

Linguistic semantics and lexicography: a troubled relationship

Robert Lew

1. Introductory

In the present paper, I would like to address the issue of the relationship between linguistic semantics and lexicography, focusing on what linguists have to offer to lexicographers, and vice versa, in the description of lexical meaning. It is hard to do justice to all the many strains and positions in one brief paper, so the reader will have to excuse a hasty generalization here and there as well as a certain degree of selectiveness.

The general point that this paper makes, as reflected in the subtitle, is that the relationship between linguistic semantics and lexicography is aptly described as a troubled one.

When one considers what *general* semantics has traditionally concerned itself with – though it is often defined in general terms as “the study of meaning” – it has in fact tended to focus on *how* words (and, to a lesser extent, other “chunks” of language) mean rather than on *what* they mean. This metatheoretical leaning has perhaps to do with the influential philosophical tradition within semantic theory – after all, general semantics grew out of philosophical and logical roots.

Mainstream *lexical* semantics, in turn, appears to have concentrated to a significant extent on lexical relations between words themselves

(Apresjan 2000; Cruse 1986), and on decomposing lexical meanings into primitive components (Greimas 1966; Wotjak 1971).

Given the above division of labour, we are left with a considerable gap that has not been sufficiently attended to: the description of actual lexical meanings. This is a huge area that has been, so to speak, voluntarily surrendered by linguists and left in the hands of lexicographers. The latter have willingly risen to the occasion, because the description of lexical meanings is what they see as their primary concern.

There are various factors that might be brought in to explain the relative lack of interest of linguists in the actual meaning of words. One might, for example, invoke the notion of language universals, central to some influential linguistic paradigms: if, as these paradigms would like it, linguistic theory is to deal with the universal facts of *language* (not a *specific* language), then the study of actual lexical meaning is automatically excluded from consideration.

As Burkhanov (1997: 61) ironically but truthfully observes, discussing the generative paradigm and its approach to meaning,

[i]t is not surprising that under these conditions a theoretical semanticist was normally expected to contribute to the analysis of the meanings of *bachelor* or *good*, or to re-discuss the bald head of the non-existent French sovereign. Any attempt at a

detailed semantic analysis of the actual linguistic data in its complexity was left over for lexicographers and other people who were not able to rise above the “base matters” of “descriptive” or “applied” research, i.e. lexicologists.¹

2. Is lexicography part of linguistics?

The question that probably needs to be asked at this point is whether lexicography should be seen as part of linguistics. Many linguists seem to assume without argument that lexicography fits comfortably within linguistics, and although some *have* actually argued the point – witness Hans Meier’s 1969 paper with the telling title “Lexicography as Applied Linguistics” (Meier 1969) – it may be that the inclusion of lexicography under linguistics is more of a reflex habit and a matter of academic politics than well-considered judgement (Burkhanov 1997: 70).

As has been noted (Piotrowski 2001), in this country the profession of lexicographer is not (yet?) well-established as an autonomous one. Therefore, it is perhaps more common than in, for instance, the US or the UK for linguists to double as lexicographers. If the above is true, a tendency to associate linguistics with lexicography would be understandable.

¹ The status of lexicology versus other disciplines is the principal theme of Burkhanov (1997).

Piotrowski (1994: 10), as well as Burkhanov (1997), see lexicography as an autonomous domain, one which employs the findings of linguistics, but contributes its own methods as well.

Bańko (2001) basically upholds Piotrowski's view. He points out (2001: 13) that good lexicography must have a solid grounding in language data, preferably large language corpora (here he owes much to John Sinclair and the Cobuild project). I think this is not necessarily a point of difference though, since increasing numbers of mainstream linguists are also turning to corpora, appreciating the role of systematic and comprehensive language data in the study of language. Having said that, however, I also believe that the corpus approach to linguistic study should rather be seen as a contribution of *lexicography to linguistics* than the other way round.

Bańko (2001: 17-18) also points to an interesting inconsistency: some of those linguists who see lexicography as part of linguistics, expect dictionaries to be more or less uniform in their description of language data, which is quite the opposite to what they would expect of non-lexicographic linguistic works.

Frawley (1993: 1) uses an interesting metaphor when describing the relationship of (Montague tradition) semantics and lexicography: "Semantics is to lexicography what economics is to accountancy".

Further, numerous other positions on the disciplinary status of lexicography are possible. To mention just two of the more interesting ones, Spevak (1987) treats both lexicography and semantics as part of *lexicology*, while Charles Fillmore describes “the effort to analyze the frame-setting background of a word’s meaning” in modern English monolingual learners’ dictionaries as “a kind of ethnography” (Fillmore 2003: 284).

Another complication in interpreting the various positions in the relationship between semantics and lexicography lies in the fact that the term *lexicography* may variously refer to at least two different activities: firstly, lexicographic practice (dictionary-making), and, secondly, theoretical lexicographic reflection and lexicographic research, which currently is often termed *metalexicography*. The new term is used precisely to avoid such confusion. The problem is that when authors claim lexicography to be part of linguistics, it is not always clear which of the two (or perhaps both?) they mean. The inclusion of one under linguistics does not automatically imply the inclusion of the other. For example, my current position is to accept lexicographic practice as falling on the margins of descriptive linguistics, but I prefer to see *metalexicography* as autonomous from linguistics – a position that will find some justification in the following sections of this paper.

3. The contribution of semantics to lexicography

Semanticists have sometimes volunteered suggestions concerning the description of meaning in dictionaries, but often these suggestions have been received less than kindly by lexicographers, and have been branded as unrealistic – unfortunately, not without good reason.

On the other hand, semanticists have been known to accuse lexicographers of having no theoretical foundation for what they are doing, such as Wierzbicka's (1985: 5) much-quoted charge: "Lexicography has no theoretical foundations, and even the best lexicographers, when pressed, can never explain what they are doing, or why".

I believe that it was the inadequacy of traditional linguistics as a theoretical foundation for lexicographic practice that has prompted lexicography into developing its own theoretical discipline: *metalexicography*, or theoretical lexicography. Apart from linguistic considerations, *metalexicography* takes account of the extralinguistic context of dictionary-making and dictionary use, which theoretical linguistics resolutely ignores. Thus, the rise of *metalexicography* is likely an indication that traditional linguistic accounts were generally seen as insufficient and limiting. Wierzbicka herself makes this very point forcefully: "If modern linguistics were to be judged by the contribution it made to lexicography, it would be hard to understand why linguistics is said to have made dramatic advances in recent decades" (Wierzbicka 1993: 45).

On the other hand, Wierzbicka's own efforts to offer such a contribution are taken to pieces by Hanks (1993), who systematically demonstrates how very unrealistic and impractical the linguists' view of lexicographic practice may be, if they have not themselves extensively engaged in real dictionary-writing. In fact, as Zgusta nicely puts it, "the best practitioners among us are those lexicographers who have the ability to cope with what is, or theoretically should be, intractable." (Zgusta 1993: 136)

To point to but one example of the rift between semanticists' proposals and real-world lexicography, some semanticists give themselves the privilege of abstaining from defining the meaning of a subset of lexical items (usually referred to as semantic primitives or undefinables). Now, lexicographers are constrained in their work by the expectations of dictionary users as well as the restrictions imposed by the publishers. Because of this, lexicographers normally cannot afford the convenience of leaving out the "troublesome" words from the dictionary.

4. The lexicographers' dilemma

George Miller (Miller 1999: 1-19) ties up some of the points discussed above when he writes:

... a distinction should be noted between lexical semantics and lexicography. It is a lexicographer's task to compile associations between word forms and word meanings and to publish them in

a convenient alphabetical list. Although lexical theory and lexicographic practice are ordinarily close, in addition to deciding what should be included in a lexical entry and how definitions should be written, lexicographers must actually write the definitions and at the same time worry about such practical matters as how to keep their dictionary down to a manageable size (Landau 1984). Commercial considerations aside, however, most lexicographers would argue that a good dictionary is the ultimate test of any theory of lexical semantics; they sometimes become impatient with criticisms from theorists who have never worked as lexicographers. As one lexicographer has put it, "most of the words one has to deal with when working through the alphabet turn out to be more recalcitrant than those chosen as examples in works on semantic theory" (Atkins 1993:19).

It is true that the "commercial constraints" mentioned by Miller must have – sadly but inevitably – negatively influenced the quality of the work of many but the most dedicated and determined lexicographers. The pressures from the publishers on the lexicographers to respect the deadlines and deliver, sometimes sacrificing the quality, have been the curse of many a lexicographic project. This one aspect, however, may, rather paradoxically, change in favour of quality due to the spread of free, low-quality dictionaries in the public domain, as argued by Adam Kilgarriff: “

making good dictionaries, as opposed to bad ones, is what every lexicographer wants to do. There is usually tension between lexicographer and publisher – better vs cheaper – and the change in the market gives more weight to the lexicographer’s case.” (Kilgarriff 2005)

5. Can semantics and lexicography work hand in hand?

What I have said thus far perhaps paints too pessimistic a picture of the relationship between semantics and lexicography: though rarely, it is probably possible for theoretical semantic insight to go hand in hand with lexicographic practice: a shining positive example is the original Meaning \Leftrightarrow Text project of the Moscow linguists (now developed into a full-blown Meaning-Text Theory), whose relative success suggests that co-operation, or even integration, between semantics and lexicography is possible, as evidenced in Igor Mel’čuk’s work (1974; 1981; 1988).

One would be remiss not to mention the corpus revolution, which has had a major impact on lexicography, resulting in new approaches to lexicography, meaning, and the advent of Corpus Linguistics, which however is not a unified theoretical model so much as a bundle of methodological approaches.

Charles Fillmore’s Frame Semantics model, which combines the insights of the more traditional semantic functions and the more modern cognitive schemata, also shows good promise for successful lexicographic

application (Atkins 2002). In fact, a number of cognitive-linguistics approaches do not seem to shy away from the description of actual lexical meaning, as has been the case in most other linguistic paradigms (as argued in Section 1 above).

There is, then, some benefit for lexicography to be drawn from linguistic semantics, but clearly not all strains of semantic research render themselves to lexicographic application with equal facility.

6. Does linguistics benefit from lexicography?

It is worth noting that linguistics not only has something to offer to lexicography, but also owes some debt to it. Lexicography has had a hand in the rise of modern linguistics. Hudson (1988) makes the interesting point that lexicographic practice has implicitly shaped linguistic theory by influencing linguists as ordinary dictionary users. Nowakowski (1990) refers to this covert influence as the “metaphysics of the dictionary”.

It appears that lexicography has also continued to remind linguists of the importance of meaning in language – that vital aspect that appears to have been neglected, or even negated, in some paradigms.

Further, as John Sinclair pointed out in his 2004 paper under the telling title *In praise of the dictionary*, “[a] dictionary is both a practical object on the bookshelf and an application of a theory of language to the description of meaning”. (2004:10)

7. Conclusion

Wierzbicka's charge that lexicography has no theoretical foundation has to be refuted: there is now a solid, and growing at a healthy pace, theoretical foundation to lexicographic practice. This foundation is metalexicography, which arose to meet those many needs of lexicographers and dictionary users that were not being properly addressed by linguists. Although undoubtedly new developments in linguistics bear some relevance to dictionary-making, metalexicography is less and less likely for the latter to be seen as just a part of linguistics, as it grows, branches out, and specializes.

It is perhaps unavoidable that a troubled relationship should end in divorce, but there is no reason this cannot be, after all, amicable divorce. Let us hope that lexicographers will keep an open mind to developments in linguistics, and that linguists will continue to exhibit a healthy fascination with dictionaries.

References:

Apresjan, Jurij

1993 Systemic lexicography as a basis of dictionary-making. *Dictionaries: The Journal of the Dictionary Society of North America* 14: 79-87.

2000 *Semantyka leksykalna. Synonimiczne środki języka*. Wrocław: Ossolineum.

Atkins, Beryl T. Sue

1993 Theoretical lexicography and its relation to dictionary-making. *Dictionaries: The Journal of the Dictionary Society of North America* 14: 4-43.

2002 Bilingual dictionaries: Past, present and future. In *Lexicography and natural language processing. A festschrift in honour of B.T.S. Atkins, Corréard, Marie-Hélène* (ed.). 1-29. EURALEX.

Bańko, Mirosław

2001 *Z pogranicza leksykografii i językoznawstwa*. Warszawa: Uniwersytet Warszawski.

Burkhanov, Igor

1997 On the correlation between lexicology, linguistic semantics and lexicography. *Zeszyty Naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogicznej w Rzeszowie. Seria Filologiczna. Językoznawstwo* 4 (26): 55-73.

Cruse, D. Alan

1986 *Lexical semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

1993 On polylexy. *Dictionaries: The Journal of the Dictionary Society of North America* 14: 88-96.

Fillmore, Charles J.

2003 Double-decker definitions: The role of frames in meaning explanations. *Sign Language Studies* 3 (3): 263-295.

Frawley, William

1993 Introduction. *Dictionaries: The Journal of the Dictionary Society of North America* 14: 1-3.

Greimas

1966 *Sémantique structurale: Recherche et méthode*. In. Paris:

Hanks, Patrick

1993 Lexicography: Theory and practice. *Dictionaries: The Journal of the Dictionary Society of North America* 14: 97-112.

- Hudson, Richard
 1988 The linguistic foundations for lexical research and dictionary design. *International Journal of Lexicography* 1: 287-312.
- Kilgarriff, Adam
 2005 If dictionaries are free, who will buy them? *Kernerman Dictionary News* 13: 17-19.
- Landau, Sidney I.
 1984 *Dictionaries: The art and craft of lexicography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 1993 Wierzbicka's theory and the practice of lexicography. *Dictionaries: The Journal of the Dictionary Society of North America* 14: 113-119.
- McCawley, James D.
 1993 How to achieve lexicographic virtue through selective and judicious sinning. *Dictionaries: The Journal of the Dictionary Society of North America* 14: 120-129.
- Meier, Hans H.
 1969 Lexicography as applied linguistics. *English Studies* 50: 141-151.
- Mel'čuk, Igor A.
 1974 *Opyt teorii lingvističeskix modelej "smysl-tekst"*. Moscow: Nauka.
 1981 Meaning-text models: A recent trend in soviet linguistics. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 10: 27-62.
 1988 Semantic description of lexical units in an explanatory combinatorial dictionary: Basic principles and heuristic criteria. *International Journal of Lexicography* 1 (3): 165-188.
- Miller, George A.
 1999 On knowing a word. *Annual Review of Psychology* 50: 1-19.
- Nowakowski, Mirosław
 1990 Metaphysics of the dictionary versus the lexicaon. In *Meaning and lexicography*, Tomaszczyk, Jerzy and Barbara Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (eds.), 3-19. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Piotrowski, Tadeusz
 1994 *Problems in bilingual lexicography*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego.
 2001 *Zrozumieć leksykografię*. Warsaw: PWN.

Sinclair, John

- 2004 In praise of the dictionary. In *Proceedings of the Eleventh EURALEX International Congress, EURALEX 2004, Lorient, France, July 6-10, 2004, Vol.1*, Williams, Geoffrey and Sandra Vessier (eds.), 1-11. Lorient: Université De Bretagne Sud.

Spevak, M

- 1987 The editor as philologist. *Text* 3: 92.

Wierzbicka, Anna

- 1985 *Lexicography and conceptual analysis*. Ann Arbor: Karoma.
1993 What are the uses of theoretical lexicography? *Dictionaries: The Journal of the Dictionary Society of North America* 14: 44-78.

Wotjak, Gerd

- 1971 *Untersuchungen zur Struktur der Bedeutung*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag.

Zgusta, Ladislav

- 1993 Lexicography, its theory, and linguistics. *Dictionaries: The Journal of the Dictionary Society of North America* 14: 130-138.