Finally, the historical precedents of a number of the alternative defining techniques are also considered, in an attempt to put the issue into perspective.

0. Introduction

Numerous problems regarding definitions have been identified over the past decades and many different ways of dealing with them have been proposed. In order to maintain a specific focus, only lexicographic definitions will be examined (and not, for instance, logical definitions),[1] and only principled definitional problems will be addressed (as opposed to flaws which may be the result of poor lexicographic practice).

---

*   The paper is a written version of the plenary address delivered on 19 April 2012 at the 21st Annual Conference of the Polish Association for the Study of English (PASE) in Kraków.

[1]   Zgusta (1971:252f) characterises the difference between the logical and the lexicographic definition as follows:

> whereas the logical definition must unequivocally identify the defined object (the *definiendum*) in such a way that it is both put in a definite contrast against everything else that is definable and positively and unequivocally characterized as a member of the closest class, the lexicographic definition enumerates only the most important semantic features of the defined lexical unit which suffice to differentiate it from other units.

Similarly, the solutions discussed will be restricted to those arrived at within lexicography (rather than within linguistics or philosophy),[2] and only improvements to the definition itself will be considered (rather than modifications to other elements of the microstructure, such as usage labels, examples, or pictorial illustrations). It should also be emphasised that only dictionaries for human users, and not dictionaries for computer applications, will be examined.

Despite this, we cannot ignore the fact that, historically, dictionary definitions have their roots in philosophy. Consequently, most of the problems identified below arise, one way or another, from the limitations of the definitional format which for centuries had remained unchallenged in the West: the classical (analytical, Aristotelian) definition. This is the kind where the *definiendum* (the item being defined) is first subsumed under a more general category and then circumscribed with the help of the feature(s) necessary to distinguish it from other members of that category. Thus, the *definiens* (the right-hand side, defining, part of the definition) consists of a hyperonym of the definiendum – i.e., the name of the closest superordinate category (*genus proximum*) – and a small set of distinguishing features (*differentiae specificae*). The following is a simple example:

square rectangle whose sides are of equal length,

where *square* is the definiendum, *rectangle* – the genus proximum, and the rest of the definiens specifies the differentia (a single one being sufficient in this case).

1. Problems and solutions

1.1. Circularity

Two kinds of definitional circularity are commonly recognised: direct and indirect. The former – also called an internal circle (Svensén 2009: 226) – occurs when a lexical item is defined by itself (A=…A…), as in:

branch a part of a tree that grows out from the TRUNK (= main stem) and that has leaves, fruit, and smaller branches growing from it (*LDOCE5*)[3]

It is a common belief among metalexicographers that confusing the two types leads to problems:

[a]s Pascal observed, the entire defining tradition developed by logicians and philosophers lies outside that of dictionaries. (…) much confusion has arisen as a result of the efforts of many later thinkers, especially Leibniz, to apply this tradition to dictionaries (Rey 2000: 7).

[2] Proposals put forward by linguists (e.g. Wierzbicka 1985) are primarily of interest to (and interpretable by) other linguists, without being directly applicable to the compilation of general-purpose dictionaries.

[3] Throughout, only those parts of the definitions are quoted which are relevant to the discussion. All grammatical and phonetic information is omitted. Dictionary titles are given in full in the References.

The latter – alternatively known as an external circle – does not remain within the confines of a single definition, but affects at least two definitions, with two or more lexical items being used to define each other, e.g.:

crash an accident in which a vehicle violently hits something else   (A = …B…)

accident a crash involving cars, trains, planes etc.   (B = …A…)

(*LDOCE4*)

The circle can, of course, be extended, e.g. A = …B…, B = …C…, C = …D…, D = …A….

No principled remedy for circularity is known. Indirect circularity cannot be avoided when the presentation language (i.e. the language of description) of a particular dictionary is the same as its object language (i.e. the language being described). As a result, all monolingual dictionaries suffer from circularity; it is just a question of the size of the circle. Naturally, the larger the circle, the less likely it is to be noticed by the user.

It goes without saying that circularity (especially direct) should be avoided whenever possible – and it certainly would have been possible in the two examples just quoted. Even so, we suggest that, while unacceptable to the logician, for the average dictionary user a vicious circle is less of a problem than is commonly assumed.[4] For instance, the definition of *branch* above, although circular, is both interpretable and informative. The definitions of *crash* and *accident*, while more difficult to defend, are not completely without merit, either: a learner who knows the meaning of one of the nouns may still learn something from the definition of the other (and they will probably have no need to consult a definition of a familiar item, thus remaining unaware of the circularity). All of this is not meant to condone definitional circularity as such, merely to argue that, while undesirable, it need not always be detrimental to understanding.

1.2. Obscurity

Unlike circularity, whose dangers tend to be exaggerated in the metalexicographic literature, obscurity really is a serious problem. As famously declared by Dr Johnson (1755: Preface), "[t]o explain requires the use of terms less abstruse than that which is to be explained" – a maxim as self-evident as it is difficult to follow.

1.2.1. Defining *obscurum per obscurius*

The abstruseness Johnson warned against is tantamount to committing the logical error of defining the incomprehensible by the still less comprehensible (*obscurum per obscurius*). To take the definition of *sand* below as an example, certain elements

---

[4] Circularity is anathema not only to logicians and logically-minded linguists (like e.g. Wierzbicka 1992–1993), but also to many lexicographers. Landau (2001: 157), for instance, is convinced that "circularity does not just make things difficult – it makes them impossible. No amount of diligence on the part of the reader can penetrate the barrier of circularity".

of the definiens (e.g. *comminuted*, *silicious*) are much more difficult and much less used than the definiendum:

> **sand** a material consisting of comminuted fragments and water-worn particles of rocks (mainly silicious) finer than those of which gravel is composed (*OED3*)

This kind of obscurity follows from the nature of things. It cannot be avoided in the case of simple definienda, that is, basic, everyday words, which are impossible to paraphrase using words which are even simpler.[5] Even so, it is worth noting that in native-speaker dictionaries a degree of obscurity is not just inevitable, but probably expected as well. If, for whatever reason, a speaker of English decides to look up *sand* in a dictionary, they presumably are searching for more than an explanation of what the word means. They are, therefore, unlikely to be surprised when confronted by rarer, more difficult words (though not necessarily by *comminuted*!), and will in all likelihood be prepared for the necessity of performing double or even multiple lookup.

The situation is, of course, very different in the case of foreign users, for whom obscurity is a serious, often insurmountable, obstacle. This is probably why attempts at preventing it have come mainly from the compilers of monolingual learners' dictionaries (MLDs). Before discussing these attempts, however, it is necessary to take a brief look at another common manifestation of definitional obscurity.

1.2.2. Lexicographese

In addition to the obscurity which is an inherent aspect of the defining enterprise, there is yet another kind, born in response to the problem of space limitations in (print) dictionaries. In an effort to ensure optimum use of space, different space-saving devices have been introduced – e.g. abbreviations, slashes, and tildes; omitting articles; placing additional or optional information in parentheses – with the result that the elliptical language of dictionary definitions has gradually evolved into something markedly different from the way people normally write, let alone speak. Critics (e.g. Hanks 1987) have dubbed this type of language *lexicographese* or *dictionarese*.

As with definitions that are guilty of *obscurum per obscurius*, those couched in lexicographese pose a particular difficulty for language learners, who, in addition to having to cope with a foreign language, need to master this special code. Even if they

---

[5]   Logically, one possibility would be to refrain from defining such words altogether, in line with what has been proposed, among others, by Wierzbicka (1997: 25):

> One cannot define ALL words because the very idea of 'defining' implies that there is not only something to be defined (a definiendum) but also something to define it with (a definiens, or rather, a set of 'definienses'). The elements which can be used to define the meaning of words (or any other meanings) cannot be defined themselves; rather, they must be accepted as 'indefinibilia', that is, as semantic primes, in terms of which all complex meanings can be coherently represented.

This is a non-starter for general-purpose dictionaries, which have to define, if not ALL words, then certainly the most common ones, and those include a large proportion of simple, basic vocabulary.

are already familiar with some of the conventions, having used dictionaries of their native tongue, lexicographese places an extra burden on them. The following definition, taken from a dictionary famous for its highly condensed style, gives us a taste of the problem:

> **wise** (Of person) having, (of action, course of action, speech, opinion, etc.) dictated by or in harmony with or showing, experience and knowledge judiciously applied; …
> (*COD7*)

1.2.3. Minimising obscurity

It will have become clear by now that, like circularity, definitional obscurity cannot be completely eliminated. Unlike with circularity, however, there are ways of exercising a level of damage control.

1.2.3.1. Controlled defining vocabulary

In order to minimise the danger of *obscurum per obscurius*, the lexicographer can adhere to a controlled defining vocabulary (DV), i.e. not go beyond an agreed upon list of words admissible in the definiens. The underlying assumption is that the words included in such a list will be familiar to the target user of the dictionary.

The use of a DV was pioneered in 1935 by *The New Method English Dictionary*, the first monolingual English learners' dictionary (Cowie 1990: 684). As stated in its preface,

> [t]his English Dictionary is written especially for the foreigner. It explains to him, in words which he knows, the meaning of words and idioms which he does not know (*NMED*: iv).

As few as 1,490 words were used in *NMED* to define around 24,000 vocabulary items.

NMED's innovation remained an isolated occurrence for over forty years. It was only after the idea of a restricted defining vocabulary was (re)introduced in 1978 by the newly published *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* that it managed to gain the attention it deserved. Today, most English MLDs use defining vocabularies which range in size from 2,000 to 3,500 words (to define ca 80,000 items). Below is a recent example:

> **sand** a substance consisting of very small pieces of rocks and minerals, that forms beaches and deserts (*LDOCE5*)

It would be absurd to claim that the use of a DV has freed this definition from obscurity: a learner of English who does not know what *sand* means will probably not know the meanings of some of the words used in the definiens either. Still, accepting that obscurity is a matter of degree, it is hard to see what else could have been done to reduce it even further.

1.2.3.2. Full-sentence definition

The credit for doing the most to eliminate lexicographese goes to the *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary*. As explained in detail by Hanks (1987),

in striving to make definitions more user-friendly, *COBUILD* moved away from the classical definition and towards what were believed to be naturally occurring, folk defining strategies. The result was the so-called contextual or full-sentence definition (FSD), as illustrated below:

> **wise** Someone who is wise is able to use their experience and knowledge in order to make sensible or reasonable decisions or judgements.
>
> **dream** When you dream, you see imaginary pictures and events in your mind while you are asleep.
>
> **kick** If you kick someone or something, you hit them forcefully with your foot.
>
> **kill** To kill a person, animal, plant, or other living thing means to cause the person or thing to die.
>
> *(COBUILD1)*

Looking at these examples, one can see not only that they each take the form of a full sentence, but also that they share a number of features: no abbreviations, parentheses, or tildes are allowed; the definiendum is always repeated in the left-hand side part of the definiens, demonstrating how the headword behaves in context; second person pronouns are used to address the reader directly, as if talking to them. The definitions of verbs vary slightly, depending on the kind of action a particular verb describes. The overall effect may still not be the ideal which FSDs aim at – i.e. what a parent would say to a child, or a teacher to a student, when explaining the meaning of a word – but it is certainly very different from lexicographese.

1.3. Missing hyperonyms

1.3.1. Gaps in hierarchies

The classical Aristotelian definition is most suitable for those sections of the lexicon which display clear hierarchical organisation. As noted by Schreyer (1992: 37), already Locke saw that consistent defining by *genus* and *differentia* presupposed a consistently hierarchical, gap-free system of meanings – hardly a realistic assumption, given that "languages are not always so made according to the rules of logic that every term can have its signification exactly and clearly expressed by two others" (Locke 1690: III, iii, 10). Of the two constituents of a classical definiens, it is the genus term (hyperonym) which causes more problems, often proving either extremely elusive or simply non-existent. Even concrete nouns, the category with which the classical definition allegedly copes best, are not completely immune to this difficulty.

It might seem that the impossibility of finding a suitable hyperonym is a problem for dictionary compilers rather than their users. In fact, things are often more complicated. This is because the hyperonym problem sometimes overlaps with the threat of obscurity, forcing the lexicographer to choose between a genus term which is familiar but inaccurate and one which is correct but unfamiliar. Thus, the word *cup* is defined as a *container* in all MLDs, even though a cup is, at best, a marginal member of the container category. Cups belong to the category of drinking vessels,

but calling a cup a *drinking vessel* in a learner's dictionary would definitely be counterproductive. (Admittedly, most users will not worry about a cup being called a container, yet those who do stop to consider the matter or even undertake further investigations may be surprised not to find an image of a cup among the twenty-six pictures illustrating the concept of a container in *MEDAL2* and *LDOCE5*.)[6]

1.3.2. Dispensing with hyperonyms

The obvious solution to the problem is to resort to a definitional format which can do without hyperonyms. Two of the strategies that meet this requirement will be discussed below.[7]

1.3.2.1. Extensional definition

This type of definition proves especially helpful in cases when the definiendum is a general category, hard to subsume under a yet more general one. An extensional definition gives examples of the headword's range of denotation, i.e. points to objects in the world to which the word can be applied.[8] Thus, instead of aiming at a hyperonym of the headword, it lists some of its hyponyms – or, rather than going up one level, it descends a step down from the level at which the definiendum is situated.

An extensional definition can be used either on its own or in tandem with (some elements of) an intensional definition, e.g.:

> **furniture** the chairs, tables, beds, cupboards etc that you put in a room or house so that you can live in it (*MEDAL2*)

The part up to and including *etc* is an extensional definition; the rest is the differentia specifica of a classical (intensional) definition. Compare this with the example below, which starts as an intensional definition, with a genus term, and continues extensionally, with a list of typical subordinates:

> **furniture** large objects such as chairs, tables, beds, and cupboards (*LDOCE5*)

Given that *large objects* is not a very convincing hyperonym of *furniture* (it is too general and carries no information which would not already be conveyed by the hyponyms), the *MEDAL2* definition seems preferable.

1.3.2.2. Single-clause *when*-definition[9]

The single-clause definition is another technique which does not rely on the presence of a hyperonym. Some MLDs resort to it when defining abstract nouns, e.g.:

---

6   See Adamska-Sałaciak (2010) for a more extensive background to the discussion.

7   Synthetic definition, i.e. definition via a synonym or a series of synonyms, is also a possibility in some cases.

8   Unlike an intensional definition, which tries to capture the essence of the category named by the definiendum, usually by supplying its genus proximum and differentiae.

9   The term *single clause* when-*definition* was coined by Lew and Dziemianko (2006). The definition in question does not always have to be introduced by *when*, although this is by far the most frequent case.

> **revival** when something becomes popular again (*LDOCE4*)
>
> **size** how large or small something is (*MEDAL2*)

Like the full-sentence definition, this approach is sometimes taken to be based on what happens in spontaneous, folk defining.[10]

1.4. Neglecting non-denotative meaning

Semanticists may not be in complete agreement as to the exact nature of meaning, but one aspect seems fairly uncontroversial: whatever meaning is, it is not denotation alone. Therefore, if dictionary definitions are to supply users with information about the meanings of lexical items, they cannot restrict themselves to specifying their conditions for denotation. Unfortunately, sometimes that is all they do.

1.4.1. Limitations of referent-based definitions

The centrality of denotation in dictionary definitions is reflected in the frequent reduction of definitional or 'dictionary' meaning to denotative meaning.[11] This seems to be another by-product of the traditional genus-cum-differentia model, which is clearly referent-oriented. By contrast, aspects such as expressive and evocative meaning or vital pragmatic information are frequently overlooked or, at best, marginalised. The problem is especially acute when the dictionary attempts to explain the meaning of a fixed (often figurative) expression through a short (always literal) paraphrase. Occasionally, a usage label (e.g. *informal, pejorative, humorous*) may be of help, but labels are, as a rule, too crude when it comes to pinpointing the subtleties of connotative and attitudinal meaning.

There are good reasons why people use pre-constructed phrases instead of saying 'the same thing' directly, 'in their own words'. Fixed expressions allow speakers to distance themselves from what they are saying, to take the edge off whatever it is they wish to communicate by filtering it through shared cultural experience and social values. Thanks to this indirectness, such expressions can function as politeness devices, creating solidarity, expressing sympathy, and mitigating judgements (Moon 1998: 260–269). Capturing all this in a conventional, formulaic definition is a truly challenging task.

1.4.2. Going beyond denotation

What we need in order to capture non-denotative meaning is, essentially, a definition capable of defining a word without describing the thing behind the word.

---

[10]   The subject of folk defining has not been sufficiently explored. For an early discussion, see Manes (1980); for the results of a recent experimental study, see Fabiszewski-Jaworski (2011).

[11]   Cf. the following passage from an introduction to semiotics:

'Denotation' tends to be described as the definitional, 'literal', 'obvious' or 'commonsense' meaning of a sign. In the case of linguistic signs, the denotative meaning is what the dictionary attempts to provide (Chandler 2002: 140).

Such definitions – sometimes called metalinguistic (Geeraerts 2003: 87) – have long been used in the treatment of lexical items devoid of referents, such as grammatical (function) words or words whose meaning is solely pragmatic (e.g. *hello, sorry*). These days, they are also used increasingly often – though perhaps not often enough – for dealing with conventional multi-word units.

Thus, instead of defining an expression by describing its referent (i.e. the thing or situation named), a metalinguistic definition focuses on how the expression is used. It starts with a phrase such as: "(is) used to/for…", "when you/people say…", "you call sb a…", and proceeds to specify the function(s) which the expression serves in communication. Many metalinguistic definitions are at the same time full-sentence definitions; some consist of more than one sentence. As an illustration, let us look at how one leading MLD explains the apparently simple phrase *just (good) friends* (in the entry for *friend*), offering valuable pragmatic information about the sort of situation in which the phrase is conventionally used and simultaneously – albeit indirectly – about the likely attitude of the speaker:

> **just (good) friends** used for emphasizing that two people are not having a romantic relationship. People sometimes use this expression to suggest that two people really are having a romantic relationship, even though they claim they are not. (*MEDAL2*)

A definition like this would have been unimaginable, say, forty years ago, when dictionaries were still heavily restrained by expectations of presentational economy. It would have been perceived as too 'chatty', not streamlined or elegant enough – not to mention the fact that, because *just (good) friends* is a seemingly transparent phrase, most dictionaries would not have bothered to record it at all.

1.5. Encyclopaedic 'contamination'

The difficulties in conveying non-denotative meaning are not the only troublesome consequence of the referent-oriented nature of the classical definition format. A related problem is how to separate linguistic from encyclopaedic information in the definitions of nouns (the only part of speech featuring in both kinds of reference work). To be precise, this is only a problem for those who believe in the necessity of such a separation, but until recently that meant almost everyone.[12]

Any attempt to ensure that no encyclopedic information whatsoever finds its way into dictionary definitions is, of course, doomed to failure. Rey (2000: 2) appears to be stating the obvious when he says that

> [t]he classical opposition between definitions of words and definitions of things, discussed especially in the 17th and 18th centuries, is hardly satisfactory (…) 'word' and 'thing' are too brutally contrasted.

---

[12]   In some lexicographic traditions, a distinction is made between two types of dictionaries: those more strictly linguistic and those that allow a reasonable amount of encyclopaedic information. Accordingly, the French distinguish between *dictionnaires de mots* and *dictionnaires de choses*; the Germans have *Sprachwörterbücher* and *Sachwörterbücher*.

All the same, much has been written about how one should define so-called nat-
ural-kind words (names of plants, animals, minerals) without contaminating the
purely linguistic definition with information which belongs in an encyclopaedia. It is
not beyond the realms of possibility that certain pioneers of English lexicography
may have been trying to address this problem when they produced the following
definitions:

>   **Dog,** a beast (Kersey 1702)
>
>   **Cat,** a well-known creature (Kersey 1708)
>
>   **Horse,** a beast well known (Bailey 1721)[13]

However, it is rather unlikely that such definitions actually were the result of their
authors' respect for the dictionary-encyclopaedia boundary. Kersey and Bailey
probably considered it pointless to invest more effort in defining common words
which, they suspected, no-one would ever look up.

Historical considerations aside, the controversy over natural-kind words – and,
in general, over what constitutes linguistic as opposed to encyclopaedic knowledge –
is of little interest to ordinary dictionary users. It is also not a problem for those
strands of contemporary linguistics (such as cognitive semantics) which believe that
the two kinds of knowledge form a continuum.

In sum, rather like the problem of circularity, this, too, appears to have been
blown out of proportion.[14] The dictionary definition of a particular word should
not be identical to the definition of the same word in an encyclopedia, but that can
be achieved fairly easily, without going to extremes. It seems reasonable to include
only as much extralinguistic information in the definition as is likely to be known
to the average native speaker and refrain from citing facts known only to experts
(even if the lexicographer happens to be in possession of such facts and is, therefore,
tempted to impart the knowledge to his readers).

1.6.   Alienating the user

1.6.1.   Conflicting worldviews

While the problem of distinguishing between linguistic and encyclopaedic knowl-
edge is somewhat academic, taking dictionary users' worldviews into account seems
very real by comparison. It is the only problem among those discussed which is not
a consequence of the classical definition format, but follows directly from the fact
that lexicographers, like dictionary users, are human.

Dictionaries are inevitably ethnocentric, their authors being limited by their own
experience of the world and their beliefs about it. Bias can be discerned especially

---

[13]   Kersey (1708) uses this strategy several times, e.g. to define *fly*, *hare*, *sheep*, *asparagus*, *saffron*
("a well known plant"), *nettle* ("a well known herb"), *elder* ("a well known shrub"). Bailey
employs it, among others, for *alder, almond, ash, ass, bee, blackbird, crow, goose, mint, mouse*;
interestingly, he also uses it once for the name of an artefact: *lamp* ("a light well known").

[14]   For more arguments, see Adamska-Sałaciak (2006: 54f.).

with regard to politics, race, gender, and religion. Of the many possible ideological problems (see e.g. Moon 1989), only that of culturally determined beliefs will be tackled below. It is an especially sensitive issue in communities without a developed dictionary culture, where failure to reflect the collective worldview may result in a wholesale rejection of the dictionary. Take the following two examples:

> **Xhosa** a member of a cattle-rearing Negroid people of southern Africa, living chiefly in South Africa

> **Zulu** a member of a tall Negroid people of SE Africa, living chiefly in South Africa, who became dominant during the 19th century due to a warrior-clan system organized by the powerful leader, Shaka

> (*CEDO*)

While informative to the outsider, these definitions are potentially offensive to the people they describe, especially when compared with definitions of other ethnic groups in the same dictionary. Murphy (1998: 15) thinks that a kind of white norm must be at work here, as only non-Whites are described using phenotypical, genotypical, historical, and cultural (rather than solely geographical) criteria. This can be read as implying that people of colour are somehow abnormal and therefore worthy of comment.

Or consider the following:

> **tokoloshe** an evil spirit widely believed in by both urban and rural Africans; it is invoked in witchcraft and offered as an extenuating circumstance in criminal cases (*DSAE3*)

Again, the definition is superficially innocuous and interesting to a non-African. Africans, on the other hand, may find it less than satisfactory. Of the many beliefs associated with the tokoloshe, that elevated to a defining attribute is the fact that the spirit's influence is cited in courts of law as an explanation for criminal behaviour. This choice

> reflects the lexicographer's bias as a cultural outsider in as much as it is not linked to or contextualized within the religious model of spiritual possession which is part and parcel of a number of traditional African religions (Swanepoel 2005: 191f.).

Since the loss of personal agency through spiritual possession is experienced as a reality in those religions, believers in the tokoloshe's power may see the *DSAE3* definition as misrepresenting their world.

Such issues are extremely relevant in the context of MLDs, which are aimed at learners of English worldwide, and indeed are equally important in any dictionary likely to be used in a multicultural community.

1.6.2. Preventing user alienation

A great deal of caution and sensitivity is required of any lexicographer hoping to negotiate the minefield of dearly held beliefs, folk truths, and age-old prejudices which

are part of the target users' culture.[15] No ready-made blueprint exists for steering clear of the danger zones. There, is, however, a simple rule of thumb which it might be helpful to follow: dispense extralinguistic information judiciously; when in doubt, assume that less is more. It is clear, therefore, that there is a close connection between this problem and the dictionary-encyclopaedia question discussed earlier.

Beyond that, the use of templates – also called 'pro-forma entries' (Atkins, Rundell 2008: 123) – seems a good idea. Thus, for instance, if all the definitions of ethnic groups are prepared according to the same template, users will have no cause to complain that their nationality, race, or ethnicity has been treated unfairly. Adhering to templates entails using the same ontological markers (Swanepoel 2005) – e.g. "in X religion…", "is believed/considered to be" (instead of "is") – for items of similar status. While this will probably not be enough to ensure that the dictionary does not privilege any single belief system (especially not that subscribed to by the lexicographer!), it is definitely a step in the right direction, and one that is relatively easy to take.

2. New problems

Our examination of definitional problems and how they can be resolved would not be complete without acknowledging that the proposed solutions have led to certain new problems.

2.1. The straitjacket of defining vocabularies

Definitions written with the help of a defining vocabulary are at times imprecise and/or clumsy. Due to the limited lexical resources on which the lexicographer is obliged to rely, they may occasionally sound childish, creating the impression that the dictionary is talking down to the user. The following examples, taken, respectively, from the first and the most recent edition of *LDOCE*, are a case in point:

> **syringe** a sort of pipe, used in science and medicine, into which liquid can be drawn and from which it can be pushed out in a particular direction (*LDOCE1*)

> **thyme** a plant used for giving food a special taste (*LDOCE5*)

While a lot can be done – and has, in fact, been done in the later editions of *LDOCE* – to improve the definition of *syringe*, that of *thyme* is probably as good as it can be under the circumstances, as words such as *herb* or *flavour* fall outside the permitted range of vocabulary.

2.2. The long-windedness of full-sentence definitions

The considerable length of FSDs may – in addition to reducing the overall coverage of the (printed) dictionary – lead to difficulties with interpretation. Even in the

---

[15]   For a particularly striking example of lexicographer sensitivity (which was put to the test when preparing a dictionary of an Australian aboriginal language), see Zgusta (2006: 91).

absence of any particularly complex syntactic structures, the sheer length of the entry can prove an obstacle to comprehension, especially for users whose native language is typologically distant from the language of the dictionary. For instance, some learners may struggle with anaphora resolution, wondering what the pronouns *it* and *them* refer to in the following:

> You say that something is **a load of rubbish**, **a load of junk** etc or that a group of people are **a load of tramps**, **a load of has-beens**, etc, as a way of showing your disapproval of it or them. (*COBUILD1*)[16]

2.3. The misleading syntax of single-clause *when*-definitions

An obvious deficiency of this type of definition is that it does not meet the substitutability requirement. In order for the definiens and the definiendum to be interchangeable in a sentence, they must belong to the same grammatical category. The single-clause definition does not permit this, as its definiendum is a noun, while its definiens is a clause.

Admittedly, substitutability is more of a logical requirement than something dictionary users will normally need to explore. There is also, however, a practical dimension. As demonstrated in a series of experimental studies by Lew and Dziemianko (2006), Polish learners of English are significantly less successful in identifying the headword's part of speech in single-clause definitions than in classical definitions. Having said that, syntactic opacity seems a small price to pay when one considers the benefits of single-clause definitions (especially as part-of-speech information is explicitly conveyed by grammar codes in a standard dictionary entry).

3. Historical precedents

Before summing up, it may be instructive to look at certain intriguing precedents of the modern definitional devices that are to be found in reference works of the past.

3.1. Single-clause *wh*-definitions

Single-clause definitions starting with *when, where, whereupon, whereby*, etc, were used in the Latin-English dictionary of Thomas Elyot (1538) – not just for dealing with abstract nouns, but also for adjectives, adverbs, verbs, and longer phrases. Among the numerous examples quoted by Stein (2011) are:

> **Colluuies**, whan the erthe is couered with water by greatte floodes

> **Pedatim**, where one foote goeth with the other, Foote by fote

---

[16] Nakamoto (1998) has further examples of personal pronouns in definitions which may confuse foreign learners of English. For a more complete discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of FSDs, see Rundell (2006).

Nauigabilis, **le**, where a shyppe maye passe, Nauigable

Praesidero, **are**, where tempest commeth very soone, and before the tyme accustomed

Orbem facere, where people doo gather them rounde togyther in battayle

Elisha Coles (1676) also used *wh*-definitions, albeit for a markedly different purpose than that which is behind their use in the modern MLDs. According to Osselton (2007: 393), most of Coles' definitions were

truncated versions of more expansive and grammatically explicit entries taken from his main source-book, the dictionary of Edward Phillips, or from contemporary legal dictionaries and glossaries of nautical terms, dialect, etc.

Here are some of the examples quoted by Osselton (2007: 394ff):

Obtuse angle, when two lines include more than a square.

Fall off, when the ship keeps not near enough to the wind.

Livery-stable, where Horses of Strangers stand at.

Judas tree, (with broad leaves) whereon he is supposed (by some) to hang himself.

Lay-land, which lies untilled.

Barresters, -rasters, who (after 7 years study) are admitted to the bar.

Fleawort, whose seed resembles a flea in bigness and colour.

3.2. Extensional and encyclopaedic definitions

Sir Thomas Elyot and Elisha Coles are not exactly household names; Dr Samuel Johnson definitely is. Indeed, it is quite well known that, compared to later lexicographers, Johnson (1755) liked to use a fairly free, discursive style. Also, in the manner of his contemporaries, he did not pretend that his definitions had nothing to do with the extent of his own knowledge or his personal opinions (see e.g. Moon 1989: 71). To which we may add, in the context of the present discussion, that he did not avoid extensional definitions or steer clear of encyclopaedic information, as the following, much-quoted definition testifies:

DOG, A domestick animal remarkably various in his species; comprising the mastiff, the spaniel, the buldog, the greyhound, the hound, the terrier, the cur, with many others. The larger sort are used as a guard; the less for sports.

Conclusions

One of the things we have tried to demonstrate is that not all the problems touched upon in the preceding sections are of equal importance. Thus, lexicographers do not need to lose sleep over indirect circularity or agonise over the impossibility of

separating linguistic from encyclopaedic information with surgical precision. By contrast, the threat of obscurity – a feature which can compromise the effectiveness of a definition – must be carefully addressed. Additionally, conveying non-denotative meaning and making sure definitions do not offend users' sensibilities both pose a major challenge.

As for the proposed solutions, it seems that in the main they have been remarkably successful, their benefits outweighing the few disadvantages. Some of the solutions are commonsensical, based on the (unspoken) assumption that, when compiling a dictionary for human users, the lexicographer should behave like a human. A few defining strategies popularised by the English MLDs can be considered a return to tradition (but a tradition from before the late 18th century, i.e. predating the advent of lexicographese). While postulating a straightforward causal connection would be too far-fetched (given that not many contemporary lexicographers are intimately familiar with the history of their discipline), it is still humbling to see how little is genuinely new. In any case, it is no longer unquestioningly assumed that all definitions must be of the Aristotelian kind,[17] and that is definitely a welcome development.

Finally, while the apparent historical precedents do not necessarily provide support for the use of any of the non-classical defining techniques today, it has to be stressed that arguments in their favour have come from other quarters as well. As shown by Geeraerts (2001), modern semantic theory has vindicated a number of alternative lexicographic practices, including the use of extensional definitions and the admission of encyclopaedic information into dictionaries.

References

Dictionaries

Bailey N. 1721. *An universal etymological English dictionary*. London.

CEDO = *Collins English dictionary online* [www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english].

COBUILD1 = Sinclair J. (ed.) 1987. *Collins COBUILD English language dictionary*. London.

COD7 = Fowler H.W., Fowler F.G. 1982. *The concise Oxford dictionary*. [7th edition]. Oxford.

Coles E. 1676. *An English dictionary*. London.

DSAE3 = Branford J. (ed.) 1987. *A dictionary of South African English*. [3rd edition]. Cape Town.

Elyot T. 1538. *The dictionarie of Syr Thomas Elyot Knyght*. London.

Johnson S. 1755. *A dictionary of the English language*. London. [www.johnsonsdictionary online.com].

Kersey J. 1702. *A new English dictionary*. London.

Kersey J. 1708. *Dictionarium Anglo-Britannicum*. London.

LDOCE1 = Procter P. (ed.) 1978. *Longman dictionary of contemporary English*. [1st edition]. Harlow.

LDOCE4 = Summers D. (ed.) 2003. *Longman dictionary of contemporary English*. [4th edition]. Harlow.

---

[17] Although the results of some recent studies (notably Fabiszewski-Jaworski 2011) strongly suggest that it is the format favoured in spontaneous defining as well.

LDOCE5 = Mayor M. (ed.) 2009. *Longman dictionary of contemporary English*. [5th edition].
   Harlow.
MEDAL2 = Rundell M. (ed.) 2007. *Macmillan English dictionary for advanced learners*.
   [2nd edition]. Oxford.
NMED = West M., Endicott J. (eds.) 1935. *The new method English dictionary*. London.
OALD7 = Wehmeier S. (ed.) 2005. *Oxford advanced learner's dictionary*. [7th edition]. Oxford.
OED3 = *Oxford English dictionary online*. [www.oed.com].

Other literature

Adamska-Sałaciak A. 2006. *Meaning and the bilingual dictionary: The case of English and
   Polish*. Frankfurt am Main.
Adamska-Sałaciak A. 2010. Why we need bilingual learners' dictionaries. – Kernerman I.,
   Bogaards P. (eds.) *English learners' dictionaries at the DSNA 2009*. Tel Aviv: 121–137.
Atkins B.T.S., Rundell M. 2008. *The Oxford guide to practical lexicography*. Oxford.
Chandler D. 2002. *Semiotics: The basics*. London.
Cowie A.P. 1990. Language as words: lexicography. – Collinge N.E. (ed.) *An encyclopedia of
   language*. London: 671–700.
Fabiszewski-Jaworski M. 2011. Spontaneous defining by native speakers of English. – Akasu K.,
   Uchida S. (eds.) *Asialex 2011 proceedings lexicography: Theoretical and practical perspec-
   tives*. Kyoto: 102–109.
Geeraerts D. 2001. The definitional practice of dictionaries and the cognitive semantic con-
   ception of polysemy. – *Lexicographica* 17: 6–21. [Repr. in Geeraerts D. 2006. *Words and
   other wonders*. Berlin, New York: 343–363].
Geeraerts D. 2003. Meaning and definition. – Van Sterkenburg P. (ed.) *A practical guide to
   lexicography*. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: 83–93.
Hanks P. 1987. Definitions and explanations. – Sinclair J. (ed.) *Looking up: An account of the
   COBUILD project in lexical computing*. London, Glasgow: 116–136.
Landau S. 2001. *Dictionaries: the art and craft of lexicography*. [2nd edition]. Cambridge (UK).
   [1st ed. 1984, New York].
Lew R., Dziemianko A. 2006. A new type of folk-inspired definition in English monolingual
   learners' dictionaries and its usefulness for conveying syntactic information. – *Interna-
   tional Journal of Lexicography* 19.3: 225–242.
Locke J. 1690. *An essay concerning human understanding*. [ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/l/locke/
   john/l81u/].
Manes J. 1980. Ways of defining: folk definitions and the study of semantics. – *Forum Lin-
   guisticum* 5.2: 122–139.
Moon R. 1989. Objective or objectionable: Ideological aspects of dictionaries. – Knowles M.,
   Malmkjær K. (eds.) *ELR Journal* 3: 59–95.
Moon R. 1998. *Fixed expressions and idioms in English: A corpus-based approach*. Oxford.
Murphy L.M. 1998. Defining people: Race and ethnicity in South African English dictionar-
   ies. – *International Journal of Lexicography* 11.1: 1–33.
Nakamoto K. 1998. From which perspective does the definer define the definiendum: anthro-
   pocentric or referent-based? – *International Journal of Lexicography* 11.3: 205–217.
Osselton N.E. 2007. Innovation and continuity in English learners' dictionaries: The single-
   clause *when*-definition. – *International Journal of Lexicography* 20.4: 393–399.
Rundell M. 2006. More than one way to skin a cat: why full-sentence definitions have not
   been universally adopted. – Corino E. et al. (eds.) *Atti del XII Congresso di Lessicografia,*

Torino, 6–9 settembre 2006. Allessandria: 323–338. [Repr. in Fontenelle T. (ed.) 2008. *Practical lexicography: A reader.* Oxford: 197–209].

Rey A. 2000. Defining definition. – Sager J.C. (ed.) *Essays on definition.* Amsterdam, Philadelphia: 1–14.

Schreyer R. 1992. The definition of definition in Locke's *Essay concerning human understanding.* – *Lexicographica* 8: 26–51.

Stein G. 2011. The linking of lemma to gloss in Elyot's *Dictionary* (1538). – Timofeeva O., Säily T. (eds.) *Words in dictionaries and history: Essays in honour of R.W. McConchie.* Amsterdam, Philadelphia: 55–79.

Svensén B. 2009. *A handbook of lexicography.* Cambridge (UK).

Swanepoel P. 2005. On defining 'imaginary' beings and attributes: How do lexicographers cope with culturally determined differences in beliefs about cosmology, ontology and epistemology? – *Lexikos* 15: 179–195.

Wierzbicka A. 1985. *Lexicography and conceptual analysis.* Ann Arbor.

Wierzbicka A. 1992–1993. What are the uses of theoretical lexicography? – *Dictionaries: Journal of the Dictionary Society of North America* 14: 44–78.

Wierzbicka A. 1997. *Understanding cultures through their key words.* Oxford.

Zgusta L. 1971. *Manual of lexicography.* Prague.

Zgusta L. 1988. Pragmatics, lexicography and dictionaries of English. – *World Englishes* 7.3: 243–253. [Repr. in Zgusta L. 2006. *Lexicography then and now: Selected essays.* Tübingen: 87–99].